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ALI PARKER

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Introduction



Well hey there! Thank you so much for grabbing one of my books. I sure hope you love it.

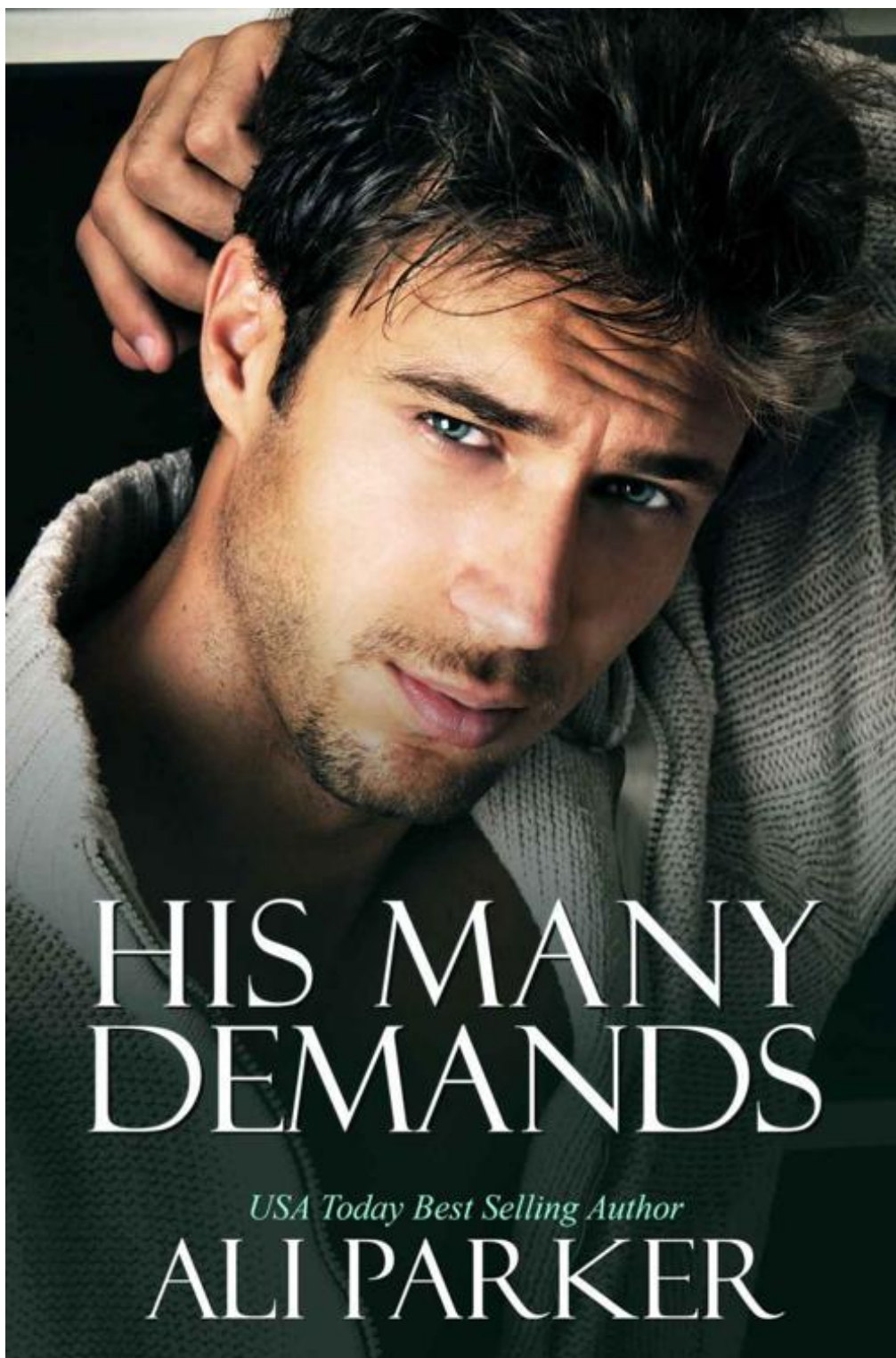
I'd hate to part ways once you're done though. How about we stay in touch? We have a great family of readers on my Insiders

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We do exclusive giveaways, facebook parties, Christmas cards, event invites and sneak previews for this amazing group.

And as a HUGE thank you for joining, you'll receive a free book on me!

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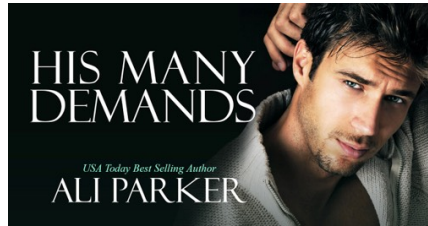


HIS MANY DEMANDS

USA Today Best Selling Author

ALI PARKER

DESCRIPTION



My Needs.

My Demands.

Your Pleasure.

You're Welcome.

She had one year left of college when our parents got married. And thanks to being raised in poverty, she needed help with her expenses.

My dad, being the benevolent billionaire, stepped up without question.

But there was a catch. She had to intern at the firm for a year. With me.

As her boss. Poor sweet little thing.

She has no clue what she's up against, but she'll figure it out soon.

I don't play typical games, but the ones I do play, I always win.

And regardless of how taboo our relationship might become, I'm all in.

The reward is worth the risk.

I just hope she can keep up with my many demands.

PROLOGUE



Damn: 110. She needed a 70 to make the dean's list for her senior-level marketing class, but she'd pulled out a 110.

A smile touched Bethany's lips, her eyes darting around the room to see if she could make out the various grades on her classmates' papers. From what she could see, she must have gotten the highest grade. She sat back in her chair and listened as the classroom filled with either groans or soft whispers of gratitude for passing grades. She hadn't worried much about passing, but simply passing was never enough. She had to be at the top—the best grade in the class.

The elderly professor moved to the front of the room, dropping a small handful of remaining tests on his desk and turning to face the class. A quick adjustment to his glasses and he scanned the room, his eyebrow raising at the noise.

“This was your final test for my class. I know some of you are graduating on Saturday, and I congratulate you. If you failed this test and subsequently this class and it's holding you back from graduating, that's your problem. You were given every opportunity to do well in here. If you failed, then you worked hard to do so.”

He shrugged as a lanky guy in the back row spoke up, Bethany turning to look over her shoulder as his drug-induced voice resounded. “Is there a make-up quiz for this test?”

“No, Mr. Johnson. This is final, and you will be seeing me next semester, no doubt.”

Bethany turned and raised her hand, her long chestnut locks tickling her shoulders as she moved. “What was the top grade in the class?”

“Yours.” The professor smirked and moved from his reclined position. “Class is dismissed. Don’t bother stopping by to talk with me. I have somewhere to be, so this is goodbye for this semester. Enjoy the rest of your summer, and don’t have too much fun.”

Bethany leaned over and grabbed her backpack, a smile pressing her cheeks toward her eyes as she got up and walked from the room, her head held high and smugness sitting on her like a well-worn cloak. She was the smartest, the fastest—the best.



A quick stop by the advisory office before heading to have lunch with her mother stole her thunder; her adviser’s news was depressing, a quick reminder of her financial reality.

“Congratulations, Bethany. It looks like you’ll be graduating in the top 3 percent of your accounting class.” The middle-aged man looked up, his portly belly almost touching the chair between his opened legs.

Bethany focused on the kindness in his gaze even though his appearance struck her with worry. She needed to get to the gym. The summer sessions were always so daunting and stole every waking moment she could find in order to simply keep up. It was over now, though.

She sighed with relief and nodded toward the adviser.

“That’s great news. I’ve already been accepted into the MBA program, so I’ll start in a month. I’m excited.”

The man mumbled something, turning to his computer and hitting a few keys. Bethany sat back, her eyes moving across the various pictures that hung on the walls. The photos were filled with smiling kids and a woman as portly as the man before her, their happiness apparent or well-rehearsed.

A family had never been part of Bethany's thoughts. Racing up the corporate ladder and making a name for herself was her top priority. Making enough money never to have to worry where her next meal was coming from or if anyone would see her mother paying with food stamps was all she cared about. She would change her situation no matter what it took.

College was a luxury that her grades from high school alone had afforded her, but the master's program was still up in the air. The hope was that grants would cover most of the cost, and she could pick up a small job or paid internship at an accounting firm.

Time was the only restriction. She needed something flexible because her course load wouldn't allow for much more than studying and schoolwork. She reached up, tucking her hair behind her ears as she looked back at the adviser.

"So, am I good to go?"

"Hold on just a minute, kiddo. Looks like there's an issue with your fees for next semester. I'm just trying to make sure you're all paid up." He glanced over at her before picking up his phone. He spoke for a few minutes to someone who she assumed was in the registrar's office. The conversation, from the parts she could hear, was only causing the knot in her stomach to grow. He thanked the lady on the phone and sighed, hanging up and looking over at Bethany.

"Good news and bad news. What do you want first?"

"The good news."

"The good news is that the first third of your upcoming semester was picked up by a grant."

"And the bad is that the last two-thirds weren't?"

"That's right." He shrugged, sympathy covering his round face. "Is there a possibility of getting a small part-time job or internship in the city?"

"I have no clue. Seems like more to do, but it is what it is." She sat back and sighed, the reality of her ever-present

situation bleeding its way across her emotions. She was going to break down soon, and she'd rather it not be in front of him.

She stood up and reached over, her hand extended. "I appreciate your help. I have a month to figure it out, I guess."

"You have about six weeks before they require that second payment. Good luck. You're smart; you'll figure this out."

She shook his hand and walked from the small building, the sun pressing down on her in the smoldering Texas heat. There was nothing to figure out. The MBA program at UT Dallas was way out of her league in terms of financial funding, and her mother was forever broke. Thanks to a drug-dealing father and a life left in shambles, there wasn't much hope.

She got in her car as the first tear fell. She'd have to ask her mom to do something that seemed far-fetched but was her only hope.

"Mom, will you marry Kent?" She looked up in the small rearview mirror, realizing how selfish she was being as she worked through how to ask something so demanding of her mother. But Kent was a billionaire. It would work in her favor, and she knew without a doubt that her mother would be *much* happier with the stability and love Kent would provide. It was good for everyone. No. She couldn't do it.

But what other choice did she have?

CHAPTER 1



BETHANY

“Mom, will you marry Kent?” Bethany let the question hang in the air as her mom reached for a fluffy white roll sitting in the basket between them.

“What?” Her mom pulled her hand back like she’d been burned.

The older woman was a perfect replica of Bethany. Long, silky chestnut hair, full lips, and green eyes. She looked completely innocent and well-kept, and yet she’d been through more hell than anyone could possibly imagine. She and Bethany both.

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but when you told me that he proposed a few weeks ago, you seemed really happy. I don’t know why you just didn’t say yes right then.”

“It’s complicated, Bethany.”

“I know, Mom. But I also know that you’re just holding back because you’re letting everything that happened with Dad scare you away from the one thing that could make you truly happy. You and Kent have been dating for six months, and he’s crazy about you.”

“Why do you care if Kent and I get married right now?”

“I had an appointment with my adviser today, and there isn’t enough funding for me to get through the first year of my master’s program.” She held up her hand as her mother started to protest. “I know you don’t understand the need for a master’s, but I’m telling you that I need it. I want financial

freedom, and ever since Daddy left all those years ago, we've had anything but that. I want a chance to be free from this, Mom."

Her mom visibly flinched, reaching and taking the bread and then picking at it, her gaze filled with concern. They had been through far too much together over Bethany's twenty-two years not to be straightforward with one another. Her mom loved Kent, and Bethany knew they would get married eventually, so the request wasn't too far-fetched, just perhaps a little selfish in its timing.

"And you think me marrying Kent will take care of your finances?"

"I'm praying that you'll mention my situation. I'm not asking for a handout but a loan. I'll pay it back once I'm working for an accounting firm downtown, Mom. There is no way I'm not going to get a great job next year. I just need some help now."

"I wish I could help you, but I don't have anything put away." Her mom's eyes diverted toward the table as the waiter walked up, a smile on his mouth.

"Hi, ladies. You ready to order?"

Bethany's mom sat up, pulling her menu up as she motioned for Bethany to place her order. Bethany picked up the menu and looked at the prices, not caring a bit what items were attached to them. They were broke and shouldn't even be at the small cafe. Money was the bane of her existence, and coveting it anytime soon seemed like a lofty goal.

"I'll take a cup of tomato soup and a water, please?"

"Not very hungry today?" He smiled and took her menu, winking at her as she smiled back.

"Nope. Big breakfast."

Her mother ordered as Bethany reached for a roll. Her stomach softly protested, the deep burn of hunger an old friend. She hadn't had a big breakfast or any breakfast at all. Every penny she had went to books and supplies for school. She ate once a day and sometimes not even that unless her

roommate brought home leftovers. She'd have given anything to order a cheeseburger with fries and a Coke, but life wasn't that giving.

The waiter moved away, and Bethany shoved the rest of the roll in her mouth, the soft white bread melting in her mouth. Worry covered her mother's features as she pushed the basket toward her.

"Are you not eating again?"

Bethany finished chewing the roll, her thoughts far from the conversation at the table as she enjoyed the flavors rolling across her tongue. She ate out every once in a while, but it was usually on a date, and that always ended with some random horny guy demanding sex. *Disgusting.*

"I have to spend what little money I get from my grants on a place to live and books, Mom. Food is a luxury."

"Baby, you shouldn't starve yourself."

"What options do I have?" Bethany laughed, the sound falling flat.

"Take a semester off and come back home with me." Her mom crossed her arms over her chest, an eyebrow raising as Bethany reached for another roll and picked up the small cup of butter, dipping the bread in it without concern for her actions.

"I can't take off from school, Mom, and I don't have a car that runs very well. One more year of this, and I'll be able to finally take care of myself."

"I don't like that you're not eating."

"I don't like it either, but you're as broke as I am."

"I'll ask Kent to give me some money for you."

"No." Bethany leaned forward, her mouth pursed into a tight line. She didn't want handouts from someone who wasn't connected to her family intimately, and even though a loan was an option, it was the last option on her list. She needed Kent to move into the position of being her stepfather, and then it would make sense to get financial help from him.

“Yes.”

“No, Mom. Just stop messing around and get married. You’re going to get married anyway. He loves you, and you love him.”

“What would being married to him change?”

“I would be his daughter, Mom. I would finally have a dad, and maybe, just maybe, he would see my struggle and offer to help me.” Tears burned her eyes, and she picked up her napkin, wiping at them quickly. Being emotional or weak hadn’t gotten her anywhere in life, and it certainly wouldn’t do her any favors now.

“Oh, honey. I’m so sorry I don’t have more to give you. If only I’d been a stronger woman when your dad put us through all that shit.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.” Bethany dropped the napkin in her lap, her emotions pressing hard against the confines of her chest. “I have one more year of school and need help. You’re going to marry Kent anyway. I’m just asking that you move it up and do it in the next month, Mom. Please.”

Her mom bit at her lip, looking up and thanking the server as he put their lunch down in front of them. Bethany constrained herself as the steam rose up from the small cup before her. She could have ordered more, but she knew her mom was broke and struggling as well. The older woman in front of her hid her own suffering, and internal strife as well as Bethany did. No one knew how much they’d been through and how they continued to persevere.

“Let’s pray over our food.” Her mom bowed her head and prayed, Bethany closing her eyes and listening to her mom ask God for the millionth time to help them. He’d seemed to turn a blind eye or deaf ear to them for all the years Bethany could remember, but six months ago he *had* delivered Kent into her mom’s life.

Kent owned several companies and had been a widower for ten years. He was older than her mom and had two sons,

one a complete loser and the other the center of his enterprise in the heart of downtown Dallas. Bethany had yet to meet either of them, but she liked Kent and knew he would treat her mother like a princess.

If only the woman could get past being hurt and used by Bethany's father, giving love another chance and opening up a world of possibilities for them both.

"Kent would be thrilled to hear I'm ready to move forward, I guess." Her mom's words lit a spark of hope in Bethany's chest as she looked up.

"He loves you, Mom. He's told you that a million times."

"I know, and I love him too. I'm just a little worried about fitting into his world. I come from the wrong side of the tracks, Bethany. His friends and work associates are going to see beneath my layers of makeup and call me out as the phony I am."

"You're not a phony. You're the most real person I know, Mom." Bethany reached around her soup to touch her mom's arm, concern pulling her brow together. "You just need to be yourself and not anyone else. You can't change for someone, or you'll end up hating who you've become."

"How did you get so wise?" Her mom winked at her, patted her hand and picked up her spoon, taking a tentative sip of her own soup.

"So, you'll think about it? I'm on a short leash, and I'll start looking for jobs this afternoon, but I need help quickly."

"Wait until Monday for the job thing. You're graduating tomorrow, and I want you to just enjoy the accomplishment." She put her spoon down and picked up the last piece of bread, tearing it in half and handing the larger piece to Bethany. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom. I'm sorry to bother you with this. If I could figure it out on my own, I would."

"We will always have each other. I'll talk to Kent tonight about everything. When he proposed a few weeks back, I wanted to say yes, but I just haven't been able to move around

my past. He's so much better than I am." Her mom shrugged, heaviness sitting on her pretty features.

Bethany reached up and pulled her long locks into a messy bun before scoffing at her mother.

"He's not better than you. He's had a different path, Mom. His life is a different story. I'm just glad that your path crossed with his. He's going to be great for you. He thinks you hung the moon."

"He is a great guy." Blush touched her mother's cheeks, and Bethany laughed softly, romance a lofty thought in her world.

Bethany had seen the same guy, Jake, a few times, but he was horribly proper and far too feminine for her tastes. He was easy to get along with and a great study partner, but as far as physical attraction—nothing.

"Is Kent coming with you to my graduation tomorrow?"

"He sure is. I invited Damon and Matthew, his boys, but they both have something to do. I was hoping for you to meet Matthew. He's a sad soul with far too many demons to fight, but a pure heart lies in his chest."

"And what about the other boy, Damon?"

"Honestly, he's an ass. He's the typical rich boy, and he has far too much control of Kent's company and ten women around him at all times. I hate to even say this, but he sometimes disgusts me." Her mother's face twisted as if she'd bit into a lemon. Bethany laughed and leaned over, tasting her cooling soup.

"Money corrupts. I'm surprised Kent is as good of a guy as he is. He has more money than God."

Her mom laughed and took one more sip of her soup before pushing it across the table to Bethany, the small cup still more than half-full. Bethany pulled it toward her, working hard not to lift her cup to her lips and drink the thick tomato soup.

“Get yourself a sandwich or something. I have a little bit of money in the bank.” Her mother turned as if trying to get the waiter’s attention.

Bethany reached over and patted the table in front of her. “I’m good. I’ll eat this and be stuffed. We’ll make it through this; we will. Tomorrow will be a great day, and if your conversation goes well with Kent, then maybe my luck will change for good.” She pinched off a piece of the bread and popped it in her mouth. “You sure I’m not pushing you to do something you didn’t want to do?”

“Have you ever known me to do something I didn’t want to do?” Her mother smirked as the waiter stopped by with the bill.

“They must have higher-paying customers waiting on our seats.” Bethany looked over to the large crowd gathering at the door.

“Pretty soon that will be us, baby. Hang in there, and I’ll work to change our situation.”

“You do love him, right?”

“I do, but not as much as I love you.”

Bethany chuckled and turned her attention to her food, mumbling into the small cup, “I love you too.”

CHAPTER 2



BETHANY

She'd enjoyed the time with her mother, the older woman a beautiful reminder that hope and love could actually exist.

Bethany climbed into her small, beat-up Honda after kissing her mom goodbye and getting excited about her upcoming graduation. She still hadn't let the fact that she would be graduating with her bachelor's in accounting sink in. It was a huge accomplishment in itself—and even more so since she was the first in her family to do so.

The rest of the afternoon was to be spent with a few friends, her roommate, Krista, and the closest thing she had to a boyfriend, Jake. It would be comfortable and mostly uneventful, but she'd grown accustomed to moving through life as quickly as possible, her focus only on the future.

Bethany pulled up to their small apartment as Krista and Jake walked from the door toward Krista's car, smiles on their faces as Bethany got out.

“Hey, guys. What's up?”

“Just getting some snacks and sodas from Krista's car. Come help us.” Jake motioned for her to come over. “You get to see your mom?”

“Yeah, she's doing good. Looking at marrying that rich guy, finally.” Bethany laughed, leaving out the parts she felt were less than appropriate to draw attention to.

“Oh, nice. I wish my parents were rich. I mean, they’re middle class and all.” Krista shrugged, pulling her keys from her pocket and popping the trunk.

Krista’s short blonde hair and blue eyes were the exact opposite of Bethany’s dark features. Where Bethany was fit and ran most days of the week, Krista was a couch potato and struggled with her weight horribly. Bethany had tried time and time again to get her friend to join her on her runs, but the extra eighty or so pounds on Krista made it hard for her to do anything.

Her roommate was one of the nicest people she knew, Krista always buying lunch for the homeless guy down the street and tutoring at school. Bethany wondered how fate seemed to shine down on the wrong people all the time. Her mother had mentioned Damon, one of Kent’s sons, at lunch, and it was the perfect example of fate’s inequitable responses. The guy was probably good looking and rich but a complete ass.

“What are you thinking about?” Jake’s voice brought her from her senses, the lanky boy before her extending a few plastic grocery bags. “Are you already dreaming of your master’s? Brainiac.”

Bethany smiled and took the bags, the sun starting to set as the afternoon drew to a close. She couldn’t wait until Saturday, the week having lasted far too long.

“No. I was thinking about how unfair it is that some people have looks and money. One or the other is enough, don’t you think?” Bethany turned to walk with her friends back toward the apartment.

“I’m guessing you’re broke, then?” Krista laughed and moved back to let Jake open the door.

“I’ve always been poor, but I’m just making reference to my soon-to-be stepbrother. Mom says he’s an ass, and I’m sure he’s good looking and all. Just seems unfair.” Bethany shrugged, walking into the coolness of the house and putting the bags on the kitchen counter.

“His good looks would be no concern of yours, then.” Jake wagged his eyebrow.

“Jealous, Jake?” Bethany moved to stand in front of him, looking up as he took a tentative step back, his smile dropping.

“No, why would I be? He’s your stepbrother. Not like you guys would get together.” He laughed and turned to busy himself with putting things up. Bethany turned to Krista and rolled her eyes. She and Jake had known each other for the last year, but they were nothing more than glorified friends.

She’d kissed him a few times, but even drunk he would shake like a leaf when she tried. She’d heard plenty of stories of other girls on campus enjoying long weekends filled with liquor and sex. Somehow she never seemed to get close to the second half of the fun. She wasn’t willing to go out with a player, their sexually transmitted diseases of no interest to her. She had been asked out on more than a few occasions, but after so many rejections, the alpha males on campus moved to more susceptible victims.

Bethany walked to her room and closed the door before undressing. She wanted to push Jake a little that night, to see if he’d be willing to go further. She had slept around a little in high school and had a few random one-night stands during her freshman year, but human anatomy class had killed all of that for her. Dying with crotch rot was out.

She smirked at the thought, reaching for her brush and pulling her hair down to try and tame it. She pulled it into a high ponytail and slipped into a small, cream-colored cotton dress; her waist was thin, and her breasts were big enough to draw attention, hopefully from Jake.

A little bit of makeup and lip gloss, and she was ready to make her move. She walked back down the hall, the sound of a few familiar voices reaching out to greet her. They would have enough friends to spill out into the lawn of the apartment by the time nightfall arrived, but for now, a small group gathered in the kitchen.

Bethany walked in and headed for the chips, taking a few and munching on them as she greeted her friends. Jake turned

and smiled at her, motioning that she looked pretty.

He wasn't her type at all, his long blond hair always in his face and his body nothing more than bones, but he was safe. She wouldn't be falling in love with him anytime soon, and he wouldn't be falling for her either. Nothing more than a good friendship existed between them, and yet she was ready for something more physical in her life. Jake seemed the perfect candidate. Surely he wanted sex, and friends with benefits seemed fitting.

"Don't you look lovely?" Marcus, a dark-skinned marketing major, reached out and tugged on Bethany's ponytail, his smile wide and welcoming.

"Well, thank you, sir. You don't look too shabby yourself." She reached out and patted his stomach with the back of her hand. His firm abs tightened under her touch. "Dang. You've been working out."

"Swimming actually. Did you know they opened the natatorium at the school finally?"

"I've heard that, but I haven't been over there."

"Too busy making valedictorian?" He laughed, and she shook her head as Jake moved up beside her.

She reached over and wrapped an arm around Jake's lower back, the tall skinny guy towering over her by a foot.

"I wish. I'm just trying to get enough in grant money to get through my MBA degree."

"You'll do great. You always do," Jake said, looking down as he wrapped an arm around the back of Bethany's shoulders.

Marcus pointed at both of them, an eyebrow lifting.

"You two finally get together?"

"No, we're just good friends. She's way out of my league." Jake laughed and released Bethany, much to her dismay. "You guys want a drink?"

"Naw ... I'm trying out for the soccer team on Saturday. They do drug testing." Marcus held up his hands, shaking his

head.

“Alcohol isn’t a drug.” Jake laughed and looked to Bethany, who almost corrected him but decided against it. “Beth?”

“Yeah, I’ll take a beer and a shot please.”

“Getting the party started, I see.” Jake laughed and walked off, Bethany’s gaze following him. Nothing about his physique turned her on, his lithe figure the opposite of her desires.

Strong muscles and thick arms and legs were at the center of her daydreams, but with those things, it seemed, came an asshole attitude and demanding persona, neither of which she’d be willing to deal with.

“Just friends, huh?” Marcus’s question brought her back to the present.

“Me and Jake? Oh yeah. School will be over next year for us both, and we haven’t really been anything but friends.”

“Yeah, but I see the way you watch him.” Marcus smirked.

Bethany turned to see Jake in the kitchen, laughing and cutting up with a few friends as he poured drinks. He was cute but not handsome. Kind but not sexy or masculine at all. She could settle for someone like him, but it seemed like such a waste to do so.

“He’s a great guy. Who knows what will happen.” She looked back to Marcus and shrugged.

The night pulled in across the sky, her friends filling up the house and the yard in front of the apartments. Other groups of students had joined the festivities, the music nothing more than a low hum as everyone gathered in small huddles and talked about the excitement of graduation.

Bethany walked back into the house, a light sweat covering her skin from the alcohol she’d enjoyed. She sat her empty beer bottle down on the kitchen table and walked toward the kitchen. Jake was standing with his back to her as he fiddled with something.

She pressed herself to his back, sliding her hands around his waist and up to his chest; his muscles were nonexistent, and yet the warmth of another human seemed fitting. She pressed her lips to his T-shirt as he turned a little, looking over his shoulder at her.

“You’ve had too much to drink, silly girl?”

“Mmmhmmm,” she mumbled and bit at his T-shirt, pulling back and letting it pop from her teeth.

He turned in her grasp and put his arms around her, holding her tightly to him as he smiled down at her. “You should be careful. Some boy will be looking to take advantage of your current state.”

“Like you?” She laughed, reaching up and pulling his head toward her as she pressed her lips to his, the fire in her blood from the liquor beckoning her to push him past his sense of comfort.

He pulled back slowly, the kiss being broken far too quickly for her. He laughed awkwardly and put his hands on her shoulders, turning them and backing up a step.

“You know I would never take advantage of you.” He smirked and moved back to finish filling up a small bowl of chips. She leaned against the counter and reached in front of him.

“And why not? What if I wanted you to take advantage of me? Take me in my bedroom and strip me naked before—”

He cut her off, his eyes wide, his face flushed.

“Bethany. You’re drunk. Stop talking like that before someone hears you.”

She laughed, looking over her shoulder and yelling. “I’m drunk and want to get laid. Who’s with me?”

The sound of different voices yelling in agreement caused her to laugh, but her smile fell as she looked back toward Jake. The pensive stare on his face sobered her quickly. He wasn’t interested, nor was he approving of her actions.

“This isn’t you. It’s the liquor. Go take a shower, and I’ll shut down the party and lock up in just a bit.”

Heat burned her cheeks at his rejection. She wasn’t his type, or perhaps he thought she was too far out of his league. She leaned toward him as anger bit at her, her hand siding down his chest to cup his crotch. His arousal told her that it must have been the latter. He jerked back away from her touch, and she shrugged.

“Yep. I guess the liquor got you too.”

She moved down the hall, pulling her dress over her head and walking languidly toward the shower, her small pink panties matching her bra perfectly. Too bad no one was interested in seeing it—least of all her *good friend*.

CHAPTER 3



BETHANY

The morning sun streamed through the small window of her bedroom, the brightness stinging her eyes and turning up her headache. Why had she let herself drink the night before? She rarely drank, and she blamed that on how she felt the morning after she did. Nothing was worse than being debilitated for a whole day simply because you sated yourself with an evening of fun.

The smell of bacon wafted into her room, her stomach turning at the idea of food. They rarely cooked around the apartment, but the weekend was to be filled with friends, family, and good food. Bethany rolled over and groaned, the memory of offending Jake the night before assaulting her.

Why hadn't she just offered herself to one of the assholes from Kappa Alpha? There had been more than enough of them at the party. Sleeping with Jake had seemed like a good idea before she walked into the kitchen and pushed him a little too far. She covered her eyes with the palms of her hands pressing against the pain a little and groaning.

"Fucking hormones. I swear."

A knock at her door had her reaching for her covers, pulling them up to her chin before whispering, "Come in."

The door opened, and Krista stuck her head in. "You decent?"

"Yeah. Come in."

Her friend walked in, closing the door behind her and sitting down on the edge of her bed. The look on her face let Bethany know that something was up. She figured Jake had probably had a breakdown over the situation Bethany had put him in, and now Krista was here to clean up the mess.

“So ... last night was fun?” Krista started, and Bethany rolled her eyes.

“Stop beating around the bush. I feel like shit. Just tell me if he’s okay.”

“He’s okay, but I need to tell you something.”

“All right, tell me.” Bethany sat up slowly, her head hurting so bad that dizziness swam around her. “Ugh. I hate this feeling.”

“Jake and I are in love.”

“What?” Bethany turned to her friend, horror washing over her. “You and Jake have something going on? Why didn’t you tell me? I hit on him last night, for God’s sake.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t know, silly.” Krista reached out as Bethany slipped her hands over her face and let out a long sigh. Of course Jake was now dating Krista. That made everything perfectly shitty. It completed the shitastic circle and plopped the cherry on the shit-sundae.

Bethany let the news sink in, her heart hurting more over her actions than the loss of something she hadn’t really wanted. She felt stupid and rather whorish, but other than that.... She slid her fingers down her face, her fingertips covered in black mascara.

“I’m glad for you.”

“You’re not upset, are you? We figured you tried to sleep with Jake last night just because you were drunk, not because you had actual feelings for him. He’s been trying to get you to go out with him for the last year, and you’ve rejected him so many times.”

“I what?” She stiffened in the bed. “I’ve never once rejected him.”

“Oh. Does that mean you’re interested?”

“No, I’m just saying.” Bethany moved past her friend, reaching to grab a T-shirt and pulling it over her head. She pulled on a pair of pink sleeping pants and checked herself in the mirror. “I’m happy for you guys. I don’t know what else to say.”

“Did you want to sleep with him last night?”

“What? No. Jake’s not my type at all. It was the liquor.” Bethany turned to Krista, innocence layered in a perfect facade on her face. Jake wasn’t her type, but the idea of sex had seemed more than appropriate for her graduation party.

“Oh good.” Krista’s shoulders visibly slouched as a smile touched her face. “I kept telling him that it was just the liquor. No way you’d just randomly sleep with someone. We all know how much of a prude you are.”

“Prude? I’m not a prude.” Bethany put her hands on her hips, the conversation going from bad to worse.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant that you’re so beautiful and still aren’t with anyone. It’s not because guys aren’t trying ...” She laughed, and Bethany realized that the conversation was better left alone.

“Who’s cooking breakfast?”

“Oh hell! I am.” Krista jumped up and ran out of the room toward the kitchen.

Bethany walked into the hall and grabbed a towel, her heart hurting and stomach jacked sideways.

No wonder Jake had refused her. He was in love with her roommate.



Her mother and Kent had arrived just before she lined up for the graduation march, her mother kissing her cheek. Bethany looked over at Kent, who moved closer and pulled her into an awkward side hug as he smiled down at her.

“Sure am proud of you, kiddo. Your grades and ranking today are something to be incredibly proud of.” He squeezed her shoulder before moving back toward her mom.

“Yep. Nothing you can’t do if you put your mind to it, I guess.” Bethany smiled and waved, moving toward the line of people wearing the same heavy black robes that draped across her body.

She watched her mom and Kent, the older man extremely handsome and fitter than Bethany remembered from the last time they’d met. The kindness in his eyes as he looked down at her mother was also something new.

Her real father was nothing more than a bastard—a user. He only looked at you or spoke to you if he wanted something from you. She hated him more than words could express and was grateful when he left their lives around her twelfth birthday.

A tug on her sleeve had her turning to her left, Jake standing quietly with his eyes averted.

“Hey, you,” she whispered, unsure of what to say.

“Hey. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Krista sooner. I didn’t know if you’d be okay with it.” He shrugged, his dark gown swallowing him whole.

“I’m fine. I just wish someone would have told me. She said I tried to sleep with you last night. I feel like a total ass.” She forced a laugh, the memory of the night before pushing its way across her aching skull. She would never let him know that she remembered every moment of it, but the loneliness at his denial and the hour of crying herself to sleep was still very real as she stared at him.

“It’s no big deal. A month ago I would have fallen over myself to get you in bed.” He laughed, and the goofy sound caused her to smile.

He wasn’t at all someone that she’d normally sleep with or try to start a real relationship with. The need to share her celebration with him had pushed her to want something more,

but it would have ended as the sun came up. It was for the best.

“Enough of this. Congratulations.” She reached up and straightened the lapel of his robe before turning and sliding into line as they were instructed to do.

She waited her turn, her mind wandering to the conversation her mother had hopefully had with Kent and how it might have gone. Would he be thrilled that she’d finally said yes to marriage? How soon would they tie the knot? Would he offer to help her with her master’s? She’d be more than thankful for a loan if nothing else. A grant from him would be blissful, but anything to keep pushing her forward would be a break in her rather painful cycle of poverty.

She glanced at her mother and hopefully soon-to-be-stepfather and waved, smiling as she slipped onto the stage as the announcers called out her name. The moment was almost surreal, the hope it planted in her blossoming as she took her diploma and shook the dean’s hand.

“Great job, Bethany. Look forward to seeing you in the MBA program.” He smiled, and she simply nodded, turning her head for the flashing light of the cameras. Her head protested at the attention, the dull ache still remaining from her night of almost fun.

She walked down to join her classmates in the hard-backed chairs, the energy palpable in the air. Their speaker had asked to go on after the names were read, which was odd, but she was degreed and couldn’t care less about what came next. Sinking into her seat, her mind numbed at the monotone voice of their valedictorian, the message surely on success and their ability to do anything they wanted to do.

She scoffed internally, wanting nothing more than a cheeseburger, sex, and a nap. In that order.



“We’re so proud of you, sweetheart. Let’s grab some lunch. Kent made us a reservation at a restaurant here in town.”

Her mother pulled her into a hug as she stood before Bethany, who was smiling with a sense of relief sitting lightly on her. It was done. The graduation was over, and she held her diploma in her hand.

“Quite the accomplishment, Bethany. Your mom tells me that you used grants and a work-study to make your way through your bachelor’s?”

She nodded and moved back, wrapping an arm around her mom’s shoulders as they walked to the car. Various friends called out to her, and she responded in between talking with Kent and her mother.

“Yes. I was very lucky not to have to apply for loans during the last four years. A lot of my friends are leaving today with forty to eighty thousand dollars hanging over their heads. I can’t imagine.”

“Debt is the devil for sure.” He smiled and held the car door open for her as she got in the back. He opened the door for her mother as Bethany relaxed against the new-smelling leather of his Lexus. She didn’t know much about Kent, but what she had seen she liked quite a bit.

He was classy and old school, always holding the door open and shaking hands with people. His smile was warm and kind, his eyes dark and full of mystery. He would take some getting used to, as the only man in Bethany’s mother’s life had been her weasel of a father. Her mom had just about written off men for good until her older sister, Bethany’s aunt, Patty, introduced her to Kent.

“Hungry, girls?” Kent turned and looked over at Bethany, his right arm extending to hold hands with her mom.

A smile touched Bethany’s mouth as she nodded. How nice would it be to find someone like him to take care of her mom?

How nice would it be to find someone like him to take care of her? She scoffed internally and engaged in the surface-level conversation as they drove to the restaurant.

Bethany sat up as the car pulled to the front of the large building, a valet rushing to open her and her mother's doors. She got out, and her mom looked over at her as Kent spoke with another valet.

"Kent's paying, so get whatever you want, baby. This is your day." She smiled and held out her left hand, a large engagement ring on her finger.

"Oh my God, Mom. He had the ring already?"

"He sure did, and I said yes. We'll get married on the beach in Jamaica in three weeks. We just want you and his two boys to come with us. You can each bring someone if you want, and if not, just come, and we'll have some family fun."

Bethany stood there, her mouth half hanging open as Kent walked around the car and put an arm around her mother.

"I see your mom told you the good news."

"She sure did. Congratulations! How exciting."

He smiled and moved them toward the restaurant. "It's given me a whole new outlook on life. But today is about you. We'll talk about the wedding next week. We want you to come spend the week with us, meet the boys and such."

"Of course. I'd love to."

CHAPTER 4



BETHANY

At first, she was hesitant to order anything off the menu, the prices ridiculous for a simple graduation meal. Her mom ordered a salad for herself, and Bethany followed suit, but the bread bowl was calling her name. She waited until Kent reached out and took a piece, offering it to her next.

“So, Mom tells me that you’re an accountant as well?” Bethany passed the bread to her mom, her eyes on the newest member of her soon-to-be family.

“I have a degree in accounting and a doctorate in law. It’s a passion of mine, but my company is actually an accounting firm, which is something I wanted to talk with you about.” He smiled and looked over at Bethany’s mother as if asking permission for something. Her mom smiled shyly, and he reached over and took her hand under the table.

“Oh yeah? That’s great news. I’d love to talk accounting with you; just don’t tell anyone how nerdy I am. I keep that locked down most days.” She smiled as her mother chided her.

Kent sat back, the look on his face giving her peace.

“Your mother tells me that you’re headed to your master’s program in a month and are looking for some financial assistance.”

She wasn’t quite sure how to respond. His statement was completely true, and yet she felt like a beggar admitting that she couldn’t pay her own way. She glanced at her mom, whose eyes seem to press her toward the message of honesty and transparency.

“Yes. My grants only cover a third of my expenses, and getting a job is my next step. I don’t mind getting a job, but most firms would require me to work full-time. I could work somewhere non-accounting, that’s part time, but I wouldn’t make nearly enough money to live off of.”

Kent was nothing like she expected for a billionaire. Her mother might be aware of her new fiancé’s wealth, but Bethany doubted it. She’d done her research, though, and knew that McKenzie and Bryant Accounting LLC was a cash cow. If Kent wasn’t worth at least thirty billion dollars, Bethany would be surprised. Still, he was far too down to earth, far from what she expected a billionaire to act like. They were supposed to be greedy and self-serving, manipulative and spoiled.

Maybe he was exactly that, and they had yet to see it. Only time would tell.

“What about this—” He paused and sat up to the table, his eyes filled with something like excitement. “I’ll pick up the tab for the funds that you’re lacking, and you come work at M and Bs three days a week in the morning or afternoon, whatever your schedule allows you to commit to us.”

Bethany sat in shock for a minute, his offer way more than generous. She looked at her mom, who was beaming like they’d won the lottery, and in a way, she guessed they had.

The smile on Kent’s handsome face caused Bethany’s lips to lift, and she nodded before she realized what she was doing.

“Deal. Would I be working for you?”

“No, your new brother, Damon. Smart as a whip, but you’ll love him. The two of you have a tremendous amount in common. He’s brilliant and driven, hardworking and very devoted to success.”

“Sounds perfect, hmm, Beth?” Her mom beamed.

“More than perfect.” She swallowed the lump in her throat, the bread from her plate helping to push down the feeling that perhaps she was making a mistake.

She hated spoiled, frat boy alpha males. Surely her soon-to-be stepbrother was more like his father and less like the image in her head. Of course, her mom had called him an *ass*, so maybe not.

“Good. You start on Monday.”



Monday came far too fast. Bethany had spent the weekend packing up a few things to stay with her mom and Kent at his house for her week's vacation. Too bad her vacation had turned into a new job and a possible asshole boss to deal with.

Her mom had taken her shopping on Sunday for some new clothes, Kent more than happy to lend his credit card to the adventure.

She finished buttoning the white short-sleeved shirt her mother had gushed over in the dressing room, her black pencil skirt accentuating the thickening backside she was starting to hate. Bethany growled and ran her hands over the curves of her rear, her hair long and loose around her shoulders, makeup light but still obvious. She had on black heels and various accents of crimson jewelry.

Her stepfather gave her the thumbs-up as she walked into the kitchen Monday morning. “Just let Martha know what you'd like to eat, and she'll whip it up for you. You look perfectly professional.” Kent smiled and pointed to the kitchen, from which the smell of something delicious wafted toward her.

Bethany's stomach growled in protest, and they laughed together as she turned and walked quickly toward the kitchen.

Nervousness sat heavy on her, her worry over meeting her new boss nothing compared to having to pretend to approve of her new stepbrother. She would play the game for a little while, but if he was a jerk like she imagined he might be, she would be more than happy to put him in his place.

After a quick breakfast of juice, eggs, and toast, she climbed into her small Honda, her mom blowing her a kiss from the front door.

Kent's house was a mansion three times over, the number of rooms making it feel more like a hotel. Her mom hadn't moved out of her own small, two-bedroom house on the other side of Dallas, and they had decided that, for the week of *vacation*, she and her mom would stay with Kent at his place. Good thing. Her mom most likely had stale cereal and low-fat milk as the most appetizing breakfast option. Bethany shuddered at the thought.



Bethany drove in nervous silence, the sound of the traffic around her offering a bit of balm to her beating heart. It had been a while since she'd had to try to impress someone. All of the professors in the business center knew her, and her reputation preceded her thanks to tutoring often and being part of the honors fraternity.

This was a whole new situation. She'd have to impress her new stepbrother, and something told her that would be more difficult than she wanted it to be.

Not having any siblings of her own, she wasn't even sure how to approach their new relationship but figured her best bet was to respect him as her boss, and if something familial grew from that, all the better. Forcing something wasn't her style at all, her heart set on impressing people with her intelligence and wit no matter the audience.

Bethany pulled into the visitor parking, an elderly cop moving toward her and motioning for her to lower the window. The large building above them reaching high into the sky, as most of the other buildings in the business district in downtown did.

"Where ya headed, miss?" He leaned down, a smile lifting the furry mustache on his upper lip.

“I’m starting my internship with McKenzie and Bryant today. I hope I’m in the right place.” She looked around for a sign, nothing but plain concrete walls surrounding them.

“You’re in the right place. Go to the fourth floor or above in the garage, and make sure you don’t park in a reserved spot. Take the ticket the little machine up there spits out at you, and have the receptionist validate it for ya.” He moved back and motioned for her to go on through. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Bethany mumbled as she rolled up her window, and the car crept toward the small ticket dispenser. Excitement mixed with fear rushed up her chest, her breathing reminding her of the need to exercise. She usually didn’t get hyped up about things, but this was a whole new ballgame. Not having an interview with Damon left her without a clue of who it was that she would be answering to. Her mom’s comments about Kent’s oldest son left her stomach in knots.

She parked and reached in to pull her purse from the passenger seat, hitting her head on the rearview mirror and cursing at herself. She moved out of the car and walked quickly toward the elevator sign.

The heat in Texas in late August was painful. If she wasn’t careful, her hair would turn into something Tina Turner might be proud to sport. Reaching up, she tugged her fingers through the silky strands and slipped into the elevator with the *two million* other people who were headed toward the large building above them. It looked like hell had opened its gates for a quick drink of ice water.

She filed out, people rushing around her and checking their watches. Bethany looked around, trying to get her bearings before noticing a large sign on the wall that displayed a map. She moved toward it, working not to get run over by the suits that filled the large lobby. McKenzie and Bryant was on the twenty-eighth floor, the view from their windows most likely incredible.

She walked toward the correct elevator and got in at the last minute, the door closing behind her. She turned to face away from the crowd and exhaled softly, fear of the unknown

almost consuming her. The door opened a few times for other floors, and she shifted to the left and right, trying to be polite and waiting her turn.

Finally, the light for the twenty-eighth floor lit up, and the door opened, Bethany moving off with a short, squatty male who looked a little older than her. He pulled a badge from his waist and swiped it on the reader on the wall by the door. He held the door open and smiled at Bethany. “New today?”

“I sure am.” She moved toward him, a smile on her lips as she held her purse on her shoulder. “I’m supposed to check in with the receptionist.”

He moved into the large lobby behind her and shifted to her side. “I’m Ben. Nice to meet you.”

“Bethany Miller. Nice to meet you, too.” She looked around, realizing that the receptionist desk was just behind her.

“Well, good luck today, and if you need a tour, I’m in office 1014.” He smiled and walked off.

Bethany turned to greet the receptionist. “Hi, I’m a new intern.”

The receptionist looked up and held up her finger, her long red nail quite out of place for a professional environment. Bethany apologized and moved to sit in one of the small leather chairs just beside the woman’s desk. A few minutes later, the lady called Bethany back up.

“New intern, did you say?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Bethany stood and moved toward the desk, the woman standing and fiddling with some papers below her.

“Bethany Miller?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Stop calling me ma’am. Makes me feel old.” The lady smiled, but it failed to reach her eyes. “You’re going to be in that conference room right over there. Here’s a packet of stuff you need to fill out, and Mr. Bryant will call you up when he’s available. Human Resources will want some of your time

today, so make sure to stick around after you see the boss man. We'll get you an office and all that good stuff, too."

Bethany thanked the woman and walked toward the room, her shoulders and back aching as stress stiffened her. Sitting down in the large black leather chair, she pulled out a pen and began to work on the items in front of her.

The receptionist poked her head in a few minutes later, her knuckles rapping on the door and causing Bethany to jump.

"Sorry. Mr. Bryant is ready for you. Just go up the elevator to the thirtieth floor. His receptionist, Linda, will get you in to see him."

She walked off, and Bethany stood, putting the papers together and shoving them in the folder. She hated like hell that her hands trembled. She'd have to keep them in her lap in front of Damon. No way was she letting him on to the nervousness that tore up her insides.

"Here goes nothing ..."

CHAPTER 5



BETHANY

Linda was far too good looking to be a secretary, or Damon was the asshole her mother had warned her about. Bethany hated to judge a book by its cover, but the tall blonde model posing as a receptionist had been incredibly sexual—just in showing Bethany to Damon’s office, her words almost purred. Bethany thanked her and shivered in disgust as the door closed. Apparently, Damon was down the hall and would be back shortly.

Taking advantage of the few moments she had, Bethany walked around the large executive office. The windows lined the walls of half of the office from floor to ceiling. The view was spectacular, and she wanted to see it at night, the lights of the city a beautiful spectacle, no doubt.

Pictures of three men accented the wall behind Damon’s large cherrywood desk, one of them being Kent and the others Damon and his brother. She picked up one of the photos of the three men smiling at the camera, their golf shirts showing that they were at an event together.

“Oh shit. Please let the goofy-looking one be Damon.”

She sat the picture down and moved toward the door, the sound of him coming in causing her heart to race. His voice was deep, the timbre of it commanding and firm.

“I’ll be busy for the next twenty minutes, Linda. No interruptions unless the building is burning down.”

The door closed, and Bethany turned from the window, her heart sinking at the image before her. It wasn’t the goofy

brother but the devilishly handsome one. The one that caused hearts to stop and panties to disintegrate with a look. His dark hair was combed on the sides and a bit messy on the top, the smirk on his lips giving her something later to dream about inappropriately. His blue shirt was fitted, the thick muscles of his arms and chest contracting as he simply walked toward her.

She moved in his direction, extending her hand, a soft smile on her lips as she watched his dark brown eyes move from her face to her toes and back up again.

“Hi. I’m Bethany.”

He stopped in front of her and shook her hand, tilting his head slightly to the side.

“I expected you to be a little more mousy. Pleasant surprise, I suppose.” He shook her hand, his face a mask of indifference. “Damon Bryant. Have a seat.”

He moved around her, and she turned, walking toward the chair and praying like hell she’d make it before her legs gave out. Her knees shook slightly as her heart beat wildly in her chest.

The picture had been a sad representation of the man before her. The scent of his cologne lingered in the air, and she breathed in deeply, coveting it.

She sat down, pressing her knees together and letting her purse slide from her fingers onto the floor beside her. She wanted to jump in and start the conversation, but he simply demanded the lead, and she couldn’t help but let him have it. She bit her lip, stopping the minute she realized he was focused on her mouth.

“My father tells me that you’re a brilliant accountant and that you’re here to make my life easier.”

“I’m grateful for the opportunity to help.”

“So tell me, Bethany, are you brilliant?” He sat up, leaning forward as he studied her.

Something about his gaze made her feel as if she were nude, bare before him. A nervous tic caused her foot to bounce

to the rhythm of her heartbeat, her mind racing for the most appropriate answer.

“I graduated near the top of my class in both high school and college.”

“I didn’t ask that. I asked if you were brilliant.”

“Yes?” she whispered, her voice hiding from her.

This was embarrassing, humiliating. What the hell was wrong with her? She had sat in front of professors and state regulators for the board of public accountancy. She had never lost her footing before. She spoke again just before he started to, the look on his handsome face pensive.

“Yes. I am brilliant.”

“Good.” He watched her for a minute more before turning to the blinking light on his phone. “Forgive me for a minute. I need to take this.”

She nodded and diverted her attention toward the windows, her chest screaming for air. She hadn’t realized she had been holding her breath and worked to let it go quietly.

Damon was sensual and strong, dark and handsome, much more so than anyone she had ever encountered. Remembering that he was soon to be her new stepbrother was important, not that anything would happen between the two of them. He was probably six to eight years older than her and far out of her league. He made the sexy blonde in the foyer pale in comparison.

Bethany tried not to listen to Damon’s conversation but couldn’t help it.

“I know, Bridget. Yes, tonight will be fine. Eight o’clock at Pallinda’s. Wear the blue dress for me and the black heels that you know I love.”

Bethany looked over at him, his eyes on her as he spoke. His predatory gaze made her feel as if she were under a microscope, his attention almost heavy, as her skin broke out in goosebumps. She averted her eyes again toward the window, needing to get some air before she screamed.

“No, you know I don’t like it when you wear panties. No, not even the little ones. Too restraining.”

Bethany’s head snapped back forward, her eyes large and wide as Damon simply stared at her. His expression was soft and lacking emotion as if he were ordering a pizza in front of her. She swallowed hard, her eyes moving to the tug of his bottom lip, his teeth biting along the edge of it. She stood and moved toward the window, her level of comfort completely gone.

“That’s right. Blue dress, black heels, and don’t bother with your panties. I’m not interested.”

The sound of the phone hitting the cradle caused her to stiffen.

He was an ass.

If he’d had any respect for Bethany or himself, he would have held his conversation in private. She turned and looked over her shoulder, her breathing ragged and obvious.

“Bethany, I have certain needs as the CFO of this company. If you’re here to make my life easier, then you’ll quickly learn them. Your brilliance will get you far, but if you and I aren’t on the same page with things, then my father will be your champion instead of me and good luck with that.”

The implication of his words sent a chill down her spine.

“And what are your needs?” She turned slowly, crossing her arms over her chest as the door to his office cracked open, and Linda stuck her head in.

“I know you said no interruptions, but your father’s on the phone.”

“Thank you.” He looked toward Bethany as a smile lifted the side of his perfect mouth. “Soon enough. Linda will show you to your new office. Plan on having lunch with me tomorrow so we can talk about the various positions I’m going to put you in.”

He turned and sat down at his desk, the conversation over.

Bethany walked toward his desk, leaning over and picking up her purse as her mind spun out of control. She walked to the door stiffly, questions running rampant at the saucy innuendo Damon had thrown her way.

Surely he hadn't meant...

She stopped just before slipping through the door, the sound of his voice wrapping around her.

“Oh, and Bethany. You'll enjoy every one of those positions, and I'll do my best to make this a stimulating experience for us both.” He bit subtly at his top lip and watched her closely, Bethany nodding and slipping through the open door.

She was in too deep already.

CHAPTER 6



BETHANY

Bethany moved toward her new office like a zombie, her mind trying desperately to work through the last few words her stepbrother Damon had spoken to her. His voice had been filled with conviction, the seriousness of his gaze leaving her to wonder if he hadn't meant everything simply from a business perspective.

He had certain needs, and she would be required to know them and fulfill them, as it seemed every other woman in the company was busy trying to do.

Did Kent know that his son was pimping out the women of their accounting firm for his own perverted desires?

Or had Damon simply meant that, as the CFO, he would need her to be on her toes, to work fast, like he did, and keep on top of things? Those were needs, too... Maybe she was trying to make something sexual out of it because he was by far the most good-looking man she'd seen in her short life.

"Here's your office. The laptop is yours to take with you. The cords are all there, and the phone is already set up." The receptionist turned and extended a golden key, her long nails almost covering up the small item. "Here's your key. You'll need to go tomorrow and get a badge. You're not in the system yet, but Linda will work on that later today for you."

"Thanks." Bethany took the key and moved into the large office, looking over her shoulder as the woman lingered in the doorway. "Do all of the interns have offices this big?"

“No, but you must have impressed someone. Usually, three of them share an office this big.” The other woman smiled, lipstick staining her teeth. Bethany almost told her but thought better of it.

“Okay. Thank you again. I’ll reach out if I need help.”

“Your best bet is to call Ben. He’s the intern coordinator for the audit side. I would think you’d be starting off there.”

“I’m not entirely sure, to be honest, but I’ll call Ben.” Bethany smiled as the receptionist shrugged and turned to go.

Her thoughts slipped back to Damon, her conversation with him raring back to life in her mind. Perhaps he hadn’t meant that she’d be filling his sexual needs, but his reference to putting her in various positions and making it stimulating and enjoyable for them both?

“Come on ...” she whispered, taking a seat and leaning back, her skin flushed with the idea of being naked beneath him. He was far too much man for her. Of that she was sure.

“He’s your freaking stepbrother too. Get ahold of yourself.” She huffed, looking up to see Ben standing in her door with a friendly smile on his face.

“You always talk to yourself?”

“Yep. Only person I’ve found that isn’t quick to disagree with my opinions.” She laughed and motioned for him to come in.

“Oh really? Seems like the greatest struggle I have is convincing myself to do something.” He sat down in the chair in front of her, his expression open and calm.

Bethany let her thoughts of Damon go by the wayside; the inappropriateness of having those thoughts at work caused her no small amount of discomfort.

“Too funny. So the receptionist told me that you’re the intern coordinator.”

“That I am. I asked Damon if I could have a few more things on my plate, and he was happy to supply them.” Ben shrugged, his cheeks coloring pink.

“You don’t have enough work around here?” She smiled, jabbing at him about the overload of work he was probably pushing around. If she’d learned one thing in school, it was that accounting firms of all sizes were sweatshops. You got in and killed yourself until you limped out. The dark circles under Ben’s swollen eyes told her his story was in line with her assumptions.

“I have plenty of work, but I’m a single guy, so it’s important for me to get out and socialize. I’m originally from Seattle and haven’t met too many people yet. Kent brought me down here to help establish a special service line that we’ll be starting later this year.”

“Interesting. So managing the interns gives you a chance to get out of the office for happy hours and get to know people.”

“Exactly.” He smiled and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms over his portly stomach. “Speaking of ... there’s a new club in town that the interns are wanting to check out as a group on Thursday night. We thought instead of happy hour at one of the local pubs we’d go see what the rage is all about.”

“What’s the name of the place?” Bethany leaned forward, pressing her forearms to her desk, her interest piqued. Having been in college just down the street for the last few years, there weren’t too many places she didn’t know about.

“It’s called Masquerade.” He shrugged, his smile the only thing giving away his level of excitement. “You don’t have to dress up special, but if you get on the dance floor, then you’re required to wear a mask like you would at a ball.”

“Weird. Is it new?”

“Yep. Just opened two weeks ago. I swear, it’s all anyone’s talking about.”

“I’m in. I need to get out, and I’d love to meet the rest of the interns. Does anyone go with us, or is it just interns?”

“Sometimes the boss man will make an appearance, but I highly doubt it since it’s a club. His party days are over, I think. He works far too hard to enjoy life much.” Ben shook

his head as if disappointed in Damon for his unwillingness to live a little.

Bethany sat quietly for a moment, the thought of Damon not living seeming impossible. From the conversation he'd had on the phone with his girlfriend, it seemed that he was *living* a lot. To tell a girl to wear a certain dress and heels was one thing, but to command her to leave her panties at home? Hot *and* disturbing.

She could see her and Damon in her afternoon fantasies.

“Why the faraway look?” Ben asked, his short chuckle bringing Bethany back to the present.

“Hmmm?”

“You look like you're lost in thought.”

“Oh, just trying to deal with all of the transitions in my life. Sorry. Didn't sleep too well last night. I was nervous like crazy about this morning.”

“I bet. It's not only graduation for you but a new family and your first accounting job, right?”

“How did you know?” She tilted her head to the side, her smile dropping as she tried to understand who else knew about her and Damon being family soon.

Ben held his hands up, standing and shaking his head as he backed toward the door.

“I'm the only one. I get a full rundown on you guys from the boss man because I'm in charge of the program. I only know what I just shared, though, so no worries about a bulletin board being up with your info for all to see.” He laughed, and Bethany did too, liking him for his transparency, above all.

“Damon told you about his father and my mother?”

“Yeah, and a little about you. I'm pretty excited to have you join us. Graduating near the top of UT's accounting program is a big deal.”

“Thanks. It felt like a great accomplishment. I'm starting my master's in a few weeks. Just trying to pay for it.”

“I totally understand.” He moved just outside of the door, his hands reaching up to grip the frame. “So, you’re with us on Thursday night?”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

“Any questions so far?”

She bit her lip, wondering if she should ask Ben about Damon’s sensual responses, question him on how Damon plays ball in the office. She could tell the man before her respected their boss, but she wondered if part of that wasn’t a bromance in the works. Damon had looks and money, prestige and power—everything any man would want.

“What’s the story with Damon?”

“What do you mean?” Ben took a few steps back into her office, moving to lean against the bookshelf. It groaned under his weight but held him.

“I just mean that he has a sexy secretary and he seems to be dating a very attractive blonde ... I don’t know. Never mind.” She shrugged, heat rising to her face. She reached up and rubbed her cheeks, her embarrassment obvious.

“No, I don’t mind answering. I think Linda was someone Mr. Bryant, Damon’s father, hired. I honestly didn’t think Damon was dating anyone, but it’s good to hear. He needs to spend a little bit of time away from this place. His dad is looking at retiring in a few years, and Damon is the next in line, I guess.”

“What about Seattle? Did you work for them up there or for someone else?”

“Them. They have a small accounting shop up there, mostly taxes, but it’s a good learning experience. I’m originally from Seattle, so it was a natural transition to go to work for them. Damon and I spent some time in college together, though he’s a lot older than me. He was a Kappa Alpha, and I was pledging his last year as president.”

“He was Kappa Alpha?” Totally made sense.

“Yeah, we both were.” He shrugged and looked around the empty office. “You need to put your diploma and a few pictures up in here. You dating as well?”

“Me? No. I wish ... I just haven’t found the right guy.”

“I hear you. I’m looking for the right girl, but when you put in a million hours, it’s hard to meet her.” He paused and let his gaze fall back on Bethany. “Did Damon do something that made you uncomfortable, or were you just questioning his loving on blondes?”

She stood, stretching and reaching up to cover her mouth as she yawned.

“He just said a few things that seemed kind of ... suggestive, but maybe that’s because I don’t know him. He’s my stepbrother or will be soon, so I’m just trying to figure out who he is.”

Ben laughed and moved back to the door, looking over his shoulder. “He’s a great guy, very professional. If he seems to be flirtatious, it’s just because he’s a friendly guy. Half the interns would sell their souls to the devil to have him glance at them, but he’s just not willing. I’ve never heard him say, or seen him do, anything that would cause me to question his ethics.”

“Very good. I’m happy to be here, and I’m in for Thursday.”

“Call if you need anything. You have lunch plans today?”

“I’m going to catch up on getting this stuff together. I had a huge breakfast.”

“Suit yourself. I’ll see you later, I’m sure. Just down the hall if you need me.”

“Thanks, Ben.”

She smiled and waited until he was gone before plopping down in her chair. Ben would have a heart attack if she repeated the *panty* conversation she’d overheard. He’d been playing with her, talking like that in front of her. He wasn’t the

perfectly professional guy that Ben thought he was. Did that make him a creep?

Maybe he was just interested in her.

“He’s your stepbrother, for fuck’s sake.”

She growled and turned to her computer, her phone buzzing with a new text message. It was her mother letting her know that they’d be having company for dinner. Her new brother would be dropping by to get to know Bethany better.

Damon was coming to dinner?

“Crap,” she whispered. The handsome alpha was already on her mind much more than she was comfortable with. Too bad she wasn’t blonde. She tugged at a strand of her hair, wondering what she’d look like as a blonde.

She rolled her eyes at her wayward thoughts and dove into the complicated accounting technology the firm used—no guide available or needed.

CHAPTER 7



BETHANY

Bethany packed up at around six, grumbling over the fact that her mother had called twice during the last hour of work. She placed her laptop into the nice black bag that they'd left for her, which had the firm logo embroidered into it.

Nervousness tugged at her stomach as she walked through the halls, her eyes moving about to ensure that if Damon walked out of an open office, she'd be prepared to encounter him.

He probably thought she was a child, a young girl with too many brains and not enough courage to speak up. She should have called his ass on the rug for talking with his girlfriend inappropriately in front of her, but truth be known, she could only dream of a man like him demanding something of her.

Her pathetic friendship with Jake rolled across her thoughts as she walked languidly to the elevator. She squeezed in as the doors opened and had to apologize when she stepped on a beautiful red-haired girl's toe. The girl, who was about Bethany's age, merely huffed.

Bethany turned and put her hands in front of her waist, clasping her fingers together and trying to not take up too much space.

The door opened, and she moved out, Jake on her mind again. He had been a great guy and yet had no drive to reach out and press her to a wall. He had wanted her for the last two years, she knew without a doubt, and yet he never pressed her to do anything with him. Maybe if he had, things would have

been different between them. She didn't want an alpha male dick forcing her to *do* anything, but a dominant male putting himself out there with commands and demands that only she could fulfill?

She groaned softly at the thought.



The ride home was quick, the sun still shining late into the Texas evening. Bethany pulled up to Kent's large home. The circle drive was ornate, and the house was framed by vibrant pink roses. The white brick gave the house a regal appearance, not to mention the bellboy who opened her door and took her keys from her. He was a few years younger than her and horribly shy. He spoke quickly; his eyes averted as if he were warned not to look at her.

She thanked him and walked into the house, her mom walking down the hall toward her with a huge grin on her face.

"There's my working girl. Tell me all about it!" Her mother stopped in front of her, pulling her into a tight hug.

Bethany returned the gesture, feeling as if she were eight again and had just gotten home from elementary school. Her mom had a way of ushering in memories, good and bad.

"It was great. Met some new friends and got invited to go out Thursday night with the other interns. Should be fun." She moved back from her mom, looking toward the kitchen and breathing in deeply. "You said my new stepbrother was coming by tonight? We talking about Damon?"

"Nope. The handsome one," a male voice sounded behind her.

Bethany turned and smiled at the tall, goofy-looking guy that moved toward her. He was cute in his own way, his body a bit fluffier than she might like, but his blond hair and blue eyes made up for it. The smile on his face was beautiful and reached to his eyes, the brightness in those eyes making Bethany return the gesture.

She extended her hand as her mother introduced them. “Bethany, your almost-stepbrother Matthew.”

Matthew moved past her hand and pulled her up into a big hug, Bethany wrapping her arms around him and looking at her mom as the big guy squeezed the air from her lungs.

“Matt, put her down, Son.” Kent walked out of the study to their left as Matthew sat Bethany down, her laughter feeling good—right.

“It’s okay. I like hugs. I just haven’t had such a big one before.”

Matt winked and looked toward Kent. “Time to eat. The appetizers are all done.” He extended his bent arm toward Bethany and bowed slightly. “Care to accompany me, my lady?”

She smiled at Kent as he started to respond again, her mother stepping up to hush him.

Matt had something a little off about him, but Bethany didn’t mind at all. He was the exact opposite of Damon, which left her a little curious about their moms. Perhaps they only shared one parent.

“I’m thinking we have bruschetta with those little toasts and nachos for the starter.” He looked down at her and smiled. “You’re very pretty. I guess I’ll have to buy a gun or get a big stick to beat the boys back from you.”

She laughed and walked into the kitchen, letting his arm go as she took a seat at the bar that looked over the large room. Martha, the cook, looked over her shoulder and smiled at them.

“Matthew, get out the ranch from the refrigerator. The girl is more than capable of taking care of herself. No need to play the role of the overprotective brother to a girl who’s in her twenties, the age when you’re actually looking to get married.”

“Oh, she’s not looking to get married. She’s a career woman, Martha.” Bethany’s mom moved up beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as Kent moved into the kitchen.

“Smart girl. The career first and then a love life.” He turned and almost ran into Matthew, the scowl on his face leaving Bethany with the impression that perhaps his younger son wasn’t his favorite of the two.

“Thank you again for the chance at McKenzie and Bryant. I had a great day today and enjoyed meeting Damon.”

Matt sighed loudly, a silly smile on his lips as Kent looked over at him with a warning on his features.

“You met Damon? God help you. Was he an ass, or did he put his mask on?” Matt pulled at the air in front of him, pretending to slip on a mask before he started to prance around the kitchen like a villain of sorts.

Bethany couldn’t help but chuckle as her mom responded with the same sound beside her.

“I did, and I liked him.”

Bethany shrugged as Matt turned to her, his hands pressing against his hips as he cocked his head to the side.

“Everyone loves Damon. He’s the handsome, smart one.”

“You’re handsome too. Did you take your meds? You are awfully hyper today, boy.” Martha poked at Matt with the end of a wooden spoon before moving to fill the counter in front of Bethany with appetizers.

She reached up and started to dig in, Matt moving in beside her as her mother moved toward Kent.

“Well, Damon is a little rough around the edges, but he was quite impressed by you, which is saying a lot.” Kent looked over at Bethany as he popped a carrot in his mouth.

“That’s good to hear. I think I’m going to enjoy learning from him.”

“Yes, well, let’s hope that’s all you do. He’s crazy about a girl with dark hair and green eyes,” Matt said as Kent reached over and popped him with a towel.

“Leave your brother alone. He’s not here to defend himself from your empty accusations. Besides, Bethany is going to be

his sister. He has limits to his actions—mostly.”

Bethany found herself shocked at the notion that Damon hadn't been smitten with the various blondes that seemed to populate most of the office. Ben had filled her in on the fact that Linda, Damon's beautiful secretary, was Kent's hire and not Damon's. Not that it mattered at all. He was off limits, he was taken, and he was family.

Matt picked up a few nachos, balancing them on his hand as he nodded toward the back patio.

“Let's go watch the sunset. I love how well you can see it from the terrace here. My place is in the city, so there isn't much to see above the smog.” He smiled and moved toward the back door.

Bethany grabbed a small plate and loaded it up with enough nachos for both of them before joining him. Her mom called after her to be careful, but she ignored it. Be careful of what? The mosquitoes?

Matt walked out and held the door for her, moving to the side and reaching to steal a nacho from her plate. They walked to the end of the terrace, two large lounge chairs sitting there as if waiting on them.

“It's beautiful out here.” The energy in Matt's voice dimmed, his spirit seeming much calmer than only moments ago.

She sat down and looked over at him; his expression was filled with peace.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” He smiled at her, reaching for the plate. “I just act like a spaz in front of my father. I hate the idea of wearing a suit and working in a high-rise building, no offense. I act like a goober, and he doesn't consider me when something comes open. He focuses on Damon, and I have my freedom.”

It made so much sense. She smiled at how well he'd played his cards.

Taking a small bite of the nacho in her fingers she looked out at the long stretch of property before them, the crimson sun tugging the colors of evening toward the edge of the world with its descent.

“I love accounting and don’t mind the big buildings, I guess.”

“I love drawing and painting. I’m the artsy one in the family. My mother was a painter, so at least I get it honestly.” He shrugged and sat back, handing the plate back to her with only two nachos left.

She laughed, and he turned his head toward her. “What?”

“You ate most of our snack. Pig.”

He laughed loudly, the sound causing her to laugh too. Matt was exactly the kind of guy she could see herself being a sister to. Damon, on the other hand, was the farthest stretch of her sensual fantasies and going to be trouble, but Matt ... he was a big kid. Good thing she still felt like one herself most days of the week.

“I was hungry.” He reached over and pushed at her shoulder playfully. “Tell me for realz. Did you like Damon? Was he nice or rude as all get out?”

“He was professional, sort of. I mean he wasn’t rude but very much focused on business.”

“What do you mean ‘sort of professional’? Did he hit on you?”

Her throat tightened; the idea of talking about the conversation with his real brother and Matt perhaps telling Damon that she’d mentioned it was more than she could bear.

Honestly, the conversation had turned her on, and more than once that afternoon she’d imagined him forbidding her to wear panties under her black pencil skirt. Her body burned at the idea of someone with the balls to demand something of the sort. A touch of jealousy hit her as she thought of the girl on the phone, sitting with Damon at a restaurant.

“Hello ... earth to Beth.”

“Sorry. He just had a conversation with his girlfriend that was, well, it was sexy.”

“He doesn’t have a girlfriend.”

“I’m pretty sure he does.” Bethany picked up a chip and offered him the plate, Matt grabbing the last one and eating it quickly as if she might change her mind.

“Whatever you say, but I know my brother, and he’s commitment phobic.”



Bethany and Matt chatted for a few more minutes before dinner was served. She wanted so badly to ask him about his mom, as he had briefly mentioned her, but she let it slide. Now wasn’t the time, in the middle of a family dinner. As soon as dessert was cleared, Matt stood and stretched, promising to come back the next night for dinner if they would have him. His father assured him he would.

Bethany stood and offered her bent arm to Matt. “Might I walk you to the door, sir?”

“Most certainly, my lady.”

He took her arm and walked with her, skipping here and there to keep his mental act up. They stopped at the door, and he turned to her, pulling her into another breath-depleting bear hug. She laughed as he sat her down and tipped a fake hat.

“Behave, as much as possible, and if not, pretend it’s because you didn’t take your meds.” He winked and slipped out the door, Bethany thrilled to have him as an almost member of her family. He was just what she needed.

Damon, on the other hand, wasn’t.

CHAPTER 8



BETHANY

Bethany showered quickly before blow drying her long chestnut hair, the straightener a godsend in the Texas summer heat. She finished getting her hair to behave and put on a little makeup before walking into her adjoining room and getting dressed. A light blue suit with cream-colored lapels and lining made her look like a fashion icon from the fifties. It was elegant and yet demanded attention. She put on her favorite earrings and slipped on her cream-colored heels, the height of them accentuating her leg muscles. She loved feeling pretty and yet couldn't seem to find a reason to dress up most days of the week.

Her internship was going to spoil her.

Bethany walked to the kitchen, Martha handing her a plate with two breakfast tacos and salsa on it. She moved the plate to her face and breathed in deeply, the smell divine. Her stomach protested loudly, and she sat down at the bar for a quick breakfast. She didn't notice Martha watching her as she ate quickly, her concern not getting anything on her outfit.

"You haven't had the easiest of lives, have you, Miss?"

Bethany looked up, slowing her rapid chewing a little and reaching for the silky white napkin sitting beside her. She wiped her lips and reached to pick up her orange juice. She took a quick sip and sighed with relief, her gaze moving to the older Hispanic woman as she smiled.

"My father was a drug dealer and took everything from us when I was twelve. My mom's worked very hard to try and put

food on the table, but most days it was just one meal. I'm not sure I want to get used to eating again, though."

"Why is that?"

"It hurts too much when it's gone again." Bethany rubbed at her chest, just above her heart. She had dealt with poverty so long that surely it was just around the corner in this new fairy tale and would jump out and cause everything to crash down around them.

"You don't have to worry about that, child. Mr. Bryant loves your mom."

"My dad said he did too. Who knows, right? Better to prepare for the worst and find yourself pleasantly surprised than hope for something that never comes."

"Well, I think that's pretty negative, but I'll keep my opinion to myself. You want another taco, sweetie?"

"No. I won't fit in my suit if you keep feeding me, Martha."

"Then we'll buy you another one."

The chef laughed and moved to busy herself with something on the stove as Bethany finished her breakfast, enjoying it to the last bit that she licked from her fingers. It was weird to be in the midst of wealth after such a long life of wanting for everything.

One thing was for sure—Bethany would never end up with someone who was rich. They wouldn't have anything in common. While a wealthy guy might be great for entertainment and sex, chances of him understanding her were slim. She couldn't shake the image of Damon from her thoughts, angst pressing against her at the idea that her new stepbrother was becoming her go-to fantasy.

"I need meds. I'll call Matthew." She smiled and slipped out of the house into the muggy mid-August morning.

The morning was less than eventful, Bethany feeling the pressure of anxiety over her lunch with Damon coming up so

quickly. She was supposed to meet him at his office at a quarter till eleven, and it was just a few minutes after ten. She checked her watch for the tenth time before getting up and walking toward the women's restroom. She would get a few assignments from Damon during lunch, and then she was slated to work with Ben a little that afternoon on a new service they were thinking about offering in the near future.

She reached out and pushed the women's restroom door, a loud protest on the other side as she scraped the door across some poor girl's foot.

"Oh my God. I'm so sorry."

Bethany moved into the bathroom and saw that the girl was bent over and rubbing her foot as she cursed.

A dark-haired Hispanic girl stood behind the injured girl with a scowl on her face. "You should watch where you're going. Jeez."

Bethany started to apologize again as the injured girl stood up and glared at her. It was the girl from the elevator, whose foot Bethany had stepped on the day before.

"I'm so sorry. I just didn't see you there." Bethany reached toward the girl to touch her shoulder, but the shapely girl jerked away from her.

"Well, maybe you should pay more attention, you big oaf." She sneered and looked back at her friend. "I hope I can still dance tomorrow. This clumsy chick has stepped on my foot and now trampled it with the door. Ridiculous."

"Totally. You must be the new intern."

"Yeah." Bethany moved around them, not trusting herself to take too much more abuse from either of them before retaliating. Both occurrences were accidents, and their nastiness was about to bring the bitch out in her. The last thing she wanted to do was explain to Kent or Damon why she'd punched the pretty redhead in the mouth.

"Just so you know, behemoth, your lunch with Damon doesn't mean shit. He takes each of us to lunch. You're nothing special, and he's not interested in you." She shrugged

as her friend echoed her thoughts with a sound of agreement, her hands on her hips as she glared at Bethany.

Bethany stared at them over her shoulder. “You mean he doesn’t like me, like me?”

“Um no. He likes me, if anybody. Don’t even try it. You aren’t even his type.” The redhead sneered again.

“Far too large and clumsy.” The Hispanic girl smiled menacingly and moved toward the door, holding it open. “Come on, Sadie, let’s go find a Band-Aid for your foot.”

“Shame,” Bethany whispered as if she cared and slipped into a stall. She’d get the girl when the time was right, but for now, planting seeds was plenty fun enough.

“Dumbass,” Bethany whispered, tugging at the suit and letting her thoughts take her to the center of a ring as Sadie got her ass handed to her. It would be too easy, but oh, so much fun.



“Good Morning, Bethany. Damon will be with you shortly; just take a seat over there.” Linda, Damon’s secretary, looked over the top of her desk and smiled with what could have been kindness. She was too sensual, and it left Bethany wondering about Kent’s thoughts when hiring the woman. Maybe she was just that way around other women? Surely not.

Damon’s door opened, and a short blonde with a pixie haircut and red lipstick walked out, a dizzy look to her as she turned and waved, as if in love. Damon moved out beside her, his hand on the small of her back as he looked over at Bethany. His finger brushed by his lips at the crimson lipstick that was smeared on the side of his mouth. Linda got up and walked to him, leaning over to wipe it for him as the woman walked away.

“Why does Miss Carrington insist on kissing you like an old-fashioned church woman? She’s in her thirties. I think she does it simply to kiss on you.” Linda moved back and shook

her head as Damon smirked, the man never seeming to smile. “Better. Your reservation at Cruz is for eleven fifteen. You want me to call them to bring your car around?”

“Yes, the Mercedes.” He looked over toward Bethany. “You ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.” She smiled and stood, walking toward him. She half wished he would offer his bent arm like his brother, Matthew, had done the night before. The difference between the two men almost left her with more questions than comfort.

Damon walked beside her, everyone they passed stopping to greet him and giving her the once-over. A conversation needed to start between them to deflate the awkwardness, but perhaps it only existed in her mind. Or maybe he enjoyed the feeling that someone was squirming because of him. Asshole.

He opened the door to the lobby and waited until she’d moved through to step up beside her. The elevator opened, and they squeezed in, him moving in behind her. He kept the space between them appropriate, but simply knowing that it was him that hovered over the back of her caused her skin to tingle, her body reacting without consent.

She needed to talk with Krista, tell her that her new stepbrother was everything she sexually wanted in a man. *Then* let the girl call her a prude.

She smiled as the door opened and then moved out, waiting for Damon to move up beside her.

“I heard you got to meet Matthew last night?”

“I did. I liked him a lot. He’s very down to earth.”

A smile touched the side of Damon’s mouth, the look softening his features. She had to wonder if there wasn’t more to him. Between Matt’s joking about him and Ben’s support of him, surely he wasn’t the monster he appeared to be. He opened the door again for her, and they walked out of the front of the building, the Mercedes waiting for them.

The bellhop held her door open, and Damon stood beside him; his father had obviously taught him the way of Southern

manners. She slipped into the car and watched him carefully as he moved around the front of the car to get in. Breathing in deeply, she enjoyed the smell of him. Woodsy and masculine, strong and sensual. His black pants hugged his legs and waist, the faded pink button-down shirt bringing out the darkness of his features. He got in and looked over at her.

“Steakhouse for lunch. Hope you’re hungry.”

“I’m always hungry.”

“My type of girl.” He looked over his shoulder, the long tanned slope of his neck far beyond kissable. She chided herself, hoping that she’d be able to keep it together for lunch. The excitement at finally feeling a deep sense of lust washed over her but was shortly followed by the stark reality that nothing would come of it. What would they have, a double wedding? Her mom and his dad with the two of them beside them?

Ridiculous.

Was she his type of girl? From what Matthew had confirmed the night before, her looks were right in the middle of the ballpark, and yet he seemed to focus on blondes.

“Let’s utilize every ounce of time we have together today.” He turned back in his seat and reached for a pair of dark sunglasses, looking even more sinful than he had a moment before.

“Sounds good to me. What is my first assignment?”

“First, my rules. I run the company, and my father has graciously trusted me to do things my way. I have several rules that everyone is aware of, and you’ll do well to remember them.”

Heat flushed her chest and raced up her neck at the condescension in his tone. She would have to suffer through lunch if he was going to put on his asshole cloak and be the man she expected he was.

“Okay. Tell me the rules. I’m happy to be compliant if they don’t impede on my morals.” She gave him a sideways glance,

hoping to convey that the ‘no panty’ rule didn’t apply to her. He looked over at her as a lovely smile lifted his mouth again.

“I almost pegged you for someone who didn’t follow the rules. Your demeanor is on the edge. You look the part and are most certainly intelligent enough to play it, but something tells me there’s more to you than you let on. Rule follower isn’t something I would label you as.”

She laughed, her nervousness at the tone of his voice causing the air to thicken. It was hard to breathe, and something told her that it wasn’t going to get any easier each and every time the delicious man beside her made an appearance.

CHAPTER 9



BETHANY

The rules were simple, and Damon had barked them out like Bethany was a three-year-old.

No drama.

No lies.

No complaints.

In all dealings with him, those were the standards he set, and she was to follow the rules like everyone else did.

They sat across from one another at the upscale restaurant, Bethany watching Damon as he ordered their food and pulled a black napkin into his lap.

“You didn’t even ask me what I wanted to eat.”

“Did you want to change the order?” He leaned forward, his gaze heavy and intimidating.

“No, I love crab and could eat cheese until I’m blue in the face.”

“Then, hush. You’ve broken two rules—no drama and no complaints.” He winked at her, and she sat back, her hands fiddling uselessly in her lap. The fact that someone could be so handsome and have so much handed to him in life and yet be domineering in a master-slave sense was sickening. He wanted power, and he took it in each and every situation from what she could see.

“Don’t overanalyze me, Bethany. I’m too complex for you to figure me out during the first week of your employment.”

He leaned back, picking up the glass of white wine that sat before him and taking a long drink. “I want to talk with you about the interns.”

“What about them?”

“Ben is running the program for me, but he has no stamina or courage. They run all over him, and he often falls short of pushing our initiatives through to the younger generation such as yourself.” He set the wine down, lifting up his finger to tell her to wait a moment.

She bit her lip, anxiety pressing against her at why he had to play the ass and do it so well.

“There are several of the girls in the group that plague me and, I’m sure, hope to catch my eye and then my heart. It’s not happening. I would never date someone your age, and I’d most certainly not be interested in being anything less than completely professional with someone that works for McKenzie and Bryant.”

Her heart sank, much to her dismay. What had she hoped for? That her stepbrother would see something in her and show her how a real man takes a woman? Bend her over the long sleek top of his desk and give her reason to use his name profanely?

“What does this have to do with me, Damon?”

“Glad you asked.” He paused as the waiter placed the food before them, the smell causing Bethany to groan softly.

She loved good food more than anything in the world.

Damon’s eyes moved from his plate to hers, his lips parting as he studied her. “I assume your sensual sound of pleasure is toward the food?”

She laughed and picked up her fork, picking at the crab before taking a tentative bite and letting it melt on her tongue. She groaned softly again, nothing too loud, but the flare in his gaze told her quickly—he liked sounds.

“Stop concerning yourself with my food addiction, and tell me what you want of me where the interns are concerned. I am

one myself, so keep that in mind.”

He waved her off, picking up his fork and starting to eat, his head bowed slightly but his eyes focused on her. The long slope of his nose was beautiful, his eyelashes long and almost resting on his strong cheekbones. He was both masculine and yet breathtaking by anyone’s standard.

“I need you to ensure that the message is clear. I’m not interested in anyone within the office. One silly girl keeps trying to visit me daily, as if I’d ever find anything in her interesting. It would only take one moment alone with her, and she could file a sexual harassment suit against me. That’s where you come in. Make sure they know. Simple, really.”

“And why would I know that you’re not interested? They don’t know we’re soon-to-be siblings. It wouldn’t be believable that you just put me in charge of spouting out information, as if you and I were intimate.”

“Don’t tell them that you’re soon to be my sister. They would treat you quite unfairly, and then I’d be forced to step in and save you.”

“I don’t need saving.” She stiffened as her past caused her to feel small before him all of a sudden.

He looked up, leaning back as realization crossed his features. “Everyone needs saving, Bethany. Don’t deny yourself when the opportunity arises.”

She had no clue what he was talking about, and it was easier to continue down a linear path for their discussion.

“I’ll figure out what to tell the interns, but being ambiguous will just make it seem as if I have my own agenda to get into your pants.”

She looked up as he chuckled, his face softening with the action. Her heart ached in her chest at what would never be. She swallowed the desire to be whatever he wanted, to do whatever he demanded, to force him to want her as much as she wanted him. The realization of her feelings caused her stomach to turn.

“You think far too much on things. No drama, no lies, and no complaining. Rules to live by, I promise.”

They spoke very little on the way back to the office, Damon inviting her to stop by the next day and fill him in on her conversation with the other girls. She awarded him with a deadpan stare and walked back to her office, her fantasies leaving her heart beating fast and her palms sweaty.

She needed a stiff drink.



The rest of the afternoon, Bethany tried to work through her conflicting emotions. Ben stopped by and gave her a testing file for one of their large clients, and she was grateful for something to take her mind off of the lunch with Damon.

Damon hadn't been inappropriate, but it wasn't beyond him to make her feel much more with the way he watched her versus anything he might say.

She worked hard on the file until shortly after six. Her phone buzzed to remind her to get up and head home. She would be working late hours during the abhorred busy season, which was January through April, so most accountants tried to have normal ten-hour days the rest of the year.

“Are you going to Masquerade with the other interns tomorrow?”

She looked up at Damon, his arms across his chest, the thick muscles of his pecs pressing through the soft material. Her breath caught in her chest for a minute, the vision of undressing him rapidly sweeping her away.

“Yes. You?” She stood and stretched, clasping her hands behind her back and pulling. His eyes moved from her face toward her chest, the lightness of his expression darkening slightly. She crossed her arms over her breasts and moved out from behind her desk to stand before him.

“No. I'm not interested in dance clubs.”

“Don’t dance?”

“Only when I have to.”

“And when is someone forced to dance? Seems odd.”

“At weddings, which you and I will be attending for our parents soon, it would seem, and when you want to seduce someone.” His eyes rolled over her, and once again she felt bare, stripped before him. The power of his seduction was something she’d fall over herself to see, but that was a pipe dream, something she’d not get the chance to witness, most likely.

“Are we going to be able to get away for the weekend in Jamaica?”

He nodded and moved from his position, running his fingers through his hair before looking over his shoulder out toward the hall. A scowl touched his face as someone called his name, the high timbre of the girl’s voice leaving no doubt who it was—Sadie.

He walked into Bethany’s office and moved to stand just behind her, pulling her hair to the side and fiddling with the clasp of her necklace. Bethany stiffened at his nearness as Sadie poked her head into Bethany’s office, her smile falling.

“Oh ... sorry. Am I interrupting something?”

Damon spoke over Bethany’s shoulder, his chest brushing across her back as he dropped his hands and slid his fingers around Bethany’s fingers.

“Actually, yes. If you need something, talk to Linda.”

He turned toward Bethany, as she sat, frozen with shock. He looked down at her with something like hunger and control in his gaze. “It looks great on you. I love the way it teases me to want to see more of your skin. His fingers brushed by the heart-shaped locket, and she shivered, her eyes locked on him, unable to help herself.

Sadie huffed loudly and left as Damon moved back slowly, his gaze still holding Bethany still. She took a slow breath, realizing a desperate need for air.

“I thought you were going to kiss me. What a mess that would create.” She sat down in the chair beside her. “If they knew I was your sister and then you planted the seed that we were somehow interested in each other ...”

“No one will know you’re my soon-to-be stepsister, and I think planting that seed is the best way to remind everyone else that I’m unavailable. I was thinking about it this afternoon. I’ll inform my father, and I’m sure he’ll be all for it. I promise not to push you past your comfort zone. Least not yet.” He turned and walked from the office, his movements smooth, his butt fitting in his slacks far too well.

Bethany sank back in her chair and touched the necklace around her throat, her eyes closing. He’d been so close. Just a bit more, and his lips would have brushed hers. She swallowed hard, wanting to know what it would feel like, what he tasted like.

She exhaled loudly, standing and gathering her things before she made a bad decision. Going to see him again would only cloud her conscience. He seemed to be perfectly fine playing any part he deemed appropriate. Too bad his ethics weren’t in line with hers.



Matthew greeted Bethany at the door, his famous bear hug her reward for a long day at work. He sat her down and took her bags, walking with her excitedly toward the kitchen. His voice was soft, and he kept glancing around, as if trying to ensure that no one was involved in his business but her.

“I had something really cool happen today,” he whispered, hanging her handbag on the inside of the closet door. “An art dealer in Seattle called, and they want to see one of my paintings in a few weeks.”

“Matt, that’s great. Are you going up there by yourself?”

“It’s right after your mom and my dad get married. I wanted to see if you would go with me? We could totally get two rooms, no problem. I just don’t let too many people know

about my talents, so this would be great for us to grow closer as siblings.”

“I don’t see why I can’t go, as long as it’s not during class and Damon lets me take off from the firm.”

“Oh yeah. I called him earlier about it.”

“You did?” She followed Matt outside, sticking her head into the kitchen to wave at her mom and Kent before joining her almost stepbrother.

“Yeah. It was his idea that you go with me.” He smiled and walked toward the edge of the balcony, the air muggy and less than ideal for her business outfit.

“He told you that you and I should go to Seattle?” Was he trying to throw her off on Matthew? Seemed odd. Damon wasn’t the family-type guy, from what she could tell. Why he would try and build her relationship with Matthew was concerning. Unless he hoped they might find something more in each other. Damon wanted her to fall in love with Matt?

“No, silly. He’s going with me for sure, and he told me to invite you. He wants to get to know you better and thought this would be perfect.”

Lust rolled over her as she reached up and touched the small heart necklace her mother had given her for her sixteenth birthday.

“What time did he call you?”

“Just now. Well, actually, just before you walked in the door. He’s great, isn’t he?”

“Yeah ... great.”

She turned and looked toward the long stretch of green grass, her thoughts scattered. What was Damon up to? He wanted her in Seattle with him, and something told her it wasn’t for business or familial reasons at all.

Could she be so cursed?

CHAPTER 10



BETHANY

The next morning was uneventful, the whispers in the office about it being *hump day* causing everyone to chuckle and be inappropriate in hopes of garnishing a laugh. Bethany worked to avoid everyone, her thoughts depressing her further. She would have one more week before she needed to start working along with her classes. Her masters was important to her and would be needed in order for her to sit for her CPA certificate, but going back to a non-work environment seemed odd.

What would Krista and Jake be like around her? It was bound to be a bit awkward for a while. They were probably enjoying the week with her gone. Maybe she needed to think about getting a place of her own, away from campus, and just driving in for classes.

A knock at her door caught her off guard, a soft sound of surprise leaving her. She stood as a guy about her age waved, the smile on his face friendly, his eyes blue like the ocean.

“Sorry to scare you. I’m Philip, the newbie.” He smiled and moved into the room, his accent putting him from Australia or somewhere far away. He extended his hand, and Bethany reached out to shake it, his grasp firm, his gaze moving around her face.

He was handsome, and his voice could melt chocolate, but she ignored all of that, her own emotions locked up in a battle over what to feel for Damon and what to seek counseling over.

“No problem. I was just deep in thought. I do that a bit too often.” She smiled and pulled her hand back. “I’m Bethany.”

“I’ve heard. There’s a red-headed girl out to get you, I believe.” He smirked and moved back toward the doorway, leaning against the frame and crossing his arms over his chest. His dark blond hair fit his tanned skin perfectly, the set of his jaw giving him a masculine appeal. He was probably just like Jake and used his rugged good looks to have women think the opposite. All guys were like Jake, except Damon.

“Sadie. Yes, she’s a peach for sure.”

“Says you’re dating the boss.”

“Oh yeah? That’s new to me.” She shrugged. “We’re all going dancing tomorrow night. You should come. Would be good to get to know everyone. I plan on doing so myself.”

“So you’ll be there?”

“I plan to.” She smiled as someone tapped Philip on the shoulder, the voice soft and muffled. He looked back over at her and waved.

“Seems the boss wants to see me. I’ll catch you later. Pleasure meeting you, Bethany.”

He left, and she stood beside her desk, leaning over and putting her hands on the smooth surface. Why was an office setting so seductive? Was it the taboo of thinking about getting caught being intimate with someone at work? Was it the smooth, hard surface of the furniture that you might leave prints along, your evidence etched into the office?

She smiled at the thought, her expression changing drastically as she looked up to see Sadie standing in her door, her hand on her hip.

“So, just so you know. The new guy is mine.”

Bethany stood up and moved toward the other girl, stopping beside her file cabinet and tilting her head as a smirk drew her lips up.

“The new guy, Philip?”

“Yes, Philip, you ogre. He’s mine, and don’t think for one minute whatever is going on with you and Damon matters. He uses everyone here. We’ve all had our turn in his *lap*.” She smirked and looked out into the hall before turning to focus on Bethany. “Philip is mine. You can play with Damon until he’s tired of you, but once that’s done, no going after the new hottie in the office.”

“And if I do?” Bethany asked, her voice soft and almost menacing.

“Then I’ll make sure you lose your job here. Quite simple really. Kent thinks of me as a daughter. I’ll tell him something about your ethics being a bit off, and you’ll be gone. Try me on it; just don’t come crying to me when the cards fall the way they will.”

“Interesting. I think I’ll leave my and Damon’s love affair up to fate. I haven’t sat on his lap, by any means, but he sure has bought me a lot of jewelry lately.” She picked up the small heart on her chest and rubbed her fingers along the diamonds as she let her stare beat into the other girl.

“He does that to everyone.”

“Doubt it.”

Bethany turned and walked to her desk, reaching into her bag and beginning to pull out various cords. She ignored the other girl until Sadie huffed loudly and left. She was trouble and the kind that Bethany planned to dispose of. Damon was right about one thing—the girl would scream rape from the rooftop if she thought it would get her fifteen seconds of fame. Sad, really.



Bethany checked her watch, her appointment with Damon set for later in the day. She still had twenty minutes but hated to be late to anything. He would point it out if she wasn’t early anyway. She stood up and stretched, walked down the hall and slipped into the bathroom to make sure she looked good for her meeting. After checking her teeth, she reached into her

shirt and readjusted her breasts before tugging at the material of her navy-blue skirt to make sure it lay flat. Her white button-down shirt made her breasts look too big, but maybe that wasn't such a bad thing, seeing that she wanted to see him squirm like he had made her do since the moment they met.

She turned around and checked her back, a soft growl at the size of her butt. She hated it, and yet it seemed as though all of the guys on campus coveted big butts. Why, she'd never understand.

She walked to the elevator and took it up to Damon's floor. Linda was not to be found sitting at the large desk she usually occupied. Bethany walked around the small lobby for a few minutes before pressing her ear to Damon's door.

Nothing.

She walked around Linda's desk and looked at the flat desk calendar that lay on the woman's perfectly clean office space. Damon had nothing before her and nothing after her. Maybe he was in his office, and Linda had needed to leave. If he got angry with Bethany for coming in early, she'd just deal with it. He was going to be her brother, so whatever he threw at her would be invalid. Her excuse of wanting to be on time was more important than his tantrum over losing control of his calendar, thanks to her.

She knocked softly on the door, no sound coming from the other side. Pressing her ear to it, she heard the soft mumble of his voice and knocked again. She thought she heard him tell her to come in, but apparently, nothing could have been further from the truth.

Being careful to open the door quietly, she slipped her head in and looked toward his desk.

The vision of him seared into her memory. His eyes were closed, and his head was back as he sat in his chair. His hand bobbed up and down, his chest rising and falling much too fast for anything he should be involved in at the office. He bit at his lip as he whispered to someone.

Bethany wanted to shut the door, needed to close it and run. He had someone under his desk, and she could only imagine what the woman was doing.

As badly as she needed to go, her curiosity wouldn't allow her to. Her eyes moved down toward the top of the desk, and she saw a mop of blonde hair being pulled up, but only slightly. His hand was lost in someone's hair—a blonde. Linda?

Surely not.

He groaned softly and shifted, his hips gyrating forward as he opened his eyes, his focus on the door. A smile touched his mouth as Bethany caught his attention.

Her heart stopped in her chest, fear freezing her in place.

“That’s it, baby. Take it all. Such a good girl, so talented to fit so much in your pretty little mouth. Suck harder, and let me fill you up.”

He never took his eyes off of Bethany, his hips lifting again as Bethany moved back from the door. A soft moan echoed from the room as she moved back, and she heard the sound of her name on his lips as he beckoned the woman kneeling in front of him to do exactly what he told her to.

Bethany carefully shut the door, turning and pressing her back to it as she tried to catch her breath. Thankfully Linda wasn't in the lobby or embarrassment would have stained them both. Sadie was right about Damon. He was a player and had plenty of women on his lap and everywhere else.

What had she thought? She would show up, and things would change?

“This is what you get. He’s your fucking family. Grow up and stop being a pervert.”

She walked away from the office, numb to everything around her. Ben tried to stop her to talk, but she blew him off, her excuse the swirling pain in her stomach. She hadn't lied, and there was no drama in the soft echo of her voice. She was physically ill, not at the fact that Damon was a disgusting

bastard but at the realization of how badly she wanted to be the blonde kneeling before him.

She left without telling anyone, her care not for her job or anyone else but for the desperate need to get away. She needed to breathe fresh air and clear her head. She needed to talk with Krista, who would be the only one to understand.

A text message caused her phone to buzz as she walked toward her car. She waited until she was seated in the blessed silence to check it. Shock slammed into her.

It was from Damon.

I'm coming to dinner at Dad's tonight.

Be there.

No lies between us.

No drama from you.

No complaining when I give you exactly what you want.

CHAPTER 11



BETHANY

I 'm coming to dinner at dad's tonight. Be there. No lies between us. No drama from you. No complaining when I give you exactly what you want.

The drive home was torturous. Bethany held her phone in a shaky hand, her desire to text him back almost consuming her. What would she say? How did she respond to that?

I don't want anything from you? Lies.

What did she want exactly? A fling? Hot sex on the balcony to sate her lack of attention and attraction from other men for the last few years? She sighed heavily, pulling into the driveway of the mammoth-sized house her soon-to-be stepfather lived in. She turned the car off and sat in silence for a minute, her nerves pulsating along the surface of her skin.

If he played it off as a joke, things could return to normal, and she would just never mention seeing him in his office with the blonde. She could keep her mouth shut. Her eyes closed as she dropped her head back, the phone tight in her grip.

“How do I always get myself into this shit?”

A tap on her window had her jumping, her knee hitting the steering column hard.

Matthew. The almost stepbrother that acted like family and not a starving lion on the sexual prowl.

“You staying in there? Drive-through service for ya? Like Sonic.” He smiled and backed up as she got out of the car, reaching in to grab her briefcase.

“Hey, you. No, just long day at the office.”

“That sucks. You’re off early, though, right?”

“That’s about the only good thing that happened.”

Matthew reached over and took her bag as she walked beside him into the house. The smell of tomato sauce washed over her, basil and red wine as well. She breathed in deeply and reached for her bag.

“What is that heavenly smell?”

“The sauce for the chicken that Martha is working on. Go change into something comfortable. The good-looking brother is coming for dinner tonight, so no tempting him with your business attire.” Matt winked and slipped into the kitchen before she could respond.

“Yeah, well, I’d rather he didn’t.” She turned and walked quickly to the room she was occupying for the week. Whatever happened that night, she could deal with it. She was a big girl and more than capable of pushing Damon back, putting him in his place and reminding him that he wasn’t God’s gift to women.

“Too bad he totally is.”



“Why are you pacing the floor?” Bethany looked up as her mother spoke, the older woman leaning against the opening to the kitchen.

“Um ... stressed I guess.”

“About what?”

“Work and school starting soon. I don’t know.” She shrugged, her body stiffening as the front door opened behind

her. She looked over her shoulder as Damon walked in, a soft smile on his lips—one she hadn't seen before.

“Hi, Karen. Bethany. How are the two most beautiful girls in my life doing?”

Karen laughed and walked toward him, hugging him quickly and giving Bethany a *Yeah, right* look as she walked toward the kitchen. Bethany almost reached out and stopped her mom, the thought of being in the hall alone with Damon giving her heart palpitations. He moved toward her, pulling her into a warm brotherly hug.

“Hey, you. I'm so proud of your work at the office. Where's Matt?” He spoke loudly enough for the others to hear, her arms hanging board straight by her sides as he pulled her in. The smell of him wafted over her, cologne mixed with sex. She stifled a groan, his lips brushing by her ear.

“Like what you saw, Beth?” He nipped at the edge of her ear, his actions hidden as Matt walked out and Damon moved back with ease.

“Well, there is the big man.” Matt walked over and shook hands with Damon, the smiles on their faces genuine at seeing one another. A vast difference stood between them in way of character and even looks, but each of them seemed happy to see the other, a big hug following their handshake.

“Actually, you're much bigger than me.” Damon moved back and patted Matt's stomach. “What the fuck you been eating, babies?”

“Yep, and I'll eat yours too, so stop making so many.”

They laughed, and Bethany shook off the heavy emotions that pressed against her, the ache in her lower stomach for more attention from the wayward devil before her. Matt looked over at her, extending his hand. She moved toward him as he pulled her to his side and wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“How lucky are we, Bro? We finally have a sister to blame all our shit on. Why is the toilet seat up? Bethany. Why is the

milk empty and in the fridge?” Matt paused as Damon piped up.

“Totally Bethany. Ugh, girls.”

She glanced at him, his facade a good one, or perhaps the sly, sensual side of him was the facade, and this was his real nature. Without a doubt, she would be finding out soon.

“Let’s go watch the sun go down on the balcony.” Matt moved toward the back door, holding it open as Damon and Bethany moved out in front of him. Bethany looked over as Damon asked his brother to grab them a few beers from the kitchen, her heart contracting painfully in her chest.

“I’ll get them. I’m the girl.” Bethany smirked and moved toward the door, Damon’s hand reaching out to grab her forearm as he laughed.

“You’re a brilliant girl and our guest. Matt?” Damon smiled with warmth she didn’t know someone could fake so well.

“Yeah, of course. Be back in a few minutes. I’ll get us a plate of something to munch on too.” He walked into the house as the smile slid from Damon’s face. He turned toward her, using his hold on her to tug her away from the glass doors.

“You didn’t answer my question.” His tone was deadpan, his face a mask of indifference.

“What question?” Her voice was soft and unsure. She growled internally at letting herself be pulled under his spell. He was no better than the frat boys at school. Hit it and ride on. She wasn’t interested, right?

“Did you enjoy watching me this afternoon?” He reached out and pulled her toward him, his hand a vise grip on her waist. He pressed her to the wall of the house, one hand sliding down over her hip and around to the top curve of her rear as his other hand slid along her jaw, pulling her to look up at him as he shifted his hips, his body tucked into hers from the waist down. She closed her eyes and groaned softly, her body betraying her.

“Did you like it, Beth? Was that you under the desk? You with your beautiful mouth licking and sucking pleasure from me?” He leaned in, lifting her chin slightly as he dragged his nose along the column of her neck.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she whispered, reaching out and sliding her hands along his waist. Soft panting gave way to embarrassment, warmth coating her neck and cheeks. She had to get out of there. Where was Matt?

“Of course you do. I had my eyes closed for most of it, my hand gripping her silky hair, my body reacting violently for one reason.”

Bethany opened her eyes, her chest rising and falling much too fast as air seemed in short supply. He leaned in farther, his body flush against hers as he rolled his hips again.

“What reason?” she whispered, looking up into his eyes, needing his kiss beyond anything she remembered wanting.

“I just let her be you, and I came harder than I have in ages.” He nipped at her mouth as the door opened and he moved back with ease, a soft laugh leaving him as he turned to Matt.

“What?” Matt asked, walking out with drinks and food balanced in his arms and against his chest.

“Just listening to Bethany tell me a few stories of the intern. You know that crazy one that’s always trying to get into my pants?”

“Oh, God. The redhead?”

“Yeah. She’s after the new guy now. Right, Beth?” Damon looked over his shoulder, the guy before her not the one that held her captive against the wall at all.

“Yep. Sadie is a total bitch.” Bethany steeled herself, moving from the wall and brushing her shirt down in hopes of it hiding her budding nipples. She reached for a beer, lust rushing across Damon’s gaze once more before he seemed to effectively hide it for good.

“Well, steer clear of her, Bethany. I think Damon’s had more horror stories on this one than any before.” Matt popped a piece of cheese in his mouth as Bethany took a long slow drink of her beer, wishing it were something much stronger.

She listened to the two guys talk about how crazy girls were, their laughter causing a smile to lift the side of her mouth. A soft tick pulsed along her neck; her blood pressure elevated, her heart racing at the idea of belonging to the alpha before her. It would never happen. The taboo alone would leave them both unable to be anything more than a fantasy of incredible sex and longing, most likely only on her part.

Damon seemed to be perfectly fine with having a different woman every day, his appetite varied and more focused on lust than love. Perhaps he had it right. Maybe the way through life was to taste and try lots. To not stop and focus on one person but to enjoy many. She looked away to roll her eyes, her thoughts ridiculous. He was teasing her, playing a dangerous game, and yet she loved it. It had been far too long since anyone grabbed her sensitivities and demanded control of her desires. She glanced over at him, Damon’s dark gaze shifting to her as Matt laughed about something.

A shiver ran through her, and he seemed to take notice, his tongue darting out to lick at his lips before he took a drink of his beer. The door opened behind her, the sound of her mother’s voice catching her attention.

“Dinner’s ready, guys. Come on in and let’s eat.”

Bethany started for the door, Damon’s hand softly wrapping around her wrist, stopping her.

“Matt, go ahead. We’ll get all of this stuff and be right in. I wanted to talk to Bethany about something really quickly anyway.”

“What?” Matt tilted his head, his eyes shifting between the two of them.

“The balance sheet audit for a small manufacturing company and why the debits didn’t exactly ...”

Matt cut him off, throwing his hand in the air. “Okay ... don’t bore me with that shit. I’ll be inside.”

Bethany smirked as Matt walked away. Bethany gathered the dish they had been sharing; her eyes averted from Damon completely.

“What did you want to ask me?” She looked up. Mistake.

His stance whispered confidence, his eyes hungry with unfulfilled lust. Bethany swallowed hard and took a small step back, stopping herself before taking another. She would not appear weak in front of him, no matter what.

“I didn’t want to ask you anything. The taste of you on my tongue has been driving me wild.” He licked his lips again, his fingers coming up to brush by his mouth.

“Yes, well, I’m not a blonde.” She shrugged and turned to walk toward the door, Damon moving in to walk just behind her. She kicked herself internally for such an ignorant response. She sounded jealous and petty, namely because she was.

“I find it funny that you think I like blondes.” He held the door open as she stopped beside him, finding a bit of courage as she looked up at him.

“You don’t? Seems odd that one was crouching beneath your desk today, one answers your phone and the pictures in your office highlight a different one altogether.”

“Are you jealous, Beth?” The smirk on his mouth caused her heart to skip a beat, the sweet aroma of him wafting over her as the wind blew.

“Nothing to be jealous of. I’m your sister, remember?” She lifted her eyebrow, shrugged and walked in, his voice nothing more than a sensual whisper.

“Not yet you’re not ...”

CHAPTER 12



BETHANY

“So you know we have the Barrington Corp audit committee meeting coming up next week?” Kent turned to Damon, Bethany’s eyes on her soon-to-be stepfather as he turned the conversation at dinner from something more casual to business.

“I do. I’ve prepared a few things, but I thought we could meet tomorrow morning to discuss the fullness of what you want to be presented.” Damon shifted his dark gaze from Kent to Bethany as he lifted his napkin and wiped his mouth. “I’d like to involve Beth if you’re okay with that.”

“Beth?” Kent looked over to Bethany. “Do you go by Beth? I thought you went by Bethany.”

“I go by either. Most people call me Bethany, but Damon has taken a liking to the nickname I guess.” She shrugged, smiling as the rest of the members around the dinner table chuckled.

“Short and sweet, just like my new sister.” Damon lifted his eyebrows in comic challenge.

“Hey! I’m not short,” Bethany grumbled as everyone laughed. Damon had far too many sides to keep up with, and trying to discern which was truly him, or if they all were, would be a full-time job. She focused on her plate, the dinner delicious, the company rich in many more ways than she had imagined possible. Asking her mom to move things up with Kent was a bit selfish, but it was working out beautifully.

“I’d love for Bethany to be there.” Kent picked up his fork and stabbed at the chicken on his plate, his eyes moving between Bethany and Damon.

“You guys know that she will be starting school again soon,” her mother spoke up. “Have you thought through the schedule for her so that she’s able to focus on her master’s as well as doing a good job for you guys?”

Bethany laughed. “I’m right here, Mom.”

They all chuckled, Damon taking up the conversation as Matt lifted his wine glass in the air and studied the contents as if an experiment. Bethany stifled a smile at the silliness of her soon-to-be brother. He was convinced that if he didn’t make himself out to look crazy, then responsibility and demands would soon take freedom from his days.

“We can talk about her schedule more soon. When do you go back, Beth?”

“I have all of next week off, and then I need to be on campus a few days a week to help prepare for the semester starting in late August.”

“Prepare how?” Damon’s voice was soft and conversational, not at all the tone he’d used with her in the office or when pressed against her on the patio. She glanced down at her plate, her cheeks warming at how much she wanted another encounter, something longer and leading to more.

“I’ll be a teaching assistant for one of the accounting professors.” She glanced up, the slight lift of his wicked mouth telling her quickly that he too was lost in thoughts of depravity.

“Be careful,” Matt mumbled, setting his glass down and looking over at Bethany as she sat beside him.

“Be careful?”

“Yeah, I hear those old teacher dudes love to convince their pretty TAs to sleep with them. Power corrupts, right?” Matt smiled and reached for another dinner roll.

“Matthew!” Kent shook his head as Bethany’s mother reached over and patted Kent on the arm.

“It’s true. I’ve heard a lot of those stories too, but Bethany isn’t that kind of girl. She’d probably head butt anyone who got too close that she didn’t invite, right, baby?”

Bethany looked up and laughed, turning her gaze on Damon as her smile faded. “Yes, that’s right. Uninvited attention isn’t what I want at all. I want to finish my degree and get on with my life.”

“I’m with Matt. You’re far too pretty and intelligent for the old coot not to try.” Damon shrugged, seemingly ignoring the conversation that moved silently between them. She wanted him in her bed, but her life was off limits. Not that he would be interested either way, but it would be smart to lay the ground rules for anything that might happen between them from the start.

“Yes, well that’s enough about me. I’ll talk with you guys about my schedule next week if that’s okay.” Bethany sat back, laying her napkin on the table. “I think I’m going for a swim and then bed. I have a slave driver of a boss, and tomorrow is going to be busy from morning to night.”

“Why into the night? Did you get too much put on your desk?” Damon’s eyebrow lifted, his head tilting slightly as Matt got up and stretched, heading into the kitchen. Kent and Bethany’s mother started their own conversation, the tension in Bethany’s stomach moving into her chest.

“No, I just have that intern happy hour tomorrow night too. What time do you want me in the morning?” She stood up and picked up her plate, her eyes catching Damon’s as he dragged his gaze slowly down her, pausing just below her waist. She moved back from the table and shook her head. “What time?”

“I’d say I want you all morning long, but I have too much on my calendar to truly enjoy you the way you deserve.” He spoke plainly, no one seeming to notice. Bethany looked down the table; her mother lost in conversation with her newest obsession.

“Wow. That was bold.” Bethany pushed the chair in and walked toward the kitchen.

“That’s my style, *Beth*.” Damon’s voice followed her as she dropped her stuff in the sink. Surely he would call her in the morning when he wanted to talk about the audit committee stuff. The nerd in her was more than excited to sit in on such a special project, but the woman within her that needed affection was far more interested in how many ways they could take each other over the course of a four-hour love session.

She walked to her room, avoiding the dining room and Damon altogether. He was nothing but trouble, and her curiosity was going to land her bent over the desk, not of a professor, but of a cocky accountant.



The water was warm, the night sky filled with the brilliance of a million stars. Bethany sank into it, her bathing suit a small bikini, her full-piece lost to her last skinny dipping adventure in college. The sound of a car starting brought a mixture of peace and disappointment. Damon must have left, which was a good thing, and yet...

She slipped under the water, her long hair billowing out around her. She twisted, looking up through the blurry liquid to see someone hovering just over the edge of the pool. She pushed against the bottom, moving up and lifting her chin to the sky to force her hair from her face. Wiping her eyes, she opened them in time to see Damon slipping into the water, his bathing suit black and tight.

Oh fuck.

“I thought you left,” she whispered, her voice much too sensual for her liking. His smooth chest was lined with muscle, his abs holding all eight curves for perfection. She moved a step back as he sank into the water, a smile on his lips.

“No, Matthew left. He said to tell you that he would see you Friday.” Damon stretched out his strong arms and pushed

the water away from him, his body moving back from her. She stood and looked up at the sky, her torso above the water's edge.

“It’s beautiful out here.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” The thickness of his voice gave his needs away. Bethany turned and watched him, his gaze locked on hers as if they waited to see who might make the first move. They played a dangerous game, Kent and her mother just inside. Bethany steeled herself, realizing what a mistake it would be to do or be anything with this man. He was sex incarnate, dominance and power, everything she could imagine in the wettest of her fantasies. She was a simple girl and knew she would be in way over her head much too quickly.

“What are you thinking about so intently?”

“I was just working through my schedule in my head. The wedding is in a few weeks too, so I have a lot to balance.” She shrugged and sank back down in the water as he moved closer. She pressed her feet to the bottom of the pool, forcing herself to stay still and not run from him. He was a predator, and though she would love to protect herself fully, they had a long life together ahead of them in some capacity. He wouldn’t be dominating her for any of it, at least not if she could help it.

“Your schedule? That’s what you’re thinking about?”

She laughed and reached out, pressing her hand to his chest to stop him. “Don’t come any closer, and yes, my schedule. What are *you* thinking about?”

He smiled and pulled her hand along his side, Bethany moving through the water to press against him from his efforts. He smirked as she gasped, his hands sliding around her waist and locking her to him.

“I’m wondering how to get you out of your bathing suit. I’m imagining the taste of you on my tongue and the sound of your desperate panting.”

Bethany took a shallow breath, resting her hands on his thick shoulders, the water making each movement intensify as

their skin slid against each others.

“You have no modesty.” She laughed and tried to move back. He pulled her closer, one hand moving up her back and into her hair. She groaned softly, hating herself for allowing the noise to leave her.

“Tell me to stop and I will, but you have to mean it.” He leaned in, pulling her hair back and running his nose along the column of her neck.

“Stop,” she whispered, pulling him closer as her body lit on fire.

“Not good enough, Beth.” He pressed his teeth against the side of her neck and tugged softly, his other hand sliding down to cup her rear, his fingers playing along the edge of her suit. She groaned again, her mind splintering on what to do.

“Stop, Damon.” She pulled back a little, tugging against him as he smiled. He released her hair and slid his hand along the side of her face, his finger gripping hard at the base of her head as he pulled her down toward him. He paused before kissing her; his eyes filled to the rim with lust.

“I don’t think you want me to stop, do you?”

She whimpered, her resolve draining as she tightened her arms around his neck and moved to wrap her legs around his waist in the water. The painful throb of need drove into her, another sound of desire leaving her lips as she closed her eyes and rocked her hips against the fullness of his arousal. He was magnificent, huge and cocky, strong and so incredibly beautiful.

“Yes. Stop, please.”

He pulled her in as she opened her eyes, his other hand sliding down to cup her breast and knead it as their lips touched. He murmured his pleasure against her mouth, pressing her closer with the pull of his hand on her ass. His tongue rolled over hers, his lips so soft and warm. He rocked himself against her, subtle groans sending her into a dizziness she had never experienced. He broke the kiss and licked at her

mouth, sucking the edge of her chin before burying his face against her neck.

She moaned loudly as he moved both hands to grip her ass tightly, using his hold to roll her softness against the hardness he offered her. He licked up her throat, his mouth pressing a sensual kiss to her ear. She panted softly; her hands lost in his hair as a frantic feeling to strip him and consume him washed over her. She moaned against him as he spoke softly against her ear.

“I don’t like blondes at all. I like brunettes with green eyes and large breasts. With intelligence and wit, with strength and the ability to hold their own. I like women who know what they want and take it. The ones that won’t hit their knees for you until they’ve forced you to hit yours first. What kind of girl are you, Beth?”

She rolled her body against him once more, moving back and letting her gaze lock onto his, something inside of her bursting open with desire for the bastard who taunted her so well. She smiled, her eyes narrowing sensually as she let her legs drop from him, her hand sliding down his strong chest and abs as she slipped her hand into his shorts. She wrapped her fingers around him, not showing the shock at how large he was but keeping her facade perfectly in place.

He sighed, his eyes closing as he reached for her. She pulled up slowly, tightening her grasp as she did and moved out of his reach as he groaned loudly. She smiled and moved to the edge of the pool, getting out and walking to her towel.

“I’m a good girl, Damon, and you’re my boss and soon to be my brother. You and I have nothing more than those relationships to look forward to, so the rest will have to thrive in the depths of my dreams each night.” She wrapped her towel around herself and walked into the house, the soft chuckle of the devil behind her giving her more than enough ammo to sweat through her sheets all night long.

CHAPTER 13



BETHANY

Thursday morning came much too fast, and the lack of sleep from a night of tossing and turning left Bethany feeling angry and cheated. She skipped breakfast altogether, not wanting to see anyone or have to hold a conversation of any type. She had a small bonus from joining the firm that should hit her account sometime soon; she was just hoping it was in the bank already. Stopping for a coffee was out until she found time to check her online statement, a soft growl leaving her as she turned off the radio and tried to *not* focus on the night before. Having Damon out at the house while she was there was a complete *no* at this point. She wanted him too badly, needed him against her, lost in her.

She parked the car and angled the rearview mirror down, frowning at herself. Her makeup looked good, not too heavy but professional. Her hair was up in a loose bun, aging her a few years, which wasn't a bad thing at all.

"Last night was a fluke, and the fucker is messing with you. Let it go, and do your job." She fixed the mirror and got out, the sound of someone calling her helping to squish the need to barge into Damon's office and consume him where he sat.

"Bethany ... hey, wait up."

She turned to see Philip walking toward her with long strides. His hair was shorter, the curlier strands gone and a very professional cut having taken its place. He smiled, and she couldn't help but smile back. He was cute and friendly, safe, and he would make a good friend if nothing else.

“You cut your hair?” She moved in beside him, looking up at him as they moved toward the building.

“Yeah, well, I guess Mr. Bryant wasn’t thrilled with my look, so I got a call from his secretary yesterday to get it taken care of.” He laughed and shrugged. “Whatever.”

“Damon made you get your hair cut? Or Kent?”

“Damon, but it’s all good. I’m new to all of this, and it’s his company, so I got it cut.”

“I like it longer.”

“I did too.” He laughed and opened the door, moving back to let her go in first. She looked over her shoulder, a scowl on her face as anger rose in her chest.

“What a jerk.”

“He’s in charge and pays me handsomely to work here. It’s hair. It will grow back.” Philip smiled and pushed the button on the wall. “So no changing your mind on going to the club tonight, right?”

Bethany walked into the elevator, squeezing to the back with Philip. She waited until everyone got on to turn to him, her eyes catching the back of Damon’s head and nodding to give Philip a head’s up. Manipulation reared to life inside of her, the desire to push Damon to the edge and see what he was really up to presented like a perfect package.

“I’ll be there. I bought a little black dress for the occasion. I just hope it’s appropriate. I’ve never been to a work function.” She shrugged, trying hard to keep the wicked smile off her face as she knew her words were reaching their intended victim.

“I’m sure it will be just fine. I wasn’t sure I was going, but if you’re trying out a little black dress, then I think I could definitely help judge it for you.” He laughed, and she swatted at him, his deep accent pulling her from her nefarious purposes.

“Where is your accent from?”

“Australia.” The elevator stopped, and a few people got off. Bethany ignored the fact that Damon was closer, having shifted himself in front of them. His back was to them, but the familiar smell of his cologne tugged at her hormones far harder than the lovely voice of the guy beside her.

“I love it. It’s so different.”

“Most girls here like it, but at home ... it’s just commonplace.” He paused and looked at his watch. “You want to grab lunch today? I know you were busy yesterday, but today any better?”

Bethany didn’t get the chance to answer as Damon looked over his shoulder, the warning in his gaze setting her on edge.

“Actually, she’s having lunch with Kent and me. We’re discussing the audit committee at eleven today, so your date tonight will have to suffice.” Damon shifted his eyes from Bethany to pin Philip in place.

“Of course, sir. I didn’t even see you there. No disrespect meant.”

“None was taken.” Damon turned back to Bethany, his jaw locked into place. “My office at 10:45 so I can prepare you for the lunch conversation.”

Damon slipped off the elevator, and Bethany shook her head, her face burning with anger at his response. She deserved it. She had been playing with him, poking at a loaded gun, and it had gone off in her face. She glanced at Philip, who looked like he might pass out.

“Hey, you okay?” She reached out and touched his arm as the door to the elevator opened.

“Yeah, just don’t like that guy very much. He acts like he has the power to ruin you. I hate it.” He rolled his shoulders and forced a smile, Bethany chuckling at the sadness of his efforts. “I’ll see you later. We’ll talk more tonight, and good luck at your meeting today.”

She waved and turned down the hall, her mood slipping further south as she mumbled, “Thanks. I’m going to need it.”



He was pissed. That much was obvious, but he seemed the type to hide those sorts of emotions. Had none of them turned the tables on him and played back? Was his dating life a quandary of limp robots that simply did as he said, when he said? He leaned over the top of a large glass table, his finger moving along a flow chart as he spoke to her in a monotone voice. She bit her lip to keep from attacking him verbally.

“They will have the CFO of Barrington give his report, and then I will give ours, you being the one to flip the slides, and Kent will fill in as he sees fit.” He glanced up, his eyes filled with dark emotions. “Are you even listening?”

“Hmmm? No, I’m not.” She shrugged and walked to the window, moving the blinds to look out at the cityscape.

“What do you mean, no? This is important. It’s not a simple task. It’s a moment to impress Kent and lock yourself into a larger role here at McKenzie and Bryant. Pay attention, or I’ll find someone else to do it,” he barked at her as she turned, leaning against the window.

“You’re upset. Tell me why.” She tilted her head, trying to give off more empathy than she was feeling.

“I’m not upset. I want you to pay attention and do well during this meeting. You’re walking around like your head is in the clouds. Just because some punk-ass boy from Australia wants to see you shake your ass in a dress doesn’t give you the right to shut down here at work. Get your shit together, and get over here.” He turned back to the table and let out a long sigh.

Pain slammed into her, his anger as powerful as his passion. She walked over toward him and swallowed the hot lump in her throat, pointing to the chart and trying to steady her voice.

“So after Mr. Parks gets up and does his part, you will introduce us to the new board members, and I will start the slides. Can I have a copy of them today so I can walk through them mentally when I need to move us along as you speak?”

He looked over at her, the tight pinch of his shoulders relaxing just a little. “Yes, but it’s highly confidential. You’ll have to be careful with it.”

“I will review it and memorize the moving parts and then delete it.”

“By when?”

“By this afternoon. You and I can rehearse first thing in the morning together.”

“Good. I like that.” He stood and brushed his hand along his chin. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that about the dress. I’m being a dick.”

She walked toward the door and paused before leaving. “Where do I get the zip drive with the files, and where do I meet you and Kent for lunch?”

“Linda will get you a copy of the files just after lunch, and meet us down in the lobby in twenty minutes. Did you hear me? I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. “No reason to be sorry. You were wrong with your accusations anyway.”

“What do you mean?”

“My thoughts aren’t taken by a silly Australian boy seeing me in a dress. They’re suffocating in the depravity of being fucked twenty different ways by you.”

She walked out, her chest constricted as her heart raced. She couldn’t keep this up. She wasn’t as aggressive and domineering as he was. She needed to bow out soon, or he would bust through her facade and take her to the mat. Maybe an internship wasn’t a good idea at all. She needed to rethink her priorities—away from him.



Bethany walked toward the two men who would be a part of her life for the foreseeable future, Kent pulling her into a side hug as she stopped beside him.

“Damon tells me that you’re already moving on top of getting the files reviewed this afternoon. I knew you’d fit in perfectly with us.” He smiled and squeezed her softly.

Bethany nodded and looked over at Damon, their earlier conversation having thrown off her whole morning. She needed a cold shower but wouldn’t be getting one anytime soon.

“She likes being on top. She’s going to be a Bryant before we know it.” He winked at her, the look in his eyes melting her where she stood.

“You guys want to ride together or just meet me there? I can stay at lunch a little longer if we meet there.” Kent moved toward the door, holding it open as they moved out.

“I already called for my car, so Bethany and I will ride together. We’ll meet you there.”

Kent waved and moved toward his car as Damon nodded toward his black Mercedes, the man having a few more cars than anyone should. Bethany walked in awkward silence to the car and got in, buckling up and sitting back as her eyes closed. Maybe if she pretended to be tired, he would let things lie between them.

The sound of his door shutting and the car starting caused her to glance at him. Mistake. He had turned to watch her, his long eyelashes brushing over his dark brown eyes. She found herself lost in them for a moment, the subtle swipe of his tongue catching her attention.

“You surprise me,” he whispered and turned to pull the car out onto the road.

“How so?”

“You’re brilliant, as is apparent, you’re soft and feminine ... so innocent. Yet you kicked me in the chest with your comment earlier. I think there is far more to you than even you know.”

She laughed and closed her eyes again, not sure how to respond. The soft sliding of his hand just above her knee caused her breath to catch. She opened her eyes and looked at

him as he pulled his hand up, his eyes on the road. She pressed her hand to the top of his; her skirt pulled up to mid-thigh by his actions. He didn't speak but softly rubbed his thumb along the tender skin of her thigh, his teeth pulling at his lip as he breathed in deeply.

“We should take an NRL today.” He glanced over at her, his sensual lips turning into a wicked grin.

“What's an NRL?” She breathed out, pushing his hand down back toward her knee as she tried to get ahold of herself. Her heart beat so fast she looked down to ensure her shirt wasn't lifting with its throbbing.

“A no-return lunch.”

CHAPTER 14



BETHANY

They sat in the fancy restaurant, Bethany's mind far from anything that might help her future and more attuned to the things that would wreck it. The desire to climb into Damon's seat and drown in the scent of him played through the recess of her mind over and over, her stomach aching from tensing it so many times on the short drive over.

The waiter approached, and Bethany lifted her menu, trying to blink the haze away from her eyes. Damon had a hold of her in ways that birthed worry. Years of not having sex or time to find the right guy to share herself with had left her a bit too needy. The show of desire by the relentless man across the table from her had destroyed her resolve to leave well enough alone. It would take the attention of someone else to get her mind off of him. Maybe Philip was a good idea. He was cute and safe, attractive and seemed to like her already.

"Bethany, what are you having to drink?" Kent's voice tugged her from her thoughts.

"Oh sorry. Water and a glass for whatever you ordered."

"I ordered whiskey. You sure you want a glass?"

Damon chuckled and shook his head. She narrowed her eyes, tilting her head a little.

"Yes, I'll have a glass of whiskey. No problem." She would just sip it. The NRL wouldn't be happening on her shift. Sex, as much as she wanted it with him, would undo them. What happened after the night of passion? How would they act around each other for the rest of their lives?

“Bring the girl a glass then.” Kent chuckled and pulled them into a conversation about the audit committee meeting. Bethany turned toward him and forced herself to mentally make notes, ignoring the glances from Damon. She needed help with her master’s program, and Kent was the answer to that or at least the easiest answer. She would think through things and make some decisions, but with a project this important, she had to do well.

Finally gaining her footing, she asked questions and peppered Damon and Kent with scenarios and what ifs. By the end of lunch, they were both seemingly impressed, Kent having laughed loudly at her “brilliance” several times during the meal. As the bill was brought over, Damon excused himself to take a call.

“I’m so glad you’ll be with us next week. It should be a great experience for you.” He stood and pulled back her chair, Bethany standing and moving toward the front of the restaurant. Damon stood near the bar; a gorgeous blonde pressed to the front of him. He touched her face, leaning into her as she moved up to kiss his cheek. He laughed and said something, turning and walking toward Kent and Bethany.

Bethany averted her gaze as he rushed over her, sickness rolling in her stomach. Jealousy was a horrid emotion and one she wasn’t used to feeling too often. Damon opened the door and smiled at them.

“Ready?” He moved back, and Bethany nodded, wanting to ask who the woman was and yet just not willing to let on about her feelings.

Kent and Damon said their goodbyes, talking briefly about last-minute wrap-ups as Bethany got into the car and waited. Damon slid in moments later, his black slacks hugging his strong thighs, the large curve between them making her eyes widen.

“You all right?” he asked, looking over at her as he buckled up.

“Yes. Not used to having liquor at lunch, but I can’t say that I won’t try it again.”

He laughed and pulled the car out, his hand moving to his thigh as he beat out a rhythm that must have been in his head. They drove in silence, his desire to tease her seeming to have been sated. She was almost grateful as they pulled up to the front door of the office, a valet rushing out to help them.

Damon moved beside her and took her hand, Bethany looking down at it in surprise. She looked up as a group of interns moved out into the bright sunlight, Sadie at the front of the pack. Philip wasn't part of the crowd, and for that she was grateful.

"Hi, Damon!" The tacky girl spoke seductively. All of the interns waved at Damon.

"It's Mr. Bryant, and hi, guys. Behave, and no liquor at lunch." He pulled Bethany closer, releasing her as he opened the door for them.

"You know they are going to find out that we're family, and then you'll have a lot of explaining to do." Bethany looked over her shoulder at him as he shrugged.

"I don't have to explain anything to anyone. I'm in charge."

He was right. She walked toward the elevator, moving in and turning to see Damon hover over the opening, shaking his head to people as they walked up to get on. The doors closed, and it was just the two of them. He turned and took two steps toward her. He slid his hands along the wall behind her and pressed the fullness of himself against her, nipping at her mouth.

"Only twenty ways? Where is your imagination?"

Her breath caught in her chest, her body aching for so much more than he would give her. He was a tease, and she hadn't become any better herself.

"Twenty ways?"

He leaned down and kissed her, one hand moving to tug at the budding nipple of her breast. She gasped, swatting at him as he laughed and rolled his hips a few times, forcing her to

open her legs a little more as she stood trapped between him and the back of the elevator.

“You want me to fuck you twenty ways. I’m thinking of so many more than twenty. Let’s not put a cap on it, hmmm?” He nipped at her again and moved away, the door opening to his floor. He turned to walk from the elevator, grabbing himself and shifting his appearance as he glanced back with hooded eyes.

“Learn your part for the meeting next week, and make sure you wear a dark shirt and black pants, no skirts. Leave your hair up like that, and don’t wear lipstick.”

“What? Why?”

He chuckled. “Because with your hair down and your innocent green eyes, no one will pay attention to anything. They’ll all be seducing you in their heads. You’re much too beautiful for that. Wear your hair up. If it’s down, they’ll like it far too much.”

“How about you? Would you like it far too much too?” She bit her lip, the demand to seduce him and drag him down to his knees in front of her flooding over her.

He smiled and let his eyes drag across her, licking his mouth and groaning softly as if tasting something delicious. “Wouldn’t you love to know, pussycat?”



Bethany sat in her office, flipping through the files for the meeting, her mind wandering back to each and every encounter with her handsome stepbrother.

“Soon-to-be stepbrother,” she mumbled and leaned back in her chair, turning to face the window behind her. She was turning into a nympho. All she’d thought about the last few days was Damon—and even more so, sex with him. Did she have real feelings, or was it just lust? Just the demanding need to feel something as sweet as ecstasy?

“Hey, Bethany. How’s it going?”

She turned and stood up, brushing her skirt to remove the cracker crumbs from her latest snack. She smiled at Ben and moved around her desk, crossing her arms over her chest.

“It’s going. How about you?”

“Great. I’m looking forward to our event tonight. I swear we all live for Thursday nights instead of Fridays just because of getting out together. The group has started to gel. I think you’re just going to be a great add to that.”

“Yeah, well, Damon’s been giving off the message that he and I have something going on, so not so sure about your hopes of my gelling at all.”

“He told me. I think it’s smart actually. Sadie and a few of the other girls have been nothing but a pain in the ass since getting here.” Ben leaned against the doorframe, his belly hanging a little too far over his slacks. Bethany ignored it and focused on his face, the friendly smile giving her comfort.

“Why not just get rid of them? Wouldn’t that be easier?”

“Yeah, but with the labor laws today you have to have a real reason. Who’s going to believe that someone who performs at work really well and has high marks from school is sexually harassing someone like Damon? *He* looks like a predator, not her. Just have to deal with it really.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“I agree, but it is what it is.”

“Is he coming tonight?” Bethany asked, lifting her thumb nail to her lips as she nibbled at it. Damon had already said no, but maybe he was bluffing. Hopefully?

“I was going to ask you the same thing.”

“I don’t know. We’re just pretending to be together. We’re not together.” Bethany dropped her hand and laughed sardonically. Ben’s lips lifted in a goofy grin.

“Of course not, silly. You’re family. Anyway, I’m making my rounds to see how you’re doing on your workload. Also wanted to remind you that it is an office get-together and, as

such, we need to make sure our dress and attitudes represent McKenzie and Bryant as we're out."

She chuckled, Damon's reminder coming from her little black dress comment, no doubt.

"Sounds good. I'm an accountant. I don't own anything that would be considered inappropriate."

Ben smiled and moved from his reclined position. "Doing okay on your workload?"

"Yes, it's going great. Just wrapping up my review for this meeting that Kent and Damon want me in next week."

"The audit committee stuff?"

"Yeah, that's it."

"Yeah, so don't mention that to anyone else. It would seem unfair, and I'm the only one who understands that it's because you're family that they have plans to move you up the totem pole pretty fast." Ben looked behind him in the hallway.

"Oh okay. Thanks for the advice."

"You bet. See you tonight, and remember: No work talk tonight. Only good times to be had by everyone."

"I'm there, and I will do my best to follow the rules." She lifted an eyebrow as Ben left, the sound of his soft laughter warming her. He was a good guy, one she needed to get to know better. He knew Damon pretty well, so if she was going to get any sort of scoop on who Damon really was or what his past relationships looked like, most likely it was going to be from Ben.



The last few hours of the day passed too quickly. She wrapped up her review and took the zip drive back up to Linda, Damon's secretary. She nodded toward the door and smiled toward the pretty blonde.

"Is he in there?"

“No. He left just after getting back from lunch. I assume he went to see his girlfriend, but don’t tell him I said that.”

“He has a girlfriend?” Bethany couldn’t hide the emotion on her face.

“He has *lots* of girlfriends.” Linda stood up and took the zip drive. “Have a great evening, and enjoy the intern party. If you have your sights set on Damon, don’t bother. He’s a bastard and a half when it comes to women. Best boss in the world, but his sex drive is insatiable, and he’s gotten in loads of trouble thanks to it. Do yourself a favor and stay far, far away.”

Bethany nodded, whispering, “I will” as she turned to go.

CHAPTER 15



BETHANY

A quick stop by the house to change into something more club-worthy, and Bethany was on her way to Masquerade. She applied more makeup than usual, her dress covering everything but hugging her curves and accentuating perfectly just how much of a woman she was. If Sadie wanted to step up against her, she was going to bring it tonight. It had nothing to do with Damon and everything to do with someone needing to put the bitch in her place. The redhead thought she had entitlement, the right to demand things and threaten various people at will, including Bethany.

“Not tonight.” Bethany pulled up to the club and got out, walking into the loud sound of Pitbull’s “Time of our Lives” screaming from the speakers. Ben waved his hands wildly at her, a large table over in the far corner theirs. She walked toward them, cursing herself for forgetting a mask. The theme that night was half-mast and the mask was only allowed to cover your eyes.

Bethany laughed at the large clown mask that Ben pulled from his face, a large smile on his mouth. “Hey, girl. Where is your mask?”

A few other interns turned, smiles on their faces, drinks in their hands.

“I totally forgot it. I can go get one and come back.” She shrugged, keeping her eyes on the man in front of her. She hadn’t gotten to know anyone that well and felt a bit on the spot all of a sudden.

“No worries.” He turned and yelled at the group. “Introduce yourself to Bethany while I get her a mask.”

He disappeared, and several people moved up to introduce themselves. She shook hands and smiled, worried about her dress all of a sudden. Trying to feel better about herself by dressing up seemed like a great idea until she stood in front of her peers with all of them dressed like they were going to church.

“Um, wow.” Philip’s voice sounded beside her. Bethany turned and sighed with relief, reaching out to touch his arm as the muscle flexed beneath her fingers. The black mask covering his eyes made him look more sensual than he had earlier that day. His blond hair and blue eyes were the perfect match for melting girls’ hearts, and when he spoke... Bethany sighed again as Ben moved up.

“Here you go, madam. Philip, have you met Bethany?”

“I have. I was just going to ask her to come dance with me.” Philip moved his shoulders a little side to side like he had moves to share.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Bethany whispered, taking the mask from Ben and slipping it on. She wished for a moment that she had a full face mask so she could hide behind it completely.

“Looks great on you. Go have fun. The tab is open at the bar, and it’s on the company, so no worries,” Ben called out before turning to lift his glass in the middle of a large group. Bethany turned and slipped her arm into Philip’s.

“I’m glad you’re here too. I think I might have to hide the rest of the night. Sadie seems dead set on grabbing my attention and, no, just no.” He laughed, and Bethany did as well, stopping by the bar and ordering a beer.

“You like beer?” Philip asked, moving to stand closer to her. The button-down shirt he’d worn that day at work looked really good with his jeans, the material soft in appearance and hugging his sleek frame.

“Yeah, you don’t?” She thanked the bartender and lifted the bottle to her lips.

“I love it.” He lifted his Heineken toward her, and they hit the bottles together. “Most girls drink fruity drinks and stuff.”

“I’m not most girls.” She smiled, and he wagged his eyebrows before moving toward the dance floor.

The music was loud and fast, fun and energetic. She took another swallow of her beer and lifted her hand to drop it on his shoulder. He draped a hand on her hip and moved with her, their distance comfortable. Something about him helped her to relax and just enjoy herself. His eyes moved along her as they danced, the smile lifting his lips every so often, giving way to his thinking being less than professional.

He wasn’t Damon, but that was a good thing. Stripping him naked and making an exhibitionist of herself on the dance floor wasn’t at the front of her thoughts either, which was a relief. She had begun to worry about the depravity of her thoughts. It was nice to know it wasn’t a shift in who she was but rather the undeniable heat between her and her boss. The song ended, and Philip spun her around, the two of them laughing and crashing into each other.

“I’m going to run to the restroom. I’ll join you again in a minute.” He leaned in and spoke loudly as Katy Perry’s “Dark Horse” started. She nodded and handed him her beer to do away with, the song requiring both her arms in the air. It had been too long since she had let loose, the last time having been at her graduation party.

“What a fucking nightmare that was,” she spoke out loud, the music swallowing the sound of her voice completely. The strong hands of a man sliding around her waist as he pulled her against him caused her to stop dancing for a moment. He rolled his fingers along her hips to move her again, the thick press of his strong body against hers giving way to the desire just to let him be a fantasy for a minute. It was most likely Philip, and if it wasn’t, that would be even better.

Dancing with someone was the precursor to sex, their ability to move with fluidity on the dance floor leaving no

question as to their talents in the bedroom. Good thing she was with her coworkers tonight and Damon was with his girlfriend, whoever the fuck that was. Anger burned through her as she reached back and let her hand slide down the back of the man's thigh, pulling him in tighter as she rocked against him.

His fingers spread out on her stomach, his other arm moving to wrap around her chest just under her breasts. She dropped her head back on his chest, knowing she was under cover of the dance floor. There were so many people around her it felt like a sea of heat she might drown in. He pressed his lips to the side of her neck, kissing his way to her ear. The soft whisper of his voice undid her, the immediate need to be his for the night fucking her hard.

“I thought I told you not to wear this dress. I think I might have to punish you for your insubordination.”

Damon.

She tried to turn in his arms, but he locked her to him, pressing his face back down to her neck as he sucked on her heated skin. She groaned and rocked herself against him over and over, the smoldering heat of the bodies pressing against them doing nothing compared to the strong man behind her. He finally released her just enough for her to turn. She spun around, Damon moving back just a little before she slid down the front of his body, rolling slowly back up. From cheek to hip, every part of her brushed along his erection.

She stopped in front of him as he growled at her, the shiny white mask covering half of his face reminded her of *Phantom of the Opera*. He was beyond breathtaking, sin that would snuff out any goodness that might spark inside of the woman he wanted. His eyes spoke of long nights, screams and moans, pleasure beyond anything she could conceive.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispered, taking the final step to fill the gap between them. His hands rolled over her hips, sliding so painfully slow over the curve of her ass. His fingers tugged at the side of her dress, but he didn't pull it up. He leaned down, lining up their vision perfectly, the muscles in his cheeks locked down as if he were struggling to breathe.

“Because you want me to.” He leaned forward, running his nose along the side of her jaw, Bethany closing her eyes in anticipation of a kiss. A loud moan left her, and Damon rolled his hips again, rubbing himself against her belly.

“I can’t take much more, Damon. You have to stop.”

“You sound convincing. I don’t think we’ve even come close to pushing you toward the edge of what you truly want from me.” He brushed a kiss across her lips as one hand released her. She pressed against the kiss, moving back in shock as the air became so hard to breathe.

The back of his fingers brushed across her sex, the dress a hindrance. He moved the other hand to hold her head still, his fingers softly petting her, the motion lost to the movement around them.

“Tell me you don’t want to push to the edge with me. Tell me, Beth.” He turned his hand and cupped her, pressing his fingertips hard against her. She yelped, rocking into him and hating herself for doing it. What was wrong with her?

Tell him to stop, and walk the fuck away.

“More,” she whispered, her mind screaming to back away.

“Yeah, more, baby ... I need more of you.” He tapped his fingers a few times as she panted against his mouth, the sound loud and drowning her in dark lust.

He moved his hand from her face and took her arm off his shoulder, pulling her hand down to stroke his arousal as he growled against her lips.

“More, God please, more,” she whispered, a frantic throb destroying her ability to reason.

He rocked against her hand, moving his from her and holding her tightly to him as he made love to her mouth, his fingers lost in her hair as she forgot anything but him existed. The world faded fast, the music becoming her reality, the force of his tongue her lifeline. She sucked hard on his offering, moaning and panting until he broke the kiss.

“Fuck,” he growled, turning and pulling her from the floor. They walked to the front of the club, Damon ripping the mask from his face. He dropped it in the trashcan beside the door and walked out into the night, breathing in deeply.

Bethany stopped beside him, pulling her hand from his. “No. I can’t do this. It will change everything between us.”

He turned toward her, wrapping an arm around her waist and pulling her in tightly as he glared down at her. “You and I ... we’re going to happen. You can choose if you want me to take you the first time in the comfort of my home or sprawled out, naked and shaking across your desk. Tell me now because I will decide for you if you don’t speak up. Demand something of me, Bethany. Take charge of what’s about to happen to you. Show me who you are.”

She let her eyes move across his face, her vision swimming from the emotions pumping through her painfully. “Get the car, and take me to your place. No lies between us. No drama from you. No complaining when I give you exactly what you want.”

He whispered softly before leaving, “Fuck me ...”

“I plan to.” She ran her fingers through her hair and shivered, the night just having taken a drastic turn. No more cat and mouse. Time to let him have his way.

CHAPTER 16



BETHANY

The drive to his place was filled with tension. Sexual anxiety sat like a fog in the air above her. She glanced over at him. His jaw was locked into place, his knuckles white as he rolled his grip on the steering wheel. She reached over and slid her hand along his thigh, all her focus on breathing in a pattern that didn't leave her looking as needy as she was for him. He shifted his gaze to her, his tone sharp and unyielding.

“Not yet.”

She reached farther, wanting to make him burn for her the way she was burning for him. He reached down and caught her hand, lifting it to his mouth and sucking a few fingers into the wet warmth of his mouth. Bethany groaned loudly, the sound airy and desperate.

Damn him.

He put her hand back in her lap, a smirk lifting his mouth. “Behave, or I'll tie you up and make you shiver with need before I perhaps, maybe, give you what you want.”

“What you need ...” she whispered, sitting back in her seat, her words challenging and low in her throat. He chuckled and let the conversation die, both of them knowing that the night would mark not only their skin but something much deeper.

Parking the car, he turned off the lights and turned to look at her in the dark. She sat as still as possible, the air suddenly so hard to breathe.

“Tell me you want this. You’re gonna have to convince me to break the rules of engagement that I live by,” he whispered, his tongue brushing across his lips. Bethany stifled a groan and unbuckled her seatbelt.

“I don’t know your rules, but I’m tired of conversation.” She got out of the car and walked toward his house, the large bachelor pad sitting on the edge of a lake, beautiful like his father’s. He got out and locked the car as he walked toward her, looking like a lion on the prowl.

“Big words for a small girl.” He brushed past her, unlocking the door and moving aside as she passed him.

The house was immaculate, everything in its place, the style very modern. He moved in behind her, his arms encircling her waist. One hand slid down to the bottom of dress, fingers brushing up her thighs as he dragged the material up. The other moved to a breast, his thumb flicking back and forth over her hardened nipple.

She pressed back against him, her head dropping to his shoulder as his mouth made contact with her neck. The wetness of his tongue jolted her senses, a whimper leaving her lips accompanied by his dark growl.

Strong fingers pressed against the front of her panties, her body already primed and ready for anything he might want of her.

“So wet, Beth. Someone should clean that up.”

She smiled, arching her back to rub herself along his erection. His hands tightened on her, his fingers moving the material that held her captive as he stroked methodically.

“I think you owe me a confession.”

“No,” she whispered and pressed her hips forward, his finger dipping into her as her body screamed for more.

He pulled his hand away and released her, walking around her as she tried to catch herself. Her thighs trembled as he moved down the hall, his hands working to get his tie and shirt off. He turned as he reached the end of it and smiled at her, just before licking his fingers clean.

“Mmmm, I was hoping to have more of that, but if you aren’t willing to be a good girl, I have nothing to offer you.” He disappeared into what she imagined to be his bedroom. Bending over to press her hands to her knees, she focused on breathing in deeply, the room spinning slightly. What was it about him?

If she bent to him, would he lord it over her—or was that all part of his game?

In the pool, he had mentioned wanting a strong woman, one that wouldn’t get on her knees until he had done so himself. She stood up and ran her fingers through her long hair. If he wanted to play, then she would meet him in the middle and break his resolve in half. He thought he knew how to tease a woman, to bend her, but he was in for a surprise.

Bethany stepped out of her dress, letting it drop to the floor. She walked toward the room, undoing her bra and slipping out of her panties just before walking in. Damon stood with his back to her, his shirt gone and the strong muscles of his back contracting as he undid his pants.

She crawled onto the large four-post bed and slid across the sheets onto her stomach, her feet coming up to slide along each other.

“I’m serious, Beth. I’m not like other men. I want to hear what I want to hear, when I want to hear it. You don’t relent, and I’ll either take it from you or make you beg for keeping it from me.”

“What do you want to hear, Damon?” she whispered seductively, the cold sheets silky against her bare skin. He turned to face her, bending over and pulling his slacks from him before realization slipped across his handsome features.

He paused, his body hard and more than ready for a night of fucking. Tilting his head to the right a little, his eyes dragged down the length of her. He smiled and nodded, licking his lips again.

“I believe that your actions far outweigh your words.” He moved toward her and stopped beside the bed. Reaching out,

he slid his hands under her arms and pulled her face to the edge of the bed before kneeling down in front of her, his face just before hers.

“I’m not going to fuck you tonight. I want you to *need* me before I give in to you.” He smiled, leaning in and pressing his lips against hers. The saltiness of her own taste on his tongue lit her on fire, her hands reaching up to lock onto him. She broke the kiss and moved to her knees. Damon stood. She pressed his shoulder down hard, a soft laugh leaving her.

“I don’t need you to fuck me tonight. I just need you to eat until your heart’s content, and you’re shivering for something that you’ll not be getting.” She tilted her head to the side as he looked up at her; a subtle nod was all she got.

“Hush, woman.”

He moved fast, his motions concentrated and sensual like nothing she had ever seen. He stood and pressed her chest softly. Bethany fell onto her back as Damon slid on the bed, his large arms wrapping around the underside of her legs and pulling up slightly. Shoulders pressed against the bottom of her ass, he buried his face against her neck, Bethany breathing in sharply and arching her hips as shock rolled over her.

She hadn’t expected him to beckon to her. It was a bold move, and one she figured would get her laughed out of his bed, but nothing of the sort happened. The sweet sounds of him lapping at her, his fingers and teeth carefully pushing and pulling, undid her over and over again. By the third time, she pushed against his shoulder, her words slurred, her body aching for something more—for him.

“No,” she moaned. He moved her hand and pressed his tongue against her again. She pushed his head back and groaned louder. “No. No. I want you.”

He sat up, a smile lifting on his wet lips. “You want me, or you *need* me?”

Her eyes narrowed, her game having blown up in her face. He knew what he was doing. It had been his plan all along.

She was too lost to him to do anything but bow to his demands.

“I want you. I need you to fuck me all night, Damon. I want to fill this place with the sounds of my screams, with the smell of your lust. I want to be fucked.” She moved to her elbows and growled at him, something deep inside of her coming unhinged. He smiled and ran his flat palm over her belly and down her sex before patting her like a kitten.

“Good ... that’s where I need you to be.”

He forced her onto her side and moved in to lie behind her, his large erection pressed to the curve of her rear. She snuggled into him and turned her face toward him in question. He kissed her softly and licked at her mouth, nipping at her once.

“What are you doing?”

He chuckled softly. “Feeding your need. Sleep with me, and perhaps when you’re really ready to handle me, I’ll fill you up completely. For hours. Just me and you fucking like animals.”

“Now,” she whispered, rolling her hips as he groaned. His hand locked on her hip as his teeth sank painfully into her shoulder. He tugged at the flesh a little, kissing and licking the soreness before relaxing behind her.

“Now.” She arched against him, the sharp smack of his hand on her ass shocking her.

“No. You took control tonight, and for that, I drank your pleasure. We fuck when I say we fuck. Sleep with me, or go home if you don’t want me to hold you.”

Confused but too tired to deal with it, she relaxed in his arms. The dull ache between her thighs calmed finally, and she drifted off into sleep, questions beating her up from every angle.

What had she done wrong?



Bethany walked into the house, passing by the kitchen with her heels looped over her fingers. Her hair was a complete mess, and she looked like she'd sustained a long night of fucking and come out on the losing end. Funny enough, that's exactly how it felt too. Damon not finishing the job left her feeling empty and frustrated. Her mother called to her as she passed. Bethany stopped and sighed softly. No rest for the weary.

Turning on her bare heel, she walked into the kitchen and was grateful that it was just her mother.

“Where's Kent?”

“He had to fly to Seattle for a few days. Something about a surprise audit by the government.” Her mother motioned for her to sit down with her. “Where were you last night?”

“I went to have drinks with some coworkers, and things got a little wild. We ended up at someone's house, and I just crashed. Probably not the best idea, but it's what happened.”

“Well, I know you're in college, but I was worried. When you're staying here with us, just make sure you text me and let me know that you'll not be coming home.”

Bethany reached over and picked up the half-eaten pieces of buttered toast on her mother's plate, making quick work of it.

“I will, Mom. Sorry for making you worry.”

“So ... who is he?”

“Who is who?” Bethany sat back, licking her fingers.

Her mother pointed to a spot on the side of her neck. Bethany tugged at her shirt, looking down to see a bite mark on her shoulder, the indentation red and puffy. She stifled a sound of lust at the remembrance of Damon's mouth on her—all over her. He obviously enjoyed drinking her down; why had he stopped?

“Who bit you? The coworker have a dog that needs to be put down?” Her mother’s eyebrow lifted as a smile tugged at her lips. Bethany chuckled and pulled her shirt up, shaking her head and moving to stand.

“His name is Philip. He’s a new intern at work. He’s handsome, smart and just my kind of guy, I guess. I shouldn’t have stayed, but it’s been a long two years of not dating anyone to focus on my grades.” Bethany shrugged and reached for the last piece of toast as her mother lifted the plate toward her.

“I think it’s great. You need to let your hair down and enjoy yourself some.” Her mom laughed softly, the older woman’s cheeks coloring a bit.

“I think my hair down is half the problem.” Bethany took a bite, butter running down the side of her hand. She moved to lick it as her mother waved her off.

“No details. You and your tongue get out of here. I’m still your mother.”

Bethany chuckled and turned, walking from the kitchen and rushing around to get ready for what was sure to be an awkward day at the office.

CHAPTER 17



BETHANY

The dull ache between her thighs pulled her back into the depravity of her night with Damon, every subtle movement causing it to revive. She pressed her back to the elevator, praying that no one she knew would get on. The door opened to her floor, and she walked off languidly, her eyes scanning the area to see who was in and who hadn't made it yet. It was late, and by then she would usually have been a couple of hours into a project. She would have to catch up with Ben later and see how the rest of the intern party had fared. That, and give him a good excuse why she rushed off without saying goodbye after having just arrived at the club.

The “sick mom” card would work. It always did.

She dropped her purse on the empty seat in front of her desk before dropping down in her comfortable leather chair. Her stomach growled loudly, the rumble reminding her of a cat being mauled. She smiled at the thought and reached over to turn on her computer as a knock resounded at her open door.

Philip.

“Hey, Cinderella.” He smiled and pointed to the chair across from her. “Mind if I come in?”

“Not at all.” Bethany stood, reaching over the desk and grabbing her purse. She dropped it beside her desk and smoothed down the front of her gray suit, the light sapphire shirt accenting the pinstripes in the material. She felt like she owned the world when wearing a suit. Might as well act like it.

“So what happened last night? We got on the dance floor, and I had to run to the restroom. I come back, and you’ve disappeared.” He laughed, his smile warm and safe. “I looked everywhere for you. Ben was worried too. No glass slipper. No breadcrumb trail or anything ...”

She laughed and reached over to type in her password, the need to get started on something and take her mind off of Damon pressing against her.

“My mother texted and said she wasn’t feeling very well.” Bethany glanced over at him. “My father left us a long time ago, so when she needs me, I usually overreact, which I did last night.”

“Oh. Sadie said she thought you left with some guy. I figured that couldn’t be right, but you know she’s always trying to start something.”

Bethany turned toward him, her smile dropping at the mention of the redheaded intern. It was only a matter of time before she had an ass-whooping headed her way.

“Well, she was wrong. Sorry to disappoint.” Her tone changed, coldness that Philip didn’t deserve sneaking into her words. He held up his hands and shook his head as if surrendering.

“Hey, no worries here. I was just telling you what she said. I’m just glad you’re alive and well. How’s your mom doing?”

“She’s good. I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that.” She leaned back in her chair, letting out a soft sigh. Not sleeping more than a couple of hours, mixed with the torrential flood of questions the night caused, left her exhausted.

“It’s no problem. So, was she sick?”

“Yeah, throwing up and stuff. I took care of her most of the night. I’m honestly beat from it.”

“You should have stayed home.”

“Maybe, but I don’t get paid for staying home.” She stood up and reached for her bank card. “I’m thinking I want to test fate. Want to join me?”

He stood as well, a soft chuckle leaving him as he nodded. “Always wanted to fuck fate, but testing her out first sounds like a more prudent way of doing things.”

“I’m just talking about testing my new bank card. You sound like you have much bigger plans.” Bethany walked around him and through the door, looking over her shoulder at the handsome boy. “You look nice today.”

“And you look stunning, but I didn’t want to be overbearing and tell you.”

“I like that type of overbearing. Let’s get something down in the cafeteria.” She moved into the elevator, turning to watch him walk toward her. He was interested. By the look on his face, his smile reaching his eyes, he was ready to take the next step and ask her out. She would need to nip it in the bud but wanted to be careful. Not having too many friends in the office yet, it was nice to be around him. He would be a great work friend if he were willing to see her differently.

“I like the overbearing way you danced last night.”

“Overbearing?”

“I guess overwhelming would be better. You a dancer? Take lessons as a kid or something?”

“Oh, I thought you meant pole dancer. I should have been one. It would have been an easier way to pay my classes in college.” She reached up to push the button on the elevator panel, Philip having moved close to her side.

“I’ll keep my thoughts to myself on this one.”

She laughed and wrapped her arms around her chest. Philip reminded her of her ex-boyfriend, Jake, but a version she would consider dating if her stepbrother hadn’t stolen her completely. His ways were unethical, using lust and his sex appeal to leave her panting after him. She needed to figure out how to return the favor.

“Hey ... did I lose you?” Philip waved in front of her as he held the elevator door open. Bethany moved toward him, shaking her head.

“Oh sorry. Got lost in my thoughts for a moment.”

“Not thoughts of pole dancing, I hope.” He laughed as she swatted at him.

They grabbed a coffee and a few donuts to share, Philip picking up the tab and not giving her a chance to pay. Bethany sighed, rolling her eyes at him.

“I thought you guys from Australia were domineering and made your women do everything.”

“You considering yourself to be *my* woman?”

Heat rushed up her neck. She reached up and tugged at the top of her shirt to make sure the evidence of her night was fully covered. They sat down at a small table near the edge of the large white-walled cafeteria.

“No. I didn’t mean it like that. I just meant women in general.”

He grinned and reached for the only chocolate donut. He almost had it to his mouth as she gasped, reaching for it.

“Hey. I wanted the chocolate one.”

He pulled it out of her reach and smiled so big it had to have hurt his face. She reached again, moving out of her chair as he laughed loudly.

“No fucking way. I get the chocolate one.”

She put her hands on her hips, tilting her head as she eyed him and then the donut.

“I’m not playing with you. I’m eating the chocolate one.” She reached again as he stood too, extending the donut behind him. He trapped her to the front of his lithe frame with a hug, his laughter contagious.

“Not even if you *were* my woman, Beth. I’ll buy you another one.”

Bethany moved away from him, the moment sweet and almost too precious.

“Well, isn’t this a plot twist?” Sadie’s voice grated on her like nails on a chalkboard.

“A plot twist? You read?” Bethany turned to face her nemesis, a sweet smile slithering across her face. It was time to mess with the girl a little.

“Of course I don’t read. I’m far too busy riding the universe through the stars.”

“So poetic. Just beautiful, don’t you think, Philip? Ignorance can still birth creativity. Logic perhaps not, but creativity, yes.”

Philip shoved the donut in his mouth, talking around it. Bethany popped him on the chest as he broke up in laughter, pointing to the dining hall and walking away. He was headed to get more chocolate donuts. Perfect timing. *Ass.*

“I saw you leave with that guy last night. You can try and play innocent with everyone around here, but I’m on to you.”

“Because you think I left with someone from the bar you’re on to me? What does that even mean? Bisexuality is accepted by most people, but I’m not interested.” Bethany snorted softly. “I mean, I’d talk to your friend that walks around up your ass, but you’re ... not my type at all.”

“What are you talking about, oaf? You should hear yourself rambling on.” She flipped her hair behind her shoulder, narrowing her eyes on Bethany. “I saw you with the guy. Period. I’ll be telling Damon that his latest piece of ass is seeing someone else.”

“What if it was Damon, Sadie? Then what?”

“It wasn’t. He never comes to those things. Honestly, I don’t know why he’s bothering with you. Is your daddy rich?”

“It’s none of your business who my daddy is and what he is or isn’t.” Bethany moved around the table, her heart racing in her chest as goosebumps rushed across her skin. How she hated this loud bitch.

“Oh ... we’ve hit a sensitive spot. Let me guess,” Sadie pressed her finger to her pencil thin lips, “your mom had you

out of wedlock, and her druggie boyfriend decided neither of you was worth staying for. You paid for college by working your ass off and loading up on debt, and Damon feels sorry for you. Did I get it right? Did Daddy leave you because you weren't worth sticking around for?"

The room twisted around her, a splash of red brushing across her vision as she took the last two steps between her and Sadie. Her fist connected hard with the side of the mouthy girl's face. Sadie screamed and fell to the ground, blood seeping out on the white tile floor around her.

Bethany came to and bent down, trying to help her as Sadie screamed at her.

"Back up, you vicious bitch. Don't come near me. I'm calling security, and my father is going to sue. Get back!"

Bethany moved, shock rushing over her. Had she really just fucked her chances of being someone at McKenzie and Bryant and even more so, having her master's paid for?

Philip walked up, pulling her back and bending down to look at her.

"Hey ... Beth. Hey."

She shook her head, her vision still a little blurred as his voice penetrated the desire to finish the job by choking the redhead out completely.

"What?" she whispered, looking up at him.

"You need to go. Take these and get out of here. I'll work out things with Sadie for you. Make sure you talk to Mr. Bryant first. He seems to think highly of you. Get to him, and then go home. I'll deal with this."

Bethany turned, walking toward the elevator as numbness wrapped around her. It had to be a lack of sleep. She hadn't been in a fight since high school, the reason for that one no different than the one that just occurred. Would her father always be such a sore spot?

"How did she know about him?" Bethany whispered, reaching into the bag Philip had handed off to her and pulling

out a chocolate donut. She bit into it deeply and got off on Damon's floor.

Linda looked up from her desk. Concern swept across her features. "Bethany, you okay?"

"Just long morning already," Bethany mumbled, her words monotone and running together. What was wrong with her? "Where's Damon?"

"Mr. Bryant is in Seattle. He left this morning. Should be back at the end of the weekend."

"He left this morning? When?"

"At nine."

"Did he leave a message for me?" Bethany dropped the donut in the bag, her stomach turning sour.

Linda's mouth lifted in a smirk as she chuckled softly, her tone berating.

"Why would he, dear? You're an intern, and he's the CFO of the company." She reached for the phone. "Excuse me."

Bethany turned and walked to the stairs, not wanting to run into anyone she knew. A quick stop by her office and she would be headed to Kent's to spend the afternoon in her bed. A long hard cry at the situation with Sadie would help, but would it soothe the ache in her chest over Damon?

Had the night just been a way to control her and he was on to his next girl? Maybe someone who wouldn't break so easily under his demands?

Why wouldn't he at least tell her he was going out of town? Linda's words left her feeling stupid and childish. Tears welled in her eyes as she jogged the rest of the way down the stairs, stopping by her office and grabbing her purse before making her way to the street level.

Time to test fate.

CHAPTER 18



BETHANY

“Oh hell, no,” Matt grumbled loudly. Bethany moved the pillow from her head and looked up, her tears having soaked the sheet beneath her.

“Go away. I’m not in the mood to be friendly.”

He pounced on the bed, his large hand pressing against the upper part of her back again and again. She bounced with his efforts, growing angry and swatting at him.

“No need to be friendly. We’re family. Get your ass up. I’m taking you out.”

“No. I’m not interested in seeing people. I hate everyone.”

“Liar. Get up. I’m going to inhale everything in the fridge. When I come back, you better be in the shower and getting ready. Jeans and a T-shirt. Get up, get dressed and let’s go have fun together.”

“No,” she grumbled, sitting up and pushing her hair from her face in time to see Matt leave. She didn’t want to go anywhere. The darkness of her room provided the perfect place to hide. Between the situation with Sadie and Damon’s dismissal of her, as he left town without a damn word, she was done.

“Get up, or I’ll drag your ass out of there.” Matt’s voice lost volume as he moved away.

She threw her pillow across the room toward the door. A temper tantrum would be welcomed, but childish. She denied herself the action. Getting up and walking languidly to the

bathroom, Bethany stripped and got in the shower. The steam offered comfort, and her tears mixed with the water that hit her face.

Sleeping with Damon had been a mistake. One she was sure not to have the chance to live down. Was he going to come back from Seattle and pretend that nothing had happened between them? That things were business as usual?

“Why? You’re so damn stupid.” She tugged at her hair, anger rushing from the pit of her stomach to her chest. Was she so desperate to feel something, anything, that she would believe herself able to capture someone as powerful and sexy as her asshole stepbrother? And of course there was that: he was her stepbrother, or soon would be.

How had she figured that would play out? Their attraction to each other was tangible, the feeling of him taking her to heights unimaginable rolling over her in waves. She pressed her back against the cool shower wall and let her face drop into her waiting hands. Even if there had been something worth exploring in a relationship with him, how would that ever work out?

Hi, this is my husband and brother, Damon.

She growled loudly in the shower, hitting her balled-up fists against the slick tiles. She needed to separate herself from him entirely. To be intimate with him once was a mistake, just blatant horny ignorance. To do it again would be a clear indication that she was sick or a complete dumbass.

“Hurry up. I want chips and queso. Nothing else will do!” Matt yelled, his voice slipping through the crack under the locked door of the bathroom.

“I’m hurrying. Excuse the fact that I have to stop for a fucking meltdown every few minutes.”

“It can’t be that bad. Come on. We’ll work through it together.”

“You don’t want to know this, Matt.” She let her hands drop and turned to put her head under the spray of the water, not wanting to continue the conversation. She was horrified by

the thought of Matt finding out that she had fallen in love with Damon.

“Love or lust?” she whispered before turning off the shower and stepping out into the chilly air of the bathroom.

Did it matter which?



A few minutes later Bethany was standing in the entry to the kitchen. Matt’s back was to her as he shook his butt and danced in the light of the open fridge, a song being hummed from his lips softly. She cleared her throat, and he stood, hitting his head on the top door of the freezer.

“Ouch, dammit.” He turned and smiled, shutting the door and walking toward her.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to surprise you.” Bethany shrugged, leaning into the hug he offered. Why couldn’t Damon be like Matt? Why couldn’t there be no Damon at all?

“No apologies. Let’s go. I’m taking you out. Shopping, dinner, and coffee. Sound good?”

Bethany pulled out of his grasp and shook her head.

“I guess, but I’m telling you that I’m not the best company tonight.” She glanced around. “Where is my mother?”

“She said to tell you that she would see you later tonight. Something about her and her best friend going out to look for outfits for the wedding.”

“Outfits for the wedding?” Bethany turned and followed Matt’s lead as they walked through the expansive house and out into the warm summer night.

“It’s a destination wedding, remember? So I guess flip-flops and togas? Who knows? You’re the girl. You tell me.” He pushed his shoulder into her before she moved around the car to get in. Matt’s small Toyota Corolla gave off the image that he was a regular guy with a regular life. Exactly the way she knew he wanted it.

She got in the car and pulled on her seatbelt. He slipped in and turned the car on, revving the air conditioner up to high before pulling out into the quiet street of the neighborhood.

“I’m almost worried about making time for the wedding with school starting the week after we get back and my responsibilities at the firm.” Bethany looked out her window, her teeth pressing down on her bottom lip.

“The wedding is going to be a great time and one you seem to need. Talk to me about what’s going on with you today. You don’t seem like the type to hide away in your bed and let anything get you down. What happened?”

She turned her head toward him, reaching out to turn the radio on for background music.

“I punched that redheaded girl at the office in the face. I’m sure I broke her nose and probably lost my job. I’m surprised Damon hasn’t called and chewed me out. Actually, I’m not surprised. He left town without saying anything. Nothing at all. Nada.” She crossed her arms over her chest, leaning her head back and closing her eyes as a shaky sigh left her.

“Okay, one thing at a time. Did it feel good to pop the skanky bitch in the face?”

Bethany snorted and glanced at Matt, his smile bright and full of mischievous intent.

“Yes, but that’s beside the point. I’m not a college kid who can act like the world won’t punish me for fucking up. I needed this job, and disappointing your dad ...”

Matt cut her off.

“Our dad. He’s going to be your dad soon too. He’s not going to be upset if the girl deserved it, Beth. He’s very fair. He will just clean it up and warn you to make sure you think before you act.”

“I shouldn’t have done it. She just pushed the right buttons.” Bethany opened her eyes and tugged on her seatbelt. The strap dug into her shoulder perfectly; the skin still tender from Damon’s assault.

“Which buttons?”

Bethany shrugged, not wanting to bring up her sordid history in front of Matt just yet. She turned up the radio and shook her head.

“I don’t want to talk about this if that’s all right.”

He reached over and squeezed her hand. “Of course. When you’re ready. I’m always ready to listen.”

“I appreciate it.” She paused. “Why would Damon leave without saying anything?”

“Why would he say something? He didn’t tell me he was going out of town until this morning when he left. Are sisters different? More sensitive, I guess, huh?”

They pulled into a long shopping center, a brightly colored Mexican restaurant sitting in the corner. Matt pointed to it and smiled.

“Best Mexican food in town.”

“Girls are more sensitive, but Damon is my boss too, not just my brother.” She reached for the handle, getting out and wishing she were still facedown in her sheets. Being with Matt was a horrible idea. She wanted to hear from Damon, wanted to know that last night meant something to him, and instead, she was going to have to work all night to placate Matthew.

“Are you and Damon working on a project together?”

“Yes.” Bethany moved back as Matt opened the door, the sound of Hispanic music almost overwhelming. They found their seats, and she ordered a margarita with an extra shot of tequila.

Matt ordered a beer and sat back, his gaze heavy on her.

“What are you not telling me?”

She picked up her menu and scanned the items on the combo page, picking out something quickly, not caring much for food. She looked over to Matt and tried to shift the conversation.

“I’ll explain later, but first, you tell me something.”

“Okay, what?”

“Why is Damon with a hundred different women? I’ve seen him at work with probably five blondes in the last week.”

“I’ll answer, but then I get to ask a question in return.”

“Fine.”

They ordered and gave their menus to the server as Matt picked up the beer that sat before him. “He’s a whore because he hates the idea of loving someone. He figures if there are lots of women, then he’ll be too busy juggling them to love any of them.”

“That’s horrible. Why would you want to stop yourself from loving someone?”

“Protection, I guess.” Matt shrugged. “The ones that get too close and are worth his time are usually put off by the fact that he is a whore, so he doesn’t worry much about them. Love won’t come find him. He’s made sure of it.”

“And you have no idea why he does this?”

“It’s my turn to ask a question first.”

“Fine. Ask away.” She picked up her drink, the frosty mug cold to the touch. Dumping the extra shot of tequila in the glass, Bethany stirred it once and took a long drink.

“Why do you care about Damon leaving without saying he was? Why do you care if he dates or fucks ten girls?”

“Because he’s soon to be my brother.”

“Bullshit. Come clean and trust me. You’re about to be my sister, and I’ve always wanted one. Talk to me.”

She set her drink down and let out a long breath, sitting back in her chair. She should tell him, but he would judge her. How could he not?

“I’m attracted to him.” She shrugged again, reaching for a chip and shoving it into her mouth in hopes of the conversation being stalled.

“Just attraction; nothing else?”

“That’s more than one question. Why does he push women away? Was he hurt in the past? Old wounds causing him to lash out?”

“Yes, he was crushed in the past. He’s not going to let anyone in that doesn’t fit perfectly into his definition of what his woman should be. Even then, the girl who captures him will have to push past his defenses. I almost pity her.”

“Who hurt him?”

Sadness brushed across Matt’s features as he picked up a handful of chips, starting to pop one in his mouth. He paused and turned his gaze on her, his handsome face seeming to feel the effects of Damon’s pain.

“Our mother.”

CHAPTER 19



BETHANY

“What about your mother?” Bethany leaned back in her chair as the server deposited her enchiladas in front of her, the smell overwhelming.

“Damon caught her cheating on our dad several times before she got sick. He wanted to tell Dad, but Mom would beg him, plead with him, not to.” Matt shrugged, sadness creeping across his handsome features. “He went to tell him one night, finally. That was the night that Dad broke the news that Mom was dying. I think Damon felt trapped. He hated her by the time she died.”

Bethany lifted her napkin to her eyes, tears spilling onto her cheeks.

“He hated her because of the cheating?”

“Because he had suffered for several years holding her secrets so that Dad didn’t have his heart torn from his chest.”

“And then it happened anyway because of her getting sick?”

“Exactly.” Matt reached for a chip, his eyes diverted from her. “I didn’t know any of this until after Mom died. Damon kept all of it to himself.”

“How did he keep catching your mom? Were they just close?”

“When we were younger they were real close. The first time he caught her we were in high school, and he just happened to stop by the house with his girlfriend at the time.”

Matt picked up his fork and nodded to her. “Eat. We can still talk and chew.”

She smiled in response to his goofy grin, the conversation painful, and yet no tension sat between them.

“And after that, he just stopped by trying to catch her?”

“Exactly. She promised never to do it again, but he wasn’t convinced. He almost failed his junior year of high school from missing too many of his classes. He was obsessed with making sure she kept to her word. It consumed him for a while.”

“So he thinks all women are cheaters?”

Matt nodded and took a bite of his food, breathing in and fanning his mouth. “Hoooot.”

Bethany laughed. That was the deal. He was dominant and beautifully sexy, but control was paramount. She took a couple of bites of her food before letting her guard down and confessing a few of her own demons.

“I punched Sadie in the face today because she got into my background records somehow. That or the girl is just wicked good at reading people. She mentioned my childhood and how pathetic I was because my dad was the piece of shit he was.” She pulled the napkin up, embarrassment washing over her. “I’m sorry. I’m not usually so weepy.”

Matt reached out and rubbed her shoulder, his hand strong and comforting.

“No apologies. Sharing the hurts from our pasts isn’t easy, but it’s going to build up our relationship. Cry all you want. I feel like my insides have turned inside out just thinking about how much my brother hurt. He didn’t even go to Momma’s funeral. Dad’s still pissed at him for it, and Damon just can’t tell him why.”

“That’s horrible.” Bethany picked up her drink, taking a long sip and licking at the salt on the rim. “My dad left when I was twelve. I guess it was in trying to protect us from the drug dealers that were coming after him, but the mess he left my mom in was unforgivable. She ended up two hundred

thousand dollars in debt from his charges. We moved from a normal neighborhood to the ghetto overnight. Food stamps and two meals a day instead of three or four became the norm.”

“Fuck, Beth ... I had no idea.” He moved his hand back to his lap as a frown tugged at his mouth. “When did things get better?”

“They haven’t, but I think your father is our saving grace. At least I hope.” She shrugged and put her fork down, her appetite gone.

“How have you been paying for college?”

“I work two or three jobs on campus and tutor like crazy. I’ve gotten several scholarships and grants, but it’s all dried up. Kent is willing to pay for my master’s if I work for him while I go through it, which is more than generous.”

“Dad’s good like that. He will be so good to your mom and you, Bethany. He’s exactly the kind of man I want to be when I grow up.” Matt smiled and shrugged, laughing softly.

“I think I’m falling in love with Damon.” Bethany dropped the bomb, needing to get it off her chest. The air became hard to breathe, her admission more to herself than to Matt. It had only been a week. How ridiculous was that? It didn’t matter. The truth gave way to clarity, and she realized how quickly she could get wrapped up in striving to make Damon happy, in loving him beyond anything he could imagine. She could restore his faith in women and wipe away his hurts. She could.

Matt sat back, the smile playing at the edge of his kind mouth.

“I think you would be perfect for him.”

“Yes, well he might not feel the same, and there is the issue of us being family.”

“I think he might feel the same. That’s the problem. He’s going to fight against it. I would be careful to play an evenly balanced game.”

“What do you mean?”

“Damon is forever testing women. I told you he doesn’t trust them at all. He wants to push you to your limits to see if you’ll break. So push back. Don’t break, but break him if you can. Just make sure when you do that you move from a power play to love. He needs love. He needs to remember how good it feels to trust someone fully.” Matt waved the server over, their food barely touched.

“Something wrong with the meal, sir?” The server stopped by the table, confusion on his face.

“No, we’re just full. We ate too many chips. Can you bring some to-go containers and the check?”

“Of course.”

Bethany pulled her napkin from her lap and dropped it on the table next to her plate.

“He plays a hard game. I’m not used to playing games at all. I’ve rarely dated because my time has been focused on my grades, but I guess I’m willing to try.”

“I hate the idea of either of you getting hurt by the other. We have a long life of being a family in one way or the other.” Matt pulled out his card, offering it to the server as he approached.

“I agree. The issue of him being my stepbrother is a whole ‘nother concern.”

“One easily looked over. He’s not your brother by blood, and no one would need to know that.” Matt signed the bill and stood, reaching for her chair to pull it back. “You feel like shopping?”

“I feel like sleeping for a week. I’m depressed, confused and have a slight buzz.”

“Then we’re twins. Let’s go home, and we’ll pick up this date next week sometime.”

Bethany slept like a rock, Saturday morning coming much too quickly. She lay in bed for an hour after waking, hoping like

hell she would slip back into the restful darkness. No such luck.

Her phone buzzed on her nightstand, and she flipped across the bed like her ass was on fire, hoping it was Damon.

I'm headed back today. I'll be at Dad's before dinnertime. Be there.

She sent back a short message: *Fuck you? No, fuck me?*

He shot back a smiley face, and the world fell into place. Bethany flopped back on her bed, groaning loudly. He had her trapped into thinking about him and needing him without reservation. The slightest movement in his emotions sent her off one end of the spectrum or the other.

“Great ...” she muttered and got up, taking a quick shower and diving back into her sheets until her mom poked her head in the open door.

“You up?”

“No.”

“You respond well in your sleep then.” Her mom laughed and walked in. Bethany rolled over and curled up, smiling at the beautiful woman before her.

“I’m brilliant in all forms. What can I say?”

Her mom popped her butt and shook her head. “And filled with humility to boot.”

“What’s up? We missed you last night. Matt and I went to get Mexican food. Wish you would’ve come with us.”

“I went to get some new outfits for our wedding trip. I’ll show them to you later.” Her mom yawned, covering her mouth. “Anyway. Kent called from Seattle and said to tell you to pack up. He wants you to come up on Sunday afternoon so you can see the audit firsthand.”

“I have to be on campus Thursday and Friday. I can’t miss the first week, Mom.” Bethany moved to sit up, the news causing worry to sprout.

“I told him that, baby. He’s aware. He just wants you there Monday through Wednesday. You can fly back Wednesday night.”

“What about Damon?”

“He’s flying home today and will fly back out with you tomorrow.”

“Are you coming too?”

“No. Kent wants me to, but I have too much to do. We leave for the wedding in twelve days. I have to get a few packages shipped to the hotel for the decorations and stuff.”

“I thought it was going to be a small wedding.”

“It was, until Kent’s sister, Allison, got ahold of the information. Now there are a good number of people joining us. I guess when your friends are wealthy they can drop everything and go to Jamaica in the middle of the week.” Her mom chuckled and stood, reaching over to kiss the top of her head. Bethany leaned into it, emotion tugging at her.

“Mom ... would you love me if I did something terrible?”

Her mom moved back, tilting her head to the side. “I would love you with all my heart no matter what you did. I know you to be a girl that makes good choices, but if one day you don’t ... I’ll be there to help bury the body.”

Bethany laughed and fell back in her bed. “I love you, Mom.”

“Me more. Now get up, and I’ll feed you. I know you love me only second to a good meal.”



The morning turned to afternoon, Bethany padding around the house waiting on Damon most of the day. She changed into

her bathing suit, the full-piece white suit making her feel beautiful. It cut in deep on her sides and pressed her breasts up. Damon would love it.

She walked out into the early afternoon heat and found a reclining chair. Sliding down in it, she pulled her sunglasses from her hair and sighed softly. Matt must have still been asleep or back at his place. They had stayed up until the wee hours of the morning watching movies together. He had helped her to bed, his actions brotherly and loving.

A smile brushed across her lips at the thought of how easy it was going to be to fall into familial love with him.

“What’s the smile for?”

Damon’s voice jolted her. She pulled her sunglasses off and sat up, squinting as she glanced up at him. The dark gray suit he wore brought out the tan of his skin. Long black eyelashes and full lips catching her attention next. She wanted more of him.

“Matt and I watched old movies all night. I was just feeling blessed to have him as a brother.” She shrugged and stood, unsure of whether to approach him or not. Matt’s confessions the night before left her on shaky ground, her actions sure to push Damon away or pull him close.

“Glad he’s all you’ve ever wanted.”

“In a brother,” she finished his sentence, catching on quickly to the pinched tone of his voice. “What’s wrong? Something happen?”

“Yes. It did.” He turned and walked into the house, his movements stiff and unnatural.

CHAPTER 20



BETHANY

Sickness washed over her as she grabbed her towel and walked quickly to catch up to him.

“Damon. Talk to me.” She pulled at his arm as they moved into the living room. The house was quiet, the only sound being their breathing.

He turned, his face a mask of anger. Bethany backed up a step, not sure how to respond to his glare. She had done something to set him off, and yet she hadn’t seen him since they held each other all night on Thursday.

“I just got a call from our lawyers that one of my interns broke another intern’s nose. The intern that’s in the hospital is looking to sue my firm because of it. Did you not want to mention that before I had to stand condemned for shitty management skills before the lawyers? Do you think that lying is the way to build a business relationship with me? What else haven’t you told me? Care to confess now?” he barked at her, running his fingers through his dark hair and beginning to pace in front of her.

Bethany pulled the towel closer, suddenly feeling young, childish ... exposed.

“I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you in person.”

“How old are you? Do you think punching someone in the face is good business practice?” He stopped and pressed his hands to his hips, leaning toward her menacingly.

“No ... I’m sorry. I just lost control of my temper. She goaded me one too many times, and that was it for me.”

“Yes, well, I’ll send you the bill when she sues us. Oh, wait, you’re broke. I guess I’ll do with you what I do with everyone. I’ll clean up your mess, and you just go have a good time being irresponsible and doing whatever the fuck you like.”

He growled loudly, his fist clenched, his jaw set in a strong grimace.

“Fuck you.” Bethany turned and walked to her room as tears filled her eyes. He had no idea the life she had lived. He was hurt from his past, and everyone who got close to him would be his punching bag. If he gave two shits about her, he would have asked how it all happened. She would beat herself up later over not telling him about it.

“I’m not done talking to you.” He stormed after her, only to get a door in his face. He beat on it a few times. “Bethany, open the door.”

“Go away. I’m not taking this shit from you. You aren’t my father, and you’re sure as fuck trying to act like it.” She dropped the towel and pulled her suit off as his voice softened, but only slightly.

“I know that. I’m pissed that you didn’t tell me. Why? Why wouldn’t you call?”

“I didn’t think you wanted to talk to me, Damon. You went down on me Thursday and left Friday without a word. I’m not interested in looking like you matter if you can’t return the favor. Go away. I don’t need this shit, and I don’t need you.”

She walked into the bathroom, the sound of him hitting the door hard shaking her to the core. She turned on the shower and got in, her sobs painful and redemptive. He was a mistake. He was damaged goods *and* her brother. She pressed her head against the cool shower wall, a flood of emotion dragging over her in waves.

The hot water held her attention for more than an hour, her skin properly wrinkled by the time her tears were flushed and

her resolve set. She would pay for the lawsuit. She would pay for her schooling. Being broke was something that was part of her past. She could work at another firm and take care of her own shit. It would just take longer to get somewhere in life, but she would do it on her own.



Bethany pulled on a T-shirt and jeans before walking into the living room. Her mom held up her phone, a smile on her face.

“Looks like that cute boy from the office is calling. Tell him not to bite you again, hmmm?” Her mom laughed, tossing the phone to her, seemingly unaware of Damon sitting on the couch. He looked up at her, his head tilting to the side as if questioning her. She shrugged and took the phone in her room, no intention at all of calling Philip back until she read his text message.

Call when you can. Lost my job this morning. Hope you're okay.

“What?”

She dropped the phone on the bed and marched out to the living room, her blood on fire. Stopping in front of Damon, she reached to take the changer from him and turned the TV off.

“How dare you. Who do you think you are, fucking with people's lives? Philip is a great employee to you and insanely smart.”

Damon stood, his motion causing her to stumble back.

“My company. I run it as I see fit. Your ass is next on the chopping block, so watch it.”

“Why would you let him go? He was perfect for the firm. He’s the one that stayed and cleaned up that mess I caused.”

Her mother stuck her head in the room, her eyebrow lifted. “You guys okay?”

“Sibling fight. Stay out of it,” Bethany barked. She turned her attention back to the delicious bastard before her. “Why?”

Damon took a few steps toward her, pressed himself against her and tilted her chin up to him as he whispered.

“I’m in charge. I make the rules. If you don’t like them, then leave.”

“He didn’t deserve what you did, and you know it.” She jerked her face from his soft hold, the faraway look in his eyes causing her heart to hurt. He was beyond damaged, lashing out at anyone and everyone. How could anyone help mend that? Why would they want to, only to be left bruised and beaten by his attacks?

“He needed to learn his place, Beth. You do, too. He wanted to swing his dick around my office and fuck around with my girl? You’re lucky all I did was fire him. Beating his ass was next on my list.” Damon moved back to the couch and sat, his motions heavy and filled with whatever battle he was fighting.

“Fucking around with your girl? What are you talking about?”

“Your mother told me you two had gotten together, Beth. She was going on and on about how great he sounded, about how much you seemed to like him ...” He paused and pressed his hand to his eyes, his teeth grinding together. “About how you spent the night with him. And then I get a text from Sadie saying the same damned thing. What the fuck, Beth?”

“I’m not your girl, and it wasn’t him I spent the night with. It was you, asshole. I would never do that to you, but you, on the other hand, seem to be bumping into every blonde in the city. So let’s make this easy for both of us.”

He stood up and walked toward her as she held her hand out, her voice low and commanding.

“No. Don’t come near me. You’re my boss. You’re my brother. And that’s all the fuck you are.” She turned on her heel and walked to the bedroom. Stars danced along the side of her vision, her emotions far too painful to accept.

“Beth. I didn’t know ... She said it was Philip.” He walked after her, his tone changing but only slightly. Bethany turned just before walking into her room, her gaze blocked by the warm liquid of regret.

“No, you didn’t know. You don’t know anything about me. You don’t know how much Sadie hurt me, or how much it stabbed my confidence that you left without a word. That you didn’t make love to me Thursday. You don’t know how much I want you and that I can’t stop thinking about you. That I’m a good person and would never do anything to lose trust with someone I love.”

“You love me?” He took another step and stopped, his face losing color.

“Loved. Past tense. A fleeting moment of maybes. Philip learned his place, and now you learn yours. Don’t come near me.”

“Beth ...”

“Oh, and fuck your internship. I quit.”

She closed the door behind her and fell on her bed, the ache of loss drowning and damning.

CHAPTER 21



BETHANY

She half expected Damon to break the door down, the loud pounding of his fists dying off much too soon. Bethany lifted her head only for a moment before letting it drop back on her hands.

“Pathetic.” What did she want from him? Why did she have to be so fucking childish?

I quit? A long sigh left her lips as she rolled on her back. Her phone buzzed beside her. It was Philip again. She answered it, stifling the pain and confusion that sat heavy on her.

“Hey.”

“Hey. You doing okay?” His voice was much more chipper than she expected it should be.

“Yeah, just fighting with our boss.”

“Your boss.”

“Yeah, that guy.” She groaned as she sat up. Philip snickered, the sound causing her lips to turn into a smile much to her displeasure.

“Enough about him. How about you come have dinner with me tonight? I meant to ask you out since we met last week.”

A silence sat between them for a few moments, Bethany knowing quickly that having dinner or anything with Philip wasn't the answer. The fact that her emotions had unraveled so

quickly in the living room had everything to do with her loving Damon and nothing less.

“I don’t think dinner is a good idea, Philip. I’m trying to figure a few things out right now, and getting involved wouldn’t be fair to you or me.” She shrugged, rolling her eyes at herself. As if he could see her shrug.

“Okay. How about coffee between friends? I want a relationship with you. I’m willing to take a friendship over nothing.”

Would coffee turn into something more? She scoffed internally at the thought. She wasn’t boy crazy or a whore like some of the girls on campus. She had just turned into a nymph thanks to the right man stepping up and tugging hard at her strings. She stood up from the bed, wanting to go find Damon to see where they stood. He was probably over whatever was starting between them.

He had accused her with proper evidence as far as he was concerned. She knew his past and all he had been through, and yet her only response to him had been extremely defensive and rather childish. She pressed her hand to her head as Philip’s voice filled up the line again.

“Hey, if you don’t want to see me again, just tell me. I don’t want to push at all. Just wanted to see you and check up on the Sadie event.” A snicker from him had her smiling again.

“No, it’s okay. I’m just trying to figure out what to do.” She looked over at the clock. It wouldn’t be time for dinner for another few hours. She could go with him and be back in time to try and smooth things over with Damon.

“Totally up to you.”

“Yeah, let’s do it.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I’ll meet you at the Starbucks by the office?”

“That sounds perfect. I’ll see you in twenty minutes or so.”

Bethany slipped her phone into her jeans pocket, wondering if she had just made yet another mistake. Slipping on her flip-flops, she paused to wonder what her next move with Damon should be. She had told him to take the job and the budding relationship and smoke it. A growl left her lips as she quietly opened her door and looked around into the living room. Empty.

A quick walk to the kitchen had her heart racing, and her stomach turned into knots. Why couldn't she have just responded like an adult to his accusations?

Simple. She wanted him to trust her without her having to put any effort into it. She was a trustworthy person and deserved the benefit of the doubt. Maybe someone who hadn't been crushed by lies and deceit as a kid wouldn't have a problem with that. Damon was different, and now he most likely thought she was seeing Philip too.

Were she and Damon seeing each other? No.

What about all of the other women in his life? Doubtful that they had been dismissed. Bethany felt anger burn in her chest again. She walked into the kitchen with her head held high. She hadn't reacted exactly the way she would have wanted to, but he'd reacted pretty shitty, too.

Her mother looked up from a magazine, a tall glass of tea sitting on the table in front of her.

"Well. You want to tell me what's going on?" Her mom set the magazine down and tilted her head to the side.

"Just a fight over a few things from work."

"You punched someone in the face?"

"Yes. They got into my records. The girl made sure to rub poverty and a druggie father in my face." Bethany crossed her arms over her chest, the desire to fight with her mom rolling over her too. "What would you have done?"

"Punched her in the face." Her mom stood and walked toward her.

Bethany's eyes filled with tears again. Concern over Damon mixed with spikes of anger left her raw and emotionally beat.

“What happened with Damon, Beth?” Her mom pulled her close and kissed the side of her head. Bethany wrapped her arms around her mom's small waist and rested her face on her shoulder.

“He's mad that I didn't call, which I understand. He's pissed about me acting inappropriately with Philip, who's a coworker.”

“That's none of his business. I shouldn't have mentioned it in front of the ass. Forgive me.” Her mom squeezed her again before moving back. “You don't have to go up to Seattle if you don't want to. I'll just tell Kent that you're not feeling well, that you've come down with something.”

She patted her mom's hands before pulling out of her grasp. “It's okay, Mom. I'm going to go up there and show them how smart and mature I can be. It's an opportunity to make things right between all of us.”

“Well, if you change your mind.”

“I'll let you know, Mom. I'm going to go have coffee with Philip. I'll be home in time for dinner. I need to pack.”

Her mom nodded and moved back to sit down at the table. “If you're going home with him, just let me know, so I don't worry.”

“Nothing to be worried about. He and I are just friends.” Bethany shrugged and turned, walking toward the door, her eyes scanning the house for Damon.

It wasn't until she reached her car parked in the front of the house that she realized he was gone. She pulled out her phone and texted him before getting into the car.

I'm going with you to Seattle. You were wrong about a lot of things you accused me of, but I'm sorry for overreacting.

She dropped the phone in her purse, praying silently that she would hear the subtle ding of it, letting her know that he had responded. No such luck.



The strong smell of coffee beans washed over her as she entered the coffee shop. The place was packed with people of all ages, shapes, and sizes. She found Philip quickly. He stood up and motioned for her to join him. His blue eyes were electrifying; the joy on his face was warm and welcoming.

“Hey. Don’t you look like a sight for sore eyes?” He winked and pointed to the table in front of him. Three small chocolate donuts sat on a large white napkin.

She laughed and dropped her purse in the seat, picking one up and taking a bite before responding. He watched her closely. His attraction to her was nothing to guess about—he made it obvious—but not in an overbearing sense like Damon had. She was a person, not an object, so why was she so smitten with the idea of belonging to Damon?

“You look good.” She nodded, reaching to catch a crumb that rolled down her chin.

“You look better. Go get you a coffee, and come tell me about the drama you’ve been dealing with. I want a full report.” He winked again.

Bethany turned, a smile playing on her lips. Philip would be good for her—safe, but there wasn’t any chance. Her heart contracted painfully at the thought of Damon. Her lust roared to life at the mere whisper of him being close, at the possibility of tasting his lips or feeling his hands on her. Their night of passion hadn’t come close to all of the things she needed to do with him.

“Crazy ... fucking crazy,” she whispered to herself as she approached the counter.

The teenage boy taking orders chuckled. “Am I crazy or are you?”

“Hmm? Oh me, for sure. I’ll take a double espresso with milk and sugar.”

He took her order as she moved toward Philip, the handsome guy finishing one of the donuts and licking at his fingers.

“How long do I have you?” His eyebrow lifted as he sat back, picking up his drink and taking a tentative sip.

“I have about an hour. I need to pack and get ready for a trip.”

“Where are you going?” He pointed to the seat. “Take a load off. They’ll call your name.”

Bethany looked over her shoulder at the counter for a minute before dropping her purse on the floor and sitting down.

“Seattle. Mr. Bryant wants me there for an audit the location is going through.”

“Damon?”

“No, Kent.”

“Oh good. So how did they take the news about Sadie?”

“I didn’t tell them. I don’t know why I didn’t, I just hurried home and got lost in the problem. I spent the evening with my brother and just totally let the fact that I needed to call them slide.” She broke the last donut in half, sitting back to take her time enjoying her portion.

“That’s not good. Damon doesn’t seem like the kind of guy who’s okay with having news sprung on him.”

“Yep. He was rightly pissed. We had a big fight.”

“Are you guys a couple? I mean, you don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to.”

“Yes. We were. Not sure what we are now. It was ugly.”

“My fault?” Philip leaned forward, pressing his elbows to the table.

“Not really. More my fault for not being clear with him about Sadie. I think you were just the cherry on the sundae.”

“How so?”

“He thinks we’re seeing each other behind his back.” She popped the last of the donut in her mouth and stood as her name was called. She thanked the barista and walked back to the table. A quick sip of her drink burned her tongue. Curses slipped from her mouth.

“Did you tell him that we’re not?”

“Yes, but he didn’t hear me. I think I did.” She took the top off of her drink and blew at the hot liquid, steam rolling off the top.

“Is there a chance that we might start anytime in the future?”

She smirked at his confidence. His voice was beautifully different, his features so handsome. Yet he wasn’t a playboy. He didn’t feel the need to lord over her sexually and make her crazy. Was he an option?

“No. As much as I wish it were a possibility, I’m crazy about Damon. I hate that I am. He sure as hell doesn’t deserve it, but I am nevertheless. I want to break into the core of his heart and steal his breath like he steals mine.” She set her coffee down, closing her eyes for a moment to stop the flood of emotion headed her way.

“If anyone can reach him, I bet it would be you.”

She looked up as the tears rolled over onto her cheeks. Philip offered her a napkin, laughing as he shook the donut crumbs from it first.

“I think it’s over between us. He’s damaged goods, and I’m pretty close to it. He plays games with me and really every woman that he’s with, from what I hear.”

“Most guys that are hurt do. It’s a way to test the girl and save yourself another heartbreak.” Philip shrugged, breathing

in deeply as he watched her closely.

“I don’t know how to pass these tests.”

“Sure you do. Just push and remain agile when he pushes back. Meet him in the middle and show him what he’s up against. He doesn’t want you to break, Beth. He wants to see how far you’ll bend with him. It’s natural.”

“Why are we having this conversation?”

“Because I was honest when I said I wanted a friendship if nothing else.” Philip laughed and nodded toward the pastry counter. “More donuts?”

“Yeah, I think we need them.” She smiled as he got up. Her phone buzzed. Her mother letting her know that Kent had called and wanted to talk.

“Great ...”

CHAPTER 22



BETHANY

The conversation the night before had gone much better than she imagined it might. Where Damon had been accusatory, Kent was understanding and willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. How Damon had turned out to be so different from his father would be a mystery if she hadn't had a heart-to-heart with Matt.

She finished packing her things, the house quiet. Not having heard from Damon, Bethany walked to her small dresser and picked up her phone, growling softly. She would have to get in touch with him to see when the flight was, if nothing else. She dialed his number, her stomach flipping in circles and pushing against her chest.

The phone rang three times before he picked up. She almost assumed he was asleep or just unwilling to talk to her.

"Bethany." It wasn't a question of who was calling, but a declaration that he was all business with her.

"I need to know what time to be at the airport today."

"Change of heart?" His voice was deadpan, the lack of any emotion toward her stabbed hard at her. She let out a soft, shaky sigh.

"Yes. I spoke with Kent last night. We both feel it's a good thing that I continue with the firm."

"I agree. I'll be there in an hour to pick you up. Be ready. I don't like being late."

The phone went dead. Bethany pulled it from her face and growled. He was back to being an ass. Memories flooded her, one in particular: Damon had almost looked shocked the day before as he stood at the door, his face a mixture of emotions.

“You love me?”

Did he not think himself worthy of receiving love, or had it just scared the hell out of him? Was he willing to love her back, or was that proof that he was too self-absorbed to consider such a fallacy as love? She didn't know, and part of her didn't care. Emotions flying all over the place left her confused and feeling out of place in the middle of the large mansion, in the middle of this new life.

She focused on packing for the next bit and dressed in a comfortable but business-appropriate cream-colored dress. Damon would most likely be dressed to impress. Looking like a has-been next to him wasn't going to fly. Bethany dropped her small suitcase in front of the door before walking to the kitchen in search of food. She ran her fingers through her long chestnut locks, wanting him to notice how she had worked on her appearance to touch on the things he liked best about her.

The sound of the front door opening had her heart stilling in her chest. She reached up and brushed her fingers over her upper lip, a shaky breath lifting from her. Everything was fine. They were going on a business trip. He would treat her like an associate, and she would treat him like her insanely hot boss. She looked over her shoulder as her stomach tightened. No matter how much she wanted to hate him, she couldn't bring herself to do it.

His blue slacks hugged his thin waist. The white polo shirt that slipped in just above his belt brought out the tanned creaminess of his skin, the darkness of his gaze. He reached up and ran his fingers through his hair, his eyes never leaving her face.

“You ready?”

“Yes. Just hungry.”

“We’ll grab a coffee at the airport. Let’s go.” He turned and walked from the room as Bethany reached out and touched her hand to the counter. She needed something to ground her, to pull her back into reality. Should she apologize? It seemed trite, and honestly, he was as much at fault as she was for what happened between them the day before.

She grabbed a water bottle from the refrigerator and walked into the hall in time to see him pick up her suitcase.

“I can get it.”

He looked over his shoulder and chuckled, the sound not joyous at all. “I have it.”

She shrugged as he walked out the front door, her eyes moving to the perfect curve of his ass. Remembrance flooded her. Watching him undress in the open door of his closet, his body the most beautiful she had ever seen. How badly she needed to connect with him physically even if they were miles apart emotionally.

Bethany walked to her side of the car, breathing in deeply as she passed him. He looked up and turned his head toward her as if questioning her actions. She chuckled and got in the car, rolling her eyes at herself when alone. Was she really going to use their physical attraction to heal whatever happened between them?

Yes.

Even if it didn’t assist in creating a long-term relationship and fostering love. The sensually delicious man getting into the seat beside her was every painfully good fantasy she had ever had. If he was slipping away, she wanted to create a few more memories before he was gone.

Was she acting bipolar? *Yes.*

Did she care? *Fuck no.*

Damon got into the car and closed the door, started the car and pulled out without so much as a grunt toward her. She reached up and turned on the air conditioner before settling

back. If he thought the silence between them was going to cause her to choke up an apology, he was wrong. She would surely give up eventually, but she wasn't near that breaking point just yet.



The drive to the airport should have been uncomfortable, but it wasn't. Sitting in silence and simply listening to the sound of him breathing had almost offered relief. She was lost to him, and no matter what stupidity she threw at him about the two of them being *done*, they weren't. She couldn't allow it. Her fingers ran along her thigh, her eyes closed as she contemplated reaching over and touching him.

His breathing pattern shifted slightly. Looking over at him subtly, she wished for a different situation altogether. Would it still contain explosive attraction if their relationship wasn't so taboo?

"What are you thinking?" He glanced over at her, the deep timbre of his voice sliding between her thighs and stroking. She bit her lip and shook her head.

"I don't want to say."

"Embarrassed?"

"By my thoughts, yes. By my actions yesterday, no."

He chuckled, the smile lifting the side of his mouth, lickable. He pulled up to the front of the airport and nodded toward her. "I'll get the bags; just wait inside."

She got out, grabbing her purse and walking toward the door. She glanced over her shoulder as Damon worked to get the bags out of the trunk. His eyes averted to her, dragging down the back of her as he breathed in deeply.

Good. His thoughts weren't far from her.

It wasn't but a few minutes later that they were checked in and headed through security, which was a pain as always. However, sitting in first class gave them a chance to arrive just

before the plane took off, Damon having called in that they would be there just in time. She moved in front of him as they walked toward the opening of the airplane, his fingers brushing along her lower back as he moved up beside her.

“Are you embarrassed?” she whispered, looking over at him.

“Never. I say what I mean. Do what I want.”

“That so?”

“I’m interested to hear your story about how I got everything wrong with Philip, as I’m sure you’re going to work to save his ass, but I was in the right.”

She reached over and pressed her palm to the top of his slacks, dragging her hand over the curve at the front of his pants, her thumb brushing over him and flicking softly. His breath caught as he reached for her hand. She moved it before he could move it for her.

Damon shifted her in front of him as they walked on the plane, the look on his gorgeous face a warning. They weren’t on good terms. He hadn’t relented yet, and it would seem that until he did, she was going to cave to his demands. He slid his hand around her waist and pulled her flush against him, the thickness of his center pressed against her. She stifled a groan. A quick glance over her shoulder to see him left her breathless, her body reacting violently to him.

“You didn’t sleep with Philip, did you? I’d hate to kill the boy.”

She pressed back against him, her hand extending behind her to run her fingers along the side of his thigh.

“No. There is nothing with Philip.”

“Why is that, Beth?”

She turned and faced him, her hand coming to rest on his chest. “Because I want to belong to you. Simple, really.”

“Find your seats, please.” The chirpy voice of the flight attendant tried to interrupt the moment, but Damon reached

out and held her to him as if they were beyond time and space, interruption and annoyance.

“Then earn that spot.”

He nodded to their seats just behind them, motioning for her to sit down. The flight attendant sighed loudly, and Damon turned to her before taking his seat.

“Did you need to get something off your chest, ma’am?” he asked the woman.

Her cheeks burned as she seemed to lose her thoughts. “Um, no. It’s nothing.”

“Good,” he responded and turned back to Bethany.

Bethany buckled her seatbelt, the leather chairs large and much more comfortable than anything she had experienced on a plane before. Damon sat down in the seat next to her and buckled his seatbelt as well. He leaned his head back, closing his eyes and letting out a long sigh. Reaching over to take his hand, Bethany slid her fingers into his and pulled their entwined hands into her lap. He rubbed his thumb over hers but kept his eyes closed and his demeanor serious.

“I’m sorry about overreacting yesterday.” She hated that she was apologizing, but sitting next to him, staring at him, left her no choice. Her heart begged for reconciliation, her body for the long hard fuck she planned to get while in Seattle.

“Me too. I had evidence to justify my actions, but perhaps there is sometimes another side to the story.” He glanced over at her. His dark eyes held her captive. A million questions seemed to rush across his face as she reached over and brushed her fingers over his lips.

“I’m not a cheater, but ... we’re not together.”

He reached up and took her hand, pressing his nose to the palm of it and kissing softly. His actions resurrected the feeling of his mouth on her, the passion on his face as he drank her pleasure over and over again. She whimpered softly, Damon’s eyes adverting to her face.

“I don’t date, Bethany. My body you can have. My heart isn’t for sale. If that leaves us bankrupt, then it is what it is.” He pressed his teeth against the thick part of her palm, tugging softly before licking at the same spot. Damon turned, his hand sliding into her hair as he pulled her toward him. Bethany closed her eyes, her mouth open and waiting for the warmth of his tongue. His kiss was angry and filled with the mixed emotions of spouting about not wanting love and yet desperate for it like the rest of humanity.

She breathed him in, her hand sliding along his as she mumbled “Mmhmm” against his mouth. He tightened his grip on her hair, his tongue rolling along hers. The sensuality of his motions left her dizzy, the ache in her chest only outdone by the one in her lower stomach. He broke the kiss, rubbing his nose along hers as he glared at her.

“Delicious ...” he whispered, closing his eyes and kissing her again. Every nerve ending came to life, hot desire sliding down from their kiss to touch every part of her. Needy and emotionally strained from the day before, it wouldn’t take much for him to have her naked, wet and panting hard.

She broke the kiss, sliding her fingers over his lips to keep him from moving back in. Her eyes widened as his other hand slid up her thigh, his thumb brushing by the front of her panties.

“I can smell you. Divine.” He growled softly, moving to pull her fingers into his mouth. He sucked them, his eyes locked on hers. She pulled her fingers from him, a soft growl leaving her. “I need to taste you again. So perfect, Beth. Most delicious thing I’ve ever had drench my tongue.”

She moved from him and laid her head back, his fingers slipping under her panties and dipping into the mess he had made as she groaned softly.

CHAPTER 23



BETHANY

He released her from his hold. Bethany looked over at him as the flight attendant approached.

“Something to drink for the two of you?” The thin blonde smiled down at Damon, her hand pressed to the seat in front of him. The smile on the older woman’s face was anything but professional. Beth sat up, her eyebrow lifting.

“I’ll have a Jack and Coke.” He glanced to Bethany. “Baby, what do you want? Get something strong. I want you pliable for later.”

It took a moment for Beth to find her words. The flight attendant moved her hand from on top of the seat, Damon’s words showing quickly that he was a taken man.

“Bloody Mary, please.”

The woman nodded, her sensual smile falling as she walked away. Damon turned, his eyes rolling over Bethany. “Nothing happened with Philip?”

“Nothing. He wants a relationship. I told him no. He knows I have feelings for you.”

“What are those feelings, Beth?” Damon ran his palm over his crotch before adjusting himself.

“I’ll let you know when I figure that out myself.” She leaned back and crossed her legs. Another pair of panties would be hitting the trash thanks to the sexy man beside her. He reached over and stretched his hand across her thigh, moving up to the middle of her leg and resting there.

“You have desires. I have demands.” He leaned back and closed his eyes. Bethany turned to watch him, memorizing the perfect curve of his cheekbones and jawline, the thickness of his mouth.

“I have demands too,” she whispered and slid her arm into his before reclining her chair a little.

“Oh yeah?” His voice was airy, as if he were drifting to sleep. “Tell them to me.”

“You’re going to fuck me tonight like I deserve to be fucked. No more games with you.”

He glanced over at her, an eyebrow lifting. “We fuck when I say we fuck.”

She chuckled and shrugged. “Perfect. Tonight I’ll simply force you to say it’s time.”

“How so?”

“Wouldn’t you love to know, pussycat?”



Damon shifted the conversation to more of a business overview after their drinks arrived. Beth was grateful for the change. The pulse ticking along the side of her throat was a dead giveaway to the torrent of desire pumping through her. She had imagined Damon taking her in every possible way ten times each since their flirting session ended.

The plane landed an hour later, Bethany sleepy from fitful dreams the night before. Life had shifted in so many ways, and yet normality was on its way to some degree. She would be on campus later that week, and maybe the change of atmosphere would give way to relief. Her insides were twisted over how to move forward with Damon, what to do to earn his trust.

He stood and moved back, offering her the space in front of him. She moved out and walked toward their gate. Damon moved in beside her, reaching over and taking her hand into his. Her eyes diverted to their locked fingers and then to his

face. A mask of indifference sat on him, his concentration seemingly on their next steps.

“I got us a room together. If you want your own, I can change that, but I planned on working hard in the office and harder in the bedroom. I want you to be a fucking wet mess. I want to see you come unglued because of how much you need what I can give you, Beth.” He glanced over as they moved through the sea of people. The topic of conversation was shocking and yet not. He was so beyond ballsy, the man leaving her breathless at a rate that hurt.

“One room is good,” she whispered, reaching up to push her hair behind her ear. They stopped by the baggage claim, and Damon moved up, pulling off their two bags. She reached for hers as he interceded.

“I have this. Come on.”

She walked beside him, her knees weak, stomach tight at the promise of what he was capable of. One touch might send her over the edge. She groaned softly as they moved out to the row of limousines, her eyes moving along the thick muscles of his back that bunched beneath his shirt. She stopped behind him as he spoke to the driver, her hands sliding along his waist as she pressed her breasts to his back and kissed the skin just above his collar. He growled softly, pulling her arms off of him and moving to the car.

“We’re going to the Omni Hotel downtown. How long is the drive?”

“About thirty minutes, sir.” The driver looked between Damon and Bethany, a smile tugging at his mouth.

“Good. Roll the window between us up. I need time with my girl.”

He nodded, getting in the car as Damon opened the back door to the large vehicle. “Get in. Now.”

Bethany walked past him languidly, as if his demands weren’t anything to be concerned with. She played a pretty good game, but if he had any clue about how much she needed him, he might run hard and fast. Bordering obsession was the

concern; demanding carnality was the plan. He popped her butt as she climbed in, her body jolting at his hard touch.

Sitting down in her seat, she turned to watch him as the driver rolled up the privacy window. Damon's eyes held as much need as she felt sliding through her, burning her from the inside out. He slid to his knees in front of her, his hands palming her thighs as he pushed her dress up with his fingers. He stopped just before reaching her panties, his eyes moving from her thighs to her gaze. She felt frantic, her heart surely working to beat from her chest.

“Do you have any idea how much you turn me on? My body aches for release inside of you, Beth. I don't remember feeling so much in my long life.” He leaned down and brushed his cheek along the inside of her thigh, a long kiss pressed to her soft flesh. “Fuck, I need you ...”

She ran her fingers through his hair, her heart bursting at the sight of him before her again. Willing to give pleasure to her and deny his own again. He spoke a big game, but the man who stole her heart wasn't at all the jerk who would deny her love. She pulled up on his hair, his head jerking back from the front of her panties as he moved to press his mouth against the wet cotton.

“No ... my turn.” She pushed at him, crawling onto the large floor and nodding toward the seat with a smile on her lips. “Sit down, and let me love you.”

“Yeah. I'd like that a lot.” He moved to the seat, sitting back and letting his hands drop beside him. Ropes of muscles contracted as she slid her hands along his thighs, his legs not too large but strong and sexy as hell. She leaned over and pressed her lips to the softness at the base of his erection, his clothes still very much in the way. Opening her mouth, she pulled in firmly, his groan telling her what she needed to know.

He worked to get his pants undone, pushing at her a little to move her back. “Come here, baby. Take what you can.”

“I want it all,” she whispered, her mouth watering at the sight of him. His slacks lay flayed open, his large erection

bobbing softly as he watched her closely.

“I want you to have it all. As much as you want, Beth. It’s all yours.” He stroked it once, holding it up as if offering it to her.

Bethany reached out and slid her hand down the length of him, her fingers barely touching around his girth. She panted softly, air seeming to flee from her lungs. Nothing in her time of being with men had been more appealing, more desirable. She glanced from his offering up to his eyes. Hooded and filled with lust, he stared down at her as he sucked his bottom lip into his mouth.

She stroked him once again before moving to hover over the top of him. Her lips pressed a soft kiss to the thick meaty top of him before opening her mouth and taking him into her wetness. He groaned, the fingers of one of his hands sliding into her hair and holding tight. She moaned against him, the soft bucking of his hips driving her mad. He wasn’t willing to let control go, and for now, she was good with that.

She worked to cover him in wetness, licking and sucking in various rhythms over and over again. Her hands played games with the most sensitive parts of him as she waged war against his lust. His fingers gripped the seat behind him, his hips arching hard as she choked on him. She pulled back, her eyes watering at the action. Damon reached down and slid his hands along her face, pressing his lips to hers and licking at the wetness around her mouth.

“Enough,” he whispered as she moved back.

“No. I want to drink you dry.”

“Fuck, Beth.” He stroked himself once, his breathing labored. “I’m so close. Let’s just wait.”

“No.” She leaned forward, pushing his hand away and taking charge of him. He groaned loudly as she began to work him. Her eyes diverted to the ecstasy on his face. Beautiful. Intriguing. A god in his own right. His eyes opened as he looked down at her, his features softening a little. He touched her cheek softly, love filling his gaze.

“Move back, baby. I’m going to come. Let me finish it.” He groaned as she took more of him into her mouth, her hands working to touch every part of him that her mouth didn’t. She moaned against him, her body throbbing as she picked up the pace.

“Beth, please. Move back, baby. I can’t hold it much longer.” His head dropped back as his hips bucked. Beth sucked harder, taking everything he gave and wanting more. He thrust a few more times before collapsing on the seat. Beth released him, licking softly along the length of him as he shivered.

“Fuck ... ” His eyes opened, his fingers coming to stroke the side of her face softly. “Don’t make me fall in love with you, Beth. I’m damaged goods.”

“Hush,” she whispered and moved back to sit beside him. He worked to get his pants together as the driver stopped the car and opened the door.

“Everything go okay?” The older man smiled and held the door open. Beth got out and reached for him, her knees almost giving out under her. The gentleman chuckled. “You okay, young one?”

“Yes, just feeling a little woozy.” Beth smiled, her fingers gripping the man’s arm.

“Love will do that to you.”

“Damn right, it will,” Damon choked out, reaching for the edge of the door and pulling himself out. He reached for Beth. “Come on ... We’re not done.”

CHAPTER 24



BETHANY

Bethany reached out and took his hand, pulling herself close to his side as the wind picked up. The smell of salt and sea washed over her. She pulled him to a stop for a minute so she could take in the beauty of Seattle. Small shops lined the streets, the decorations eclectic, the sound of music taking her attention.

“There you two are. I was beginning to worry.”

Bethany turned to see Kent moving toward them, a warm smile on his face. She released Damon’s hand and moved in behind him as he greeted his father. Damon nodded to the counter, his face pale, lips wet and brilliantly pink.

“I’ll get the rooms.”

“Was the flight good, Bethany?” Kent moved in front of her. He reached out and squeezed her shoulder softly, a fatherly smile on his face.

“It was great. No turbulence at all.” Bethany moved into the hotel with him, her eyes averting to find Damon. Her heart had yet to slow down, the thumping pulse still racing down her nerve endings.

“That’s great news. I’m going to steal Damon for a couple of hours, but we’ll meet you for dinner tonight.” He winked at her and looked at Damon.

“What’s the plan?” Damon handed her a card to the room.

“I need you to help me on a presentation for a few hours. I told Bethany to enjoy her afternoon. We can just meet her for

dinner. Sound good?"

"Perfect," Bethany finished the thought for them. Damon looked at her, an eyebrow lifting slightly. She moved to pick up her bag. "I can take these to the room."

"No. I'll take them up with her and meet you back here in five minutes, Dad."

"Sounds good. Enjoy yourself, Bethany. Get anything you want."

She smiled and walked toward the elevator. Damon moved in beside her and growled softly.

"What the fuck?" He slipped in behind her and pressed the button to their floor, setting down his luggage and turning to her. He closed the distance between them, his fingers sliding into her hair again as he massaged the back of her head.

"I'll take a nap." She smiled and pulled him down for a short kiss.

He pressed himself against her, his body still hard and seemingly ready for so much more.

"I want you," he whispered against her lips. The door opened behind them, and he moved out of the elevator, holding it for her.

"Yeah, well, I want you too, but I'm not allowed to have you until I need you, and even then I can only have you when you say I can." She gave him a sassy look as she passed him.

His fingers caressed the curve of her butt as he moved in beside her. "You're catching on quickly. Good girl."

She scoffed and popped him in the chest, but a wicked smile was all she got in return. He opened the door and slipped his luggage in. Bethany walked past him into the expansive room, the cream-colored walls and crimson sheets luxurious.

She turned as the door closed, half expecting him to be gone. He pressed his back to the door and smiled.

"Undress for me. I have to go, but give me something to be tortured by." He nodded as if she were allowed to start.

“No.” She shrugged and walked toward the windows, pulling back the curtains and looking over her shoulder to smile at him.

“I’ll rip that pretty dress off your sexy body, woman.” He smiled.

“I love this dress.” She turned to face him, a hand on her hip.

“I love what’s under that dress. Make me ache for you, Beth. Show me what I want to see.”

Bethany reached up and unzipped the back of the dress. Her motions were slow and methodical; the sense of calm that had settled over her was almost concerning. Internally she was losing her mind. Her heart was beating too fast, her stomach in tight knots all over again.

He nodded toward her, his lip rising in a sexy smile. “You’re going to need that nap, beautiful.”

She tugged at the dress, the material silky as it slid down her skin. Her white panties and bra barely covered her body; the undies no doubt wet along the front.

Damon’s head hit the door behind him, a soft groan lifting from him as his hand reached for the door handle. “Enough ... that’s enough.”

“Oh no ... We’re just getting started.” Bethany reached behind her, undoing her bra and letting it drop. She slid her hands up her thin waist and cupped herself, tugging at her nipples and groaning as she watched him.

His hand slid over the front of his slacks, his breathing heavy and insanely hot. Damon’s dark eyes slid down her body, his tongue wetting his lips as he whispered, “Take them off.”

Bethany turned and slid her fingers into the top of her panties, slowly sliding them down her legs and bending over to let them drop onto the floor. Damon’s movement toward her caused her to stand and turn, her hand extended to stop him. He pressed against it before pushing it out of the way.

The force of him crashing into her took her breath away. His arms wrapped around her tightly, his momentum spinning them toward the bed. He pushed forward and caught them as she dropped to the softness beneath them. He lay on top of her, his lips dragging down her neck to her breasts. Bethany arched her back, a cry leaving her lips as he took her into his mouth, his other hand softly caressing the other breast. He carefully nibbled at her, his tongue lapping the space between her breasts.

She pushed up, rubbing herself against him, her legs wrapping tightly around him. He leaned up and kissed her lips softly, his eyes dark and ominous.

He stood, grabbing her thighs and pulling her to the end of the bed, her ass almost hanging off. Damon urged her legs around him, his palm flat on her lower stomach, his thumb reaching down to rub softly at her.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, his eyes roaming all over her. “Rest now, ’cause when I get back, we fuck.”

“It’s time ...” she whispered, the room growing hazy from the onslaught of emotion rolling through her.

“It’s past time.” He slid his thumb into her, pulling a little and leaving a sound of satisfaction. “I’m going to devour you over and over.”

Bethany pressed against his fingers, her sense of modesty long gone. He leaned over and kissed the top of her stomach, his lips feather light. Her breath caught in her chest as he looked up at her.

“I’m sorry for yesterday. I’ll explain when I can. Rest so I can make love to you until you can’t walk.” He kissed her again and carefully released her, walking to the door and pausing to look over his shoulder at her. “Fuck me ...”

Bethany waited to respond until he disappeared from the room. “No, fuck me ... please.”



The late afternoon turned into evening as Bethany rested. Her nap had lasted until a little after eight. Bethany checked her phone and found nothing from Damon or Kent. Getting up, she slipped on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. She stopped by the bathroom to make sure she didn't look like the hot mess she felt like. He should have been back by then.

She picked up the phone and called him after brushing her teeth and pulling her hair into a ponytail.

“Hey.” His voice was strained. Something was wrong.

“Hey. You okay?”

“Yeah, this is just a lot more than I expected.”

“You need my help?”

“No, but I'm not going to be back anytime soon. Dad just ran to pick up sandwiches and leave you a message.”

“Where are you guys? I can get food and bring it to you.”

“No, he's already been gone ten minutes. We're at the downtown office. Just grab something good to eat, and enjoy the room. Get the valet to take you somewhere if you get stir crazy. I'll be there as soon as I can.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I'm sure. We'll put you to work tomorrow.”

She hung up, a sense of disappointment settling over her. The promise of their night of hot sex and deep groans seemed to be dissipating fast. Might be for the better. She sat down on the bed and reached for the hotel phone. Ordering room service wasn't her first choice, but it would be better than going hungry for the night. Too many hard memories attached to hunger.

She ordered a chicken sandwich and fries before slipping out of her jeans and into a pair of pajama pants. She texted Matt to see how he was doing and got a phone call in return.

“Hey. I didn't mean for you to call.”

He laughed, the sound brightening her mood immediately. “I like talking more than texting. My fingers are too fat for all

that jazz. Besides, I can't read emotion. I can hear it."

"Well, I'm glad you called then."

"How are you?"

"I'm good. Damon and I had a bad fight yesterday, but today is better."

"Have you guys talked through whatever you were fighting over?"

"Yes and no. I apologized. He did too."

"Damon apologized? Whoa. Hold the phone."

Bethany laughed, lying back on the bed and letting her mind drift back to the various ways he had apologized. "Yeah, he did."

"That's big, Beth. Have you told him?"

"Told him what?"

"That you're in love with him."

"What?" She sat up, hugging the phone closer to her ear as if someone might hear their private conversation.

"I'm not saying anything you don't know already. Does he know?"

She sighed. "I think so. I don't know. That's a lot to spring on him. We've barely known each other a week. I'm not putting that out there yet. It would scare him to death."

"I think you'd be surprised."

"Yes, well, no. Just no."

Matt laughed again. "When are you coming home?"

"Wednesday night. Come to your dad's that night so we can catch up."

"I'll be there. You should tell him."

"No."

"Okay, but I think it would be a good thing."

"You also pretend to be crazy, so people leave you alone."

“True, and it works, right?”

They laughed, and Bethany hung up, Matt’s words washing over her. Should she express herself to Damon? What was the look on his face the night before when she had slipped up a bit? Horror? Fear? Loss of words at being accepted? She glanced at the clock and pulled herself into the bed, waiting for her food and wishing like hell he were there.

“I love you, Damon,” she whispered into the empty room, the words sounding right but sprouting fear. What if he couldn’t return them? What if he could but wouldn’t?

CHAPTER 25



BETHANY

Bethany woke to an empty room Monday morning. Damon's suitcase still sat by the door, nothing in the room having been touched or moved. She sat up and reached for her phone. The message from him was at two in the morning. Just a note that they wouldn't be back until breakfast. Worry tugged at her. What if it wasn't about business? What if he had someone here and went to stay with her?

She growled at herself and climbed out of bed before stripping and heading to the shower. He would be who he was, and until they locked down their relationship, she didn't have much say over any of that. She stepped into the steamy hot water. The mesmerizing pressure of the liquid caused her to groan in relief. Sleep had been welcome after the long night before of worrying all night.

The bathroom door opened and closed. Bethany stuck her head out, her hair partially wet, eyes wide. Damon looked over at her, pulling his shirt off.

"Sorry about last night. Such a fucking mess. I don't know what happened with the office manager, but he dicked up everything for this audit today."

He wasn't himself at all, nor did he look healthy. Dark circles sat under his eyes, his skin peaked. She moved back and opened the shower, hiding behind the curtain.

"I wish you would have come and picked me up. I could have helped. Come in here with me."

“I should have. You’re right. I just got into trying to fix it, and before I knew it, the sun was coming up.” He dropped his slacks and boxers before sliding into the small space with her. She released the curtain and turned to face him. Damon reached for her, closing the small step that stood between them. His hands slid around her waist, the water making his fingers glide with ease.

Bethany lifted on her toes and wrapped her arms around him, pulling him down for a long, soft kiss. He leaned into her, the heaviness of exhaustion almost palpable. She turned them slowly in the water until his back was to the spray. His groan broke the kiss. She moved from him, her eyes taking all of him in as water dripped down his chiseled chest and firm abs.

She reached for the soap, rubbing it between her hands before moving back to stand in front of him. Reaching up, Bethany pressed deep circles into his pecs and down his stomach. Her fingernails scratched lightly along the dark hair above his sex, his body coming to life within moments of her touching him.

“God, that feels good. I don’t know if I’ve ever let anyone wash me,” he mumbled, his head tilting back as water ran over his hair and the top of his face.

“Turn and let me get your back.” She moved back, picking up the soap again as desire slammed into her. His back was well defined, his butt the sexiest thing she had ever seen. She reached for it first, rolling her soapy hands over the curves of it as he flexed. His hands slid up the shower wall, body sagging forward slightly. Bethany pressed both of her hands into the muscles of his back and worked to pull the tension from them. Soft sounds of appreciation slipped from him as he pressed his forehead to the shower wall.

Bethany finished washing his beautiful body and slid her arms around his torso, pressing herself to the back of him. He reached back and rubbed his fingers along the curve of her hip.

“I have to get back up there. Dad left at three or so. I know he’s going to need me.” Damon yawned loudly, his body shivering at the effort. He turned, wrapping his arms around

her and sliding his hands down her back. He leaned into her, his mouth finding her neck. He buried his face against her throat, his erection thick and hard as it pressed against her stomach.

“I’ll go. I’m smarter than both of you put together. I’ll help this morning while you get a nap. Come after you’ve rested.”

“I want to come now.” He smiled against the side of her neck, his breath hot against her ear.

“You’re tired. We’ll enjoy each other tonight after the audit is underway and you’ve slept.”

He nipped at her ear, his hands sliding down to the bottom of her ass. He pulled her in tightly, her body molded to his. “Does it feel like I’m going to be able to sleep?”

Bethany laughed and pulled from his grasp. Holding his hips, she turned them again, the hot water splashing over her chilled skin. A smile crept up her face, Damon’s eyes growing wide as she turned to face the wall. She slid her hands up the cold tiles, her back arching, her body on display for the good-looking man behind her.

“All I’ve wanted ...” He slid his hands over her hips, up her ribs to hold onto her breasts. His body pressed into hers, a loud groan leaving her lips as she exhaled in what seemed to be relief. His motions were rhythmic and slow, his body almost too much for her to handle. She pressed back against him as he leaned over her, his teeth and tongue dragging across her back and shoulder.

She moaned and rocked forward, giving him more traction to enjoy himself.

“Oh fuck, Beth. I need you, baby.” His hands moved to her hips, the deep thrusting picking up the pace after they had enjoyed the slow sensual pattern for a while. The sound of panting caused her hormones to jolt again, her breath coming out in short spurts.

“It’s been too long,” he whispered as she moaned loudly, her body exploding into a fiery bliss as he worked her from behind. “Take it, baby. Take whatever you need from me.”

She moaned louder, his body pressing against the center of her and pulling her apart as if nothing more than a string held her together. She jerked her hips as his fingers tightened on her. He jerked her up, pressing his hand to her stomach and lifting her leg with the other hand. Driving into her over and over as his face slipped into the side of her hair, his teeth digging into the soft flesh of her neck.

The sound of him losing himself, the feel of the wicked devil behind her melting inside of her left her spinning, the room suddenly too hot. The sex too good. The soft sound of his body connecting with hers filled the air as his grip tightened.

He tensed, his hips losing rhythm as he moaned deep in his chest and let himself go. Bethany reached back and held onto his thigh, forcing herself to take the lead on their movements as he was lost in ecstasy. She jerked her hips over and over until he locked his hands on her thighs, his voice nothing more than a whisper.

“Fuck ... stop, baby. Killing me ...” He moved back, his footing unstable. Bethany turned toward him, moving in to wrap her arms around his chest. He pressed his back to the shower wall before looking down at her.

She reached up and touched the side of his face, a smile on her lips. “You’re so perfect, Damon. So fucking hot.”

He leaned down and kissed her softly. The smirk on his face made her chuckle. He was so beyond sensual, and he knew it. It was almost nice to see him too exhausted to tout his own greatness. She reached for a towel, handing it to him and making sure he was steady before getting her own.

She stepped out of the shower as he turned the water off. She would need to go into the office, but first, she wanted to get him in bed. He didn’t seem like the kind to succumb to exhaustion, but with the right amount of pressure and lack of sleep, anyone would be weary of his situation. She helped towel dry him as he brushed his fingers down her hair and rubbed her arm.

“Come on. Let’s get you in bed.”

“More already, Beth? I knew I had met my match. You’re on top this time. I want to watch you fuck me.” His words were slightly slurred, his eyes a little glossy.

She laughed and wrapped the towel around herself before wrapping his around his waist.

“Yes. Come lie in bed, and I’ll take good care of you.”

“That’s all I’ve wanted since we met.” He reached up and rubbed at his eyes as she pulled him from the bathroom. She fixed the bed, leaning over to move pillows around.

His hands took her hips, the pressure of him pressing against her causing her to stand.

“Damon. Get in the bed. Stop dicking around. Your dad is waiting on me.”

He moved past her and got in the bed, tugging the towel off and stroking himself as he sucked his lip into his mouth. “Hush, woman. Get over here and ride me.”

“No. I need to go.” She covered him up, leaning down to kiss him softly. “Hey, tell me something.”

“What?” His eyes closed, his breathing deepening quickly. He was exhausted. How he had even stood in the shower was beyond her, much less put a hurting on her libido.

“In the shower, you said it had been too long.”

“Mmhmm,” he mumbled, reaching out and pulling her down for another kiss. She kissed him a few times before moving back.

“It had been too long since we’d touched or since you’ve fucked a woman?”

“Second part.” He yawned and turned onto his side, tugging the covers closer. “I haven’t found one I was willing to make love to in ... longer than I can remember.”

Make love to?

She touched his back, rubbing softly as he fell asleep. Tears filled her eyes as realization dawned on her.

Maybe he wasn't at all who he pretended to be. Maybe her desires mixed beautifully with his demands. Lust was the fuel that would forge them closer, but it felt like love might be the coating that protected the possibility of forever.

CHAPTER 26



BETHANY

Bethany looked up from the pile of papers in front of her as Kent spoke. Her soon-to-be stepfather stood at the head of a long cherrywood executive-length table, his brow contorted.

“I’m not sure how this happened. Why the hell aren’t the numbers tying out? Zarpeth is one of our largest clients, and I know we sent a really strong senior associate to count their inventory.” He sighed and pulled the chair back, slumping down in it.

Something inside of her wanted to do anything to make things right. She simply didn’t have the experience. Just being out of school and headed back for her master’s soon, she lacked on-the-job experience.

“What can I do?” Bethany leaned back in her chair and slipped her hands into her lap as her phone buzzed.

“Call your brother, and tell him to get here.” Kent sighed again and ran his fingers through his salt-and-pepper hair.

His word stung without him knowing it. His reference to Damon being her brother left a mark on her. The reality that she had just fucked him in the shower flooded her subconscious with shame. How would they ever work? Her mother was marrying his father, and they were going to what? Fall happily ever after in love?

She picked up her phone and answered it; Damon’s name popping up and causing her heart to almost stop in her chest.

“Hey.”

“How is it going?” His voice was so deep and sexy, scratchy from obviously just waking up.

It was after two in the afternoon, but he and Kent had pulled an all-nighter the night before. He had stumbled into the shower with her, taking her fast and hard and falling asleep in the bed like a little boy, so worn out.

“It’s not going too great. Kent is asking for you.” Bethany breathed in sharply, sitting up and moving some of the papers in front of her. “I’ve recounted the inventory a few times, and it’s more than obvious the issue isn’t with the calculation but with the count that was taken.”

Damon let out a sigh that set her on edge. Was he put off by the fact that she couldn’t figure the mammoth problem out on her own?

“All right. Tell my father to hang tight, and I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. Ask him if he needs a coffee.” His voice was tight and all business. The sound of it caused her stomach to hurt. Where was the man that had whispered his pleasure against her wet skin in the steamy shower?

“Damon wants to know if you need a coffee.” Bethany moved the phone from her mouth and looked up at Kent.

“No. I just need him to stop napping and get his ass here.” Kent leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes and pressing his palms to his face.

“He needs ...” Bethany started but was cut off by the sharp agitation in Damon’s voice.

“I heard him. I’m on my way.” He hung up without another word. No asking if she wanted a coffee or if she was doing okay. No “See you soon” or “Missed you when I woke up.”

Asshole.

Kent got up a few minutes later and walked out of the small conference room as Bethany stood and moved to the window, pressing her hand against it and fighting back tears.

Had she imagined the softness of their morning after the sex? Had she made Damon into someone he wasn't? Memories assaulted her.

"Come lie in bed, and I'll take good care of you."

"That's all I've wanted since we met." He smiled and reached for her.

He had admitted to not having sex in a long time. Not because he was too busy or because he didn't physically need the release.

"I haven't found one I was willing to make love to in ... longer than I can remember."

Tears threatened to roll over onto her cheeks, leaving her looking like the lovesick child she was. She wiped at them angrily, trying hard to push away her feelings of inadequacy. He was tired, and the proverbial shit was hitting the fan. Of course, he was coarse and rough with her. He wasn't being unreasonable; she just realized that she needed more—no, expected more—from him.

"See something of interest?" His voice caught her off guard. She smoothed down the front of her black jacket, the dress under it striped with black and white. His eyes remained on her face, his mood sour, his expression pinched. He was tired, but damn him for not giving her anything to show that he felt something from their earlier interactions.

"Just trying to figure this out and be helpful." She gave him a slight smile and walked back toward the table.

"Yes, well, you're just out of college. I didn't expect you to offer assistance. You're here to learn, so watch as I figure this out." His voice was deadpan, as if she were as interesting as watching the clock on the wall tick second by second.

She swallowed her emotions and simply nodded, moving to stand beside him.

“The inventory was taken in April, and again in July, which are around the times it should be taken, but one was taken before the early morning shipments they receive and one after. They need to be consistent. Simply call the warehouse in Tampa and have them email you the receipts for the July early morning shipment. Reconcile the numbers, and this problem should be solved.” He looked up and touched his finger to the side of his temple. “You have to actually use common sense if you plan to get anywhere in this big world. It isn’t genius we’re looking for.”

“Are you saying I should have been able to figure that out?” Bethany took a step back, his reaction to her ignorance astounding and hateful.

He looked up and lifted his eyebrow, a smirk tugging at the side of his mouth. “Are you getting offended at me trying to make you a better accountant?”

“You’re not trying to make me better. You’re pinpointing my lack of common sense. That’s not something you learn in accounting classes.” She put her hands on her hips as heat rose up her chest and coated her throat. “And your tone is starting to get on my nerves. If you want to coach me to understand the details of shipment times at the client’s warehouse, that’s fine, but talking to me like I’m a dumbass because you know how things run at the Tampa plant and I don’t isn’t coaching.”

He let out a long breath. “I understand that you think we should be holding hands and smiling at each other after this morning, but I’m not interested in a relationship. If you’re not willing to be a woman who’s worth my time, then you probably need to let me know that now. Save us some time.”

Bethany took another step back as a large ball of regret pressed into her throat, the room seeming hot all of a sudden. She wasn’t even sure how to react, so she didn’t. She dropped the paper she had picked up and walked toward the door. Damon’s hand on her wrist stopped her. She turned back and pinned him with expressionless resolve.

“I’m not like every other man, Bethany. You’re not allowed to leave your mark on me. I’m here for sex, and if you are too, great, but if not ...”

“Fuck you,” she whispered and smiled as if he didn’t matter. She needed him not to, but he did far too much.

Pulling from his grasp, she walked through the small door, the hall seeming to close in on her. She didn’t stop until she got back to the hotel, the room ice cold from leaving the AC on too long. She lay down on her bed, rolling up in the covers and regretting it immediately. It smelled like Damon, the deep musky tones rushing into her nose and over her tongue as she groaned.

They couldn’t be a couple anyway, could they?

He was her fucking brother. No way would they be able to figure things out. It was too complicated.

So was sex enough? Could she just enjoy the feel of his hands on her, the taste of his tongue, the deep thrust of his body into hers? She groaned again, her nipples budding at the very thought.

She was lost to the idea of being beneath him as much as possible, but was that simply because she loved him? If there was no love there, how could the emotion be so damned strong?

Her phone buzzed.

Damon.

“Bethany.” She answered it very professionally, hating herself, hating him ... hating every-fucking-thing.

“Kent and I are headed out of the office. Feel free to do whatever it is that you women do when you’re pissed. I should be back later tonight, but if not, I’ll be in the lobby at ten tomorrow morning, and we’ll head home.”

“Is there something you guys need me to do while you’re out?” she asked, her heart breaking over and over at his dismissal of her. She was smart and brilliant, and this cock of a man was trying to tear her down.

“Nope. Just enjoy yourself. I’ll take notes today, and you can read them tomorrow on the plane while I sleep. I’m sure I have another all-nighter.”

“Let me know if you change your mind.” She hung up this time as a hopeful “Fuck you” through the phone.

Tossing the thing halfway across the room, she let herself cry into the soft white pillow beneath her. She wasn’t going to win the battle by being bitchy and fighting him with her own ammo. Having not been in more than one real relationship her adult life, she was way out of her league. The one thing she did have that he wanted, and he had admitted it, was her body.

If he were willing to use his as a weapon against her, perhaps it was time for her to return the favor.

Bethany turned over in the bed, her long hair splayed out all over the place, her makeup running into her eyes as they burned. He was a bastard, and yet she knew so much more sat just underneath the perfectly constructed facade that was Damon Bryant.

Sex would be the tool, the only means she had of breaking him down. She wanted to know the man underneath, yearned for his time and attention. She would use herself and stick to the rule he had laid down for her a few minutes ago. She was most certainly going to brand herself all over him, but he wasn’t going to get any further into her heart.

She would wedge herself so far into his thoughts, into his desires, that he begged for her time, for her attention, for her sex.

She wiped at her tears once more, her resolve setting into place. She hated to be a bitch and play dirty, but Damon left her no choice.

Getting up, she walked to the small lounge chair in the room and texted Philip.

Bethany: *I enjoyed coffee the other day. We should do it again.*

Philip: *Me too. How about today? Lunch or dinner with me?*

Bethany: *How about on Wednesday you come up and have lunch with me at work.*

Philip: *Not sure that would be okay with them.*

Bethany: *They can't tell me who I can eat with, right?*

Philip: *This is true, and the dick can't fire me... he already did. LOL*

She smiled, unable to help herself. Hurting Philip wasn't on her laundry list of things to do, but getting him to help her break Damon in half, now that very much was, and it reigned supreme.

CHAPTER 27



BETHANY

Tuesday morning came fast, Bethany having ordered room service the night before and stayed in her pj's all evening. A few sappy chick flicks later, and she was a ball of tears, wishing that something besides her new plan would work. She knew a different Damon existed. He was the one that Matt worshiped. The one that was shocked to find out that maybe she loved him. The one that held her the first night they were together, not kicking her out but tucking her against him as they slept.

Where was that guy? To what extreme would she have to go to dig through all of his protection to reach him? Was it worth it?

“What the fuck am I going to do when I get there?”

Because the truth of the matter was plain and simple. She was going to get there. It didn't matter what it took. Needing to know if anything could exist between them beyond the fiery physical attraction was paramount.

Bethany finished packing up the room, throwing Damon's stuff in his suitcase as well. A soft knock on the door caught her attention. She tucked her pink silk blouse into a black skirt that hugged her hips but fanned out on her legs. It wasn't meant for the office but perhaps a night on the town.

She opened the door as Damon leaned against the frame, his hair a mess, his eyes bloodshot.

“I came to get my bag. Didn't want you to have to deal with it.” He yawned and walked in as she moved back. His

eyes shifted down her body, stopping on her legs. “You look good.”

So one night of sleep left him acting like an ass, but two opened him up to be the guy she was in search of. His voice was soft and kind, his expression showing interest. She almost laughed but caught herself. Making fun of him wouldn't get them anywhere. He might be kind for a few hours, but his anal-retentive side would rear its ugly head soon.

Better to play her game starting now.

“I packed it up for you, but I figured I would leave it. The bellman could come get it, or you could.” She shrugged and walked toward her suitcase, popping the handle and pulling it toward the door without paying him much attention.

“I'll get yours too. Just leave it there.” He walked toward her, but she side-stepped him, her eyes brushing past him as if he were nothing more than a silly boy who thought to gain her attention.

“I'm good. Take care of your own. I can take care of myself.” She opened the door without looking back. “See you downstairs.”

Bethany walked into the hall, letting the door close before she let out her shaky breath. What if he took her rejection to heart and completely turned from her? What if her plan blew up in her face like most things had over the last few years? Nothing ever turned out right when she acted outside of her consciousness. Asking her mom to marry Kent to help her with her college funding had been a prime example. Yeah, college was paid for, but at what cost?

She had fallen in love with her fucking soon-to-be brother.

Riding the elevator down to the bottom floor, she coached herself. She could do this. She could be this girl. He was aloof and quite an ass seemingly without effort. She could play that same game. If he pulled too far away, then she would stop playing and try something else.

Why did she have to feel so damn desperate to make him hers? The thought was consuming. The need to belong to him was far more than a casual fuck, which scared her *and* broke her heart.

She walked toward Kent in the lobby and smiled as she stopped beside him. “How did things work out for you guys?”

“Oh, Bethany, great.” He reached out and pulled her into a side hug, looking behind her as if trying to find Damon. “It was all good. Damon figured it out, and we should be set. That boy is brilliant. I’m glad you’re learning from him and not me.”

Damon’s voice surprised her as he spoke behind her. “I’m not all that, Dad. I’m sure Bethany could have figured it out had I given her a chance.”

“You never give anyone a chance. You’re a glory stealer.” Kent laughed and moved toward the front desk, pulling his wallet from his back pocket.

Damon moved to stand in front of her, slipping his hands into his slacks. “Hey ... about what I said ...”

“You were right.” She shrugged and turned her attention to Kent’s back.

“Beth. It’s complicated.”

“No, it’s really not.” She smiled and turned back to him, letting her eyes move over the perfect planes of his handsome face, his dark eyes holding deep emotion. She ignored them completely, having sold out to pushing this speeding train off the tracks in hopes of making a lasting impact on him.

“Yes, it is. I shouldn’t have said tho—”

She cut him off by lifting her hand.

“I’m not interested in this. Your cock is big, and you’re as sexy as sin. I want our relationship to remain uncomplicated. You and me, we’re never going to be anything other than family, so until we are, let’s enjoy the only thing we have in common. A love for fucking.”

She walked toward the front door, the anger in his gaze scorching her. If he wanted to apologize, it was far too late. He hadn't acted like an ass once or twice but regularly, habitually. Only one way to break him down: the same fucking way he was obliterating her control—take it from him completely.



She smiled as the flight attendant stopped beside her, the boy metro for sure but handsome. His smile widened a little as he looked down at her. Bethany smiled back, letting the gesture reach her eyes.

“Something to drink for you?”

“What do you suggest?” She leaned toward him a little, her tongue touching the edge of her mouth. “I’m not in the mood for liquor, but I am *so* thirsty.”

The boy’s smile lifted a little until Damon cleared his throat. Bethany glanced over at him. His stare pinned her with accusation, but she ignored it, chuckling a little.

“It would seem my boss is thirsty as well.”

“Boss?” the boy asked.

“And my brother, actually.” Bethany stared at Damon for a minute more, the light in his gaze dimming a little. Was he hurting from the way she was? She wanted to be glad of it, and yet it tore at her resolve. She couldn’t do this for long. It wasn’t who she was at all.

“Gin and Sprite,” Damon responded before leaning back and closing his eyes.

“I’ll just have the Sprite.” Bethany smiled again as the boy nodded and winked at her.

“He’s not your type.” Damon’s words surprised her, the lack of emotion driving her forward in her own form of attack.

“You’re right. I like assholes.”

He opened his eyes and turned his face a little. “I tried to apologize.”

“You didn’t mean it, but it’s okay.”

“You play games, Beth. Good luck with it. You’re not going to last long.”

“Why is that?”

“Because we both know that where I prefer lust, you prefer love.”

“Is that because I’m a woman?”

“That, and you like to play it safe. If you love, and the guy returns the emotion, then forever might be locked in. If lust is all there is, then you stand a chance of losing someone that makes you feel alive.” His eyes moved to her mouth as he pulled his bottom lip into his mouth briefly.

She couldn’t help but watch his every move, everything about him so sensual and right. How could she not love him? He was damaged, and damn if she didn’t want to repair him.

“You’re wrong.” She shrugged and turned toward the seat in front of her.

“Am I?”

“Yep.”

“Let me prove it to you.” He unbuckled his seat belt and slipped into the aisle; the fasten seatbelt sign still on. He stopped and hovered over her as she glanced up at him.

“Lust takes courage. Love is for pussies.” He leaned down and touched the side of her face. “If all you feel is lust, meet me in the bathroom in the back. Prove it.”

“I don’t have to prove anything to you.” She pulled back, the idea of having him take her in the small space of the restroom so fucking hot it caused her body to ache immediately.

“Oh, I wasn’t talking about proving it to me. Come prove it to yourself. You wanna play with the big boys, you have to

believe the truth in your own game. Come earn your stripes, little girl.” He turned and walked to the back of the plane.

Turning back around in her seat, she closed her eyes and leaned her head back, not at all ready for something so raunchy. No matter how much of a deep, dark fantasy it was, there was no way she was giving control back. That’s all he wanted by making the claim.

She sat there for a few more minutes as her body woke up to the idea of him all over her. The deep throb between her thighs was a quick reminder that Damon’s body was more than worth rendering control to him and allowing him to take advantage of her. The shower scene washed over her, and she stifled a moan, getting up before she lost her courage.

Her fingers gripped the seats as she moved quickly, the door to the bathroom opening as she approached. She pushed her fingers into his chest and moved into the small space with him. His brow lifted as he chuckled.

“Never in a million years would I have expected you to get up.”

“I don’t care what you expected.” She pushed at his chest slightly. He sat down, his fingers brushing the back of her knees.

“Love is messy, Beth. Stay with me in lust, and we can drown in each other over and over again.” He slid his hands up her thighs, into her skirt, fingers running along the edge of her panties. He brushed by her sex as she closed her eyes, tugging away from him.

Bethany turned and looked over her shoulder as she let her eyes drag across him. “Take my panties off, and stop talking your bullshit nonsense.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He smirked and reached up, his large hands palming her ass before he dragged her panties down. His wet tongue slid up the back of her thigh, his lips soft and sucking at her skin as he moved. She leaned forward, her back arching slightly as he moved her skirt up her back, his tongue licking

at the swollen wetness of her lips. She pushed back as he groaned, the sensual connection with him enough to undo her.

He licked a few times, his tongue lapping at the wetness he caused. She felt the loss of contact with him and almost started to move before he locked her into place with his hand on her thigh. The sound of his pants being unzipped caused her heart to flutter, her breath to catch.

“Come here, baby. Sit back on me, and let me fuck you.” He reached up and tugged her down, Bethany more than willing to be pliable for his needs. He guided her carefully to rest on top of him, her hands pressing into the soft material of his slacks, his thick thigh muscles underneath.

She groaned and lowered herself onto him, the width of his cock opening her up further than she remembered from the day before. He sucked in a breath between his teeth, his hands under her thighs as he lifted her off the ground. The motion made the rest of his erection disappear inside of her, Bethany moaning his name as bliss rushed through her veins.

He spread her legs over his and slid one hand up to cup a breast over her clothes, the other rubbing softly at the bundle of nerves at the top of her sex. He used his hold on her to lift her slightly, the firm press of his hips against her rear making a soft slapping sound as he worked himself in and out of her.

“Feel good, Beth? Taking all that dick inside of you?” he whispered against her hair before Bethany reached back and pulled her locks into a bun. She wanted more of his skin on hers.

“So good. Don’t stop, okay?” Her words were airy and filled with the dark lust that tore her willingness to stand strong against him apart entirely.

“Never. Just hold on to my legs, and take what I’m giving you. You want what I have, don’t you, Beth?” He pressed his lips to her neck, Bethany’s back arching to take more of him in. He pinched the softness of her clit between two of his fingers and tugged a little. “You want me all over you, deep inside of you, marking your sexy little body with my teeth and fingers. Tell me you want it as bad as I do.”

He lifted her with his thrust, every movement sending deep tremors of pleasure into her. She leaned back against him, rocking her hips forward to increase the friction of his fingers, his pinches hurting so good.

“I want it as bad as you want the smell of me on your sheets, the sticky wetness of my come on your fingers ...” she panted, almost unable to speak past her own want for all of those things.

“You’re damn right, I do.” He pressed his fingers in tighter, jerking them as she buckled, the orgasm ripping through her like none before.

“Oh fuck, Damon ... no, no, no,” she murmured over and over, rocking herself against the thickness of his cock, the soft pads of his fingers.

“Yeah ... yeah take it, Beth. Such a good girl. I’m going to destroy your desire for any other man. So it’s my body you need, my cock you can’t get enough of ...”

She nodded as he continued to assault her with the truth of where she already was. He moved his hands to her hips, pulling hard and slamming her back down on him as he groaned softly over and over.

“Fuck, you’re perfect. Squeeze your ass, and whisper my name. I’m so close, Beth. Take me over.” He pressed his lips to her ear, jerking himself in and out of her as she quickly obeyed him.

He growled loudly as his teeth sank into the soft skin of her neck, just behind her ear. Bethany yelped but let the pain fuel the pleasure of knowing that he was going to explode any minute. He released his bite and groaned against her hair as he filled her, his hands digging in tightly to her bare hips as he moaned.

“Oh fuck, Beth. Oh shit. So perfect, baby. Delicious, tight little pussy that’s so wet for me.” He groaned again and slammed her down once more. He shivered, moving to wrap his arms around her. The soft sound of knocking at the door scared the shit out of her.

“Occupied. Be out in a minute,” Damon spoke loudly against her neck. His tongue pressed to the throbbing skin at the back of her neck, soft licks and kisses not dimming the fire of his bite.

“You bit me, you ass,” she whispered, turning her face a little.

He reached up and pulled her closer, brushing his lips past hers as his gaze burned into her.

“As a reminder.”

“Of what?”

“That I’m in control, and you, little pussycat, are mine.”

CHAPTER 28



BETHANY

Every move she made reminded her of the way he touched her in the airplane restroom. The warmth between her thighs was a constant pleasure that caused her mind to be distracted. She had planned to own him, but once again he had pulled her strings and assumed control.

They walked off the plane in silence, Damon having fallen asleep pretty quickly when they got back to their seats. The look from the male attendant when he finally delivered their drinks after trying *forever* was pensive at best. Damon's hand rested in her lap, his fingers tightly wrapped around her upper thigh.

She just smiled sheepishly at the attendant and decided not to worry too much about it. She'd never see the guy again anyway. He could think all he wanted to about her *brother* manhandling her thigh.

The bite mark behind her ear was safely covered by her thick hair, but her fingers kept brushing by the swollen flesh, the pain almost unbearable. Why Damon would think he needed to bite her so hard was questionable. Maybe he just got lost in the moment.

Bethany tried hard not to focus on the fact that he had blamed it on the need to mark her, to call her his. So many things lay between them, still unanswered. They were all about lust, and no matter how she felt about it, she was his. Too bad her body and mind were in a deep battle over what that truly meant.

Kent joined them as they walked down the long corridor of the airport, dark circles under his eyes.

“I’m going to get a cab to take us home. Damon, are you coming to the house or what?”

“Bethany and I are going to grab something to eat and talk about the audit. You go home and rest. I’ll get her over there later, or she can always crash at my place.”

She simply nodded, a little shocked at Damon’s plan. Talking about the audit was honestly the last thing she wanted to do, and she knew he was beyond worn out too. The thought rushed across her mind to refuse him, but the look on his face shut her down. He was demanding for her to come with him. It wasn’t a question.

“You sure? You look beat too.” Kent moved toward the taxi line as Damon nodded.

“Beth, you good with that?”

“Yeah, it’s whatever. I slept last night. You guys didn’t.”

“We’ll see you later, Dad.” Damon waved to Kent and turned to walk next to Bethany toward the valet area. “You’re staying the night with me. Text your mother later, and let her know you’re too tired to leave and are sleeping in the extra bedroom at my place.”

“She knows we don’t get along, Damon.” Bethany smirked and turned her attention to the paving tiles a few feet in front of her. The idea of staying at his place again caused fear to rise in her stomach. Fucking was one thing, but holding each other, or talking intimately, or sharing a meal at his kitchen table... too much. She was already in love, and he wasn’t.

“I think we get along really well. You don’t?” He smirked and reached for her hand, slipping his into hers as they moved into the busy drop-off zone of the airport.

They rode in silence to his house, Bethany closing her eyes and trying like hell to come up with a plausible reason that she needed to leave. The sex in Seattle had been good, but almost

too intimate. If they were just going to hold tight to lust, then sex would need to be carnal and unloving ... much like being bitten in a bathroom stall.

She laughed out loud, clamping her hand over her mouth.

“What’s so funny, beautiful girl?” He smiled over at her.

“Who are you?” She laughed again, turning to watch him while he drove.

“You know who I am. What do you mean?”

“You’re bossy and domineering, promising carnality and nothing more, and yet you held me the first night we had sex. You talk about making love to me in the shower and treat me like shit when you get to the office. You fuck me in a bathroom and want more. That’s far more intimate than lust would allow.”

“How so?”

“Sex at your house is intimate, Damon. It’s around your stuff and in your bed.”

“I’m complicated.” He shrugged, looking over as he slipped his fingers into her hair and brushed them by the painful skin on her neck.

She yelped and slapped at him. “Don’t touch that. It hurts.”

He brushed his fingers over it again, a smile lifting his lips. “Good. It’s a reminder.”

“Yes, that I’m yours, but you aren’t mine.” She moved from him and leaned back, closing her eyes and hating like hell how much her voice let on that she was displeased with their situation.

“No. It’s a reminder that you’re mine. I don’t know what the fuck that means. I’ve never wanted someone exclusively, but I want that with you.”

“Oh ... so I don’t see anyone who could potentially love me because you’re going to lust me.” Bethany turned to look out the window as the early afternoon sun sat high in the sky, blinding her.

“I don’t know what it means, Beth. I’m tired. I don’t want to have a deep conversation right now.”

“I know, just a deep fuck.” She kept her gaze on the road just beyond them but reached over and took his hand, wrapping her fingers around his.

“For now? Yes.”



Bethany followed him closely as they walked into the house, his shoulders slightly slumped, which was cause for concern. He looked over his shoulder, his eyes heavy with exhaustion.

“You hungry?”

“No. Let’s take a nap, and then we’ll get something to eat.”

“Yeah. That sounds good.” He moved toward his bedroom, stopping to lean against the wall as he pulled his foot up and tried to get his shoes off.

Bethany moved in front of him and knelt before him, working to untie his shoes as his fingers slipped into her hair.

“Don’t lie to me again, okay?”

She looked up as she tugged a sock off his foot. “Lie about what?”

“Anything. I guess I understand the Sadie thing but don’t lie to me again. One more time and I’ve nothing left to give you. Got it?”

“Don’t treat me like I’m not intelligent again.” Bethany stood, dropping the sock and looking up at him, her voice strong and steady. “I’m fucking brilliant, and you tore me down yesterday because you have the sensitivity of a grizzly bear.”

He smirked.

“Do it again, and I’m serious. I’ll quit and start dating someone like Philip who recognizes how brilliant, sensual and beautiful I am. How badly I want to explore the depths of my

sexuality, but how very important it is to a girl like me to only give that gift to a man who loves me. A man who treasures me, Damon.”

He reached out and slid his fingers into her hair, leaning down and brushing his lips over hers. “What if we’re wasting our time with these games? I don’t know if I can be that man, or if I want to, Beth.”

She smiled and pulled back from him, walking toward his bedroom as she pulled her silky top from her and dropped it behind her. “I don’t know if I want you to either.”



Crawling into his bed, she swallowed the lie, grateful that he was being open, and yet his truth hurt more than a lie might. He was too scared to reach out beyond himself, and though she knew that, she wanted so badly to heal him. Would the cost of doing it leave her barren and alone?

He stopped by the edge of the bed and slipped out of his slacks, unbuttoning his shirt and sighing softly as he crawled in the bed. She had pulled off her skirt but left her panties and bra on. Damon slipped in behind her, sliding an arm under her head and pulling her back to his front as he spooned her. His naked body felt so right against hers, his arms tight as if he were scared to lose her.

“Does your neck hurt, baby?” he whispered in the darkness of his room, his voice so good it ran across her nerve endings and caused her to moan. She arched her back a little, rubbing her rear against the consistent throb of his erection.

“Yes, but I’ll be fine.” She wrapped her arm around his, locking him to her. His hold on her was a clear indication of the battle that raged within him.

“I’ll put something on it when we get up. I shouldn’t have bitten you that hard. Just felt so fucking good to think about marking you.”

“Do you mark all the girls you’re with?” she whispered, fear tugging at her at what his answer might be.

“Never. You’re erasing lines I have set up for myself, Beth.” He turned slightly and yawned loudly before snuggling back into her. His breathing deepened as he slid his hand down her side, running his fingers over the wet mound of her sex beneath her panties.

He kissed her back and slid his fingers up slowly, pressing into the tightness of her ass. His words tore her open, her soft gasp the only sound in the room.

“I want in here. You’re going to open up for me soon.”

“I don’t know,” she whispered softly, never having done anything outside of normal missionary sex, and to be honest, not much of that.

“It will hurt a little, but I’m going to take you there, Beth. You’ll beg for more when I’m done with you, baby.” He kissed her neck again, his fingers rubbing back and forth between her entrances. “Tell me you want it.”

“Go to sleep.” She reached down and pulled his hand from her as he growled softly. A smile lifted her lips, the notion that he was willing to help her explore pleasure leaving her breathless.

“I will, but don’t be scared to explore your body with me. I want you to feel so much pleasure, baby.” He kissed her neck again, the coldness of his nose pressing against her as he tugged her even closer still.

“I want you to feel with your heart. Sex is so much more than physical emotion.”

“Shhhh. Don’t complicate what we have.”

She nodded, knowing good and damn well that he had already done that, the day she caught him at his desk, lost in ecstasy as he watched her spy on him. It could have ended there, but he had taken that first step. His rules were laid out, his demands explored and now his mark lay on her body.

Something told her that without too much more effort she would be returning the favor, but his body was too beautiful to mark.

It was his heart she was after.

CHAPTER 29



BETHANY

He slept late into the afternoon, and as much as she wanted to stay with him, she needed to clear her head. Bethany left Damon a note, blaming her stomach for her departure, and said that she would see him on Wednesday in the office. She called her mother to come and pick her up around three that afternoon. Nibbling at her lip with worry over her decision, Bethany let out a long sigh of relief as her mother showed up.

She got in the car quickly and flashed a smile at her mom.

“Thank you. Damon’s asleep, and it almost felt creepy sitting there watching him.” She gave off a nervous laugh as her mom eyed her.

“I’m surprised you just didn’t let Kent bring you home. I thought you and Damon didn’t get along at all.”

“We don’t really.” Bethany shrugged and fidgeted with the air conditioner, trying to find something to do. “He just wanted to go over the audit and pinpoint areas that I should learn to focus on.”

“Bethany ... I know he’s a really good-looking guy, but you know he’s about to be your brother, right?”

The tone of her mother’s voice shifted. There was some hint of understanding in her words. Bethany’s stomach contracted painfully as she glanced at her mom.

“There’s nothing going on with Damon and me.”

“Maybe not, but one of you, or perhaps both, wants there to be something. I heard how passionately you were fighting at

the house before the trip, Bethany. No one uses that much energy and emotion unless something lies behind it.”

“I’m not having this conversation.” Bethany turned and looked out the window, feeling all of ten years old again. Going back to Kent’s was a mistake. She needed to pack her shit and get back to campus. She would go into the office the next day, wrap up a few things, and then have lunch with Philip. After that, she was headed to meet with the professor she would be spending the rest of her semester trying to impress. Being a teaching assistant wasn’t at all her idea of a good time, but it wasn’t up for discussion. Master’s degree students were required to spend two semesters giving back for a reduced rate.

“Okay, but I’m here when you need to.”

“I won’t,” she barked out, wanting to crawl into a hole and disappear. It wasn’t so much that her mother was aware of something brewing between her and Damon, or that she had called her out on it. It was that she was right. He was going to be her brother soon. Why did she keep pushing that to the back of her mind as if it didn’t matter?

It was all that mattered.



Damon hadn’t called the night before, which was probably for the better. Bethany walked into her office Wednesday morning with a heaviness that didn’t sit well with her. She needed to talk to someone about everything, but who? Maybe getting back to her friends that evening would help some. She could spend the night talking everything out with her best friend, Krista. It would be good to see Jake again too. The awkwardness had all but dissipated between the two of them for sure.

“So they let you in the building?” Sadie’s voice pulled Bethany from her thoughts.

“Make whatever you’re here to say quick. I’m not in the mood for you this morning.” Bethany let out a shallow sigh

and sat down in her chair. Black slacks and a silky black blouse was her choice of attire that morning, dark colors for a shitty mood.

“I actually wanted to thank you.” Sadie reached up and ran her fingertips down the perfect bridge of her nose. “I had to get a nose job thanks to you being psychotic. The surgeon did a really good job. I didn’t realize how much I hated my old nose.”

Bethany lifted an eyebrow; her sense of hearing must have been off. “Come again?”

“It’s true.” Sadie laughed, a smile touching the fiery bitch’s mouth. It was the most genuine thing Bethany had seen from the girl since they met. “I’m sorry for being a bitch. I hate making new friends, but ... well, we’re all going out tonight if you want to come.”

“All I had to do was punch you in the face to get you to lay off?”

“I guess so. I feel much better about myself. The nose is good, right?” Sadie turned and wagged her eyebrows.

Bethany laughed, her shoulders relaxing slightly. Maybe things would start to look up from here. She and Damon and were on the fritz, sort of, but maybe other parts of Bethany’s life could start coming together. The tension between her and Sadie had begun to affect everyone in the last week, so maybe the fight was a good thing.

“The nose is good.”

“You coming tonight?”

“I’ll see what the day looks like. I need to go back to campus this afternoon to start working on my master’s pre-work.” Bethany reached over and started her computer, working to keep her voice neutral. She was still in shock that the conversation was even happening but wanted to hold her cards tightly to her chest. Could be a setup. Sadie wasn’t beyond it.

“Are you two having a normal conversation?” Ben stopped at the door by Sadie as Bethany smirked toward them.

“I think we are,” Sadie replied and moved back out into the hall. “All right, well, we’re meeting downstairs at six. Feel free to invite Philip or whoever you’re seeing now.”

“Thanks.” Bethany motioned for Ben to come into her office.

“How was Seattle?” he asked, taking a seat and repositioning his bright blue tie.

“It was okay. I wasn’t much help, but I don’t suppose they expected me to be.”

“You guys get everything sorted out?”

“They did.” She crossed her legs and leaned back in her chair. “Are you going to this outing tonight?”

“Yeah. It’s just to a local bar.”

“Another club?” Bethany mumbled, rolling her eyes.

“No. Just a bar. We’re going to have a few drinks. I’m going. You should come with us.”

“I’ll see. I was hoping to catch up with some old friends back on campus.”

“Damon an ass while you guys were there?”

“He was pretty stressed out. He had his moments.”

“I hear he and his girlfriend are having issues. I would just steer clear of him. He always acts like this when he’s upset about stuff.” Ben smoothed his hand down his chest, flattening the tie before standing. “Anyways, keep that on the down-low, but I know you have to interact with him a lot, so don’t take anything personal.”

His girlfriend? Was Ben referring to her and he didn’t know? Bethany was aware that she was far from his girlfriend, but surely the senior associate in front of her wasn’t talking about a different woman that Damon was seeing. Was he?

“Will do. I didn’t know he was seeing anyone.” She stood, unable to remain comfortable while Ben looked down at her.

“Yeah, some girl that’s had him wrapped around her finger for a while. He won’t give up the goods. He never does.” Ben laughed and walked out, calling over his shoulder. “Call if you need me.”

“I will,” Bethany muttered before sitting back down. She would have to drown herself in work until lunchtime, or the idea of Ben talking about another woman in Damon’s life was sure to undo her.



Her phone buzzed just before twelve. She picked it up and smiled, grateful for the distraction of having lunch with Philip. Her intent had been to use the poor guy to make Damon jealous, but that had changed. She couldn’t do it, and honestly, Damon had shifted recently back more into the guy she wanted to know than the one she saw in the office the day before.

“Guess sex on a plane changes things.” She slipped to the back of the elevator, their intimate conversation the day before washing over her. His arms had been so tight around her, his strong body curved against hers. He was everything she wanted, and yet with every subtle step she took forward, he seemed to leap back. It wasn’t meant to be, but could she stop pressing forward in hopes that it would become something great regardless?

She slipped off the elevator with a large group of people; her body warmed at the idea of exploring everything Damon wanted to do to her. She wanted the opportunity to be a bad girl in front of him—for him—only him.

“There you are.” Philip walked up and reached out, his fingers grazing her arm.

“Sorry. I got wrapped up in an assignment. How are you?”

“I’m really good. I grabbed sandwiches and chips for us. That okay?”

“Sounds great. How do you know what I like on my sandwich?” Bethany moved to the small table and took a seat, reaching to pick up the dark drink he moved toward her.

“I made a few assumptions. I figured if you didn’t like any of this, I’d just go get you a damned chocolate donut.”

She laughed and picked up the bag of Doritos between them, three different bags still sitting on the table. “I hate that you spent all this money.”

“It’s no big deal. I got an internship at another big firm. I start next Monday.”

“Oh, that’s great news.” Bethany sat back, letting the lovely sound of his voice wash over her. He was handsome and kind. That he was her age, and not looking to make her feel like an idiot or bend her over a desk, sat in his favor.

She wanted so badly to like him, to invite him into her world and let it be the two of them that worked toward creating a relationship, but she couldn’t.

“Philip. What a surprise.” Damon.

Bethany glanced up as she slipped another chip into her mouth. Damon’s gaze was light and almost friendly as he extended his hand toward Philip.

Philip shook it, his lip quivering slightly as Bethany watched him. “Yes, sir. Just having lunch with Bethany. I mean no disrespect.”

“No, it’s me who owes the apology. I read over the files after everything calmed down and realized the error of my ways. Your job is yours if you want it back.”

Damon almost sounded sincere, but something about his expression begged the question.

“I appreciate that, sir, but I’ve accepted a position elsewhere.”

“Our loss then.” Damon’s eyes moved across the table, stopping on Bethany for only a moment. “Enjoy your lunch date then.”

“How can I not?” Philip laughed as Damon’s smirk slid into a smile.

“I agree. An intelligent woman, great roast beef and the world at your fingertips.” Damon started to move, stopping only to glance back at Bethany for a moment.

“Good job this weekend. Nice reminder of what you’re capable of. I almost underestimated you.” He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes.

Bethany turned back to Philip as Damon walked off, his comment a sucker punch directly to her stomach. She hadn’t done anything but slut herself out to the sexy man walking away from her. His cryptic message hurt. He was poking at her hard. The lust versus love conversation wasn’t going to die anytime soon between them.

She tried hard to focus on the handsome boy before her, but the minute they wrapped up lunch, she headed to visit with her boss. They needed to discuss a few things, and none of them could wait any longer.

CHAPTER 30



BETHANY

She didn't think to stop by her office before going to his, her focus simply on setting things straight between them. She needed to know if she was the girl Ben mentioned or if Damon was playing a bigger game than even she had even imagined.

Bethany walked off the elevator as Linda, his receptionist, looked up and smiled. Bethany's eyes averted toward Damon's office as the door opened and a pretty blonde she had seen before walked out. The girl waved and smiled to Linda as she fixed the smudge of her lipstick on her bottom lip. Her clothes were a little disheveled or appeared to be.

Stopping cold in her tracks, Bethany's eyes followed the woman, who seemed out of place in the middle of their office. Her heels were a little too high, her dress a little too red.

This had to be the other woman.

Linda said something, but Bethany didn't hear her as she turned and walked to Damon's office. She reached out and pushed the door open, slamming it behind her.

Damon turned around, his hands on his tie as if he were just putting it back on.

"Need something, Beth?" He tilted his head as he moved toward her.

"Who was that?" She hated the accusation in her voice, the sadness that permeated the edges of her words.

"Who was who?" He stopped in front of her and pinned her with the dominance of his stare. "Who was that woman?"

“Yes.”

“First, you tell me who that boy was that you were having lunch with.” He took a step toward her, his demeanor shifting from very professional to aggressive. Bethany took a step back, reaching out and pressing her fingers to his chest as he continued to stalk toward her, his face shaded a light pink.

“You know who that was. I’m not here to play your fucked-up games.”

“Oh, but aren’t you? You brought that boy up here to my cafeteria for a reason, right? Who is he?”

“I’m not answering that.” She hit the wall behind her, a soft sound of surprise leaving her lips. He leaned menacingly over the top of her.

“Who the fuck is he to you? I know who the punk ass is. What does he mean to you? I’m starting to think you’re right ... you are playing a game, but I’m not.”

“Bullshit. He’s nothing more than a friend.”

“Why here? What purpose did you have in bringing him here? Did you want me to see you two together? Is that what you wanted?”

“No. I mean yes ... Fuck, I don’t know.” She pushed at his chest, but he only crowded her more. The heat rolling off of him was almost stifling, the dark press of his gaze making her want to pant for air. This was too much. He was overwhelming.

“Get out of my office, and when you grow up, come back.” He started to move as she reached out and grabbed tightly onto his jacket, pulling him back flush against her. His hand slid up the wall behind her as he pressed his hips forward, reminding her quickly how well they fit together.

“No. Who was the woman? I’m not leaving here until you tell me.”

“She’s a client, Beth. I don’t fuck our clients.”

“Just your interns?” Beth pushed at him as she moved from the wall.

“I gave you what you wanted. I can’t help that your feelings have changed.” He shrugged, his face expressionless.

“And yours haven’t?” she asked as tears slipped against her gaze. The world blurred, and she hated him for making her feel two inches tall again.

“Wait, let me make sure I have the facts straight.” His voice rose another octave as she wiped at her tears. The woman who left the office was far more than a client. By the shifting of her clothes and the adjusting of her lipstick that much was apparent.

“Stop.” Bethany moved toward the door, not wanting him to leave her with the guilt that belonged to him. “If you were seeing someone, you should have said something. I know you’re good being a whore, but I’m not.”

“You fuck me on a plane yesterday, leave me a note when I ask you to spend time with me. You bring Philip to my place of business and rub him in my face, and then you come into my office accusing me of what? Sleeping with Mrs. Finnegan? Is that what you’re accusing me of?”

Bethany took a shallow breath and closed her eyes. “I’m leaving. I have to be at school.”

“Yeah, you do that.” The side of his beautiful mouth lifted as Bethany opened her eyes. His expression was filled with hurt, something not quite right about the conversation.

“Damon.”

“No. You’ve said your piece. Go about your business, and keep wondering if the color of her lips is pressed on my skin, Beth. I know what you’re thinking, but you know what? You. Don’t. Know. Shit. About. Me.” He walked to his desk and picked up the phone, turning his back to her and barking out instructions to someone, most likely Linda.

Bethany stood there for a few minutes, her heart shattering over and over again in her chest. He was right. She didn’t know much about him, but what she did know she didn’t like very much at all.

She walked quickly out of his office, holding back the torrential flood of tears until she slipped into her office. She closed the door, turning and gasping at the enormous vase of red roses. There had to be close to fifty squeezed tightly together. The office smelled blissful.

Walking toward the flowers, she let her tears fall. Most likely from Kent or Philip. Someone who understood that she was a good person, an intelligent woman and a force to be reckoned with. She plucked the card and sat down at her desk, the need for them to be from Damon crashing into her.

She couldn't open the card just yet. She let her head drop, her chin pressing against her chest as she lifted her free hand to her face to catch some of the wetness that fell from her eyes.

How painful his continued rejection of her was. He was confident and assured, mature and locked into a successful life. She was a simple girl looking for the next exit on the road from adolescence. He didn't get it. He didn't understand her and the need she had to be loved, to be adored and treasured.

It was over between them. Simple, and yet so damn hard to convince herself of.

She opened the card and let her eyes scan over the words, the world stopping for a moment.

Beth,

You're right. I'm scared. I've not let anyone in my heart, in my life—ever. I have a lot to work through, but if you're willing to be patient with me, to be true to me ... I'll try. I want you to be mine first, and then we will work on me being yours.

Take a chance with me?

~ D

“Fuck,” she whispered, another round of tears dropping from her eyes. If she hadn’t been branded his before, she was now. She reached for her phone and called his office, the call shifting her to Linda.

“Is he there?” Bethany asked.

“No, he left and said not to bother him for the rest of the day. Sorry, kiddo.”

Bethany hung up and texted him.

Bethany: *I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have invited Philip. I shouldn’t have accused you of sleeping with the client. I’m just lost in this, Damon. I’m lost in you, and I feel like I’m the only one waiting to be left with nothing, to be made a fool of.*

His text took a few minutes, but relief flooded her when she received it.

Damon: *I don’t want your apologies. Save them for someone else. I’ll make my offer once, and if you don’t want it, then we’re done. Tonight. My place. Leave your fears, your accusations and your panties somewhere else. They aren’t welcome here. Brave enough, Beth?*

She texted back one word, her world crashing in around her with need for the man that left her breathless, the one that dragged her into depravity and could possibly be the most important thing in her life at present.

Bethany: *Yes.*

CHAPTER 31



BETHANY

Being back on campus felt good, felt right. Bethany breathed in deeply, the heat in Texas stifling, but the smell of fresh-cut grass and honeysuckle made it worth dealing with. She wasn't looking forward to working for one of the business professors for the next semester, but it was a requirement of the master's program. She would just buckle down and get through it and keep her eyes on the future.

The future.

It seemed as though Damon was willing to be a part of that plan. She honestly couldn't fathom one without him in it, and yet they still had so many obstacles to jump over to get there. The fact that they were about to be family was the largest, but working together and both being so damn bullheaded were competing for a close second.

Bethany moved back as a large group of girls piled out of the business building, one of them turning to give her a once-over. She chuckled and slipped into the coolness. Wanting anything other than a man had not occurred to her, but it was becoming more and more the norm to consider both men and women as partners. She shrugged the thought away, not needing more than Damon. She could barely handle him. The thought of another woman with them, touching her man, caused possessiveness to rise inside of her.

"Just no ..." she muttered and jogged up the stairs to the second floor. She still wore her work clothes and was glad of it. Her destination was a vast auditorium. Cost accounting was

required for anyone who wanted to be a business major, regardless of whether they were going into accounting or not.

A handsome, distinguished-looking man glanced up and smiled kindly. “You must be Bethany?”

“Yes, sir. Bethany Miller. Nice to meet you.”

“Pleasure is all mine. Kendal Tarrington.” He extended his hand, his gaze professional and remaining on her face. She let out an internal sigh as she relaxed.

The guy wasn’t a douche or a perv from what she could tell. She could totally do this.

“I have to admit up front that cost accounting was *not* my favorite undergrad class.” She smiled, and he chuckled, taking his hand back and pulling a pair of glasses from his pocket. He looked up.

“I’m not thinking too many people would say that it was.” He shuffled through a few papers on the desk in front of him as Bethany stood quietly. He was probably in his mid-thirties, in great shape and smelled like heaven. He probably struggled *a lot* with beating back the hordes of college girls that took his classes and worked to grab his attention. She tilted her head a little, noticing no ring and feeling even worse for the good-looking man.

“Most people like financial accounting better?” She tried to make conversation as she walked toward the front row of the auditorium. Taking a seat, she dropped her purse beside her and laid the small notebook she’d brought with her on the makeshift desk before her.

“Oh yeah. The rules in financial are clear cut, and you can simply push forward. With cost, the rules change a little depending on the various scenarios you might find yourself in.” He glanced up as he pulled a notebook from the pile. “Here we go.”

She turned as he took a seat to her left, leaving a few between them. His light blue button-up shirt and dark blue slacks were perfectly matched to his tie. She couldn’t help but smile. His messy brown hair and dark green eyes only added

to the complete package of his persona and appearance. He was the typical accounting type, and yet his looks could allow for a modeling career if he were up for it.

“So I’m thinking I’d like for you to be here on Tuesdays and Thursdays.” He opened the notebook and adjusted the Metro-styled glasses on his regally shaped nose. “That good, or does it interfere with your master’s classes?”

“That’s fine. How old are you?” Bethany asked, suddenly realizing that she wanted to know, more than having to bear the burden of the awkwardness it might create.

He chuckled and sat back in the chair, pulling the glasses off and pinning her with a hard stare. “Let me give you the spiel I give everyone. I’m thirty-one. I’m not a model, nor do I care to be. I’m a guy that loves math and football, and I’m an extreme stickler for the rules. I don’t date students or TAs, so keep things staunchly professional between us, or I’ll dismiss you.”

“Wow. You’ve practiced that.” Bethany chuckled.

“More times than I care to admit to.” He swung his glasses around as he lifted his eyebrow. “We good? You good with all of that?”

“Yep. I’m taken by the best-looking man in all of Dallas. You’re safe. Just wondering how much you must struggle with all of these silly girls that take your classes.”

He rolled his eyes and looked back down at the notebook. “Enough to have to memorize a damned speech about why it’s inappropriate for them to behave the way they do.”

Bethany couldn’t help but laugh. She could see the two of them becoming quick friends. It was going to be a good semester where school was concerned. Getting back to the books and seeing her friends would help to ease the incessant need that hovered just above her where Damon was concerned. She couldn’t spend her days on her back with him between her legs, or could she?



“There’s the girl of the hour!” Krista walked toward the car as Bethany got out, a smile lifting her mouth at the sight of her best friend.

“Has it only been a couple of weeks? Feels like for-fucking-ever.” Bethany wrapped her arms around the other girl and sank into the hug.

“Can’t text or call nobody? Too busy being important?” Krista moved back and tugged at a strand of Bethany’s long hair.

“You too, butt nugget.” She winked and walked toward the apartment. She would be staying with Krista most days of the week, some at Kent’s place and hopefully some in the arms of her handsome stepbrother. Bethany reached over and ran her hand down the back of Krista’s hair.

“You totally got some low-lights put in your hair.”

Krista opened the apartment and moved back. “I did. I just felt like it was too blonde. With it being so short and gold, everyone kept calling me Tinker Bell.”

Bethany laughed and let her eyes scan the living room before sinking into the old beat up green couch she had come to love.

“Tinker Bell is beautiful.”

“And thin. I’m not.” Krista grabbed a handful of her stomach and shook it. Bethany rolled her eyes.

“Where’s Jake?”

“He’ll be here soon. He had to meet with the new professor he’s going to be TA’ing for.”

“You guys still together?” Bethany asked, wishing like hell she would have kept in better contact with her friend. Why had she let her new life completely suffocate her old one? Didn’t seem right.

“Um ... no. We didn't really get together. He was confused I guess.” Krista shrugged, her smile sliding to a frown.

Bethany patted the seat next to her on the couch. “What do you mean? I thought you guys just decided after graduation that you liked each other.”

“I've always liked Jake, but I knew the two of you had something going on, so I backed off.” She shrugged before sitting down and kicking her feet up. “He thought he wanted to give things a try too, but he just up and changed his mind last week.”

“Why?”

“I don't know. He didn't explain it.”

“Are you upset?” Bethany reached over and ran her fingers along her friend's arm.

“Yes and no.”

“Explain.”

“I wanted something to happen between us, but it was so weird. He's been one of my best friends for four years.” She leaned back and closed her eyes. “I'm good with us just being friends. It's better that way. Every time I think about us making out, I keep wondering if he's wishing I'm you.”

“What? He wasn't interested in me, Kris ... I tried, remember?”

“Yeah, but I think he was just overwhelmed or shocked. He's asked about you, like, every day since you left.”

There was a slight twinge of bitterness in her voice. The hint of it stung, but there wasn't anything Bethany could say to make things better. Jake had completely rejected her the night of the graduation party. Hell, she had stripped naked and walked toward her bedroom, beckoning him to come with her.

Damon would have taken her in the hall before she could make it to the privacy of the room. The thought caused her body to tighten, her hormones to flutter.

“I’m in love,” Bethany blurted out, knowing that she couldn’t say anything in response to Jake, but she could most certainly share her own situation that would make anything Jake might be thinking moot.

Krista opened her eyes and sat up, shock registering on her face.

“Really? Who?”

“One of the guys at the firm I’m doing my internship with.” Her cheeks burned with embarrassment, the idea of blurting out the fact that Damon was her stepbrother just wasn’t going to happen. No way could she share that. Anyone with half a sense of morals would slam her to the ground.

A knock at the door surprised both of them. Bethany got up as Krista laughed at their silliness. Jake stood on the other side as she opened it, his smile warm and reminding her of so many good times.

“Hey, you.” He stepped into the apartment and pulled Bethany into a hug, nuzzling his face into the crook of her neck. How many times had she wanted this very thing over the last few years? She didn’t now, and even if some part of her did, there was no way in hell that she could hurt Krista or imagine life without Damon.

“Good to see you, buddy.” Bethany squeezed Jake in a bear-hug manner and moved back. His eyes moved across her as he smiled. She reached out and brushed his long blond hair from his eyes. “You need a haircut.”

“Well, you don’t. You look great.” He stared for another moment. Bethany shut the door behind him and walked back to the couch.

“Thanks. I was just telling Krista that I met the man I’m going to marry.” She laughed, trying like hell to bring the room into a more comfortable state while still putting it out there that she was officially taken.

“Oh yeah? Tell us about him.” Jake walked to the couch, his smile fading as he moved to sit on the other side of Bethany. The tension between him and Krista was palpable.

“Wait. Are we going to dinner?” Krista asked.

“I can’t. I need to do a few more things for work tonight.” Bethany gave an apologetic look before turning back to Jake. “He’s tall like you, but dark hair and dark eyes. He’s bossy and domineering. Quite a dick sometimes, but he’s going to be really good for me.”

“Wow. He’s like the total opposite of me.” Jake laughed as Krista stood up.

“I’m getting something to drink. You guys want anything?”

“I’m good,” Bethany responded, turning her attention back to Jake.

“Me too. Thanks, though.” He watched Krista go and then turned back to Bethany. “You have to help me.”

“What? Why?”

His sudden change of expression left Bethany concerned. A frantic look sat on his handsome face.

“She’s fucking obsessed with me. She’s been my shadow for the last two weeks. I need you home. You have to pretend like we’re together or something. I need your help.” He reached out and took Bethany’s hand.

“That’s ridiculous. That doesn’t sound like Krista at all.”

He lowered his voice and leaned in. “She’s going to bring me a drink because she has to be doing something for me all the time.”

“But you’re not thirsty.”

“I fucking know that. I’m serious about you helping me.”

Bethany turned as Krista walked in with two drinks. “Here, handsome. Thought you could use something.”

Jake gave Bethany a knowing look. Something was a little off, but what could she do to help? Had things shifted that much after just two weeks?

She thought about her life and how she felt about Damon now. Yeah, things could shift dramatically in the space of a couple of days.

CHAPTER 32



BETHANY

Worry clouded her thoughts as she drove to Damon's house. The situation with Krista and Jake was so odd. It was hard to imagine it happening, and yet it seemed to be. Maybe Krista had been obsessed with Jake for much longer than either of them imagined?

Her phone buzzed in the seat next to her, and she pulled it out as she parked the car in front of Damon's place.

Damon: Where are you? I'm getting impatient.

Bethany: Here. Why does that not surprise me?

He opened the car door as she yelped and hit her knee on the steering column.

"Because you know me so well after only a week and a half?" He lifted his eyebrow and moved back. His white button-down shirt was open, the swell of his beautiful chest and abdomen muscles on full display.

She got out, not able to wait another second to touch him. Sliding her hands around his waist inside his shirt, she lifted to her toes and pressed her lips to his with a soft moan. He wrapped his arms around her and tilted his head, deepening the kiss as he took dominion over her mouth.

His strong hands pressed into her back, the sensation sending tendrils of pleasure shooting all over her. He broke the

kiss and pressed his forehead to hers.

“No more accusing me of shit. Things are quite rarely what they seem to be in my world.” He nipped at her mouth, his eyes dark and filled with warning.

“I understand,” she whispered, wanting so badly to apologize but knowing that he wasn’t interested in her words as he noted earlier.

“Come inside and tell me about the campus visit.” He moved back, taking her hand and closing the car door with his other one. “We need to get you a new car, by the way. This one is on its last leg.”

Bethany swallowed the excitement of knowing that he wasn’t furious with her. How close had she come to blowing the best thing that had ever happened to her? He was rough around the edges for sure, but that was one of the main reasons she wanted to melt into a puddle each and every time he came near. To tame a lion would be a great feat.

“I like my college car. It has character.” She laughed as they moved into the house. He glanced back at her, the upturned corner of his mouth so incredibly sexy.

“You have character ... you ballsy girl.” He released her hand and moved into the kitchen, all sorts of cold cuts and bread out on the counter.

“What’s all this?”

“Dinner. I figured something fast and filling would work. I’ll cook for you another night.” He started pulling together a large sandwich and nodded toward the two plates sitting out. “Hand me one, and get yours. Get whatever you want, just make yourself at home here.”

He had two plates out, and he wanted to cook for her? She swallowed the hot burn of tears, almost too afraid to let herself believe that he was letting her in bit by bit. She handed him a plate and nibbled on a pickle as she watched him. Nothing in all of her life was more enticing than seeing him in the kitchen. His dark hair curled a little at the top, his playboy persona only elevated thanks to the need for a haircut.

She reached out and brushed her fingers through it. Damon looked up and caught her hand, kissing the inside of her wrist softly a few times.

“Stop being sentimental, and get your sandwich. You’re wrecking my world. Stop looking happy about it.” He pressed his teeth to her wrist and released her, winking and looking back toward his masterpiece.

“No way you fit that in your mouth.” Bethany laughed and moved to stand behind him. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she leaned forward, needing contact so badly with him. He rubbed her hands as they clasped around his midsection, and she knew—he was softening toward her. She needed to tread lightly here if things were to go the way she wanted them to.

“You’d be surprised what I can fit in my mouth. Want me to show you tonight?” He chuckled, the sound warming her fully.

“You going to choke on that huge sandwich for me just to prove a point?”

“No. I’m going to eat the hell out of this sandwich. I plan to choke on desire and fit as much of you in my mouth as you can handle. Plain and simple, sweet girl.”

She stiffened, his words driving a stake into her core and exploding heat along her nerve endings. “How do you do that?”

He lifted his arms and turned in her grasp, wrapping her in a hug. “Do what? I want to hear you say it. Tell me what my words, my plans, my desires do to you.”

Bethany lowered her head a little. The weight of his stare was almost too much.

“Look at me, and tell me.” He spoke with authority as he bent down a little, putting himself back into her line of sight. She straightened her shoulders and nodded, telling herself over and over that she could do this.

“You make my body ache. It comes alive with your words.”

“My promises.”

“Yeah. I want all of them.”

“How does it ache? How does it come alive, Beth? Tell me. Describe it for me. Make me tremble with need to fulfill that wicked ache you have because of me.”

She swallowed hard. It was overwhelming to have him hovering over her, his words so sensual. The timbre of his voice was methodical, deep and tugging at her good-girl appeal. She wanted to strip naked and offer him anything—anytime—anywhere.

“Tell me, baby. Talk to me.” He leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers. She leaned into the kiss, but he pressed his forehead to hers again, stopping the connection. Bethany growled softly as he chuckled.

“You don’t get another kiss until you respond to my questions.”

“Fine.” She tried to pull back, but his strong arms locked her into place.

“What are you afraid of?”

“Sounding like an idiot. I’m the one trying to impress you, remember? You have all your shit together. You’re successful and extremely good looking. I’m just ... I’m just a college girl trying to figure everything out.” She pulled against him again.

Damon tightened his hold on her, picking her up and moving them toward the kitchen table as he let her go. He reached down and wrapped his strong hands around her waist, lifting her and forcing her to sit on the table. He pressed forward, pulling her hips until she was pressed against him. His hands slid into her hair as he looked down at her.

“Every time I see you, my cock hardens to the point of pain. I want to rip your fucking clothes off and teach you a lesson for what you do to me, but something inside me stops that violence. That something is the warmth that rushes through me, Beth. It coats my insides and yet still burns along the trail of my pleasure points. My heart races, my palms sweat, and the lust, burns brighter—but differently. It’s a need,

a desire, a demand that forces me forward toward you.” He pressed his hips forward, the thickness of his erection brushing against the junction of her thighs as she let out a soft yelp.

“You’re not a girl.” He leaned down and dragged his nose along her jawline as he inhaled deeply. “You’re a woman. You’re my woman. Stop acting like that girl. I don’t like her. Be who you are, and tell me what I do to you. I need to hear it from your lips. Demand it from me.”

“It’s like a fire,” she started as she reached up and pushed his shirt from his shoulders, reveling in the beauty of the beast before her. “A sharp, stabbing jolt of electricity. It starts in my stomach and races along my skin, leaving me hot and wet, needy and willing to do anything just to feel your hands on me.”

“Good, baby. Keep going.” He bent over her, pressing his body to hers. The soft brush of his lips along her throat almost undid her, the strong tick of her pulse in her neck only getting worse as he whispered along her skin.

“It’s not just your words but seeing or even thinking about you. I want you to explore me, to teach me and open me up. I need to be beneath you, bent over for you, on my knees for you.”

“You do, baby. I need you too,” he whispered against her ear as his fingers slid between them, pressing softly into her wetness above her slacks as he growled against her throat.

“I want to drown in your scent and bathe in your depravity. I don’t know why you chose me, but every word, every look, every touch breaks me in half. I can’t imagine my life without you ...” she whispered. Her body tensed and shook slightly as he pressed his tongue to her collarbone and dragged it slowly up her neck, his lips and teeth pressing to her chin as he groaned.

He moved back and pushed softly at her chest to force her back. Bethany descended, leaving her elbows behind her, unwilling to watch the ceiling. She needed to see him. He ran his hand from her neck through the valley between her breasts

to the top of her slacks, tugging a little as his dark brown eyes moved back to meet her gaze head on.

“Tonight is about us. I want you to know me a little better, and I want to explore the deepest parts of your body. You want my heart? You’re going to have to come after it . I keep it on lockdown and have for so long that I’m not sure it’s truly available anymore. I want you to have it though.”

He undid her slacks as she kicked off her shoes. Lifting her hips, he pulled the silky material from her legs, his hands rubbing her thighs firmly as he watched her. Bethany panted, the room shrinking to nothing more than him. His hunger was overwhelming, the sensation of being swallowed whole very much where she was.

He reached up and wrapped his fingers around the small string of her panties on each hip, pulling down and chuckling deep in his chest as he chucked them behind him. Taking a knee in each hand, Damon opened her legs to leave her on full display for him.

His finger ran down the length of her swollen sex, the slick pink skin throbbing painfully as he glanced up at her. “Relax and let me touch you a little. We’ll eat soon, but I need this. I need to watch you come for me. When I tell you to come, you do. Not before that. Got it, sexy girl?”

Bethany nodded slowly, her tongue pressed between her teeth as she struggled to breathe. He ran his finger along her sex again as she groaned loudly and lifted her hips, the top of his digit slipping into her.

“Needy, baby?” he asked, his voice so deep and sensual as it skittered across her exposed flesh.

“Fuck yes.” Bethany lay back, her heart trying to beat its way out of her chest. She moaned loudly, the sound animalistic and emotional as he slid two fingers into her and pressed his other hand against the top of her sex, his palm rolling in slow circles as he worked his fingers in and out of her.

“So beautiful. Tight little body taking what I give you and wanting more. You want more don’t you, Beth.” It was almost a command, not a question. He glanced up at her as she lifted her hips in rhythm with his assault.

“Yes,” she groaned, not caring what kind of needy whore she must look like to him as she forced him to work her hard and fast. His soft panting shot her over the edge, and she gripped the tablecloth as her ass came up off the solid structure.

“I feel it. You’re swelling on the inside, but I’m not ready for that yet.” He pulled his finger out and patted her pussy softly. His eyes narrowed as she looked up at him and let a long, angry sound rise from her.

“More,” she whispered.

“Wait. I want you to hear me when I say I’m going to be in charge of this relationship.” He patted her wetness again as she writhed beneath his touch. “Tell me you hear me. I’m in charge of your body. I’m the only one that makes you come—ever again. Tell me, Beth.”

“Yes. You’re the only one that can make me come. I’m only yours, Damon. Please ... stop fucking around with your games, and give me more.”

“These aren’t games ... they’re a training ground.” He slid his fingers deep inside of her and pressed deep against the part of her that caused the world to explode. “Come for me, baby. Come hard, Beth.”

A long sound left her as her body contorted, hips pumping against him as he bent over and pressed his lips over her clit, sucking it deep into his mouth.

The world shattered, and she let herself dive into the deep end of the pool—no air needed; she wasn’t ever willing to come up again anyway.

CHAPTER 33



BETHANY

“**W**hat did you mean by ‘a training ground’?” Bethany asked before lifting her sandwich to her lips. She sat in one of his T-shirts, her body bare beneath it. Soft music played from the TV as they snuggled into the couch together.

“Exactly what it sounded like. You’re not used to a man wanting to take pleasure from you, both his own and yours.” Damon licked mustard from his finger before glancing over at her. “If I’m going to settle down with one woman, I want her to get used to me taking what I want.”

“Sounds greedy to me.” She shrugged, not minding it at all. The idea of him settling down with one woman and her being that woman left her heart racing. What she wouldn’t give for that to be the future.

“It is. Life’s too short not to be though.” He moved her legs off of him and stood, his slacks the only thing he wore. “Plus, it’s not like I’m taking something from you that you don’t want to give. I’m talking about opening you up to the possibility that as your man I know what you need, and if I ever don’t, well, you just speak up, and it will be yours.”

Not able to respond, Bethany watched him pick up her plate and walk back toward the kitchen. He was devastatingly gorgeous, his ass flexing in his pants perfectly as he moved. The thick swell of muscles running along his spine and rolling over his shoulders left her dizzy. How in the world had she ever ended up so lucky? When was the rug going to be pulled out from under her? Surely it was coming.

“You want anything else, baby?” he yelled from the kitchen as she turned and curled up on her side on the couch.

“Just you.”

He walked back in, lifting a beer to his lips and taking a deep drink. “Tell me about your afternoon. The part after you almost dicked up our relationship again.”

She kicked at him playfully as he smiled, sitting down and pulling her legs back into his lap. He pressed his thumb into the bottom of her foot, rubbing softly back and forth as she felt herself begin to melt.

“I just met the accounting prof I would be working with for the fall. He reminded me of a proper version of you.” She laughed.

The side of Damon’s mouth lifted in a smirk. “The proper version? Poor guy.”

“No, it’s just that he was good looking and really well dressed, but he was very standoffish. He told me his age and the fact that I would be ejected from the program if I so much as looked at him in a sensual manner.”

Damon stopped rubbing and turned his attention to her, his eyebrow lifting. “Did you hit on him?”

“What? Fuck no. I’m ruined for life thanks to you. He was just really apprehensive about me being there I guess.”

“Did he hit on you?”

“No, Damon. He was just straightforward, making the rules clear.” Bethany shrugged and ran her finger over her lips, enjoying the view of the sensual man of her dreams rubbing her feet.

“What’s his name? You know I went to school at UT as well, for my undergrad at least.”

“Dr. Kendal Tarrington. He teaches cost accounting.”

A smile lifted Damon’s mouth, and Bethany sat up, pulling her legs from him. “You know him?”

“Fuck yes, I know Kendal. We were in our frat together. Biggest prick in the universe.” He laughed loudly, the sound of it wrapping around her and making chill bumps break out on her skin.

“He seems like a great guy.”

“Oh, he is. He’s one of my best friends actually, just very uptight.”

“Why isn’t he married? Seems so weird.”

“Same reason I’m not, I guess.”

“Why is that?” She pulled her legs toward her, stretching his shirt over her knees to cover her nakedness beneath.

“He hasn’t found the right woman, but he’s not looking. His girlfriend from college dicked him over royally. He doesn’t trust a woman as far as he can throw her.” Damon moved closer, shifting to slide in behind her. Bethany straightened her legs out, scooting forward as he took over most of the couch, his arm sliding under her head. The other arm wrapped around her and his hand moved up to play with her breast.

“What about you?” She had to ask. “Do you trust me?”

“I want to. I think I do, but I have a lot of demons in my past.” He leaned forward, pressing his lips to the side of her neck as he breathed in deeply. She shivered, and he moved his hand to the bottom of the T-shirt, tugging it up and slipping his hand back up to cup her bare breast.

“Why are you such an ass to me sometimes? One night we’re making love, and the next day you’re tearing me apart with your words. Do you need meds?” She turned her face, a smile on her lips as she teased him, the derivative truth still very much there.

“I don’t know. I’m going to work on that. I think I have a hard time not separating work from pleasure. I don’t see you as my girl at work. I see us as colleagues, at least I try to.”

“Why? Am I not good enough to be yours in front of our peers?” Anger slipped into her voice, and she hated to ruin the

mood, but she needed resolution.

“Hush, woman. That’s silly. I would show you off to everyone, and I will when the time is right. You’re breathtaking and have me panting like a high school boy with a hard-on.”

“Then why not let me be yours everywhere?”

“Because I’m not sure how to do that, Beth. I’ve worked to protect myself so long that undoing that isn’t an easy feat. That and the fact I can’t seem to get my fucking hormones under lock and key when you’re around. You can hide your wetness from peering eyes, but I can’t exactly hide my erection.”

“True. I just don’t like it. I don’t want there to be a separation anymore, and the next time you bark at me, I’m going to drop kick you.”

He groaned and shifted his hips forward, grinding himself against her rear.

“I need to tell you something else. I spoke with Matt a little about your mother and that whole situation a while back. He brought it up, and I just listened.”

Damon stiffened behind her, his body going still. She continued to explain, hoping that it wasn’t wrong to tell him.

“I wasn’t going to say anything, but I know being transparent and open is important to you, so I promise you one thing ... no secrets between us, at least not from my side of the relationship.”

He pressed another kiss to her neck and slid his hand to her stomach, pulling her back toward him as he slipped one of his legs through hers and wrapped himself around her tightly. He didn’t have to say anything. His action spoke volumes. He wanted love as much as everyone else did, and like half the population walking around lonely, he was scared. How could he not be?

“I still hate her, Beth.”

“I can imagine so.” Bethany reached back and ran her fingers along his thigh before pulling from his hold and turning to face him. She lay down on her side, snuggling into him as she nuzzled her face into the sexy smell of his chest.

“I wish I could just tell Dad, but what good would it do?”

She looked up as he reached down and brushed her long hair back, his eyes on her but looking far away from the present. She rose up a little and brushed her lips against his. He blinked and leaned down, deepening the kiss, his tongue rolling over hers as his hands tightened on her back.

Moving back from his oncoming assault, Bethany licked her lips and reached up to touch his with her fingers, committing the softness of them to memory. “Not telling him makes you feel like a liar, which is what she was. I don’t understand it fully, but I think you need to get this off your chest.”

He kissed her fingers before sliding his hand back under the T-shirt, his fingers rubbing softly over the curves of her rear. He pressed his hips forward, grinding his hardness against her softness once again.

“Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t want to think about it right now. I want to make love to you until you drag me deeper into the depravity that your sexy little body begs me for.” He shifted them again, moving her to sit on top of him. “Take the shirt off for me.”

He extended his hands above him, tucking them behind his head as his eyes narrowed slightly. Bethany pulled the T-shirt over her head and dropped it on the floor next to her, her body bare and on display for him.

“Mmmm ... everything I want, right here. Do I trust that it won’t be gone soon?” He reached up and rolled the tip of his index finger around her nipple as she rocked against the thick press of his arousal, his pants still in their way.

“I’m not going anywhere unless you force me to.” Bethany moved back, working to get him out of his slacks.

“I want you with me. I’ll work on that other shit if that means keeping you by my side.”

“Good,” she whispered, her heart beating so hard in her chest.

He lifted his hips as she pulled his pants down. He wasn’t wearing underwear, which honestly didn’t surprise her at all. She chuckled, and his brow lifted.

“Where are your underwear?” She moved toward him, and he reached for her, forcing her to move faster.

“I told you not to wear any, but you did. I, on the other hand, followed the rules.”

“You wear panties?” she asked, sliding herself along the firm length of him as her expression changed. Nothing seemed funny all of a sudden as need rose in the center of her body.

“Hush, woman. Arch your hips, and take me inside of you. I want to watch and enjoy every moment of this.” He took her face with one hand and lifted it a little; her chin extended toward the ceiling.

Bethany arched her hips, his body pressed against hers as he lifted her a little. The position was almost uncomfortable, but knowing that he wanted to savor the moment and force her to remember he was in charge somehow overwhelmed her system. She groaned as he rolled his hips, his cock barely inside of her but pushing in a firm circle against her opening.

She moaned again and reached up, pushing his arms from her face. She didn’t realize the movement would cause her to lose balance and slam down on him, his body stretching hers in all the right ways.

“Oh fuck, Beth.” He slapped her thighs hard before pushing on the couch to move back and sit up. He pressed his lips to her breast, opening his mouth slowly and tonguing her nipple rhythmically as he took hold of her ass, rolling his wrists and causing her to work him.

“Almost too much,” she whispered, burying her hands in his hair and wrapping her arms around his head as she lifted

up and arched her back. He tightened his grip on her as she rode him hard.

“No, you’ve got this, baby. You know how to work me. Stop thinking about it, and let yourself sink into me. I’m all yours. That’s what you want, isn’t it?” He looked up from below her, his eyes filled with a softness she didn’t know existed in him.

She jerked faster as she watched him, her eyes rolling back into her head slowly as she came. He lifted up off the couch with his thrusts, his body so hard and strong, everything a man should be and then some.

“I want you so bad. I need you.” She rocked against him as he growled softly. “Only you. Please don’t make me go to anyone else. I just want you.”

“I’m all you’re getting ... forever.” He tucked his forearms under her knees and moved quick, standing up as her body was still spazzing. “Hold onto my neck tightly. I want in deeper.”

“Yeah ...” She tightened her grip as he slid his open palms against the bottom of her ass and dug his nails in. She screamed at the pleasure-pain and tried to focus on what he wanted—what he needed. Somehow it always married beautifully with her fantasies.

The sound of him coming slammed into her, and she joined him.

CHAPTER 34



BETHANY

Bethany lay in Damon's bed as he slept. Their sex was delicious and so fulfilling. He hadn't taken her much longer after they stood up, the pressure overwhelming them both. After a quick shower, they had slipped into bed. She couldn't sleep, her heart far too full to let her mind rest. Various scenarios of where they might be headed ran through her, none of them ending with a happily ever after.

She growled softly and slipped out of the sheets around three in the morning. Damon's soft snoring was stupid levels of precious; his big strong body laid out across most of the queen-sized bed. She picked up the towel she had been wearing earlier, wrapped it around her and walked to the couch. She turned on the TV and muted the sound as she nibbled at her lip.

How badly she wanted to tell him that she loved him, but the last time she did he had taken it poorly or had he? Shock sat on his handsome features, his voice losing strength as he whispered his response to her confession.

You love me?

She knew that Kent and Matthew loved Damon, but had his mother not been forthcoming with her love for him? There was no way he hadn't been told by a multitude of women.

Why was the moment so surreal? Why did it haunt her so badly?

The idea of him moving beyond his past sounded doable, but she knew quite well that hers still clung to her like a well-worn coat. Living in poverty and fear never seemed to lose its grip on her. It left her wanting love and acceptance. Was her willingness to compromise with some of Damon's anger issues part of that?

He hadn't at all been angry that night. He had been loving and seemed to be shifting in his rules and standards. Anyone who had been hurt as badly as he had was forced to create a tight wall—a fortress of sorts that everyone would be forced to contend with.

He would be hers. It was only a matter of time.

The sound of her phone buzzing caused her stomach to tighten, worry sprouting inside of her. Who in the world would be calling at three in the morning?

Twelve unanswered text messages registered on her phone, all from Jake.

***Jake:** Bethany, I need you to call me. I was serious today, and Krista isn't acting like herself. Did she take meds when you guys were together? Maybe something for bipolar disorder? Just call, please.*

The messages got increasingly worse, the intensity in his words driving Bethany to move from the couch in search of her keys. Was he overreacting? Probably? But the messages screamed of panic, and from what she could tell, Krista was beating at Jake's door, waking up the neighbors and shit.

That didn't sound like Krista at all. Bethany hit the call button on her phone and picked at her lip, pacing in front of the couch as she tried to think of what to do.

No answer. She growled in frustration and tried Krista.

Damon walked out, rubbing his eyes and stopping by the large ornate fireplace that most likely never got used. Too damn hot in Texas.

“Can’t sleep?” He moved closer, and realization moved across his beautiful features.

Bethany walked to him and reached out, brushing her fingers along his chest as she tried to ground herself in the present.

No answer.

“Fuck,” she whispered and turned from him. His hands pressed into her shoulders, but he didn’t speak. The fact that he was there with her, his arms moving around her to offer comfort, was overwhelming. Tears blurred her vision as she left a message.

“Kris, it’s me. Please call me back. Jake has been texting me, and I’m not sure what’s going on, but I need you to call me. I’m really, really, *really* worried about you. If I don’t hear from you in, like, ten minutes, I’m coming over.”

She hung up and turned as a tear dripped onto her cheek. The last thing she wanted to do was remind Damon that maybe she wasn’t the woman he needed her to be. She was stuck in the middle of some weird college bullshit and was simply still a stupid, childish girl.

“Baby, what’s the matter?” He pulled her in tightly, his grasp reminding her that if they were going to move forward, they were going to have to do so together. Would he laugh at her or chide her for being an idiot?

“Just college drama shit.” She pulled back as her dinner rose in her chest.

“Obviously whatever it is, it’s upsetting you.” He reached up and wiped away her tears, leaning over and kissing her nose. “I’m not one-dimensional. I try to be, but believe me, it takes effort, baby. Tell me what’s going on. Who are these guys?”

“What guys?” Bethany sniffled, anxiety wrapping around her. Something was wrong.

Krista or Jake should have called by now.

“Chris and Jake.”

“No, Krista and Jake. My two best friends in college. Krista is my roommate, and Jake has been a good friend of mine since my freshman year.”

“They dating?”

“She wanted to, but he didn’t. I don’t know.” Bethany pulled back and ran her fingers through her hair. “It’s complicated.”

“You need to go over there? Sounded serious by the message you left.”

“Yeah. I need to go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He reached out and grabbed her, pulling her close and looking down at her. The seriousness in his features left her concerned. Surely he wasn’t going to pull the selfish card and not let her go without making her feel like shit for leaving him.

“I’m going with you then. You’re not driving yourself in the middle of the night.”

“No. I’m good. Really. I’m sure I’m just overreacting, and there is nothing to be worried about.”

“Well, let’s go check it out then. Get dressed, and I’ll drive.”

Bethany leaned in and kissed him softly. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” He released her as she jogged toward the bedroom. Fear tore up her insides, but having Damon willing to go with her made it seem like the world was finally righting itself.



“Does your friend Krista have a history of being a violent person?” Damon asked, reaching over and taking Bethany’s hand.

“No. I mean, I don’t know. We’ve been friends and roommates throughout college, but I didn’t know her before then.”

“Are we headed to her place or this guy Jake’s?”

“Jake’s. He was the one that seemed panicked.” She reached for her phone and plugged in the address before linking it to his Bluetooth. “This should keep us on track.”

“Good. I think when this is all cleared up we need to go by your place too.”

“Why? To see if Krista is okay?”

“We can do that, but I was more thinking of christening your bed.” He smirked, and she relaxed slightly, thankful for his mood being spot on with what she needed.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yes, unless it’s about my mother. I’m not ready to go there just yet.”

“No, I’ll let you start that conversation when you are ready.” She rubbed his fingers with her own, wanting to crawl up into his lap. “Do you think our relationship can develop past the fact that we’re about to be siblings?”

“Of course. We’re siblings by marriage. My father’s choices aren’t going to tell me who I can and can’t be with. You and I have every right to be together.”

“Do you think they will see it like that?” She hated to have the conversation, but honestly, it was the last barrier to the idea of them actually making something of the future. Plus, she seriously needed to get her mind off of the situation with Krista and Jake. She might go crazy if she let herself ponder it too much. Outside of Damon and her mother, Krista and Jake were closer to her heart than anyone else.

“I don’t give a damn how they see it. If things crumble with my father because of this, then we’ll pick up and start somewhere else.”

“So you’re seriously considering giving us a try?”

“You and me?” He glanced over at her, his gaze kind and thoughtful.

“Yes. Us.”

“I’m not giving it consideration, no. I’m telling you that I’m a challenge and that it’s not going to be easy to push past the fortress I’ve set up, but I’m your number one fan, baby. If you want to persevere with me, then I’m willing to do more than try.” He shrugged and turned his attention back to the road.

Bethany watched him as sleep tugged hard on her resolve to stay awake. “I’m sleepy.”

“I like you sleepy. It transforms you from beautiful to ridiculously cute. Makes me almost feel bad for wanting to lick every inch of you.” He glanced over and smiled.

“Don’t feel bad; just do it.”

“What? Lick you to death?”

“Please?” She whispered her response before her eyelids fluttered, the world going dark in the comfort of Damon’s fancy car.

CHAPTER 35



BETHANY

“Bethany, wake up.” Damon’s voice pulled her from her nap, her eyes opening as she gulped for air. “Hey ... it’s okay. We’re here.”

She sat forward, brushing her fingers through her hair and trying to make sense of the scene. Several cop cars sat around the parking lot. People milled about everywhere.

“Oh my God. You don’t think something has happened to Jake, do you?” She pointed to a spot nearest the action, not really wanting an answer from Damon. “Park over there.”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but don’t rush into it, please. I don’t want anyone manhandling you. I’m possessive if you haven’t noticed, and I’ve had very little sleep. This wouldn’t be good for anyone if a cop thought to overstep his boundaries.”

She didn’t pay him any attention but reached for her phone that sat silent between the two of them.

“How can I have a zillion text messages from Jake and now nothing? He and Krista both know that I’m worried.” Her voice was pinched as fear worked to consume her.

Damon parked the car and got out, moving to her side. Opening the door, she reached for his hand, and he helped her out. He wrapped an arm around her waist as they walked toward the commotion. There had to be at least four hundred or more students loitering around Jake’s apartment, the complex one of the largest on campus.

“What are the odds that this is all related to Jake? I mean it could easily have been someone else. People overdose on drugs and shit all the time,” she mumbled to herself.

“Excuse me, guys. You can’t go any farther than this.” A cop stepped toward them, holding up his hand and speaking loudly as if they weren’t right in front of him.

“What’s going on? My girlfriend has a good friend of hers that lives in this building.”

Damon’s reference to her being his girlfriend wasn’t lost on her, but she tucked it away for a celebration later when it was more appropriate. She looked around to see if she could spot anyone she knew. Someone had to know what was going on, and it wasn’t like the cop was going to give them any information.

“I’m not at liberty to discuss it.” He glanced at Bethany as she turned back to pull Damon away. “Just text your buddy. I’m sure he or she’s fine.”

“Yeah, thanks.” She rolled her eyes, unable to help the wave of sarcasm that rushed from her lips.

Damon slipped his hand into hers as they walked along the edge of the police tape. He stopped quickly, releasing her hand and moving forward as she looked up from her phone.

“Kendal. What the hell are you up to, man?” Damon’s voice was filled with warmth. The two men hugged and patted each other on the back, the scene before Bethany a little shocking.

“Man ... this fucking life won’t give me a break.” Kendal turned his back to her and pointed to the building. “I’m the campus adviser for these boys, and damn if they aren’t always getting into trouble.”

“Yeah. We need to know what’s going on, but first.” Damon pulled at Kendal’s arm to force him to turn. “This is my girlfriend, Bethany. I hear you’ve already met.”

Kendal turned, his face showing plainly the shock he was in. He extended his hand as a smile lifted his lips. “This is the

best-looking guy in Dallas? Quite the plot twist if I say so myself.”

Bethany let out a forced laugh as Damon put a tight arm around her shoulders. “I guess you could say so, Dr. Tarrington.”

“Please, Kendal outside of class.” He glanced at Damon. “This girl is half your age, you dirty old bastard. What are you thinking?”

“She keeps me on my toes, and she’s only a few years younger than me.” Damon laughed before glancing down at Bethany, his smile fading. “We’ll catch up another time. She’s worried about a good friend of hers. What’s going on?”

“I honestly don’t know yet. I was told to wait here, and the minute they finished swabbing the place I would be brought forward to answer questions.”

“Who was hurt? Was it an overdose or what?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll be the one to call the boy’s parents. I know the police were called about an hour ago, so whatever happened most likely just happened.”

“Is someone dead?”

“No. They would have mentioned that. I know one of our students has been taken to the hospital via the ambulance, but who or why ... no clue.” Kendal shrugged and ran his fingers through his brown hair as he looked back toward the complex.

“I’m almost surprised you’re teaching still.” Damon reached out and squeezed the other man’s shoulder, Bethany a little shocked by the warmth between them. When Damon had referred to Kendal as a good friend, she thought he was using the term loosely.

“Yeah, well, I love it. Can’t let a couple of scandals rip your dreams from you.” Kendal shrugged and kept his gaze on Damon.

“They ever prove your innocence?”

“Yeah. The girls finally relented, but you know how that goes. They watch me like a fucking hawk now. I had to give

Bethany here the same speech I give everyone. I would never date a student, and yet ...” He shrugged and let out a long sigh.

She wanted to ask questions, but it wasn't her business, and honestly, it would just leave things too familiar between them. She liked knowing that she would be working for someone on campus that respected Damon, but being friends with him herself didn't seem like a good idea. They needed to keep things very professional to make sure no one in administration questioned him where she was concerned. She would never want that.

“Fuck them. I'd be shocked if there was ever a girl that could melt your resolve where the rules are concerned.” Damon scowled.

“I've not found one yet, that's for sure.”

A cop walked toward them, and Kendal moved forward.

“Which of you is Dr. Tarrington?”

“That would be me.” Kendal raised his hand as the cop motioned him forward. “If you could come with us. We've got a few questions for you and needed to fill you in on what to tell the boy's parents.”

“Good guy,” Damon spoke, his eyes moving along the crowd. He turned and pulled Bethany into a warm hug, kissing the top of her head. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just too much lately. I pray nothing happened to Jake. I should have turned my phone up louder or something. If anything happened to him ...”

“I doubt it's him, Beth. Let's just wait until we find out before we move into full-blown panic.” He kissed her hair as she looked around the crowd.

“I just wish I could find someone I know that we could talk to. Someone that could give us information quickly. Like now.” She pulled from Damon's hold, her stomach in knots. Surely if it wasn't Jake, he would either be walking around or would have responded to seeing the missed calls from her on his phone.



The sun was barely breaking over the edge of the sky when Kendal walked back with the cop, stopping in front of Bethany.

“Hey. They have Jake’s phone, and they’re saying that for some reason, he was texting you before the accident.”

“Oh shit.” She clasped her hand over her mouth, her knees going weak at the fact that it *was* Jake. “What happened? Is he okay? Shit. I knew something was wrong.”

Damon moved in, offering his arms to keep her standing. Bethany choked on a sob as tears began rolling down her face. She tried to rein them in, not wanting to appear weak or become useless to them in any way.

“Yeah, they aren’t letting us talk about it, but I will tell you that he’s in critical condition in the hospital. It’s looking good, but anything more than that is off limits. I need to call his parents, but the cop is going to want to question you and what your relationship is with him.”

“I got her,” Damon spoke, taking Kendal’s attention and assuring both him and the cop that they would do whatever necessary to help.

“I’ll be back in a few minutes. Don’t go anywhere, okay, kiddo?” The cop nodded, turning his attention to Damon. “Keep the phone with you too. We’re going to want to look over her text messages.”

Damon nodded as Bethany turned toward him, her lip trembling as she tried to pull herself together. “I hate it when people call me kiddo. Do I look like a kid?”

“No, baby, but he’s an old man. We’re both kids to him.” He reached out and ran his fingers down her hair. “It’s going to be okay. Let’s finish this shit, and we’ll go find where your friend is at the hospital.”

Bethany nodded as her phone buzzed in her hand, scaring her. She lifted it toward her face, the number a private one.

“I need to take this.” She moved from Damon as he let her go. The sun busted through the dense fog of early morning and warmed her skin. She let out a long breath and answered the call.

“Hello?”

“Bethany. It’s Krista.”

“Oh my God. Where the fuck have you been? Jake has been in an accident, and I have messages on my fucking phone that implicate you in whate—” Krista cut her off.

“Shut up. I need your help. I’m at the police station, and you’re my one call. I need you to call my dad and tell him I need his lawyer.”

“What? Why? What the fuck is going on?”

“Look, you’re my only friend. Just make the damned call, please?”

“Why didn’t you call him?”

“He won’t talk to me. My number is blocked from his phone.”

“What the fuck am I supposed to say?”

“Tell him to send his lawyer to the Dallas police station downtown. Tell him I’m being charged with either attempted murder or first-degree manslaughter. It depends on whether Jake pulls through or not.”

“Oh my God. Did you... Did you...”

Damon’s arms wrapped around her from behind as the earth shifted beneath her. Was this shit for real? Krista tried to kill Jake? Why? No way this was happening.

“I’m on a tapped line. Just call my father.”

The phone went dead, and Bethany turned, her senses dulled, her body numbed to all external factors. She glanced up at Damon, his mouth moving, but she couldn’t make out a word he said.

Was love so powerful that when denied it could rear its ugly head and leave violence as its only outlet?

What kind of person was capable of that type of malevolence?

The kind of person that loves for the very first time and loses that light; the darkness their last reprieve, their only option.

CHAPTER 36



BETHANY

One Week Later

“You look like you’ve had a long week.” Linda, Damon’s secretary, spoke from the open door of Bethany’s office.

“You could say that. Just wondering how the hell life got so complicated all of a sudden.” Bethany shrugged, leaning back in her large leather chair and crossing her legs.

It had been a week since the night in front of Jake’s apartment complex. Krista’s lawyers hadn’t been able to get her bail posted due to the knife Jake was stabbed with being found without much effort. Her fingerprints were all over it, and she wasn’t even trying to deny her guilt. But she wasn’t confessing either.

Bethany had gone to both the police station and the hospital several times over the last week. Damon had been beside her for most of it. Matt had taken a turn, taking her to the hospital, but Jake had yet to wake up from the medically induced coma. The doctors said he would make a full recovery, but it would take some time to get back to being himself.

“Well, I have some good news, or at least I think it’s pretty cool.” Linda leaned against the frame of the door, her long blonde hair in a high bun. She had twenty years on Bethany, but she was beautiful, in a professional way.

“I could use something to brighten the day.”

“Damon got your new office together. I just kicked the contractor out because it’s all done.” She smiled and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I think it’s going to look weird having an intern on the executive floor.” Bethany shook her head and stood. “But ... I’m excited.”

“You’re only an intern until you get out of school, I’m sure. You could push that and be an associate without much effort. Kent is soon to be your father.”

“Yeah ...” Bethany sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and slipped down into her thoughts as she stared at the multitude of papers on her desk. No one was going to accept her and Damon being together. They had kept it completely on the down low because she wanted him to. Why it didn’t seem to upset him was beyond her. Was it enough that he was good with it?

“Okay, well ... When you’re ready come on up with your personal effects. I’ve scheduled the guys to come by later this afternoon when you’re on campus and move everything else. If you want things done in a certain way, make sure you leave instructions on your chair for them.”

“I can do that. Thanks for your help.” Bethany came to and watched Linda leave. She had come to like the feisty secretary a little more than when she had first started a few weeks back.

Something about being so close to Damon during the workday seemed wrong, taboo. It was hard enough to concentrate with him stopping by several times a day, but knowing that he was just down the hall made it more difficult. Bethany groaned softly before collecting her purse and packing up her laptop.

“Might as well get this over with ...”



“Bethany, come this way. Your timing couldn’t be better.” Kent walked toward her as she exited the elevator on the

executive floor.

“Hi, Kent. Can I drop this stuff off in the new office first?”

“You bet. We’ll swing by there, and then I’ll introduce you to Erica.”

“Erica?”

“Yes. She’s the chief advertising officer for the firm.” Kent stopped outside the door of the new office and moved back a little as Bethany walked in. The room was large like Damon’s, the desk sitting on the far end with a small table and several chairs around it in the center of the room. The windows were floor to ceiling, the view of the clouds breathtaking.

“Advertising? I’m surprised that an accounting firm would need an advertising officer.” Bethany put her stuff in one of the chairs around the small meeting table and turned.

“Most of our clientele is obtained by word of mouth, but we have logos and ads just like everyone else. Erica does a great job of keeping us straight, but she’s a little much, if you catch my drift.”

Bethany chuckled as she nodded. Artsy types always got on her nerves, but somehow Matt was managing to change her perception little by little.

“Are you sure you want me to have this office? I’m just an intern. This feels incestuous.”

Bethany flinched at her own choice of words, the phrase slipping out before she could pull it back. The truth of the matter pressed against her again. Why couldn’t she just be comfortable with it like Damon was? They weren’t blood. It wasn’t that big of a deal.

Why the hell did it feel like it was?

“About that. Let’s go ahead and move you up to a senior associate, and I’ll take the heat from the board should we get any. Your GPA from UT is enough to support the promotion, and the fact that we have plans for you going forward will be part of our support.” He moved into the office, crossing his arms over his chest as he tilted his head. “You did tell your

professors that you were going out of town this upcoming weekend with us for the wedding, right?”

“No, but I figured I would just push hard today and tomorrow. School doesn’t officially start until next week. I’ll get all of my final preparations for them done and be on the plane Friday morning.”

“Good. Jamaica wouldn’t be right without you there. Your mother wouldn’t be happy at all.” He chuckled and nodded toward the window. “That view is so beyond heavenly as the sun rises or sets, especially when you’re here.”

“I’m thinking with the profession that I chose that seeing both might be a possibility.” Bethany smiled and moved to the window, looking out at the city.

“What might be a possibility?” Damon’s voice caught her attention, his presence sending a thrill of anticipation through her. Would he forever be able to do that? He was captivating no matter how hard she tried to deny it. She continued to look out the window as if he didn’t matter. A smile touched her lips as he spoke with his father for a few minutes. The window reflected the two men, and the likeness between father and son was obvious.

Damon’s dark gray suit fit him like a glove, the white button-down beneath his jacket only bringing out his tanned skin and dark features.

“Being here morning, noon and night.” Kent chuckled.

“Nawwww ... We’re hiring more people this year, remember? That’s our initiative. Give these brilliant young minds who work for us some family time.”

“And what about you, Son? You need some too.”

“I’m working on that. I’ll bring Beth to your office shortly. I want to talk with her about the new Kissinger tax files.” Damon turned his back to her, the jacket blocking the view of his perfect rear.

“Already making the poor girl work on taxes?” Kent laughed again as Bethany turned around and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I actually like taxes. Don’t tell anyone?” She smiled.

“Yes, you don’t either. Scary.” Kent shivered and walked out into the hall. “Make it soon. I have Erica in my office, and the sooner she meets Bethany, the sooner I can stop looking at ads.”

“Better you than me,” Damon muttered and reached out, closing the door to the office. He turned and lifted an eyebrow. “I honestly thought you might consider telling me to fuck off with this request.”

“What request?” she asked before taking a step back, her back pressed to the glass wall behind her. The fitted black skirt and pink shirt left her feeling feminine but professional.

“The request that you move up here to my floor.” He walked toward her, his movement languid, but the look in his eyes said that he was anything but relaxed.

“I do think it’s a little ridiculous. People are going to talk.” Bethany pressed her hands to the glass to keep from reaching out for him. They would forever play games with one another. It was too much of a turn-on not to.

He stopped in front of her, his eyes moving over her face as if he were studying her. “I hope they do. I plan on making sure we break your office in good. If you moan loudly enough, then the talk won’t be cheap, but well seeded.”

“You’re corrupt.” She reached out and pulled him close, losing the battle but winning the war as he pressed her against the window. His hands slid up the glass on either side of her face as he leaned down, brushing his lips against hers. His hips shifted as his body pressed in tight.

“You like it.” He dragged his nose along the curve of her jawline until he pressed a soft kiss against her ear. “You’re staying with me on this trip.”

It was so hard to breathe all of a sudden. “We’re all staying in the same hotel. Is that what you mean?”

“No, and you know it.” He groaned softly against the side of her neck, his hand getting lost in her hair before he turned and pressed his lips to hers, hard.

His tongue was so wet and thick. The press of it against hers left her panting, the sexy bastard against her turning her into nothing more than a needy whore within minutes of him walking in.

What a great day it would be to finally return the favor.

She slid her hands into his jacket, over his hips and gripped his ass. He pulled back from the kiss, his eyes glossy as he pressed his forehead to hers.

“My father’s waiting on us, but all I can think about is what color your panties are.” He nipped at her mouth as she gasped, stiffening at his sensual attack.

Bethany blinked slowly, tilting her head as he moved back a little. She licked her lips; his eyes followed her every move.

“You assume I’m wearing panties.” She smirked and ducked under his arm, unwrapping herself from him and walking toward the door. “You coming?”

“As soon as my cock stops throbbing.” He leaned against the glass, his attention seemingly on the scene before him. “Wicked bitch.”

“You would have me no other way.” Bethany opened the door and glanced over her shoulder. “I have to meet this Erica chick and then pack my old office. Did you really want to show me a tax file or were you bullshitting?”

He turned and pressed his palm to the front of his slacks. “I’ll bring the file to your office in an hour or so. Good luck with Erica. She’s a tiger. You guys should get along beautifully.”

“Is that sarcasm?” Bethany laughed.

“It very much is. Get out of here before I check your claims.”

“Is that a threat, Mr. Bryant?”

“It’s a promise, baby ... A promise I know you’ll be thinking about until I make good on it.”

She had no words. He had once again sucked the air from the room. Bethany turned and walked into the hall, working hard not to fan herself as her skin burned as if on fire.

Yes ... Being down the hall from him was going to be the death of her.

CHAPTER 37



BETHANY

Bethany paused outside of Kent's office. Her heart was racing, pumping excitement down every open vein. It had been a few days since she had found herself wrapped up in her new obsession. The situation with Krista and Jake had taken all of her extra time outside of work and school, and honestly left her emotionally spent.

Damon was getting impatient with his needs, and more than anything, she had to have a night of him reminding her of what it was to live. She let out a long breath before walking into Kent's office. Now wasn't the time to imagine all of the things Damon would do to her if she would just make a few minutes and invite him in.

"There you are." Kent stood and extended his hand toward the well-dressed woman beside him. Her hair was shoulder length and sandy blonde. The red suit she wore fit her athletic frame well, the color screaming that the woman was a creative type. Her blue eyes pinned Bethany in place as she extended her hand.

"I'm Erica Hall. I assume you're Bethany, Kent's new protégée?"

Bethany chuckled uncomfortably as she shook the other woman's hand. "Not sure about all of that, but I'm looking forward to a future here at the firm."

"Bethany, Erica is going to be spending more time down here in Dallas, so you'll be seeing her at the house from time to time as well." Kent moved toward Bethany and Erica.

“Where are you living now?” Bethany asked, clasping her hands behind her back as the other woman’s eyes moved over her in an analyzing fashion.

“I’m in Seattle. I lost my father recently, and we were in the middle of the funeral preparations when you visited. I was hoping to break away, but my mother was being uncooperative as she always is.” Erica shrugged as if the event were no big deal.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Bethany turned her attention back to Kent.

Erica was breathtaking up close. She had a classy California-girl look to her.

A jolt of fear rushed through Bethany. Had Erica and Damon been an item before?

“Thank you,” Erica said before moving back to the small table behind them. “I’m going to head down the hall for a little while, Kent. We can meet next week when you’re back from your wedding and vacation. I have some new ideas, and I know you can only handle so much creativity ... I’m thinking you’re at your max.”

“You know me too well.” Kent chuckled. “Come to the house for dinner tonight. I want to show Damon and Bethany a few of the new ads you’ve created and get their opinions.”

“I don’t want to take up any of your family time.” Erica turned and tilted her head. Bethany tried not to stare. She wanted to ask the burning question that pressed across her thoughts but refused to look like a silly child.

“I won’t take no for an answer.” Kent looked over toward Bethany. “Did you have plans tonight, or are you good with us talking over dinner?”

“I’m great with it.” Bethany forced a smile, hating the idea of having to sit between Erica and Damon at dinner. She had almost convinced herself that they had been involved on some level. How could they not?

“Is Matthew going to be there?” Erica asked, her voice softening a little.

“Did you want me to have him there?” Kent moved back as Erica walked in between them, her attention on Kent.

“Yes. I’ve not given up on convincing him to come join me. The man has talent.”

“So you say, but I’ve seen nothing other than him remaining locked in his college days. I swear that boy’s going to be the death of me.” Kent shook his head, his smile telling a different story.

“Not everyone can be Damon, boss.” Erica walked out into the hall as Bethany turned to Kent.

“Erica wants Matt to work for her or ...”

“Yeah. Matt’s always been very artistic, and a few months ago Erica had me send him up to Seattle to spend time helping her develop a new advertisement for us. She seems to be quite taken with his talent.”

“Have you seen the ad?” Bethany asked, surprise rolling over her at the new information.

“Nope. He’s tight-lipped about it. He thinks he has us all bamboozled, but we know he’s brilliant. Just because he’s not an accountant like Damon and me, he thinks he has to act like an idiot to stay under my radar. What he fails to understand is that I would never force him into a mold that he doesn’t fit into.”



Bethany walked back to her office in sensory overload. Between the heated encounter with Damon and the run-in with yet another beautiful woman that had been in his life far before her, she was spent. She walked into her office and stopped short as her chair turned.

“That took too long.” Damon smiled and nodded to her door. “Close that.”

She stood frozen in place, his voice low and commanding. Desire rolled over her in waves as she tried to remember how

to speak.

“I’m not going to ask you again, baby.” He licked his lips and stood.

Bethany turned and closed the door, moving to face him as she pressed her back to it. “There are a ton of people around here. No way we’re doing anything in this office. Let’s go to the big one upstairs if you’re feeling ...”

“Turned on by you?” he asked and stopped a few feet from her, extending his hand to her. “Did you like Erica?”

“Were you two together before us?”

Damn. She hadn’t wanted to ask and honestly didn’t want to know. She put her hands in Damon’s and yelped softly as he pulled her flush against him, her heel almost catching on the carpet. He wrapped his strong arms around her waist and looked down at her, heat filling his gaze.

“And if I said yes?”

“I don’t know. She’s far more beautiful than me.”

“I wish you could see what I see.” He kissed her nose before releasing her. He turned and pushed the papers off her desk, the heaps of files flying to the floor on both sides of the cherrywood structure. “No. We weren’t together. She’s into Matt, and I’ve never found her remotely attractive. She likes art for God’s sakes.”

Bethany took a step back before forcing a laugh. “Art isn’t all bad.”

“Hush.” He moved back toward her, pulling her close and leaning down to consume her mouth. He groaned softly, his arms so tight around her that it was hard to breathe. She pulled back a little as he licked and kissed her mouth before moving down to her neck.

“We are not doing this in here.”

“Yes, we are. I told you that night at the club that you had a choice.”

“Yes, and I went home with you. Being naked and shaking on my desk at work is not on my to-do list.”

“That’s okay. It’s on mine.” He pulled back and smiled. “You’re beyond beautiful to me. Don’t forget that.”

She pressed up on her toes, capturing his lips again, needing his words to be made manifest. So many changes as of late had left her barren and questioning everything. He pulled back and slipped out of his jacket before walking to the door and locking it.

“No moaning loudly. I don’t want to have to reprimand you in front of our CEO for schlepping it up in your office with some poor unsuspecting male.” He laughed as her mouth dropped open. “What? It could happen.”

She pressed her rear against the desk and lifted an eyebrow. “Oh? You’re good with me schlepping it up with some other guy?”

“Fuck no,” he growled and moved toward her, wrapping his hands around her waist and lifting her to sit on the desk. He glanced down as his fingers pressed into the flesh of her lower thigh before dragging her skirt up as he pushed. “I’m the unsuspecting male.”

“No one will believe that.” Bethany reached up and ran her fingers through his hair before pulling him down for another kiss. Hunger pulsed through her as the smell of his skin and cologne filled her senses. “God, you smell good.”

He licked at her mouth before lowering her back on the desk. He ran his hand over her breast, squeezing softly and tugging her down toward him. “I want these fucking clothes off of you, and yet there’s something so desperate about fucking you while you’re still dressed, like I can’t bother with taking the time to strip you bare.”

“Stop talking, and take me. I need you inside of me,” she whispered.

He made her bold, his confidence becoming hers quickly. He would fill any need she had, and it was damned time she started taking advantage of that.

“Yeah ... Lift your ass.”

She did, and he pushed her skirt the rest of the way up as he let out a sound of appreciation as the skirt ripped down the side. “You should be punished for lying.”

Bethany laughed and reached up, pulling on his tie hard as he bent over her. “I couldn’t agree more.”

Damon’s gaze locked onto hers as he freed himself from his slacks, the sound of the material hitting the ground sending a rush through her. He buried his face into the soft skin between her breasts, his tongue lapping at her as his fingers pushed the panties aside.

“So wet, Beth. You need this?”

“I’ve been thinking about you all morning. I’ll always need you.” She groaned and wrapped her legs around him, pulling herself down the desk farther as he nipped at her chin and stood.

“Good girl.” He pulled hard on her hips, filling her with his large cock. She arched and groaned, bucking once against him. “If you make another loud noise, I’m going to be forced to put something over that pretty mouth of yours. I don’t wanna do that, but something tells me you might like it if I did.”

He rolled his hips as she closed her eyes, the sound of his voice and the weight of his threats pulling her to the edge of ecstasy so fast. He held on tightly to her, his body working in deep rhythms as he panted softly.

Beth glanced up at him, the look on his handsome face throwing her over the edge. She arched hard again, a deep moan ripping from her. Damon pressed himself to the top of her, his palm covering her mouth as he picked up his pace.

“Your naughty little moans are going to get us caught, pussycat.” He rocked into her faster, the friction delicious, the sound of their fucking overwhelming her. She moaned against his fingers before licking and sucking on them. His eyes rolled back as he groaned. She bit his fingers hard, and he groaned loudly as he moved his hand from her mouth.

“Hush before you get us caught.” She leaned up and kissed him hard, her feet pressing to the edge of the desk as she lifted her hips and tugged hard on his sex with her body.

“Oh fuck. I’m gonna come if you keep that shit up.”

She jerked harder as he growled and stood back up. His fingers slipped between them, his thumb pressing tightly against her clit.

“Work yourself against me. I want to hear you once more.”

“I thought you ... said to ... to hush,” she panted softly before coming again.

“Mmmm, I changed my mind. Those little needy sounds pouring from you drive me mad, Beth.” He moved back and pulled her legs up, closing them and lifting them in front of her before pressing back inside of her as she whimpered. He kissed her legs and licked at her ankle as he worked his hips. A moment later his eyes closed, the last inch of him being forced inside of her as the world dissolved into an inferno of lust.

“More,” she moaned and gripped the desk to press against his assault.

“Take it then. It’s yours. Own it, baby.” He jerked his hips, the sweet slap of him against her, mixed with his words, left her in mindless shivers.

He was hers, and owning him sounded too good to be true.

CHAPTER 38



BETHANY

The sun pressed against her exposed shoulders as she walked to class. The world somehow righted because of Damon's hands having been all over her. How the man made her feel so good in so many ways was still mind-blowing. She'd left holding her skirt as he walked closely beside her. The rip wasn't horrible but enough to where she was more than mortified by the idea of walking out with it. They were both laughing by the time they reached her car.

He had leaned over as she rolled the window down, the look in his eyes leaving her breathless. He was going to tell her. He had almost said it. It was on the tip of his tongue surely. She shouldn't have saved him from the heaviness of the moment, but the truth was she loved him. He would express himself when he was ready. She was more than sure of his feelings for her.

Bethany reached up to ensure her sleeveless white top was positioned properly. The last thing she would want is for Kendal to think she was trying to dress seductively. Her black slacks worked well with the shirt, giving her a business casual appeal while still allowing her to be comfortable. She walked into the business building and removed her sunglasses, blinking a few times to let her eyes adjust. A warmth pressed between her legs, the soreness of Damon taking his pleasure at such a deep angle resonating with her.

So fucking hot.

She walked into the large auditorium as Kendal looked up from the podium at the front. He pulled his glasses off and

looked around as if confused. “Is it Thursday? I’ve thought it was Wednesday all day. Weren’t you just here yesterday?”

Bethany laughed and dropped her purse and notepad in one of the chairs in the front row before sitting down in another one. “I need to work today and tomorrow if you’re okay with that. I’ll be out of town until mid-next week because of my parents getting married.”

“Your *parents* are getting married?” He lifted his eyebrow, the smirk on the side of his mouth endearing.

“My mom is marrying Damon’s dad.”

“Wow. That’s a plot twist.” Kendal laughed and moved around the podium before hopping off the stage. His corduroy pants fit him well, and he was one of the only men she had ever seen pull them off well.

“Right? That’s part of the struggle I guess.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

“Not really. I’m not sure what to say other than the fact that it depresses the hell out of me.” She shrugged and looked up at him as he stopped a comfortable distance from her, leaning back against the stage.

“I understand that, but it’s not like you’re blood-related, Bethany.” He shrugged as if it wasn’t that big of a deal.

“It’s no different than you falling for one of your students, but you’re hell bent on not letting that happen.” She tilted her head, letting her lip lift as he shook his head in denial.

“Not even close. I’m bound by my agreement with the university, and I’m in my thirties. I’m not interested in a college-aged tart.” He blushed as he held up his hands. “Not that you’re a college-aged ...”

She cut him off with a loud laugh that felt good. “I get it, but most of the students here are far old enough for a relationship, Dr. Tarrington.”

“It’s different, and this is *your* counseling session, not mine.”

“It is, you’re right. Mine is way worse. It will look like incest.” She stood up and stretched. “Enough of this ... Besides, you don’t even come close to having the degree to counsel anyone.”

“True ... Sort of. You got tax problems?” He smiled, and she couldn’t help but chuckle. If Damon hadn’t swept her into a world where only he existed, she would be in line with the other thousand girls to try and snag Kendal. He seemed too good to be true, but Damon did too.

“No, but I’ll know where to come if I do.” She pointed toward the large white board, his scribbles everywhere. “You want me to work up some lecture notes for your classes starting next week?”

“Yep. Just like yesterday. Let’s look at the syllabus as well.”

“Will do.”

She walked around the stage and jogged up the stairs as he hoisted himself back up with ease.

“Impressive. Ever been in a rock band?” She teased.

“Yep. I’m a guitar player through and through.” He wagged his eyebrows playfully.

“Wow. As if you weren’t attractive enough. Yeah, don’t go around bragging about that.”

“No shit, right?” He shrugged and pulled out a few papers from the lectern, handing them to Bethany. “Hey, any news on your friend?”

“Jake?”

“Yes. I haven’t heard anything since talking to his parents last week.”

“He’s still not woken up, but I’m going to visit today. I’ll let you know if anything changes.”

“Man, I thought my college days were hard with all the crazy girls that just acted bizarre.”

“What’s the worst thing that happened?”

“Um, no. When you’re not my TA, we’ll talk.”

“How about me, you and Damon over beers? Story time?”

“Corona?”

“You bet.”

“Sign me up.” He laughed and pointed to something on the page, extending it toward her. “I’ll be starting here, but it jumps around a bit. Just do what you can.”

“No problem.” She took it and walked back down to one of the small desks.

“Did they convict the girl who stabbed Jake?”

“Not yet, but there’s too much evidence to believe it might have been anyone else.” Bethany let out a long sigh, her heart heavy. “Krista was my roommate for the last four years. Her mother said that she has bipolar disorder, but it’s never been this bad. I know it’s silly, but I can’t help but think that falling in love with Jake and being rejected is what pushed her over.”

“Could be a possibility. Most people with the illness take medication.”

“I’m sure she does too, but love has a way of rooting itself in deeply and jacking you up.” Bethany shook her head, still in a bit of shock over having the situation happen. “Just scary.”

“I think it’s a predisposition too, though, Beth. Can I call you Beth?”

“Bethany please.” She tapped her pencil on the desk in front of her. Only Damon called her Beth, and she wanted to keep it that way. Made it somehow more special. “So because she had been hurt before, you think it opened her up to being violent about it?”

“I think that someone who’s wanted love for a long time, and finally gets it, feels a sense of ownership over it. Sometimes to the point of it being unhealthy. It becomes more like an obsession.”

“And when that love is denied or taken away, they snap?” Bethany sucked her bottom lip into her mouth, her thoughts

sliding from Krista to Damon. How long had he been opposed to loving someone?

“Sometimes, but I think it depends on the person.” Kendal moved to the edge of the stage again, squatting. “Take Damon for instance. He’s had plenty of shallow relationships, but he’s never, in all our years together, introduced me to anyone he called his girlfriend.”

“But what if something happened and he lost me? Would you think he would be violent?”

“Are you worried?” Kendal tilted his head to the side a little, his gaze inquisitive.

“No. I love him too much to think about a future without him. I don’t think it’s the situation with us, but I can’t help but wonder.”

“That’s natural. He loves you too. I can tell. Has he told you yet?”

“That’s none of your business.”

“I fell in love with a sophomore student of mine about six years ago, and nothing happened, but my life fell apart because of it. Her parents sued the school and me for inappropriate behavior. That’s why I give my speech. I’m not interested in fucking up my life again. Love can kiss my ass for what it’s worth.”

Bethany sat in silence as if she’d been slapped. Never in a million years had she expected Kendal to share his story. She, of course, wanted to know more, but there was no way she was pushing him. They were destined to have a friendship whether she felt like it was a good idea or not. From what she could tell, he was loyal to Damon, and she knew she was, so maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea.

“Damn.” She glanced down at the papers in front of her as the image of Damon’s expression when she mentioned loving him rolled across her vision. “I told him that I loved him, and he looked like he had seen a ghost.”

“He’s got a lot of demons in his past. Give him time, Bethany. He’s a really good man, but he’ll force you to push

past a load of bullshit before you get to see that guy.”

“I know. Defense mechanism, right?”

“Yep. We all have them, and for a good reason.”

“He’s letting me in slowly; I just have to stick to the course.”

“You’ll be glad you did.”



She headed to the hospital after wrapping up her job assignments with Kendal. Damon texted that he would meet her there, but she told him to hold off. She needed time alone with Jake. Hopefully, Damon would understand that, but maybe not. The fact that Jake had been texting her, begging for help the night of the accident, left her raw and scarred.

She should have been there for him, and yet she was getting laid on a couch, only concerned with her drive toward lusting Damon into loving her.

“Let it go. Fuck,” Bethany grumbled under her breath as she walked down the stark-white hospital corridor. Jake’s room was on the left at the end of the hall, his name on the door making things easier. The loud beeping of machines could be heard as she approached, and she paused outside the door with her hand on it, letting out a long breath before walking in.

Jake was sitting up in the bed, his skin pasty and pale, but he was alive.

“Oh my God.” She rushed toward the bed as a nurse held up her hand.

“No touching him. He’s not healed up just yet, and I’m not putting him through another thing. Boy’s been through enough!”

Bethany stilled near the edge of the bed and reached out, taking his hand as tears filled her eyes. “I’m so sorry. Please forgive me ...”

His voice was weak, his smile barely lifting his mouth. “It’s not your fault, Bethany. I’m just glad I was able to fight her off some.”

“I’m still in shock that any of this happened.”

“Me too.” Jake squeezed her hand before laying back and closing his eyes. “This new guy... Is he good for you? He’s a solid dude?”

“Yes. He’s a good man. He’s got some hang-ups, but nothing any worse than one of us.”

Jake opened his eyes and tilted his head, the worry in his gaze so familiar it pushed her to move closer as her tears spilled onto her cheeks.

“Be careful. I know we can’t base everything on this situation with Krista, and I don’t want us to, but be careful. It’s hard to know someone if they don’t want you to, or at least parts of them.”

She reached out and brushed his blond hair from his eyes. “Don’t worry about me. Just rest. Damon has been here with me to visit you every day for the last week. I will be careful, but I’m learning more and more about him every day.”

“And you love him?”

“Very much so.”

“Does he love you?” Jake winced as the nurse poked at him under the covers from the opposite side of the bed.

“I think so. He’s scared to say it though.”

“But he shows it? Words mean nothing without the backing of action and affirmation.”

“He does.”

“Good. Tell him if he hurts you that I’ll kick his ass.”

Bethany laughed, not having the heart to tell Jake that there was no way he would take Damon in a fight. Her best friend was too beat up, too broken and scarred to do anything but lift him up.

“I will tell him, and I wouldn’t put it past you.” She leaned over and kissed his forehead as he slipped into sleep, his breathing deep and peaceful.

CHAPTER 39



BETHANY

Bethany got home around four and decided on a quick nap before everyone was scheduled to arrive for dinner. She wasn't much in the mood for company after seeing Jake bruised and laid up in the hospital, but they had advertisements to review and final plans for the wedding trip to make. Lying in the comfort of her bed, she finally gave herself over to the need for rest and slipped into the welcoming arms of darkness.



“Beth, baby ...” Damon’s voice pulled at her. She tried to sit up, but he tightened his arms around her, the handsome thing lying behind her in the bed and spooning her. He pressed a kiss to the side of her neck and brushed his hand down her outer thigh. “You awake?”

“Yeah. I didn’t mean to fall asleep, or maybe I did. What time is it?” She curled up farther and snuggled back against him.

“It’s almost seven.”

“Seven? Shit.” She pulled from him and slid off the side of the bed. “I need to get ready. I was hoping to take a shower.”

“There is no reason to hurry, baby. Just get ready and come out when you can. We’re just putting out snacks to hold us over until dinner is ready.”

Bethany pulled her shirt over her head quickly and slipped out of her slacks, walking toward her closet as she spoke over her shoulder. “Is everyone already here?”

Damon moved into the closet behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and leaning down to kiss her shoulder. “Yeah, but they can wait.”

She swatted at him playfully. “You had me earlier today. Don’t make us late and have this Erica chick thinking I have no respect for other people’s time.”

“She’s not going to think that. She’s a bitch at the office, but when you get her alone, she’s just like the rest of us.”

“Get her alone?” Bethany turned and slid her arms around his waist as her lip turned up in a smirk. “Have you had her alone a lot?”

“That you’re jealous is *almost* cute.” He leaned down and brushed his lips past hers as he ran his hands down her back to cup her butt. “I want more of you. Let’s fuck first and then join them later.”

She laughed and pushed him back softly. “Love how you avoided the getting Erica alone question.”

He popped her butt and walked out of the closet, messing with himself from what she could tell. It was nice to know that she could turn him on without even trying.

“There is nothing to talk about. She’s nothing but a business partner to me. She has a thing for Matt, which I think I mentioned.”

“A thing?” Bethany called out as she tugged a cream-colored blouse from a hanger and pulled it over her head. She slipped into a nicer pair of jeans and left her feet bare. Her mother must have been shopping on Kent’s dime by the look of a few new things hanging in her closet.

“Yeah. She’s a creative-type person, remember? Matthew is too. I think she would move in quickly if he even remotely showed interest in her.”

“He’s not interested?”

“Nope. He’s scared to death of her.”

“Why?” Bethany walked out as Damon bit his lip and shook his head.

“Not sure. Ask him.” He moved toward her and wrapped his arms back around her. “Fuck woman, you turn me on no matter what you’re wearing.”

“That’s because you know what’s beneath my clothes and that it all belongs to you.”

“Damn straight.” He slid his hand into her hair, his fingers pressing gently to the base of her head as he tilted her face toward him. “I’m looking forward to this trip. It’s been a long time since I’ve wanted to go somewhere. It’s lonely going without someone to share it with.”

“I find it hard to believe someone as gorgeous as you would have to do anything alone.”

“It’s not about looks, Beth. It’s about trusting someone enough to let them into your world.”

“Are you letting me in?”

“I’m not sure I have any other option *but* to.”

She lifted up and pressed her lips to his, tilting her head to the side and opening her mouth as his tongue slid against hers. She groaned and tightened her arms around him as she sucked at his offering, something deep inside of her waking up. She wanted to drop to her knees in front of him, to feel his hands tighten in her hair, to taste his pleasure on her tongue. She broke the kiss, breathing a little harder thanks to the depravity of her thoughts.

His eyes sparkled with desire. It took her breath away.

“What are you thinking, you bad girl?”

“I was thinking how badly I want to lick your balls, suck your cock ... press my face against the most intimate parts of you and let the scent that belongs only to you etch across my senses.” She leaned up and kissed him softly as he stared deadpan at her. “Just a desire that keeps haunting me.”

“We should explore this.” He reached for her as she turned and ran to the door. A soft yelp left her as he charged after her. “Beth ... Now. Now!”



Bethany slowed just before walking into the kitchen, heat burning her cheeks from her forward response. A smile lifted her lips, leaving her feeling fulfilled, happy. Her mother turned as she stood with Erica, Matt, and Kent.

“There you are. We were starting to worry.” Her mother smiled.

Matt walked toward her and pulled her into a big bear hug as Damon rounded the corner and moved to open a bottle of wine. “There’s Sleeping Beauty. Damon and Dad working you too hard at the office?”

“They *are* slave drivers.” Bethany laughed and walked toward the large platter of crudité. She picked up a carrot and dipped it in the creamy ranch sauce as Erica responded.

“Man, I remember when I started working for these two years ago. I took more naps than I care to remember.” She smiled, and Bethany returned the gesture. “I would honestly go home feeling like my brain was bruised.”

“That’s because you’re creative, and they aren’t. Like trying to teach calculus to Michelangelo.” Matt joined in and moved to take the bottle of wine from Damon. “Give me that. Check on the steaks.”

“Are you guys cooking tonight?” Bethany asked, looking at Damon.

“We are. Be very scared. Dad gave everyone the night off. He does that from time to time. It’s healthy for them and us.” Damon nodded toward Kent, who had remained quiet until then.

“Yeah ... That’s great. Let’s talk about the trip. The planner in me is crawling up the walls. I know we have the hotels and airlines booked, but are you guys wanting to have

the ceremony at night on the beach or during the day in the hotel or what?”

“Let’s get the platter and wine and go out on the porch and talk. I’ll turn on the fans and bring the booze. You guys get the food.” Damon nodded toward them, winking at Bethany.

She grabbed the veggie tray and followed behind him, her eyes moving across his back and rear. The dark blue shirt he wore looked good on him, and his slacks hugged the beautiful swell of his ass. He was beyond gorgeous. Why he would waste his time with someone like her was still a mystery. His response in the bedroom about wanting to trust someone left her lost in thought. He was letting her in, of that she was sure. He didn’t have a choice from what he had said. Did that mean that he loved her too? Had to. Then why not tell her?

“I called the hotel last week, and the ceremony is on Saturday afternoon at five or so. It’s when the sun is setting, so they will set everything up and have us in the hotel about an hour before sunset. As it begins, they’ll usher us out there,” Matt spoke up, moving back to hold the door for everyone.

“You’re so good, Matt,” Erica responded as she moved just behind Bethany.

“I try.” Matt walked toward Bethany and reached for the tray as everyone started to set up the table, his cheeks colored pink. “Give me that, Sis.”

“She’s cute,” Bethany whispered and motioned toward Erica.

“She’s scary as fuck.” He laughed, his voice nothing more than a whisper as well.

“You and I are talking more about this in Jamaica.”

“Yeah, well, Dad invited her to come with us.”

Bethany turned toward everyone, a little surprised by Matt’s words. “Who all is going with us to Jamaica?”

“All of us here.” Kent smiled and pulled Bethany’s mother in for a side hug, leaning down and kissing the top of her hair.

“Oh, nice. Erica, you’re coming with us? I wasn’t sure Dad could convince you.” Damon moved toward Bethany, stopping just beside her.

“It was Matt who convinced me. You know, I’ve been after him to come and join me at the firm. We thought this would be a good time to go over his portfolio and for me to liquor him up enough to get him to say yes.” Erica smiled, shifting her eyes toward Matt. Bethany glanced at her almost stepbrother as he shrugged bashfully.

“I’ll watch the steaks.” He walked toward the grill as everyone chuckled. Matt was so different from Kent and Damon, and yet was every bit as handsome and attention grabbing. Bethany looked forward to getting him alone on the trip to find out more about the situation between him and Erica. The beginning of something was there, but what she didn’t know.

“Well, before we get further into the night ... I have an announcement to make.” Damon spoke up, and everyone turned toward him. Butterflies began to move in Bethany’s stomach at the authority in his voice. He glanced at her and winked, confusing her a bit, but she was too intrigued by him to be concerned with it.

“I know this might not go over well, but I don’t care. You guys know me, and the one thing I hate is secrets or lies.” He paused, and everyone’s expression softened. Bethany let her eyes move around the crowd as she crossed her arms over her chest.

What was he doing?

Damon moved toward Bethany, pulling her into a side hug and smiling down at her before looking toward his father and her mother. “I know the two of you have found something special in each other, and I’m thrilled. My father deserves a good woman, and I have no doubt that he’s found the best one for him. We will be a family at the end of this weekend, but I need to be very transparent with both of you, and with you, Matt. Bethany and I have been seeing each other for the last little while, and I’m in love with her. I haven’t ever been in

love before, and I know this is a bit of an off situation, but I'm asking you, as my family, to accept it. If you're not willing to, then count me out of whatever the future holds."

Damon looked down at Bethany as she choked on both fear and pride that he would step up in front of their family and claim her as his. "I'm not willing to choose a future that she's not my better half in."

He turned back to look at his father. "Do you understand?"

CHAPTER 40



BETHANY

“We already knew,” Bethany’s mom responded softly. “We fully support what’s happening between the two of you and have seen changes in each of you that leave us breathless. We can’t speak for Matt, but we knew this moment was coming.”

Bethany tucked herself into Damon’s side, some part of her wanting to disappear as tears began to streak down her face.

“I love you both, and you know that. I figured something was up the night you treated me like the fucking pool boy and sent me to fetch shit left and right so you could make out while I was gone.” Matt laughed loudly, everyone else joining in but Bethany.

“Are you sure you’re not disappointed?” Bethany spoke up, her voice broken with emotion.

“No, baby. I couldn’t be more proud of the woman you’re becoming. Damon is family by marriage, and the way you two look at each other thrills me as your mom.”

Bethany moved away from Damon and walked to her mom, slipping into the warmth of her hug and letting herself cry a little. Kent patted her back and pulled her into a warm hug too.

“We are going to have to change your title from intern though. The uprising has begun at work thanks to the lovely upgrade you got.” Kent laughed, and Bethany joined him.

“There has been an uprising since day one. Damon has every female in that place in fits, especially the interns.” Bethany moved back to Damon’s side, slipping back into his arms as Erica spoke up.

“Yeah, but it doesn’t matter who wants his attention. It’s you who has it.”

“You’re the only woman that has it, now and forever.” He kissed the tip of her nose and looked back toward the crowd. “Okay ... Let’s plan this trip out and get to looking at ads. I love all this sharing shit, but making money and drinking mai tais is a close second.”



“Did you mean what you said tonight?” Bethany moved through the water to stand in front of Damon, her fingers sliding across the silky skin of his chest. His eyes captivated her, the hunger and need, the lust and desire burning her.

“Come here.” He reached out and pulled her flush against him. “I know you’ve been through a lot lately, and I’m proud of you. At your age, I would have put my hand through a wall and given up on everything.”

“No, you wouldn’t have.” Bethany smiled, but the expression faded as Damon pinned her with truth.

“I have a lot of healing to do because of what happened with my mother. I’ll share all of it with you on the trip, when we’re away from all these familiar things.” He glanced back at the house. The strong muscles of his chest and neck flexed, the reminder of his strength sending tendrils of pleasure through the center of her. “I grew up in this house. I found her cheating on Dad here.”

“I know, baby.” Bethany reached up and touched his cheek, turning him back toward her. “We can talk about it when you’re ready. I’m here no matter how long it takes you to heal.”

He took her hand in his, turning to kiss her palm sensually. “I know you are. I can feel it for the first time in my life. Scares the shit out of me, but I’m ready.”

She moved closer, lifting her legs and wrapping them around his waist. “We’ll take it slow.”

“No ... Let’s dive in deep. It’s not our style to tiptoe into anything. Let’s lay ourselves bare and trust without reservation. Jump off that cliff with me, and let’s work together to hold each other above the waves as they come. I’ll support you in anything you want to do, just don’t ever lie to me. If you get tired of me or need something emotionally or sexually that I’m not giving you ... You come to me. I’m your man, and I want to know what you need. Promise me that you’ll talk to me if something comes up.”

“Nothing is going to come up. You leave me feeling like my soul is on fire and my panties are a torrential waste.” She laughed and pulled up, brushing her lips across his.

“That’s today, baby. I’m asking for forever. Ten years from now you might not feel that way. I want you to promise me here, tonight, that you’ll speak up. I don’t want to invest my whole heart and be left broken years from now.” He touched the side of her face softly, the man staring at her revealing a new layer to her.

“I promise you that I will always be straightforward and honest. If something comes up or I’m feeling lonely, angry, upset ... Whatever, I’ll talk to you. I want us to work. I know that without a doubt. I need you in my life, Damon.” She rolled her hips, the thick press of his erection sparking to life just how much she needed him. “I want you inside of me.”

“I need to be inside of you, baby.” He pressed his lips to the side of her neck, his teeth digging in slightly as she groaned. Everyone had left or gone to bed, and it was just the two of them. The moonlight cast a blue shadow across the pool, making everything feel so much more dramatic.

Damon tugged at her bottoms, forcing Bethany to move back a little until he pulled them off. He worked his shorts over his hips, letting them float to the surface behind him as he

pulled her against him again. His fingers gripped tightly onto her ass, and he tugged her down, his body filling hers with a few hard thrusts.

“Oh God,” she groaned, her lips finding his as he pressed himself deeper inside of her warmth. He kissed and licked at her mouth as he rolled his hips, his rhythm slow and deep. She dug her fingers into the strong muscles of his back and lifted up to foster the delicious friction he worked into her. He broke the kiss and pulled her hair back a little with one hand as he forced her to look up at him.

“I need you too. I want you more than I imagined possible. Tell me you’ll be mine, Beth. Tell me forever sounds good to you, baby.” He drove back into her, tightening his hand in her hair. The pleasure-pain forced her near the edge of exploding as she panted softly.

“Forever. Anything less isn’t enough.”

“Forever isn’t enough for me.” He licked her throat, sucking softly on the curve of her chin as he slid his hand from cupping her ass to press against the tightness of her opening. “I want to taste you and touch you everywhere. I want to take you to new heights mentally, emotionally, physically. I don’t want there to be a place on you that isn’t branded by me.”

“Yes ... Fuck yes, I need that, Damon.” She pressed back, letting his finger slip into her as he began to fuck her faster. She screamed as the orgasm rolled through her, arching her back and taking in every sweet sensation he caused to pulse through her.

“That’s it, baby girl. Ride all of it. Fuck yourself against me. Anything you want, Beth. All yours, baby.” He worked her fast and hard, his own orgasm lifting a loud, sexy sound off his lips as he pumped into her a few more times.

“God, you’re so good ... So fucking sexy.” Bethany reached up and touched his face as he slid his finger out of her, but kept her locked around his waist, still buried deep inside of her.

“You haven’t seen anything yet.” He winked and chuckled.

“Keeping the goods hidden?”

“Yep. Making sure you were the one.” He leaned in and brushed his lips across hers, nipping at her mouth carefully.

“I assume you’ve come to that conclusion?” She smiled and held onto the sexy man in front of her tightly.

“I love you. I’m sorry I couldn’t say it before. It scared me, and I’m not used to feeling so fucking exposed, but I won’t deny you the words that I hope my actions scream. I love you, baby.” He leaned in and kissed her with a fiery passion. She matched it, rolling her hips and bleeding into the kiss all of the worry and fear, the need and desire that he caused over the last few weeks. He pulled back. His soft panting was so far beyond hot that she moaned at the sound of it, tightening her body around his.

“You want more, sexy girl?” He wagged his eyebrows and rolled his hips, pressing deeper into her.

“Always ... I need more of you.”

“You love me?” he asked and squeezed her ass tightly before beginning his next assault.

“Forever. Jamaica is going to be fun.”

“You think so, hmm?”

“Will you be there?” She smiled and pulled him down for another kiss.

There was no need to respond. He’d be wherever she was or so she hoped.

CHAPTER 41



BETHANY

Bethany turned and looked around the tiny garage, boxes piled high on both sides of her. There was no way they were going to be able to get her mother's place fully loaded up by nightfall. Why in the hell the woman would want to was the question. She had gotten a wild hair that everything needed to be moved out of the old house and put into storage before the wedding three days away.

Letting out a long sigh, Bethany pushed her chestnut hair back, the messy bun at the back of her head not doing its job at all. Her mother walked in from the front of the garage, a few cars having stopped to see if they were having a garage sale.

"Go call Matt and Kent. Someone wants the washer and dryer."

"Mom. We should just donate all of this stuff. There's no reason to sell it."

"I am donating it. Go get them, sweet girl."

Turning, Bethany checked her phone for the tenth time within the hour. Damon was at the office, holding down the fort so the rest of them could help pack. He was the only one she wanted to see, the idea of her mother getting married suddenly weighing heavily on her.

Kent was a great guy, but her real father was too when they first got married. Her mother deserved the best. Bethany hoped this time that's what she was getting. Her new stepfather had been nothing but kind and giving, but everyone knew that even

hell had recruiting days. Hopefully, things would be different this time.

She opened the door to the small two-bedroom house and stuck her head inside. “Hey, guys. Someone wants the washer and dryer. Come help us load it for them.”

Closing the door, she pulled her phone from her pocket and let out a groan. “Mom, I need to change and get up to the college. I have to get in a few hours with Dr. Tarrington today.”

“I thought you told him you were working yesterday instead.”

“I did, but school starts next week and the mess he gave me to work through yesterday didn’t get entirely done. I don’t want to leave him in a lurch. I need him on my side for the next year.”

“Then get going.” Her mom walked toward her, a smile on her pretty face.

The guys walked into the garage, Matt making caveman noises, as if they were the only reason the washer and dryer were able to get loaded. Bethany looked over her shoulder and rolled her eyes playfully.

“The men-folk are here now. Let’s get something done.” Matt smirked as Kent popped him in the chest.

“Which car, baby?” Kent glanced at Bethany’s mom, her cheeks turning a rose color.

“The green truck with the open tailgate.” She walked toward them. “We can help too.”

“Heck no, you’re not. You get hurt and who will marry my dad? Stand down, Karen. We’ve got this.” Matt kissed his biceps, one at a time, before moving toward the washer. Bethany leaned against the wall closest to her. Matt was so different than Damon, and yet they had a friendship that permeated the air around them every time she had seen them together. The longing for Damon to be there with her rolled over her again.

The guys lifted the washing machine with ease and walked out toward the waiting truck as Bethany's mom moved to stand beside her. Glancing over, she realized her mom had tears in her eyes.

"Hey, you okay?" Bethany wrapped an arm around her shoulders and tugged her close.

"Yes. I just don't deserve Kent. He's far better of a person than me, Bethany."

"That's not true." Bethany pulled her mom into a hug, resting her cheek on the same shoulder that she had for the last twenty-two years. "He's a good man, but you're a great woman."

"You're a little biased."

"Damn straight I am." Bethany moved back and reached up, wiping at her mom's tears. How Damon would harbor hate against his own mom was understandable but so painful to think about. Bethany wouldn't have survived the trauma of all her birth father put them through if her mom hadn't been the rock she was. Damon's past hurts were different, but just as life-altering.

"Watch your mouth." Her mom pulled back as a smile spread across her face. "I'm so excited about leaving tomorrow, but I'm scared too."

"Of the flight? I'll be on the plane with you." Bethany reached up and tugged her hair down, working on redoing it.

"No. Of not being who Kent needs me to be. He's got all his shit together, and I feel like the hot mess express on a good day." Her mom chuckled and wiped a few more tears, turning so her back was to the guys as they walked back in. Matt continued to tout their greatness as Bethany shook her head at him, enjoying the sound of his laughter.

"Watch your language." She turned back to her mom, softly squeezing the older woman's shoulders. "Kent loves you just the way you are. He doesn't need you to be him. Just be yourself, and everything will work out, mom."

"I love you, little girl."

“I love you too. I need to get up to the college.” Bethany released her mom and ran her hands over her shirt. “The college is closed right now, and I’m not even sure if Dr. Tarrington is up there. Does this look too bad to just drop by for an hour or so? Should I get dressed up?”

Her mom reached out and brushed her hand down Bethany’s back. “Change into a blouse instead of this t-shirt, and you should be good to go. Your jeans aren’t dirty. Before you go, tell me how the situation with your friends is going.”

Bethany’s best friend and roommate, Krista, had gone off the deep end a few days earlier, attacking their other best friend, Jake, and leaving him for dead. It was still a mystery as to what would lead Krista to react so violently to Jake turning her down. It had to be a combination of being off her medication combined with having her heart broken. It seemed to be the most likely reason.

“Jake is going home on Monday. His parents are with him now. He’s doing better, just shaken up. I haven’t spoken to Krista in a few days. I’m not sure what I would say if I did. I went to see her a few days ago, but she just sat there, staring at me.” Bethany shrugged. Sadness rolled over her, and the need to drown in Damon’s affection washed over her again.

“That’s disturbing.” Her mom shivered and patted her arm. “Get going, and we’ll see you at Kent’s tonight for dinner.”

Bethany walked into the house to get her keys. A single red rose sat in a tall glass vase with a small note attached to it just beside her purse. She picked it up and smiled. Kent had left it for her mother. It simply read, “Three days until my life is complete. Thank you for saying yes.”

Tears filled her eyes as she stood there. She and Damon were on the road to building their relationship, the lust having blossomed into love for both of them, but they had a long road to hoe. He wasn’t trusting, and she was beyond fearful that he would find someone better, more worthy of his time.

She laid the card back down and picked up her keys. Bethany patted her phone in her pocket and walked back out to

say her goodbyes. Matt lifted her off the ground with his big bear hug just before she reached the car.

“You excited?” He put her down and bounced on the balls of his feet. He was much too big of a guy to pull off goofy, but he was doing it somehow.

“I sure am. We’re still set for Saturday afternoon on the beach for the ceremony, right?”

“Yep, but we should have time to explore and play around when we get there.”

“That sounds great.” Bethany pulled her phone out as it buzzed.

“I’m still not sure Erica going with us is a good idea.” Matt’s smile slid from his handsome face. His blond hair was a mess, but it was most days. “Just seems odd that she’s going to be there. I think they have her rooming with you.”

“I’ll beat her off of you. No reason to be worried.” Bethany lifted the phone to her ear, lifting her finger to tell Matt to hold up a second. It was Damon. “Hey, baby. Work going okay?”

“My father isn’t answering his phone. Can you please tell him to fucking answer me?” His voice was tight. The fact that he hadn’t greeted her at all was concerning, but something was off.

“I’ll just give him my phone. Hold on a second.” Bethany walked back toward the house, half-expecting Damon to say something - anything to her. Nothing.

She handed the phone to Kent as her heart contracted painfully. Forcing a tight smile, she moved back a little to give him a bit of privacy. “It’s Damon. He’s been trying to get a hold of you.”

Work in progress. Work in progress.

“Oh. Thanks.” Kent took the phone and smiled down at her. Bethany half-expected him to turn and walk away to keep the conversation private. They were soon to be a family, but most people needed a sense of privacy on the phone. Not Kent.

“Hey. What’s going on?”

Bethany could hear Damon’s mumbles, but she wasn’t able to make them out. From the look on Kent’s face, something wasn’t right.

“All right, well, we can take care of it when we get back next week.” He paused. “No. You’re coming with us in the morning, son. I don’t want to do this without you.”

Bethany wrapped her arms around herself, her hopes of walking on the beach with him and making love with the windows open dying slowly. It was supposed to be a time for the two of them to learn each other better. Damon had promised he would open up on the trip. He just needed to get away from everything familiar so he could dive in deeper with her. They needed this getaway - almost more than her mom did.

“All right. Do what you can and just get out there by Saturday afternoon. We won’t start without you.” Kent paused again, looking at the ground and running his fingers through his salt and pepper hair. “All right. We’ll see you late tonight. Maybe we can figure something out to work through the situation faster. I know. All right.”

Kent handed the phone back to Bethany, a sad smile on his handsome face. “Looks like that damn Zarpeth audit we looked at in Seattle isn’t as straight forward as we hoped.”

“That’s not good.” Bethany lifted the phone to her ear as she waved to them. “Hey.”

Nothing. He had already hung up. She let out a soft sigh as tears filled her eyes. Matt had gone into the house from what she could tell. She was grateful not to have to explain herself. She was being a tit-baby. Plain and simple. Getting in the car, she rolled down the windows and pulled out of the driveway, having effectively dodged her family.

“You couldn’t say two words to me?” she mumbled to the empty hot air in the car.

Everything had changed and yet nothing had.

CHAPTER 42



BETHANY

She had gone through an array of emotions by the time she reached the campus. Parking the car, she rolled up the windows and sat in stony silence for a minute longer. She had promised Damon that she would give him time and space to work through some of the things that bothered her most about him, and she would. Forcing herself not to react was going to kill her, though. He was a different man at home than he was at the office, which made sense to some extent, but she belonged in both worlds with him. They would have to work through their differences of how they expected those worlds to look.

Grumbling, she got out of the small Honda and slammed the door, the car groaning in protest. Damon was right about one thing, she needed to get a new car, but there were more important things nagging at her, like paying for her graduate program. The car hadn't fallen apart yet, and her plan was to pay Kent back with the money she was making at the firm and then start working to replace her dilapidated possessions.

The campus was busier than she expected. It would seem that freshman orientation was going on that day. She tucked into the business building and took the stairs up to Kendal's office, half-expecting him to be out. The door was open at the end of the hall from what she could tell, which was good and bad. She needed to talk with him a minute about his desires for his week one notes for the students, but she looked like hell - sort of.

“Hey.” Bethany stopped just outside of the door in the hall as Kendal turned around in his chair.

He was in jeans and a polo shirt, his hair a mess and glasses making him look more handsome, as if it was possible.

“Hey, Bethany. Forget something yesterday?” He stood and crossed his arms over his chest.

Remembrance at his conversation with Damon a few days earlier brushed across her mind. They were closer than she imagined from her conversations with Damon, Kendal having been in his fraternity and the two being close friends.

“No. I wanted to touch base with you before we fly out tomorrow. I wrapped up the week one notes and e-mailed them to you, but several of your points didn’t make sense to me. I figured it was just my lack of retaining the details of cost accounting.” She smiled and moved into the hall as he walked toward her.

“I locked my main laptop in my classroom. Let’s stop by there, and we can look it over together. I’m sure it’s a case of me being scatterbrained, but thank you for making it look like you’re the one with the issue.” He smirked and held the elevator open for her. “You and Damon looking forward to getting away?”

“We were.” She glanced down at her shoes, not wanting to get emotional over something Damon had no control over. It was more the fact that he didn’t mention it at all to her than it was that he wasn’t going, or was it a combination of both?

“Uh oh.” Kendal pressed a button on the panel in front of them and turned to face her. “What happened?”

Bethany slipped on her facade and glanced up, forcing a smile. “Something came up at McKenzie and Bryant. I didn’t really get the details of it, but Damon seems to be Mr. Fix-it.”

“He always has been. He’s what we call a glory-stealer.” Kendal chuckled and held the door open for her. “He always has been the first on the ladder to put out the biggest fires.”

“Why am I not surprised to hear this?” She walked beside him, her emotions starting to settle thanks to the calm

demeanor of the man beside her.

Kendal laughed softly, as if remembering something. “I could tell you story after story of him fixing up, cleaning up and picking up after everyone. For a man that most people think is a playboy billionaire, I can assure you, his work ethic would have gotten him there if Kent hadn’t had done it first for him.”

Kendal unlocked the door to the large auditorium. Bethany walked in and breathed in deep, the smell of education in the air. Old books and sweaty bodies. She smiled at the thought, moving to take a seat in the front row.

“If you want to pull up the e-mail, you’ll see my questions. See if they make sense to you.” She pulled her phone out of her jeans and set it on the desk beside her. Texting Damon would only bother him, but damn if she didn’t want to. Why did she have to calculate her value to him on whether they communicated regularly and effectively? That was never going to leave her feeling good about herself.

He had worked too long to shut everyone out. He wasn’t going to change overnight.

Kendal made a few noises as he worked on the stage in front of her. He popped the laptop closed and smiled.

“Your questions were spot on. Great job on this. I’ll work to adjust the notes to explain myself better.” He walked to the stairs on the edge of the stage and took a seat a few away from her.

“I can make the adjustments now if you just tell me what you want,” she offered.

“No, I’ve got it. You have a big event coming up.” He brushed his fingers by his mouth before pinning her with his stare. “What’s going on? You didn’t need to come all the way up here for this.”

She shrugged, not sure what to say. Kendal was her professor and boss for the next year. They weren’t friends. Damon held that spot with him, and yet she knew she could talk and he would listen.

Closing her eyes, she let her head fall back and let out a long, shaky sigh. “I’m sorry. I should go. I just haven’t made many friends over the last few years for fear of someone realizing what a fake I was. My two best friends are lost to me right now, both trying to heal, and the one person I want to talk to can’t communicate worth shit. I just needed to get away from everyone.”

“I get it.” Kendal’s voice was soft and kind.

Bethany opened her eyes and turned to smile at him; her tears tucked away for the moment. “He told me that he loved me last night. He told the whole family that we’re together and if they didn’t like it, they could bite his ass.”

“He told his dad to bite his ass?” Kendal lifted his fist to his mouth and let out a short laugh.

She smiled, unable to help herself. “Not exactly, but you get the point.”

“Then why is there hurt sitting all over you? You look like you haven’t slept in a week. Isn’t this what you wanted from him?”

“Yeah. He’s not going to be able to go on the trip and...” She sucked in a deep breath; the water works turning on. She didn’t know Kendal well enough to cry in front of him. Why was she even there?

“He can’t help that, Bethany. He’s fully invested in that firm. It means the world to him, not for his success, but because his dad’s retirement is in it.”

“No, it’s not that. He called this morning and didn’t even say two words to me. He told Kent that he couldn’t go. I swear, he has no sensitivity about how I might receive him barking at me like I’m his fucking secretary.” She rolled her shoulders and stood. “I need to go. I’m being stupid and showing my age.”

Kendal remained seated but chuckled again. “It’s okay to be your age. We’re all insecure, no matter how old we are. Go by the office and see him. Stop letting your mind tell you things aren’t good. They are. Go prove it to yourself. He’s

probably beyond tense. Offer to grab him a coffee and say, ‘I love you’ in a small way.”

“Yeah. You’re right.” Bethany bent over and picked up her purse, grateful for the handsome man in front of her. He might be close to Damon, but she could see the two of them becoming good friends over the next year as well.

“I’m usually right. I’m a guy.”

She rolled her eyes and pulled her purse onto her shoulder. “Just one more thing.”

“Shoot.”

“You told me that Damon had yet to have a serious relationship because he wouldn’t allow it, but I’ve seen a pretty blond moving around in the background of our lives for the last few weeks. Am I just making a mountain out of a molehill or is something going on that I should dig into?”

“He’s a one woman man as best I know. He’s not interested in cheating or lies. His past will show you that quickly if you dig a little.” Kendal lifted his hands and stretched. “I think that’s probably Bridget. They dated in high school and college off and on. She’s a rich bitch and an old family friend. They tried to get serious in college, but he just couldn’t seem to truly get into her. I’m glad, to be honest. Bitch was controlling.”

“She’s still around after seven years of you guys being out of college.”

“Six years. Don’t age me, please. I’m doing that well enough on my own.”

Bethany forced a smile, this new information not leaving her feeling much better than she had on the way to the school. The blond had been at the restaurant when Kent and Damon had taken her to lunch, and coming out of his office not too long ago with her hair a mess. Was she the one below his desk the day she caught him acting rather nefarious?

Sickness rolled over her as the voice of reason sparked up.

He told you that it wasn't what it seemed. He's not done anything to show you distrust.

“Don't make too much of it. She's interested in him. He's interested in you. You've broken the cycle of the two of them getting back together over and over again.” Kendal stood and smiled as Bethany turned and walked to the door. “Have fun on your trip and stop worrying. I'll see you when you get back. Give him space. He's worth it.”

This had to get easier. Wondering if things were going to fall through the floor before they began was going to get old fast. Much like him not taking her feelings into consideration when he was at the office.

He might be worth her efforts, but was she worth his?

CHAPTER 43



DAMON

She was pissed, and he couldn't blame her. Well, maybe not pissed. Hurt was more like it.

Damon set the phone down on his desk and slipped his hand into his slacks before walking toward the full-length windows in his office. The sunny day did nothing to permeate the sickening feeling that swelled deep inside of him. He'd have to miss his father's wedding if he couldn't fix the situation with Zarpeth soon. It needed far more than a quick band-aid, and yet a patch-up job was all he had time for.

It was time for his father to have a happy ending, to get to enjoy a relationship that was based on truth and love. Karen, Bethany's mother, was going to be great for him.

"Much better than my own cheating-ass mother," Damon mumbled under his breath and tried hard not to let the images of catching her with another man poison his thoughts. He was already struggling like hell with keeping his mood under control.

"Damon?" Linda's voice reached him before the soft rapping of her knuckles on the door.

He turned and forced a tight smile for his secretary. "What's up?"

"I'm running down to the cafeteria and wanted to make sure you didn't need anything." She gave him a warm smile. She was a pretty older woman, but he kept her beside him because she was organized and would quickly turn into a

bulldog to protect him if the situation called for it. She was loyal, and *that* meant more to him than anything else.

Loyalty and trust.

“No, but thanks.” He pulled his hands from his pockets and walked over to his desk. “Hold all my calls for a little while. I need to review these inventory files one more time and see if I can’t come up with something that would help close this gaping hole at Zarpeth.”

“Anything I can do to help? I’m happy to grab Ben or one of your other staff and haul them up here for you.” She stepped just inside the door, but not too far.

He sat down and leaned back, letting his vision glaze over. “No. Just close the door on your way out. The team has already turned in their reports. Thank you though.”

“Of course.” She closed the door, and silence rushed in to welcome him.

Had he really told his and Bethany’s family that he was in love with her the night before? Had he told her?

The smile that lifted his lips reached to his eyes. He should have said something to her when he called to talk to his father moments before. She was young and would overreact to his dismissal of her. She wouldn’t realize that he was protecting her from the asshole he could quickly become if he weren’t careful.

She’d been so sexy in the pool. Like a kitten. Unsure of herself and yet wanting his affection desperately. He closed his eyes and pressed his palm to the front of his slacks as his cock stirred to life.

“Fuck,” he mumbled before biting his lip. Maybe there was time to have her again before she got on a plane the next morning. Realization rolled over him, and he sat up. He wouldn’t be sinking deep into his girl if he didn’t get his shit done in the office and get over to his father’s.

They needed to hire a more experienced senior manager for the firm, someone that could support Damon and help to filter the amount of work that ended up on his desk.

“Preferably a male.” He sat up and ignored the soft thumping of his pulse along the base of his cock as it continued to harden. One thought of Bethany, and he was lost to lust. Why? How was she so different than the other women who walked into his office on a regular basis.

His thoughts quickly moved to her, and he leaned back in his chair and gave himself over to it for a minute. Long brown hair and big green eyes. So much innocence and yet determination and drive resonated in the way she carried herself. Confident. Smart.

Every inch of him ached for her attention by the time he pulled himself out of the deepening daydream. Reaching for the phone, he stood up and walked to his door to lock it. To call or not to call?

“Just leave it alone.” He flipped the lock on the door and walked toward the small restroom attached to the back of his office. Privacy was the best part of being an executive, but just slightly above getting to control every aspect of the company when his father was away.

There was no reason to call her and apologize for not talking to her earlier. They could talk later. Hearing her voice would just distract him more, and he was already on edge from all the bullshit bubbling up on the Zarpeth account.

He flipped on the light and closed the door to the bathroom before dropping his slacks and turning to sit down. It had been a long time since he had to take care of himself, but then again, being with one woman made things more complex.

“And far more stimulating.” He wrapped his hand around his cock and lifted his hips, pressing deep into his tight hold as a tremor ran through him. It wouldn’t have taken more than a phone call to get her up there, and if he knew her well enough, Bethany would be more than willing to help him let off a little bit of steam. His pretty girl loved sex as much as he did, or so it seemed.

He let his head fall back as he continued to work himself near the edge of orgasm. His mind moved from the sterile

bathroom to the beach in Jamaica, the sound of the ocean so real, the smell of the salt water almost concerning.

Stretched out across the empty beach naked with Bethany on his lap, her back to his chest.

“You’re so beautiful, baby,” he whispered against the back of her shoulder and moved his hand to rest between her thighs as she lifted her hips and stroked his cock with her tight, wet body.

“And I’m all yours.” She pressed back down and moaned loudly, throwing him toward orgasm. Hearing her come was all he wanted.

“Just mine.” He cupped her mound and rolled his fingers over her clit in a slow rhythm as she gripped his thighs and lifted up, working herself up and down his shaft.

“I’m so close. Bite me.”

He growled softly and pressed his teeth into the back of her shoulder as she arched her back and came loudly, her moans pushing him over the edge to join her.

His breath hitched as he thrust his hips one last time and lost himself to the delicious warmth provided by his orgasm. The phone ringing just outside the door didn’t faze him a bit, nor did he let it pull him from the moment.

Damon gripped the side of the toilet as he lifted his hips and finished the job. Stars burned at the edge of his vision, and it was most likely a good thing that Bethany hadn’t been at work that day. He would have been enough of a bastard to get her up to his office for a quickie against the wall or bent over his desk.

He leaned over and pressed his arms to his thighs as he panted softly. So much pleasure. And there could be the promise of love behind it. Real love. Not the bullshit emotions his mother pretended to have for his father, but authentic caring and connection.

The sound of someone knocking on his door had him moving quickly to clean up. He walked from the bathroom with his heart still racing. Letting off a little bit of steam would help, but he needed far more than a ten-minute masturbation session. He'd have to find a way to get over to his father's later that night and take advantage of Bethany's sweet body.

Part of that meant explaining his shortness from the call moments before.

"Fine. Whatever." He pulled the door open to find Linda standing in the hallway, looking sheepish.

"Sorry to bother you, boss, but Patrick is on the phone. He needs to talk to you. It's an emergency." Her expression was pained.

"It's always an emergency with this guy." Damon rolled his eyes and walked back to his desk. "Who hired him anyway?"

"Your father did, and you like him, remember?"

Damon chuckled. "I don't *like* anyone but Ben."

"Not true." She stepped inside his office and lifted her eyebrow as he turned and dropped back down in his chair. "You like me, and you sort of like Patrick."

"Stop trying to save the guy from getting his ass handed to him. Close the door and forgive me in advance." Damon picked up the phone.

"For?" She moved a few steps back and grabbed the door handle to pull the door closed.

"For yelling." He put the phone to his ear as his mood darkened again. "This better be a call where you tell me that you have fixed all the things your team missed at Zarpeth. That or you better sit down and protect your ass, because I'm about to hand it to you."

"Hi, Damon," Patrick mumbled.

"It's Mr. Bryant for this conversation," Damon barked into the phone as Linda closed the door softly.

CHAPTER 44



BETHANY

Bethany took the long way to the office, working hard to talk herself into actually stopping by. Damon would be in a horrible mood because of the situation with Zarpeth. Did she really want to set herself up to be his punching bag?

Maybe Kendal was right. She should give him the benefit of the doubt and simply stop by with an 'I love you' of sorts.

She made a quick turn off the freeway and pulled into the local coffee shop, ordering herself something sweet and picking up Damon's favorite drink. Pulling back out onto the road, she steeled herself, locking her emotions down. She was disappointed about him not being able to come. That's really what it boiled down to. She could sling anger and accusation at him for not speaking to her earlier, or she could give him the coffee, kiss his cheek and go home to pack.

Matt would be in Jamaica with her. There was tons of fun to be had with just the two of them together. She smiled at the thought and turned on the radio in the car, finding something upbeat and losing herself in it.

By the time she reached the office, she had completely reset her mood. She parked and took a long drink of her frozen coffee before checking her teeth and smoothing her hair. He would most likely make a comment about her jeans and t-shirt, but she would turn it into humor if she had to.

"No hurt feelings and no overreacting." She looked at herself in the rear-view mirror before getting out and walking

languidly to the front door. A familiar voice caught her attention as she reached for the door handle.

“I thought you were on vacation?” Ben walked up next to her, reaching out and opening the door for her.

“I am, starting tomorrow. I was actually going to work today, but my mother had wedding jitters and turned it into ‘clean out the old house’ day.” She smirked and glanced toward Ben, trying to get a read on him as to whether he was judging her grungy look.

“Well, I’m glad you stopped by. I wanted to tell you that we have a new audit I want to pull you onto with me when you get back.” He smiled, the expression reaching his eyes. If he thought she looked bad, she couldn’t tell. She let the thought fade, writing it off as another useless insecurity.

“That sounds great. Is it here in Dallas?”

“It’s back in Seattle. You can stay here most of the week, but we’ll take you up there a few times. It’s a four-week audit. Damon’s fighting with them today, unfortunately, or at least their Florida branch. I swear no one has standards anymore.” Ben scoffed.

“I’m headed up to see him. I should have brought you a coffee too. You want me to go grab you guys something?” Bethany moved into the elevator when it opened.

“No, but thanks. I just had a late lunch with the interns. Everyone is doing great, so no need for a pick me up just yet.” He pressed the button for his floor and glanced over his shoulder at her. “You going to the top?”

“I guess you could say that.” They laughed together at the double entendre.

The door opened, and he got off, pausing and turning around. “Have a great time on your trip. Relax and find your center.”

“I plan on trying.” She smiled as the door closed. That’s exactly what she needed to do. If she could locate her center, it would help squash some of the raging insecurities of who she would have to be to keep a guy like Damon. Maybe it had

nothing to do with working to keep him, but simply being herself and letting him be him.

She moved out of the elevator as the door opened.

Linda looked up from her desk and smiled. “Hey Bethany. We didn’t expect you today.”

“Yeah, I just wanted to stop by and spread a little cheer to the boss-man. I hear he’s having quite a day.”

“You could say that. He’s morphed into a large grizzly bear, so enter at your own risk.” She smiled and nodded toward the door. “He’s on the phone, but I’m sure he won’t mind you slipping in. Just be quiet if you can.”

“Of course.” Bethany turned the knob carefully before slipping into the small crack she created. She closed the door and met eyes with Damon as he glanced up.

He lifted his hand to warn her not to speak, his gaze almost aggressive.

She nodded and moved to sit in one of the chairs surrounding the small table in the middle of his large office. His blue slacks fit him perfectly, his white shirt only helping to accent the darkness of his tan. How badly she wanted to be the one to button up his shirt in the morning and kiss him before he left for the day.

And she would be.

Their next steps were going to be to get to know each other better, get through their parents’ wedding and then she was going to push him to move in together. They were better for each other the more time they spent in the presence of the other. She would love to move into his house but needed him to be the one that suggested it.

“I know that, Patrick. Here’s the end result of this conversation. You pull your staff together and reiterate once more that the corporate office of McKenzie and Bryant has standards. If your staff isn’t willing to sign off on those rules and regulations and abide by them, then we have no use for their talents.”

He paused and ran his fingers through his dark hair. Bethany set his coffee on the table next to her as her eyes moved across him. The swell of his pectoral muscles pushed at his shirt as he twisted a certain way. Just knowing what lay underneath all his clothing left her blood warming. Now wasn't the time for a sexual intervention, but it sure sounded good.

"I'm coming to Florida in two weeks and when I get there... this shit better be cleared up. You're on your last warning. Tell me you understand clearly the objectives of the tasks I've given you and that you will be getting them done."

He moved out from behind his desk and walked toward the window. Reaching up, he pressed his hand to the glass and seemed to be looking out at the city. She couldn't help but stare at the soft curve of his rear, her heart pounding a little harder in her chest as her desire spiked.

"Good. Don't fuck this up. I'm out of patience with you."

Damon pulled the phone from his ear and hit a button before turning and walking toward her. He let out a long sigh and stopped in front of her.

Bethany stood up and slid her hands up his chest, pulling him down for a long kiss.

He mumbled 'yes' before sliding his arms around her.

She flattened herself against the front of him, loving every hard plane of him that pressed against her softness. She ran her fingers through his hair, scratching softly as he slid his tongue deep into her mouth. Pressing her teeth against his offering, she shifted her hips, rubbing herself against him.

He broke the kiss, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead to hers. "How did you know that I needed that?"

"I didn't. *I* simply needed it." She smiled as he opened his eyes, the dark orbs seeing far into the center of her soul.

"Such a greedy little thing, aren't you?" He nipped at her mouth before pulling back. Walking back to his desk, he tugged at his erection and growled at her.

“Only for certain things.” She walked to his desk and extended the coffee toward him. “You missed out on your brother and father renewing their man-cards this morning.”

Damon let out a short laugh, his mood seeming to have shifted. “That so? Tell me about it. I could use a break from this shit.”

He plopped down in his chair and took the coffee from her, taking a deep drink of it and shaking his head in approval.

Bethany sat down in one of the empty chairs beside her and leaned back, crossing her legs and tilting her head slightly. He watched her like a hawk, his eyes moving down the length of her. She stifled a shiver.

“Mom gave away her washer and dryer set, and Matt and Kent loaded it for the older man who got it. I swear, I expected one of them to throw their back out.” She shook her head as a smile lifted her lips.

“Dad lifted a washer?” Damon set the coffee down and licked his lips.

“Yeah, but he wasn’t touting it like Matt.”

“True Matthew fashion... to sing of his greatness.” Damon tapped his fingers on the desk in front of him. “How are you? You feeling okay after our conversation last night?”

The moments in the pool the night before were like a dream come true. Damon admitting his love for her and asking her to dive headlong into the future with him. Incredible, yet so damn terrifying.

“I’m working through it. I feel beyond blessed, but you know how us youngins can be. I’m already questioning why me.” She glanced down at her hands, hating the topic at hand.

“Because you’re everything I want in my life.” He reached across the desk and tugged at a long strand of her hair that had fallen loose.

“Greedy little thing, aren’t you?” Bethany looked up and smirked.

He laughed and leaned his head back, closing his eyes. “I’m sorry about this morning. I was so fucking furious over not getting to leave with you guys that I just wanted to break some shit. I should have told you instead of telling dad.”

“It’s fine. I understand.” She stood up and walked around the desk toward him.

He reached up and brushed his fingers down her arm before tugging her down into his lap. Bethany turned and sat down, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“It’s not fine. I’ll work on it.” He pulled her down for another long kiss, his fingers snaking up into her hair and holding the back of her head tightly.

She relaxed into the kiss, suddenly wanting so much more. She made love to his mouth for a few minutes until his arousal pressed against her uncomfortably.

“When are you coming home tonight?” She kissed him briefly again.

“I’ll be at dad’s a little late, but I should make it by seven. Be there.”

“I will. Let’s have dinner with them and then we’ll sneak off to your place. That sound good?”

“I wish baby. I need to eat and then make my way back up here.” He ran his fingers along her face softly. “I’ll be there for the wedding, and we can spend the night together afterward.”

“Okay.” Bethany tried to hide the disappointment that spread through her. Not being close to Damon was going to suck royally. She had laid her hopes on one more night. She needed it.

“Come here. Kiss me again and then get your sexy ass out of here. You’ve made the day a million times better.” He pulled her down and took his time licking and kissing her mouth.

Bethany melted against him, her fingers brushing by his cock as he groaned. She would have pushed the moment if his phone hadn’t interrupted them.

He moved back and checked it, growling softly.

“I need to get that.” He pushed at her butt to move her off of him.

She stood and wiped at her mouth before walking to get her purse. She turned to tell him that she loved him, but he was already on the phone, his head down and pencil scribbling furiously.

“Love you,” she whispered under her breath as she walked to the door, no return gesture given to her.

CHAPTER 45



BETHANY

Bethany walked into Kent's large home as the smell of apple and cinnamon hit her in the face. She breathed in deeply and made a detour to the kitchen. Martha, their chef, was whistling a tune and taking pies out of the oven.

"It smells divine in here." Bethany moved around the portly woman and closed the oven for her.

"Apple and peach pies were the first things my momma taught me how to make. I've been baking them from scratch since I was a little girl." Martha smiled and pulled her mittens from her hands. "What's wrong? The frown on your face is not the normal reaction to the smell of this goodness, you silly girl."

Bethany chuckled and moved toward the large counter that ran the length of the kitchen. Several pies baked to perfection sat proudly. She breathed in deeply, trying to decide what her response should be.

"I'm just sad that Damon is going to have to miss the vacation part of this trip. He'll be there for the wedding, but I was looking forward to spending some time with him." She shrugged.

"That's completely natural. I would be disappointed too. His daddy is for sure." Martha picked up a rag and started to wipe off the counters. "I have chicken laid out for the big family dinner tonight. You want Mexican or Italian style?"

Matt walked in and smiled. "Italian all the way. That means more bread, right?"

“Tortillas are bread, boy.” Martha wound up her hand towel and popped him.

His yelp caused Bethany to smile despite herself.

“Italian it is, unless the lady wants something else.” Martha glanced back to Bethany. Matt gave her a look that said to agree with Italian or he would put a hurting on her. She laughed and nodded, her stepbrother quick to break her sour mood.

“I’m good with anything edible. I need to pack actually, so I’ll get that done, unless you need my help in here?” She walked toward Martha, reaching out and rubbing the older woman’s shoulder. She was so good to the Bryant’s and had pulled Bethany in quickly to be part of the family.

“I’ll go with you. I wanted to get you to help calm my fears. I’ve eaten enough Tums to kill a large baby calf.” Matt walked past them, his comment making little to no sense.

“Don’t let that boy fool you. He’s wicked smart.” Martha nodded after Matt, her voice soft and full of truth.

“Oh, I know. He thinks he’s got all of us fooled...” Bethany rolled her eyes and laughed loudly at Matt’s response.

“I can still hear you two. Jeez!”



“Tell me why you’re nervous? The wedding or the flight?” Bethany walked into the bedroom and moved to the closet in search of her large suitcase. Her mother had picked up a few things for her to take on the trip, but she had yet to try them on. Whether they were going or not was another story altogether.

“Neither. My father invited Erica to join us, you know.”

“That’s a good thing, Matt. She’s a big part of his professional life. He probably thinks of her as a daughter of sorts.” Bethany glanced over her shoulder in time to watch Matt flop down on the bed dramatically. She laughed and

tugged out the suitcase that she had originally brought to Kent's a few weeks back.

The plan had been to spend a week with him, but that had quickly turned into several weeks. She wasn't sure about returning to her apartment now. Not with the situation with Krista being so bad. Her friend was still in police custody.

"I don't care what he thinks of her as. She intimidates the fuck out of me. I wanted to relax, wear what I wanted and eat like a pig." He let out a long sigh. "Now I have to behave and play the part."

He sounded so much like a wayward teenage girl that Bethany had to give him some hell over it.

"Yeah, I don't think she's going to like the pink panties you wear or the way you eat your food like a dog from a dish..." She paused as he lifted his head and rolled his eyes. "Move over so I can put my suitcase up here with you, you big girl."

"You have no idea what the pressure is like." He rolled over onto his back, his eyes focused on the ceiling as he pressed his hands to his chest. "She's perfect. Perfect teeth. Perfect record. Perfect ass. Ugh. It gets old."

Bethany laughed so hard a snort resounded. "You're so dumb right now."

"I'm telling Damon you're a snorter for that." He lifted his head and winked at her.

"I think Erica is only perfect in one way and that's what scares you so damn bad."

"What way is that?" Matt rolled over, almost falling off the bed. He caught himself and moved to his stomach, his hands holding his chin up.

"Perfect for you."

"Oh please. We're like oil and vinegar. Total opposites."

"Nope. Not even close. You're both artistic, good looking and have a great outlook on life. I think you should stop trying

to turn her into a big scary monster.” Bethany moved to her closet and started to pull out clothes.

“Okay. I’ll do that... when you do it too.”

She glanced back at him, lifting her eyebrow. “I have no clue what you’re talking about.”

“Sure you do. It’s just a little different. I treat Erica like an untouchable and you treat Damon like everything he does, or every word he speaks is meant as is. I’ll give her a chance just to be her when you give him a chance just to be him.”

Bethany grabbed a few shirts and walked to the bed, throwing them in the open suitcase.

Matt moved to his knees, pulling them back out and folding them.

“I’m perfectly fine with Damon being who he is.”

“Were you hurt by him not talking to you this morning?” Matt pulled out another shirt, folding it and averting his eyes from her.

“Yes.”

“Why?” He glanced up at her quickly, his eyes wide as if he were worried.

“Because if we’re going to be together, I expect him to communicate with me. I was on the fucking phone with him, and he didn’t say anything, Matt. Not two words.” Heat rushed up her chest and coated her throat. Surely Matt wasn’t taking up for Damon when he was a cock earlier that day.

“And why didn’t he say anything to you?”

“Because he’s an ass and doesn’t think of other people.”

“Who’s staying behind to take care of the mess at McKenzie and Bryant?” Matt moved off the bed and nodded toward the closet. “Go get more clothes while I drag myself deeper into this hole for the sake of my wayward older brother.”

“Damon is staying back to take care of things. It’s his damn job.” She stormed to the closet and yanked out a few

more items, not giving two shits about what she wore. No one would be there to impress anyway.

“No, it’s my father’s job to take care of large scale things like this.” Matt paused and lifted his hand as Bethany started to retort. “Damon has his faults, I’ll give you that, but him staying behind totally debunks your claims. He’s caring, and he does think of other people. He’s not used to being exclusive with someone and is working through his own demons. He was stressed, I bet and didn’t want to snap at you. It was the same thing I would have done, sparing you from my wrath. You don’t deserve to get hit with it.”

Bethany started to bite back, but truth stopped her. Matt was right. She was pushing so much angst onto the situation only because she wanted to be the one holding the cards. If Damon was a true bastard and things didn’t work out, she could simply blame that.

She dropped the remaining items in front of Matt, her shoulders dropping. “You’re right.”

“Yep. This time I am. Write it down. Doesn’t happen often.” He moved around the bed and pulled her into a tight hug. “I’ll try and give Erica a bit of grace, but you do the same to Damon. Who knows, we might both end up happy in the end.”

“I think we will.” She wrapped her arms around the big guy in front of her and pressed her cheek to his chest.

“Now... you’re not my sister for another few days. Throw your undies at me, and I’ll fold them for you.” He moved back, lifting his hands as if preparing for the onslaught.

Bethany grabbed the closest pillow to her and started to beat him with it. He screamed like a small child, getting a hold of a larger one and wailing back.

He was exactly what she needed in her life. A friend. A brother.



Bethany picked up the bread and walked into the dining hall behind Martha, her mom and Kent already seated at the table. They all took their seats, Damon's still empty. Sadness rolled over her, but she forced it away. He would be there soon, and she would work hard to make him feel welcomed. She needed to be his centering, his soft place to land, no matter what that meant.

"All right, let's pray?" Kent bowed his head and prayed over the food and the trip they were leaving for in the morning.

Bethany whispered amen and glanced up, Damon sliding his arm over her shoulders and smiling.

"Sorry I'm late. Long day at the office. My boss is a monster." He smirked as everyone chuckled.

Bethany leaned over and pressed a soft kiss to his lips before squeezing his thigh softly. "My prayers are answered."

"You were praying for me to have a slave-driver of a boss?" He winked and pointed to the large plate of chicken in the middle of the table. "Someone start passing that toward my end of the table. I need it... now."

"How was everything? You get anywhere on all of the stuff at the office?" Kent picked up the platter and passed it, his voice shifting to business.

"It's good. We can talk later. Let's just enjoy our dinner together, Dad. You guys get everything wrapped up in the wedding decorations and stuff? Aunt Allison driving anyone mad yet?" He smiled and stood, reaching for the platter. He offered the serving fork to Bethany and glanced down at her, a smile on his lips.

"Yes. I swear I'm not sure what I did to be blessed *and* cursed so much by my only sibling. She's been planning beside Karen, but we wanted this to be small. Intimate. It's going to be over two hundred people."

Bethany turned, her mouth dropping open. "On a destination wedding? That's insane."

“I agree.” Bethany’s mom picked up her wine glass and took a long drink.

Kent reached over and squeezed her shoulder. “The good thing is that between Allison and Matthew, we’re almost done. Just a few things to be done once we get on the island, but other than that, we plan on relaxing. I want you guys to do the same.”

Matt looked up from his plate. “When is Erica coming out?”

“She’s already there. I believe her flight was at lunch today. She’s wrapping up the negotiations on the liability contracts for one of our partners who’s out there already.”

“Of course she is.” Matt huffed and picked up his chicken, biting into it without cutting it.

Bethany laughed. “Hey. You’re breaking our promise.”

He put the chicken down and started to cut it, a smirk lifting his mouth. “It was more for your benefit than mine.”

“Most things are.” Bethany turned to Damon as a look of question slipped across his handsome face. “I’ll tell you later.”

“Please do. If Matt and Erica are involved, I want to know all about it.”

CHAPTER 46



DAMON

“**W**hy am I not surprised that you’re interested in my suffering?” Matt lifted his eyebrow and stuffed a whole roll into his mouth.

“Your suffering?” Damon glanced down the table toward his dad, taking note of the warm smile on Karen’s pretty face as she leaned in to whisper something to his father. “Dad. You hear this? Matt is *suffering* because you invited Erica to this wedding.”

“Don’t start.” Matt shook his head and reached for his beer. “Seriously. I’ve already gotten a counseling session by our new sister.”

Everyone stiffened at Matt’s remark.

“*Your* new sister.” Damon wrapped his arm around Bethany’s shoulders and pulled her closer. “My soon-to-be forever.”

Bethany glanced over at Damon, the expression on her pretty face showing discomfort. It was going to be a couple of bumpy months as their family transitioned, but they would make it through. She wasn’t his sister; nor would she ever be. Damon had one sibling, and he was chewing through rolls at breakneck speed down the table from him.

“Why are you so upset about Erica going?” Karen’s voice was soft, inquisitive. “I thought you guys liked her.”

“It’s just Matt.” Beth pulled from him and picked up her fork. “He’s convinced himself that she becomes a three-headed

monster when the sun goes down.”

“Two head.” Matt wagged his eyebrows. “It’s just two heads. Let’s not get dramatic here.”

“Oh, sorry.” Karen laughed, and he couldn’t help but smile. Matt would always be terrified of Erica. She was his perfect match.

“I think this will be good for the two of you.” Damon shrugged and pulled his arm away from Bethany. “She’ll let her hair down a little and chill out, and you might see a side of her that forces you to stop being a child about dating her.”

“Is Erica interested in dating Matt?” Damon’s father glanced up and turned his attention to Matt. “Why didn’t you mention that? Are you not interested in her?”

Martha stuck her head through the open door to the dining room. “Oh, he’s interested. He’s just scared of her.”

“Very scared.” Bethany threw in her two cents.

Matt’s complexion went from normal to pale and then to a darkening pink shade.

Damon lifted his hands. “Hey. Leave the poor guy alone. Women like Erica can be very overwhelming. We’re not being fair.”

“I’m not interested,” Matt barked out and stabbed his chicken breast with a fork before lifting it to his mouth and biting deeply into it.

“Cut that please.” His father gave him a stern look.

“He’s grown, Dad. Leave him be.” Damon picked up his wine and downed the glass before reaching for the bottle. “Erica’s had a thing for Matt since the day she joined the firm.”

“Can we maybe, just perhaps, change the subject?” Matt picked up his knife and massacred his chicken.

“Agreed.” Bethany glanced up and turned to face Damon. “How much longer are you thinking you’re going to have to

work tonight? Any hope of you getting done and joining us? I could come up to the office after we eat and help you.”

“I’m not sure, baby.” He set the glass down and reached out to touch the side of her face before realizing that everyone was watching them. Clearing his throat, he pulled back and turned his attention back to his plate. “I’ll get out to Jamaica as soon as I can. I don’t need anything but time. Just time to sit down and finish my review.”

“You sure? I can come-” Kent started.

“No, Dad.” Damon glanced down the table and shook his head. “It’s going to be fine. I might even be able to get through everything tonight. Doubtful, but who knows.”

The conversation shifted down to the other end of the table, and Karen filled everyone in on the decorations that they’d finally settled on. Damon half-listened as he took his time enjoying the meal. Martha was an excellent cook, the best as far as he was concerned. His mother hadn’t put much energy or effort into making dinners, and as he and Matt had moved out of the chicken nugget phase, they had finally hired Martha to help out.

Damon stiffened as Bethany slid her hand up his thigh and turned to face him. “I don’t want you to go back up there tonight.”

“I know, baby.” He gripped her hand softly, holding her in place to make sure the little tart didn’t finish her ascent and grip his dick right there at the table with their family gathered around. Not that he would have been offended, but walking around sporting a tent in front of his soon-to-be stepmother wasn’t happening. Just having Beth so close was a turn on. Anything extra and he’d be lost to *showing* just how much he liked the pretty girl next to him.

“Let me come with you. I can make copies, take notes-”

“I’d like that, but you and I both know that we wouldn’t get anything done.” He rubbed his thumb over the top of her hand and leaned in to brush his lips against hers. “How about you meet me in your bedroom for a few minutes after dessert.”

“How about now?” She moved back and licked at the side of her mouth, teasing him.

So fucking hot.

“All right,” Martha’s voice stole him from the naughty thoughts that plagued him when Beth was close by, “everyone has to try my tiramisu. It’s a new recipe, so be totally honest with me. You’re not going to hurt my feelings.”

“Anything you make is delicious, Martha.” Matt moved out of his seat to help her serve everyone dessert.

“I’m stuffed.” Bethany pulled her hand from Damon’s lap and moved to get up. “Save me a piece for later though?”

“Yes, of course.” Martha smiled and continued to dish large scoops of the multi-layered dessert out to everyone.

“You need my help with something?” Damon glanced over his shoulder as Beth walked toward the back of the house.

“Sure. I was going to try and get my makeup bag down from the top of the closet. You could probably reach it much better than I can.”

“All right. I’ll be right there.” Damon reached out and took a bowl from Martha as lust burned through the center of his stomach. He didn’t have time to properly seduce his girl, but a quickie never hurt anyone. He took a big bite and got up. “This is delicious. Best I’ve ever had.”

“You flatter me, boy.” Martha smiled as the rest of the table started to pipe in with their accolades over the dessert.

“I’ll be back for more in a few minutes.” Damon turned and lifted his spoon to his lips as he walked quietly through the hall toward Beth’s bedroom. She was staying with his father and her mother for a few weeks, but the time would come sooner than later where she would head back to campus, or they would get a place together.

The idea of sharing his house left Damon a little on edge. He was in love with Bethany, and wanted her in his bed every morning when he woke but living together?

“It’s the next step, asshole,” he mumbled and shoved another bite into his mouth.

“You talking to yourself?” Beth turned from the closet and smiled.

“Yeah. I’m the only one that doesn’t disagree with me.” He gave her what he hoped was a cheeky grin. “You really needed help getting your makeup bag?”

She laughed. “Yes. What did you think I needed?”

He set the bowl down on her nightstand, closed the door behind him and locked it. “That you wanted a quick fuck before I headed back to work.”

“You’re so vulgar.” She pulled her shirt over her head and walked around the bed, reaching for him as he crashed into her.

He pulled her in tight and leaned down to kiss her. The moan that resounded around him as she wrapped her arms around his neck was delicious. He gripped the back of her thighs and forced her to wrap her legs around him as well.

“I might be vulgar, but you’re naughty.” He moved her to the bed and laid her down before crawling on top of her. “You know I don’t have time to take care of you the way I like to.”

“Properly?” She ran her fingers through his hair and smiled up at him. “Get down here and kiss me until you have to go then.”

He growled softly and pressed himself tightly against her. She stole his breath with her innocent beauty. Did he deserve such an incredible woman? One who had been through so much? Would he even know how to treat her? To love her like she deserved to be loved?

“Stop thinking and start kissing.” She pulled him down for a long kiss that left them both panting. “I want more,” she whispered against his lips.

“Me too, but I need to get to the office. Hold that thought?” He licked her lips before grinding against her

softness. “I’ll be in Jamaica soon, and I plan on ravishing every inch of you.”

She moaned and slid her hands down his back to cup his ass. “We can’t start that process now?”

“No, pretty girl.” He nipped at her soft lips and brushed her hair back. “But imagine every bit of it. I expect you to give me full details on your daydreams, and you have to use naughty words when you tell me.”

She blushed and laughed. “Stop it.”

“Never.” He tucked his face against her neck and rocked against her a few more times.

If only life were that easy.

CHAPTER 47



BETHANY

The night had been filled with laughter and wine, the stories everyone told embarrassing to someone in the room. Each of them got their turn in the hot seat. Damon hadn't stayed long, but gave her a long kiss at the door and promised to be in Jamaica as soon as he could.

Bethany worked hard not to think about it as she moved into the airport the next morning, her mother beside her. They walked to the long line of people already there for check-in. Kent and Matthew had stayed back with the driver, pulling out luggage and checking it all on the curbside check in.

"I'm so nervous. Tell me this is going to be great." Her mom pressed her shoulder against Bethany's, her smile tight.

Bethany wrapped an arm around her mom and smiled down at her. "This is going to be a dream come true. We'll get checked in and get us a good magazine and a coke."

"You're right. I just feel so jittery."

"That's a good thing. This isn't just a vacation, Mom, but a huge change in your life. I'm so proud of you." Bethany squeezed her mom tightly before releasing her and moving up a little. She glanced over her shoulder, looking for Kent and Matt and not finding them yet.

"Well, your pushing a little helped. I probably would have stayed on the fence until I convinced myself that I was really good enough for Kent, which would never have happened."

“I do the same thing with Damon. I swear I’m waiting for the other shoe to fall. There’s no way someone as incredible and so put together could want me.” Bethany moved up another step.

“You have to be kidding me, right? You’re the full package. It’s him that should be worried.” Bethany’s mother cocked her hip and gave a funny look.

Bethany laughed and turned as Kent called to them.

“Girls. Come over here. Let’s take the premier line for check in.” He urged them to join him as Matt walked up to the counter.

Bethany repositioned her bag and shrugged as her mom glanced at her questioningly.

“You and I have a lot to get used to.” Bethany’s mom chuckled and moved back through the crowd.

“I’m just stoked to have more than one meal a day. Martha has officially spoiled me. She’s my favorite person now.” Bethany moved in behind her mom.

“Hey. Watch it. That’s my spot.” Her mom glanced over her shoulder, moving out of the long line of impatient people. They moved through the premier line within a few minutes and made their way to security.

Matt seemed to be laser-focused on getting them through the various stops and safely to the gate. His demeanor was all business, the sight of him being so demanding and taking charge almost comical. He did it well though.

They found the gate and sat down, Bethany looking up at him as he let out a long sigh.

“Your guard is down.” She tilted her head as her eyebrows lifted.

He looked down at his pants, checking his fly. “No, it’s not.”

Bethany rolled her eyes and stood, glancing down at her mom and Kent. “We’re going to get a drink and some snacks for the flight. You guys want anything?”

They put in their orders. Bethany slipped her arm into Matt's as they walked to the open market in the center of their terminal.

“Since when does someone refer to the fly on your pants as a guard?” She had to know.

“Hell, who knows. You kids today have all new names for old stuff. I thought you were talking about my pants. What guard is down?”

“Yours. You were very mature and businesslike back there. You better watch yourself, or your father might think you capable of doing something grown up, like running a business.”

“Oh no! You don't think he noticed do you?” Matt gave a look of panic, the expression melting into a sarcastic smile. “He's not fooled. Neither are you.”

“This is true.” Bethany released him and moved to pick up the latest fashion magazine. The girl on it looked far too familiar. She moved toward Matthew, making sure not to walk on the outside of the store and have the item pick up the security device. That's all she needed - to look like a thief.

“Matt. Do you know this girl?” She held up the magazine.

He scowled and pushed it away. “Ugh. I hate that bitch.”

Bethany pulled the magazine up to her face and studied the girl. “Is she on a TV show or something? She looks like someone I know.”

“You don't know her and be thankful. She and Damon were a thing a few times over the last thousand years. Her name is...”

Bethany cut him off. “Bridget.”

“Yes. Go put that up. Don't support her shit. She's a venomous snake. Not sure what my brother ever saw in her.” He turned and walked to the cash register with a bunch of items. “Grab what you want and come on. I'll buy, but you have five seconds.”

She chuckled, putting the magazine down and picking up a candy bar. She stood there for a minute more before picking it back up. She was a glutton for punishment. She had to have it, needed to know more about this girl. How in the world was she supposed to compete with a model?

You're not. Stop it.

Bridget was beautiful, no doubt. Her silky looking blond hair and big full lips had nothing on the mixture of blues that made up her eye color. Bethany dropped both on the counter, and Matt picked up the magazine.

“No. I’m not buying that. You seriously don’t want to know anything about her, Bethany. She’s a horrible person, and all you’ll see is what she wants you to see. She wears a tight mask.”

“Please? I want to read all the other articles.”

“You’re not getting it to read up on Damon’s old flame?”

“No. Promise.”

“Liar.”



The flight to Jamaica was much quicker than Bethany imagined, but most of that had to do with the fact that she had fallen asleep.

Matt pushed softly at her shoulder, waking her. She jerked up and looked around as everyone began getting up and pulling their bags from the overhead bins. Finally gaining awareness of her surroundings, she grabbed her magazine from the seat pocket in front of her and slipped it into her handbag.

“Come on, sleepyhead. No more rest for you.” Matt moved back and made room for her to get out.

The seats in first class were large and worn leather, so incredibly comfortable. She didn’t remember even hearing the safety announcements before she had passed out. Moving out

in the aisle, she lifted to her toes and spotted her mother and Kent getting off the plane in front of them.

“I didn’t even realize I was tired. I slept good last night.” She glanced back at Matt. “Are we going to baggage claim next?”

“Yeah. We’ll get our stuff and load it up on the resort’s van. They should be sending one after us.” He walked behind her as she moved off, the air warm around them in the tunnel that connected the plane to the terminal building.

“Is it an all-inclusive resort?” She slowed a little, letting Matt move up beside her as they walked out into the building. Her mother waved at her.

“Yeah. All the food and drinks you want. I wish I could enjoy it like you will, but I’ll be on a damn interview the whole time.” He grumbled under his breath about the lack of fairness in life.

“You aren’t in an interview. Just enjoy yourself. If Erica doesn’t like you for who you are then forget her, Matt. She’s not worth your time.”

“I don’t want her to like me. Relationships take work.”

They stopped in front of Kent and Bethany’s mom, Kent glancing between the two of them. “Matt bitching about Erica again?”

“He sure is.” Bethany glanced at Matt and smiled. “How on earth did you know?”

“Whatever...” Matt moved up to Bethany’s mom and offered his arm. “Karen, let’s leave these rascals and go have a lovely vacation with buffets and fruity drinks.”

“I’m with him.” Bethany’s mom laughed as they walked off together.

Bethany shook her head, glancing at her soon-to-be dad as he seemed to slow his stride a little.

“I wanted to tell you that I’m so far beyond blessed to have you and your mother in my life. I’m thrilled at the family unit we’re already becoming, and I want you to know something.”

He stopped, and Bethany paused beside him, turning toward him and begging the water works to stay down.

“What?”

“I know you and your mother had a rough go at life due to some of the decisions your father made. I’m not him. I will never be him, but if you ever see me slipping into someone you don’t like, someone you can’t respect, someone you question, come talk to me. Love me enough to let me know?”

Bethany nodded as her eyes filled with tears.

He extended his hands, and she slipped into his arms, wrapping him into a tight hug. Everything was going to be okay. Her mom would be taken care of and so would she. Warmth spread down her chest and rested in the center of it, the moment one she would remember forever.

Old hurts never left, but they could begin healing thanks to new treasures. She was grateful to have one in Kent.

Matt had forced Bethany to come to his room at the large, luxurious resort first. She was staying with Erica and Matt with Damon, but Damon, of course, wasn’t there yet. Bethany pulled her bag behind her down the long open halls until they reached Matt’s room.

“You know I want to go check out my tub and the bed in my room, right?” she huffed as he fumbled with the door.

“I know. You can go in a minute. I just wanted a few more seconds with you, okay?”

“All right.” Bethany couldn’t argue with someone wanting her time and attention. Especially someone like Matt. He had no self-confidence. That was the issue. Now, how to build it?

He opened the door and moved into the room, holding it for her. Two large queen beds filled up a small portion of the room, the rest being a living area with two couches and a small kitchenette. The view of the white sand beach just beyond the glass doors at the back of the room was breathtaking.

Bethany pushed her suitcase against the wall and walked toward it, pressing her hands to the glass and letting her eyes

move across the beautiful swell of the ocean as it crashed into the shoreline.

“I love the beach.” She glanced over her shoulder as Matt started to pace. “What’s the matter with you?”

“You slept the whole damn flight. I figured I could get you to help me work through this decision, but all I got was growls, snores, oh, and did you know that you talk in your sleep? Actually, you teach school. It’s creepy and somehow cute.”

Bethany turned and walked toward him, reaching out and taking him by the shoulders. “Talk to me about what decision?”

“Bethany... have you not been paying attention this last week? Half the reason Erica is here is to try and get me to come work for her at McKenzie and Bryant in the advertising group. She knows I’m a creative.”

“And that would be bad because?”

“Because I don’t want to wear a monkey suit and put on a mask every day. I like who I am, and freedom is key to me.” He pulled back and ran his hand through his messy blond hair.

“You’re an artist, Matt. You should be sharing your talent somewhere. If you don’t want to work in design with me, Damon and your dad, then start selling your art to galleries. Aren’t we going to Seattle next week with you for that very reason?”

“Yeah. I want to see what the guy thinks. What he has to offer. I need options, or I’m going to fold under the rationale she presents.” He turned and started to pace again. “It doesn’t help that I would give my left foot to see her naked.”

“Too much.” Bethany held her hands to her ears. “We’re not going there. That’s you and Damon’s talking moments.”

“Got it. Sorry. I’ll wait until Saturday evening when you’re my sister to talk about the perfect curve of her...” He paused and laughed as Bethany let out a long groan.

“Look,” Bethany removed her hands from her face and walked toward her brother, “talk to her. Just talk to her and see what she wants and what she’s offering. Tell her that you have another opportunity as well that you’re going to be checking out. We’ll go to Seattle in a week or so, and then you can make a decision.”

“You’re right. I don’t have to make a decision here.”

“Exactly. This is about relaxing. If you don’t want to talk business at all - tell her.”

“Okay. I can do this. I can do this.”

“I’m going to my room. I’m completely grossed out now.”

“Tell me what color her panties are later.” He winked and started to laugh as Bethany grabbed her suitcase, gave him a ‘go to hell’ look and slipped out.

Damon wasn’t the only lustful one. Apparently, Matt was too.

CHAPTER 48



BETHANY

Erica wasn't in the room when Bethany finally got the door open. Cold air hit her in the face as she walked into her room, the layout mimicking Matt and Damon's room. Erica had taken the bed far from the door from what she could tell. It almost seemed odd not to be rooming with her mom, but with her Aunt Patty coming later that day, she wasn't surprised. Her mom rarely got to spend much time with her younger sister. This would be good for both of them.

Bethany checked her phone and smiled, a message waiting on her from Damon.

Damon: Have fun for me. Text me when you get there, and I'll call you tonight.

Bethany: I'm here. It's beautiful, and you're sorely missed.

Damon: Matt losing his shit over Erica yet?

Bethany: How did you guess?

Damon: Welcome to my world. I'll call you tonight, baby. Be in your room by nine.

Bethany: So bossy.

Damon: I am your boss and your man. 9 on the dot.

Bethany: Yes Sir.

She shook her head and searched high and low for a plug for her phone. At least he was responding today. The audit had to be taking his full attention, so his willingness to give her a few seconds meant a lot. She needed to quit picking apart their relationship before it even began.

A knock at her door caused her to jolt. She turned and walked to it quickly, pulling it open and smiling as her mother turned in a full circle.

“Like my new sundress?”

“It’s beautiful mom. Looks great on you.”

The white dress with large yellow flowers looked really good on her mother, but the smile was what pulled it all together and left her looking beautiful.

“Aunt Patty here yet?”

“Nope. She will be here by two though. We’re meeting at one in the large wedding hall on the south end of the resort. I just wanted to stop by to tell you to be there.”

“Will do. I’m going to unpack, and I’ll come find you guys. Make sure you tell Matt. He needs to get out and be around other people. He’s a nervous ninny.”

“Crazy how different he and Damon are.” She glanced down the hall and waved, Erica walking toward them. “Speaking of, have you spoken to Damon?”

“We talked a minute ago. I told him we missed him and he told me to have fun.”

“Great advice.” Erica stopped in front of them and ran her hand down Bethany’s mother’s arm. “You look lovely.”

“Thank you, ma’am. A gift from my beau.”

“I want one.” Erica let out a soft sigh and shrugged her shoulders. The blond was a bombshell. It was no wonder Matt was overwhelmed by her. Her white pantsuit fit her athletic frame exceptionally well. It accented her dark blond hair and vibrant blue eyes. She should be on the front of the latest magazine, not Damon’s ex.

Remember to check that magazine out later.

“You want a sundress or a man?” Bethany’s mom asked and chuckled.

“Both?” Erica smiled and turned her attention to Bethany. “You like the room? We can totally switch beds if you want. I just grabbed one.”

“I’m good actually.” Bethany moved back to open the door. “You guys come in here. I just realized I was blocking the entrance.”

“I’m good. Just wanted to show you the dress. I’ll see you at one. Bring Erica with you if she’s done with her business stuff.”

“Will do.” Bethany leaned out the door and gave her mom a quick hug before the older woman walked off, twirling once more.

“Where are we going at one?” Erica walked into the room and sat down on her bed, tugging her heels off.

“They are decorating at one. You don’t have to go if you don’t want to. It’s probably going to be a lot of me getting in the way. I can’t color a picture right much less decorate for a wedding.” Bethany shrugged and moved toward the large floor-to-ceiling glass doors at the back of the room.

“I love decorating. Anything artsy fartsy and I’m in.”

Bethany glanced over her shoulder, smiling at Erica. Chances are, she was far more like Matt than even he realized.

“Good. You can come do my part then. I’ll just supply us with endless wine and jokes.”

“Endless wine is something I could go for.” Erica flopped back on the bed. “I’m going to close my eyes for a minute. If I pass out, wake me when it’s time to go?”

“You bet. Long morning?”

“God, yes. I swear working in Corporate America is a huge drag on my creativity. I’m glad that your dad allows me freedom to just be me. As much as he can, I guess.”

“Yeah, he’s a great guy.” Bethany walked around the large room, fiddling with various things and checking out everything that seemed to be part of the deal. “I think that’s the reason Matt runs so hard and fast from the idea of working for Kent. He’s worried about being shoved into a mold.”

“I get it, but with me protecting him as I do all of my staff, he’ll have far more freedom than he thinks.” She yawned softly, covering her mouth and apologizing.

“It’s all good. Take a nap, and we can catch up later.” Bethany opened her suitcase and pulled out a yellow sundress before heading to the bathroom to change. Her mother had the right idea. Wear very little, but remain classy and do it well.

She hoped she could pull it off as well.



Bethany woke Erica just before one. The pretty blond changed quickly, and they were on their way to locate the wedding reception room. The wind blew through the open ends of the hall, sweeping in behind and in front of them. The warmth caused Bethany’s skin to break out in chill bumps. She wrapped her arms around herself and breathed in deeply.

“Oh man. I need this serenity so much. Everything has been moving far too fast in my world for my liking.” Bethany glanced toward Erica, a flash of red catching her eye behind her.

“You’ll have to tell me about it sometime.”

Bethany nodded and turned, her eyes locating the source of the brilliant color. Matt.

“Hey, you. Come up here with us. We’re going to decorate. I bet you and Erica could get it done in half the time of the rest of us.” Bethany stopped and waited for Matt to join them. His bright red shirt had blue and yellow birds decorating every inch of it. It would have been tacky on anyone else, but on Matt it was fitting. He had it tucked into a pair of khaki slacks,

which fit him beautifully. He was bigger than Damon, his physique more that of a linebacker than a quarterback.

“I’m coming. Just didn’t want to interrupt any girl talk.” He moved up between them, offering his arm to each of them. “Erica.”

“Hi, Matthew. You look great. I love the shirt. Did you get it here?”

“Sure did. They have a kick-ass gift shop. You’ll have to check it out. Like an explosion of color.”

“You can take her later this afternoon,” Bethany suggested, glancing over at them.

Matt gave her a stern look and Erica nodded, as if thanking her.

“What’s on the agenda for today?” Erica asked as they turned to the right, another large hall opening in front of them. The signs on the wall pointed their way to the wedding hall, but the trip was quite a hike.

“Decorating is as far as I was given insight into the future.” Bethany smiled and pointed up ahead. “There’s the room. Let’s see what else we have to get done today.”

“Dad mentioned something about a large family dinner tonight. I assume that’s every night though.”

“Did Kent rent out one of the dining patios? They’re beautiful here.” Erica moved into the open room, Bethany following her as Matt held the door open for them.

“I’m not sure, but that would be awesome.” Bethany moved toward her mother, a thin red-headed woman barking out commands to the poor guys running around with white and light pink flowers.

“What’s awesome?” Her mother turned to her and gave a tight smile.

The other woman had to be Kent’s sister, Allison. Bethany turned to her mom as Matt called out to the bossy chick. It was Kent’s sister.

“There are large patios that you can rent to have dinner on. Did you know that?” Bethany reached out and tugged Erica over to join them, not wanting to leave the woman out of anything.

“Oh yeah. Kent’s got one rented for the time we’re here. Should be a lot of fun. It’s right on the beach. They bring in the chef to cook for the crowd.”

“I saw a few pictures on the Internet about it. Looks great.” Erica glanced over her shoulder, a frown sitting on her face. “Who is that chick? She has about five minutes to stop telling Matt what to do before I light into her.”

Bethany’s mother reached out and took hold of Erica’s arm. “Oh please go light into her. She’s driving me crazy, and we just got here.”

“Who is she? The wedding planner?” Erica asked.

“That’s Allison. Kent’s sister.” Bethany turned back to her mom. “What else are we doing today besides decorating and dinner?”

“Nothing. Dinner is at seven, so after this, your afternoon is open.” Her mom smiled and moved away from them, walking toward Allison. “The rest of the help is here. Let’s get started so everyone can relax a little before dinner.”

“Good.” Allison turned and pointed to Bethany and Erica. “You two, we’re going to weave the white and pink together, creating a lovely design that screams forever.”

“No, we’re not. Grab the lattice work and come help me. We’re going to work together on a design for the opening of the room. People should feel the sanctity of hope and love when they walk in.” Erica pointed to Allison and moved toward her.

Bethany stood in shock, her mom not moving beside her either. Allison’s face shifted from demanding to welcoming.

“Are you an artist?”

“I sure am. So is Matt. You can simply follow instructions now. Nothing is on your shoulders anymore. All mine.” Erica

moved closer and put her arm around Allison's shoulders, turning her and walking toward the flowers.

"Wow." Bethany's mom moved toward them, leaving Bethany standing there.

Matt walked up and stopped in front of her, taking her face in his hands and tilting her head up toward him. "You see what I mean? Crazy intimidating."

"I'm impressed. Like really impressed."

Matt released her and turned, looking over his shoulder. "I'm scared shitless."

"Don't shit those pants. I like them. They look hot on you." Bethany patted his back and started to move toward the others. She wanted to get the decorating part over with quickly. The sooner she was on the beach and enjoying the serenity she was after, the better.

"You think so? Think Erica likes them?" He jogged up beside her and elbowed her softly in the side.

"I know she does. I can see it in the way she watches you."

"Do you think I..."

"Stop right there, buddy. Once again, I'm not Damon."

"Damn near close." He laughed.

She couldn't help but consider his words a compliment. Now, if only Damon were there. Then everything would be perfect.

CHAPTER 49



DAMON

The make-out session the night before was just enough to set his nerves on edge. Maybe it was more than that. Maybe knowing that the whole family was flying out to Jamaica without him was part of it.

“Get over it.” Damon leaned toward the mirror in his large bathroom and pulled the razor down the side of his face as he eyed himself. How nice it would have been to let his sexy girl sit on the countertop in front of him and help him get ready for work.

Knowing the two of them, it would turn into something hot quick, and he’d be calling in - every day. A smile lifted his lip, and he accidentally nicked his chin.

“Dammit.” He set the razor down and grabbed the towel beside the sink to press it tightly to his face. He couldn’t help but wonder what everyone was up to. The quick text to Bethany had him thinking more and more about his family than he would have before meeting her.

Matt was terrified of Erica, which was almost humorous. They were a perfect fit for one another, and if Matt chilled the fuck out for a minute, he would see that.

Erica was a creative type, just like his brother. Too many meetings or a long night of working in the office, and her eye would start to twitch. She had a reason for being an executive at McKenzie and Bryant, but Damon wasn’t sure what it was. Wasn’t his place to ask.

After he had finished shaving, he dressed quickly, packed the rest of his stuff for the trip, and drove to the office in silence. It had been a long night of poring over reports and records, but he had an idea of how to fix the issue. The trip to Florida that he had scheduled in two weeks would allow for him to get some much needed face-to-face time with his staff and with Zarpeth's CEO, who was a long-time friend of his father's.

"I just need to close up the gaping holes, and I can get to my family." He parked and checked himself in the mirror before getting out of his car. Several familiar faces smiled, and a few waved as he made his way up to his office.

Everything seemed dull without Bethany there to add excitement to life. *What in the world did I do before her?*

"Morning, boss." Ben walked down the hall toward Damon, a smile on his face. "What are you doing here? I thought you guys were headed out for Jamaica."

"Everyone else left this morning. I'm supposed to head out tomorrow early, but I'm thinking I might be able to get out of here in a couple of hours. I spent a long night up here last night."

Linda stood from behind her desk and smiled. "I moved all of your meetings to next week. I have a flight that's headed out of here in two hours. You want to try and catch it?"

Ben cleared his throat. "None of my business, but I think that's a great idea. There isn't too much that you're going to be able to do on Zarpeth until you get out there in a few weeks."

"Very true." Damon glanced down toward his feet, trying to determine if there were anything else he could do before leaving that would help them with the inventory issue. "I just feel like I should be able to lock this up before I go. I'm not sure I'd be able to relax if-"

"One or ten margaritas and you're going to be great, boss." Ben patted Damon's chest. "I'm here if you need anything, and from what I hear, your dad has opened up a few positions to try and get some help in here."

“Really?” Damon’s eyes widened a little. “Not sure why he didn’t discuss that with me first.”

Linda leaned toward them. “Probably because you’re busy running the show around here, Damon. He knows how many hours you put in and all that you do.”

“True.” Ben smiled and walked toward the elevator, turning to speak over his shoulder. “Get out there to your family.”

“Yeah, soon.” Damon ran his fingers through his hair. “What were you doing up here anyway? Smelling the leather? Dreaming of the day when you have an office up here with the big boys?”

“Something like that.” Ben smirked as he pressed his back to the far side of the elevator as the doors closed.

“He said he wrote up your report for you.” Linda sat back down at her desk. “You had notes all over the place. Took him half the morning.”

Damon lifted his wrist to his face to check the time. “Half the morning? I left here at four, and it’s just now ten. When did Ben get in?”

“Around five from what he told me. He came up to help you wrap things up, but when you weren’t here, I guess he just gathered your notes and wrote the report.”

“Excellent.” Damon turned on his heel and moved into the office to look for the report. It was typed up and professionally bound in a black folder on his desk. Catching the flight to Jamaica wasn’t going to be hard to do at all, thanks to Ben being a team player.

“So... does this mean you want me to call a driver to take you to the airport?” Linda leaned against the doorframe and smiled.

“Yeah. Do that. I’ll be ready to go in fifteen minutes.”



Damon sat down in first class on the plane and let out a soft grunt as he stretched his legs out. The older woman beside him glanced over and smiled.

“I love it up here. I never thought I would be able to afford this, but my Fred finally made it big just before he passed.” She shrugged and leaned back in her seat.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Damon buckled his seatbelt and pulled the blind down on the window. “What did he do for a living?”

“Oh, don’t be sorry. He was a mean old bastard.”

Damon smiled, unable to help himself. Would Beth tell a similar story when he died of old age? Always sweet and loving to her, but a cock and a half to everyone else.

The woman crossed her arms over her thin frame and chuckled. “He worked in the shoe business. Built up a small chain of shoe stores around the nation.”

“Very interesting. What’s the name of the place?” He turned his head a little to focus on her. She was pretty and must have been a looker back in her time. Soft spoken, but there was a fire behind her eyes.

“Delany’s. It’s a chain now.” She glanced toward Damon. “Don’t let me bore you to death. A good-looking man like you, being bothered by an old woman like me when you’d much rather catch up on rest, I’m sure.”

Damon stifled the yawn building in the back of his throat. “I’m good. I slept like a baby last night.”

If you count the three hours of sleep I got.

“Well, you’re kind. Thank you.” She reached over and patted his arm. “Are you married?”

“Not yet, but I found the girl I’m going to marry.” He crossed his arms over his chest and forced himself to look alert. Before Bethany, he probably would have said something nice to the older woman and fallen asleep, but something about his woman softened him. Hopefully, it was only in the right ways.

“I bet she’s beautiful.”

“Absolutely. She’s got long brown hair and big green eyes. She’s sweet and sensitive, but bossy as hell.” He smirked. “I’m going to Jamaica to surprise her. She expects me tomorrow.”

“Oh, nice. She’s going to love that. You should take her flowers.”

“Do women really like flowers? Seems like a waste of money.” Damon chuckled at the look that passed across the woman’s face. She *obviously* liked flowers a lot.

“I think it’s more about the idea behind getting the flowers, but yes, women love flowers.”

“Why?” His eyes grew heavy.

“Because it says, I love you, or I care about you, and it does it in a soft, sensitive way.”

Damon nodded. “I could see that.”

“When are you getting married?”

“I’m not sure.” He reached up to press his hand to his mouth as a yawn escaped. “We’ve just started dating, but I want to move fast.”

“Scared to lose her?” The woman’s eyes twinkled with knowledge. As if she’d seen a million things and knew far too much for her own good.

“Something like that.” He brushed his hand over his lips. “I just feel like moving fast is perfectly acceptable when you know what you want.”

“I would agree. Fred and I dated for three weeks before he asked me to marry him, but that was the way things used to work. No reason to dilly-dally.”

Damon smiled as she continued.

“If you know who you’re supposed to spend the rest of your life with, why in the world would you tarry? Seems like a silly way to test fate. Just marry the girl, and the rest will work its way out.”

“Did you and Fred work out?” He mumbled as sleep pulled him farther and farther under.

“Yes. Fifty-eight years. I loved that old bastard with everything inside of me.”

“Do you miss him?” Damon tried to hold his eyes open, but it wasn’t going to happen. He finally gave in to the exhaustion plaguing him as she whispered a few more words.

“Every single day that goes by. Enjoy all of them, son. You never know when the ride’s going to stop.”

“You’re right. I will,” he whispered and gave himself over to the darkness as thoughts of Bethany filled his mind’s eye. They weren’t moving too fast.

At least not for him.

CHAPTER 50



BETHANY

They wrapped up the decorating after a few hours of moving quickly and following Erica's vision to the smallest detail. The room looked incredible, the vision of it bringing tears to Bethany's eyes. She moved toward the door and stepped out into the hall, wiping her face and walking in to take it all in once more.

"Looks good?" Erica called to her.

"I've honestly never seen anything so breathtaking. Great job to all of you."

Bethany's mom walked over and pulled her into a tight hug. "Thank you, baby. There's only a little clean up left to do. Go grab you a magazine and hit the beach. Enjoy yourself, and I'll come find you in a little bit."

"You sure?" Bethany squeezed her mom tightly once more and moved back.

"Yes. Go. I'll watch out for Matthew. I know he's a little nervous around Erica."

"Can you blame him? The woman's a beast."

Her mom chuckled and shook her head before walking back toward the rest of the crowd who seemed eager to keep going. Bethany let out a soft sound of appreciation and turned, slipping out into the hall and walking slowly back to her room.

She closed her eyes and imagined Damon's hand in hers; his strong fingers wrapped tightly around hers. Every part of her wanted him to be there. She swallowed down her

emotions, labeling herself as silly and picked up the pace toward her room.

Stopping in front of the room, she glanced down the hall to where Matt's room was, trying to think through how she was going to have a night alone with Damon with Erica in her room and Matt in his. It would make the most sense just to have them switch for that night, but where Erica might be comfortable with it, Matt would probably stain his nice slacks.

Bethany chuckled and pushed the door to the room open, moving in and pulling her bikini out. It was hot pink and had a few ruffles, which wasn't her style, but it accentuated the best parts of her and hid the rest. She changed into it and pulled her sundress back over her head. Grabbing a towel, she stopped by the front door and glanced toward her handbag where the magazine was. Nothing good would come of reading up on Bridget. It would only make her feel less worthy of Damon, and Matt was right. The girl could make you see whatever she wanted to simply because it was an article and not a real life encounter.

Would Bethany want to run into her in real life? No. She had seen her a few times and wasn't interested in seeing her again. Was Bridget a client of Damon's? Surely not. Probably so.

Making a split-second decision, she reached into the bag and pulled the magazine out, tucking it under her shoulder and slipping out in the tropical heat. The beach was just a left turn and out of the side of the building. She moved onto the white sand and glanced up and down the long strip of sand, only a few people laying out or resting.

Bethany let out a squeal of joy as the warm wind blew across her again, the sights and smells ushering in peace. She walked to the edge of the water, dipping her toes in and shivering. The water was far too cold to get into, but something told her that the minute Matt showed up, they would be swimming or fighting back waves like two ten-year-olds.

She laid her towel out and slipped out of her flip-flops before getting comfortable on her stomach. She wouldn't stay too long in case she burned, but an hour or so in the sun would do her good. Pulling the magazine out, she did the exact thing she promised Matt she wouldn't do - she flipped to the article on Bridget.

Miss America Teen. Check.

Works with the poor and homeless. Check.

Makes a ton of money through sponsorship. Check.

Heir to a large hotel conglomerate. Check.

No husband or love interest. Check.

She read the article word for word, the message of how great the girl was only causing her to feel more and more like shit. She closed it and chucked it in the sand next to her before pressing her forehead to her arms.

Why in the world would Damon and her not be together? She was drop-dead beautiful and seemed to have everything going for her.

Matt mentioned she was a bitch, but it was hard to picture a bitch working with the homeless and feeding the poor. Bethany let out a long sigh and tried to think about something else. Why had she bought the damn magazine in the first place? She had enough demons to slay where Damon was concerned and didn't need to add a hot blond to the mix.

She glanced up as someone approached, the sound of singing preceding them. Her mother.

“Hey, baby. Aunt Patty is going to be in later tonight. Something about her flight being delayed. You mind company?”

“Not at all. I can sit up and share my towel.” Bethany started to move, but her mother sat down in the sand next to her.

“I’m good just like this.” She stretched her legs out, her sundress covering far too much skin. Bethany reached over and yanked it up a little as her mom swatted at her hand.

“I had a cool moment at the airport with Kent.” Bethany glanced at her mom before tugging her sunglasses off her head and slipping them onto her face.

“Oh yeah? Tell me what happened.”

“He just told me that we’re both a blessing to him and that he’s not Dad. He promised to never hurt either of us, and he told me to love him enough to come talk to him if I felt like he was slipping on those promises.”

Bethany’s mom lifted her hand to her face and let out a soft cry. Bethany reached over and rubbed her mom’s leg, the years of pain and agony having been a common sharing between them for so long.

“I’m so glad you found him, Mom,” Bethany whispered and removed her hand from her mom. She reached out and took the magazine and tossed it behind her, not wanting to watch Bridget smiling up at her any longer.

“Me too.” Bethany’s mother sniffled once before reaching behind them. “Who is this?”

She held the magazine up and turned it to Bethany.

“It’s Damon’s ex. I’ve seen her around the last few weeks, but finding out that she was, or is, a model is a little deflating.”

“Why? What she does has very little to do with who she is as a person.”

“Yeah, I guess, but she’s insanely pretty.” Bethany pressed her forehead back to her hands, not wanting to dive any deeper in the self-pity pool that hovered just before her.

“You’re much prettier, and I’ll point out the obvious for you too... Damon is with you. Not her.”

“That’s true.” Bethany closed her eyes and listened to the sound of the water crashing along the shore. “I wish he were here. I swear just being together has turned me into a basket-case. I hate that I need him to constantly be positive and

validating all the time. I'm trying to figure out how to just let him be himself. It's driving me crazy."

"It's all part of the growing process baby. A relationship doesn't develop overnight, and neither does trust nor comfort. You have to continue to work together to dissolve both of your worries and insecurities. Love has the power to do that, but it takes time to develop too."

The touch of her mother's hand brushing along her back caused her to relax. She was right. They just needed time and a lack of drama. Bethany mumbled 'thanks' and let herself drift into a daydream, Damon the center of it and his need for her insatiable.



She glanced up a little while later to find the beach empty beside her. Her mother must have gone back in at some point. Sitting up, she brushed the sand from her shoulders before moving to pack her stuff up. The sun had started to set, so it must have been getting close to dinner time. She finished putting her stuff in her bag and tugged it over her shoulder, grateful that she didn't feel the pain of being burnt.

She walked back toward the hotel as Matt walked toward her, his face set in a grimace. Either something was wrong, or Erica had cornered him. The former of the two seeming more likely.

"There you are. Shit. I've been looking everywhere for you." Matt stopped in front of her.

She walked past him, motioning for him to join her. "Let's walk and talk. I need a quick shower before dinner and have had enough sun for one day."

"Yeah, sure. I was in the bar, getting one of those fruity drinks you love, you know, in honor of you, and guess who the fuck I saw."

"In honor of me, huh?" Bethany rolled her eyes at him and stopped outside of her room, turning to pin him with her stare.

“Who did you see?”

He reached around her and plucked the magazine from her bag, holding it up and pointing to the pretty model on the front. “Bridget. She’s here with her sister’s bachelorette party. I could honestly throw up all of the coconut milk and mashed bananas I just consumed to take the rum down smoothly to my belly.”

“You’re shitting me.” Bethany reached out and took the magazine back, shoving it back in her bag. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“I wish I were. I need to tell Damon, just to prepare him. He can’t stand this chick.”

Bethany nodded, not able to do much more. She reached out and patted Matt on the chest, trying to keep her emotions on lockdown.

“Tell him I said hi if you talk to him. I’ll see you at dinner, and we can talk more.” She winked and turned, opening her door and slipping inside. A quick shower and she would be on her way to dinner. It would be a long hour of pretending like everything was fine because she damn sure wasn’t going to let on that she felt any intimidation at all.

The girl was only a model, an heiress, a saint. What was there to be intimidated by?

CHAPTER 51



BETHANY

Dinner was delicious, and the company was superb. Matt seemed to have a second sense that she was upset, or should be. He sat beside her the whole night, making jokes and calling attention to himself, which diverted it from her. She laughed more than she remembered doing for a long time. All of her worries over Bridget, her friends, and her relationship with Damon seemed to melt away. Being in the presence of people she loved and that loved her made all the difference in the world.

When dessert was presented, Bethany excused herself, the clock on the wall close to her reading eight fifty-five. She didn't want to miss an opportunity to talk to Damon and wouldn't survive him being a dick because she was late. His timetable was only set to remind her that he was in charge and for the moment - she was good with that. She needed him to be in charge, to take charge of her.

Matt looked disappointed when she stood up and said her goodbyes.

“What? Dessert just got here. What girl passes up flourless chocolate cake? Is the world ending?” Matt lifted an eyebrow.

Bethany leaned over and whispered in his ear. “The hottest guy I know is calling in five minutes. He's a bit of a stickler on time. I don't want to miss the opportunity to tell him that I love him.”

“Oh!” Matt moved back and smiled. “Then get out of here. I totally get it.”

She kissed her mother's cheek and walked back to the room, her hair down and tickling her shoulders as it danced around her. She felt beautiful in the dress, but it had to be something to do with the ambiance that the beach provided. It was warm and sensual, relaxing and capable of sweeping her into fantasy after fantasy.

Her phone buzzed as she pushed the door to her room open, Damon never missing an appointment, whether it be with her or anyone else.

Flopping down on the bed, she pressed the talk button and held it to her ear. She wasn't going to let the vacation be ruined because Bridget was there. Chances are that she was a great person and she and Damon just didn't mesh well. No need to bring it up and have the focus be on his ex rather than on the two of them.

"Hi baby," she spoke softly into the phone as weariness clung to her.

"Hi, Beth. Tell me about your day." He was forever demanding.

"We got here, and shortly after that I talked Matt off a cliff over Erica being here. Came to my room and talked to her for a minute. Unpacked and then we went to help decorate. I met your Aunt Allison."

"Oh shit... I bet that was an adventure of sorts."

"You could say that."

"Did she boss everyone around properly?"

"Nope. Erica took over and told her very professionally to step back and shut the fuck up. I was impressed."

Damon let out a short laugh, the deep timbre of his voice rolling over her.

She had whispered her thoughts before she realized what she was doing. "I want you here with me."

"I want to be there too, baby. I will be soon. I'm trying to get all this shit wrapped up, so it doesn't blow up further. I'm putting a Band-Aid on it now, and I'll fix it for good when I

travel to Florida.” He let out a long sigh, and Bethany closed her eyes, just wanting to hear him breathe.

“I got to spend some time on the beach, and then we had a big dinner. Your brother was the center of attention, which was more than fitting. He’s a total ham.” Bethany moved up on the bed until her head rested on one of the fluffy white pillows.

“Mmmm... did you get some sun?”

She glanced down at herself, tugging her sundress to the side a little. A soft line of darkness showed up where her bathing suit wasn’t. “I sure did. It looks good.”

“What did your bathing suit look like? Did you wear the white one or the black one?”

“I bought a pink one for the trip.”

“I haven’t seen that one yet. Why not?” His voice hardened a little. The sound caused Bethany’s stomach to tighten. He was so fucking hot.

“I was waiting to show you when we got here. I’ll pull it out when you get here.”

“Is it a full piece or a bikini?”

“It’s a bright pink string bikini. Are we really going to talk about my bathing suit instead of something more important?” She let out a short laugh.

“I like talking about what you’re wearing. Helps me imagine how I’m going to slowly strip you out of it.” His voice deepened as static picked up in the background, as if he were moving around.

She didn’t want to ask and break the spell he was slipping under. He needed her. She could hear it in the way he spoke, the things he wanted to know, the demanding tone that beckoned her to tell him what every stitch on the damn bathing suit looked like.

“I’d like that a lot. I wanted to spend hours sprawled out across your big four post bed last night before we left. I kept imagining all the things you would do to me.” She cupped the

phone to her ear and slid her hand down her stomach before cupping herself, applying a little pressure and closing her eyes.

“I wanted that too baby.” He moved around a little more. “Let’s give you a little bit of relief now though... hmm?”

“How?” Her eyes opened as her heart began beating faster. Surely he didn’t mean what she thought he did. He was bold and brazen, but she wasn’t sure she could keep up. Nervousness rose in her stomach and rushed upward, threatening to take her voice from her.

“Go lock the door.”

“I can’t. Erica is staying with me.”

“I didn’t ask that, Beth. Get up and go lock the door.”

She let out a soft sigh, but got up and locked the door. “She’s going to be back any minute.”

“Dinner was at seven and Matt’s there. She’ll be back at ten and not a minute before.”

Bethany started to protest, but he cut her off. “What are you wearing? Give me details so I can imagine it.”

“A yellow sundress.” She climbed back onto the bed, her voice shaking slightly.

“And underneath it. Tell me what you have on under your pretty dress.” His voice was steady, the lust in it ever-present.

“A pair of white panties.”

“No bra?”

“No. It doesn’t really allow for it. I had on a bathing suit top earlier, but it’s off now.”

“Mmmmm. I love your breasts. Tug your top down and slide your hands up your ribs, cupping yourself. Let it be my hands, baby. Tell me how much you can hold, Beth. Are your hands big enough?”

She slid her hands up and curved them around the base of her breasts, her hands barely covering anything. “I can’t wrap my hands around them.”

“I can’t either baby. I love trying though. How about your nipples. Tell me the texture. The color.”

Bethany opened her eyes for a second and glanced down, her breasts sitting heavy, her nipples budded tightly simply from the neediness of his voice.

“Dark pink and so hard. I want your mouth all over them.”

“All over you, girl. It’s going to be all over you.”

“Please?” She ignored the sound of her voice, focusing on his alone.

“The little white panties are still on, right?”

“They are.”

“Good girl. Keep them on. It will increase the pressure I want you to feel.”

“Damon. I can’t do this. I’ve never...”

“You’re not going to do anything you haven’t done before. This time you just get to hear my voice as you imagine it to be me. I need you to be my hands until I can get to you. Can you do that for me? Nothing uncomfortable, just me and you, baby.”

She closed her eyes and sat in silence for a minute, wanting so badly to give in fully to him, but unable to push past her reserve. He had seen her deep in ecstasy. Would this be any different?

“All right. I’ll try for you.”

“No, Beth, try for us. Just listen to the sound of my voice. Get comfortable and close your eyes. Tug your dress up over your thighs for me.”

She followed his instructions and kept her eyes closed, her breathing shaky and shallow. She couldn’t do this.

“Run your hands over your thighs, so taut and tight. I love your legs, Beth. Squeeze your thighs and let me hear you enjoy it.”

She applied pressure to her thighs, her mind's eye slowly taking her out of the equation and depositing him between her legs, his hands on her. She moaned softly, letting her legs fall more open.

"Touch me," she whispered, needing him to mark every inch of her.

"Yeah, baby. I'm gonna touch you everywhere. You're my girl. It's only me who gets the pleasure of touching you."

She moaned again, squeezing her thighs harder.

"That's it, Beth. Open your legs all the way, baby. Slide those hands up your thighs and over your smooth stomach for me. I want to spend a whole night exploring you, my lips brushing over your tight little tummy."

She slid her hand up her thighs and over her stomach, moving them down to cup her sex again. She arched her hips, pressing against her hands as she flooded with lubrication.

"Oh God," she groaned as she jerked her hips again.

"You're so needy, Beth. I'm going to take care of that baby. Slip one of your hands into your panties and tell me what you feel. Don't penetrate my opening. That's for me. You tell me what you feel though, baby. I need to imagine it."

"So soft and silky, wet." She arched her hips again, her mind giving her a complete vision of him watching her wickedly as he played with the most intimate parts of her.

"Yeah. Sloppy wet, right?"

"Mmmhmmm. I need you," she whispered again, starting to slide her fingers down toward the soft pulsing sensation at her entrance.

"No. No slipping your fingers inside of you yet. Tease your clit. Rub the pads of your fingers over it softly twice and then pinch it and tug a little. Let me hear you. Do it, Beth."

She followed his instructions, her body screaming for penetration. The moving in the background on the phone got worse, but she ignored it. She didn't want to lose him, didn't want to lose the moment. She needed it so badly.

A groan left her as she touched herself exactly as he prescribed.

“Oh, baby. My cock is aching in my pants for a long night of fucking you. I need you wrapped around me, Beth. You want that?”

“Fuck yes.” She slid her fingers down her swollen lips again, pressing against her entrance as she let out a long groan.

“Let me in. I’m going to take full advantage of that need that’s fucking you already.”

“Yeah. Make it hard and fast,” she whispered and started to press her fingers inside of herself as a knock resounded at the door.

Bethany jerked up and tugged her dress down, her head spinning at how far she had slipped into the moment with him. “Fuck. Someone’s here.”

“Let me in, Beth.”

“I can’t right now, Damon. Erica is probably at the door. We can finish it later. I’ll go to the bathroom or something.” She walked to the door and tugged it open, shock rolling over her as Damon stood in front of her, his eyes hooded, and expression demanding carnality.

CHAPTER 52



BETHANY

There wasn't time to react or to say anything. Damon crashed into her, pushing the door shut behind him. He was on top of her, his body hard and more than ready for everything he had promised. Beth wrapped her arms and legs around him, kissing him several times before moving her tongue up the side of his neck.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" She tugged at his shirt as he moved up a little to start removing clothes.

"Making love to my woman."

"You were on your way here the whole time?" she growled at him and started undoing buttons.

He chucked his shirt behind him and fell back on top of her, his hands moving to cup her butt and rub against the wetness he created.

"Yeah. I wanted the foreplay over so I could just fuck you long and hard. Forgive me." He kissed her chest again before tugging her straps loose and pulling the front of her dress down. "Fuck yes."

She arched, screaming softly as the fingers of one of his hands slipped inside of her, his mouth spreading over her breast as he sucked her nipple into hot wetness.

"Oh God. I'm gonna come. I was so close from your fucking teasing." She arched her hips as he fucked her harder with his strong fingers. She screamed as her body twitched deep inside her womb.

He flicked her nipple with his tongue, glancing up and growling, “Come hard for me, Beth.”

She rode the orgasm, so beyond grateful that he was with her. She left her modesty at the door and jerked her hips back, massaging herself with him. She stilled a few moments later, panting and covered in a light sheen of sweat.

Her heart melted as she glanced up. He watched her intently, his dark hair a mess, his eyes glossy with need.

“Get your pants off and remind me why I put up with you,” she barked at him as the side of his sexy mouth lifted in a smirk.

“Oh, I’m gonna show you why you’ll always want to deal with me. Turn over on your stomach and put your ass in the air. Time to teach you a few lessons.”

Damn if she didn’t roll over and press her knees to the bed, her dress rolling up her back. He pulled her up and tugged it off before running his hands over her breasts, down her stomach and pressing in tightly to her hips.

She groaned again before leaning over and sliding her hands up the bed. She didn’t care if anyone walked in. There was nothing that could stop this moment between them.

“Hold on to the sheets baby. I’m over-stimulated tonight. My cock’s thick and fucking longer than I’ve seen it in a while. Tell me if I hurt you.” He pressed forward, his body opening hers slowly.

Bethany pushed up to her hands, forcing herself back against him. She was beyond wet and yet it still took a few hard strokes for him to slide into her fully. She bit her lip, her mind splintering as pleasure ran through her. Damon leaned over and slid his hand between her breasts, cupping her throat and pulling her up on her knees, her back to his chest.

“There it is. Balls deep, Beth. How in the fuck your tight little pussy is holding all this dick, I have no clue. So fucking hot. You want me to plunge it in and out of you, baby? Tell me, and I’ll take you over the edge as many times as you can handle. I want to hear my name on your tongue.”

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice lost to need. A long whimper left her as he pressed against her, his motion pressing him against her ass tightly.

“I want in there. You know I do, right?”

“I know. I want it too.” She turned from him and pressed her hands back to the bed before pulling forward a little and slamming back onto him.

“My turn.” He slid his hand along the curve of her ass and took hold of her hip with the other hand. His thrusts were deep and hard, her whole body shaking as she moaned loudly with every violent impact.

She wanted to utter a million things, but couldn't seem to put a cognitive thought together. Nothing made sense but needing more of him. He was so far beyond sexy, the deep grunts that lifted from him doing nothing but making her want to open herself to anything he wanted of her.

His thumb brushed by her ass, rubbing softly over her entrance. “I wanna feel the tightness of your ass, Beth. Tell me I can press into it.”

“Fuck me,” she groaned as he slid his finger into her, his cock stretching her as it seemed to thicken more.

“Every day for the rest of your life, bad girl.”

The slapping of their bodies mixed with the depravity of wanting to explore the idea of him replacing his thumb with his large cock almost did her in. She pressed her face to the bed as liquid pooled around her lips. She wanted to taste him, wanting him to take hold of her and make her everything he ever wanted in his wildest fantasies.

He changed the pace of his finger fucking to rub against the deep press of his cock inside of her and that was it. She stiffened as heat burst from the center of her stomach and rolled across her back. The hair at the back of her neck lifted and she screamed his name over and over as he picked up his strokes, fucking her hard and mercilessly. The orgasm wouldn't stop, his fingers working overtime to force the fire to blaze inside of her.

She pressed back against him, rolling and rocking her hips as he struggled to breathe.

“I’m going to lose my load, Beth. Stop that shit, you wicked little bitch.” He reached up and slid his hand into her hair, pulling back a little as she groaned loudly, wanting him to pull more.

Something about pleasure mixed with controlled pain threw her into ecstasy faster than anything else. She worked him harder, going against his desires and listening intently for the change in his breathing. He released her hair and dug his fingers into her hips as he released a loud, guttural groan. He continued pumping in and out of her as he bent over and pressed his teeth into her back, tugging softly at the flesh as she arched her back and milked his cock for all it was worth.

Damon pressed a shaky hand to her before licking along her back and over the curve of her ass. He pulled out and let out another groan. Bethany collapsed on her stomach, the air so damn hard to breathe.

“Roll over and let me hold you, lover.” Damon moved down and pressed his body against the top of hers, brushing her hair back and kissing her lips a few times. “I couldn’t imagine you being here without me. What if you found some hot cabana boy who could fuck better than me?”

She let out a short laugh, her fingers running up and down the damp skin of his muscular back. “That isn’t possible. You are the best fuck, ever.”

“That’s almost crude, dirty girl.” He nipped at her lips and rolled off of her and onto his back. He reached for her, and she moved toward him, tucking against his side and glancing up at him.

“Erica is going to be back any minute, baby. You need to go.”

“Nah. Matt knows I’m here. He was helping me with keeping you occupied until I could get here. He’ll tell Erica. I’m not sleeping anywhere but tucked against your naked body.”

She smiled and snuggled in closer, brushing her fingers over the sensual muscles of his stomach. The tight black curls that dusted the trail to his thick cock was such a tease. She brushed her hand over his semi-erect dick, squeezing it as he growled.

“You’re not even going to get a nap tonight if you keep it up.” He glanced down at her and nudged her to look up at him. He brushed his lips past hers. “So fucking beautiful, baby. Did you know that?”

“What? That our sex is beautiful?”

“That you’re beautiful. You’re everything I want in my life. Don’t forget that. I’m in this for the long haul. Just give me a little bit of grace when I dick up because I will. I always do.” He reached up and ran his fingers through his wet, dark hair.

“I love you,” she whispered and pressed a kiss to the side of his chest.

“I love you too, Beth. Close your eyes and get some rest. We’ll get a shower in the morning and go see everyone together.” He leaned down and kissed her again.

“I don’t want to ruin the moment... but I have to ask you something.”

“Anything.”

“Matthew ran into Bridget, your ex, earlier today. I guess she’s here for a bachelorette party or something.” Bethany glanced down, not sure where she was going with the conversation or why the hell she would bring it up. She cursed herself internally for saying anything. What was wrong with her?

“And? What about it?” He looked down at her, brushing his lips over her forehead.

“I don’t know. She’s just beautiful and, I guess I...”

“You nothing. She is beautiful, but not at all in the way you are. She’s painted up beautifully. Some guy gets paid shit tons of money to make her look like you do when you roll out

of bed. Don't assume I'm an asshole just because I play one on T.V."

She laughed and popped him in the chest.

He caught her hand and pulled it to his mouth.

"I'll tell you anything you want to know about our relationship tomorrow. Right now I just made love to the only woman I love. I don't want to think about or talk about anything but you and me."

"Okay. I'm sorry I brought it up."

"I'm not." He brushed his hand over her hip, squeezing softly. "Are you on the pill? We might need to use condoms if not."

"I am. We're good." She snuggled in tightly. "Do you want kids? In the future, I mean?"

"I do. I want two or three."

"Boys or girls?"

"Whatever we're gifted with."

"We?" Bethany moved to her elbow, her heart filling up and overflowing.

"Who else would I plan a future with?"

"I don't know." She leaned over and pressed her lips to his chest, brushing them down to his nipple before licking it a few times. He groaned and pulled her on top of him.

"We have a long time to decide all of that. The next year can just be about learning each other, figuring this thing out and solidifying who we are as a couple." He ran his hands over her shoulders and down her arms.

Bethany rocked her hips sensually, wanting so badly for every word he promised to come true. It seemed too good to happen. Them together forever? What could be better?

"Make love to me, Beth. Take me inside of you and lock us together once again. I don't think I could ever get enough of

the sounds of your pleasure and knowing I'm responsible for it."

She shifted her hips, positioning the head of his cock at her entrance. "Only you."

"Only me, baby." He pressed her shoulders down and groaned with her as she began her assault, needing to take their love-making through the night and deep into the early morning.

He was right about one thing, she was a greedy little thing - for him.

CHAPTER 53



DAMON

He laid beside her, watching her sleep for what seemed like forever. The ache in the pit of his stomach was a staunch reminder that he hadn't eaten anything for dinner.

Damon rolled onto his back and closed his eyes, breathing in deeply and trying to decide if ordering room service was his next step, or going down to the hotel bar. It was probably located on the beach, and with his luck, he'd run into Bridget, but something had to give.

He rolled over and got out of bed as quietly as possible before pulling on a pair of slacks and a t-shirt. The concern over bumping into his ex was silly and unfounded. There was nothing at all to worry about. Bridget was still lusting over him after their last breakup, but she always would. The bitch loved to play the odds more than anyone else he knew.

If it wasn't likely that she could get something, she wanted it more. He smirked as he shuffled around and finally found the room key. He couldn't help but think of all the times in the past where he would hold something back from Bridget just to watch her come undone.

"So damn dramatic." He opened the door carefully and slipped out into the hallway. The breeze rolled through the open-ended area and left him relaxed. Maybe it was more than the atmosphere. Making love to Beth for a few hours was more than enough to relax him.

"If I weren't starving to death, I'd be asleep."

"Who are you talking to?" Matt whispered harshly.

Damon glanced over his shoulder and lifted his eyebrow. “What the fuck are you doing sitting out in the hallway?”

“You took Erica’s room, and now she’s in my room.” Matt stood up and walked toward him. “What did you expect? I need to just get another room. I’ve been pacing outside the damn door for almost an hour.”

“What the hell is the matter with you, knucklehead?” Damon wrapped his arm around the back of his brother’s neck and pulled him toward the large opening at the end of the hall.

“I told you already that she does strange things to me.” Matt let out a long sigh. “I’d rather not go into it.”

“All right, but stop being a weirdo and go into the damn room. There are two beds.”

“Let me just come into your room. Surely you and Beth are done for the night.” Matt pulled out of Damon’s hold and slipped his hands into his pockets.

“Beth and I are just getting started. Get your own damn room.”

“I had one until you fucked it up.” Matt stopped a few feet from the bar and tilted his head to the side. “Is that Dad? What the hell is he doing out here?”

Damon smiled and pulled off his shoes before stepping into the sand. “No clue, but I’m glad to see him. We didn’t get to catch up when I got here.”

Matt followed beside Damon without a word, which was unlike Matt. Damon glanced over at him and poked him with his elbow.

“You okay?” Damon stopped behind their father and reached up to squeeze his father’s shoulder.

Matt shrugged. “I’m fine. I guess.”

Damon’s father glanced over his shoulder. “My two favorite boys in the world. Come to join your pops for a late night drink?”

“Something like that.” Matt climbed up on the stool beside him, and Damon took the other side.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Damon reached over and rubbed the top of his father’s back.

“No. I don’t know why either.” Damon’s father picked up his beer and finished it before lifting it up toward the bartender. “Another please.”

“Two more of those.” Matt nodded toward the beer bottle.

“Make it three.” Damon smirked and pressed his forearms to the bar in front of him. The idea had been to grab a quick bite to eat and get back to the warmth of his naked woman snuggled under the covers. It looked like that wasn’t going to happen.

Hopefully, she’ll stay asleep until I get back.

“You nervous?” Matt leaned forward and glanced back at their father.

“I don’t think so.” He shrugged. “I’m one hundred percent sure about that. Those aren’t odds I deal with very often.”

“I’d take that deal without blinking an eye.” Damon smiled as his father glanced over at him.

“I think you already have that deal. I’ve never seen you leave work early.”

Matt chuckled. “Is the situation under control?”

Damon stiffened. “Of course it is. I didn’t leave shit in disarray. I wrapped it up as best I could for now, and I’ll fix the rest when I head down to Florida soon.”

“Is it bad?” His father’s eyebrows pulled in tight.

“It’s ugly, but we can fix it. I just need some time with the team and with the executive team at Zarpeth.” Damon rolled his shoulders. “I’d rather not talk about work. I need a break from all of it.”

“No, I agree.” Matt picked up a menu. “I’m starving. You guys want to split some appetizers.”

“Are they still serving food this late?” Damon’s father leaned back and let out a long sigh.

Damon waved at the bartender and reached for the menu in front of Matt. “You guys still serving food this late?”

“We sure are, sir. What can I get you?” The middle-aged native leaned forward and pointed to the top of the menu. “This platter is one of our top sellers. Never had a complaint off of it.”

“We’ll take it.” Damon handed the guy the menu and glanced behind him to see a large group of women sauntering up from the water. “That looks dangerous.”

Matt spun around in his seat and kept spinning. “Yep. Drunk women can only mean one thing.”

“Trouble,” Damon and his father echoed each other.

The three of them laughed.

“Things are changing fast, aren’t they?” Damon’s dad glanced back and forth between Damon and Matt. “I mean, it wasn’t that fast, but now that we’re here, it sure feels like it. You guys okay with everything that’s happening? Me marrying Karen and all?”

“Dad, we’re grown men.” Damon snorted and glanced over at Matt. “Well, at least I am.”

“We’re good with it, Dad.” Matt rolled his eyes and flipped Damon off as their father glanced toward Damon.

“And you’re not upset that me marrying Karen puts you and Bethany in an awkward position?”

“No. It’s not going to affect us, Dad.” Damon reached out and squeezed his father’s shoulder. “We’re not blood-related, and I figure we’re smart people... we can work through anything that comes against us.”

“Speaking of shit coming against you,” Matt started, his words gaining Damon’s attention. “Did you get to talk to Bethany before you guys-”

“Hey. Don’t go there.” Damon lifted his hand, warning his little brother. Making Matt eat sand at one in the morning would be worth the ass-chewing he would get from his father if he did it. “And yeah, she told me that Bridget was here.”

” Bridget, as in your ex?” Damon’s father turned in his seat to fully face him. “What are the odds?”

Damon turned and took the beer the bartender set in front of him. He drank deeply from the bottle before shaking his head and growling. “Figures, right? The past is always looking for a way to rise up and bite you in the ass.”

“She doesn’t mean shit to you anymore, Damon. Just let it go. If we run into her, just be nice and ignore anything else she throws your way. You know she’s a vindictive bitch.”

“Matthew. Jeez. When did your language get so bad, son?” Their father spun around to face Matt.

Damon wagged his eyebrows and pointed at Matt like he’d done most of his life when his father wasn’t looking.

“Sorry, Dad. I’ve been hanging around Damon a lot lately. It’s tarnishing me, obviously.”

“Nope. I’m not accepting responsibility for your trashy language.”

“Trashy?” Matt’s eyes filled with challenge.

“Boys. Come on. You’re grown. You don’t-”

“First one in the water wins.” Damon turned and ran toward the water while trying to chug down the rest of his beer. He tossed the bottle behind him and pulled at his shirt. The vision of Matt moving up beside him in his peripheral vision had him pumping his arms and legs faster. There was no way in heaven or hell that he was going to let his little brother get one over on him.

“I’m catching up.” Matt pushed at Damon, trying to knock him off balance.

Damon laughed and swung at Matt, hitting him in the chest about the time they reached the water. It was enough that Matt

lost his balance and fell over, leaving Damon to run into the ocean alone.

“I won.” Damon turned around and lifted his arms to the sky.

“Won what? Food’s here. I’m going to eat the whole fucking plate before you get back up here.”

Damon realized what his little brother had done and started back out of the water.

Matt laughed and backed up as another group of girls walked down the beach. “Ladies. My brother is Dallas’ most eligible bachelor, and he’s looking for a good time.”

“Matt Bryant. I’m going to whoop your ass.” Damon walked out of the water and lifted his hands as the girls moved closer to introduce themselves.

“I won,” Matt called over his shoulder and walked back to the bar.

“Yep. You won,” Damon grumbled and started to make his way through the crowd. Matt might have won the battle, but Damon would win the war. He’d just tell Bethany that Matt tried to set him up with a gaggle of half-naked drunk girls on the beach. Damon laughed at the thought. His poor brother didn’t know what was headed his way.

He almost felt sorry for the guy.

Almost.

CHAPTER 54



BETHANY

Bethany woke to the sound of the shower going. She stretched, the soreness between her thighs delicious and a great reminder. She had the most aggressive, demanding man in the universe. She smiled and sat up, more than happy to give over to his cravings anytime.

She ran her fingers through her hair and walked into the bathroom, slipping into the shower with him.

“Good morning, sexy girl.” He turned and reached for her.

Bethany moved toward him, sliding her hands up his thick chest and over his shoulders. His body was honed for sex, his face model material. She lifted to her toes and pressed a long kiss on his mouth, the warm water rushing over her.

She pulled back and reached for the soap before rubbing it all over him. Using her fingernails, she made small circles over his skin to make sure he was completely clean.

“My turn,” he mumbled, his eyes hooded again.

“No way. We have breakfast this morning that I plan on making. Every time it’s *your turn* we end up sweaty and covered in come.” She laughed and ran her hands over him again, washing away the soap.

“I’m not sure that I heard a complaint in there.” He turned and lifted his hands. “Wash my back, my ass, my legs.”

“So bossy.” She moved up and enjoyed every second of fulfilling his request.

“You know my response to that.” He arched his back, pressing his ass into her hands even more. She leaned into him, rubbing her breasts over his back and licking at the side of his neck.

“We’re going to be late.”

“No. I’m getting out, though I’m considering asking you to stroke my cock a few times before I go.” He glanced over his shoulder and gave her a look that would melt hearts.

“No need to ask.” She reached around him and tugged at his cock a few times as she turned her kisses into long bites, her teeth sinking into him as he shuddered.

He pressed his hand over hers, his rhythm faster and harder than what she was currently doing. She slid her other hand down the outside of his thigh, her nails grating him as he jerked forward. He groaned a few times before his breath caught. His seed spilled out onto their conjoined hands, and she stroked him a few more times, making a beautiful mess.

“So far beyond sexy, Damon. I want to drown in you, baby.”

He groaned again and jerked his hips before pulling her hand from him. He washed her fingers and let her go, turning to slip his hands into her hair and pull her up for a long, hot kiss.

“I love you. Wash up, and I’ll make sure to return the favor when you least expect it.” He kissed her again and got out of the shower.

Bethany moved up as she tried to still her racing heart. “Why does that leave me more worried than excited?”

“Because you know me too well?” The shower curtain opened at the back, and she turned in time to see his hand coming toward her. He popped her ass hard and slipped out of the bathroom.

She grumbled and started to wash up.

Nothing could take away from her elation. He was there with her, and they would get to spend the next few days loving

on each other and sharing the joy of their families joining together.



The whole family was already gathered for breakfast by the time they walked up. Bethany had decided on a pair of white shorts, sandals, and a light blue tank top. She would have something on the shorts within an hour. Damon had laid the bet on the table, and she was more than happy to take it. She smirked at the thought as she took a seat next to her Aunt Patty.

Damon walked around the table, shaking hands and giving hugs.

“I’m honestly not surprised at all that you made it out here early.” Kent took a large plate of bacon and sausage and passed it down the table. There had to be twenty people sitting with them. Most of them Bethany knew, but a few were new faces, extended family no doubt.

“I took your advice and brought Ben onto the project. He needed something challenging, and I needed help.” Damon shrugged and stopped by Aunt Patty. “I’m Damon, Bethany’s boyfriend. You have to be related to Karen. You’re far too pretty not to be.”

“Oh?” Patty slid her hand into his and looked over her shoulder at Bethany. “I like him. Can we keep him?”

“Damon this is my Aunt Patty, mom’s younger sister.” Bethany laughed along with everyone else at the table. “Forever seems like a good amount of time for us to keep him.”

Damon took the seat between her and Matt, reaching over and resting his arm on the back of her chair. “What’s the plan for today?”

“Just got here and already taking control.” Erica smiled, winking at Bethany.

“You guys know me. Just tell me to chill, and I’ll force Bethany to make me.” He wagged his eyebrows as the waiter walked around the table taking drink orders. They put in their order and settled back as Bethany’s mom walked everyone through the agenda.

The wedding was the next day at sundown, but almost everything was in place and ready to go. The day would be filled with relaxing, a few games of beach volleyball and a huge party with a dance for that night. Everyone in attendance for the wedding was invited.

Bethany turned to tell Damon how excited she was to show him the tight little white dress she bought for the party as her eyes landed on the one person she hoped not to see. Bridget.

The pretty blond wasn’t as attractive off the pages of the magazine, but she still brought it - big time. She moved toward the table, a look of excitement on her features. She glanced at Bethany, but quickly shifted back to Damon.

“Damon Bryant?” She spoke a little too loud.

He turned and looked over his shoulder. “Bridget. What’re you doing here?”

Bethany glanced at Matt as Damon got up and hugged the lovely model. He turned and introduced her to the table as an old friend and a current client. Matt rolled his eyes and pretended to stab her in the butt with his knife. Bethany laughed and turned back to breakfast, not wanting to see the two of them close together. She didn’t need anything to detract from all of Damon’s claims. She was his woman. This chick was just grasping for straws. Sucks for her to lose the best thing that most likely ever happened to her.

Damon sat down as Bridget moved up to talk to Kent for a few minutes. Bethany slid her hand along his thigh and leaned against him as he put his arm behind her again. She smiled reassuringly, and he leaned over, brushing his lips against her cheek. He pressed a soft kiss to her ear.

“See? Told you she looked like the top of an old broom mop. You’re so insanely beautiful. She’s got to be jealous. I would be.” He kissed her ear again and moved back, picking up a large plate of waffles and holding it in front of her. “Here, baby. Get a big one, and we’ll share it.”

Bethany glanced down the table, unable to help herself. Bridget only seemed to have eyes for Damon, but those eyes weren’t showing joy at all. She looked rather pissed.

Good.



“Damn that was delicious. If I could just live here and eat platters of bacon my life would be complete.” Matt stretched, his bright yellow and orange t-shirt slipping up and showing the muscles of his stomach.

Bethany ran her hand over them, tugging at his shirt in surprise. “You totally have a six-pack.”

“Of course I do. I work out. Hellur?” He tugged his shirt down and glanced behind Bethany as they all stood around the table. “Get your woman off of me. She’s likely to fall for my beauty, creating a fissure between us that I don’t want and you don’t need.”

Bethany rolled her eyes and moved to Damon, wrapping her arms around him. His white button down shirt was loose and made for the beach. “You look good.”

“You look, feel and taste good.” He pressed his lips to hers as Matt made a loud gagging sound.

Damon pulled back and licked his lips, his eyes boring into Bethany. He glanced up at Matt as his lip lifted. “What’s the matter? Thought you were worried about her leaving me for you? I just wanted to remind her who her lover was.”

“Okay. Enough. Thank you. Siblings here.” Matt held up his hands and walked out onto the beach from the table.

Bethany released Damon and gave her mom a quick hug as Erica moved up beside her. Weariness sat heavy on the other woman. Bethany reached out and squeezed her new friend's shoulder.

"You okay? You look tired."

"Yeah. I stayed with Matt last night, and I don't think I slept a wink."

"Oh. Like..." Bethany stopped herself, not sure how open of a person Erica was.

"I wish. More like, we were both in different beds not sure what to say to each other and too worried about snoring or talking in our sleep to actually *get* any sleep."

"Come back to our room tonight. Damon and I can have time together during the day or when we get home. I don't want you exhausted."

"No way. We're good. I just need to stop letting Matt's concerns become my own. I know what I want. I'm about to stop dicking around and just take it." She shrugged and nodded toward the boys. "Looks like they are hoping for a game of volleyball. You up for it?"

"Hell yeah." Bethany glanced over her shoulder and held up a fist. "Boys against girls. You're going down."

"Ha! You wish, chick. You're going to eat my shorts!" Matt responded and caught a hand to the chest. He glanced to Damon and laughed. "Okay, you're going to eat Damon's shorts."

"Better," Damon muttered and looked up. "Let's do this. The chance to get to teach both of you good-looking women a lesson in one swipe? Brilliant. Lay your wager."

"Winner chooses where we have sex tonight." Bethany walked toward them, taking the ball from Damon and pushing her hip against him as she walked onto the sand.

Nervous laughter followed her as Matt didn't seem to know how to respond. Erica moved into the sand beside her,

taking the ball and glancing over her shoulder at Matt, no doubt. “I’m down. You, Matthew?”

“Fuck yeah, I am.” Matt’s voice dropped an octave.

Bethany glanced over her shoulder, almost surprised by the predatory look on his face as he watched Erica move to the far side of the sand court.

Damon laughed and clapped his hands. “All right. Girls can serve first. We’ll go easy on you both. It’s hard to play against such great athletes as the Bryant boys.”

“Oh, fuck no. They’re going down.” Bethany glanced back at Erica as she prepared to serve.

“No worries, sister. We were district champs in high school every year I was on the team.” Erica winked and threw the ball in the air, hitting it hard. It dodged both of the guys and scored the girl’s a point.

“You’re welcome.” Matthew shrugged as if they had given the point away.

“Keep it up, and I’ll make you my bitch, Matthew,” Erica spoke with a sultry voice.

“Yes, ma’am.” Matt saluted her and Bethany couldn’t help but share a warm smile with Damon.

He was so handsome, his dark hair moving as the wind blew, his strong arms and chest on display as he pulled his shirt off and threw it in the sand. Suddenly, losing sounded much, much better than winning. She would take him above her in the bedroom if she had the choice of where they were going to spend their night fucking, but he was creative and bold. He would push her to open up and walk beyond the edge of her comfort.

The thought sent a shockwave through her, and she missed a return ball. She glanced back to Erica, who very much had on a game face.

“If you throw this game for Damon, I’m going to get you good,” she growled playfully.

Bethany shrugged and turned back around, bursting into laughter at the look on Matt's face.

"See... I told you. Insanely intimidating," Matt mumbled and squatted, preparing. "Bring it on, girl. You're going down."

"I hope so," Erica responded, and that was all it took. Matt missed every ball hit to him after that.

CHAPTER 55



BETHANY

The boys won the game, but only by a point. Erica cursed the whole way back to the room as they danced and made a scene in the hall before the girls. Bethany couldn't help but laugh uncontrollably. Damon was beyond cute as he delighted in his brother's madness.

"This is such bullshit," she huffed and stopped at the room, glaring down the hall at them.

"Sore loser and you're going to be sore when I get done with you." Matt clapped his hands and high-fived Damon. If Matt and Erica ended up sleeping together, everyone would be shocked, Matthew especially.

"Promises. Promises." Erica slipped into the room with a soft chuckle under her breath. The girl was devious. She knew what she was doing.

Bethany pressed her hand to the door and looked down the hall, catching Damon's attention as Matt slipped into their room. "That was fun."

"It was, but don't forget later tonight when I strip you bare on the edge of the ocean and make love to you, that I get to. I won."

A shiver ran through her, and she bit her lip to keep from letting him see just how much he affected her. "I'm ready."

"Good. I love you, wicked naughty girl."

"I love you too, overly competitive jackass."

He laughed and walked into his room. Bethany stood there for a minute, taking in the joy that raced around inside of her chest. She wanted to analyze every bit of it, but decided just to let it be. Damon was hers, and unless she walked away, it seemed he would be forever.

She moved into the room to find Erica laid out on her bed, her eyes closed and a huge smile on her pretty face.

“What are you smiling about? We lost!” Bethany asked, moving to the small kitchenette to start a pot of coffee. It was ten thirty, but her cup hadn’t been strong enough at breakfast. She needed something to kick-start her brain, or she would soon find herself in a zombie state. No sleep and loads of sex didn’t bode well for being on point should her mom or Kent need something of her.

“Just thinking about Matt. He’s so docile at times, but at others, when he’s not concentrating on how intimidated he is, he comes out of his shell.” She opened her eyes and turned on her side. “I just want to pry him open faster.”

“He’s a good man, one of the best I’ve been around. He’s definitely the brother I’ve always wanted.” Bethany started the coffee pot and walked to the back door, opening it and tugging the screen door into place. “Just be careful with him. He means the world to Damon and me.”

“Of course. I’m just going to be myself, and if he doesn’t like me for who I am, then I guess it wasn’t meant to be.” Erica’s voice grew softer.

Bethany glanced over her shoulder and smiled at the pretty woman. With her blond hair spayed out on the bed she looked almost angelic. “How long have you had feelings for him?”

“Since we met five years ago.” She rolled onto her back and lifted her hands in the air. “I’ve dated a few men since falling for Matt, but nothing seems to work out. I think I’m just at the point where I’m going to shit or get off the pot, you know?”

“I do know - completely. I did that my graduation night. The pot exploded. It was ugly.” Bethany let out a short laugh,

glad that Damon couldn't hear her talking like a fifteen-year-old boy. He would most likely laugh, or find her completely disgusting. Bethany chuckled at the thought and poured her a cup of coffee before offering one to Erica.

The other woman got off the bed and walked to the back door, glancing toward the kitchen. "What do you mean? Something happen with Damon?"

"No, it was before I met Damon. I'd been seeing one of my best friends off and on throughout my bachelor's program. We were study partners, and though he wasn't my type, I wanted a relationship, or affection really."

"Sex?"

"Exactly. I stripped and walked to my room in front of him and... nothing."

"Wow. Really? Nothing? You're really hot. He didn't take the bait?"

Bethany felt heat rush up her cheeks. Erica's comment wasn't lost on her. It was nice to hear you were pretty from others, but to be told you were hot by someone who was hotter than you? Brilliant.

"Nope. He was supposedly falling for our other friend, Krista, who happened to be my roommate."

"Oh shit. Plot twist."

"It gets better, or worse, really." Bethany handed Erica the other cup of coffee. "Krista is bipolar and on medication, but she stops taking it, and Jake tells her that he's not interested. She's been too aggressive and extremely overbearing. She goes off the deep end and stabs him twelve times in the chest and stomach."

"No way. You're making this shit up, right?" Erica took a tentative sip of the coffee and smiled. "This is delicious. Remind me to hover around you when you're making coffee in the morning."

"I'm not kidding at all. Horrible situation. He's alive, but still in the hospital. That's been the drama at the edges of my

world for the last week.” Bethany let out a long sigh and joined Erica at the door.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I hope this place gives you some rest. You need it.” Erica wrapped an arm around Bethany’s shoulders and squeezed softly. “I’m here if you need to talk more about it too.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“On a lighter note, what does the bridesmaid’s dress look like?” Erica moved back and took another drink of her coffee.

“It’s actually white, funny enough. Mom wanted to wear a muted rose color since this isn’t her first wedding. She bought me a pretty white dress that is relatively comfortable to wear.” Bethany shrugged and turned her attention back to the beach as a large gaggle of girls jogged by in skimpy bikinis. Bridget was at the front of the pack.

“You have to be kidding me. Ugh.” Bethany turned from the window and walked to one of the chairs at the kitchen table, sitting down.

Erica moved to the door, looking out and shaking her head. “Desperation always screams louder than any other emotion.”

“That pretty blond leading them is Damon’s ex.”

“Oh. The chick from breakfast?” Erica moved closer to the door, peering out. “Hopefully she trips and eats it. I’m watching just in case. I’ll replay the visual for you if it happens.”

Bethany laughed and nursed her coffee. “I’m not going to let it worry me. It’s stupid.”

“I agree. I’ve known Damon Bryant for five years and have even seen him with a few other girls, and it was never like what I see in you guys.” She turned and, walked into the room, taking a seat across from Bethany. “He’s in love with you. Don’t miss the way he looks at you, the lightness of his spirit when he’s with you, the twinkle in his eye.”

“You saw the twinkle too?” Bethany chuckled and got up to answer the door as someone knocked on it.

It was her mom and Aunt Patty. “We’re going to the beach. Come join us?”

“I might. I’m talking with Erica right now. I’ll catch up with you shortly.”

“All right.” Her mom smiled and slipped her arm into her sister’s. “No rush. Just wanted to see if you wanted a break from all the new faces.”

Bethany chatted with them for a few more minutes before walking back into the room and picking up her wallet. “I’m going to grab a coke. You want anything?”

“No. I’m good.”

Slipping out into the open-aired hallway, Bethany glanced to her left and right, trying to figure out where the hell to go. She heard a coke drop from a machine nearby and smiled, turning left and heading to the small opening.

The sound of two men talking caught her attention, the voices far more than familiar. She paused beside the opening and pressed her back against the wall, knowing it was a horrible decision.

“Are you upset that Bridget’s here?” Matt asked.

“Not at all. I hate that bitch,” Damon responded as the sound of one of them opening a coke filled the air.

“I think Bethany is dealing with it well.”

“She is. I’m hoping she continues to. I don’t want to have to keep reminding her over and over that I’m into her.” Damon let out a long breath. “I wish she would just hear me when I say it.”

“She’s young, Damon. We were worse than her when we were younger.”

“Yeah, but Bridget never needed so much reassurance. I’m just not sure how many more times I can say the same thing. I’m with her... doesn’t that speak volumes?”

“I think so. I’ll talk to her. She knows you care about her.”

“I don’t just care about her, Matt. I love her.”

“Love is a big word, bro. You just met her a few weeks ago. You should be careful slinging around the ‘L’ word. I don’t want her hurt.”

“Fuck you, dude. I know my own heart.”

“You told Bridget you loved her a few days after you got together all those years ago.”

“True.”

Bethany turned and walked down the hall, slipping back into the room and pressing her back to the door as her eyes filled with tears. Was Damon’s expression of love nothing more than words? He was just bitching about her not getting it, but was there anything to get or was it hollow, an empty promise with no backing?

Wiping at her tears, she tore off her shirt and shorts and slipped into her bed, the smell of him rising up and wrapping around her. She forced herself not to cry. It was just a conversation between brothers. He didn’t love Bridget anymore, but how long would he “love” her? If the words were so easy to mutter, then how much did they really mean?

She remembered the look on his handsome face, the pale sickness when she told him that she loved him back at the house during their large fight. Had she misread him? Was the illness on his handsome face more a fear of having to share empty feelings instead of his concern over truly being loved by someone?

Letting her thoughts go, she closed her eyes and forced her mind to relax. She would sleep the day away. Surely her high emotions were due to lack of sleep and over-stimulation thanks to Damon, and now, Bridget’s presence.

Damon loved her. That was enough, right?

CHAPTER 56



DAMON

Matt reached out and patted the side of Damon's arm. "Just make sure she knows that you're not at all interested in Bridget anymore. That's what will keep things on the right track."

"I already did." Damon ran his hand down his face and turned, feeling someone behind them. "I'll tell her a hundred more times if I need to."

"What are your plans?"

"I'm going to go find Beth and see if she wants to lie out by the beach with me. It's a lazy afternoon, and from what Dad said, we aren't due to dinner until late tonight."

"I'll come with you if you want."

"Yeah, sure." Damon walked out into the hallway and made his way down to Bethany's room.

Erica's voice surprised him as she walked up from behind them. "She's lying down. I just went to grab a Coke. You guys going to the beach?"

"Yeah." Damon turned to face Erica. "Is she all right?"

"I think so. She's just tired." Erica shrugged as her attention quickly turned to Matthew. It was almost comical to see how much the two of them liked each other, and yet neither of them were willing to say anything about it to the other.

It was childish and stupid. It was totally Matt's persona.

“How messed up is it that Bridget is here right now? Of all the places in the world...” Damon let his words die off as they walked toward the opening at the end of the hall that would lead to the beach.

“Things like this always happen to you.” Matt moved up beside Damon and glanced over at him. “Remember that girl you tried to date in high school and your ex-girlfriend with the big boobs kept showing up everywhere.”

“Tera. She did have big boobs. At least to a fifteen-year-old kid.” Damon smirked, glad Bethany wasn’t there to hear him and Matt acting like goons. It was a side of himself that he only allowed Matt to see. Now Matt and Erica it would seem.

“Really?” Erica gave them a look before walking to the edge of the water and sitting down. Her long legs stretched toward the water, and something seemed oddly intimate about the moment.

“We were boys.” Matt snorted and dropped down next to her before glancing up at Damon. “Sit down, man. Take a load off.”

“Yeah. I’m gonna walk down the beach, but I’ll be back shortly. Just want a few minutes to myself.” Damon turned and walked toward the far end of the beach, which was empty as far as the eye could see. He’d made the decision that Bethany was going to be his woman for the rest of his life, but something was nagging at him.

Maybe the older woman on the plane was right. There was no time like the present. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet to check for his large credit card. Everything was in place as it should be.

He glanced up toward the large resort where they were staying and took a sharp right. There was no way in hell he would mess up his father’s special moment, but the minute it was over, he wanted his own moment. One with just him and Beth out on the beach. One that would seal the deal and make her forever his.

She wouldn't need to ask anymore if he loved her, or if he were interested in any other women. He'd show her.

The sand was soft between his toes, but the sidewalk was a little too hot from the afternoon sun beating down on it. He jogged across the pavement, cursing here and there about not grabbing his shoes. It wasn't as if he'd planned to be anywhere but along the water, walking down the beach.

He stopped outside of the main entrance to the hotel and pulled on the door, finding it locked.

"Damn." He'd left his key in Beth's room, not expecting to be gone from her side. He leaned in and cupped his hands around the glass. He pounded on the door with his hand and moved back as a woman in a black uniform opened the door.

"Forgot your key, sir?"

"I sure did. I appreciate your help." Damon walked in and blinked a few times as his eyes worked to adjust to the inside of the resort. "Do you by chance have a jewelry store on site?"

"We do. Just down that hall to the left." The woman glanced down at his feet and smiled before looking back up. "Unexpected purchase?"

"Something like that." Damon chuckled and moved past the woman toward the direction she pointed. The store was right where she'd said it would be.

A proper-looking gentleman in a suit looked up from one of the jewelry cases and gave Damon an odd look. "Um, might I help you, sir?"

"Yes. I'm going to propose to my girlfriend sometime this weekend. Can you show me your engagement rings?"

"Of course, sir, but our prices are honestly a little above market, at best. It might be advantageous for you to take a cab into town and-

"I'm good. Thank you. Show me the most expensive ring you have, and the most beautiful. The most dainty." Damon pulled out his wallet and laid his platinum card on the counter.

“I want her to feel like the queen of the world when I pull it out.”

“Of course, sir.” The man nodded and moved about with a little more confidence. Damon worked hard not to scoff at him. Maybe Beth was changing him from the inside out. A couple of months before and Damon would have ripped the guy a new asshole. Somehow it didn't seem that important in the middle of paradise to be a dick.

He bent over and unlocked a cabinet as Damon leaned over and let his eyes move along the various rings. All of them seemed too big, or too small. Too round or too square.

“How about this one?” The man pulled out a small box after they'd gone through what felt like a million rings.

“Let me see it.” Damon pressed his hands to the glass below him and hoped like hell that the guy had something incredible to show him. Bethany deserved the best. She was going to make him a better man, and give him hope for something he thought he would never want. Love. Family. Commitment.

“It's one of a kind. It's very expensive.” The guy held the box in his hand as he glanced up at Damon, but had yet to open it.

Damon met his stare. “Open the box. I have more money than I know what to do with. Stop dicking around and show me the ring.”

Maybe Bethany had more work to do still.

“Of course. I'm sorry.” The clerk popped the box open and lifted the ring toward Damon.

He knew immediately. “That's it. Put it in a bag and charge my card.”

“Sir, it's three hundred thousand dollars.”

“And?” Damon took the box and brushed his thumb over the top of the diamond.

“Okay.” The guy took a shaky breath and extended his hand. “Anything else I can get you today?”

Damon glanced up and handed him the ring as his heart fluttered in his chest. He was going to propose to Beth. So soon. Without giving it a second thought?

“Yeah, a drink.” He pursed his lips and let the truth sink deep inside of him. He belonged to her. They’d figure out the details later. Besides, he wanted to see her face light up when he dropped to his knee and offered her forever beside him.

Hopefully, she would say yes.

He smirked at the thought. “Wouldn’t that be some shit?”

“Sorry, sir?”

Damon glanced over his shoulder. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

CHAPTER 57



BETHANY

Bethany woke to the quiet room around her, Erica nowhere in sight. The crimson rays of light coming through her open door brought in the awareness that it was close to dinner time. Bethany slipped out of the sheets and picked up her phone, three messages from Damon looking for her. They stopped just after lunch. He must have realized that she was taking a nap.

Running her fingers through her long hair, she yawned loudly and walked to the bathroom as the conversation with Matt and Damon rolled over her again. She was making too much of it.

“Let it go. Stop letting shit threaten to ruin what you guys have going.” She looked at herself in the mirror before picking up a container of powder. She brushed some over her nose and put her earrings back on before dressing in a coral sundress and slipping on her sandals. The cut of the dress made her breasts center stage for the outfit, but it wasn’t slutty or inappropriate, just extremely feminine.

She walked out of the room and texted Damon to find out where they were. He was on the beach just outside of the dinner patio. She walked down the long hall, breathing in the salty smell of the ocean and wishing she had another week she could lay on the beach and soak up the sun.

School would be back in session next week, which not only meant a thick load of classes for her but working for Kendal and Damon at the same time. It was sure to be a testing

period for her patience and ability to survive on little to no sleep.

Bethany walked out onto the warm, white sand and moved toward the dark-haired man who had stolen her heart. She slid her hands around his waist and pressed her cheek to his back. His hands brushed over hers, holding her to him.

“I was getting a little concerned,” he spoke, but the wind carried away the strength usually found in his voice.

“Just tired from last night.” She snuggled in closer.

He turned and pulled her against his chest, kissing the top of her head. “I think I’m just on a high from being here. I feel great.”

She glanced up at him, a smile moving across her lips. “You look great.”

“So do you.” His eyes moved down her as he pulled back a little. “Your breasts look huge. I love it.”

She smirked and moved to stand beside him, slipping her hand into his. “Your breasts?”

“Now we’re talking.” He winked and moved toward the waves, stopping short of where the sand darkened. “Have you figured out your schedule for school starting next week?”

“Somewhat. I’m going to meet with Ben early next week to lock everything down.”

“Sounds good. Just let me know if you need me to help somehow.”

“You have enough to do.” She turned her gaze to move across the horizon as the sun began to pull behind the edge of the earth.

“Yeah, but I want to do you more than any of those other things.” He moved in behind her and slid his hands around her, his fingers pressing into the bottom of her breasts as he leaned down and kissed the side of her neck.

“I like the sound of that.” She turned her face a little and kissed the soft skin beside his eye.

“We’re due for dinner in a few minutes, but how about me and you come out here and walk the beach afterward? I have a bet that’s owed up on...”

“Surely you’re not expecting me to get naked on the beach with you.” She leaned against him, honestly not caring if he did. He was adventurous, and she wanted to experience anything he had to offer.

“I most certainly am. Sand has a certain attraction. It just feels so good in your ass when you’re trying to limp back to the room.”

She laughed and moved from his hold as Kent called for them to come join the family.

“You’re too much.” She slid her hand into Damon’s as he chuckled.

“You seem to take every inch of me quite well.”

She groaned at the thought and moved up to the patio as everyone started to arrive. Damon released her and moved to help with a few things. She huddled close to her mom and Aunt Patty, listening to their adventures with a sexy lifeguard. Patty was single and damned and determined to find a man half her age. She needed someone to keep up. When she started talking about her overly aggressive sex drive, Bethany excused herself, not wanting to lose her breakfast.

She moved toward Matt and Erica, the two of them talking casually. She almost turned away, but Matt called her over, putting an arm around her.

“We were wondering where the hell you had slipped off to.” He gave her a warm side-hug and released her.

“I tried to sneak out when I realized you were sleeping.” Erica took a drink of something fruity looking, her glass matching Matthew’s.

“I just didn’t get much sleep last night. I’m in college and still not able to pull all-nighters without suffering.” She smirked and turned as a server moved toward her. She ordered whatever Matt and Erica had.

“I thought you didn’t drink fruity drinks.” Matt lifted an eyebrow.

“I don’t usually, but those look really good.”

“They are.” Erica took another drink and gave a soft snort. “There’s the DJ. The dance floor is ready, and the buffet is almost set up. You guys ready for a long night of partying?”

“I don’t think we have a choice.” Bethany let out a short laugh and pointed as her mother and Aunt Patty pulled Kent out on the dance floor. Everyone joined them as the food was being uncovered. Bethany walked over to check out the goods, snagging a strip of grilled chicken and turning to find Damon walking toward her.

“Looks like dad pulled out the stops for this one.” He smirked and pulled her against him. “Have I told you how beautiful you look tonight?”

“I’m not sure, but I’m happy to hear it again.” She smiled and licked at her fingers.

“Watch it, vixen. Your little pink tongue makes my heart race.” He wagged his eyebrows. The man with too many burdens and an aggravated disposition was nowhere to be seen. She needed to get him away from the office more often. Hopefully, she could be a part of alleviating some of his stress in the future.

He moved beside her and slipped his arm around her, his fingers brushing rhythmically over the top curve of her rear. She crossed her arms over her chest and followed Matt and Erica as the pretty blond pulled him onto the dance floor.

“You wanna go join everyone?” Damon leaned down and pressed a kiss just behind her ear, sending chills racing through her.

“Yeah. I do.” She intertwined her fingers with his and walked toward the dance floor, pausing only for a moment as he almost ran into her. “Wait. You don’t like to dance.”

“I don’t, but remember what I told you?”

“Oh yeah. Only at large events like weddings and when you want to seduce someone.” She winked and started toward the floor only to have him tug her back.

“The wedding is great, but I’m working hard to seduce this saucy little brunette who seems to have me under her thumb without much effort.”

“You should teach her who’s boss.” Bethany lifted her eyebrow.

“I think that’s a brilliant idea. I plan to put it into action after dinner tonight.”

She laughed as her mind raced through the possibilities. Turning on the floor, she reached for him and began to move with the salsa music. Damon tucked himself against her and moved across the floor, his skills far better than she imagined possible. The man fucked like a minx. There was no way that his ability to dance so well wasn’t linked directly to that.

Bethany held on and tried hard not to pant, but no one would believe she was that out of shape.



Dinner was incredible, the number of meats and variety of cheesy potatoes left her feeling full and almost uncomfortable. Having sex anywhere, especially on the beach, did not sound like fun. She glanced over at Damon, watching the way his face lit up when he and Matt were teasing each other. He might not have a solid foundation of what the word “love” meant, but she did. She would spend the rest of her life showing him.

Getting up, she bent down and kissed the top of his head. “I need to run to the restroom. I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Okay, baby. Just don’t slip away for another six-hour nap.” He winked and turned his attention back to Matt.

Bethany walked off before anyone else could question where she was headed. Tugging at her dress, she wished like hell she would have worn something a little more comfortable.

Trying to impress Damon seemed silly, but she wasn't sure she wouldn't be striving to do that for the rest of their lives.

She turned the corner and stopped short, a tall woman almost plowing her down. A scowl formed on the other girl's face, realization running over Bethany. It was Bridget. The model, the ex, the perfect girl Damon didn't seem to want anymore. The one he had professed his love to after a few days of being around her.

"Oh. Excuse me." She took a step back, her eyes running down Bethany. "I'm Bridget. Damon's first girlfriend."

"I'm Bethany. Damon's current girlfriend." Two people could play at this game.

Bridget smirked and pursed her lips as if fixing her lipstick. "Good luck keeping him. He's a player and a half. I was back in his bed a week or so ago. The sex is just so good. I swear I'm an angel until he's around. He has this way of turning all of us into needy sluts. Odd really."

Bethany moved around her, pushing into the bathroom and muttering 'excuse me' as the other girl laughed loudly. She was in Damon's bed a week ago? That wasn't possible.

Heat washed over her, forcing her to stop by the sink and catch her breath. A wave of nausea pulsed through her, the food from dinner threatening to make a violent exit. She splashed cold water on her face and patted it dry, trying hard not to mess up her make-up.

"Bridget is a liar. Matt already told you that." Bethany stared at herself in the mirror, a frown turning her mouth down. Bridget was everything she wasn't. Had Damon dropped her or was the situation reversed? Maybe she dropped him. Did he still want something with her?

"No. Fucking stop it." She patted her face quickly and slipped out of the restroom, determined to forget all of it. It was nothing but a dark spot on their time together. She wasn't going to let it ruin everything.

She rounded the corner and made her way over to the table to find Damon missing. She looked at Matt with question.

He rolled his eyes and pointed to the dance floor. “I told you that bitch was a wolf in sheep’s clothing.”

Surely not.

Bethany glanced at the floor, Damon in the middle of a large crowd of women. Bridget waved at her, the smug look on her face causing Bethany to stiffen. Surely he wasn’t dancing with them. What would possess him to do that?

He glanced over at her and waved for her to join him. She wanted to react, but her family seemed to be watching closely. She smiled and shook her head as if none of it bothered her at all. Damon didn’t like dancing, and he didn’t fall to peer pressure, so was he simply wrapped up in the activity of the big event happening around them, or working to seduce his old girlfriend that he was obviously still fucking on the side?

Bethany turned on her heel and walked out onto the beach, breathing in deeply and refusing to cry. She wouldn’t be the victim. She had been that for far too long.

CHAPTER 58



BETHANY

The wind blew around her, tugging at her dress as if urging her to walk farther down the beach. She gave in to the motion and turned away from the party, moving languidly down the stretch of soft sand. She stopped only to remove her sandals, looping her fingers in the straps and letting everything go. Too much had happened too fast. She had a crazy load of shit waiting for her to figure out how to balance the minute she got home as well. A break was in order. She just hoped it wasn't going to be her to shatter.

“Bethany,” Damon called for her, but she kept walking, never picking up her pace nor turning around. He moved up beside her, reaching over and pulling her to a stop.

“What?” She glanced up at him, her voice far more cold than she wanted it to be.

“I got pulled into the middle of that shit. Don't be upset, baby.”

“You had a choice, and you chose. I was in the bathroom for a minute after being accosted by your perfect ex.” Bethany shrugged, grateful that anger burned brightly instead of sadness.

“What did she do, Beth? I told you she was a bitch.”

“A bitch that you snuggled up to in front of our family on the dance floor and are still dipping your cock into from what she says.” Beth shrugged and turned, walking down the beach again as if nothing mattered.

“Beth. That’s a crock of shit, and you know it.” He walked up beside her, tugging her to stop again. “Stop moving and talk to me.”

“Actually, I don’t know anything. You have trust issues, and I’ve been completely forward with you. You haven’t seen me sitting in anyone’s lap or texting Philip or some other dude, have you? No one has walked out of my office with a dazed look and smeared lipstick.” She reached up and poked him in the chest. “And don’t tell me you love me if you don’t mean it. Grow the fuck up and come back when you’re ready to be serious. I don’t share.”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her tightly against him. “She’s nothing to me. I haven’t had her in my bed in years. Stop listening to other people’s shit and focus on me. I weary from reminding you that I care about you and have chosen you. I’m right fucking here.”

“You’re going to get more weary then. You’re not the only one who had expectations of what love looked like only to have it ripped away. I’m waiting for the moment your father shows up, breaks my mother’s heart and takes everything from us once again. Do you know what it’s like to never date in high school because you’re so fucking scared someone will realize that you’re on food stamps? Never let anyone touch you for fear of them asking why your ribs are so prominent? How do you answer? I’m starving to death?” She let out a shaky breath and pushed at his chest, needing a little bit of room to breathe. “Don’t pull the rug out from under me, Damon. Rip the Band-Aid off or shut the fuck up and expect to be weary. My past doesn’t lend me to be hopeful of the future.”

He pulled her close and slipped his hands into her hair, forcing her to look up at him. The tension in his fingers felt good, the strong tick of his jaw telling her that he was more than affected by her past situations. Good. He should be. She was heartbroken over his mother’s deception and his part in it. She would take every bit of it from him if she could. That was what love was all about. Never giving up. Never backing down.

“I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere, and I love you more than I have ever loved anyone. Bridget isn’t anything to me, and I should have told them no. I didn’t want to look like the stiff-necked asshole that everyone seems to think I am. Forgive me. I’m not willing to spend the last few days of this trip fighting with you. I need you too badly.” He pressed his lips to hers - hard.

Bethany slid her arms around his neck, not wanting anything but him. They would work through the details later. Nothing was going to be straightforward or easy, but he was willing to communicate. She needed to process everything but didn’t want to talk anymore for now.

She broke the kiss, brushing her lips over the strong line of his jaw as she whispered, “I don’t want to fight either.”

He bent down and slipped his arm under her legs, picking her up and walking down the beach further. He leaned down and kissed her again, his soft groan undoing her from the inside.

“No more talk of anyone but us. This isn’t about them or our insecurities. It’s about us, Beth. It’s about us working toward forever. Tell me you want that and trust me when I say that I do.” He stopped as the hotel disappeared in the distance, a faint light all she could make out.

The moon sat full and heavy above them, the light blue glow of it spilling out over him, making him more beautiful, as if it were possible. She reached up and brushed her hands down the thick muscles of his neck, over his chest and around his waist.

“I want that.” She pressed her lips to the center of his chest as his hands moved firmly down her back, pressing into massage her. She let out a soft moan and moved back, needing to get his shirt off of him. She wanted to taste his skin.

“It’s yours, baby. Stop running from it, from me.”

“Okay,” she whispered and pressed his shirt from his shoulders before pressing her mouth back to him.

“Fuck, that’s hot, Beth.” He undid the small ties at the top of her dress, pushing at it until it fell into the sand beneath her. “Let me get out of my slacks and let’s get into the water. I want to feel the wetness and warmth of your body in contrast to the chill of the waves.”

She nodded, her voice lost to the desire to dive in deep with him. Moving back toward the water, she turned and slipped off her tiny black panties. He groaned loudly, the sound needy and delicious. She walked into the water, wrapping her arms around herself and waiting for him once she was waist deep.

He joined her, taking her hand and pulling her farther into the surf. “Come here, baby. Let me take care of you the best way I know how.”

“I’m sorry for overreacting.” She moved to him as the sand beneath her dropped off. The water rose to her neck, and she clung to the front of him, Damon holding on to her tightly.

“No sorries. I would have to give a million too. Just concentrate on right now. Let’s me and you stay in the moment together. We’ll work through all this shit from our past over a bottle of wine, nudity and a roaring fire at my place when we get home. Deal?” He slid his hands over her rear, tugging at the back of her legs.

She wrapped her legs around him, the thick brush of his erection against her center causing her to whimper softly. How he left her needy and undone was a mystery. Bridget had one thing right. Being around Damon did make her feel like a starving hooker. Everything about him lent to the desire to fuck all night, unapologetically.

“Hold on to me tightly. I want to memorize your curves with my hands, Beth.” He pressed his face into the crook of her neck, sucking softly as his fingers ran up and down her back, over her hips to her breasts. “So damn hot. I swear I almost came just watching you dancing in your sexy little dress tonight.”

“I was hoping you’d like it.” She smirked and slid her fingers through his hair, rolling her hips a little to get the full

effect of being molded to the front of him. A deep ticking sensation started in her core and grew until it pushed along her wrists and neck.

“I loved it.” He lifted his head, his eyes locked onto hers. “I love you. I will always love you.”

She shifted her hips and pressed down, his cock sliding into her tightness. She let out a groan, wondering how the hell she could be so tight again after their long night of love-making.

He slid his hands down to cup her butt as he began to work himself into her.

“I love you too. Just keep telling me. I’m a needy bitch.” She smiled and kissed him softly as they panted against each other’s mouths.

The conversation was over as he gripped her ass tightly, pulling it up and down, working himself with her body. Nothing could be sexier. She held on to him, her nails digging into his shoulders as a fire started from the friction. She arched her back, giving him more room to thrust into her as she let out a long cry.

“Mmmmm... scream for me.” He pressed his teeth against the top of her breasts, Beth letting out another scream from the pleasure of it. How he could bring her to come so fast was beyond her, but she worked herself against him, helping the moment to last as long as it could.

She relaxed against him, pressing her cheek against his chest as she hugged him.

He slowed his assault and pulled out of her. Jerking her head up, she pinned him with a questioning stare. “Did you come?”

“No, baby. I want to go back to the bedroom and spend the night buried inside of you again. I just needed to reassure you that every bit of this, including my heart, belongs to you. Let’s grab our clothes and go find a bed to ruin?”

She laughed and slid down the front of him as she nodded. “That’s a great idea. Do you think it’s a bad thing that sex

seems to be our love language?”

“No clue what that is, but I’m not thinking it’s anything but good. Sex is almost everyone’s love language in some sense. Love of self or another.” He took her hand and walked out of the water with her, bending over and handing her the pretty dress she left sitting on the sand.

She moved back, watching him closely as she pulled it up her legs and over her stomach and breasts.

He was magnificent, the moonlight accentuating the swell of his muscular frame. He turned, and she reached for his cock, the thick member standing at attention, swollen and deliciously hard.

“How the hell did I end up so lucky?” She stroked him once, tugging him toward her with her hold on him.

He laughed and pulled her close. “I’m the lucky one. Let’s get dressed before that gaggle of girls comes running down the beach and I have to tuck myself away inside of the closest thing I can find.”

“Are you referring to me?” She scoffed and stroked him a few more times, petting his arousal and thinking of all of the things she wanted to do with it.

“I was.” He leaned in and nipped at her lips. “You’re the only place I want to be.”

“Then let’s go, and I’ll open up for you.” She licked at his mouth, reaching around him to caress his ass.

“Oh yeah? You gonna let me devirginize you tonight?” He lifted an eyebrow and squeezed her hips, rolling his and pressing into her hand between them.

“Maybe.”

“Maybe’s good enough for me. I’m the chief negotiator for the firm. I think this maybe might just be the yes I was looking for.” He chuckled as she swatted his ass and moved back, tugging her dress back into place.

There wasn’t a part of her body she didn’t want him to touch. Tonight was just the beginning of her willingness to let

him explore. It was about trust, which was starting to grow deep inside of her. Kent wasn't like her father. Damon wasn't either.

Time to give them the opportunity just to let each of them be who they were and not some bastardized version of who she expected them to be.

“Come on, baby.” Damon reached for her hand, fully dressed and sporting a naughty smirk on his mouth. “Come let me take care of you for the rest of the night.”

She took his hand and snuggled in beside him. “Yeah. I'd like that - a lot.”

CHAPTER 59



BETHANY

Bethany woke to the smell of coffee. She turned on her side and squinted against the bright light coming through the open glass doors. He stood with his back to her, his blue slacks on and torso bare. She laid there for a few minutes, studying him.

Beautiful.

He turned and smiled. “I thought I heard your breathing change a little. You sleep good?”

“I did.” She moved up to her elbow and let the cover drop from her breasts.

He set his coffee down and moved to sit on the edge of the bed, pulling her into his arms and pressing his lips to hers in a long kiss. “I made you some coffee. Strong and thick like you like it.”

“That’s how I like my men. My coffee I’ll take anyway it comes.” She smirked as he lifted his eyebrow at her.

“Your man, not men. You’re officially off the market, Miss Thing.” He leaned down and kissed her again before getting up and walking back to the kitchen. “Go get in the shower and let’s get the day started. There are a few more things to do for the ceremony tonight, and it will be here before we know it. I’ll bring you a cup of coffee.”

“Is it still at sundown tonight?” Bethany moved to the edge of the bed, running her nails through her hair and yawning.

“Yes. Matt and Erica went for a game of golf this morning. They asked us to join them, but I told them you didn’t respond before ten.” He chuckled and handed the coffee mug to her. His eyes moved down her, his bottom lip tucking into his mouth. “You need to get dressed, or I’m going to force you to stay in bed all day. So fucking fine.”

She took the coffee and tried not to jerk it as he brushed his finger by her nipple. “I’m going. Two nights of sex isn’t enough for you? Insatiable.”

“It’s not even close. Sorry, baby.” He moved back toward the window. “We’ll grab something to eat and find mom and dad when you’re done.”

It sounded so odd to hear him refer to Kent and her mother like that, but it was fitting. She was past the part of him soon becoming her stepbrother. He wasn’t blood, and if their parents accepted it, then nothing else mattered.

Bethany enjoyed a long shower, her body sore in all of the places it should be. She ran her fingers over her back and down the curve of her ass, testing her entrance to make sure she was okay. Damon had been careful with her, but they hadn’t gotten very far in their desire to try anal sex. He was huge, and she wasn’t used to the incredible pressure of having something press into her. They would try again and again and again until he fit inside of her. She groaned at the thought, her center tightening as she let out a shaky breath.

He was going to be the death of her, but oh, what a way to go.



Bethany left Damon with Erica and Matt as she slipped off to talk to her mom for a few minutes. She was greeted at the door by her Aunt Patty. After a quick hug, she slipped into the room and walked to the bathroom, glancing back to her aunt.

“How is she?”

“I’m a fucking wreck,” her mother yelled from the bathroom.

Bethany’s eyes widened as she knocked on the door. Her mother never said the ‘f-word.’ “Mom. Let me in.”

“Fine, but my hair’s a mess, and this make-up makes me look like a hooker.” A long cry left her mother as the door flung open.

Her mother hadn’t been a hot mess in years, not since her younger days when every day started and ended with bad news. Bethany slipped into the bathroom and closed the door, moving in front of her mom and taking her shoulders.

“Hey. Look at me.”

Her make-up was smeared, her eyes red and puffy from crying. She glanced up at Bethany as a few more tears rolled down her pretty face.

“This isn’t about who you think you should be. Remember our talk earlier? Kent is marrying you for who you are, Mom. He’s madly in love with you. He rented out half of this damn hotel to prove it.” Bethany reached up and brushed her fingers over her mom’s cheeks. “Here’s what we’re going to do. Aunt Patty is going to grab us a bottle of wine, and we’re going to take our time and make you look like the princess you are. Our past, our problems, our worries can all go to hell. They aren’t welcomed here. Today is about love and goodness, about being made one with someone as good as Kent.”

“Okay, baby. I’ll try.” Her mother glanced down to her hands and let out a shaky breath.

Bethany moved to the door, opening it and jumping back. Patty was pressed to the other side.

“Sorry. Is she okay?” Patty crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes wide and tears lining the edge of her gaze.

“She will be. Grab us a bottle of cold white wine and let’s celebrate and get her ready. Want to?” Bethany nodded, her aunt catching her understanding.

“Of course I do. I’ll be right back.”

Walking back into the bathroom, Bethany pointed to the sink. “Wash your face and let’s go into the living room area where the light is better. We can chat a little while and then get you done up. We have five hours. I’ll meet you out there.” She pulled her mom into a tight hug, her heart swelling with love for the woman before her. No one deserved a happier ending more than her mom.

Bethany walked out of the bathroom and closed the door, hitting it twice and reminding her mother that she was serious. “You have three minutes, and I’m coming back in.”

“So damn bossy,” her mother muttered and laughed softly.

“I get it from my mom. Blame her.” Bethany walked to the phone and ordered a cheese and meat tray before texting Damon that she would find him later. Her mother needed her help, and she wasn’t going anywhere. He was all for it.

Taking a seat by the back door, Bethany let out a long sigh. A smile lifted her face as she let the good memories of her childhood run by her vision. She didn’t even hear her mom approach.

“What are you smiling about, pretty girl?”

Bethany turned and let out a chuckle. “I was thinking about the time you decided to be a Mary-Kay representative and bought all of that expensive make-up.”

“Oh Lord.” Her mother rolled her eyes and walked to the kitchen, pulling down three wine glasses.

“I honestly thought you got all that crap for me. Remember?” Bethany asked.

“How could I forget? You were seven and covered from head to toe in every expensive-ass product they offered.” Her mom let out a loud laugh, her hand covering her mouth.

Bethany let herself relive the memory, tears filling her eyes as they belly laughed together.

Patty walked in a few seconds later, both of them still trying to recover. They worked to get a glass of wine for each of them as Patty questioned what was so funny.

“Just memories of Bethany being young and wanting to be a princess.”

Patty lifted her drink into the air. “For a new beginning for my big sister. I don’t know anyone who deserves it more than you.”

“For my mom, who has shown me that one thing has the power to cure all hurts, all hang-ups, and all heartbreaks. Love. May it follow you everywhere for as long as you live.”

Her mom nodded, tears dripping down her face as they hit their glasses together carefully.

“No more tears.” Bethany reached for a box of Kleenex and passed them out. “Only happy times now.”

“Speaking of happy times and princesses,” Patty paused, snorting as she shook her head. “You remember getting our asses whooped for getting into momma’s expensive make-up and dressing up like hookers?”

“Oh my God. We did.” Her mother laughed, Patty joining her.

Bethany lifted her glass again. “I knew I got it from somewhere... blame my mother.”

“For what?” Patty lifted her eyebrow.

“For everything.” Bethany smirked and took a drink of the wine.

“Typical.” Her mom rolled her eyes and set her wine glass down. “All right. I’m ready. Let’s do this.”



Bethany stood at the back of the strip of beach they had chosen for the ceremony, the bright tiki torches lighting the way to the large lattice-work design that Erica had worked on. Kent stood beside the priest, Damon to his side and Matt standing beside him. They all faced the priest as large crowds filled up both sides of the event. Patty stood up front, lined up

with Matt, the smile on her face large enough to be seen from Bethany's vantage point.

The music started for her to make her way down and she took a step forward, praying like hell she didn't trip. The moment was so surreal, her desire to spend forever with one of the men waiting at the front almost overwhelming. He glanced back at her, his eyes going a little wide.

He mouthed "hot," and she chuckled, unable to help herself. The dress was beautiful, white and innocent in its design. It was perfect. Her mother knew her too well. Simple, straightforward and pretty.

She moved up beside Patty and glanced over to Kent, her soon-to-be father smiling warmly at her. The priest motioned for everyone to stand and Bethany turned, catching a glimpse of her mother as the moonlight washed over her. The air was suddenly so hard to breathe, the beautiful woman walking toward them everything Bethany remembered from her younger years.

There hadn't been a day that her mom hadn't reminded her how much she was loved. Tears burned her gaze as she turned with her mother's progression. The look on Kent's face was complete adoration. Bethany glanced toward Damon, his eyes only for her.

'I love you,' he mouthed and winked.

She nodded as heat rushed up her chest and covered her neck and face. She would cling tight to that love and never let anything come between them that wasn't quickly rooted out.

The priest started the ceremony, and Bethany relaxed, enjoying every second of it.



Erica caught the bouquet as Bethany's mother threw it and Damon had teased Matt mercilessly throughout the night about it. The music was great, the food insanely good, and the company the crown jewel of the evening. Bethany slipped off

as everyone crowded on the dance floor, just needing a few minutes to process her thoughts.

She slipped out of her shoes and walked to the edge of the water, her eyes scanning the horizon.

“Hi, beautiful girl. Is your heart taken? I’m looking to spend forever with someone.” Damon moved in behind her, wrapping his arms around her.

“It is. Sorry, buddy.” She smiled as he laughed against the side of her neck, his breath warm, his arms strong.

“What do you think about that?”

“About what?” She turned and slid her arms around him, the black and white suit he wore seemingly made just for him.

“About spending forever with me?” He leaned down and brushed his lips across hers before taking a step back, tugging out of her hold. Slipping his hand into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a small black box.

“What’re you doing?” Bethany pressed her fingers to her lips as her heart almost stopped. “We haven’t been together but a few weeks. We have so much shit to work through. We can’t... We...”

“Hush.” He smiled and moved down to one of his knees, lifting the box toward her and popping it open. “I don’t care how long we’ve been together. I’m looking at the future. Don’t tug me into the past.”

She let out a soft cry and took a step toward him, the beautiful ring a large diamond nuzzled into two smaller ones.

“I would spend the rest of my life looking for you, but I don’t have to. You fill my needs, my desires, my deepest fantasies, Beth. Marry me and let’s build a life that will blow both of our minds. Be mine and let’s be together - forever, baby. Give me forever.”

Nodding, she extended her left hand and let out a soft cry. “Yes. I want forever with you.”

“Good.” He stood and slipped the ring on her finger before pulling her to him and kissing her passionately.

She melted into him, clinging tightly to his promises. It wouldn't be easy, but anything worth truly investing in never was.

"I love you," she whispered as she broke the kiss.

"Mmmm... I like the sound of that. Say it again." He laughed as she said it again and again.

He picked her up and spun her around once before kissing her tenderly.

"Do you think we would be missed if we slipped off?" He lifted his eyebrows once.

She shook her head and wrapped herself around him, needing the warmth of his arms. "We would be, but since when did you start caring?"

"I am a greedy little thing." He laughed and leaned down to look her in the eye. "Only for you. Forever."

"Forever," she whispered and lifted to her toes, losing herself in the only thing she wanted to belong to - him.

CHAPTER 60



BETHANY

The sun filtered through the blinds, filling the room with a warm glow and pulling Bethany from the best sleep she could remember having. Damon was on his stomach, his arms above his head, muscles defined and skin sun-kissed. She moved closer, unable to help herself.

Her left finger held the promise of forever, but her heart ached at the possibility of something happening to them. The engagement had happened so fast, and yet it was right. She pulled the ring closer to her face and studied it as he groaned softly in his sleep. The sound of him enjoying something in his dream caused her heart to flutter.

How could a man like him want a simple girl like her?

He was wealth, and she was poverty.

He was beautiful, and she was plain.

But it didn't matter. Nothing did but the fact that they were going to be together. They would figure out the crazy details later when they were back home and in the comfort of their own environment. She wouldn't let anything come between us. No matter what.

She moved closer and pressed her lips to the thick muscle of his shoulder, kissing him softly up to his neck and along the side of his face.

His dark brown eyes opened as he blinked a few times and her breath caught in her chest. Stunning wouldn't begin to express how beautiful he was.

“Hi baby,” he whispered and turned over as he reached for her.

She moved into his arms as he lay on his side and brushed her fingers along the side of his face, enjoying the soft stubble of his beard.

“Hi.” Bethany leaned in and brushed her lips by his only to have him sink his fingers in her hair and roll them over, deepening the kiss and pressing his warm body against her.

“I was dreaming about you.” He brushed the tip of his nose down the side of her face and pressed his lips to her neck, loving her like no man had before. Warmth rose from the tip of her toes to the center of her chest, spilling out to race down her arms and rise to the top of her head.

She moaned and gripped him tightly. “Tell me about it.”

“We lived by the water, and you were barefoot and pregnant.”

She laughed and reached up to touch his face again as he pressed his forearms into the bed beside her head and pushed himself up to hover just above her.

“What’s so funny?” He smiled, and the world seemed perfect for a moment.

“Nothing. I just half expected to hear you say that we were having sex.”

“Sex is great, but it’s the little things I’m looking forward to.”

“You think having a baby is a little thing? Where’s my boyfriend? What have you done with him?”

He chuckled deep in his chest and rolled onto his back, taking her with him. She pressed her hands into the firmness of his chest and sat up, straddling him and rolling her hips to grind along his thick erection.

“I’m pretty sure if you checked all the necessary appendages, you’d see that I am very much still your man.” He slid his hands up her thighs and tugged at the covers as she

held them clasped to her chest. “Don’t hide from me. You know how much I love your body.”

Bethany nodded and let the covers slide down as he sat up and wrapped his arms around her. The soft press of his lips over the top of her breasts had her sighing softly. She belonged to him completely, and nothing felt better. Never in her life had she expected to find someone like Damon and capture him. She thought settling would be her story, but it wasn’t at all.

“I love you.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned down to press her lips to his as his hands moved down her sides and rested on the top curve of her rear.

“Not as much as I love you.” He gripped her ass and pulled up, forcing her to arch her back as he pressed into her. The groan they shared filled the room and left her nerve endings tingling.

“That’s right.” She leaned down and pressed her lips to his ear as he ran his strong hands up her back and gripped her shoulders tightly. “More.”

“Not even close, lover.”

She rocked against him, massaging his body with hers as he cupped her face and pulled her down for a long, passionate kiss. The hunger from all the times before was still there, but the passion of commitment wrapped them together, bringing in a whole new level of emotion for her.

They made love for the next hour, clinging to each other as if they were scared to consider what might happen if they let go. He pulled her down to rest on top of him as they rode the last high together.

“God, Beth. You’re so good to me, baby.” He brushed his hands down her back rhythmically and turned his face a little to adorn her with kisses along her nose and cheeks, over her eyes and by her lips. “Promise me we’ll get to walk down the aisle sooner than later.”

“That is the plan.” She smiled and kissed him one more time before getting out of bed and walking to the patio that led

to the beach. “What time is our flight out of here today?”

“I think it’s around five tonight. Come here and let me hold you.”

Bethany glanced over her shoulder, once again stunned by how incredibly sexy he was. She wasn’t sure she would ever get used to seeing him in her bed, naked and looking like a god.

“No way. I know how this works. I get back in the bed and we don’t go anywhere for another hour or two.” She smiled and turned back to pull the curtain open a little. The white caps out in the ocean crashed onto the seashore over and over, captivating her. She didn’t hear him sneak up behind her, and accidentally let out a soft yelp and jumped as he wrapped her in a tight hug.

“What’s wrong with staying in bed all damn day if we want to?”

“Nothing if it was just you and me.” She lifted her hand in front of her face, studying her ring again.

“You like it?” He leaned down and kissed the top of her shoulder.

“I love it. It’s perfect.” She pressed back against him. “How did you know what my ring size was?”

“I didn’t. I had Matt steal one of the rings from your jewelry box at Dad’s, and we took it to the jeweler’s to have it measured.” He snorted. “He was scared shitless that you would notice.”

She laughed. “You guys were working together to pull one over on me?”

“Oh yeah. We’ll be doing that for the rest of our lives.”

She turned in his arms and clasped her hands behind his neck. “Speaking of Matt, where is he? Did he spend the night with Erica?”

“No. I thought he did, but the first night he stayed in Dad’s room, and last night I guess he got another room. He gave Erica our room though, which was pretty cool of him. I don’t

know what his deal is where she's concerned. They'd be great together."

"I agree, but he's not ballsy like you. He's got to make sure he's completely into her before even making the first move. It's probably a good thing seeing that she's a big part of your father's company."

"This is true." His eyes moved across her face. "Who are you going to have at our wedding for your maid of honor?"

"I don't know. Who knows what the hell is going to happen with Krista." She glanced down and tried not to let herself dive into the horror of what her best friend had done to Jake. Krista would be facing prosecution for attempted murder soon, and Bethany had no doubt that she would be required to make an appearance. None of it made sense, but at the moment, it didn't need to. Bethany's mother was happy and secure in her new marriage with Kent, and Beth had Damon forever.

Everything would be fine, and life would work out the parts that weren't.

"We'll figure it all out. You know that." He leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose. "You sure you don't want to reconsider on the staying in bed thing?"

She laughed and shook her head. "You're too much."

"Oh yeah? I think you handle me pretty good."

"Just pretty good?" She lifted an eyebrow and tilted her head a little.

"Really good? If I say pretty good and challenge your skills, are you going to try and outdo yourself?"

She moved out of his arms and laughed as she walked toward the bathroom. "You wish."

"Naw, I'm more than content with everything I have. Especially you. Get up and let's get packed. The flight leaves at four today."

"Okay." She smiled and lingered in the doorway as he watched her. The need to be cheeky bubbled up inside of her,

and she just couldn't pass up the opportunity. "You think I belong to you now?"

"No, I don't think anything. I know you do."

There wasn't anything left to say. He was right. He usually was.

CHAPTER 61



DAMON

“Wait. You what?” Kendal’s eyes widened as he sat across the table from Damon the next day. “What the hell were you thinking? It’s been, what, three weeks?”

Damon shrugged and pulled the black napkin down into his lap, ignoring his closest friend’s concerns. Beth was the woman for him, and there wasn’t any going back from that decision. He’d measured her attitude, her drive, her hunger in the office and the bedroom and seen the signs of success in all areas.

She was going to be his forever, whether that started now or in five years. She’d spent the night wrapped around him after the long-ass flight back to the States. She fit – perfectly beside him.

“Just know sometimes.” He nodded to the waiter who hovered beside them, the poor idiot looking like he’d just swallowed something poisonous. “Pour.”

“Of course, Sir.” The guy picked up the open bottle of red wine on the table and tipped it up to fill Damon’s glass.

“No, you don’t *just* know. You’ve never had a solid relationship in your life, Damon.” Kendal ran his fingers through his messy brown hair.

“Who has?” He brushed his fingers over the rim of the glass as he glanced up at the bar. The gaggle of well-cared-for women had their eyes focused on either Damon or Kendal. Perhaps both. Funny how none of them even stirred him. Beth had to have sold her soul to the devil for the power she had

over him. It was almost unfair, and yet he didn't believe in fate or fairness. A man made himself by his actions and choices, nothing else. The woman he'd fallen for was wickedly sensual, intensely intimate and willing to bow her knee to him alone.

She was all he needed.

"Lots of people." Kendal's voice rose in volume.

Damon gave him a look to warn him. He'd always been the alpha out of the two of them, Damon having led their fraternity as president his full five years at University of Texas in Dallas. Everyone respected him, and he expected it.

"That's bullshit. Just because you're wavering on the fence about dating some girl doesn't allow you the right to judge the timing of my proposal to Beth." Damon shrugged and lifted his glass to his lips.

One of the women from the bar seemed to have gained her courage. She walked over and pressed her well-manicured hands to the empty seat across from Damon and smiled.

"Hi. I couldn't help but notice you. Have we met before?" She smiled with a false sense of shy. It was almost cute. Almost.

"No, I don't think we've met." Damon motioned toward Kendal. "This is my good friend, Dr. Kendal Tarrington. I'm Damon Bryant."

"Your name is familiar." She pressed her fingers to her lips.

Damon couldn't help but chuckle under his breath at the way Kendal tensed up. He was forever lost to being confident around women after all the shit he'd been through. Funny enough, he was the biggest playboy outside of Damon back in school.

"Maybe we fucked in college?" Damon tilted his head and lifted his shoulders.

She laughed and glanced over her shoulder before returning her stare to Damon. "Maybe, but I think I would have remembered. I'm Terri."

“Nice to meet you, Terri. I’m a taken man, so this conversation is over before it’s even begun, but Kendal here is-”

“Taken too. Thanks.” Kendal smiled and waved at the woman.

“I wasn’t hitting on you.” She snorted as if her actions had nothing to do with bedding one of them for the afternoon. “I just thought you were familiar.”

“Well, now you know our names.” Damon shooed her away as her smile dropped. “If you’ll run along... Thanks.”

Her face fell as she turned and flipped her hair over her shoulder. “Asshole.”

“Damon. Shit.” Kendal picked up his glass and emptied it. “Anyway, back to the conversation on Bethany. She seems like a nice girl. I think you should take it slow. She’s been through a lot with her friend getting stabbed. My understanding is that they’re going to subpoena her to come testify against the girl who did it.”

“The one that was her roommate?” Damon finished his wine too and pushed his plate away. Meeting Kendal for a short lunch to catch up seemed like a good idea until the guy decided to shit on Damon’s good news. Was everyone so fucking careful in life? Where was the risk-taker Damon remembered the good professor to be?

Life kicked him in the nuts too many times.

“You’re diverting and doing a horrible job of it.” Kendal picked up a fry from his half-empty plate. “Tell me you’ll be careful with her.”

“What are you, her daddy?” Damon picked up his napkin, wiped his mouth and stood. “I gotta get back to the office. She’s in good hands, old man. Stop worrying about me and find yourself a woman that makes you crazy, like Beth makes me.”

“Right. See you sometime soon, buddy.” Kendal lifted his hand, and Damon shook it before walking to the bathroom.

He didn't get to the door before a leggy brunette with pretty eyes and ruby-red lips stepped in front of him. She was one of the women with the scout that was sent over to the table moments ago.

"Hi. I'm Lisa." She put her hand in the middle of his chest and pressed her teeth to her bottom lip.

Damon moved her hand off his chest with little to no emotion. "Hi, Lisa. Like I told your friend back there, I'm a taken man. I'm not interested in being accosted by the gaggle of you. Find another chump to spread your legs for."

"What?" Her distressed expression was good, but not quite convincing.

"Right. Excuse me." He moved around her and pushed the door to the bathroom open as a growl rumbled deep in his chest. Women like the ones at the bar were a dime a dozen and always seemed to think that flashing a pretty smile was going to win them something. How many times had he refused someone in the last month? Too many times to count, and yet it was nothing to brag about. It was exhausting.

He stopped in front of the mirror and washed his hands as his eyes moved along his face. Dark circles sat under his eyes, not enough for most to notice, but he could see them without trying. Touching the soft skin, he shook his head.

"Fuck, maybe Kendal was right." Maybe he had moved too fast. She was just the full package and would understand him if she could work past his unwillingness to share. She came from a broken past like he did. It didn't matter that it was a different set of circumstances. They were still both fucked up, and something about that gave him peace.

He pulled out his phone and flipped through a few of the pictures they'd taken on their vacation as he let out a long breath.

Long brown hair and green eyes that captivated him. A small waist and huge tits that took up most of his palm. He closed his eyes and dropped his phone back into his pocket as his body woke up. He didn't care how fast things had gone.

He'd give anything to hang on to the feeling she left him with - pay any price.

They could get to know each other over the next year and figure things out slowly, but no one unwrapped a package they didn't first purchase. That was Bethany. He'd put himself into wanting to try something more than a fuck-buddy relationship with her, and now it was time to be deliberate in learning about her, figuring out what made her tick.

He opened his eyes and pursed his lips as his pulse spiked. He'd popped the question simply because he didn't want to lose her. She was beyond worried about them being siblings, but it was an invalid concern, or at least it seemed to be.

He hadn't thought too much about it.

After wiping off his hands, he walked out of the restroom and through the center of the restaurant. Kendal was gone, but the girls at the bar weren't. He winked at them as he moved past them, teasing the whorish idiots.

Why women weren't more dedicated to their men was a mystery. It almost seemed as if all the stories that populated the water cooler were about the bastard executives cheating on their wives, and yet Damon had seen the flip-side more times than he cared to admit.

He pulled out his phone as he handed the valet his ticket. Bethany answered on the second ring.

"Hey. Where are you?" Her voice was soft and sweet, like the innocent girl she wasn't.

"Leaving lunch. Where are you is the question? You get unpacked this morning?" Their flight back the night before from Jamaica had worn the poor girl down. He'd given her the day off but almost lamented doing it. Seeing her back in their normal surroundings would have helped to settle his unease. His father hadn't been too thrilled about him proposing so early either, but it wasn't anyone's fucking decision but his.

"I'm doing it now. I came back out to my apartment and decided to spend some of the day cleaning things up. I had a message from Krista's dad that he would be by sometime

today to get her stuff.” She sighed softly as if trying to hide just how hard the situation between Jake and Krista had been on her. Having her closest friend go off her rocker and stab their other friend over being rejected by him was over the top.

Damon shook his head at the thought of anyone dropping off the deep end that bad.

“You need me to come over there to help you out when he gets there?” Damon nodded at the valet as he got into his black Mercedes and buckled up.

“No. I’m fine. He’s a good guy. A lawyer, actually. He and Krista used to get along great, so hearing that they’re not speaking, or haven’t been...”

“Things change, right? People change.” He knew the minute he said it he shouldn’t have.

“Oh yeah? You changing over there, Mr. Bryant?” She was trying to be cheeky and failing miserably at it.

“Nope. I’m fully dressed, you naughty vixen.” He smiled and pulled out into the mid-afternoon traffic.

“I’m only naughty for you.”

“This better be true.” He glanced over his shoulder and held back the information about having lunch with Kendal. Bethany was TA’ing for him over the next semester and already seemed to be a little too interested in Damon’s old friend. He was being overly protective, but couldn’t help it. There hadn’t been too much in his life he’d wanted to hang on to, but Beth seemed to make the cut.

“Are you coming to Kent’s now?”

He was grateful she didn’t refer to his father as hers. It was an odd situation, but ignoring it seemed to be the best way to deal with it, at least in his mind.

“No. I’m going back to the office, but I’ll try and come out there later tonight. We have a lot of shit to sort through over several large projects.”

“You want me to come in?”

“Nope. I would have told you if I did.” He turned on his blinker and jerked in front of someone. “I gotta go, baby. See you later.”

He dropped the call and tossed the phone in the seat next to him as Kendal’s words rushed across his mind. Maybe three weeks *was* too fast. His mother and father had gotten married after a few months of dating, and that had been fine for a few years.

Pain laced the center of his chest as the sound of her moaning for another man filled his ears. He reached up and rubbed his chest as he growled.

“Stop it. Leave that shit in the past where it belongs.” He pressed harder on the muscle above his heart and made the last turn that would lead him to the office. His mother’s infidelities shouldn’t have fucked up his love life so much, but they had. He almost expected to find every woman he dated in bed with another man. It was a sick thought, and one he hadn’t been able to shake until Beth.

Something about the way she spoke to him, looked up to him, respected him. She was in it for the long haul, or so he hoped. She had a ring on her finger that should have made the promise more firm than it was.

“As long as I don’t fuck it up,” he mumbled and pulled into the large garage next to their building. “Or she doesn’t.”

The former seemed more likely.

CHAPTER 62



BETHANY

The large diamond sitting on her hand seemed surreal. Had Damon really proposed after three weeks? Warmth flooded her over the thought, quickly followed by a million reasons why *he* might decide his offer was a mistake. The man was as fickle as any she'd ever met but so worth the effort. Having been raised to be independent and fight for everything, she wasn't used to wanting to belong to anyone or anything, but Damon was different.

Belonging to him felt good, right. Like he might have the ability to patch the holes in her past and give her a future that looked far brighter than the one she was forcing herself into. Work was going to become her only focus, much as school had been for the last four years.

A knock at the apartment door caused her to jump. Krista was still in jail, and though Bethany should have visited her close friend, she simply didn't have much to say to the other girl. Having lived together for four years and not knowing that Krista was manic bipolar was beyond concerning. Had she missed the signs or simply ignored them?

Bethany peeked through the peephole in the center of the door and let out a sigh. Jake and his father. She opened the door and forced a warm smile on her face. Tears were the alternative, but she refused to make him uncomfortable.

"Hey! What a great surprise." She moved back as his father wheeled him into the living room. Seeing him in a wheelchair pulled at her heart strings even more. "What are you doing over here?"

“We were headed home from the hospital, and this guy wouldn’t let up about stopping by the apartment to get his game system. God forbid he read or something.” His father smiled and moved over to give Bethany a quick side hug. “Thank you for helping Jake through this.”

“Of course.” Bethany’s vision blurred with hot tears.

“I’m *not* sitting in a bed for two weeks with nothing but old classics to read. Someone kill me now.” Jake snorted, in far better of a mood than anyone expected of him. After being repeatedly stabbed in the chest, Bethany could only imagine what his body looked like. The thought caused her heart to contract painfully. Love had the power to do crazy, fucked up things.

“So you decided to stop by here because?” Bethany moved over and gave Jake a hug as best she could.

“I saw your car sitting out front. Ain’t nobody missing that beat up piece of shit.” He chuckled and grimaced as his hands came up to press against his chest.

“Take it easy, buddy, and watch your language.” His father walked to the door. “I’ll give you guys a few minutes while I make a call. Be back in five.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Jake waved and turned his attention back to Bethany as his facade faded. “Damn, I’m glad to see you. I swear it’s been a nightmare having to sit in that hospital bed and have people poke and prod at me.”

Bethany dropped to the couch and motioned for him to move up until their knees touched. She squeezed his legs softly.

“I was terrified that you were-” She lost the volume to her voice.

“It’s okay.” He reached out as a soft sob left her. “Come here.”

Bethany nodded and moved up farther, leaning in and letting him hold her. “Don’t hurt yourself. I’m just being sensitive. It just scared the shit out of me.”

“It’s by far the craziest thing I’ve ever been involved in or heard of.” He brushed his hand down the back of her head. “I’m okay though. The tough part is coming up.”

Bethany moved back and took his hands in hers. “The court case?”

“Yeah.” Jake glanced down at their hands as a sheepish look crossed his face. “I’m not angry at Krista. I should be, but we’ve been friends for so long. I knew she had a few issues, and my mother is bipolar. Getting off her meds was a stupid thing to do, and I know most of the shit that happened was caused by her not taking them. I should have read the warning signs and gotten her help.”

“I agree, but the fact still remains that she attacked you and almost killed you.” She squeezed his hands and released him to slump back into the couch. “I hate the idea of testifying against her, but she’s dangerous. Obviously.”

Bethany wiped her eyes and studied Jake’s pasty composure. His blond hair was a little longer than she’d seen him wear it, and his cheeks were hollowed out.

“That’s true, but still... those medications after taken for so long are a huge part of keeping someone stable.” He shrugged and grimaced. “She needs to be under supervision to take them, and I assume that’s what her attorney is going to push for.”

“If her father lets them.” Bethany ran her fingers through her hair before working the long strands into a messy bun. “He’s coming over soon to grab her stuff, or sending someone. You know he’s rich as hell. I doubt he’ll come himself.”

“I met him a few times. I think she puts an evil spin on him because he’s wealthy and forces her to stay in school, but he seemed like a good guy.” Jake shrugged and winced again before chuckling. “I keep forgetting that any movement tugs at all these stitches.”

“I’m so sorry, Jake. I feel so fucking guilty about not having answered the phone when you called in a panic. I could have stopped-”

“No, you couldn’t have. You’d have been stabbed half to death too. She was out of her mind.” He got a faraway look in his eyes before shivering. “Anyway. What’s going on with this new guy of yours? Is he treating you well? The wedding go good?”

“Everything was great. He’s a great guy.” She slipped her hands under her legs, grateful that he hadn’t said anything about the ring on her finger. He had to be a little out of it not to notice. The ring was beautiful and sparkled like crazy in the light. Jake *not* noticing was a good thing. One less fight to have.

“Good. Make sure he stays that way.” Jake turned a little and groaned as his father walked back in.

“You ready, son?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Jake turned back toward Bethany and smiled. “Dr. Tarrington is going to let me TA alongside you until I get back on my feet. The university has been good to us through this crap, but I don’t want to get behind. Is that all right with you?”

“Heck yes.” Bethany got up as Jake’s father pulled him back toward the door. “I’ll be right beside you no matter what you need. You putting off your master’s this semester?”

His father spoke up, “Hell no. I tried to tell him that one semester wasn’t going to make or break him, but you know he’s an overachiever.”

Bethany laughed and wiped at her eyes again. “He’s in good company. I’ll help out where I can.”

“Study dates twice a week like we used to?” Jake winked and wiggled around in his wheelchair as if trying to get comfortable.

“Only if you’re buying coffee.” She opened the door more fully and moved back to let them out.

“Him buying the coffee?” Jake’s dad chuckled. “You mean me?”

“Are you offering?” Bethany teased him and closed the door as they waved their goodbyes. The thought of what Jake must look like under his loose T-shirt and sweat pants caused her to cringe. Krista had almost succeeded in taking his life, and thank God she hadn’t, but he was forever changed. Every time he changed clothes or got naked in front of a girl, they would see the excessive scarring all over his chest and stomach.

“Unbelievable.” She tried to discard the thought, but it lingered as she cleaned up the apartment and packed up the rest of Krista’s stuff. Both of her friends’ lives were forever changed, and hers as well. Fear over what love could do tugged at the edge of her thoughts and tried hard to force her to step back from what could possibly be the greatest love story of her life.



The visit with Krista’s dad wasn’t nearly as bad as Bethany had prepared herself for. He was very much the guy Jake said he was. Friendly and grateful for her help. They loaded everything up in his Lexus, and he apologized for the two-hundredth time before driving off.

Bethany made the quick decision to go over to Kent’s in hopes of seeing Damon. With all he had to catch up on, there was no way in hell she was going to bother him. Things had changed a little, and yet not nearly enough for her liking. The ring on her finger should have been the open door for her and Damon moving in together and planning their days together, but it wasn’t. They were back to dating with the promise of moving toward something more solid in the future, or so she hoped.

She got in the car and buckled up before hitting the button for Matt on her phone and sliding the device into hands-free mode.

“Hey. Hey. Hey.” Matt’s boisterous voice filled the confines of the car and caused her to smile.

“Hey, you. Are you out at dad’s?” She backed up and hit the brake hard as a biker sped across the parking lot behind her.

“Yep. Already here.”

“Shit!” Bethany barked as the guy waved like ‘no big deal.’ Him eating the back of her bumper would have been a big damn deal.

“You don’t want me here?” Matt chuckled.

“No. Some idiot just drove his bike behind the car while I was backing up. I swear.”

“Kids nowadays!” Matt sounded like an eighty-year-old with an agenda for changing the next generation.

She laughed and let out a quick puff of air. “I’m glad you’re over there. Is Damon there by chance?”

“No. I haven’t talked to him since yesterday. I’m hoping you have?”

“Yeah. We spoke earlier. He’s at the office, trying to take care of things before your dad gets home on Thursday.”

“Your dad too.”

“Don’t remind me,” she grumbled and pulled onto the main street on campus. “That means Damon is officially my brother.”

“You’re so risqué.” Matt had so many personalities it was damn near impossible to tell what was going to come out of his mouth next.

“I’m not sure that’s the word I would use, but moving on... Are we still planning on going up to Seattle this weekend with you?”

“Yep. You and Damon both. I know you guys might have to work a little from what he said, but I’d really like it if you could go with me to the gallery. I’ve never shared my full portfolio with anyone. It’s a little nerve-racking.”

“We’ll be there with you, or at least I will. I’m not sure if Damon has something big he has to take care of up there.” She

stopped at the stop light at the edge of campus and glanced around, feeling a bit excited. One more year and she would be done with school and ejected fully into the real world. She'd been waiting her whole life to take ownership of her future and her situation, and it was right in front of her. As much as she loved her mother, the last ten years had been beyond rough. Never again would either of them go to bed hungry. Bethany wouldn't allow it.

"Erica is going to join us too, I guess," Matt huffed.

"And you're not happy about that? You big baby." Bethany smiled as the light turned. Matt was smitten by Erica and intimidated beyond belief. She was a force of nature, but Matt could hold his own. *If he tried.*

"This coming from the girl that said yes to marriage after three weeks of knowing some weirdo at the office."

She laughed. "He's the hottest weirdo I've ever seen in my life, so sue me."

"You're broke like me, and I'm pretty sure *hot* isn't the best criteria for a spouse. Those looks will fade, honey."

"Doubtful, and even if they do, I love him enough to remember what he used to look like."

Matt pretended to gag. "You guys are too much. Get over here and help me finish off this gallon of cookie dough ice cream."

"I thought you were working to keep your girlish figure?" She pulled onto the freeway and settled down into the comfy seat that fit her like a glove.

"I am. That's why I'm going to start jogging with you every day."

"No, you're not. That's my quiet time. I need to get back to it."

"Yes, I am. I can be quiet."

"Lies. You Bryant boys are just full of lies."

"Amongst other things."

CHAPTER 63



DAMON

Frustration sat heavy on his shoulders as he drove toward his father's mansion on the far side of town. Having wanted to be just like his dad his whole life, now was his chance, and yet it didn't seem nearly as thrilling as he hoped it would. People were childish and irresponsible, and that was on a good day.

Between the fuck ups his Seattle team made on the Zarpeth inventory and the Kissinger tax audit coming up, he was beat. The trip to Jamaica had been good for him, maybe too good, but returning to another crisis wiped away the positive effects he hoped to hold on to for a few more days.

He pulled up in the circle drive and parked his Mercedes, but didn't get out. Bethany's beat up Honda sat beside Matt's old green truck, both of them looking like something the pool boy might drive. A smile lifted Damon's lip at the realization that Bethany was a lot like him, but a lot like Matthew too. There were parts of her past he wanted to explore, but that would come in time. He didn't have the words to offer if she brought up something devastating. He was still fighting his own demons and had spent far too many years *not* getting emotionally involved to just dive in head first as he promised her they would.

It was a promise made in the heat of the moment and a stupid one. It's the type of action that emotionally free people took. Neither of them was free.

The sound of Matt and Beth laughing as he walked into the house caused something to loosen in his chest. He worked his

jacket over his shoulders and hung it up near the front door, pausing to listen to his brother tease his soon-to-be wife.

Wife? Odd...

“You guys having fun without me?” He walked toward the smell of garlic and butter as his stomach rumbled. His lunch with Kendal had been light and quick. He was needed in the office to play his role and his father’s. That he was taking the evening off was a miracle, and one he would surely pay for the next day.

“Never.” Bethany glanced over her shoulder and smiled.

Her white shorts and blue top looked good on her. Long legs that went on forever, and handfuls of silky brown hair. His body reacted the minute she turned and walked toward him.

“Good. I don’t wanna get jealous. I’m not a very nice guy when I do.” He slid his hands down her arms as she wrapped them tightly around his neck and lifted to her toes to press her lips to his.

He ran his hand down her back, cupping her rear as his other moved to get lost in her thick tresses. He pressed his tongue against her lips and tightened his hold on her as she opened up, letting him in deep. She was compliant and everything he wanted to be tucked beneath him in bed. No matter what happened in their struggle to make a life together, sex would be the common meeting ground.

“Damn, guys. Really? I know it’s new and stuff, but shit.” Matt’s comment caused Damon to break the kiss and smile.

“Stop being jealous and bend Erica over a table somewhere. She’d love it, and you need it.” Damon moved his hands up to cup his girl’s pretty face. “How was the rest of your day?”

He leaned down and kissed her again as she moved her hands down his chest and wrapped her arms around his waist, pulling him flush against her. The soft scrape of her nipples against his chest left his cock rising to attention. She needed to

be laid across a table and consumed as well. What the fuck was Matt doing there?

“It was good.” She glanced down and wagged her eyebrows. “I don’t think Erica is the only one that-”

“Hey. Still here.” Matt moved up beside them and lifted his eyebrow. “Let’s eat dinner and then you two can act like horny teenagers. It’s gross.”

“You wanna do it in my dad’s bed? He’s not coming back into town tonight.” Damon nipped at Bethany and moved back as he let out a shaky breath.

“I do. Now?” She moved to the exit to the kitchen and took off as Damon bounded after her.

“No better time than now.” He reached her as she’d just made it inside the guest room. He crashed into her, picking her up and carrying her to the bed as she wrapped her legs around his waist and leaned in to kiss his mouth. Fire burned his insides at the intense desire to get inside of her, to hear her come for him.

He rocked against her as he pressed her to the bed below him.

“Does this mean we’re not eating dinner?” Matt’s voice was far too close for comfort.

“We are. Get the fuck out, and we’ll be there in two minutes,” Damon barked.

“Be nice.” Bethany slid her hands up his chest and moaned as he rolled his hips, rolling his cock along the softness she provided.

“Nice? Nice guys never get anywhere.” He rolled onto his back and held on tightly to her hips, forcing her to sit up so he could see her. He slipped his hand under her blouse and brushed his fingers over her nipple as she moaned again. She was divine, something to behold as she faked innocence.

“I like nice guys.”

He slid his free hand up her thigh and into her shorts to brush the back of his fingers against her pussy. “Seems like

maybe you like bad boys. Perhaps you're telling a fib."

"Just because I get turned on by bad boys doesn't mean I *like* them." She smirked and rolled her hips, massaging the full length of him.

He slipped his fingers under the curve of her panties and growled at the sticky hot wetness that pooled between her thighs. "I want in here."

She moaned and pressed her hands to his chest as she leaned over. The cascade of her hair danced around his chest and filled the air with the smell of coconut.

"Let's eat with Matt and then you can have anything you want." She leaned down and kissed him as her hips shifted again. He pressed a finger deep inside her tight body and licked at her mouth as she whimpered against his lips.

"Tell Matt to go away and let me eat you instead." He pumped his finger rhythmically, pressing against her g-spot and tugging.

"Don't," she whispered roughly but didn't move.

"No? You don't wanna release?" He smiled as her eyes narrowed and her breathing got off a little. "I like the sounds you make when you come. I'd prefer to hear it before dinner and after. I usually get what I want, so..."

"Hush," she grumbled and pressed her breasts against his chest as she arched her back and closed her eyes. He slipped another finger deep into her wetness as she groaned loudly and opened her thighs further.

The look of ecstasy on her beautiful face when she crested over the edge of orgasm was intense, gratifying.

"Fuck," he groaned as her body tightened around his fingers and spasmed. "So fucking hot baby." He gripped the back of her neck and rolled them again so that he could hover above her as he finished his assault. He'd be taking his time with her later that night, but the quickie was in order.

"More," she whined, lighting him up complete.

“You’ll get more when I’m ready.” He ran his fingers just under her panties, petting her as he pressed his mouth to her nipple and tugged just over her clothes. “God, you smell so fucking good, Beth.”

“Tell Matt to go away.” She pressed her foot into his chest and pushed.

He moved back and shook his head. “I’m not hurting the big guy’s feelings; you do that.”

“Never.” She sat up and tugged her shorts back into place as he slipped his fingers into his mouth and licked them clean. The woman tasted like heaven and watching her react to him teasing her mercilessly made life better.

“Come on. Let’s go eat and get back to doing what we do best.” He pulled her up and kissed her a few times as she stood on wobbly legs.

“You’ve ruined me for sainthood.”

“Honey, you didn’t have a chance.” He laughed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders as they walked back to the kitchen.

Matt glanced up from chopping cilantro and lifted his eyebrow. “Do I even wanna know?”

“Nope. No kissing and telling here.” Damon chuckled and released Beth to find them a bottle of wine. “Besides, I’m not going to ask about you and Erica when you finally get the balls to pop her cherry.”

“Hey. Shit. I’m still here.” Bethany threw her hands in the air dramatically as they laughed. It was good to belong to people with far better hearts than his. They might find a way to make a good man of him yet.

Maybe.



Matt left after dinner, and Damon worked beside his girl to get the kitchen cleaned back up and everything back to normal.

“You really think Matt and Erica would be good together?” She wiped her hands on a dishtowel and turned to face him.

“I do. They’re a lot alike.” He shrugged and finished the red wine in the glass closest to him before moving over to pull her flush against him. “Enough about them. Let’s get back to us.”

“Are you going back into the office tonight or staying here?” She worked on the buttons at the front of his shirt and licked her lips.

“I’m staying with you.” He brushed his hands down the sides of her head, intertwining his fingers in her hair. “Unless you’d prefer-”

“Don’t even.” She pushed at his shoulders, forcing him to break contact. Her fingers pressed into the tight muscle of his neck as she pushed his shirt from his shoulders. “I want you to myself every night.”

“Good answer.” He reached down and pulled her shirt off. “Turn around.”

She leaned in and kissed his chest several times before swirling her tongue around his nipple. Her hands cupped him tightly as her nails played with the underside of his sack.

“Turn around.” He reached down and removed her hands from him, though the feel of them wrapped around him was almost too delicious to refuse. She needed to remember who was in control. Love could have its way with their relationship, but in the bedroom, he wanted supreme reign. He couldn’t imagine it any other way.

She pressed her hands to the counter in front of her and arched her back to rub her ass along the front of his slacks.

He growled and reached down to run his hands down the outside of her thighs as he pressed his chest to her back and smiled. “Find something you like?”

“I like it a lot,” she murmured.

He moved back and squeezed her thick curves, loving how big her butt was. She seemed to hate it, but he couldn’t get

nearly enough of it.

“Come get on your knees for me.” He popped her ass and reached up to undo her bra before turning and walking to the living room. He worked himself out of his slacks and let them drop wherever they did.

“On my hands and knees, or-”

“Right here, baby. On your knees. Come suck me off.” He turned and stroked himself as her eyes moved down his body and widened a little as they reached his cock.

“Fuck yes.” She stopped in front of him and ran her fingernails down his chest as she sunk to her knees, the sweet little bitch making sure to run her lips by his dick as she hit the floor.

“Such a good girl, Beth. You know I love you, right?” He slid his fingers into her hair as she reached for his cock and nodded, ignoring his gaze as she focused on his erection only.

“Yeah, I know.” She sucked one of his balls into the warmth of her mouth.

He groaned and pulled back on her hair before tilting himself toward her and rubbing the head of his erection against her pretty lips. “Good. Remember that while I fuck you like I don’t.”

CHAPTER 64



BETHANY

White-hot electricity danced in the center of her stomach as she toyed with him. The minute he took complete control, it burst out from its epicenter and danced along her pleasure points, leaving her exposed, needy, raw.

“I wish you would unload on me.” She stroked up his thick shaft several times before leaning in and taking as much as she could in her mouth. The musky flavor of his excitement was almost enough to throw her over the edge. The man was a beast in the bedroom and deserved someone far more adventurous. Something about him made her want to be that girl no matter the cost.

He groaned and tugged at her hair, pulling her closer to his body, forcing more of his cock into her mouth.

“Breathe through your nose and work to take all of me. Don’t assume you can’t. Make it work, Beth. Push.” He brushed his fingers down the side of her face and pumped his hips slowly as he watched her with an intensity she’d never seen before. On anyone before.

She forced herself to follow his instructions though some part of her wanted to rebel. There was too much promise in walking the thin line with him in the bedroom to disobey. Anywhere else, and she would have given him a run for his money on dominance, but on her knees in front of him? He was in charge, and the thought left her breathless for more.

He worked himself in and out of her mouth over the next few minutes until his breathing turned to panting, his smooth

thrusts turned to fast pumps of his hips.

“I’m gonna come. You want it, baby, or you want me to finish it?”

She reached up and gripped him tightly, pumping his thick flesh as he groaned loudly. “I always want it.”

“Right.” He locked his gaze onto hers and pressed back into her mouth, losing himself as she watched closely. Never in a million years had she seen someone more sensual, more beautiful and comfortable to simply be exactly what he was. Alpha.

He moved back and dropped down on the couch behind him as he let out a shaky breath.

“So hot,” she murmured and moved in between his legs, rubbing his thighs before sliding her fingers over his tight abs and up his chest. He groaned again and closed his eyes as his head dropped back onto the couch.

“Get up here and fuck me.” He took a shaky breath before reaching for her. “Take your shorts and panties off and turn your back to me. I wanna hold your ass while you work me.”

There were no words to offer as she got up and slipped her shorts and panties over her legs. He gripped her hard as she turned and moved to sit in his lap.

“God, you smell good. Did you come with me?” He lowered her.

She moaned loudly as he forced her open, taking up every inch of space inside of her and forcing her to accommodate his size.

Bethany pressed her hands to his thighs and pushed back farther as they groaned in tandem. Chill bumps raced across her exposed skin as he brushed his hands up her back and gripped her shoulders, finishing the deal with a strong thrust from beneath her.

“No, not yet. Almost.” She pressed her hands into his thighs and lifted up to work him.

“Not like that baby. That’s for me. This time is for you.” He pulled her back and forced her to lay flush with her back to his chest as he rolled his hips, massaging her body.

She groaned and repositioned herself, pressing her ass tightly against his stomach as she tried to find enough air to breathe. The man had a way of forcing it from the room without even trying.

His strong arm tightened just below her breasts, one hand kneading her as the other slipped into the messy curls between her thighs and tapped against her clit.

“Take your time with me.” He licked at the side of her neck as she panted roughly. She couldn’t seem to speak, nor did she want to try. The level of pleasure washing over her in waves was suffocating. “Just lock yourself into the best position for my thick head to bounce against the place you need it and let me work you long into the night.”

She groaned as a shiver ran down her spine, but nodded. “All night, okay?”

“Yeah, baby. All night.” He lifted his hips as she cried out again, pleasure ruling her in a way that left her lost to him. The man had too much power out of the bedroom, but once in it, she was held captive, and willingly so.



She woke the next morning to find him gone already. A note sat by the coffee pot with one of the pink roses from the front yard clipped and sitting in a vase beside it. The smile that touched her face faded quickly as she read it.

Beth,

I'm in the office already, I'm sure. Make sure you set the alarm, and leave your ring at home when you're in the office. I don't want to overshadow my father's wedding celebration by

talking about ours. We still need to figure out how to ease everyone into the idea of us being together. Let's be smart about it. I know you understand that.

D

“What?” She read the note again and rolled her eyes. Typical. Immaturity raged inside of her as she got dressed in the only clean outfit left in her make-shift closet at Kent’s. A pair of black slacks and a peach-colored top. She worked her hair into a bun, wanting to be defiant just because she could and grabbed her keys. A long day promised to keep her thoughts about Damon’s request at a minimum, but by the time she reached the office, she’d talked herself into a million underlying messages from the letter.

He wasn’t happy with his decision to ask her to marry him and was backtracking, which seemed insane, and yet it was the only conclusion she could come to. Why hide their engagement? No one seemed to give two shits about the situation when she’d brought it up before Jamaica, including Damon, but now he did?

“Overshadow Kent’s wedding. Stupid,” she mumbled under her breath as she walked toward the elevators in the large downtown building that McKenzie and Bryant owned several floors in.

“Hey, you!” Ben walked out of the cafeteria holding a muffin and cup of black coffee. “Did you get a chance to eat?”

“Not yet.” She tucked away her internal struggles. “Aren’t we supposed to meet this morning? I thought I saw something in my e-mail from you.”

“Yeah, in thirty minutes. Let’s just do it now, and we can chat while we eat?” He gave her a friendly smile.

“Sounds perfect. Let me set my stuff down, and I’ll get something real quick.” She dropped her briefcase and purse by

the table where Ben sat down and started to unwrap his muffin. “You need anything else?”

“A long-ass vacation, a hot woman to love me and a napkin?”

“I can help with one of those, and it’s the saddest of the options.”

“But the most helpful for the here and now!” he chuckled as she walked off.

Her ring was tucked into the inside zipper of her purse, which was the cause of concern. If someone took her purse, or she lost it, then what? The damn ring had to have cost fifteen to twenty thousand dollars. She was taking chances on something that cost more than she’d paid for her car and school the last semester.

Stupid. And for what reason?

Was Damon ashamed of their relationship? Their situation? Was she?

A little, if she were being truly honest with herself. She grabbed a yogurt and an orange juice seeing that all of the chocolate donuts were gone. She made her way back to Ben and worked to let the angst inside of her go. The night before in Damon’s arms was exactly what she needed to keep at the forefront of her thoughts. Otherwise she would dig herself into an impossibly deep hole of what ifs.

“Your napkin, Sir.” She dropped a few in the center of the table and sat down.

“Thanks. How was the wedding? The beach? Let me live vicariously through you.” He grabbed a napkin and wiped at his mouth.

“It was great. The wedding was beautiful, and we all got a quick vacation, which was much needed. Damon relaxed for the first time since I met him a few weeks back. It was fun.” She shrugged and worked to open her yogurt. “Anything happen around here?”

“Not really. Sadie has been much more amicable, so we might want to make sure the apocalypse isn’t headed this way. I swear the girl has gone from being a two-headed dragon to a firefly.”

Bethany lifted her eyebrow. “Too much Lord of the Rings for you?”

He chuckled. “I guess so. We had an all weekend marathon of it.”

“Who’s we?” She leaned in as her expression softened. Ben was a great guy and deserved a girl in his life that would treat him right.

“Me and my little brother. He’s about your age. We flew him in from Seattle.” He shrugged. “I wanted to show him around town, but you know how it is. You do what’s most comfortable to you. Popcorn and movies are our thing.”

“Fun. So, tell me about this new job you’re pulling me on.”

“It’s Zarpeth. I think you helped Kent and Damon with some of the inventory audit shit a week or so ago, right?”

“I went up there but didn’t help much. It was tense, to say the least.” She took a quick bite of her yogurt and decided against it as her stomach tightened.

Should have gone for the omelet.

“It’s a mess. We’re taking up a new team this Friday to start working on it. Damon said that you had classes starting tomorrow, and you’re TA’ing for a cost accounting professor, but I figure we’ll still have you join us on the weekends if nothing else.” He shrugged.

“No rest for the weary, hm?” She opened her orange juice and glanced around, missing Philip all of a sudden. “Hey, do you think Damon would give Philip his job back if he earnestly asked for it?”

“I don’t know.” Ben stood and wiped his mouth before stretching. “I’ll ask him, but for now, just download the client files and get yourself up to speed on Zarpeth. The information

on the company is in their file. We're going to be pulling seven days a week until we get everything sorted out. I think the plan is to head down to their main warehouse in Florida next weekend, not this one. We'll see who's going on that trip, but I remember Damon mentioning that he wanted you there."

"All right. I'll jump on the review and get ready. I guess me being there Thursday night to Monday morning is going to be enough?"

"Yep. We'll take every bit of help we can get." He gathered his stuff. "Let me know if you have any questions and I'll keep you in the loop as much as I can."

CHAPTER 65



DAMON

It was just after lunch, and she'd yet to stop by or text. She was upset, and he couldn't blame her, nor could he console her. It was a simple request to leave the ring at the house, and it had very little to do with him not wanting to show her off, and everything to do with laying the proper foundation for their relationship.

He'd been cocky about the situation before, but that was before he decided to up and ask the pretty girl to marry him.

Marriage. Fuck. The word alone seemed to bring with it a whole host of feelings that Damon wasn't ready to face. It was supposed to be the binding of two people into a relationship that spanned time until the end showed up for one member or the other, but it rarely happened.

The phone buzzed as he sat at his desk, taking a quick five-minute breather for the only break he would have that day.

"Mr. Bryant, Erica Hall is on line one for you. Are you free to--"

"Put her through, Linda." Damon sat up and pressed his forearms to the desk in front of him as Erica's voice filled the room.

"Hey there. You recovered from all the Mai-Tais yet?"

"I'm definitely feeling a sense of longing to be back out there. Nothing like walking into a shit-storm after a relaxing vacation."

“That’s the way it always works, but something tells me that you create shit-storms if there isn’t one waiting for you. It helps you feel wanted.”

He chuckled. “Right. What can I do for you, Miss Hall?”

“Back to business, I see.” She cleared her throat as Damon increased the volume on the phone and got up to pace the floor. He slipped his hands into his slack pockets and tried to let his worry over Bethany go. They would work things out.

“Always business with me.” He smiled.

“Agreed. This call is a bit of business and pleasure, I guess. I wanted to make sure that you guys were still planning on being in town this next weekend.”

“We are. We’re meeting with an art dealer for Matthew and working on an audit for M&B for the rest of the time. Do you want to get together while we’re there?”

“Actually, yes, and I’m hoping that you’re still working on Matt about joining me up here. I think him finding someone to sell his art is great, but he still needs a steady income.”

“You just want him near you, Erica. You’re not fooling any of us,” he snorted and stopped by the window.

“Is it that obvious?” Her strong tone dimmed a little.

“It is to me, but I get it. He would be great working in the advertising department as a designer-”

“Lead designer.”

“Right, but Matt doesn’t care about being in leadership or ruling Corporate America. He cares about being free to be and do what he wants to do. He doesn’t need money, though I suppose he’s trying to cut the ties from our father as I did just after college.”

“Then he can just come and be a designer for me. I think he would love the city, the people, and he could grow so much as an artist here.”

“I agree. I’ll talk to him and see where his thoughts are. I can’t promise much as Matt has always been a free spirit, but

I'll have the conversation."

"Soon, please. I need to fill the spot I have available, and I'd love to put his name on it instead of opening it up to the public." She sighed, and Damon couldn't help but let the smile on his face widen. The woman had been after Matt since they first met five years ago at a large conference for growing businesses. The fact that she'd come to work for M&B three years after that conference left him to believe that some part of it was to get closer to Matt.

It was creepy, and yet sexy as hell.

"Will do. Anything else?"

"Not really. You and Bethany okay? I know you made a big decision while you were in Jamaica. How is the aftermath of that?"

"Good. It's great. I gotta run, but we'll see you this weekend." He waited for her to say her goodbyes and pressed the button to end the call. He wasn't sharing his feelings with anyone, especially not another woman. He might have the reputation of a playboy with an open invitation to get hit on, but he was far from it. The day he'd found his mother in bed with some random guy from her work had changed everything.

Fucking around was out. Nothing could tempt him to change his mind, not even a ghost from the past.



"Damon, I'm not sure if you remember, but your father scheduled an interview for the open Senior Manager position we have. One of the interviews is today and the rest later this week. I do believe this one comes highly recommended from a good friend, and your dad was leaning toward giving her the job. He just needed to go through the motions to make it look legit." Linda stood just inside the office, her back to the door.

"Really? Damn." Damon reviewed his schedule and didn't find the interview anywhere. "Was the interview with him or

me?”

“She’s supposed to meet with him, but he’s out of town, as you know. Can I show her in?”

“I guess. Cancel my lunch appointment with Bart Darren today and reschedule it. Get me a sandwich with the office order if you guys are ordering out.”

“Ham and Swiss cheese with mustard?”

“Yep, and chips. Surprise me.” He stood and pulled his jacket off the rack behind him as he walked toward the small circular table in his office. He needed the candidate’s resume, but hopefully, she brought it with her.

The woman that walked in behind Linda almost made his heart stop.

“Delilah?” He forced a smile and moved around the desk to give her a quick hug. She returned the gesture and laughed.

“I should have told Bridget to tell you, but you know she’s in Jamaica. They turned off their phones just to get away from everything.”

“I saw her there.” Damon moved back and nodded to Linda. “Thanks for showing her in.”

“I was supposed to meet with your dad, but he’s still on vacation from what your secretary told me.” She snorted. “I’ve never known Kent Bryant to take a vacation since I met your family in middle school.”

“He hasn’t. It’s half the reason he’s a grumpy old bastard.” Damon pulled out the chair for her as he worked through how he was going to make sure Delilah *didn’t* get the job. Where she was a great lady, her little sister was the bane of his existence. Having dated Bridget through most of his high school years and college, he always thought they would end up together, but it never happened. There was little love lost, but having the blond bombshell back in his life would only create tension between him and Bethany.

No thanks. We have enough as it is.

“And you’re turning out just like him, right?” She sat down and crossed her long, shapely legs before offering a sweet smile. “Well, you know I have to tell you that Bridget said hi. She’s going to find it pretty funny that I had to interview with you instead of Kent.”

“Why’s that?” Damon took the resume she offered and leaned back in his chair as he unbuttoned his jacket. Delilah was the spitting replica of her twin sister, Bridget, her long blond hair full and shiny, her skin flawless, eyes crystal blue and tits as fake as the wrapping on his breakfast sandwich earlier that morning.

“Because when we were kids, I had a crush on you before you guys started dating. That little twit talked me out of asking you to the Sadie Hawkins dance at school because she wanted to ask you. She kept making fun of me because I was in the band and you were a football player. Such a bitch, right?” She shook her head and laughed.

“You were much more my type than Bridget, but I figured I’d cut my losses and say yes to her.” He glanced down at the resume as foreign emotions raced through him. How many conversations had he had with Delilah about his suspicions about his mom when they were kids? He was too embarrassed to bring it up with Bridget, but her sister had always been so sweet, so inviting.

“Figures. We could have been married for six years with kids by now. Remind me to slap her when she gets back to the States.” She leaned back and dropped her hands into her lap. “Anyway, let’s do the interview, and don’t do me any favors, okay? If I’m not the best person for the position, don’t hire me. Promise.”

He nodded. “I promise.”

Fuck. One hot mess after the next.



The interview went well, a little too well. She was beyond perfect for the position and would be a trusted ally in the office

for both Damon and his father. The biggest issue wasn't having her around, but knowing that Bridget would be haunting the edges of the place now too. She would use Delilah's new job with M&B to get closer to Damon and see if she couldn't whittle her way back into his life. It was inevitable. The bitch had tried everything else. Damon couldn't stop himself from thinking this too was another ploy.

He finished up a few things and got up to walk down to Bethany's office only to find her gone.

"She's at UT for the afternoon. I guess she's a teaching assistant for one of the cost accounting professors up there." Sadie stood behind him, a shy smile on her pretty face. The girl was a lawsuit waiting to happen. Why they'd decided to hire the daughter of a senator was beyond him. Probably a favor to the girl's father, but fuck was she spoiled.

"Nice to know. Are you keeping tabs on everyone now for us? Should I up your salary?" He gave her a tight smile and crossed his arms over his chest.

"No. Don't be silly." She reached out and brushed her fingers down his arm before turning her head a little. "Like the new nose? I had to thank Bethany for being a lunatic. I didn't realize how much I hated it before."

"Interesting." He turned to see Ben walking down the hall and almost sighed in relief. "Hey, man. You getting everything together for Friday?"

"That, I am, Sir. Everyone has the client files, and we're locked and loaded to go clean this shit up for you." Ben slipped his hands into his pockets and glanced over at Sadie. "We'll get you on the next traveling engagement. This one just filled up."

"Yeah, no problem. Well, see you, gentlemen, later." Her eyes lingered a little too long, but Damon ignored it and turned to face Ben.

"Did you get to talk with Bethany?"

"Yeah, why? She seemed good with going with us. It will be a great experience if nothing else."

“No, I think she’s fine with it. I just didn’t know if she mentioned anything about us.”

Ben’s eyebrow lifted. “You guys, as in the fake relationship you’ve created to thwart off these other crazy girls?”

“No, we are dating now.”

“What? She’s your sister.”

Damon pressed his friend with a hard stare. “There’s no blood relation, and the last time I checked, I’m free to date who I’d like to date.”

“Of course, but damn...” Ben ran his hand through his thin brown hair and glanced around. “What happened to the busty blond?”

“She’s an old friend from college. Nothing more. We dated back then.”

“Set me up with her.” Ben chuckled.

“Happily. Look, her twin sister, Delilah, just interviewed for the Senior Manager position we have open on the team. I need to talk with my father, but I’m pretty sure she’s getting the position. Just watch out for her and Bethany, okay? Delilah is a sweet girl, but I don’t want anyone messing with Bethany for the sake of messing with her. Got it?”

“Of course, boss. I wouldn’t let anyone mess with anyone.” He shrugged. “I got it under control. We’ll figure it out.”

“Good. The situation with Beth and me is confidential until I say otherwise.”

“You bet. Thanks for trusting me with it.”

Damon nodded and turned to walk back to his office, reaffirmed in his decision to keep the information about the engagement hidden. If Ben, who thought a lot about Bethany and was one of Damon’s college buddies, had a negative reaction, then the rest of the firm would act ridiculous about it, and their board of directors would flip their shit.

It wasn't worth all that, not yet at least.

CHAPTER 66



BETHANY

The rest of the day was a blur, and after watching the late night show, she fell asleep on her couch. Damon not calling or texting was something that would bug her all day no matter how badly she tried to shake it.

“Everything is fine.” She leaned over the bathroom counter in the coffee shop beside campus the next morning. Dr. Tarrington had been out the day before when she finished making preps for his first day of school but wanted to meet the next morning to go over a few things. She couldn’t deny him, even though meeting him meant getting up an hour earlier than she planned.

She walked out of the bathroom and brushed her fingers through her hair as he waved from the counter at the front of the restaurant.

“Bethany. Over here.” His smile was warm, his face incredibly handsome. He had his glasses perched on his nose, which only seemed to make him more attractive. It was a dangerous position for him, and yet he must have loved his job enough to deal with the friction it caused.

“Hey, Dr. Tarrington. How are you?” She moved up to stand beside him, leaving a good bit of space between them. Kendal didn’t need any drama related to possibly dating a student, and she was aware of how people talked when given a reason to.

“I’m great. Let me buy you a coffee and a muffin or bagel?” He adjusted his glasses and glanced back up at the

menu.

“Sure. I’ll take a tall vanilla latte and a blueberry scone.”

“Nope. Only muffins or bagels.” He winked at her and shook his head. “Just kidding. Give the woman what she wants.”

She started to pat his back in a friendly manner and decided against it. She’d only heard a little of his story but wanted access to the rest. It was none of her business, and wouldn’t do her any good, but after hearing him talk about his life being ruined a few years back, she had the odd sense to help protect him for the year she’d be working beside him.

Maybe it was because he was Damon’s best friend.

She took a seat near the back of the coffee shop and pulled out her phone, checking for a missed message from Damon and coming up empty again.

“Waiting on someone?” Kendal stopped beside the table and handed her a cup.

“No. Just wondering why Damon hasn’t called. We didn’t talk at all yesterday. I had a message from him on the counter that could have been taken as controversial or even hurtful, and then nothing.” She huffed. “I’m not bringing this up with you. We’re here to get you ready for your first class this afternoon, not mull through my insecurities.”

He chuckled and set his coffee down. “Let me grab our scones, and we’ll chat about all of it.”

“Fine.” She took the top off her coffee and glanced up to find several of the girls around her focused on Kendal. She turned her attention back to the steaming caramel-colored liquid in her cup and blew softly. There was no saving the poor man from his stunning good looks. That was his momma’s fault. She smiled at the thought.

“What’s so funny?” He sat down, his green eyes studying her as if waiting for some revelation to occur.

“I was just smiling at your situation. It’s not funny, but maybe you should just change professions, or hey...” She

reached across the table and squeezed his forearm, thinking nothing of it. He tensed under her touch. “Maybe you should find someone off campus to date.” She pulled her hand back. “Sorry. I keep trying to make sure I don’t act too comfortable around you.”

“That’s much appreciated.” He leaned over and pulled his bag strap over his neck before digging out a folder. “Dating isn’t as easy as it seems. You guys are still in college and surrounded by people your own age who are looking for a connection. That’s not how the rest of the world functions, as I’m sure you already know.”

“Very true.” She took a tentative sip of her coffee. “Maybe Damon knows someone he can set you up with.”

Kendal chuckled. “No, but thank you. All the women in his past have been bitches, pardon my French. You’re the exception to the rule, I think.”

“Thank you?” She laughed and put the top back on her coffee before taking a bite of the scone he pushed toward her.

“What was the note about yesterday morning?” He leaned back and crossed his legs in a manly fashion.

“This.” She held up her left hand. “He wants me to leave it at home when I’m at the office, but anywhere else, I can wear it. It cost more than a car. I hate the thought of taking it off, even for a second.”

“Because you might lose it?” He lifted his eyebrow, questioning her motive.

“Yes, among other reasons. Why are you not asking questions about this? Did he tell you already?”

“Yes. We had lunch yesterday. After seeing each other for the first time in a long time at your friend, Jake’s, apartment, we decided to start having lunch once a month. It just happened to fall on Monday this week.” He shrugged and took a bite of his scone. “These are awesome.”

“Yeah, I love this place.” Bethany pinched another piece off of hers. “And what do you think? Too soon? Too much?”

“Do you want to know?” He licked his lips as someone sighed close by.

Bethany turned to try and discern who it was, but Kendal tapped the table between them, pulling her back.

“What? Yes, of course, I want to know. I asked.”

He chuckled. “Most people ask lots of things they don’t want the answer to. It’s prudent to ask, but it takes courage to receive the response.”

“Wow. That’s a lot of mental mumbo-jumbo you got going on there this morning, Dr. Tarrington.”

“Right? I do my best thinking first thing in the morning. It’s disturbing.” He cleared his throat. “It’s too soon for something as big as an engagement. You guys have loads of hurdles to climb over, and you both know it. The note asking you not to wear the ring shows that Damon is starting to consider some of them.”

“The hurdles?”

“Yes.” He lifted his hand. “That doesn’t mean that he doesn’t think he’s in love with you, or that he doesn’t want a future, but you guys aren’t a normal couple.”

Heat brushed up the center of her chest. “And who has the right to judge what normal is?”

“Exactly.” He let out a soft sigh. “Her name was Ana, and she was so beautiful. Sweet and kind and only four years younger than me, but none of that mattered. Our situation wasn’t at all what you might call *normal*. She was my student, my best student, and the university, my friends, her parents, fuck, everyone threw stones at our budding relationship. You don’t get to define normal, Bethany. They do.” He pointed to the restaurant and waved his hand about as his words deflated her.

He was right. They had far too much stacked up against them to simply walk into the office and announce their engagement, but something about hiding it felt wrong too. The worry that Damon wasn’t proud that she belonged to him tried to creep in, but she pushed it back. It was stupid. He’d told

their families, the people that mattered most that they could all take a hike if they didn't want to support their budding relationship.

He wasn't ashamed of her.

"That sucks." She glanced around and wrapped her free arm around herself as she nursed her coffee. "It's unfair. Not right."

"Agreed, but it is what it is." He shrugged.

"What happened to Ana?"

"She transferred to A&M in College Station and is probably the head of some big four firm right now. She honestly was one of the most brilliant accounting minds I'd seen at the time, or since. She made *me* think." He chuckled before letting out a soft grunt. "I would say that I miss her, but it's been six years, and after making the decision to walk away, I didn't turn back."

"And the university just popped you on the hand and let you go?"

"Sort of. They knew how close our ages were and that the relationship was consensual."

"I thought you said that the girl finally pulled back the charges. What charges?"

"That wasn't Ana. Another girl in my second year of teaching stayed after for tutorials late one night and came on to me. I told her no. She got pissed and filed a claim with the university that I'd raped her in the fucking classroom." He pinched the bridge of his nose between his fingers and shook his head. "I kept thinking that I should just leave this place, that nothing was worth all of this shit."

"But after being in school for six years for your doctorate, you decided differently?"

"Exactly. I fought hard as hell to get it. I had them check the cameras, and they did and counseled the girl to pull back the charges, but word had already gotten out on campus. They asked for my resignation, and I refused. I threatened to sue

them, and that shut them up. I've had a TA or two ever since, and all of my rooms are monitored with cameras, including my office. I'm not sure what they think they're going to find, but they're full of shit. I never touched that girl or anyone else since Ana. She was my one and only mistake." He lifted his eyes and pressed her with a hard stare. "I'll never, ever make the same mistake again."

"Can't say that I blame you." Bethany nodded toward the folder. "Let's go over your syllabus for this week since classes start in an hour. We can finish up this lovely conversation another time if you're up for it."

"Good plan. I like a girl with focus." He smiled and pushed the papers across the table. "Tell me what you worked on yesterday and we'll go from there."

"One more thing." Bethany let out a soft exhale. "Matt mentioned to Damon while we were on vacation that he needed to be careful in throwing around the idea that he was in 'love.' I guess he told Bridget that he loved her too--"

"Yeah, on the third date. We still give him shit over that, though we really shouldn't. The poor guy hasn't dated much due to some family stuff he's still dealing with, but I'll let him tell you about that when he's ready." Kendal shrugged. "I would assume he means what he says, Bethany, but like any of us, he's looking for a relationship that probably doesn't exist. How nice would it be to find someone where you don't have to think about anything but them, but it just doesn't work that way. Not in this world."

"Well, this has been thoroughly depressing." She snorted as he laughed.

"I'm sorry. Ignore me. I'm going through my own shit right now."

"Why? The semester just started."

"I know, and I saw a girl yesterday in the Dean's office that I would sell my soul to take to dinner. It took all I had to turn and walk away." He shook his head and glanced down toward his hands.

Her heart contracted in her chest as he fiddled with his fingers.

“You can’t date someone in the master’s program either?”

“No.” He glanced up. “No one from the university. Period.”

“No other professors?”

“Nope. No one.” He shrugged and pulled the papers back toward him. “All right so let’s talk about this thing so you can get on with your life.”

She nodded, but let the question she wanted to ask die on her tongue. What about his life? How did he ‘get on with it’ when he was stuck in the past? Regret and sorrow sitting on him so comfortably that he looked five years older than he was?

It was beyond unfair. So much so, that she couldn’t help but try and work through a way to help him overcome it. Something had to give, it just had to.

CHAPTER 67



DAMON

The alarm clock had gone off too early the next morning, and not having gotten in from work until three that morning left him grumpy and hating the world. It was a fair assessment of most of his mornings, but this one seemed worse.

Why hadn't Beth stopped by during the day? There was no fucking way she was completely good with the note he left her. It wasn't like her at all not to swing by and light into his ass over it. It would have been a great time to close the door and press her hot little body against the wall, grinding into her and bleeding out his aggression all over her.

Every muscle in his body protested as he moved into the shower and worked quickly to create a thick lather of soap across his chest. How badly he wanted her there with him to enjoy the warmth of the thick mist all around him, the slippery wetness of his skin against hers.

"You're killing me, baby." He slid his hand down his thick erection and stroked his sack a few times. "I need you here, and yet you're off saving the world. Probably pissed and hurting. Why didn't you come find me?"

He could have taken the time to find her, but it seemed like the ball was in her court. He had too much shit on his shoulders to stop and track her down to apologize for something he wasn't at all sorry about. Their engagement was exciting and something to be proud of, but he had to make sure to lay the foundation for everyone around him to accept it. Their families being so supportive was almost expected.

After washing himself off, he got out of the shower, his body hard and ready for a good hour or two of fucking and yet, no woman to fuck. She should have been there, and he didn't give a shit about how greedy or needy it was. It was a fact.

He changed into a pair of black slacks and a light blue button down before working a tie around his neck and pulling his jacket on. With a few meetings with clients later that day, he was stuck having to completely look the part.

“This is what it's going to be like soon. Dad retired and me working myself into an early grave.” He adjusted his tie and checked himself in the mirror one last time. “Yep, still me.”

Traffic was heavy as he made his way into the office, but it gave him plenty of time to get over the mixture of angst and melancholy that wrestled inside of him. The loud booming of his metal music somehow offered a reprieve from his thoughts, which was greatly needed as well. He and Bethany needed to talk things through.

“I need to bury myself balls deep inside of her and hear her cry out my name ten times. Then we can talk.” He adjusted himself as he climbed out of the car and walked toward the elevator on the darkened basement floor of the parking garage. Was she talking with Matt? Kendal? She didn't seem like the type of girl to hold things in. Surely she was pissed over the ring situation. Why hadn't she said anything?

“Ugh,” he growled and walked in, ignoring everyone as he made his way up to the thirteenth floor of the building. Ben was leaning over Linda's desk, both of them laughing as he walked up.

“Where is Bethany? I didn't see her once yesterday. Did she even show up?” he barked and laid his arm up on the elevated portion of his secretary's desk.

“She's at school, remember? UT started back today. She's out all day if I remember correctly.”

“Who okayed her being gone all damn day, every day? Aren't we paying her a salary?” He was going off the deep

end, but for some reason couldn't pull himself back. The look on both Ben and Linda's faces said he needed to.

"You okayed it, Sir. I have the requisition if you want me to pull it for you?" Linda asked the woman anything but sheepish. It was one of the main reasons he kept her for as long as he had. It was one of her only skills.

"I met with her yesterday about going to Seattle with us, remember me telling you? She's already studying the files. I think she just has a lot to juggle with her internship, her master's and her teaching assistant position. She's doing well, Damon. Really well." Ben's warm smile forced Damon to take a mental step back.

"Good to hear. We have a meeting at ten with the controller from Zarpeth. Is she not going to make it back in time?" He ignored Ben's information spill on her being out all day. She should have made time for something so important.

"I-I'm not sure I mentioned it to her. I'll give her a buzz and see if-"

"No. I've got it." He turned on his heel and walked into his office, slamming the door behind him. "What the fuck is wrong with you? Pull yourself together. You wrote the goddamn note, and now you're the one acting like she dropped that shit on you. Man up."

He pulled his phone from his back pocket and texted her.

Damon: We have an important meeting at ten this morning. I expect you to be there.

Bethany: I wasn't told about a meeting this morning. I have class from 9-11. It's not happening. Someone should have told me.

Damon: You're an intern. Forgive us for not assigning you a secretary yet. Glad to know your plush-ass office isn't enough.

He growled as he waited for a response. What were they fighting about again? Right. His expectation that she should be present for something she had no clue was happening. He dropped down into the chair beside his desk and ran his fingers through his hair. He was in full cock-head mode and hated himself for it. It was simple.

Society would say that they shouldn't be together, that it was incest or workplace inappropriate. Not only was she an intern in his firm, but she was his little sister now too. That was the core of the angst, the center of the fury that burned his insides.

He hated the fact that he was pushing her away slowly. It was a defense mechanism, but one that would ultimately ruin everything he wanted in his future, namely her.



“How dare you.” She closed the door behind her as she walked into his office. It would seem she had far more subtlety than he did in not letting the whole office know that she was pissed.

“Me? I fucking didn't hear from you all day yesterday, and then you sluff off a meeting that you know is important?” Her V-neck t-shirt dipped into the sexy curve of her breasts and stole his attention as he turned from the window and walked toward her aggressively.

“I didn't know about the goddamn meeting.” She poked her finger in his chest. “And why did I have to come after you yesterday? You should have come looking for me. You leave me a note that you don't want me wearing my ring, and then you keep your door closed all day? Very mature. Very loving, Damon.”

“Watch it.” He gripped her wrist and pulled her closer to him, locking her against his chest as he leaned down and breathed in deeply. Her scent was so unique and had the power to liquefy his need, forcing it to rush through his veins at break-neck speed.

“No. You’re being an asshole. I was completely mature about the ring thing. I get it.”

“Do you?” He grabbed her other hand and pulled her even closer before leaning down and kissing her painfully hard. “Do you know how much I want to scream from the rooftop that you’re mine? That maybe, finally, perhaps now it’s my turn to live a little. Do you have a clue?”

Her grimace faded a little as she lifted to her toes and brushed her lips against his again. “Stop it. That’s unfair to pull out something like that.”

“It’s true, and you know they’ll never accept it. I’m your boss and your brother.” He hated how visible her flinch was at his words. Truth always did sting like a bitch.

“I thought you didn’t care about that stuff.”

“When you’re beside me, I don’t.” He released her and ran his hands up her arms to cup the side of her neck as he licked her lips. “I wanted you in my bed last night, in my shower this morning, but you were nowhere to be found.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and jumped, wrapping her taut legs around his waist as he moved toward the door and pressed her to it.

“You were here half the night, weren’t you?” She licked at the side of his neck as he pressed forward and ground himself against her.

“That’s beside the point. You should have been here with me.” He sucked her earlobe into his mouth and grunted softly as he gripped her ass and ran his fingers along the thick crease of her blue jeans, teasing her.

“You’re right. I have too much going on.” She gripped his face in her hands as he rocked her against the door again. “Maybe I should quit my master’s program.”

“Is that a possibility?” He was a bastard for asking.

“No, asshole.” She ran her fingers through his hair as someone knocked on the door behind them, causing Beth to yelp.

“Just me, boss.” Linda. “Your meeting is in fifteen minutes. You said to give you a head’s up.”

“Right. Thank you, Linda.” He studied Bethany’s face, memorizing the soft smile lines at the side of her mouth and the way her long eyelashes brushed by her skin, taunting him to dive in deeper with her.

“I hate you for making me want you like this.” She brushed her nose by his neck and moved up to kiss him softly again before sliding down the front of his body. “What are your plans tonight?”

“I don’t know yet. Nothing turns out like it should here.” He moved back and brushed the back of his finger past her budded nipple. “You’re not going into this meeting in jeans and a t-shirt.”

“It’s all I have with me.” She lifted her eyebrow as if to challenge him.

“Then go back to class. You need to get your calendar lined up with Linda’s, Bethany. It’s the best way to make sure you don’t miss something important again. Being an intern doesn’t give you endless mulligans, and as I’ve said before, we’re looking at moving you up quickly. You’re family. You need to run ahead of the group.”

The look on her pretty face said she didn’t much appreciate his coaching.

“Right. I swear I have no idea what you’ve done with my fiancé, but when you find him, tell him to call me. I need to work out a lot of untapped aggression, and he’s the only one I’m allowed to get naked with.” She turned her back to him as he reached out and wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her back. He cupped her mound with one hand and her throat with the other.

“Come out to my place tonight. Ten, and don’t be late.”

“No. I’m not interested in your bullshit.” She pulled forward, but he hung on tightly.

“What do you want from me? I’m your boss here, and you need to step it up.”

She glanced over her shoulder before pulling back from him. “I’m your woman no matter where we are, or what stupid trinket I’m allowed to wear or not wear, and as your woman, I’m telling you to step it up and stop being an ass. I don’t need more drama in my life. Where is the guy I fell in love with? Is he tucked back inside your finest three-piece suit?”

“No clue what you’re talking about.” He could almost feel the blinders coming down and locking into place deep inside of him. “Ten o’clock tonight.”

“Don’t hold your breath.” She walked out without another word. Her willingness to stand up to him and deny him only made him want her all the more.

It was a sick and twisted game seeing that she already belonged to him, or did she?

CHAPTER 68



BETHANY

It was a stupid decision to make, but after working with Kendal on Thursday, she finally caved and decided that a late lunch with Philip wouldn't hurt. Damon was still being an ass over things that were completely out of her control, and she was learning to leave him to himself when he was in one of his shitty moods. It still stung like a bitch, but she had a ring that said that no matter what happened while they were on their way to the altar, the plan was still to go.

"Hey." Philip stood and moved around to offer her a friendly hug. His hair was back to being the length it was when they first met before Damon had him cut it off. He looked good, almost too good. Broad shoulders and tanned skin, the man was every bit of California, and yet he was from Down Under. His accent left her heart fluttering, though it was nothing more than a silly infatuation like most women had for foreign accents.

"Hi. You look great. It seems like your new job is allowing you to work less and play more?" She smiled and took her seat across from him as the server approached. She ordered a Coke and pulled the menu toward her face, but kept her eyes on him.

"I quit." He shrugged and leaned back in his chair. "I know it's only been a week or so, but honestly, I worked as hard as I did in school to work for Mr. Bryant. I took the week off to lay by the beach and think through things."

"Kent or Damon?" The confession surprised her a little.

“Both, but originally Damon. He visited UT and gave a speech on being a young leader my freshman year, and something about the way he presented himself coupled with his success? I don’t know. He intimidates the fuck out of me, and he’s a total asshole, no offense if you guys are still dating, but I still want to learn from him.”

“I get that.” She played with the straw in her drink. “You don’t have to love the people you learn to respect. Maybe you should ask for your job back. He offered it just before I left, right?”

“He did, but I’m not sure he was serious about it. He had an odd vibe to him that day. I guess it was because I was having lunch with the beautiful woman he was dating, but still...” Philip smirked.

“He got over it fast.” She glanced up as the server approached.

“What can I get you guys today?” The girl looked between Bethany and Philip, an odd smile on her face.

“I’ll take a turkey sandwich with fruit.” Bethany handed the girl the menu, trying to determine if she was trying to hold back a knowing grin.

“Burger and fries, hold the onions.” Philip handed her the menu and turned back to Bethany as he let out a short sigh. “So how do I go about this with Damon?”

“Wait a minute.” Bethany held up her hand and kept her attention on the girl. “Do we know each other?”

“No. I was in the coffee shop yesterday. You’re Dr. Tarrington’s TA, right?”

Oh... that’s why she’s holding back her smile. She saw Kendal and me together.

“Yeah, he’s a great guy. Crazy strict, but a good accounting teacher. Are you majoring in business?” Bethany hated to carry on the useless conversation but didn’t want to look like an ass.

“No, I’m theater, but we all know about Dr. Tarrington. We’re just hoping we’re his next slip up.” She snorted. “Don’t tell him I said that.”

“I don’t even know your name.” Bethany smiled and turned back toward Philip as the girl left in a hurry.

“Next slip up? What the hell was that?” Philip took a drink of his Coke and leaned in as if she were about to share a secret.

“Kendal dated one of his students six years ago.” Bethany glanced over at the girl who couldn’t be more than a freshman. “How she knows about that is beyond me.”

“Rumors that juicy last forever.” Philip shrugged. “Back to me. What do I need to do?”

“Just stop by the office and tell Linda you’re there to see him. I would offer to get involved, but something tells me that he wouldn’t appreciate me interfering. He’s already leery of something happening between you and me.”

“Why is that? Did you make something up to make him jealous? Full disclosure here. I’m walking into the hornet’s nest. Don’t cover me in honey.” He chuckled, and she did as well.

“No, it was a misunderstanding that’s too embarrassing to rehash. Just stop by and talk to him. He *owes* you the job after he fired you for being a good employee. He overreacted. Take advantage of it.”

“Are you guys not together anymore?” He lifted his eyebrow.

“We are, I’m just saying. This isn’t too difficult of a situation. Own it.” She shrugged and turned to let her eyes move across the girl again. Why in the world would people still be talking about Kendal’s indiscretions six years later?

Why did she care?



Another night without Damon in her bed made it harder to fight against the nagging sensation that he was battling far more than he should have been where they were concerned. She tried to remain positive and convince herself that everything was fine. Matt had been a good cheerleader during the latter part of the week, but nothing was going to fully set her right but Damon.

She needed him to say that he was sorry, that he loved her and they would work through things. The nagging need to be constantly reminded of his feelings was a pain in his ass from what she'd overheard in Jamaica, but it was what it was. He was a dick half the time and therefore could make it up to her by being the kind of guy she deserved the rest of the time, which he was completely capable of.

After packing for their flight later that day, she drove over to Kent's house to pick up Matt and have breakfast with her parents. They'd gotten home late the night before, and yet still found the energy to text her that they were safe. She needed to remind Damon that a text took seconds and yet would mean the world to her.

The smell of bacon filled her senses as she walked into the large ornate mansion. The sound of laughter from the kitchen caused her to exhale in relief. Normal people with no agendas or chips on their shoulders. Just what she needed.

"And then I told Karen that calamari was squid, but she kept fighting me over it." Kent laughed loudly as Bethany's mom swatted him.

Bethany stopped by the entrance to the dining room and leaned against the frame, not wanting to disturb the story.

"I thought they were just little fish rings." She shrugged. "They make fish sticks. I thought the fried rings Kent likes to order were fish."

Kent laughed loudly again as Matt's smile widened. "So we get the platter, and the Jamaicans don't use the tentacles for the dish, but baby--"

“Octopus. With baby feelers and little heads.” Her mom squealed and glanced over toward Bethany as her cheeks turned pink. “Oh my gosh. It was so disturbing.”

“Did you eat them?” Bethany asked as she took the seat beside Matt.

He reached over and pulled her into a tight hug, shaking her a little. “You ready for this trip?”

“I didn’t eat them. I just couldn’t.” Bethany’s mom shook her head and snuggled up against Kent.

“I’m as ready as I’m going to be. I feel like we just got back from traveling.” Bethany pulled out of Matt’s hold and reached for the big platter of breakfast meats and scrambled eggs that sat on the table between them.

“We got back on Sunday. It’s been a whole week back here, silly woman. Time to hit the road again. Besides, my future is riding on this one.” Matt wagged his eyebrows and picked up his fork.

“Your future isn’t riding on anything. It’s in your control to do or be anything you want to,” Kent threw in his two cents.

“I agree with that,” Bethany added. “But, this is an important trip. Have you packed up your portfolio, or can I see it before we head to the airport?”

“It’s in the bedroom down the hall. I’ll show you, and then we’ll bubble wrap it together. It’s a bitch to pack up.” Matt shoved half a pancake into his mouth. “Bring your running shoes. We’re going to keep in shape while we’re up there.”

“This from the guy with syrup running down his chin and a full pancake in his mouth.” Bethany tossed her napkin to him and smiled.

“Half. It was only half. I can fit a whole one. You wanna see?” He smiled and licked at his chin, trying to get his tongue to lap up the syrup.

“Matt. Jeez, son,” Kent barked and tossed his napkin across the table.

“You guys are prudes. Except you, Karen.” He got up and ran another pancake through the lake of syrup on his plate before leaning over and folding it up. “Dare me?”

She shouldn't have, but she couldn't help it. He brought out the kid inside of her. “Yep. Double dog dare you.”

“Oh brother. Not you too.” Kent laughed as Matt forced the whole pancake in his mouth and motioned for Bethany to join him.

She contemplated doing it too, but the look on her mom's face said - just no.

Laughter bubbled out of her as she moved down the hall to find her brother.

“My brother,” she whispered, letting the truth of her statement sink in. She and Damon had a fucked up situation to face, but she and Matt had nothing but good, clean times ahead of them. Both relationships were worth every ounce of effort she planned to put into them, but the one with Matt was just so much more straightforward.

“In here, Miss Thang.” He reached out of one of the bedrooms and grabbed her arm as she yelped and lost her footing. He caught her and turned her to face the bed.

A large portfolio lay open with some of the most beautiful paintings spread out before her. Everything from the mountains to the beach at sunset to a woman dancing in a bright red dress with long black hair and eyes that begged the man she watched to make love to her.

“Wow,” Bethany breathed out and moved closer to hover over the top of the bed. “Matt... these are incredible.”

She glanced up to find him nibbling on his thumb by the doorway.

“Thanks. I taught myself to paint years ago. It's always been a passion of mine.” He shrugged. “I did a one-off picture of Damon about three years ago, but I've never shown him.”

“Can I see?” She moved back, not wanting to touch the paintings in case she messed anything up. The weekend was a

big deal to Matt, which meant it should be to her and Damon too. Supporting him needed to come first on their list of things to get done in Seattle.

“Sure.” He moved up beside her and shuffled things around until the painting of a handsome teenage boy around fifteen or sixteen stared up at her. His eyes were locked on the camera taking the photo from what she could tell, his expression soft, and lips almost turned down. The sadness in his eyes was heart-wrenching. It was almost as if Matt had caught Damon at the moment of someone’s death.

“When is this from?” She reached out and let her fingers hover above his cheek. “He’s beautiful.”

“It was the day after he caught mom with Barney, her work partner.” He shrugged. “Fucking school pictures were the next day. He brought his home a few weeks later, and I gave him massive amounts of shit over this picture.”

Bethany moved back as a hot lump of regret filled her chest. He wasn’t an easy man to get through to, and she’d been treating him as if he were. She needed to do more than was expected of her to reach him. Waiting for him to reach out wasn’t going to happen. It would do nothing but put large divots in the future they wanted together.

“Wow.” She shook her head and turned her attention to Matt. “You didn’t know.”

“No, I didn’t know for a long time.” He shrugged. “I found the picture about three years ago and painted it with accents on his cheeks and eyes to show the pain I know he felt. It’s not something he’d want to see, but it was my way of apologizing for not being there for him. I was dumb and high on the latest wave of reefer.”

“You guys got through it though, and we’re going to get through this weekend together. It’s going to be great.” She walked over and pulled him into a hug. “You’re going to be great.”

“You think so?” He smiled down at her, his blue eyes filled with the kind of hope that most people could only dream of.

“I know so.”

CHAPTER 69



DAMON

Fury burned through him at the fact that she'd ignored his request for her to join him at the house at ten the night before. Not only had he closed down shop early and left a ton of shit for the next day while they were traveling, but he'd skipped out on drinks with some old friends who just happened to be in town.

What was she trying to prove? That she was in control? That the promise of a future wasn't worth shit if it couldn't be instantly built before her eyes?

He pushed the door open to the tiny hole-in-the-wall breakfast joint on the east side of Dallas that he loved to haunt during his college days. It was quick, cheap and delicious. He pulled out his phone after glancing around and seeing that Charles wasn't there yet.

Having been a great mentor to him in college at UT, Damon tried to stay in contact with the old guy as much as he could. The last minute breakfast was the perfect excuse to save him from having to fly to Seattle sandwiched in between Beth and Matt. He loved them both but wasn't in the mood for Matt's positive attitude or Beth's questions over his devotion to her. He'd been a dick lately, but she had too, period.

After shooting off a quick text to both of them, he sat down at a booth and glanced over the menu that was all too familiar to him.

"Well, well... look what the cat dragged in." An older woman with a bright smile and platinum-colored hair stopped

by the table. “Mr. Bryant. It’s been at least three years since I’ve seen you in here.”

Damon tilted his head to the side as a genuine smile spread across his mouth. “Heather, right?”

“That’s right!” She let out a soft giggle. “You’re not in college anymore from what we all gathered around here.”

“Nope. I’ve been out six years now, but I’m meeting Charles-”

“Charlie, boy. How many times I gotta tell you to call me Charlie like the rest of the world?” The portly mentor pulled out the chair across from Damon and smiled up at Heather. “Nice to see you again, Pumpkin. Grab me a coffee, black, and a glass of fresh squeezed tomato juice.”

Damon turned his nose up. “You guys squeeze your tomato juice?”

“We do for Mr. Darek. He’s been keeping this place open by having breakfast here every morning for the last fifteen years.” She laughed, patted Charles’ back and walked off.

“Well, tell me why we haven’t gotten together for a quick meal in the better part of a year. You so busy that you can’t spare an old man a few minutes?” Charles lifted his eyebrow and leaned back.

“Never. I guess our paths just stopped crossing so often, but that’s my fault. Obviously with me locking myself in my office at M&B for sixteen hours a day, every day, my social interactions have almost ceased to exist.” Damon pulled his napkin into his lap and pressed his forearms to the table, preparing himself for the lecture that was sure to come.

“And whose fault is that?”

“Mine, of course. How have you been, Mr. Darek? Still teaching with as much vigor as you did six years ago when I almost failed your finance class?”

He chuckled deep in his chest, the action causing his belly to dance around. “Of course I am, and I do. I love my job.

They're going to have to kick my old ass out of there, and I have tenure, so good luck to 'em!"

Damon smiled and let his anger go. It wasn't well founded and only served to fuck up his day with the promise that he and Beth would have another explosive fight over nothing more than her being the strong woman that he wanted her to be. Funny when you got what you wanted, you weren't quite sure if that's what you were after in the first place.

"I'm heading out to Seattle after this."

"Oh yeah?" The old man reached up and took his juice from Heather as she put a few drinks on the table. "I'll have three eggs, over easy, sweetheart. Bacon and sausage, well done on both accounts. Grits made with milk and loads of butter. I wanna die young and beautiful."

Damon smirked. "Me too. I'll take the exact same thing."

Charles shook his head and rubbed his belly. "I think you might actually have a chance at it. You only seem to be getting better looking as you're getting older. Good thing too, seeing that I remember you being an ass and a half with the ladies back at UT."

"Me? An ass? No..."

"Right. Why are you headed to Seattle? Got a lady friend up there, or is your father still holding on to his tax practice in that area?"

"Both, but the trip is to work on an audit up there. We have some people not doing their jobs. Go figure?"

"Kids nowadays. Entitlement. That's what it's all about."

Damon smiled and kept his thoughts to himself. "It's a quick turnaround, and I'm hoping for positive results."

"And this lady friend. Tell me about her. You have to be nearing thirty by now. Most people are having kids at your age. As crazy as it feels to say it, you're behind the curve, old boy."

Damon chuckled. "I'm thirty-one, and I'm right where I want to be."

“That so?” Charles lifted his eyebrow and leaned back in his chair. “You ever had grits with milk and butter in them?”

“I’m happy. I guess I could be a little more content, but happy will work for now. She’s a graduate from UT herself. She’s studying to be an accountant and just recently started her master’s, and yes, my mother used to make grits just the way you’ve described. They’re shit any other way.”

Charles slapped the table and sat up. “Finally. I swear! All these northerners with their watery grits and scones. Why in the world would you want to mess up a perfectly good biscuit?”

“No clue.” Damon moved back as the food was delivered.

“Tell me more about the girl. How long have you been together?”

“Three weeks, but she’s the one. I have no doubt.” He said a quick prayer over his food and worked to cut his eggs as the image of Bethany on her knees in the living room washed over him.

So beautiful and compliant. So right for him. His pulse spiked just thinking about having her again. Her rejecting him was more of a message than the loss of interest. Now he needed to figure out what the message was.

“Three weeks? How in the hell do you know if she’s the one if she’s only been with you three weeks? Aren’t you one of the last self-proclaimed bachelors?”

“Am I? I don’t remember making that proclamation.” He shrugged.

“You were drunk, and it was the last football game of your senior year. I still have the footage if you’d like to revisit it.”

“No, I’d rather not, to be honest.”

“Is she working at the firm with you and Kent?”

“Yes. She’s an intern for us this fall and next spring. She’ll work her way up fast; I have no doubt.”

“Is that because she’s sleeping with the boss?”

“No. Of course not. She’s brilliant.”

“And beautiful?”

“Beyond.” Damon folded the last piece of bacon on his plate and watched his old mentor to see what he was getting at.

“You know what happened to Kendal with a situation very similar to this, right?”

“Of course I do, Charles-”

“Charlie.”

“Of course I do, Charlie, but this is different. We’re not under the watch of the university. My father owns the company, and he’s quite happy with mine and Bethany’s relationship. It’s just... complicated.”

“Complicated, how?”

“Her mother married my father last weekend.” Damon glanced down and waited for the berating that never came. He glanced up to find Charles watching him in what appeared to be stunned silence.

“Wait. So this girl is not only six years younger than you, but an intern at your firm and she’s your step sister?”

“Well, when you put it like that-”

“Put it like what?” Charles huffed and picked up his bowl of grits. “You’re up shit creek without a paddle my friend. As brilliant as you are, this has to be one of the dumbest things I’ve ever seen you do.”

“I love her. It’s simple really.” Damon sat back and licked his lips. There was an expectation somewhere inside of him that anger would be his response to Charles, but it wasn’t. Telling his old mentor how he felt about Bethany felt natural. Right. Maybe he wasn’t being fair with his concerns about letting the world know that she was his.

“Well, keep that shit to yourself, or you’ll ruin the poor girl.”

“What? Why would us being in love ruin her?”

“Damon. You just touted out every fucking taboo in the book. Are you serious right now?” He reached across the table and popped Damon in the forehead with the back of his spoon. “Think with your head and not your dick, son. She’s a young girl who’s about to enter the world of Corporate America. She needs a good start, a clean record. You’re throwing down a stripper pole and covering it in grease.”

“What?” Damon chuckled, unable to help himself. The older Charles got, the less sense he made.

“You’re making a mistake. Close it down and offer to be a big brother to her, or give her another mentor. You don’t need a relationship with that much baggage already attached to it. For shit’s sake. What does Kent say about this? He’s fine with it?”

“Yes.” Damon wiped his mouth and picked up his phone from the table. “I gotta get going. The flight’s taking off in forty-five minutes. I just wanted to-”

“I’m sorry if I upset you, but you know I shoot straight. There are very few guys who I still invest my time in, but you’re one of them.”

Damon stood and nodded, forcing himself not to react with anything but gratitude. “Of course. I’m good, though I disagree with your advice this time. Bethany is the woman I’m going to spend my life with. We just have to get over these hurdles. We can do it.”

Charles extended his hand but didn’t get up. “You trying to convince me, or yourself, son?”

“Only you, old friend. I have no doubt.”

“Right... tell someone else that lie.”

CHAPTER 70



BETHANY

“He didn’t do it on purpose.” Matt wrapped an arm around Bethany’s shoulders as they walked down the long terminal to the baggage claim. Somehow Matt couldn’t fit everything in a carry-on, so she hadn’t even tried. He was being a bit of a diva, which opened the door for her to follow suit.

“No? He told me to be at his house last night at ten, and I fell asleep like I have for the last few nights, sitting on my couch, completely exhausted. I didn’t even mean not to go over there.” She huffed and stopped beside the turnstile as bags started to drop from the large opening at the other end.

“It’s going to be fine, Sis. Stop worrying, okay?” He pressed his shoulder to hers and moved up to get their bags when they showed up.

“You’re right.” She popped the handle on her bag and followed behind him as a feeling of trepidation tried to pull her back down. “I need a drink.”

“Well, let’s get to the hotel and then we can unpack and grab something to drink while we wait for Damon.”

“Sounds good.” She rubbed his back as they stopped beside a stretch limo, the guy waving around a sign for McKenzie and Bryant on it. “You nervous about the showing tonight?”

“Not really. It will happen, or it won’t.” Matt moved to the back of the car and shook hands with the driver while Bethany glanced around. It was beautiful, and the air was clean. There

was something to be said about getting away from Texas humidity in late summer.

“See something you like?” Matt turned to look across the horizon.

“Just glad to get away with you.” She got in and buckled up before laying back and letting out a long sigh. She pulled her phone from her purse and decided she was done being the difficult one. Texting Damon even when it was the last thing she wanted to do seemed most appropriate.

Bethany: Sad to see that you missed the flight. I hope everything is okay. I miss you something horrible.

Damon: I'm boarding now. I'll be there just before we need to leave. I had breakfast with an old mentor from college, so it wasn't a total waste. I missed you last night. To say I wasn't upset would be a fucking lie, but I assume you had a reason for standing me up.

“We never agreed.” She clenched her teeth as Matt turned to face her.

“Hmm?”

“Nothing.” She let out a slow sigh and let go of the rising emotion inside of her. Were all relationships so fucking intense? She couldn't remember dating much, so not having a comparison, she had to assume they were.

Bethany: I was so tired that I fell asleep with a bowl of soup on my lap on the couch back at my apartment. It was ugly.

Damon: Ha. That's not good. You need to look at your schedule and see what's going to go. I'm not an option. You're stuck, baby.

Warmth filled her as tears blurred her vision.

Bethany: Hurry up and get to Seattle. I need you. I feel like we're being pulled apart before we even start.

Damon: We're not. We just have a lot going on. It's going to be fine. We just need to figure out how to communicate better. We'll work on it this weekend. Keep Matt in a good frame of mind, and I'll come find you the minute I get into town.

Bethany: Did you get our room together?

Damon: Do you have to ask that?

Bethany: Good. I was getting worried.

Damon: Well, stop.

“Everything okay?” Matt turned his head toward her and smiled.

“I think so. We just have so much shit flying at us, and trying to keep two dominant people from killing each other is hard on a good day.” She laid her phone down in the seat beside her and wiped at her eyes. “He wants me to give something up, but everything I’m doing has to stay. It’s not that easy.”

“Then maybe you stop working at the firm. Dad is going to support your college goals no matter what. He wouldn’t deny you.” Matt reached over and squeezed her hand.

“Maybe. I’ll think about it.” She turned her hand over and clasped his hand. “So tell me what happens tonight. Are we the only ones with the dealer?”

“Sounds so nefarious. I love it.” Matt’s lips lifted in a beautiful smile. Bethany had no doubt at all why Erica was in love with him. He was the complete opposite of Damon and yet still the full-package deal himself.

“You know we’re having dinner with Erica tonight. Damon set it up earlier this week, I think.”

“What? Fuck.” Matt released her hand and pressed his hands to his face as he groaned out loud. “Call and tell her we got delayed.”

“You’re so ridiculous. She’s perfect for you.” Bethany forced herself not to laugh at how childish Matt was being.

“You don’t understand. I’m childish and try hard to have fun so I don’t have to face the fact that I’m... Never mind. It’s TMI.” He turned to look out the far window and huffed again.

“You’re what? Afraid of commitment? Worried that she’s too much for you? Intimidated by her?”

“I like strong women, Bethany, but only so I can break them down.”

“What? That doesn’t-” She studied his expression understanding all too clearly what he meant. “Oh. In the bedroom? You like to-”

“Good enough. Thanks. The conversation took a turn for the worst. I’m good when I’m single, but being with someone like Erica will just bring it out of me. I hate it.”

“Why? Women love a strong man.” She reached out, but he moved away.

“Because I wanna be loving, but it’s hard. I don’t even know why.”

“You objectify them?”

“A little, yeah. Let’s change the subject. I haven’t dated since college, and things have honestly been great. I don’t plan on starting soon.”

“You’re making yourself out to be a monster.” Bethany chuckled, but the sound fell flat as Matt waved her off and left her stewing in her thoughts. Whatever was going on with him, she’d have to talk with Damon about it later.



She glanced up from reading a magazine on the bed in the room as the door opened. Damon walked in, looking like he'd been up for three days straight.

“Hey.” He gave her a tight smile and dropped his bag just inside the door before pulling off his suit jacket.

“Hi, baby.” She got up and moved toward him, pulling him down for a long sweet kiss. There was no fire to it, but it was almost a good thing. They were dancing around each other as if they were both waiting for the other to strike, to pull back and deny the other.

“Your flight go okay?” He kissed her again and ran his hands over her hips to squeeze the top curve of her ass.

“Yeah. It would have been better with you being with me, but I was still pretty pissy toward you, so maybe not.” She smiled and pulled from him, turning and walking toward the bed. “Come lay down with me until we have to go.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.” He pulled off his tie and undid his shirt before letting it drop to the ground behind him. “Why were you pissy? You stood me up.”

She opened her arms to him and cradled his head against her chest as he snuggled up beside her and let out a long sigh.

“You refuse to call or text me. We’ve had two or three days since getting back from Jamaica where we haven’t talked.” She kissed the side of his head and groaned as he rolled her onto her back and moved to lay on top of her.

“You have fingers and a phone too. Why do I have to be the one calling all the time? This is the twenty-first century.” He licked his lips and tugged her blouse down as he sucked one of her nipples into his mouth. The soft lace covering her breasts was little protection against his assault.

“You wanna be in control here, but nowhere else? Is that what I’m hearing?” She pushed at his shoulders.

He moved back to his knees and ran his hands up her legs, squeezing softly. “I’m in control everywhere, Beth. If you wanna try and tug it from my tight grip, go for it baby. I’d love to see you own it.”

“Own you?” She reached up and brushed her fingers over his lips as he tugged her shorts down her legs.

“You already own me; you’ve just denied yourself the opportunity to flaunt that.” He brushed his knuckles over her mouth and licked his lips. “How long do we have?”

“Forty minutes until we need to meet Matt downstairs.” She bit her tongue on his comment about flaunting anything. He’d denied her that opportunity when he left the note about hiding her fucking ring.

“That’s just enough time to lose myself in you.” He moved back off the bed and worked his slacks off his hips.

She sucked in a sharp breath as he climbed back on the bed naked, hard and hungry. He leaned down and bit the edge of her panties before pulling them down her legs with his teeth.

“Damon. Do we really-”

“Shhh.” He moved back up her body and forced her legs open. “You and I need this more than anything else we might get this weekend.”

“Each other?”

“Yes, baby. Hold on tight.” He pressed his hands beside her head and smiled as he dipped his hips and impaled her.

A long cry left her as she lifted her legs and wrapped them around his narrow hips. “You could have warned me.”

He leaned down and licked at her ear. “I’m gonna fuck you now. That all right?”

“Yeah,” she whispered before giving in to the carnality that lay between the two of them. Passion was fueled by many different emotions, but at the moment it was neediness. Both of them searching for the other and yet missing the mark over and over again.

“Good. Give yourself over to me and stop thinking. Work me hard from below, Beth. Bring me over the edge, and I’ll do the same to you.”

She nodded and cried out his name as he crashed into her and lifted her legs, trapping them against his chest as he brought her to the edge with intense efficiency. His lips pressed tightly to hers as she felt the world explode, and oddly enough, for a moment, nothing mattered.

Nothing but him.

CHAPTER 71



DAMON

Somehow the sex set him right, cleared his mind and left him feeling far more relaxed than he had when the day started. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and smiled down at her as they walked to the elevator. Matt had texted ten times to see when they were coming. The poor guy was nervous, and Damon couldn't blame him. The tension between his brother and Erica wasn't anything new but had grown significantly over the last two years since Erica came to work for the firm.

Between trying to impress a high-class art dealer and Erica, Matt was going to be running circles around himself. Liquor. He needed to get a few drinks into him, and things would be fine.

"Like my dress?" Bethany wrapped her arm around the back of his waist as they moved into the elevator and turned to face the door.

"Love it. I'm a little concerned about having to beat the men off of you, but it's worth it." He smiled and licked his lips as his eyes moved over the soft swell of her breasts. She was exquisite, and he hadn't been lying in his conversation with Charles. He was completely convinced that she was the woman for him, he only hoped she was sure of it too.

She lifted her left hand and smiled as she turned her attention to the large diamond sitting on her finger.

"There's no need to beat anyone off of me. This right here makes it more than obvious that I belong to you."

“And you do.” He turned and pulled her flush against him before kissing the tip of her nose. “Only wear that when we’re not in the office, okay?”

“I know.” Her smile faded a little. “I got the message loud and clear the other day.”

“And you understand why?” He pressed his fingertips under her chin and forced her to look up at him. “My request is not without reason.”

“I know.” She moved back and refused to look up at him. “It just stung a little.”

“I didn’t mean for it to.” He took her hand as the elevator opened and walked out in the large openness of the hotel lobby. “I hired your friend back.”

“My friend?” She moved up beside him and intertwined their fingers.

“Yeah, the little shit you were using to make me jealous.”

“What? I wasn’t... Oh. Philip.” She shook her head. “We’re just friends. Nothing more.”

“I recall you saying that already. I took your word for it and gave him the job back. I did it for you.” It was partially true. The kid hadn’t done anything wrong but draw Bethany’s attention away. He shouldn’t have lost his job in the first place, and after getting the opportunity to step back from the high-emotion of the situation with Bethany and Sadie, Damon had discovered the error of his ways.

No need to open the door to another possible lawsuit.

“Somehow I doubt it was all for me, but either way, thank you. He’s a good guy and thinks a lot of you.”

Damon ignored her comment, not wanting to dive into just how *good* of a guy the Aussie was. He had a thing for Beth, and though his grades and drive were impressive, Damon would be keeping an eye on the little shit.

Matt turned and let out an exhausted sigh as Beth released Damon’s hand.

“Shit. We have thirty minutes before we’re supposed to meet Jonathan. Let’s go.” Matt huffed and walked toward the door, in a dramatic fashion. Damon smiled, unable to help himself. Matt’s work would speak for itself. He had nothing to worry about.

“I thought it was appropriate to be casually late for these things. It speaks of your importance as an artist.” Damon shrugged as Beth turned and glared at him over her shoulder. He chuckled and walked out behind the two of them.

Her dress fit her beautifully, tight on her hips and accentuating her ass in a way that had his stomach tightening again. He could make love to her ten times a day and still want another turn buried deep inside of her.

Love or Lust?

Scary enough, there were times he wasn’t too sure of the answer. Love seemed like the right answer, but after only three weeks, was it possible? Maybe. Maybe not.

He got in the back of the black Lexus next to Bethany and dropped his hands in his lap as the driver pulled out of the hotel and headed downtown to the art gallery they were scheduled to be at in ten minutes.

“Thanks for coming with me. I’m tense as shit.” Matt leaned forward and smiled.

“Liquor. It will help.” Damon winked at his brother and turned to watch the lights move across the window. “That or fucking Erica.”

“Damon.” Beth popped him in the chest as Matt groaned.

“What? Just trying to offer a bit of advice.”

“Don’t,” Beth and Matt muttered in tandem.

He shrugged and let his thoughts fade into some of the issues they were dealing with at work. It would be nice to spend the evening with Matt, Beth, and Erica, but tomorrow, he was back to being on point with his time and attention. There was very little room for pleasure in his life, and what he did get, he didn’t want to waste on frivolous adventures.

Matt was so different from him, at least in certain ways.



“He’s late.” Matt turned toward Damon as Bethany walked through the small gallery without them.

“It’s fine. He’ll be here shortly. He set this thing up with you and was impressed by your talent. Stop worrying so much.” Damon reached out and pulled at the large portfolio pad that rested under his brother’s arm. “Let me see this.”

“Yeah, sure.” Matt handed it to him and moved to a large glass table in the middle of the room. “Bring it over here, and you can look through each one, just be careful. Some of the textured ones will chip off if you mess with them too much.”

Damon nodded and laid the portfolio pad down before moving slowly through the various scenery paintings, each done with incredible precision. His brother was talented, no doubt.

“You sure you want what this guy is offering?” Damon glanced over his shoulder as Matt began to pace the floor. He looked so much like their mother it was painful. Blond hair and blue eyes, a California tan and a great smile. No one would ever guess that under his sweet disposition was an aggressive asshole at times. He kept himself hidden away, mostly from himself. It was odd and had to be exhausting.

“I don’t know what I want, to be honest.” He shrugged. “I don’t want to rule the world with you and dad. I hate numbers and will act like a fucking idiot until I’m old and unable to walk if it means you don’t try and strap a monkey suit on me again and stick me in a cream-colored office. Death would be better.”

“All right, drama-king.” Damon chuckled and flipped to the next one. The woman looked a lot like Bethany, but it couldn’t be her. It was dated at the bottom from three years before. “Wow. She’s beautiful. What’s her story?”

Her cheeks were sunken in a little, and dark circles sat under her eyes.

“That’s Beth. It’s showing the truth of her struggles.” He shrugged and glanced around.

“How can it be Beth? This was done three years ago.” Damon brushed his fingers over the date and couldn’t seem to tear his eyes off the echo of pain painted so beautifully into the painting.

“I just put that date so she wouldn’t ask questions. There are some subtle differences between her and the girl in the painting, but it’s her.” He moved closer and pressed his hands to his hips, studying it beside Damon.

“And what is the truth of her struggles?” Damon glanced over toward his brother. Beth had shared a little bit, but not nearly enough.

Have I asked about her past? Shame worked its way up his chest, but he discarded it. Everyone had a fucked up past to some extent. What didn’t kill people left them more capable of dealing with the next shit storm. One of the reasons Beth was going to be his woman for the long haul was her willingness to persevere no matter what.

“Her father left them when she was twelve, I think. He was a drug dealer and walked out one day, taking all of their money and warning them that the dealers he owed money to might show up, but it was on them. She’s been so fucking poor since.” Matt turned and let out a sigh. “Ask her about her past, Damon. Don’t be a prick.”

“Fuck you,” Damon mumbled under his breath and turned to the next picture, one of himself.

“Jonathan’s here. Help me sell this. I want this bad.” Matt patted his back and walked off, giving the art dealer a warm welcome.

“What the hell?” Damon whispered as memories rushed across his mind. Sickness swelled in his stomach, and chill bumps broke out across his skin. He pressed his fingers to his lips, remembering the day the picture was taken. It was the day

after he caught his mother fucking around on his dad. The worst moments of his life were captured in the pain Matt had painted so perfectly in his eyes.

“Hey. You okay?” Beth rubbed her hand down his back and pressed her cheek to his shoulder as she stood beside him.

“Yeah. Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?” He snorted and flipped the page. “I’m wondering why Matt felt the need to paint a picture of a photograph from my teenage years. It’s a waste of his time and talent.”

“He doesn’t think so.” Bethany turned, tugging at Damon to do the same. “Hi. You must be Jonathan.”

“I am.” The tall, gangly fellow with a disturbing comb-over and a bright red pinstripe suit extended his hand.

Damon forced himself not to react as he extended his hand. “I’m Damon Bryant. This is my fiancé, Bethany. I’m Matthew’s brother.”

“Lovely! I do believe one of the pieces Matt sent in originally was of you.” Jonathan glanced over at Matt, who almost looked ill. “Is that right?”

“Sure is. Let me show you the rest of them.” Matt moved up toward the table, and Damon took Beth’s hand and moved back as the door opened and Erica walked in. Her long blond hair was pulled into a messy bun, and her bright blue dress reminded Damon of something out of the fifties or sixties. It was ruffled at the bottom and far more feminine than Damon had ever seen her. She was stunning, but nothing compared to the pretty girl holding his hand.

“Hey, guys. Sorry, I’m late.” She gave Beth a quick hug and smiled at Damon before moving toward Matt and introducing herself to Jonathan.

“Come on. Let’s walk around.” Damon nodded toward the back of the small studio. “Twenty bucks if you can tell me what the fuck this painting is supposed to be.”

She laughed. “Do I look like I need twenty bucks?”

He glanced down at her and smirked. “You look like you need a spanking, but I’m thinking that would only lead to me playing around in places that would have us in trouble. You moan too loud to get away with anything in here.”

She smacked his chest as her laughter filled the room around him. He pulled her back to his chest and wrapped his arms around her, leaning down and kissing her ear.

“What do you see when you look at it?” He glanced up, not seeing much of anything other than someone getting trigger happy with a paint gun. Art made no fucking sense at all. The price tag showed that the piece was valued at over ten grand, which was completely ridiculous.

“I see the division of heaven and hell. Angels in a battle for the end of times.” She shrugged. “See the river there in the back?”

“River? Angels? Where did you get a glass of bourbon? I want one.” He released her as she moved forward and lifted her hand, explaining what she saw, but never touching the painting.

“Don’t touch anything!” Jonathan’s voice was sharp.

“Watch how you talk to my girl. She’s not touching your shit, but I’m about to.” Damon turned and took a step toward the guy, not caring who was trying to do what, no one was going to raise their voice at Beth, no matter the reason for it.

“It’s okay.” She moved up beside him and wrapped him in a side hug. “I didn’t touch it. I wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh, sorry.” Jonathon’s cheeks turned pink as he spun on his heel and walked back toward a very stunned looking Erica and Matt.

“Fuck no. There was no need to-”

“It’s okay, baby. Seriously.” She lifted to her toes and pulled him down for a quick kiss. It was okay to her, but that didn’t mean he was good with it.

He was the only one allowed to get testy with her, and he even felt like whooping his own ass from time to time. Lust or

love?

Sure felt like love.

CHAPTER 72



BETHANY

“Well, that went well.” Matt glanced up as Bethany downed her second glass of wine. They had wrapped things up with Jonathan an hour later and headed out to dinner, just the four of them. Bethany was almost glad that the eclectic art dealer had turned them down for the meal. Spending time with Damon, Matt and Erica sounded relaxing, or it might have been if Matt wasn’t sitting on pins and needles around the blond bombshell that Bethany wanted to get closer to.

It would be nice to have a friend, and since there weren’t many girls her age to choose from and Krista was facing murder charges, Erica would have to do.

“It did. I think Jonathan really liked your work.” Erica smiled seductively and pressed her elbows to the table as her wine glass dangled from her fingers. “It was a great portfolio. I’m glad you decided to show him the full breadth of your talent and not just have the scenery pieces in there.”

“Were you thinking about leaving out the paintings of people?” Bethany picked up a piece of garlic bread from the center of the table and glanced over to see Damon on his phone, working no doubt. The man rarely gave it a rest, but she understood all too well. She was itching to get back to the room to work on something for Kendal that she needed to have ready by Tuesday morning and a research project synopsis for class on Monday. The good times were almost over, but she was hanging on as long as she could. Damon seemed to have moved on already.

“Yeah. Some people get uber sensitive about paintings of faces. Noses are especially hard to get right, emotion is difficult, and everyone has an opinion about whether the piece looks true to form. It’s hard, but they’re my favorite to work on by far.”

“Was the one of the dark-haired girl, the close-up, Bethany?” Erica took a sip of her wine, and Bethany couldn’t help but notice how closely Matt’s eyes followed her. He was into her. Why was he fighting it so much?

Was it the monster in the bedroom bullshit? She had to ask Damon about it later. Surely he would know more than she did and could fill in the blanks for her. The question was, would he? And really, did she want to know more about Matt’s bedroom tendencies?

Sadly enough, yes.

“No. It’s just a coincidence. I did that one back in two thousand and thirteen.” He shrugged and picked up his menu. “I hope it works out with Jonathan, though I’m not sure if working on paintings all the time will work for me. We’ll see.”

“I know of a certain advertising agent for a great company that’s looking for a lead designer.” Erica chuckled as Matt gave her a look.

“Who?” Damon glanced up from his phone.

“Us, silly.” Erica shook her head and reached out to squeeze Matt’s thick shoulder. “Have you given it any more thought?”

“What’s that?” He turned and gave her a quick glance. It was almost too cute how shy he was around her.

“You coming to work for Erica, Matt. It’s a good balance in your life. Paint some of the time and work for her and us, really the rest of the time. It’s not as restrictive as you think. I talked with her a little bit about it, and you could have the freedom to come and go as you want.” Damon’s voice was a little muted by the angle of his head as he continued to answer e-mails on his phone.

Annoyance rolled over Bethany, but she swallowed it down. It wouldn't do anyone any good for her to reach out and put her hand on the screen. He needed to put the damn thing up, but she wasn't going to be the one to tell him. They were getting along for the first time all week. She wasn't messing up the serenity.

"I'm thinking about it. We can chat tomorrow morning when you show me the new office space you guys have." Matt winked at Bethany and pulled the bread basket closer to him. "Did you like that red suit Jonathan had on? I'm thinking I need one."

She laughed and spat a little of her wine out at the thought of him in something so grotesque. "No. Just no."

Damon grunted and handed her a napkin, a look of disdain on his impossibly handsome face. He was lucky he was so hot. He was an ass far too often not to have the looks to rein someone back in from walking away.

"I think it would look great on you." Erica laughed and set her wine down. "I've had too much to drink. I'm going to the ladies' room. I want the grilled salmon and veggies if they come."

"We'll get it for you." Bethany smiled up at the other woman and waited until she left to turn her attention back to Matt.

"You need to take her dancing tonight, or for dinner tomorrow night."

"What? No." Matt shook his head.

Damon's phone rang, and he stood. "I need to take this."

"What do you want us to get-"

He walked off and answered the phone, leaving Bethany to feel silly for asking him anything.

"Ugh. He's such a dick sometimes." Matt grabbed another piece of bread and tossed it across the table to her. "Why do you put up with him?"

The light tone of his voice let her know that he was teasing her, but the question was rather valid.

“No clue.” She shrugged and took a bite of the bread. “Let’s not talk about Damon and me, let’s instead focus on something new and fun. Like you and Erica.”

“There is no me and Erica. She’s far too much woman for me, Sis. Seriously. Look at her.” He pushed at her glass of wine a little. “She drinks white wine for God’s sake.”

Bethany snorted. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“You gotta be a tough bitch to handle three glasses of white wine. It’s so tart and dry that my lips get tucked under my gums, like this.” He tucked his bottom and top lip in, leaving him to look like a horse with more gums and teeth than anyone should be allowed. “How do you like me now?”

She laughed again and put the rest of the bread into her mouth, speaking around it. “I’m falling in love with you. I’m so glad you’re not like your brother. I couldn’t handle two of you.”

“How naughty would that be? You in bed with both of your brothers?” He gasped dramatically. “At the same fucking time?” Another gasp.

“What are you two laughing about?” Erica took her seat beside him, and Bethany watched as he transformed from laid back and fun-loving to stiff and unyielding.

“Just being siblings.” Bethany shrugged and picked up her menu as the waiter approached. Damon was nowhere to be found, so Matt ordered him a steak, which turned out to be the wrong cut of meat and the wrong temperature from what he wanted.

To say that he was moody would have been an understatement.



“I have some work I need to do tonight,” Damon barked as he glanced over his shoulder.

Bethany shrugged and kept her thoughts to herself. Dinner had been fun in momentary spurts when Matt wasn't giving Erica stiff responses, and Damon wasn't mumbling half-ass responses. She should have just gone to dinner with Matt by herself.

Damon walked into the room and pulled off his jacket, tossing it on the bed and working on his tie. She wanted to move around him and help undress him sensually, but he wasn't in the mood to be bothered with anything, least of all her.

“Have you met everyone from this Zarpeth team?” She tried to start a casual conversation as she opened her suitcase and pulled out some comfortable clothes.

He glanced up from the desk he hovered over and smirked. “I'm the CFO of the company. I put the team together.”

“Okay, Mr. Sensitive. Shit. I was just wondering who all was on the team. It was an ice breaker of sorts.”

“We can talk about it at breakfast tomorrow. I have too much to do tonight to casually talk about things that don't matter.” He sat down and pulled the laptop closer to him.

She ignored the sting deep inside her chest at his dismissal of her. Why was she there again? Right, to make her mark on McKenzie and Bryant. It would have been nice if it was for a better reason, like supporting her man or having a getaway for the two of them, but nothing could be further from the truth. When Damon wasn't tense, he was difficult. When he was stressed, there was no dealing with him.

After putting on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, she slipped her feet into her sandals and pulled her laptop strap over her shoulder.

“Where are you going?” He glanced up.

“To the hotel lobby. I figure you might be making calls or-”

“I’m not. You’re good staying here, just keep the TV down low if you’re going to watch it. I need to review a few things for our meeting tomorrow and work through the Kissinger tax files. You know, nothing too pressing.”

She walked to the door and opened it. “It’s all good. I’ll find a comfortable chair in the executive lounge and work on my school stuff. I have a lot due when we get back home.”

“You can’t go into there looking like that.”

She put her hand on her hip. “Like what exactly?”

He lifted his eyebrow as if she should have already known what she looked like, and she did. The challenge was for him to insult her.

Why are you trying to start a fight?

“Right. Do what you want.” He shook his head and went back to his computer, leaving her standing there.

“I will.” She grabbed the door handle but stopped as the sound of his laptop slapping shut caused her to stiffen.

“You know what, I’ll go. I need a drink anyway, and I’m still dressed in something more appropriate for the lounge. Just stay here.” He tucked the laptop in his briefcase and moved past her, pulling the door open. “Be awake when I get back. I want to go over a few things before we go to sleep.”

“Over what?” She moved back, a little surprised by his desire to leave the room. His reasoning was asinine, but so was he.

“Some of the auditing steps that you’ll be in charge of.”

“I’m an intern.” She wished she could have pulled her words back the minute they left her lips.

He chuckled. “Is that all you want to be?”

“Did I say that?” She moved away from the door and let out a tired huff. “Just go. You’re in a mood, and we’re just going to tear each other apart. You got your sex, so whatever.”

“Got my sex?” He snorted and opened the door. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“Exactly what it sounds like it means.” She crawled up into the bed and waited to press her palms to her eyes until he let the door close behind him without a word.

She shouldn't have said it, but it was how she felt. He wasn't at all the same guy who'd dropped down to his knee in the sand in Jamaica. He was more like the asshole that let some girl give him head while she watched on her first day of work.

“No. Please don't let us go backward. We don't have much farther to go to unravel everything. Please.”

CHAPTER 73



DAMON

“Now that you got your sex? What the fuck does that mean? She didn’t want to fuck?” he growled as he took the stairs all the way to the bottom floor of the hotel. She was being so incredibly sensitive, and it was getting old.

It was because she was young, that and the fact that their relationship was so new. Why the hell did he propose? It only seemed to add another layer of weight to their already crumbling foundation.

Because I love her.

Do you?

“Yes,” he mumbled and walked into the executive club as a pretty redhead at the hostess stand glanced up and smiled warmly.

“Evening, Sir. Would you like a table with a connection or no?”

“Damon. Over here, man.” Ben’s voice caught him off guard, and he moved over a little and lifted his hand to wave at his old friend.

Where he needed to get a few things done, the night was young. He could have a drink or two with Ben, catch up and then try to work through some of his ever-expanding to-do list. Besides, he owed Ben a bit of an apology. He’d been a horse’s ass earlier that week to both Ben and Linda. Chances are that both of them had let it slide, but nevertheless, Damon was

working on being better about letting his emotions get the best of him.

“I’m good. I’ll come get another table after a few drinks with an old friend.” He nodded and started to walk off as the woman gripped his upper arm lightly, stopping him.

“I’m Amanda.” She handed him a card. “Let me know if there is anything you need while you’re here.”

He winked and pulled from her hold. “Great. Thanks.”

Slut.

“Hey, buddy. When did you get in?” Damon slid into the booth across from Ben and started to get his computer out, but decided against it. He could spare a few minutes.

“About two hours ago.” Ben shrugged. “The whole team is here, but I thought it would be nice to have a drink by myself, you know, test out the theory that only alcoholics drink alone.”

“And? You figured out if you fit the bill?” Damon chuckled, letting the angst from his fight with Bethany go.

“I’m still working on that.” Ben glanced down at his hands and back up. “So Bethany didn’t come with you? I thought we were going to start her on-”

“She’s upstairs. We’re having our tenth misunderstanding for the day.” Damon leaned back and turned as the waiter walked up. “Vodka and a splash of sprite. Three limes and a napkin, please.”

“Of course, Sir.”

“We tried to wrap up most of the third quarter stuff at the office before leaving this afternoon, but it’s just massive. We’re meeting at six tomorrow morning in one of the conference rooms to try and finish up.” Ben shrugged, seemingly ignoring Damon’s comments about Bethany. He was almost grateful not to have to explain himself further.

“I’ll be down there with you guys. Everyone made the trip okay?”

“Yeah. Who is this new Senior Manager? We met briefly at the airport, but I need to know more. The woman is hot as fucking sin.” Ben ran his fingers through his hair.

Damon chuckled. Delilah was beautiful, but Ben was way out of his league if he was thinking about hitting on her. She wasn't the type of woman to date anyone who wasn't wealthy like a well-worn coat. She got that from her mother, as Bridget had too. They looked a lot alike, but Bridget's hair was darker, her tits bigger and she had a nefarious look on her pretty face all the time. Delilah not so much.

“She's a good friend from my high school days. I dated her sister... you know, Bridget.”

“Dude. I seriously thought she was Bridget, but when she introduced herself...”

“They do look a lot alike. Maybe too much.” Damon sighed and sunk into the booth behind him.

“You miss her?” Ben lifted his eyebrow.

“What? Hell no. She was, wait, *is* a bitch. Greedy and selfish with her eyes on nothing more than scoring a prize. I'm nobody's trophy. Screw that shit.” Damon rolled his shoulders and took his drink from the server as it was delivered.

“Interesting.”

Damon lifted his eyebrow. “Why is that interesting?”

“I would have thought she was your trophy. After you being top dog in Kappa Alpha all through college and sleeping with just about every vagina on campus...”

“I didn't sleep with a lot of women.”

“Fuck that; you didn't. You're getting old and senile. You slept with a lot of girls. Period.” Ben rolled his eyes and ran his hand down his chest, letting it rest on his portly stomach. “Remember that contest you and Kendal had every year.”

“Agh, fuck. Don't remind me of that.” He laughed, finally relaxing enough to kick-back and let his guard down. It didn't happen too often, but Ben was an old friend. The poor guy hadn't gotten very far in life, but he was a hard worker and

would eventually figure out how to play the game. It was always more about who you knew than what you were capable of.

“Someone should. You’re a completely different guy now, or maybe you aren’t, shit, I don’t know.” He shrugged. “I saw Kendal a few months back, and he’s changed completely. Stiff as hell and seems to have a chip on his shoulder.”

“I’ve changed a lot.” Damon nursed his drink, thinking of all the women he took to his bed before growing up a little. They weren’t toys, though most wished they were. It was disturbing and the older he got, the more he moved away from giving in to their desires, even if they matched his own. Bethany was different. Why, he was unsure, but the fact remained. If she wanted it, all she’d have to do was say so, but therein lied the challenge. She wasn’t ballsy enough to stand up to him yet. She was almost there, but not quite yet. “Kendal has a lot of reason to withdraw. He worked his balls off to get that job at the university. Thanks to some whorish child with stars in her eyes, he almost lost everything.”

“I’d love to hear that story.”

“Then ask him. It’s not my tale to tell.” Damon turned as a busty girl with big green eyes, and long dark hair walked up. Her blue dress was tight, leaving plenty of her tits bouncing above the top of it. Red lipstick and a pretty pink tongue that darted out and licked at her mouth. She knew she was hot.

“Hi, boys. My friends over there and I were wondering if you might like to buy us a drink.” She smiled as Ben grunted.

“Nope. We’re gay. Can’t you tell?” He lifted his eyebrow and glanced across the table at Damon. “Women nowadays. Jeez.”

Damon chuckled and lifted his glass to the girl. “Thanks for the offer, but no thanks.”

“Wait. Are you?” The girl shifted her eyes back and forth between Damon and Ben.

“We don’t kiss and tell.” Damon finished his drink and pulled out his laptop as she walked away, mumbling about

how all the good ones were taken.

“You’re welcome.” Ben tapped the table between them.

“Thank you?” Damon popped open the computer and ran his finger down the screen to open the programs.

“Yeah. I was saving you.”

“From what? A hot woman?” Damon smirked and turned his attention back to the screen.

“No, from making a mistake. You’re with Bethany now, right?” Ben coughed. “You know that’s a big ass mistake in the making, right?”

“We had this discussion already, and you didn’t save me from anything. I proposed to her. I’m a lot of things, but a cheater isn’t one of them.” Damon brushed his fingers across his lips. “Why is it that our tax people never seem to work as fast as the audit side?”

“The rules change too often. You know that. Cut them some slack.”

Damon sat back as Ben reached across and closed the screen. “We’re old friends, right? Frat brothers?”

“Yeah. So.” Damon reached for the top but paused.

“So I’m telling you as someone who cares about you, you need to set this thing up with Bethany well. She’s not only an intern at the firm, she’s-”

“I know. Stop fucking reminding me,” he growled, wishing like hell he could pick them up and move to a foreign country where no one knew either of them. That would solve everything in their relationship, maybe, but the host of other problems it would create was almost stifling.

“She wants to move in together, which is the next step in the relationship, but I’m not sure I’m ready for that just yet.” Damon picked up his glass and lifted it, trying to get the server’s attention.

“You proposed. I’m pretty sure you don’t get to *not* be ready for anything. Next steps are blown out of the fucking

water thanks to the ring you gave her.”

“What’s with the tone, Ben? You don’t even know her.” Damon leaned forward a little as aggression pumped through his center.

“Hey. I’m just worried about you.” Ben leaned back and lifted his hands in a show of surrender. “You know I’d support you in any crazy, fucked up adventure you wanted to go on, but this... it’s nuts. Period.”

“I agree, but it is what it is.” Damon shrugged and opened the laptop. He’d proposed too soon, but like any great opportunist, he wasn’t willing to let go of the one that would eventually become the right partner for his lifestyle. She was everything he wanted and then some. She’d grow into the rest, and most likely mold him into the man she wanted him to be. It would just take time and a whole lot of fucking frictions from what he could tell.

“It’s not what it is. This is marriage. It’s a really big deal.” Ben lifted his hands again. “I know, I’m just saying.”

“Well, don’t. I’m fine. We’re not moving in together for a while. We both need to grow into our relationship a little more. I’m happy with the moves I’ve made. I love her.”

“Do you, or are you infatuated with her?”

“Is there a difference?” Damon chuckled. “You’re drunk and emotional. Stop projecting that sappy love shit on me. Bethany and I are good together, and everything is going to work out perfectly.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ll force it to.”

“Even if that upsets her? Women don’t like that alpha male shit too long. It’s good in the beginning, but then you better start softening.”

“Not happening.” Damon clicked a few buttons. “Go get some sleep and leave me in peace. My relationship with Bethany is great.”

“Where is she?”

“In the room.” He glanced up. “Why?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s her getting into that cab.” Ben pointed out the window as Damon’s heart almost stopped in his chest.

“What the fuck.” He slipped out of the booth and took his phone with him. The cab was gone by the time he walked out of the hotel.

A valet turned toward him and smiled. “Need me to get your car for you, Sir?”

“No. Where was that girl headed?”

“Um... I don’t know.” He turned back toward Damon with an odd expression.

“Right. Of course you don’t.” He turned and walked down the long sidewalk that led toward the parking lot as he called her.

“Hey.” Her voice was thick as if she’d been crying.

“Where are you going? It’s fucking eleven o’clock in a big city.”

“I’m getting some Tums. My stomach is killing me, and they don’t-”

“Why didn’t you text me to get them.”

“Because you were busy.” Her bark was worse than her bite.

He pulled the phone from his ear and let out a long sigh. She didn’t see him as anything more than an asshole. Otherwise, she would have come down and asked him to go with her, or for her.

“Be careful. I’ll see you when you get back. Stop by the bar and let me know you’re safe.”

“Right. Will do, boss.” The phone went dead.

A growl left him that had an elderly couple moving to the other side of the sidewalk. Why did women have to be so damn sensitive?

Ben walked out of the hotel. “Everything okay?”

Damon slipped his facade into place. “It’s great. She’s just running to the store.”

“Ah. All right, boss. See you in the morning. Good talk.”

Ben turned and walked back inside as Damon lifted his face toward the sky and tried not to condemn her to an ass-chewing when she got back. Why in the world she would leave the hotel without telling him was a mystery.

“She’s an independent, strong woman. It’s one of the many things you love about her,” he huffed as if combating his thoughts. “You do. You love her. Period.”

CHAPTER 74



BETHANY

He wasn't in the room the night before when she got back, and she didn't have the desire to go after him. A sadness settled on her that still held her tightly as she woke Saturday morning. The text from Ben she'd failed to see the night before showed that the team decided to meet up at six that morning. It was almost eight by the time she woke up.

Damon wasn't anywhere to be found, but his suitcase was open, and the smell of his skin was on the bed next to her. She got dressed quickly and called Ben as she walked from the room. Her issues with Damon would have to be solved later that evening when she could get him alone for a heart-to-heart. Hopefully kissing and making up would be a part of it, but nothing was happening in the bedroom until she got him to come to the table on why he was being such an unbearable ass.

"Good luck," she muttered as Ben picked up the phone.

"Hey, Bethany. Sorry about the late text. No worries about not making the six o'clock pow-wow, it was a different team anyway."

"I feel like crap for not making it. I fell asleep early. My stomach was killing me."

"Yeah, Damon told me."

"Is he down there with you guys?"

"No, and most of the team has already headed over to Zarpeth's main office. I was cleaning up a few things. You want to meet me downstairs, and we can take a cab together?"

“That sounds great. I need to get a coffee.”

“There’s a shop at the bottom of the client’s building. It’s a nice underground food court thing.”

“I’ll be downstairs in ten minutes.” She jogged down the stairs, not paying a bit of attention to her heels. She’d learned to run in just about anything during college seeing that being late was something she was good at. She’d gotten better over the last few years, but the issue still seemed to linger.

She checked her phone to see if Damon left her a message and found nothing. A text from Jake said that he’d been to the doctor and he was healing nicely. She texted back quickly congratulating him as her chest constricted painfully. Why hadn’t Damon asked about her stomach, or commented on leaving early?

He was pulling back and didn’t seem to care that she had no choice but to notice.

She swallowed her emotions and walked out of the stairwell to find Ben standing near the door. The dark purple blouse she had on accented her gray skirt and jacket well, leaving her to feel professional and well put together. Too bad her insides didn’t reflect all that confidence.

“You look pretty today. You sleep well?” Ben asked as he moved up beside her.

“Thanks. I slept well once I fell asleep.” She forced a calm expression on her face and tried to hold back the tears that kept threatening to blur her gaze. She needed an hour to let herself go before facing a room full of strangers that were supposed to be her colleagues over the next few months.

It was going to be fine. Everything was going to be fine.

“You’re going to like this team. Some of the guys have been slacking off a little, so expect some tension when you walk into the room. Damon’s going to come in and talk to the team at nine. He’s pissed about some of the things that have slipped through the cracks, and rightly so. It’s going to get ugly before it gets better,” Ben chuckled and got into the back of the cab.

“Awesome,” Bethany muttered and got in beside him, not at all in the mood to make small talk with the portly senior. He was a good guy, but a close friend of Damon’s. There was nothing she could say that wouldn’t make its way back to her wayward fiancé.

“Did you get to meet the new Senior Manager on the job? Damon hired her this last week. An old friend of his that Kent likes a lot.”

An old friend of his from when?

“No, but it’s been a long week. You know I started my master’s program on top of everything else.” She stifled the need to pepper Ben with questions. She’d find out what she could from observation and then hit Damon up for the rest of the info later that night.

“I did know that. I’m not sure how you’re doing it, but you know I’m here if you need anything, right?”

“Yeah. Thanks for that.” She leaned back and closed her eyes, hoping to shut down the conversation. Ben started to hum something softly under his breath and didn’t say another word until he held the door for her at the large high rise in downtown.



“Let’s just start by saying that I’m disappointed.” Damon glanced around the oval table they sat at.

Bethany had yet to get over the shock of having Philip on the team and seated next to her. They hadn’t had more than a minute to say hi to each other before Damon walked into the quaint conference room and caused the mood to shift dramatically.

The pretty blond across the table was new to her and had to be Damon’s childhood friend, who scary enough looked like a softer version of his ex, Bridget. Sickness rolled through Bethany’s stomach as she tried to keep her concentration on Damon. There was no reason to let his words smack her

around seeing that she wasn't part of the team that had failed to do their job well.

“Patrick. Why don't you stand up and introduce yourself, and tell the team what's going on so that they understand fully the shit storm that your team is pulling them into.”

A dark-haired Hispanic guy stood up and smoothed his shirt as his hands shook.

“Right. I'm Patrick. I'm the manager on this engagement, and as with a lot of large manufacturing clients, we're having some serious issues with inventory. In our firm, and every firm really, the interns and new staff work the inventory counts. Ours was done incorrectly, and yet we didn't catch it during our review process. After investigation of the situation, it doesn't seem that we were dealing with collusion or fraud, but it's a very sticky place to be right now.” He slipped his hands into his pockets. “Most of the team was pulled apart, and you guys are the new members that are hopefully going to help us pull this ship back on course.”

Damon spoke up. “Patrick is the only one from the team that isn't looking for a job, and that's because he wasn't involved. Don't mess this up. We're under the closing arguments for a government audit. It's ugly, and you need to be on your toes. Period.”

“How about we introduce ourselves, boss? Would that be all right?” Ben spoke up from across the table, and Damon nodded.

“Yes. Do that.” He moved back to the door and opened it. “I'll be in the office at the end of the hall if you have what I would consider an emergency.”

The smile on the blond across from Bethany was almost sickeningly sweet. They had more than a friendship from what she could gather. The way the woman watched Damon left her with very little question over it. If they hadn't been together, then the woman wanted to and was left wanting. A whole host of emotions danced around inside Bethany's stomach as everyone went around the room. Finally, it was the blond's turn.

She stood and pressed her hands to the table. To say she was in shape and made for the suit that fit her snugly would have been an understatement. She was like a softer version of Erica, but something was off.

“I’m Delilah. I’m the newbie out of all of us, I do believe.” A chuckle resounded along the members at the table. “I’m the Senior Manager on the job, so you won’t see too much of me, but I’m here if you need anything. I have six years of experience in audit from one of the big four accounting firms and am happy to be here now. My desk is in Damon’s office for this weekend, so make sure if you need something, that it’s worthy of interrupting him. Setting up an appointment with me might be the best way to do things, and use your chain of command. I should should hear from Patrick as your manager more than anyone else. That’s all. Thanks!”

After a few more introductions, Bethany made hers and Patrick dismissed the team to grab a coffee, take a bathroom break and meet down the hall in their workroom for the weekend.

Philip moved up behind her as they walked out into the hall.

“I’m seriously in shock that Damon would allow me to be on the same team with you.” Philip laughed and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Me too. Maybe he didn’t find out until this morning.” She shrugged. “Or maybe he doesn’t care. I’ve never been anything but faithful, so there’s no reason to question me.”

There was no way in hell she was going to discuss her disintegrating relationship with the one guy that would be waving his ‘next-in-line’ ticket to date her. That would have been a tragedy waiting to happen. She had to be on guard over whatever was happening between her and Damon. Otherwise, they would keep pushing at each other until one of them walked away.

It was the last thing in the world she wanted, but he seemed to feel differently.

“That’s a good thing. Either way, I’m glad to be back.” Philip smiled and nodded toward the coffee stand. “Want something?”

“Yeah, but I’ll wait. I see you cut your hair.” She pushed at his shoulder and laughed as he shook his head.

“Don’t start with that. I’m still a little salty over it.” He turned to go into the coffee bar as Bethany walked toward Damon’s office. There was no way she was starting the day without first talking to him for a few minutes about the night before. There had to be a way to let him know just how hurt her feelings were without starting a fight.

She rubbed the empty spot on her hand where her ring should have sat and couldn’t help but think through how fucked up it was that she couldn’t share the good news with people. He had to lay the foundation?

“Then lay it,” she grumbled and lifted her hand to knock on his door. The feminine voice beside her stopped her dead in her tracks.

“Hi, Bethany. Something I can do for you?”

She turned to face Delilah. There was no reason not to give the girl a chance at a solid work relationship, and seeing that she was the Senior Manager on the job, she would be the one writing Bethany’s annual review.

“I was just stopping by to talk with Damon for a minute.”

“Mr. Bryant?” She lifted her eyebrow as if to question Bethany’s casual reference to Damon.

Heat bubbled up from the center of Bethany’s stomach and coated her chest and neck in warmth. She couldn’t exactly spout out that she was part of the family, one of Kent’s kids now. That would fuck things up for them when they told everyone that she was Damon’s fiancé. There was no way she could use that either.

“Yes, Mr. Bryant.”

“Right, well, one of my jobs is to protect Mr. Bryant’s time, so maybe I can help you instead.” She tilted her head to

the side, and the kind look she had plastered to her face in the conference room moments ago was all but gone.

“I don’t think so, but thanks.” Bethany turned and reached for the door.

“And why not? Something I should know?” The woman was persistent.

“No. I just-”

“Bethany. I’m Patrick. Damon’s told me so much about you. Says you’re Kent’s new protégé and might put him out of a job.” He chuckled and extended his hand. “There a reason we’re having a pow-wow around Damon’s door?”

“Mr. Bryant?” Bethany asked cheekily and glanced over at Delilah, disliking the woman already.

“No, we just call him Damon. His father is Mr. Bryant. He’ll tell you that.” Patrick laughed as the door behind Bethany opened.

“Is there a reason why you guys are having a meeting out in the hall by my damn office? All I can hear is the three of you,” Damon barked softly as anger brushed across his handsome face.

Bethany smiled at Patrick. “That’s my cue to leave. Nice to meet you.”

“Sorry, Damon. The girl wanted to talk with you for a minute, and I just asked what she needed.” Delilah’s voice followed her down the hall as she made a beeline to the bathroom and walked in, plopping down in a stall and pressing her hands to her face.

“What the hell is happening?”

CHAPTER 75



DAMON

Bethany walked into the bathroom; her shoulders rolled in slightly. She was hurt. Fuck.

Of course she went to the one place I can't get to her.

Did she not remember him holding her the night before as he apologized for their long evening apart? He was stressed. Did she not get stressed and pull back from all of humanity until she figured things out? Surely she did. Why wasn't he granted the right just to be who he was instead of who she expected him to be? That change would come over time, but fuck, it wasn't instantaneous.

Damon waved his hand to silence Patrick and Delilah and moved back, letting the woman into his office. Having to share his space with anyone but Bethany, even workspace sounded like hell on earth. As long as Delilah could remain professional and keep the chattiness to a minimum, they would be all right.

“Sorry about all of that.” Bridget's sister walked in and laid her briefcase on her desk. “Is she-”

“None of your business.” He walked to his desk and sat down. “I'm not discussing anything other than business with anyone today. I have a ton to do, so if you're in here with me, you're quiet and busy. Got it?”

“Absolutely.” She nodded and turned her back toward him.

He half expected her to start crying or throw a fit, but she didn't. Like a mature adult with their feelings tucked deep into

their chest instead of sitting on their shoulders, she sat down and got her ass in gear.

Amazing. Why can't Beth do that?

It had to be because they were dating. Engaged. Getting married.

He ran his fingers through his hair and tried to get through a few more e-mails as concern swept through him. She needed to work for another firm. There was no way they were going to be effective working together and sleeping in the same bed. A lot of people pulled it off, but a whole lot more didn't. She wouldn't be able to pull herself beyond the relationship they shared to be professional in the office. Ben had done a good job of keeping their friendship on the side while at work, but that was no comparison to what he and Bethany were looking at.

Marriage. Forever.

His watch buzzed, alerting him to the appointment with Zarpeth's CEO in ten minutes.

"Meeting?" He'd almost forgotten Delilah was in the room.

"Yes. Bring a notepad and come jot down anything we might need to remember later. Mr. Talling is a good businessman, but his company has grown far too fast. We need not only to see where we can add value, but where we can sell extra services too."

"Absolutely." Her voice was almost professional, but not quite. It was a little too flirty. There was nothing to do but ignore it. With the history they had, and the strong friendship she'd given him all those years ago, he wasn't going to assume anything. Maybe she just sounded sensual to everyone. It didn't matter.

He picked up his coffee and walked to the door, opening it and stopping short. The sound of Bethany laughing with a guy left his blood running cold.

Stop it. It's nothing. Don't get paranoid and fuck things up further.

Moving out in the hall, he took a quick right and walked the long way to Mr. Talling's office so that he could peek into the audit room where the staff were. Bethany's gray suit looked so damn good on her, and yet she had no clue just how beautiful she was.

It's not like he had an opportunity to mention it to her yet. They had to be careful of showing too much of their relationship in the office, but it was damn hard not to pull her aside and make sure she was all right. He could only hope that she was headed to his office earlier in an effort to do just that.

"You need something?" Patrick looked up as Damon stopped by the open door.

He glanced over his shoulder toward Delilah. "The meeting is in that corner office down the hall. Get the lights on, and I'll be right there."

"Yeah, no problem." She walked off, and Damon turned back to the room, unable to let his gaze rest on anyone but his woman's.

"Beth, you wanted something earlier?" He pursed his lips as warmth spread through his stomach, infusing the goodness of what could be between them. He was fucking things up and felt like a fifteen-year-old cock-head when they were together as of late. Why he couldn't get himself in check and try harder was a concern. That coupled with the weight of getting married almost seemed too much until he was standing in front of her. Then it all made sense.

"Nope. I'm good." She glanced up from the papers in front of her and flipped her long dark hair over her shoulder.

"Can you come here for a minute, please?" He turned and walked back to his office as he sucked a shallow breath through his clenched teeth. His cock twitched in his slacks, his pulse quickening. The woman had a strange power over him that made little to no sense.

She walked into the office, and he closed the door. "How is your stomach?"

“I’ll live.” She was cold, her emotions on lock-down. He *had* fucked up.

Some part of him wanted to poke at her and start the fight they were headed toward just to get it over with, but he couldn’t push them closer to the edge of ending things. He didn’t want that at all.

For her to grow up and act a little more mature? Sure.

For her to understand the sticky situation they were dealing with over him being her boss and her brother and her lover? Yes.

But for it to end? Never.

“Hey.” He reached out, but she moved back a step. “Beth.”

“Don’t.” She glanced up, and the hurt in her face lanced his insides. “You leave last night in a pissy mood, get in my face about needing something for my stomach and then don’t even wake me up to tell me you were going. I’m glad we saved the firm a little bit of money by rooming together.”

“You know-”

Her expression hardened as her face turned red and she poked her finger into the center of his chest as she took several steps toward him, backing him up as she did.

Hot wouldn’t cover it. The woman was blistering when she was angry. It aged her by ten years, pulling her toward a confidence that left him needy and aching all over. There was nothing he desired more than to meet his match in the office, in the bedroom, in the world, and he had. Now he just had to be patient while she grew up a little and took ownership of the woman she was going to become.

It was enough to keep him hanging on forever.

“And who the fuck is this Delilah chick? She looks exactly like Bridget. Is that some kind of warning? Did you hire her because-”

He gripped her wrist and pulled her flush against him before turning them and pressing her tightly to the full-length windows that ran the length of the room.

“Hush. Dad hired her, and she’s nothing to me.” He leaned down, running his nose along the sensual line of her neck as his cock throbbed in his slacks. “God, you turn me on so fucking much. How? How do you keep pulling me back with this horrid desire to strip you down and cover you in kisses?”

“Pull you back?” Her blue eyes moved across his face as he leaned back a little, but kept his hands locked on her hips; his front pressed to hers.

“I didn’t mean it like that. Don’t get even more sensitive. I just needed a minute with you.” He leaned down to kiss her, but she turned her face away.

“Move. You’re not at all the man I fell in love with. Back. Up.”

“What? No. I’m exactly who you fell in love with. You’re expecting someone different to show up because I gave you a ring, but that’s not how it works. I’m still me. If you don’t-”

“Don’t you dare say it,” she barked as tears filled her eyes.

“Beth. Come on, baby. You know I love you. I was there last night wrapped around you. I’m stressed, and shit is hitting the fan. If you didn’t work here, it would be a different situation altogether.” He trapped her face in his hands and leaned down, taking ownership of her soft lips. She fought against him for a second before moaning and melting into him.

The kiss was long and deep, his pretty girl sucking on his tongue as her fingers slid down the sides of his chest and moved around to squeeze his ass. He rocked into her and licked at her mouth until she pushed at him.

“Stop. You’re messing up my lipstick.” She shook her head, still not showing any emotion that would lead to reconciliation.

“So?” He kissed her again roughly. “Let’s get through today and go out tonight. Just you and me. Last night sucked, as has most of this week. I don’t want you hurting.”

“Then stop being a dick.” She pushed at his chest and averted her eyes from him. He was losing her.

“Hey.” He gripped her chin and forced her to look up at him. “You’re mine. No matter what happens between us or what silly little bullshit storm we deal with. We made a promise to each other. Remember?”

“Who is Delilah, Damon? Is she Bridget’s sister?”

He sighed and moved back. “Yes. She’s her twin.”

“I thought Bridget was in Jamaica for her sister’s bachelorette party. Is she not *that* sister?”

“No. She has three sisters. It wasn’t Delilah’s event.”

“Right. Awesome.” Bethany ran her hands over her breasts as she smoothed down her shirt and Damon’s stomach tightened further. Stripping her and making her forget everything but him sounded like such a good idea, but it wasn’t the time or the place. Surely Mr. Talling was already waiting with Delilah for him.

“Dinner tonight. We can talk about all of this.”

“Yep, ‘cause I’m not sleeping with you again until we do.” She turned her back to him and walked toward the door.

“Excuse me?” The lust that pumped through him moments before dissipated. Did she think he was a pet to be rewarded with her body when he behaved and not otherwise? Hell no.

“You heard me. I want this thing between us, but I’m starting to feel like I’m the only one that does.” She walked out and closed the door behind her.

He growled low in his chest and pressed his hands to his face as he moved back toward the window and groaned. She was young, inexperienced, immature and so fucking hot.

“So damn difficult.” He ran his hands down his face and took a shallow breath before calling his dad and dropping down into a chair.

“Morning, son. Everything okay?”

“Yes. We’re here, and I’m about to meet with James. The team is fully engaged, but I’m not calling about work.” He

sighed and let his eyes move across the beautiful view of the city that the office afforded.

“What’s going on? Bethany okay? Matt?” The mild panic in his father’s voice forced him to get to the point quickly.

“It’s Bethany and me. I love her, but fuck if she’s not difficult,” he growled and leaned back in his chair. “One minute she seems to accept me for the moody bastard I am, and the next, I’m hurting her damn feelings over and over again. It’s exhausting and coupled with all this work bullshit; I’m starting to wonder if I did the right thing.”

“By proposing?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“Only you can answer that. Having your significant other at the office with you isn’t an ideal situation, but Bethany is a smart girl. She’ll hold her own if you give it to her.”

“I guess.”

“I know she is. Stop treating her like she’s at the office all the time. Knowing you, that’s what’s happening.”

“We have to be professional here. I refuse to be anything but,” Damon huffed and got up. The only good thing about having yet another fight was his hard-on was officially gone.

“Right, but you don’t have to be professional the minute you walk out of the office. Take her out and have fun. Let that angst go while you’re at home, at the hotel, out for a dinner date. Don’t carry it with you. I know how you are. I bet you’re being office Damon all the damn time.”

“I am not.” He forced a chuckle as he realized that he was doing exactly that. *Fuck.*

“If you guys love each other, work it out. It will be fine. I promise. Just force her to be like you in the office, and force yourself to be like her anywhere else.”

“All right. I’ll be in touch.” He dropped the call and swallowed the need to apologize a million times to her. It wasn’t that he wasn’t willing to, but that he couldn’t figure out what the hell he was actually apologizing for.

Be more fun outside of work. He could do that. Maybe.

CHAPTER 76



BETHANY

Maybe she was overthinking it. A few weeks back he'd been more of an ass than ever, and she'd been fine with it. For some reason, she half-expected him to change simply because of the engagement, but she hadn't changed much, right?

She packed up and walked out of the conference room after everyone else had skipped off to dinner thirty minutes before. Damon had texted sometime just after lunch for her to meet him out at the street around seven. After a long day of trying to catch up to where everyone seemed to expect her to be, a hot bubble bath and TV sounded good, but that wasn't happening.

As long as there wasn't another fight to deal with, she'd be good. Too much more and she was liable to crack and chuck the ring at him. There was only so much someone could be expected to put up with, even someone head-over-heels.

She took the elevator down and stifled a yawn as she walked out of the building. A sleek black Mercedes much like Damon's sat parked in front of the building as other cars moved by in the street. Bethany clutched her bag in front of her and tried to appear casual as she looked around. If Damon were in the car, he needed to roll the damn window down.

As if on cue, it rolled down.

Her breath swept from her chest as he smiled, neither of them saying a word.

Don't cry. Don't cry.

The five o'clock shadow that dusted his chin and cheeks left him looking more rugged than she could handle. How physical attraction could wash over the aches and pains and make them momentarily better was a mystery that she was too tired to think through, but it worked its magic on her.

"Hi, pretty girl. I have the night off and was wondering if maybe you'd like to go to dinner? Maybe grab a drink at a piano bar after and let me twirl you around the floor a little? Dessert could be optional but might be fun. A long shower?"

"I thought you didn't dance unless forced to." A smile touched her lips as she trapped the pain of their roller coaster relationship deep inside of her.

"Only at a wedding or when-"

"Seducing a woman. I remember." She glanced down the street and shook her head. "I'm good, but thanks for the offer. I'm not looking for one night, but many. The guy who's supposed to come get me is, well, he's soon to be everything to me. I think." Tears blurred her vision.

So much for trapping it behind a cheeky facade.

He got out of the car and moved to stand in front of her, his expression loving and filled with concern.

"Baby. I'm right here. You know we have a lot to work through."

"And a ring doesn't change that. I get it." She reached up and wiped at her tears angrily. "I wish dinner and dancing were the cure-alls for the hurt inside of me, but it isn't."

"Can it be a start?" He touched the side of her face and licked his lips. "Please."

It wasn't a request.

"Yeah. Sure." She touched his hand before turning her face to kiss his palm a few times. "Stop shutting me out, and stop being a dick. I've kept up with your rules and your demands and your needs. Give back a little before this thing falls apart."

He nodded stiffly, obviously not liking the idea of her taking control of the conversation or directly addressing the

issue.

His problem. If it falls apart, it won't be because I didn't give it my all.

She walked around him and got into the passenger's side of the car to find a pretty bouquet of red roses laying between the seats.

“What do you feel like for dinner? Seafood, steak, something else?” He picked up the roses and handed them to her. “For you.”

“When did you have time to get these?”

“I made time.” He reached over and touched her arm with the back of his fingers. “Let's have fun tonight and try to leave all this angsty bullshit behind us for a while.”

“I'll try.”

“What can I do to change that from trying to doing?” He tugged at a strand of her hair before leaning into her seat and kissing her softly a few times. “Where's my girl under all this drama? Is she in there? I want her. I need her. Tell her to come out and have dinner with me.”

She nodded, not willing to push it any further. “Okay.”

“Good.” He dropped back in his seat, clueless. “Now, where to?”

“Let's go to the steakhouse Erica was talking about in Jamaica.”

“You wanna fly to Jamaica?” He winked at her and reached for her hand, pulling it up to his lips and kissing softly. “I know the one. It's one of the best in the world.”

“Good.” She pulled her hand from his and turned to look out her passenger's side window. “I heard it rains here all the time, but it hasn't at all today unless I missed it.”

“You were trapped in a conference room all day.” He brushed his fingers by her leg and pushed her skirt up a little before gripping her thigh softly. “You want me to stop by the hotel so you can put on something more comfortable?”

She glanced over at him and rested her hand on his, not wanting him to go any higher. The need to protect herself from whatever they were headed toward rolled through her violently.

“Yeah, that would be great actually.” She forced a smile and reached to turn on the radio.

“You sure you’re all right?”

“Yep. Just a lot on my plate right now.” She crossed her legs in a way that forced him to pull his hand back. “I think the one thing I can’t shake is why you wouldn’t have told me about Bridget’s sister coming to work at the firm. I guess it’s really not my business.” She shrugged and kept her voice soft and conversational, as if they were discussing the color of the drapes in a house. “It just shocked me to see her there with no clue of who she was or that she was coming.”

“I get that.” A tenseness entered his voice that didn’t belong there. It should have been her that was tense over the situation. The omission of truth was the same as lying, or at least that’s the lesson he’d taught over her punching Sadie in the face and not saying anything about it. How was this situation any different?

She pulled out her phone and texted Matt as Damon sighed softly and put both hands on the wheel, squeezing tightly until the leather creaked in protest.

Bethany: Where are you?

Matt: At the hotel. What’s up? You need me?

Bethany: Yes. I’m going to tell Damon I have a stomach ache. I can’t do this tonight. Can we go somewhere undercover?

Matt: My chest hurts over this, but yeah, I like undercover.

Bethany: Mine too, but I can’t keep up this fake shit anymore. I’m hurt and I’m sure it’s my fault, but I need to get away from it for the night.

Matt: Text me when you’re free.

The phone rang on the car's console, and Damon tapped it twice. Ben's voice filled up the car as they pulled up into the driveway of the hotel.

"Hey, boss man. We're all going to a great piano bar down the street from the office. You and Bethany should join us."

"Naw, man. We-"

"Just a second, Ben." She pressed mute on the dashboard. "You should go. My stomach is starting to get sick again. Seriously. Come back to me tonight, and we can catch up."

"No." His expression tightened further as anger burned across his face. "I'm coming up with you."

"No. Really. I don't want to be sick in front of you. I love you." She leaned over and kissed him, but he didn't return the gesture.

"Beth, I'm not letting you be sick alone. We're in this thing-"

"Go. I need some time to myself. I'll text you if I need something. Let me be gross in peace." She forced a laugh and grabbed her purse and got out of the car.

He sat in the car, staring out the front window as she turned to wave at him. Nothing. It wasn't until she was standing in front of the elevator with tears running down her cheeks that she realized that she left the flowers he got her sitting in the front seat.

"Fucking great."



"I think you guys are putting *way* the fuck too much pressure on yourselves. My God, you just got together three weeks ago." Matt dipped his chip into the bowl of hot salsa between them.

Bethany sucked down another drink of her frozen margarita before answering.

“I know. I keep telling myself that, but some of the little things he’s done that have hurt me seem to feel so damn big. So big...”

Matt reached over and squeezed her hand. “So let’s talk about something else. You and Damon will figure this shit out. You’re too right for each other not to, okay?”

“Okay.” She glanced down and forced the hot lump of regret in her chest to go back down. They would figure things out, maybe. Hopefully. “Did you ask Erica out?”

“No. She’s a piranha.” He laughed as Bethany gave him a look.

“She’s a great girl and someone that you would-”

“I know. I’ve heard it a million times. No is my answer. I don’t want a woman like her. Honestly.” He shrugged. “She’s beautiful and leaves my insides shaking with white-hot need, but she’s not the kind of woman I want to tie myself to emotionally.”

“Why is that?”

“She’s like Damon. Strong, confident, a bitch and a half, and I love it. I would become her lap dog in public and put a collar on her in the bedroom. She would bring out the worst parts of me.” He reached over and pulled Bethany’s drink toward him. He took a drink and licked at the salt on the side before grimacing. “This tastes like shit.”

“You lick the salt first, nugget-head.” She laughed and showed him how to do it.

“I’ll just stick to beer for now. Thanks.” He lifted his beer in the air. “Things are going to work out. I promise.”

“I hope so.” She hit her glass against his and let Matt move the conversation to more relaxed, fun topics, which he did well.



Finding Damon asleep on the couch of the room when she got back that night was a little concerning. He had to know that she went out, but how long had he been in the room waiting for her?

The roses were in a vase on the desk, and a card sat beside them, unopened. Had he gotten it for her for their dinner date?

Guilt pumped through her as she opened the card and turned to face him. The soft sound of him breathing let her know that he was asleep. She glanced up from the card and let her eyes move along him as the moonlight spread across his sleek figure. He was in slacks and nothing else, his beautiful body like something out of a wet dream.

Beth,

Give me time, and I'll give you patience. Give me grace, and I'll give you trust. Give me your heart, and I'll treasure it forever. This isn't the end, but the beginning, right? Sure feels like the opposite is happening. Where are you tonight, baby? Is there someone else you'd rather be with than me? Who is he? How can I be more like him? Am I not enough?

There's so much to work through, but for me, you're it. I'm willing to keep pushing forward if you are. I hope you are, Beth, because despite it being three weeks, I love you.

D

She pressed her fingers to her lips as a sob lodged in her chest. There he was, the man she'd fallen in love with. He was tucked somewhere deep inside the asshole across the room.

After setting the card down and changing into a tank top and panties, she walked across the room and sat down on the bed beside him on the couch, brushing his hair back as tears rolled over her cheeks. It would be so easy to wake him up and make love to him for the rest of the night, to forget the hurt and work toward something better, but she couldn't force herself to do it. She'd never cheat on him, and though that was his main hang up, she shouldn't have had to convince him that she wasn't out with another man.

Well, no one other than Matt, and he didn't count.

She leaned over and kissed his head a few times as he grumbled and rolled onto his side, putting his back to her. She kissed his shoulder and got up, pulled the top cover off the bed and put it on him before getting in the over-sized bed beside him and trying to force herself to get some sleep. They had another long day on Sunday, and she needed to be on her toes. Otherwise, something told her that she'd have Delilah in her face, which wouldn't go over too well.

Wonder if she needs a nose job too.

CHAPTER 77



DAMON

The light mist that covered the golf course that next morning ushered in an odd peace that Damon needed more than he wanted to admit, even to himself. Bethany had come in from her date, or whatever she'd been doing, opened the card and left him on the couch. It was a clear sign that things were headed toward being over. It was too much to consider, so like he'd done his whole life, he boxed it up and tucked it away. Fuck it. All of it.

“So you think you guys going down to Florida next weekend will help some?” James Talling glanced up as he wiped off the tip of his putter.

“Absolutely.” Damon nodded and glanced over to Patrick. “Pat’s going down there, and some of our other hard-hitting staff. We’ll wrap everything up and set up new procedures and processes. It will be a brand-new operation by the time we leave.”

“And all in a weekend.” Patrick chuckled and walked out to the fairway beside Damon as James moved up to take his turn. “We missed you last night. Ben thought you were going to join us.”

“Yeah. Too much to do. I had to work for a few hours, and then I passed out. One too many bourbons, I guess.” He crossed his arms over his chest and tried not to think about how good Bethany looked laying in the bed that morning, still sound asleep. The covers had pulled off of her as she lay on her side, and her tiny white panties left so much skin on display. It took every ounce of denying himself not to bend

down, tug them to the side and eat her for breakfast. Any other morning and he would have.

“You all right?” Patrick’s expression hardened a little as his eyebrows furrowed.

“Yes, just a lot on my mind, but nothing I’m willing to discuss.” Damon nodded as James walked toward them.

“Of course, boss. Just know I’m here if you do.”

“Thanks.” Damon took the putter from James and smiled. “You’re not going to win this one, my friend.”

“The story of my life.” He laughed as they passed. “The only success I have is Zarpeth, and it’s started to crack at the seams too.”

Damon turned at the older man’s confession. Zarpeth crumbling was a serious situation, not just for the revenue, but because M&B was tied to the company’s reputation as they were all of their audit clients.

“What do you mean?” Damon pressed the putter to the ground and gripped the top with both hands as he leaned forward and stretched.

“Hm?” James turned back to face Damon. “Oh, I’m just being a cynic. Everything is good outside of this inventory mess. I was referring to all the other shit in my life.”

“Like?” Damon stood back up and swung a few times, feeling much better about James’ explanation. There wasn’t room for too many more shit storms in his life right then.

“Dana is filing for divorce next week.” He shrugged. “I guess all these years of me working eighty-plus hours a week finally got to her.”

“That sucks. I’m sorry to hear that, man.” Damon moved toward his ball and hit it once. It sunk in the hole and James growled loudly.

“You get all the lucky balls, don’t you?” He laughed as Damon lifted his eyebrow at him and walked toward the cart as Patrick moved to take his turn.

“I’m not sure lucky would be the word. My life is a bit of a mess right now too.” He ran his fingers through his hair and stretched again.

“Can’t be worse than mine.” James slipped his hands into his pockets and let out a shaky breath.

“You love her?” Damon couldn’t help but ask.

“Yeah, man. With all of my heart, but love isn’t enough.”

“No? I’ve always heard that if you had love, you had everything. Doesn’t love heal all wounds and stop time or some crazy shit like that?” Damon forced a smirk though his heart ached deep in his chest.

“I wish.” James glanced down toward his feet. “She’s trying to take custody of our twin boys, and though I’d rather be skinned alive and dipped in acid than hurt her, I have to fight for them. She’s going to take it as an attack, and I fucking hate that, but what else am I supposed to do?”

“How old are they?”

“Ten. They need me.” He chuckled and glanced back up. “Fuck. I need them. I need her, but she won’t hear me.”

“Women are complex. Have you asked what the source of her hurts are?”

“Yeah, but I can’t let go of the company.”

“Sure you can. You’ve built it from the ground up. Hand it over to a well-qualified team of managers and go get your wife back.”

“It’s not that easy, but maybe you’re right. I’ll think about how to do that. Even if this is it for Dana and me, I still owe the next woman in my life a better chance at a relationship than I gave my wife.”

“Would you change it all if you could? Go back and fix the small cracks in the marriage?”

“Hell yeah. She’s everything I wanted in a wife, a lover, a best friend.” He pressed his teeth into his lip and shook his head before walking down the fairway toward the next hole.

” Is James all right?” Patrick walked over and got into the golf cart.

“Yeah, he will be.” Damon dropped down into the driver’s seat and tried to figure out if he still had a chance of fixing him and Bethany. She hadn’t cheated on him. She wouldn’t do that.

Neither would his mom have cheated on his dad. Not in a million years, but she did.



He walked into the office a few hours later to find the staff working fast to put out a third quarter fire for another client. He left them to it and walked to his office to find Bethany staring out the window.

“Hey, can you organize a dinner tonight? It looks like those guys in there aren’t going to get a break anytime soon. We’ll either bring something in or go somewhere.”

“Yeah, I guess.” She glanced over her shoulder. The sadness on her pretty face tore into him, but he’d made his apologies yesterday only to have her lie to him about her stomach and leave with someone. No way had she gone out by herself for two hours. He’d parked the car and gotten to the room in time to smell the remnant of her perfume that filled the place.

“Thanks.” He walked to his desk and sat down, not bothering to ask why she was standing by the window while everyone else was busting ass. That wouldn’t gain him any favors, though, after the night before, he wasn’t sure he wanted any.

“Thank you for the card. It was sweet.”

Sweet?

“Sure.” He popped open his laptop and turned it on before glancing up to catch her watching him. “What’s up, Beth?”

“Why does everything have to be a fight between us? What am I to you? Your girlfriend? Your associate?” She pressed her hands to her hips. “You’re fucking secretary?”

“Because I asked you to organize a dinner?” He leaned back in his chair and forced his anger to stay at the edge of the confrontation. She was mad, and yet it was his turn to light into her. She was one hundred percent in the wrong.

“Yeah, Damon. That’s why.” She shook her head and walked to the door.

“Right. Close the door behind you, and thanks for your efforts. Hope your stomach is all better.” He glanced down and opened a few files as the door closed. “Fuck. What the hell?”

They were past the point of saving things, or so it seemed. This was the reason he refused to get into a relationship in the first place. Everything was taken the wrong way, skewed, fucked up. It was exhausting, and at this point, not worth the effort. If all he was going to do was continue to hurt her with every move he made, then he was done.

He was honest in the card the night before. He did love her. But as James had clearly reminded him, love just wasn’t enough.



The rest of the day was a blur of activity, and he didn’t look up from his laptop until Ben knocked on the door later that evening. The twinkling stars outside of his window let him know it was well past the time he’d planned to get up and find something to eat. His stomach growled angrily as if in protest.

“You coming?”

“Where?” Damon stood up and stretched before pulling off his suit jacket.

“Dinner. Bethany organized a family-style dinner at the Italian place just down the road. Come on; we can walk.”

“Where is the rest of the team?” He walked out into the hall to see Delilah on the phone.

“They’re already there. We let them go to get the appetizers and stuff. You good walking?” Ben grabbed Delilah’s elbow, and she nodded and moved in behind them.

“Yeah, I could use some fresh air.”

“Long day?”

“Yeah. I didn’t move once I don’t think. Everything hurts.” He reached up and rubbed his hand down the back of his neck before rolling his shoulders a few times. “Beth do okay today?”

“Oh yeah. The girl is honestly brilliant. She’s fast as fuck too. I love having her on the team. She didn’t talk much, which was odd, but I figured she was just tired from a wild night with-”

Damon popped him in the chest. “Don’t. Not appropriate.”

“Gotcha.” Ben gave him a sheepish look and held the elevator open for them.

Delilah’s eyes moved across him as a smile touched the side of her mouth. “My stupid sister seems to think that I’m going to set you up again.”

“Again?” Ben’s eyebrow lifted. “Were you the one that set him up with Bridget originally?”

Damon chuckled and pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. Were they going to unlock the stories of his past? He was too tired to deal with much of anything.

“Yes. The dumbest mistake of my life. I should have swiped him up for myself.” She laughed and moved to Damon’s side, pressing her shoulder against his. “We would make a good couple.”

“Would have. Past tense.” He forced a smile and walked out into the lobby of the building. Ben and Delilah laughed and poked fun at him as they walked to the restaurant. He played into it a little, but stopped outside the restaurant and turned to face them. “All right, drop it. I don’t want anyone

here to feel inferior to either of you because we have a past together.”

“You have a past with Damon too?” Delilah laughed. “Have you seen him in a speedo?”

Damon rolled his eyes and walked into the restaurant. The hostess ushered him to the back room where the rest of his staff were. Philip was seated next to Beth and leaning over, showing her something on the menu, but they were entirely too close for Damon’s comfort.

She laughed and turned her face towards Philip’s to say something, putting them awkwardly close, intimately so. The widening of her eyes said that she realized it, and she moved back.

Damon cleared his throat and smiled. “Thanks for all the hard work. Bethany, can I see you for a minute?”

“Of course.” She stood up as her face lost color.

Unbelievable. Something was going on between the two of them. Damon had taken a chance on hiring this little shit back, much to his detriment, obviously.

He moved through the restaurant and walked out into the cool night air as she stopped beside him.

“Is this a good place for dinner? I should think-”

He turned and grabbed her arm as he leaned down to get in her face. Her tone was cocky, shitty, full of condemnation.

“What are you doing right now? Do you want this to end? If you do, fucking say so, and I’ll save us the pleasure of ripping each other apart from across the room.”

She jerked her arm from him and slapped him. Hard. “Fuck you for that. You know that I love you. You’re the villain here. Not me.”

He rubbed his cheek and glanced around. “Right. I’m the one that lied. The one that went somewhere with someone last night and left you sleeping on the couch. Yeah, I forgot. That was me.”

“If I don’t have my legs open or a calculator in my hand, I’m nothing to you but a puppet on a string.” She took a step back toward the restaurant. “And I didn’t lie. You did.”

“Your stomach still hurting?” Anger burned through him as he clenched his fists and tried hard to pull himself back from pressing her to the side of the restaurant and reminding her who was in charge. It would do no good. She didn’t want him anymore. That much was obvious.

“Is anyone else from Bridget’s family going to start working here? I mean, the more the fucking merrier.”

“Grow up, Beth.” He turned and walked back toward the office.

“Don’t leave me standing here.”

He ignored her and lifted his eyes to the sky as his heart ripped in two and tears burned his gaze. She could have her freedom and her future. He would take the role Charlie had advised him to. Mentor. Friend. Big Brother.

He could be anything she needed him to be and nothing else.

CHAPTER 78



BETHANY

“Everything okay?” Philip glanced up as Bethany took her place beside him.

“Yeah, I think so.” She picked up her menu and forced herself into a place of calm that didn’t exist. She’d been through enough shitty situations as a teenager to know how to cover her tracks emotionally. Damon’s denial of her concerns over Delilah showed where he was far too clearly.

The only question was whether there was hope for a change of heart in either of them. A depression that she couldn’t imagine surviving began to stir deep in her chest. As sad and stupid as it seemed, she couldn’t shake the desire to have him one more time. The strong emotions they shared when making love were enough to leave her panting and shaken. It was a little like hitting a perfect drug and riding the high as long as she could. He was addictive in ways she’d never imagined possible.

“You don’t look like everything is okay.” Philip glanced around and pressed his shoulder to hers. “You and the big guy fighting?”

“Always,” she mumbled and picked up her glass of tea. Delilah stood across the room talking with Ben and Patrick. Several associates across the table laughed loudly, and the room seemed too big all of a sudden. “I can’t do this.”

Bethany got up and walked languidly toward the front of the restaurant as if it were simply time to leave for the night. Being dramatic and making herself the center of conversation

at the office the next day wasn't happening. One more egg in her basket and she was liable to crack.

She waved down a cab as Philip jogged up beside her.

"I'll go with you." He touched her back and offered her a kind smile as he opened the door with his free hand. "You want to head back to the hotel or go grab a sandwich and check out this skate park I heard about?"

"I don't know." She got into the cab and leaned back, ignoring the stale scent of cigarettes and breath mints.

"Where to, kiddos?" The older guy in the front seat glanced over his shoulder.

"Over to the skate park near downtown?" Philip asked, his tone hopeful.

"It's going to rain a little tonight. You guys will get wet."

"It's all good. We're not made of sugar; we won't melt." He laughed and sat back in the seat before turning his attention toward her. "It's going to be fine. I promise."

"Is it?" She turned her head a little, pressing her cheek against the seat and studying him. "He's eight years older than me, my boss's boss's boss, and my stepbrother. Tell me how this is going to work out." She let her eyes move across Philip's boyish features. Why couldn't she have fallen for someone like him? The relationship would have been simple. Easy.

"Do you love him?" The look in Philip's eye said he was hoping for a no. She shouldn't have been there with him.

"Yes. With all of my heart, but it doesn't seem like that's enough. There are just too many differences between us." She sighed and turned to stare out the front window of the cab. "I need to figure out what I'm going to do and then just do it. Sitting on the fence is killing me."

"Are we talking about being with him or not? Is that the choice you're talking about?"

"Yeah." She crossed her arms over her chest as the cab came to a stop.

“Here we go, guys. That deli over there has the best turkey on rye of any place in the whole damn city. You’ll thank me if you try it.” The cabbie turned around, and Philip paid him.

Bethany didn’t have the energy to combat him on paying for the cab. They would be charging it anyway. Chances are that Damon would see the date and time and question the shit out of Philip over what he was up to during the team dinner.

Same thing as you are. Running.

They got out of the car as Bethany’s phone buzzed in her pocket. Matt.

“I need to get this.” She paused outside of the deli.

“Damon?”

“No, my brother. Can you just get me something small? My stomach is a little jacked up from everything.”

“Sure. We can share something. You picky?” He opened the door and studied her.

“No. Thanks.” She turned and walked to a bench that sat near the road and dropped down onto it before answering Matt’s call. “Hey. Where are you?”

“I’m headed to meet with Erica, and then I’m taking the red-eye. Damon said you were flying back with him. Is that right?”

“Yeah, I guess.” She shrugged as if Matt could see her. “I’ll be fine. What are you meeting with Erica about? Working at McKenzie and Bryant?”

“Supposedly. Probably just a plot to get me alone and lick the clothes from my body.”

“That’s almost hot, but terribly awkward all at the same time. Can you actually lick the clothes from someone?”

Matt had a way of making her feel normal no matter what he was up to. She was more than grateful for the reprieve for the moment.

He laughed. “So maybe I’m being dramatic, but only a little.”

“Well, be safe, and I guess I’ll see you when I get back home next week.”

“All right. You and Damon working through things?”

Hopefully Matt wasn’t as sensitive to lying as Damon was. Otherwise, she’d have been in trouble.

“Yep. We’re good.”



The facade she held on to tightly through her friend-date with Philip crumbled into a million pieces when she got back to the room and found Damon’s stuff gone. She cried throughout the night at the unfairness of life. She couldn’t seem to catch a break no matter what she did, and each one that appeared to be something great turned into ashes in her hands.

After a long, hot shower the next morning, she rolled her hair into a tight bun and dressed conservatively for her last day in the Seattle office. She was catching a flight later that night and had called to move it up to the one before their scheduled flight just to make sure she *didn’t* have to sit next to Damon. She wasn’t even sure he would be pissed about her actions. He might be happy to have a break too.

She twirled her ring around her finger as the cabbie drove her to Zarpeth’s corporate office, her thoughts a million miles from the present.

The memory of Damon gripping her hand tightly as he told their families that she was his woman and they could all jump off a cliff if they didn’t like it ran through her mind over and over. What had changed in the last week or so? The trip to Jamaica was wonderful, relaxing and so far beyond stimulating. She had a fucking ring on her finger to prove that something did exist between them. Where the hell was it now?

She pulled the ring off and tucked it into her bag as the cab driver pulled the car up to the curb. She paid and got out, jogging toward the building as the rain picked up. It didn’t matter so much with her hair up, but looking like a drowned

rat was out seeing that Damon was most likely still pissed at her, and Delilah would show up looking like a million dollars.

Bethany took the elevator up to the top floor and checked her watch, cursing under her breath for being an hour late. She just couldn't seem to get herself motivated to get up and pack before heading out. It was no matter. No one would give her hell for it, or they hadn't thus far.

She walked into the audit room and set her bag down as Philip glanced up and smiled.

"Morning. I like your hair like that." He wagged his eyebrows playfully as she chuckled.

"It rains too much here for me to do anything else with it." She sat down and turned as Damon's voice filled the hall. It was quickly accompanied by Delilah's.

"Tie down the loose ends and plan for the trip Friday to Florida." His tone was deadpan. He was in asshole-boss mode.

"Will do. I'm going to fly back to Dallas with you tonight. That all right?" Delilah had an almost flirty sound to her tone.

"Yeah. That sounds good. I think Bethany is the only other one going back with us." They stopped by the door, and Bethany glanced up.

"I'm taking an earlier flight. There is a storm coming in at ten when we were leaving. You might want to adjust your time too." She shrugged and glanced back down, typing out nothingness on her computer.

"Right." Damon turned and walked out of the office.

"You're late. Don't make a habit of it. The team starts working at seven every morning. Do you want to be early? Great. Don't be late." Delilah put her hands on her hips as Bethany looked up and realized the Senior Manager was addressing her.

"Oh, of course. I had a rough-"

"I don't care what you had. You're no more special than anyone else. Be here on time, or you'll not be invited back to my team." She tilted her head to the side.

“Excuse me?” Bethany pushed her hair back and stood up as Philip reached over and grabbed her wrist.

“Hey. Just nod and say okay.” He awarded her a tight smile.

“Is there a problem with me requesting you to be here on time?” Delilah laughed and looked around the room.

Bethany glanced around as she pulled her hand from Philip and moved around toward the door. The intention was to walk to get a cup of coffee and get out of the tense situation, thereby letting it die.

“Nope. It was the way you did it.” Bethany pinned the other woman with a hard stare and walked past her into the hall.

Delilah snorted and followed behind her, continuing the convo. “Is there something I should know, Bethany? Do you have special privileges that I wasn’t told about?”

“Not sure what you’re talking about.” Bethany pulled a plastic cup from the holder near the coffee pot. “Don’t talk down to me, and we’ll be fine.”

“Show up on time, and I won’t talk to you at all.” The blond wasn’t nearly as sweet as she’d appeared a few days back. *Interesting.*

“It was one day.” Bethany glanced over her shoulder and decided to pull back a little. There was no reason to give the bitch ammo to make life miserable.

“Two days, and you’re on the docket for going to Florida with Damon and me on Friday this week. You’re the only intern going, so I would advise you to be on time and impress both of us.”

“Or what?” Bethany pursed her lips.

“Or you won’t work here anymore.”

Bethany snorted. “I’m sure my father would love that.”

“I’m not sure who your daddy is, but this is the real world. You make your own name, or you get stomped on. Your father

might have gotten you the job, but he can't keep it for you."

"My dad is Kent Bryant. I'm pretty sure I'm safe here." Bethany scrunched up her features as she passed by the bitch. "Breath mints will help with that smell."

"What?" The angry sound of Delilah huffing in the relationship that Bethany had connections that even she didn't have was far more pleasurable than it should have been, even if it was incredibly immature.

Bethany walked down to Damon's open door and took a sip of her coffee as she leaned against the doorframe. "So your new Senior Manager has it out for me. I'm thinking someone who hated my guts assigned me to the same job as her. What do you think?"

"That you're overreacting. Auditing is hard work, and people get very little sleep. Delilah is a great manager. You'll learn to like her when you realize that she's got six years of experience on you." Damon glanced up and gave her a tight stare.

"Did you get another room last night?" She wrapped her free arm around her waist as her heart quivered. So much promise lay between them, and it was breaking into far too many pieces to repair in time.

"I did. Did you expect something else? I'm not sleeping on another couch."

"I would have let you into my bed."

"Fuck buddies now?" He chuckled, but the sound fell flat. "No thanks."

"Wow." She glanced down at the floor. "I get that you and I are having trouble, but I want off this assignment. Your ex lover's sister is a bitch, and she's got her eye set on making sure I know it."

"You're being a child." He looked back down at his computer. "This team is built of the best staff I have, you included. You were the promised brilliance I needed at the intern and associate level. Are you saying that you aren't brilliant now?"

He wouldn't even look at her.

"I'm saying that I'm not going to put up with her treating me like shit."

"Are you going to pop her in the nose?" He glanced up before standing.

"Awesome. Fuck you too."

"Hey. Not everything is about you. Remember that."

"Oh, I got it. Nothing is about me. See you in Dallas. Maybe." She turned and tossed her coffee in the trash before packing up and walking out. Kent could take care of the Delilah situation and get her on another assignment, or she'd quit. There had been too many times in her past when life handed her a lemon and forced the fucker down her throat.

This wasn't going to be one of them.

CHAPTER 79



DAMON

Three days later

A growl left him as he paced in front of his fireplace, his house quiet and completely void of warmth. Three days. Three fucking days and nothing from her. Not a peep.

What would be so hard about them apologizing and getting back together? Didn't people in love do just that? You fucked up; you got back together. What the hell? Why was it so different with them? It couldn't be. Things had to work out, and yet they weren't. Not in the slightest.

Delilah had hit on him the entire way back to Dallas, leaving him sick. He didn't want another woman. He wanted his woman. No matter how many sappy-ass stories the pretty blond beside him told, or how hard she worked to remind him how close they'd been as kids, it didn't matter. She wasn't Bethany.

He worked on Tuesday to get Beth off the job for Zarpeth, but his dad killed the idea. He'd spoken with Bethany, and they'd worked out the issue. Kent met with Delilah the day after and talked through her management style. All of it pissed off Damon. It was like being cut from the loop after managing it effectively for the last few years alongside his dad.

It was another strike against the beautiful girl who had his heart. Some part of him was beyond ready to offer her the world if she'd just relent and help him fix things, but it wasn't going to happen. His pride wouldn't allow it.

He dropped down on the couch and leaned back, needing so fucking bad to call her and force her to come over. If he could make love to her, then she could see how much he wanted things to be right between them. A groan left him as images flew by his closed eyes. Them fucking against the wall, on his kitchen table, the bathroom of the plane.

“God, I miss you so much, Beth.” He pressed his palms to his eyes as delicious tendrils of pleasure resurrected in his stomach and forced his body to wake up. Just another night. She would see him again and not the dick head he was forced to play thanks to the overwhelming stress in his life to keep everything afloat. His resolve to be anything but her man was slipping fast, nauseatingly so.

He pulled out his phone and ran through her text messages, the longing inside of him only building faster.

“Shit. How do I fix this?” He pulled up a picture he had of her laughing on the beach in Jamaica. The trip had been so right, so fun, so peaceful, especially Sunday after the wedding. Nothing was better than spending the day testing out her body and hearing her moan. So fucking hot.

“Kendal. Or Matt.” He sat up. He needed help. Matt was a derp with girls by choice, but Kendal, he could help. Damon dialed his old friend without thinking too much more about it.

“Hey, buddy, what’s up?” Kendal answered on the first ring.

“Has Beth come to work for you yet today?” He glanced at the clock to see that it was just past lunch. He couldn’t stay in the office any longer and took the day off after lunch, which didn’t seem like the best of ideas now that he was walking around, stewing in his misery alone.

“No. She’s coming in around three today. Why? Everything okay?”

“No.” Damon got up and grunted. “We’re fighting non-stop.”

“That’s because you forced the relationship too fast, Damon. You asked her to marry you three weeks after meeting

you. What did you expect, man?”

“Right. Fuck you too. I need your help.”

“Oh shit. What do you need me to do? You know I hate getting caught up in drama.”

“I know. I do as well, but I need you to take her to dinner and order some beers. Get her to relax a little.”

“And then... no way am I seducing her Damon. This isn't one of our fucked up college games, right? I'm not into that sharing a girl shit anymore.”

“No. Fuck no. You touch her, and I'll break your face.” Anger burst through his center as he stopped by the back door. Between his raging hard cock and the pulse beating frantically on the side of his head he thought he might blow.

Damn this woman for pushing me over the edge and doing nothing to cause it.

“Good answer.” Kendal sighed loudly. “What do you want me to do? Just get her there and talk about how great you are?”

“Hell no. I hate lies. Just get her there and then I'll show up. I need to see her. We can make it look like you brought us both there.”

“No.”

“Yes. I need you. You've always been my wingman. I love this girl, but can't get over myself to call her. Please. I'll return the favor.”

“I won't need a favor.” Kendal chuckled.

“Yeah, you will. Just help me.”

“I like this girl, Damon. She's a good woman. Don't fuck this up.”

“I'm trying not to do just that. Help me.”

“All right. Vincent's Bar by the Museum of Science. It's far enough from the college that I won't have to deal with running into a million students. Be there at six. I'll get there at five thirty with her, but I'm warning you...”

“No need to warn me. I promise I’ll make things right. I can’t imagine trying to get through another night without her.”

“Fuck me. Maybe it is love. Wouldn’t that be some shit? The biggest whore from our college days finally settles down. I want to be the best man at the wedding.”

“That’s Matt’s job, and I wasn’t the biggest whore. You were.”

“True. I thought I’d try and pawn it off on you, buddy. See you in a bit.”

Damon hung up the phone and pressed his face into his hands. “Please let this work. Please. I’m running on empty with this shit and have fucked it up too many times. Let her see the ‘me’ she needs to see to come back and help me save us.”



A nervousness he hadn’t experienced in a long time bubbled up inside his chest as he pulled the door open to the bar a little while later. Kendal stood by the far end of the bar with a warm smile on his face.

Beth had her back to him, giving him a few minutes to appreciate how beautiful the swell of her ass filled up her jeans. She had plenty to hold on to, and the thought of some man worshiping her body instead of him left him wanting to stop in place and drop to his knees.

One night. He only needed one night with her, and they could be back on track.

“You told him to shred his test? Why?” Her voice reached him, brushing across his skin and leaving his heart racing.

His facade was in place, but he was willing to strip it away the minute he got her alone.

“Because he cheats, and he’s an asshole. He’s not going to make it in accounting. Period.” Kendal glanced over at him

and extended his hand as he approached. “Hey, buddy. Glad you could make it.”

“Yeah, thanks for the invite.” Damon shook his hand and moved to put his arm around Bethany’s shoulders. He leaned down and kissed the side of her head, squeezing a little. “How are you, beautiful? Long week?”

“Yeah. Too long.” She glanced up at him but turned her attention back to Kendal. “You didn’t tell me you invited Damon.”

“I sort of invited myself.” Damon released her and moved to the bar, getting a beer and returning to find Bethany alone. Kendal was far too good of a friend.

“I’m not sure what you’re expecting from me, but-”

“Nothing.” He lifted his finger and pressed it to her lips. “I don’t want anything from you tonight, but for you to have fun. I needed a beer and called Kendal. I have very few friends, and he’s one of them. I asked if I could join you guys. Besides, I wanted to see you.”

He ran his hand down the side of her throat and gripping her lightly. “Fuck, you’re beautiful. I don’t tell you enough.”

She nodded and lifted her beer to her lips. The fire he’d seen over the last three weeks had all but died out. She looked at him like she would Matt, or she was playing it off well.

He released her and took the seat next to her. “So you decided to stay on Zarpeth with us? I’m a little surprised.”

She turned and finished her beer before responding. “I’ve never let anyone push me away from something I wanted. This time is no different.”

“And what do you want, Beth?” He reached out and gripped her hand, pulling her a little closer.

“A solid job and a good future. What most women with a head on their shoulders want.” She tugged her hand free and turned as the bartender stopped beside them. “I’ll take a shot of patron and another beer.”

Damon glanced over at the guy, not surprised to find him eye-fucking Beth. Any man in his right mind would.

“I’ll take a shot as well.” He turned back to her and gripped her belt loop. “You can’t be mad at me forever. You still have my ring. Right?”

“It’s somewhere. I keep forgetting where I’ve laid it seeing that I can’t act like a normal woman who’s supposedly found the love of her life and said yes to his promise of forever.” She was being sarcastic, ugly, bitchy.

“Then wear it when you want to. If someone asks about it, tell them what you think is best.” He pulled her closer. “Maybe I was wrong.”

“Maybe I was.” She glanced down as his heart constricted in his chest.

“No, not at all.” He slipped his hand into her long dark hair and brought her down for a probing kiss that she fought against. Her tight lips were in a tight line, her body stiff and unyielding to his subtle demand. “Open up for me.”

“No.” She pulled back as the liquor showed up. “I can’t.”

“Are we not together anymore, Beth?” He bit his tongue on telling her that as an adult, people usually dealt with childish shit and got over it. She didn’t need any more coaching or training, and he needed her beneath him. She had a few more minutes of him playing a nice guy before he toted her from the bar over his shoulder.

She lifted the shot and handed him his. “To what we should have been.”

He tossed it back and stood up, pulling her to him as he leaned down and pressed his nose to hers. “I’m not the one giving up.”

“I don’t want to give up, but what choice are you leaving me?”

“I’ll change.” He hated himself the minute he said it. It was a lie, and they both knew it. He’d wake up in the morning and decide that there was nothing *to* change. He liked who he

was most days of the week, and would come to resent her if she changed that. "Come home with me."

"And what? Ride your dick until we both pass out from pleasure?"

"Yeah. That sounds about right." He nipped at her aggressively.

She gripped the sides of his neck as her breathing got off. "I hate you right now."

"Then take it out on my body. Don't deny at least one more night before you destroy me."

CHAPTER 80



BETHANY

His hands felt so damn good gripping her tightly as she stood pressed to the front of him. Damn Kendal for setting them up. He had no clue what he'd done. She had worked all week at pulling herself from wanting to fall at his feet like a weak, needy bitch and here he was, in her face, forcing her to beckon to his lust. It was consuming, a fire in the middle of a blizzard. Only a fool would deny the sexy bastard another night trapped beneath him.

“One more night.” She lifted up and pressed her lips to his as the liquor warmed her core, adding fuel to the fire he started the minute she was made aware of his presence. They needed so much more than one more night together, but it didn't seem like it was going to happen.

He hated her. He had to. Maybe it was because she had a bit of power over him, or because she'd forced him to consider a normal future with marriage and god-forbid kids, but either way, he hated her. That was the only logical explanation.

“Come on.” He gripped her hand and turned, half pulling her out of the bar. It reminded her too much of their night on the dance floor at Masquerade when everything began to spiral out of control.

Him hiring Bridget's sister to Lord over her was the straw that broke the camel's back. And why the fuck would he hire Philip to join the Zarpeth team? Was he hoping that she would cheat on him and thereby allow him to break things off and get back to his unattached life?

He handed the valet his ticket and turned, pulling her tightly against him as his strong arms wrapped around her. The smell of his cologne left her dizzy.

“I’m going to remind you how good we are together tonight. If you can walk away from me after what I plan to make you feel... well, fuck it. I deserve to lose the best thing in my world.” He kissed her several times and licked her lips, leaving her legs weak.

“Don’t make this about me leaving, or I’ll go home now. You left me the minute we landed in Dallas from our trip to Jamaica.” He started to protest, but she pressed her fingers to his lips. “No. I don’t want anything from you but your body tonight. That’s all I can handle right now.”

He nodded and moved her hand slowly before leaning in for another kiss. “Then it’s yours.”

Warmth spread through her like electricity as he kissed her deeper, forcing her to open up and let him explore her. She groaned and tightened her grip on his shirt, needing more of him and not wanting to wait until they got back to his place.

“Let me get you home.” Damon opened her door and helped her in before walking to the other side of the car and getting in. He buckled up and reached for her hand, kissing it a few times before starting the car and pulling out into the darkness of night. “You look so good, Beth. Those jeans fit your ass beautifully, baby.”

“Thanks. You look good too.” She leaned her seat back a little and let out a shaky sigh. “I don’t know about this, Damon. We’re so far from where we were just a week ago.”

“No more talking about our fucked up situation. Undo your pants and let me touch you.”

She turned her head to study him, falling in love all over again, though she hated herself for it. “Let’s wait until we-”

“It wasn’t a request, Beth. Do what I said, baby.” He touched the side of her face and licked his lips. “Let me feel you against my fingers.”

She nodded and worked her jeans open before lifting her ass and tugging at them.

“No. Leave them on.” He shifted toward her and slid his hand down her stomach before working his way into her panties.

A shiver raced through her, and she moaned loudly, the liquor forcing her to comply much more than she wanted to. His fingers brushed down the top of her sex and worked to spread her lips, teasing and rubbing softly before pressing lower.

“So fucking silky, Beth. Hot and wet just like I like you.” He rolled the tip of his finger along her entrance before pressing in a little.

“Shit,” she groaned and pressed her hand to his on the outside of her jeans, forcing him to push in farther. Pleasure danced between her thighs as her nipples budded and heart began to race. “Be rough.”

“Anything you want, lover.” He jerked the car over to the side of the road, pulling his hand from her and put it in park. “God, I love you. I don’t care what the fuck is going on with us. I want you so bad.”

He moved halfway into her seat, pressing her to the comfortable leather chair and slipped his other hand into her panties, penetrating her and working two of his fingers deep into her as he brushed her hair back and made love to her mouth.

“Harder,” she whispered, not quite sure where the need to have such violence in their sex was coming from.

“Mmmhmmm,” he grumbled against her neck as he moved down to lick the top of her breasts, his fingers working pure magic against her tight slit.

She arched her back hard as an orgasm burst from her center and dragged her from the edge of depression.

“That’s it, baby. Ride it hard. Don’t let it go.” He kissed her lips softly. “Don’t let me go.”

“I don’t want to.” She gripped him tightly as he petted her wetness and brought her down. “I don’t want to, but I’m not sure how else to make this work.”

“We’ll figure it out together.” He kissed her again and moved back into his seat. He replaced his hand with the other and rubbed her softly as she closed her eyes and tried hard to simply enjoy the pleasure of having his hands on her.



They barely made it into the house before he tore her shirt off of her. She reached for his and returned the favor. Thick muscle shivered under her fingers as she gripped his arms and wrapped her leg over his hip.

“God, you smell so fucking good. Like vanilla and sex.” He gripped her other leg and forced her to wrap her legs around him as he walked them toward the bedroom.

The beer and shots from earlier had fully engulfed her to the point of being drunk. She had little inhibition before, and it was much worse with her state of mind. She lowered herself a little and rubbed against the thickness of his erection.

“I want you inside of me.” She lifted back up, rubbing her nipples over his hardened skin. “Take my bra off.”

“So demanding. I almost like it.” He worked her bra off as she kissed and licked at his neck, pressing her teeth into the soft skin below his ear as he growled, “Be careful. You’ll mark my skin.”

“Good.” She pressed her mouth to his ear as she reached between them to slip her fingers into the top of his slacks and tugged on the meaty head of his cock. “You left an ugly mark on me. Seems only fair that I return the favor.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He popped her ass and dropped her on the bed. “No putting your teeth near anything that matters too much.”

She laughed and stretched out on his bed as a silly smile formed on her lips. “Are we fucking tonight, or are you still

waiting for me to *need* you.” She was throwing punches under the guise of being drunk, but it felt good.

“You already need me. Who else is going to fuck this sexy little body of yours?” He worked her jeans down her legs and snapped her panties off of her as she yelped.

“I can think of lots of guys who would love to try.” She laughed loudly as he rolled her over and pulled at the front of her thighs as they pressed to the bed below.

“And they would die.” He pulled harder. “Hands and knees. Now.”

“I love doggie style. It’s so deep.” She stretched her hands out and pressed her face to the cold sheets as the room spun. Some part of her consciousness screamed for her to stop. Sleeping with him would only confuse things more. It’s what had them in the hot mess they were dealing with in the first place. “We should talk.” She hiccupped and laughed again.

“No more talking, baby. Not tonight.” He pulled at her thighs and pressed his tongue to her wetness as she groaned loudly and spread her legs farther.

“I love it when you do this.” She gripped the sheets as desire for him swelled in her belly. “Touch my ass.”

“There’s my girl.” He licked up the length of her body, taking the time to lavish her ass before pressing his thumb against it. “Fuck yourself, Beth. Take it from me. I’m the only man who’s touching your body. Period.”

“You’re the only one I want.” She pressed back against him as she cried out loudly. Nothing felt better than having him against her, taking her in any way he wanted to. Sex was healing, but what if it was all they had? It couldn’t be. She loved him, and he’d mentioned earlier that night that he loved her.

She came hard against his tongue, and he lapped at her until she pulled away.

“I want your dick.” She gripped the sheets as another wave of white-hot lust ran through her. She’d never been a whore,

and yet with the man behind her, something about the part felt fitting. Like it was right to do so with him.

“I know you do, baby.” He moved off the bed for a second, keeping his hand on her ass, gripping it tightly. He moved back up and rubbed himself against her entrance as she panted softly and pressed back.

“Not yet, Beth. I wanna toy with you a little.” He pressed in and gripped her ass tighter as she yelped in pleasure-pain. “You know you belong to me, right?”

“I know. I hate it, but I know.” She pressed back again and sighed in relief as he gave in to her. The thick press of his body into hers was like coming home, like being welcomed into a place that didn’t belong to anyone but her.

“So fucking beautiful.” He caressed her ass and gripped her hips, rocking forward, massaging her until she shook.

“Slow down. I’m gonna come again.” She slid her hands out in front of her, leaving her ass in the air on full display for him like an offer to him alone.

“I want you to come a few more times. You’re so sloppy wet down there. I love it.” He ran his hands up her back, gripping her sides tightly until he reached her shoulders and pulled, forcing himself the final few inches in.

They moaned in tandem, and she nodded and pressed her teeth into her lip. She was on edge, dangling over the valley of pleasure he offered her.

“I can feel how close you are.” He leaned over and pressed his chest to her back. “Hold the sheets and tell me if I hurt you.”

She whimpered at the promise of carnality. It’s who they were together. If nothing else existed, for tonight, this was enough.

“Take what you want. Brand me,” she whispered and arched her back as he gripped one of her breasts and put some of his weight on her back, fucking her hard and fast until they both dove into wicked-hot depravity. It was a place she didn’t want to resurface from.

Besides, too much waited for them at the surface.

CHAPTER 81



DAMON

He had trouble falling asleep with her beside him for fear if he did, that he would wake up to find her gone again. She slept curled up against him, her breasts heavy and tucked against his side, her lithe arm across his chest, fingers gripping his side as if she were scared too.

“What are we doing, baby?” He kissed the side of her head.

She mumbled something and snuggled in closer as the morning light shone through the window behind him. The smell of their sex stained the air and left him wanting more of her. It wasn't just about the intense pleasure, but about being one, being locked against her and working to bring her to acknowledge that something special existed between the two of them.

Fucking Bridget and every other girl in his past had been about finding release and saying thanks for the ride. It was so different with her.

He brushed her hair back again and let his fingertips trace her eyebrow as he studied her petite features. She could have anything she wanted from him if she would only grow up a little, follow his rules and ask.

Fucking just ask for it. Anything.

She mumbled again and turned over, reaching for the covers. He leaned down and pulled them up before turning on his side and pulling her to rest in front of him. They would be leaving for Florida later that day, but he had another hour or so

that he could stay in bed with her. He contemplated getting up and making her breakfast, but the soft press of her ass against his stomach left him not wanting to go anywhere.

He wrapped his arm around her and kissed the back of her neck a few times.

She took his hand in hers and pressed it to her breasts, beckoning him to massage her.

“You awake, baby?” He brushed his nose down the back of her neck and shifted his hips, pressing the head of his dick against her opening, dipping into her a little.

“Sort of.” She moved her upper body a little away from his and lifted her top leg, moving it back to rest on his. She wanted him.

He moved to his elbow and gripped her top leg just behind her knee before thrusting firmly and filling her up again.

They moaned together as she gripped his wrist and rolled her hips forward, taking ownership of their sex. He worked her for a few minutes, not quite getting the angle he wanted, but unwilling to roll over and pin her to the bed in an awkward position made for the heat of fucking and not sweet lovemaking in the morning.

It was a good sign she was reaching for him at all.

“I love you.” He leaned down and kissed her cheek as he shifted a little and pressed farther into her.

She undulated her hips and worked him without a response. He tried hard not to let it bother him. She loved him too; she had to. Things didn’t change that fast. Or did they?

“Lay back,” she grumbled and rolled over, pulling her body off of his.

“Horny this morning?” He chuckled and reached for her as she crawled on top of him and turned to face his feet. Desire pumped through him as she took his cock into her hands and worked herself down onto it. The position was deliciously wicked, the tightness of her body only accentuated by the angle. She reached behind her and pressed her hands into his

chest as her chin lifted to the ceiling, and long silky strands of hair danced over his stomach.

He reached up to grip a good handful of it and lifted his hips, wanting to give her as much cock as she could handle. That she was in the mood to fuck was a shock. They'd gone at each other half the night. Something inside of him shifted, and he wanted to force her to stop so that he could turn her over and make love to her nice and slow, but she seemed to want something else entirely.

"So good," she mumbled and pulled against the hold on her hair as her moans filled up the room. She rode him like a champ, showing a much more aggressive, wild side of herself than he'd seen before. Where it was a part of her persona he wanted to explore, something told him that a shift had occurred. She wasn't making love to the man she wanted beside her for life. She was fucking a stiff dick. Nothing else.

He gripped her hair tighter as the thought brought anger racing through him.

"Give me more." She swatted at his balls as he grunted. The sensation sent a tendril of pain shooting through him.

"You bet." He flipped them and pressed her to the bed on her stomach before moving to his knees and fucking her deep and hard. "Like this? This what you were after?"

Her laughter caused his libido to die. She moved to her elbows, looking like a goddess in his bed. "Sex. It's all about the sex with you. Life is just one big huge fuck, isn't it?"

He rolled off the bed and walked toward the shower. What the fuck was that? He'd reacted to whatever she was doing. He glanced back to see her flop back and laugh loudly again.

"He wants me... he wants me not."

Despair filled him as he closed the door and started the shower. Who was she? Where along the short journey had he lost her? He wasn't sure of the when, but it had happened nevertheless.

She had asked for one more night, and they'd shared in six hours of making love to each other in ways that would forever

stain him, but in the early light of morning, everything changed. She had changed.

He wasn't surprised to see her gone and a note left on the counter for him when he walked back out.

There was no reason to open it. He already knew what it would say.

Her engagement ring sitting next to it spoke volumes.

They were done. Over.

Love wasn't enough.

It was naive to think it would be.

CHAPTER 82



BETHANY

“Turn to page eleven, and you’ll see our final report on the inventory system implementation for Zarpeth. As a member of the team, each of you needs to read through the document and sign off on the documentation. It’s simply a summation of your work and our recommendations to Mr. Talling.” Damon glanced around the room.

He stood at the front of the conference room, Delilah beside him, looking like the angel she wasn’t. The woman was stunning and stood far too close to Damon’s side for Bethany’s liking, but there was nothing she could do about it. Damon should have shifted over or made it more obvious that he was uncomfortable with her closeness, but he didn’t.

He continued to plow through the meeting agenda and barked his commands at any and everyone around the table. Something had to be going on between the two of them. Sex? Maybe, but there was no way to know for sure.

Bile rose up in Bethany’s throat at the idea of him sleeping with anyone but her. The memory of making love a few weeks back ripped through her mind’s eye, weakening her. She’d been a total bitch that night to prove a point, and it had worked. He hadn’t said more than two words to her over the last few weeks. What did she expect? She’d hit him where it hurt the most... in the bedroom.

Bethany glanced down at the packet and flipped to page eleven, working hard to scan the page and getting nowhere. Her thoughts were scattered, her heart broken into a million pieces.

She ran her finger across the page, blinking a few times to try and refocus. She didn't belong there. Delilah had made that more than clear over the last three weeks. The new senior manager at McKenzie and Bryant didn't seem to give a shit that Bethany was Kent's daughter. No one on the team seemed willing to go up against the bitchy blond, and Bethany refused to take the situation to Damon. He already knew all of it from what she gathered.

"There were several reports that we received that were hard to decipher." Delilah brushed her long blond hair over her narrow shoulder and glanced around the room. "I didn't include those findings in the report for obvious reasons. If you want to see me after the meeting, Bethany, I can explain where you went wrong."

Bethany glanced up, her neck and throat warmed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry? What was wrong with the report?"

"You and Delilah can discuss that when we're done here." Damon turned his dark gaze on her, leaving her to feel even more disconnected.

She glanced down without another word and swallowed the hot ball of regret lodged in her throat. She'd asked her mother to marry Kent so that she could get some help paying for her master's. Never in a million years had she expected the proposition to be loaded with the requirement to work at M&B as part of the deal.

You got what you bargained for. This is ultimately all your fault.

"Any other questions?" Damon asked the group that sat quietly.

Bethany glanced up at him, needing to see something in him that reminded her why she still loved him. She'd spent more time crying to Matt and Kendal than she wanted to recall. Both of them wanted her to fight for her relationship with Damon, but of course they did. They cared about the bastard almost as much as she did.

The conversation with Kendal the day before in the parking lot at UT rolled through her mind, choking her with indecision.

“Ask your question. Get it off your chest.” Kendal took a step toward Bethany, his green eyes filled with so many emotions. She knew he had too much of his own shit going on to deal with hers, but couldn’t help but dig for anything she could get on Damon.

“How is he?” She pursed her lips and glanced down at the ground as another wave of pain shook her shoulders. There would be no holding herself together with him still in her life. She had to make the decision to fight for him or turn around and walk.

“He’s torn in half. He’s devastated and has sunk down into being the bastard we both hoped he would never be again.” Kendal reached out and pressed his fingers softly under her chin to force her to look up. “If you’re angry, hurt, lonely, curious... if you care at all - go find him and tell him.”

“I can’t, Kendal.” She closed her eyes, not wanting him to see how destroyed she was from losing him.

“Then lose him. It’s your choice.” He released her and walked around her to his car.

His words and actions were heartless, but he was simply goading her to do something before it was too late.

“All right. Get busy. No one is leaving before ten tonight.” Delilah clapped her hands and walked toward Bethany. “If you’ll hang behind, we can talk about your report.”

Bethany glanced up into the other woman’s eyes and forced a tight smile. “I’d love to, but I have class in an hour. Maybe another time?”

Delilah snorted and closed the door to the empty room. It would seem that Damon and everyone else high-tailed it out of the meeting as quickly as possible.

Bethany let out a soft sigh and stood up, turning around to face the bitch who'd been riding her tail for the last few weeks.

"I'm not sure if you and Kent have spoken, but I did pull him aside earlier this week just to let him know of the concerns I have with your performance."

"Oh yeah?" Bethany put her hand on her hip and cocked her head to the side as anger burned through the center of her chest. "And what exactly are your concerns?"

"Firstly, you show up when you want to." She lifted her fingers into the air, ticking off one thing after the other. "You leave when you want. You get the assignments you want. You're getting privileges that no one else is." She laughed obnoxiously loud. "Hell, you get better privileges than Damon, Kent's flesh and blood."

"And what did Mr. Bryant have to say about your concerns?" Bethany reached down and picked up her bag, trying hard to keep her cool. She was the youngest on the team and the low-man on the totem pole. She might have a nice office on the top floor, but she was still going to have to work her way up to earn the spot that went with the office space.

"Your report for the meeting today was short and didn't have nearly enough detail to include your findings in the group summary." Delilah crossed her arms over her chest. "So basically all the work you did is null and void seeing that you didn't document it properly. Bravo. Great job. I'm sure your father and your brother appreciate you spending their time and money to do a piss poor job that a guy off the street could do."

The need to realign her nose raced through Bethany, but she pushed it down. It would be seen as childish and cause more problems than it was worth.

"My documentation was in perfect alignment with what was asked of me. My senior, Patrick, actually pulled me aside to compliment the thoroughness of my work, so I think you might have lost a few documents in the mess you call your desk." She picked up her bag and walked toward the door. "But don't bother with looking for them. I'm putting in my

notice today. I don't need this shit, and I most certainly don't need to work for someone that casually loses the top button of her shirt no matter which outfit she has on. It's inappropriate, and you look like a slut." Bethany shrugged as Delilah let out an angry sound. "I'll make sure I explain that to my *father* when we talk tonight about the reasons behind me feeling bullied at his firm. Have a great day, and here. You still need these."

Bethany tossed the bitch a small container of breath mints and walked out into the hallway. After a quick stop by her office to gather her personal things, she walked to the elevator with her head held high.

She and Damon weren't getting back together because she wasn't willing to bend to his rules nor his demands. She'd made a huge mistake in so many ways over the last few months, but it all started with a selfish request.

"I should have never asked my mother to trade in her freedom for mine." She pressed the button for the first floor and moved to the back of the elevator as a torrent of emotion pumped through her.

She got what she deserved, and her lesson was learned.

Now it was simply time to unwind all that which she'd laid in place.

"Time to make things right." She walked out of the elevator and didn't glance back once. The past was the past, and Damon belonged right there with every other mistake she'd made. She pulled out her phone and called Philip. He was the only friend she had in her life that didn't have a direct connection with Damon. Calling on Kendal or Matt would have been asinine.

"Hey. Where are you? There's a buzz up here that you quit." Philip sounded a little out of breath.

"I did. Are you busy in a little while? I need a drinking buddy."

"You asking me on a date?" He snorted. "I thought you were sold out for the big guy."

“If you’re busy, then never mind.” She closed her eyes and regretted calling. It wasn’t a date at all. It was a desperate cry for a friend. Hers were either tied to Damon, in jail or trying to learn to walk again.

“No. No. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have teased you. I’ll pick you up at eight. Just give me the address.”

“All right. See you then.” She hung up and texted him the address. Nothing would happen between them because he wasn’t Damon.

No one was.



“Bethany? That you?” Martha’s voice was comforting in ways that didn’t make sense, but Bethany was willing to take anything she could get.

“Yeah,” she called out to the Bryants’ cook and maid. “I just came by to talk with Kent for a little while.”

“He’s out back, working on his golf swing. Take the stairs beside the pool down to the grass, and you’ll see him.” The older woman laughed as she stuck her head out of the kitchen. “Or just follow the sound of cursing. His swing is off today, and he’s not too happy about it.”

“Thanks.” Bethany glanced over toward Martha and paused as she stepped out of the kitchen.

“What’s the matter? You look like someone died.” She ran her hands over Bethany’s shoulders, squeezing softly. “You okay?”

“No.” Bethany glanced down. “I quit today.”

“Quit what?” The look of shock on Martha’s face didn’t help the sickness playing around in the pit of Bethany’s stomach.

“The firm. I can’t do it anymore.” She shrugged. “Let me go talk to Kent, and we’ll catch up when I’m done.”

“All right, child. I’m here for you.” She pulled Bethany into a warm hug. “Just don’t make decisions in haste. There is nothing good that can come of that.”

“I know.” Bethany squeezed the older woman once more and pulled from her arms. “Thanks.”

“Anytime. I’m making lasagna for dinner tonight if you want to stay,” she called after Bethany.

“We’ll see.” Beth walked out onto the patio and paused, closing her eyes and letting the coolness of the fall weather roll over her exposed arms. She was still dressed in her business casual attire, but it felt more appropriate seeing the conversation that was soon to take place.

“Dammit to hell!” Kent’s voice rose up from the side of the house, and Bethany let out a slow exhale. He wasn’t just her boss. He was her new father, and he’d made a lot of promises to her as his new daughter. He’d kept every one of them, and where she needed to have a conversation with her *dad* that night, she needed the first one to be with her boss. Hopefully he would understand.

“Kent?” She walked down the stairs beside the pool and stopped a few feet from him as he turned. A big smile lifted his lips.

“There’s my beautiful girl.” He turned and walked toward her, pulling her into a hug. “Damon called and said that you left the office upset.”

“I’m not sure how he knew that, but it’s been a rough day.” She leaned into the hug, enjoying the warmth of his connection. “Can I talk to my boss for a few minutes and then my dad?”

“Of course, kiddo. Or, you could just talk to your dad.” He took a step back and reached out to cup her face. “You’re hurting.”

Beth pressed her teeth into her lip and shifted her eyes toward the dark blue sky. She nodded, unable to get anything out for a moment. Tears burned her gaze, and she couldn’t help but wonder how many more tears she would have to cry.

It was a fucked up mistake to ask for help in the way she did. Everything that had gone wrong in her life felt somehow connected to that moment she asked for help.

“I quit today. I can’t work for M&B.” She lowered her chin, letting her tears fall onto her cheeks. “If that means you can’t help me with my master’s program, then I’ll get a loan. I know that was part of the deal, but me being there is toxic for the team, and it’s hurting Damon. I can’t do it anymore.”

“I’d never take a gift away from you, Bethany.” Kent brushed a few more of her tears away. “If you don’t want to work at the firm, I’m perfectly fine with that. Of course I want you there with us, but I know things aren’t as they should be between you and Damon. We’re family before anything else. I want to see you two reconcile if it’s at all possible.”

“I don’t know what’s possible, to be honest with you.”

“Stay for dinner and let’s talk about all of this. The three of us. You, me and him.”

“No. I can’t. I’m heading back to campus. My apartment is still mine.” She moved back and brushed the rest of her tears away. “I don’t want to get into the details of why I quit. I just need you to know that if you want to take back the funding for my-”

“No. I want you to know that it’s yours no matter what happens, okay?” He reached out and cupped her cheek. “I’m not going to let this go without looking into it. I hope you understand that. If something is wrong with my firm, then I have to fix it.”

“I know, but I think you’ll find that the only thing that was wrong with it is now gone.” She cupped her hand over his. “I need to go. Thank you for being here for me.”

“I always will be.”

She pulled back and turned to walk back up onto the patio.

“And Bethany.”

The look of worry on his face left her wanting to scurry away so she could cry in peace. Why was it that when she was

in pain and someone was kind to her, it broke her down fast?

“Yes?”

“You’re not the thing that’s wrong with the firm. Don’t believe your own lies, kiddo. They’ll do nothing but destroy the truths.”

She nodded and jogged up the stairs, avoiding the kitchen and walking out to the front of the house to her car before anyone could see her.

There was no changing her mind.

Her quitting M&B was final.

No matter what.

CHAPTER 83



DAMON

The meeting had been short, which was good, but fuck if he didn't have a million things to say to the beautiful brunette that stole his heart. His pride kept his tongue tied up as he walked out of the room and took a sharp right to walk back to his office.

Delilah was upset about Bethany's report she'd turned in, but he'd yet to see it. After he checked his messages, he would ask his new senior manager to produce Beth's report so that he could check it out himself. It was a coaching moment that he could have with Beth if nothing else.

"Damon." Delilah stuck her head in the room, her blue eyes a little wide as if she were scared.

"What? Make it quick," he barked, glancing up from a pile of papers on his desk. She was beautiful and reminded him of a better version of Bridget, but she was the past. He couldn't even force the feeling that something might happen between them. It wouldn't happen now like it didn't when they were younger. He was unfortunately lost to everyone thanks to Beth. The hope that fluttered around his chest every time he saw Beth was enough to leave him cynical and sickened.

With neither of them bending, nothing was going to change.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but I think Bethany just quit." She crossed her arms over her chest and shrugged, trying hard to look nonchalant. "It's better this way. She's sensitive and young and honestly, isn't doing the work."

“That’s not what Patrick or Ben had to say about Bethany’s output.” He stood up as anger burned through the center of his chest. Had Delilah attacked Beth? Her methods of calling the girl out in the middle of the meeting were unprofessional.

“Yes, well, they’re men. They’re obviously attracted to her.”

Damon snorted and walked around his desk as he narrowed his eyes on the woman. “I don’t think it had a damn thing to do with them being men. What exactly did you hope to gain today by calling her out in front of the team? I’m sure that dropped morale for everyone, not just her.”

“I wasn’t being a bitch. I wanted everyone to understand that it’s important to pull your own weight. Period.” She reached out and pressed her fingers into his chest. “Stop being so sensitive about her. She doesn’t have you wrapped around her finger too, does she? Just because she’s your step-sister, she gets privileges that no one else gets.”

Damon brushed her hand from his chest. “She’s a good employee and the youngest member of our team. Your intimidation tactics better not be behind her walking out of here today. It’s unacceptable, and you’re smarter than this. Playing with fire only gets you burned, Delilah.”

“Damon. I didn’t-”

“Save it.” He turned and walked out of his office toward Beth’s. He paused at the door to see that most of her personal things were gone. “Fuck.”

The last thing in the world he wanted was for her to keep losing bits and pieces of herself. They were headed in two different directions, and the hope of them ever coming back together was growing more and more slim, but he still loved her with every ounce of his heart.

Walking to the tall windows that ran from the floor to the ceiling, he pressed his hand against it and glanced down. Burnt orange and red leaves blew all over the front walkway of the building as the sun set in the far end of the sky. His heart constricted in his chest as the door opened, and she walked out

holding a box. He was high up, but he could tell it was her by the color of her hair and the way she held herself.

“Boss?” Ben’s voice surprised him.

Damon glanced over his shoulder and forced his facade into place. “What?”

“You all right?” Ben walked into the office, glancing around as if the poor guy thought a bomb might go off any minute.

“No, I’m not.” Damon turned and ran his fingers through his hair. “Bethany just quit.”

“Oh shit.” Ben crossed his arms over his chest. “Why? What happened? Because of Delilah calling her out in the meeting?”

“Among other things, I guess.” Damon walked over to Beth’s chair and sat down, letting his eyes scan the various scraps of paper on her desk. A small white wrapper from a fortune cookie was taped to the edge of her desk from one of their many dates.

Life will be filled with adventure.

On the end of the saying, there was a small hand scribbled ‘in bed.’

Damon smiled as sadness filled him. He’d written the ‘in bed’ as he teased her that all fortunes from a fortune cookie had to have that ending. It made more sense that way.

The memory of their last time together in bed flashed in front of his eyes. She’d been angry that morning and had done a good job of showing him. He hadn’t felt used like that since his freshman year of college. Those were memories best left dead. He’d become a raging whore that used women like dishtowels after that.

“I’ll talk to her, Damon. She’s too good to lose.” Ben walked the rest of the way into the office and sat down in an empty chair.

“No. I’ll talk to her tonight. We’re having family dinner at my dad’s house.” He brushed his fingers by his lips. “I just

spoke with Delilah and she insinuated that you and Patrick gave Beth a good review because she's a beautiful woman, and well, you're a man."

"What?" Ben's face grew red as his eyes widened. "That's bullshit. Bethany is beautiful, yes, but she's brilliant and fast as heck, Damon. I told you that already."

"I figured as much." He glanced down. "I'm going to document the situation and our conversation, as well as mine and Delilah's. My father hiring her was a mistake. I wish he'd have mentioned it before he signed the paperwork with her."

"No shit." Ben rolled his eyes. "How dare she say that about Patrick and me? She's been a total bitch to Bethany. We've all been tiptoeing around her just to keep the peace, but I was coming in today to tell you that it has to stop. I can't tell her to back the hell off, but you can. She's my boss for God's sake."

"I'll take care of it. Don't worry."

Linda stuck her head into the office. "Mr. Bryant, Mr. Talling from Zarpeth is on line one. I told him that I would have you call him back, but he's pretty insistent on talking with you."

"Now what?" Damon stood up and slipped his hands into his pants pockets before walking out of Beth's office and back down to his. The smell of her perfume clung to him, leaving him wanting to reminisce on all the good times they had before everything went to hell in a hand basket.

Damon closed the door behind him and dropped down into his chair. He reached over and pressed the speaker phone button.

"James. Tell me you have some good news. This fucking day is making me want to break open the oldest bottle of brandy I have and drink myself into oblivion." He closed his eyes, praying like hell that James wasn't about to deliver more bad news.

Beth walking out of the firm on the pretense of quitting was not only a horrid situation for him personally, but he

would be facing one fucked up shit-storm when he got to his father's that evening. Beth was family and no one treated family like it would appear that he treated Beth.

“Hey man. I read over the audit reports and the recommendations. We're going to rebuild the inventory system using the programs you've noted here. I hired a new general manager for the Florida plant earlier this week. He's on the ball and will give you a call later this week. Thank you for all of your hard work. You're an invaluable member of our team here.”

Damon let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. “Excellent. Don't call me a member of your team, old friend. I'm your auditor. You know that doesn't work too well for objectivity.”

James chuckled. “On an even better note, my wife and I are going to work things out. I took your advice. I hired a few key people to help me run the office so that I could pull back and try working only fifty hours a week, and it's working. I'm at home at night with her and the boys. We make dinner together, do the kids' homework together, put them to bed and spend time talking about our day. It's bliss, man. I didn't realize how simple of a shift it would be. I wanted to thank you for the conversation on the golf course. It changed everything.”

Damon sat up in his chair as warmth filled his chest. “So love is enough?”

“Yeah, man. Love shown and spoken. People don't know you love them unless you show them. Unless you tell them. You know what I mean?”

“That's great, James. I'm thrilled to hear that.” Damon stood and walked to his windows, putting his forehead against the chilled glass. “And all of the bad blood between you and Dana is gone? All it took was for you to make a few sacrifices that showed her that she was number one in your life?”

“Yes. I'm sure we're still going to fight and have issues like every married couple in the world, but we're going to work through it. I just can't imagine being at the end of my

life and everyone talking about what a great businessman I was. I want to be known for being a great father and a fantastic husband. I want Dana crippled by my death, not relieved because of it. I want us to mean everything to each other.”

“That’s awesome. I’m not sure there’s anything left to work through for me and my girl. We aren’t even talking anymore.” He let out a short sigh. He’d not shared his heart with anyone but Matt and Kendal, nor did he want to. It would seem his wants were irrelevant at the moment. Hearing of James’ good news left Damon wanting to analyze his friend’s every step to winning Dana back.

“You still love her?”

“With every part of me. I hate thinking that my life is going to go on without her in it. It’s like getting the winning ticket to the lottery and never getting to cash in. She’s everything I want, James. My fucking pride won’t let me apologize for something I didn’t do.”

“Then you better hope your pride keeps you warm at night, Damon.”

“Fuck you too, old friend.”

James laughed. “Tell your father my check is in the mail for your services.”

“I will. I’m glad you called. Congrats on working things out with Dana.”

“Thanks. Now it’s your turn. If you love her, you’re an idiot for letting her go. Love is fickle and doesn’t show up very often. Go after her with the same passion and drive that caused you to win her over in the first place.”

Damon moved back from the window and nodded. “Right. Talk to you soon, James.”

They hung up, and Damon paced the floor, trying hard to think through why Bethany fell for him in the first place.

Passion. Aggression. Lust.

Everything changed so damn fast. All of those things only seemed to agitate her now, so going back to the beginning and

using the tools he'd used to win her for the first time was the quickest way to losing her forever.

“What are you doing, baby?” He glanced out the window and took a shaky breath. “Why did you quit today? Another way to separate yourself from me? To run farther from me?”

He gathered up his things and tugged his bag over his shoulder. Patrick was pacing the hall outside of his office when he stepped out.

“Boss. There is no way in hell I would ever give someone a good review unless they did a good job. I'm the most ethical guy I know. Ask anyone. I'm a total stickler for the rules. Bethany could be the hottest thing on the planet, and if she sucked as an auditor, you'd know it. No way would I-”

“Hey.” Damon reached out and clamped his hand down on Patrick's shoulder. “I know this. It's all good. I had to vet the information that was thrown at me. We're good, okay?”

Patrick let out a long sigh and pressed his hands to his knees. “I hate this new chick, boss. She's a bitch. I hate to say that seeing that she could fire me on the spot, but she's not right. She's been after Bethany since she got on the team. I think she hates the fact that Bethany is your step-sister.”

Damon tried hard not to cringe at the fact that everyone would soon know that Beth was family. It was hard enough trying to keep the fact that they were engaged from the prying eyes of everyone at the firm, but now them knowing that she was family only added another layer of concern.

We're not engaged anymore. She gave me the ring back.

“I'll work it out. Thanks for your hard work this week.” Damon patted the kid on the back before walking out of the tall skyscraper they occupied several floors of. He called out to the house to see if there was anything he could pick up for dinner. He was glad that Martha answered the phone and not someone else.

“No. Just come on out. I have a hot and cheesy lasagna coming out of the oven in fifteen minutes. Matt's already here, but Bethany just left. You're going to have to eat her portion.”

“What?” Damon unlocked his car and got in. “Why isn’t she staying?”

“I don’t know. She was upset about something. She went to talk with your father and left before I could talk to her again.”

“All right. I’ll call her later. Thanks, Martha.”

Damon started the car and leaned his head back, closing his eyes. “What do you want from me, Beth? What, baby? I miss you so goddamn bad and yet every time I look at you, you turn away in disgust. Do you want me to come after you or leave you alone?”

He shook his head, trying hard not to slip into a dark depression as he pulled out of the parking garage and headed out to his dad’s house. There was no doubt in his mind that his father was going to be upset by Beth quitting. He’d ask why she left and Damon would stand there dumbfounded.

The only answer he could come up with hurt too bad to speak.

She left because of me.

CHAPTER 84



BETHANY

She had to get over her depression. It covered everything in a dark gray tint and left her wanting to sit on the couch and stare at the wall. She could cling to a tight facade of indifference when she was out in front of other people, but when she was at home alone, there was no reason to put forth so much effort.

The *date* with Philip the night before should have been fun. He was a great guy and so incredibly safe for her from a relationship perspective. Sadly enough, all she'd done the whole time was talk about Damon, think about him, cry over him... it was disturbing.

"Stop it," Bethany grumbled angrily as she sat up and tossed her pillow across the room. She'd cried her way through another long night. How long would the pain and sorrow over losing him last? "Forever."

She pulled herself out of bed, using her anger as fuel to push herself through a quick shower. She got dressed in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt before pulling a sweater over the top of her head. A quick brush through her long brown hair and a pair of comfortable winter boots and she was out the door.

It wasn't her usual day to TA, but she knew Kendal could always use the help. He'd not deny her assisting for the day, and anything was better than sitting in the apartment crying all day long.

There was no way he would complain about her outfit either, or at least he never had before. She looked like a

teaching assistant, and if he didn't like it, she'd leave and try again tomorrow. He didn't deserve to catch the brunt of the emotional battle that raged deep inside of her, but if he got in her way and pushed too much, it would spill over no matter how hard she tried to hold it back.

She walked through the halls of the accounting building, avoiding stares and feeling far too exposed though no one knew the baggage she was carrying around.

Pushing the door to the auditorium open, she half expected to find Kendal already working. The room smelled of stale books and mothballs, and for some reason, the thought caused her to smile. She took a seat on the front row and glanced up as the door opened.

Kendal looked incredible in his blue slacks and oxford sweater. He was a preppy bastard but did it well. How he and Damon were so close was a mystery to her, but somehow it brought her a little bit of comfort knowing that someone as good as Kendal was watching out for her man.

"Bethany." He stopped at the opening to the large auditorium.

"Hey, Dr. Tarrington." She went for casual, though there was something about him that made her want to open up and share her hurts - her heart.

He closed the door behind him and paused, giving her an odd look. She couldn't help but wonder what he was thinking.

"It's not Tuesday, right? I don't have my days mixed up, do I?" He smiled and moved up to take the seat beside her.

"No. I just wanted to stop by to see you." She glanced down at her hands and let out a shaky breath. "I went on a date last night with Philip."

Kendal's eyes grew wide. "All right." He leaned back in his chair and dropped his hands into his lap.

"And all I could think about was Damon." She pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head. "He's not the right man for me, Kendal. I know he's not, but I can't get him out of my head. It's driving me insane."

“Love does that.” He clasped his hands together. “Bethany, you didn’t, you know...”

She glanced up, her expression tight. “Didn’t what? Tell Damon? Hell no. He would kill Philip with his bare hands.”

“No, you didn’t sleep with this guy, right?”

“With Philip?” She rolled her eyes. There was no way in hell she would sleep with anyone for a long time. It wasn’t fair to them or her.

“Thank God.” He stood up and walked toward the stage. “He wouldn’t forgive that.”

“I know that. I wouldn’t forgive it either. We might be on a break, but he still belongs to me.” Did she really believe that? No, not really. It would seem things were winding down, but some part of her still wanted to hold on to hope, to dig her fingernails deep into it and not give up.

“And he believes that you still belong to him.” He turned to face her. “He didn’t hire Delilah. Kent did.”

“How do you know that?” Damon had already mentioned it, but she wasn’t sure what to believe anymore. Either way, he’d lied about it. Not mentioning it was the same as lying.

“We played golf together on Saturday, and I asked him.”

“Was he angry about your asking? Did you tell him it was for me?”

“No, because it wasn’t for you. I wasn’t even sure I was going to tell you what I found out.” He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “You two are acting like fucking children over this thing, Bethany. You’re not a young girl looking for your prince charming, and he’s not a broken soul who can find healing in anyone but himself. You can’t make each other complete.”

“Says who?” She took a few steps toward him and pressed her fingers into his chest. Who the hell did he think he was? Where was the Kendal she had come to know? “Love has the power to do anything it wants to do.”

“And what does it want to do, Bethany? Save you both?”

“I don’t know, but I can’t hold on too much longer.” She pressed her free hand to her chest as her face crumbled. “I’m hurting so bad right here. It feels like someone has a fucking vise grip around my heart and I need him so badly.”

“Then go to him. Let him hold you and remind you how much he loves you. Stop fighting this shit and embrace it.”

“Then he wins.” She pushed at Kendal’s chest as an ugly cry left her. “If he wins he’ll never respect me for who I am.”

“You don’t know that.” He gripped her hand tightly and pulled her toward him. He turned his full attention on her. “Stop speaking for everyone around you. You don’t know what he has to say about his feelings for you or the reason he hired Philip. Maybe that was to show you that he trusted you to make the right decisions, but you’re not doing that.”

“I’m not a fucking puppet.” She pulled her hand from his and walked toward the door. “Your class roster is on your desk. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bethany, go talk to him. I can’t solve this for you guys.”

“I wasn’t asking you to.” She paused by the door and glanced over her shoulder. “What would you do for love? Would you give up your rights and become whatever your lover wanted you to?”

“Is he asking that of you or are you forcing yourself to believe a lie to stay protected from possibly the greatest thing you might experience in this life.” His gaze darkened. He was pushing at her, and she knew it.

“Would you change everything, Kendal? That was the question.”

He pulled his phone from his pocket and glanced down as his expression changed.

“Yes. I would change everything for the kind of love that promised to sustain me through loss and death, through fear and loneliness. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t give up for that.”

“Not even your rules?” Her eyebrow lifted. She had him.

“Perhaps that’s the only thing.” He smirked and shook his head. “Get out of here and go mend what you’ve almost let get broken. It’s not worth all that, and if I stand correct, neither you nor Damon have rules.”

“Thank God for that.” She patted the door and mumbled her thanks before walking out. Jake turned the corner and waved as he moved into the auditorium.

Good. Kendal needed someone with him. He was struggling with something that he wasn’t going to talk about obviously.

Bethany glanced down the hall to her left after holding the door for Jake. Someone that looked a lot like Damon walked toward the exit at the far end of the building. The guy hit the door hard as he walked out into the mid-day sunlight.

“Damon?” she whispered but stood frozen in place. It took a minute, but before she could stop herself, she was jogging after him. It had to be him. No one looked that good from behind in a pair of slacks. Was he spying on her or coming to see Kendal?

She paused as a large group of students walked toward her, forcing her to turn to the side to slip through them. By the time she made it outside, he was nowhere to be found. She pulled her phone from her pocket and glanced down at it expectantly as if he were going to call. He hadn’t called for weeks.

After taking a few more minutes to ensure that he wasn’t close, she walked around the accounting building toward the parking lot. Kendal stood beside his car with a dark-haired girl. Something was wrong, but it wasn’t Bethany’s place to interrupt whatever it was.

Was Kendal seeing the girl? The passion on his handsome face said that he was. There was something else there too... Fear. Loss. Terror.

“What the hell?” Bethany walked toward her car and tried to ignore the burning need to turn around and help him. She dialed Damon’s number, not wanting to bother him, but

needing to inform him that something was up with Kendal. It was his place to check on his friend, not hers.

“Beth?” Damon’s voice was raspy as if he’d been yelling all night. Her first thought was that maybe he’d gone to a ballgame and had a good time, but that quickly morphed into him groaning and moaning with Delilah instead.

“Something is wrong with Kendal.”

“Yeah, he’s interested in the wrong woman,” Damon barked into the phone, his voice gaining strength.

“I didn’t know he was seeing anyone.” She glanced over her shoulder to see the woman crying. “Something is wrong. Like, really wrong. I don’t know what it is, but you need to call him.”

“You go comfort him, Beth. You seem to be comfortable doing that already.” The phone clicked, and Bethany pulled it away from her ear, surprised by his accusation.

Did he think something was up with her and Kendal? No fucking way.

“What?” She growled and got into her car. After buckling up and starting the engine, she called Matt and explained the situation. He promised to call Kendal and deal with Damon. Whatever was going on, Kendal needed Damon with him. He looked like he’d seen a ghost.

“And why the hell would he run out of class when it was just about to start?” She pulled away from the curb before pausing. If Kendal left and his class walked, he’d be in trouble. Was he leaving?

She pulled back up, put the car in park and got out. The phone buzzed, and she checked it, almost expecting it to be Damon.

“Philip. What’s going on?” She got out of the car and jogged back toward the school, trying not to sound like she was out of breath. Her worry over Kendal mixed with the concern that Damon thought something was up with her and his best friend left her heart racing.

“Just calling to see if you want to grab coffee later. I had fun last night. I want to see you again.”

“Uh, yeah. Sure. I’ll call you when I get out of class.”

“It’s Wednesday. You don’t teach on Wednesday do you?”

“No, but something came up. I’ll call you later.” She dropped the call and walked back into the building, almost plowing into Jake.

“Hey. Kendal needs someone to take over his class. I was going to tell the dean.” Jake shook his head as if he were upset.

“No, it’s okay. I’ll do it.” She smiled and opened the door. “Come give me some moral support.”

“Always.” He chuckled.

The sound of the class having a good time reached her as she pushed open the doors and walked up to the podium.

“Good morning, everyone. Dr. Tarrington is dealing with something at the moment, so I’ll start us off, and he can take over when he joins us.”

There was a soft cheer around the room as Bethany forced a chuckle and turned on the computer. “Get out your accounting books and turn to page twenty-eight. Just-in-time inventory is our topic today. Get excited. This is riveting stuff.”

Another chuckle.

She smiled and forced her worry and angst deep down inside of her. “What? You know you love it. Let’s get started.”

CHAPTER 85



DAMON

“Unbelievable.” Damon tossed his cell phone into the seat beside him. Never in a million years had he seen Kendal Tarrington look at a woman so tenderly. The way he held Beth’s hands in his teaching auditorium left no doubt in Damon’s mind. They were sleeping together. If nothing else, Kendal had feelings for the girl.

The agony of thinking that Beth would turn to someone else for affection was enough to cripple him, but it being his closest friend? Kendal was like a fucking brother.

Sweat gathered at the edge of his brow as memories crowded into his mind, one after one, each more fucked up than the last.

“Stop,” he whispered and closed his eyes tightly as the sound of his mother’s infidelities filled up his mind. How long would he have to carry the burden of knowing what she did? She was gone, and he still carried it around. The dark circle it created on the center of his heart was only growing.

Pressing his hand to his chest, he reached up angrily and pulled down the rearview mirror.

“They’re not together. Neither of them would do that to you. Kendal would sooner die than hurt you.” Damon dropped back in his seat and took a few shallow breaths. How quickly life could unravel him. He hadn’t been emotionally wrecked this badly since the night he found his mom. He’d promised himself that he’d never again let anyone into his heart like he had his mother.

And now Bethany was there, and fuck if Kendal wasn't too.

After calming himself enough to stop shaking, he pulled out of the parking lot at UT and headed to the office. Whatever was going on with Kendal would surface soon. Bethany sounded panicked, but she also had feelings for the guy.

"No she doesn't," Damon barked loudly in the car and pressed the gas, scaring the poor guys walking on the street beside him. The battle raged within him the whole way downtown.

He forced himself to calm down as he parked at the office and walked in languidly. He nodded at the attendant and smiled at a few colleagues as they passed him. He didn't have all of the facts on Bethany and Kendal, and until he did, he was going to give them the benefit of the doubt. Not that Beth would grant him the same treatment, but it was irrelevant. He didn't have to react like she did. He refused to.

"Damon." Linda glanced up and gave him a weary look. It had been a long time since she'd called him anything but Mr. Bryant. "Your father has been waiting on you."

"Great. I'll head down to his office in a few minutes." He nodded to his secretary and walked into his office. After setting his stuff down and checking his calendar, he made his way down to the corner office where his father spent most of his time or used to. He knocked on the door and poked his head in. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yeah. Shut the door and come on in. I didn't want to talk about business last night at dinner with Matt and Karen. Everyone seemed a little edgy with Bethany not being there." Damon's father nodded to the seat across from him. "Take a seat."

"I have a meeting in twenty minutes with the CEO of Killinger. Just want to give you a heads-up." Damon unbuttoned his suit jacket and sat down.

"Where were you this morning? I thought you were having the Killinger meeting at eight."

“I was. I went up to the school for a few minutes. I wanted to see Kendal.”

“And?” His father tilted his head to the side, studying him as he had been doing most of Damon’s life. There was acceptance and love in his gaze, but expectation as well.

“And he and Bethany were knee-deep in conversation. I didn’t want to interrupt, so I left.”

“Interesting.”

“I guess. What do you want to talk about, Dad? Beth?”

“For starters, yes. What the hell happened yesterday?”

“She had her fill of being treated like a child and walked out.” Damon leaned back and crossed his legs. “Did you really think that hiring Delilah was a good move for us?”

“She’s a strong accountant, Damon. I didn’t think the ties you guys had as kids would come to haunt us. She has great references and-”

“And she’s in love with me. She has been since we were kids. She hates her twin because Bridget and I ended up together.” He ran his hand down his face. “Anyway, Delilah has been after Beth since she got here. She knows Beth is your daughter but nothing else. She just doesn’t like competition.”

“Is that causing a stir on the team?” His eyebrows lifted.

“What?”

“Them knowing that Bethany is your step-sister and your fiancée?”

“She gave me the ring back.” Damon reached into his pocket and pulled it out. Fuck him for carrying it around, but he couldn’t help himself.

“What?”

Damon nodded. “We’ve been fighting a lot lately, and she gave the ring back. We’re better family than we are lovers.”

“And you’re okay with that?” His father’s eyes widened a little as he leaned forward and pressed his forearms to the

desk.

“No. Not in the slightest.” Damon stood and walked to the windows, finding comfort in the beautiful park scene just beyond the buildings. “I love her so much it hurts, but love isn’t enough.”

“Damon.” His father walked over to the window and put his hand on Damon’s back. “Love is always enough. Your mother and I had some rough patches, but love pulled us through.”

Sickness raced through the center of Damon’s chest and took up residence in his stomach. “Right. Anyway, Beth is probably better off not working here, but that still doesn’t solve our problem with Delilah. She hit on me yesterday... again. I’m getting quite tired of putting up with the small things just because she’s your pick for the firm.”

“Get rid of her. Find a reason to let her go, and do it.” He turned to face Damon. “And talk to Bethany. Her position with us here at McKenzie and Bryant will always be open.”

“All right.” Damon squeezed his father’s shoulder before walking to the door. It was the perfect time to explain to his dad why love didn’t work. Love was great, but without fantastic sex and loads of money to boot, most women would go looking elsewhere. Why would his mother cheat on his dad? He was a great guy. The house was beautiful; they had everything anyone could want, and yet she slept around like a whore. Why?

Because the sex was bad, or maybe there wasn’t enough of it.

Either way, he had promised himself years before that love, wealth, and sex would be the center of his relationship with a woman. There would be an abundance of all three, and then, and only then, she wouldn’t cheat on him, or leave him stranded.

And yet something was missing with Beth. The money was there. The sex was in extreme abundance, but maybe

James was right. Maybe he wasn't showing his love in the right way.

He almost felt too tired to figure it out, as if it were worth too much effort.

“Son.”

Damon paused at the door and turned back toward his old man. “Yeah?”

“What happened with you and Bethany? You seemed so sure just before the wedding.”

“I don't know, Dad.” He shrugged. “I guess I'm just not enough.”

“I highly doubt that.”

Damon nodded and walked out. There was nothing else to say about it. Beth had chosen her path, and obviously Kendal was supposed to play some part of it. As much as it pained him to think that either of them would hurt him, some sick part of his heart was thrilled to know that she might end up with a good guy like Kendal.

“Mr. Bryant?” The sound of Philip's voice caused Damon's blood to boil. It was a total mistake to hire the kid back on, but it was one he was going to have to live with. He'd fired him under unreasonable circumstances, and HR had been quite clear that hiring him back was the only way to reconcile the situation. The idea that he'd done it for Bethany was only part of the deal.

“Yeah?” Damon walked into his office and dropped down in his chair. “Make it fast. I have ten minutes until I'm on a conference call with a client.”

“I took Bethany out for dinner last night, and the whole time, I kept wishing that she'd see me.” Philip crossed his arms over his chest and shook his head.

Damon blinked a few times, trying to clear the red from his vision. Did the kid have a death wish? And what the fuck was Beth doing? Was she seeing Philip or Kendal, or both of

them? The sheets weren't even cold between the two of them, and she was already dating?

"I'm not sure I understand," Damon bit out between clenched teeth.

"She didn't see me sitting across the table in front of her." He gripped the back of the chair across from Damon's desk. "She was lost in thought or talking about how much she missed you. I know you don't want to hear this, but I was hoping that maybe the dinner might resemble a date because Bethany is such an incredible woman, but it didn't at all. She's heartbroken, and you're the only one that can fix it. She'd kill me if she knew I was standing in here talking to you, but I thought you should know. From the guy that wants to steal your girl pretty damn bad... it's impossible."

Damon nodded but didn't respond. The conversation made little to no sense.

Philip turned and walked out, closing the door behind him as he left.

Confusion swept through Damon in a suffocating wave. He stood and walked to his liquor cabinet. It was mid-morning and yet nothing was going to calm his nerves but a stiff drink.

She loved him, but she didn't?

She wanted him, but she was dating Philip and gazing deep into Kendal's eyes?

"Shit," Damon muttered and lifted his glass to his lips. He paused and closed his eyes, letting the vision of her beautiful face fill his mind. Every cell in his body woke up, all screaming for her attention, her time, her touch. Just simply her.

He tossed back the liquor and groaned low in his chest.

The phone buzzed, and he took his time walking back to his desk. He pressed the speaker button and sat down.

"What's up, Linda?"

"Your call with Mr. Killinger? He's actually waiting on line three."

“Reschedule it for tomorrow. Make something up.” Damon hit the button to drop the call.

Business could be done later. He needed a few minutes to gather his thoughts. Why did every scenario end with Beth cheating on him? Why did he automatically assume that of her?

Closing his eyes, he let his head drop back as the burn of the alcohol warmed up his chest and stomach. A soft groan left him as every wicked hot fantasy he'd had with her when they first met moved behind his closed eyelids. She was so timid and beautiful, smart and sexy as fuck.

He was going to drive himself mad with indecision if he didn't figure something out soon.

Give her up or get her back?

Fucking forget it and move on, or buckle down and do anything it took to win her back.

Life without her didn't make sense. Nothing tasted right or felt nearly as good. The excitement was gone, and a dull sadness had cast a net over the top of every day since she handed the ring back.

If he went after her a few things would have to change. No more assuming the worst about her. No more being terrified that she would go to another man for affection if he didn't smother her in sex.

No more rules. No more demands.

It wasn't lust anymore that forced him to his knees with her.

It was love.

CHAPTER 86



BETHANY

Bethany got to the coffee shop a good forty minutes before she was supposed to meet Philip, but it gave her time to think through how she was going to let him down. The guy was perfect for her, but she wasn't open to thinking about truly dating anyone yet, nor would she be for a long time.

Worry continued to swirl in the pit of her stomach over Kendal. Something was wrong. She'd tried calling Matt several times to see if he figured out what was going on yet, but he wasn't answering.

"Hey, you." Philip's voice caused her to glance up.

His dark blond hair was cut short like he assumed Damon wanted it at M&B. He looked good no matter the length of his hair though. Being from Australia, he not only had his sexy accent going for him but the beautiful golden color of his skin, his great smile, hot body, and sweet personality. He was the full package, but it didn't matter. Someone else would grab him up by the time she healed enough to even consider anything more than a friendship.

She almost preferred it that way.

"Hi." She stood. "I got here a little early. Kendal had to leave because of an emergency or something, so I took on the class by myself today."

"Oh wow. How was that?" He reached out and touched the small of her back, guiding her through a crowd of people toward the front counter. The touch was intimate and caused

chills to run down her spine, warming her and leaving her thoughts racing toward Damon.

How good it would feel to leave her coffee date with Philip and meet him over at his house. They could start a fire and forget everything but each other. Had she really laughed at him the last time they made love?

“It was okay.” She gripped the counter in front of her and lowered her head as the room seemed to pull in tightly.

“Something wrong, Bethany?” Philip rubbed the top of her back and leaned over a little, getting in her face.

“No. Just having trouble breathing. Allergies, I guess.” She sucked in a deep breath and moved back. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” He turned toward the barista and ordered for both of them. He glanced back to her. “Go wait at the table and I’ll bring the coffee over for us.”

“You sure?” she asked softly, not quite having gained the volume back to her voice.

“Absolutely.” He smiled warmly and turned back toward the counter to pay.

She walked back to the only open table in the place and sat down. Pulling out her phone, she thumbed through her texts with Matt and then with Damon, unable to help herself. Why was he so angry when she called about Kendal? His words were accusatory. Surely he hadn’t convinced himself that she was seeing his best friend.

Both she and Kendal would give the heart from their chest for Damon. He had to know that.

“You look quite lost in thought. Anything you care to discuss?” Philip set her coffee down in front of her before taking his seat.

“Not really.” She reached out and wrapped her hands around it. “Did you go into the office today?”

“Yep. I saw Damon too.” He leaned back and let his hands drop into his lap. “He seemed disturbed. Upset.”

“Yeah. I spoke with him a few minutes earlier, and he was pretty ugly.” She shrugged and lifted the mug, blowing on the dark caramel-colored liquid carefully. “I think we’re going to have to go our separate ways for a while until things calm down.”

There was no way she was comfortable believing her own lie, but maybe if she told herself enough times, she’d be able to finally accept that it was over.

“I told him that you and I went out last night.”

“What?” Her voice rose significantly. “You did what? Why?”

“Because I care about you, Bethany. He needs to know that he’s being an asshole, and he’s going to lose you if he doesn’t get up and do something about it.”

Tears blurred her vision. “You told him to help him?”

“Yes.” Philip picked up his coffee mug. “You talk about him nonstop. It’s obvious that your heart still very much belongs to him. Where I hate it, I understand it too.”

“I can’t do this anymore, though. I quit the firm to get away from him. I’m not going to family dinners and I-”

“You quit the firm because you’re hurting and because that bitch Delilah keeps bothering you.” He snorted. “I’m pretty sure Ben and Patrick went to Damon about her, and he went to Kent.”

“Wow. Really?” Bethany took a quick sip of her coffee before setting the cup down. “Did anything happen to her?”

“No clue. I think she’s probably on her last leg. Everyone is saying that she lied to Damon about Patrick and Ben being sweet on you.”

“Sweet on me?” Bethany snorted. “That’s ridiculous.”

“Yep. She’s just a bitch.” Philip shrugged and reached across the table to touch the side of her face. “You’re so much stronger than you think you are. You’re beautiful and smart, and you have everything to offer someone. If you’re done with

Damon Bryant, then give me a chance, but if you're not done, then stop moping about it and go after him."

"Easier said than done." She glanced around the coffee shop as she let out a long sigh. "I feel like if I go back to him and grovel, then he wins. I'm not sure I can live in a world where he thinks he has the right to control me."

"You think that's what he's trying to do?" Something about the way Philip asked forced her to question the belief she'd convinced herself of.

"I don't know. I hate the fact that everything that's happened to us is something he's done or not done and that I can't help but think he meant to do it."

"Or not do it?"

She smiled. "Exactly."

"Maybe you should talk things through with someone close to you so that you can dig deep into whatever is going on."

"My best friend is on trial for attempted murder." She pulled out her phone and checked the date. "Damn. The trial is this Friday. I'd almost convinced myself it was a few more weeks away."

"That sucks, but I know you'll all be glad it's over with." Philip took another drink of his coffee. "You're avoiding my question. You don't just have one friend in the world. Who's another girl you could talk to?"

Bethany thought about it for a second, and her mother popped into her mind. The only hesitation was that her mom didn't like Damon to begin with.

"You got someone?" Philip lifted his eyebrow and gave her a cheeky grin.

"Yeah. You trying to end our date before it starts?" She relaxed a little for the first time in a long time.

"You know this isn't a real date." He smiled. "How many times have you thought about Damon?"

“Not once.” She gave him a sheepish look. “All right. Several.”

“Exactly. Who are you going to talk to about all of this stuff?”

“My mom. I’ll go over to Kent’s when we get done. You’re right. I need to get all of it off my chest.” She picked up her coffee mug and nursed her coffee until it was gone.

Maybe having Philip as a friend and nothing else would work out not only in her favor but Damon’s as well.

How messed up would that be?



“Mom? You here?” Bethany called out as she walked through the kitchen toward the living room.

“In here, baby.”

She turned to walk toward the large master bedroom at the far end of the house. Her mom was standing by the full-length mirror near the bathroom with a pretty white dress hanging in front of her. She turned and smiled.

“What do you think of this? Too much?”

Bethany walked toward her mom and glanced down at the dress. “What’s it for?”

“A dinner party Kent’s having with some of his clients. I’m supposed to be there, but I’ve been begging him to let me out of it.”

“What?” Bethany chuckled and reached for her mom, pulling her into a tight hug. “You’re going to be great there. You always are.”

“I know, but you know how weird I feel around rich people.” She sighed and pulled back. “It’s like I’m still dirt-floor poor and scrambling to rub two nickels together.”

“But you’re not, Mom. You have everything anyone could want.” Bethany moved back and sat on the edge of the bed.

“All I want is a healthy, happy family. As much as I want to kick Damon in the shin, I still care about him.” Her mom laid the dress down on the bed beside her and moved to stand in front of her. “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

Bethany flopped back on the bed and let out a long groan. “I’d rather get back to living my life instead of talking about Damon all the damn time.”

“All right. Then what do you want to talk about instead?” Her mom climbed onto the bed beside her and rolled onto her side. She reached over and pushed Bethany’s hair back. “We can talk about anything you want to.”

Bethany rolled over to face her mom and closed her eyes. “I want to talk about Damon.”

Her mom laughed and pulled her into a hug. “Then talk to me, but let me tell you something you might not want to hear first.”

“Oh great.” Bethany moved back and curled up into the fetal position as she looked up at her mom. The dark circles and worry lines were almost gone. The new life Kent had given her was beyond good for her spirit. Maybe even though asking her to move up the wedding was done with selfish intent, something good came out of it. Her mom was happy.

“I know you and Damon have been going through a lot lately, and I’ve noticed that you’re not wearing your engagement ring. I can put two and two together. I’m not sure what has the two of you walking away from something you seemed so bold about only a month or so ago, but I think you’d better stop running for a minute and really think about what you’re giving up.”

“I thought you didn’t like him, Mom.” Bethany rolled on her back and sat up.

“I love him as a part of my family now, Beth. I’m not thrilled with the way he acts, or his cocky attitude, but it’s part of his charm from what you’ve said.”

“It is.” She brushed her fingers by her lips. “He hired his ex-girlfriend’s twin sister and Philip back to the firm. Why? Is

he trying to tear us apart? This woman is a raging bitch. She's been nothing but horrible to me."

"Is she the reason you quit? You've never quit anything in your whole life."

"Partially. I can't be there and walk around him every day like he doesn't exist." She turned to face her mom. "It hurts too much."

"You know, it took me a year to finally tell Kent that I would have a glass of wine with him. He would come into the bank where I worked and would try to get my attention all the time. But my mindset wouldn't let him be anything but a villain."

"What? I don't understand." Bethany pressed her elbows to her knees and held her chin in her hands. She and her mother hadn't talked much about how she'd met Kent. It seemed to happen fast from Bethany's perspective, but maybe she didn't know the full story.

"I was the victim, Beth. Your father ruined my life and ripped away my hope for a future with a solid family like I thought we were." She sat up and wrapped her arms around herself. "Everything Kent did or said, I would analyze it. Was he up to something? Trying to pull one over on me?"

"No. He's a good guy, Mom."

"And so are his sons, baby." She reached out and brushed her knuckles softly down Bethany's cheek. "You're not a victim. Damon isn't out to get you. He isn't trying to undermine you or pull something over your head. He's an ass sometimes because he's a cocky alpha male, but that's a good thing too, right? You like that about him."

"I love it." Beth glanced down at her hands. "I've never thought of myself as a victim."

"Your dad walked out on both of us. You might not have given it a name, Beth, but you've treated Damon and every other guy in your life like there's something behind their smile. You do that because, like me, you feel like you've been a victim of an unfair life."

“It was unfair. Dad messed up everything.” Beth’s voice cracked as she glanced up. “He’s a bastard, and I hate him.”

“I know, baby, but Damon isn’t like him. Neither is Kent.” She moved to her knees and pulled Bethany into another long hug. “Think about what I’m saying. Just chew on it, and it might make sense.”

“Beth?” The sound of Damon’s voice caused her heart to almost stop in her chest.

“Oh Lord.” She pulled from her mom and got off the bed. “In here.”

Damon rounded the corner and stopped. His beautifully tanned complexion was washed out, his eyes wide and filled with pain.

“What’s wrong?” Bethany moved toward him without hesitation. She reached for him, sliding her hands up his strong chest and cupping the side of his neck. “Damon. What’s going on?”

“I just called Kendal because Matt reamed me for being a dick.” He glanced at my mom. “Sorry, Karen.”

“Don’t mind me.” She got up and walked around them, leaving them standing in the doorway.

“What’s going on with Kendal?” Fear danced in the center of Bethany’s chest.

“His sister died today.” Damon closed his eyes and took a shallow breath. “I was such a cock to him the last time we spoke, but to hear him crying on the phone a few minutes ago...”

“Oh my God. Where is she? What happened?”

“She’s been in the hospital with MS for a long time. He’s her caregiver.”

“What do we need to do?” She ran her hands back down his chest and stepped back, giving him a little bit of room.

“I need to go up there. I was coming to find you, but I’ll check in later this week. You okay? I’m so sorry about the shit

with Delilah. We're handling it."

"I'm not coming back." Bethany shook her head. "I can't."

He reached out and touched the side of her face as his eyes grew glossy. "I understand. I support whatever decision you make."

"Go to Kendal. Tell him that I'm thinking about him."

Damon nodded and turned, walking out without another word. It was only after he left that she realized that her word choice might not have been the smartest.

She would explain herself when he came back to her. Maybe then they could talk through everything and figure out where they truly stood and where to go from there.

Would the story change if she decided that she wasn't a victim and Damon wasn't doing things with malicious intent?

Yeah. It would change a lot of things.

CHAPTER 87



DAMON

A million memories assaulted him as he drove toward the hospital. He'd been friends with Kendal since his freshman year of college. Kendal's baby sister, Amanda, was always in the picture because of her MS. It was unfair and didn't make much sense at all, but somehow the girl kept her spirits up no matter what.

Damon absently rubbed at his chest as he drove just above the speed limit to reach Kendal's side. How he could have contemplated Bethany cheating with Kendal was a clear sign that he had a problem. Not all women were his mother, and the sooner he realized that, the better.

"Maybe I've gone about this shit all wrong." He pulled into the parking lot at the hospital and turned off the car, sitting in the silence for a few minutes. The situation with him and Beth would have to be resolved and soon. The look on her beautiful face told him that it wasn't going to take some massive change to bring them back together. She was worried about him the minute she saw his face.

She didn't hesitate to reach out and touch him.

Relief flooded his system as he got out of the car and walked toward the front of the massive hospital. Kendal was somewhere inside, and though he'd told Damon the floor and the room number, it was too hard to understand that poor guy through his tears.

Damon paused by the front desk and ran his hand over his face. He'd never seen Kendal cry, though they'd been through

some shit that should have caused them both to break down. He hadn't even broken down over Ana, which was well worth the emotion. The girl had been perfect for Kendal, but because of her age and the fact that she was one of his students, their relationship soon became the center of controversy.

"Can't catch a fucking break, can you, man?" Damon smiled over at the nurse who glanced up.

"I'm sorry?"

"No, I was just talking to myself. I'm looking for Amanda Tarrington's room. I just got word from her brother that she passed away." Damon slid his hands onto the desk and leaned forward.

"I'm so sorry to hear that." She turned back to her computer. "Let me see where she is. Looks like she's in six forty-two on the sixth floor."

"Thank you." Damon nodded and turned to jog toward the elevator. He was surprised Kendal was still at the hospital seeing that he'd gotten word that morning that Amanda hadn't made it through the night. Why the fuck hadn't he gone home?

An older man in a white coat held the door for him as he walked into the elevator and let out a tight sigh. "Sixth floor please?"

"Sure." The guy glanced back and crossed his hands over his chest. "You all right? You seem a little out of sorts."

"My best friend just lost his sister. I'm just trying to get to him." Damon ran his fingers through his hair and shook his head. "She's had MS for a long time, but I don't think any of us imagined her not pulling through."

"MS is a horrible disease." He moved toward the door as the elevator stopped on the third floor. "I'm sorry for your loss, son."

"Thanks," Damon mumbled and pulled out his phone. Nervousness resurrected deep inside of him. What was he going to say to Kendal that would offer comfort? He should have called earlier, but he was lost in his belief that his best friend was after his girl. "How fucking stupid is that?"

The door opened on the sixth floor, and Damon forced himself to walk out and turn left. The room was down on the right, but the hall was empty. He'd half expected Kendal to be sitting alone in the hall. There was no way they still had Amanda's body in the room, right?

"Can I help you?" A pretty nurse with dark hair and caramel-colored skin moved in front of him.

"I'm just going right here. Is... Is Amanda Tarrington still in there?" Damon hated to ask, but he had to prepare himself just in case.

"No." The woman glanced down at her hands. "Her brother is."

"Kendal." Damon turned but paused before reaching up and resting his hand on the door handle. Every horrid memory of his mother dying played along his mind's eye. Anger and devastation soon followed, leaving him frozen in place.

"He's in there." She touched Damon's shoulder. "You all right?"

"Yeah." He glanced back, thinking she looked almost too much like Kendal's old girlfriend, Ana. Surely the guy had noticed. How could he not?

She gave him a sad smile and walked back toward the nurses' station.

Damon took a deep breath and pushed the door open.

Kendal turned from the window and stood stone still. "Hey, buddy."

"Hey man." Damon moved across the room, unsure of how to react. He glanced back toward the bed to find it empty. "I'm so sorry, Kendal."

"Yeah, me too."

Damon turned back as Kendal's eyes filled with tears. He reached up and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

Without thinking, he reached out and pulled Kendal into a tight hug. "We'll get through this together."

Kendal's voice broke as he pressed his face to the top of Damon's shoulder and gripped the back of his shirt tightly. "Will we? My baby sister isn't here anymore. Mom and Dad are gone and now, she's gone too, Damon. I should have done something more. I should have forced the hospital to look at new treatments, or taken more fucking time off from work to be with her." He let out a painful sounding sob. "She died alone last night. No one was in here while she slipped into the darkness. No one."

Damon's throat tightened as tears blurred his vision. He gripped Kendal tighter, hurting for his best friend in the same way he hurt for Matt when their mother died.

There were no words that would offer comfort. She's in a better place? Was she really? Damon had no clue. He didn't even fully comprehend what the better place might be or where it was. It seemed trite and too callous to offer a canned answer to his closest friend, so he didn't.

"Let's get you out of here, okay? I'll take you back to your apartment." Damon cupped the back of Kendal's head and pressed his cheek against his friend's. "I'm not gonna leave you to deal with this alone. You're not alone at all. I'm right here."

Kendal nodded and moved back before wiping his hands down his face. "I'm so numb. Every fear I had about this day is coming true. I kept hoping that I'd be married or have a family of my own before I lost Mandy. I knew the day would come, but it's early. Too early. She was fucking twenty-five, Damon. Just a baby."

Damon nodded and moved to wrap his arm around Kendal's shoulders. "Come on, man. We'll talk in the car and at your place. Let's get out of here, okay?"

"Yeah, just turn right when we walk out. I don't want to see Dana."

"The pretty dark-haired nurse out front?" Damon glanced down at Kendal as he pulled the door open. "Is she the one you casually mentioned the other day?"

“Yeah. Just turn to the right, all right?” he barked and pulled from Damon’s grasp.

“All right. No problem.” Damon moved up beside him and ignored the sweet sound of the girl’s voice as she called Kendal from behind them. He was in no place to talk to anyone, but fuck if it didn’t feel like crap to leave her standing in the hall unanswered.

“I just can’t.” Kendal ran his fingers through his dark brown hair and got into the elevator, keeping his back to the door.

Damon got in and shook his head as the girl pressed her hands to her face and turned. The soft sound of her crying tore at his heart. Was she in love with Kendal? Now wasn’t the time to ask, but there would be some comfort in knowing that someone cared about his best friend besides him. Bethany cared too, but Kendal wasn’t going to let her too close to him. Damon had no doubt that Kendal holding Beth at arm’s-length was because of his friendship with Damon.

“My car is over there.” Kendal pointed to the far part of the parking lot as they walked out.

“Don’t worry about it. Matt and I will come get it later. Let’s just get you home.” Damon walked toward his car, moving to Kendal’s side and opening the door for him. “Man, I’m sorry for not coming sooner. I’m a fucking horrible friend.”

“It’s all right.” Kendal got in the car and leaned back, letting out a long sigh. “Just make it up to me and grab us a six pack before you hit the freeway.”

“Of course,” Damon mumbled before closing the door and walking to his side. Life was so damn fleeting. Amanda shouldn’t have passed away so quickly, but it almost seemed like she’d given up. Being in bed for so many years had a tendency to wear on someone, but Kendal wouldn’t let her see it that way. Maybe he should have been there more for her, not that Damon would have ever mentioned it, but his career, his profession had become the biggest roadblock in his life. He

wasn't willing to bend on his career in any way whatsoever for anyone. Never. Not even a little.

Why?

"I'm gonna call Beth when we get to your place after you get settled." Damon glanced over at Kendal after he got into the car and buckled up. "She was worried about you."

"I bet." Kendal turned his face toward the window closest to him. "You need to make amends with her. She's a good woman, and you're fucking things up horribly. I've been fighting your fights for you, but it's your turn to man up and fix this shit or let her go."

Damon nodded, not willing to strike back at Kendal's comment. He was right in his assessment, and Damon was moving toward fixing things. It wasn't going to happen overnight, but it needed to happen. She was everything to him. Nothing mattered outside of her and yet he was scared as hell that he didn't have the power to fix it.

"I'm working on it, buddy." He started the car and put it in reverse as he let out a soft sigh. "I was trying to think through what the best way to get her back might be, and thinking back on the beginning when we met; I realize it was about physical attraction."

"That's true." Kendal turned his face toward Damon. "But that time is over. I think the attraction can always be present, but there was something that moved you from lust to love Damon. You proposed to the girl after a few weeks. That's not at all your style. What changed all of that?"

"For her?" Damon pulled out onto the road in front of the hospital and swallowed his pride for a minute. Kendal needed to focus on something besides Amanda, and Damon needed solutions. No matter how uncomfortable talking about everything was, he needed to get it off his chest. "I stood quietly beside her during the shit with Krista and Jake. I went to the apartment with her, the hospital, the jail..." He paused as his heart constricted in his chest. "She accepted my strength and wanted to help me heal from the shit that happened with my mother. I could see the future in her eyes, Kendal. I could

feel it. For the first time in my life, I wanted a wife, a pretty house to offer her, and a few little ones running around. She has the power to change me. I can almost see myself being the man I've always wanted to be with someone like her."

"Someone like her?" Kendal winked and turned to look back out the window.

I reached over and patted his chest softly. "No. With her."

"Exactly," he whispered before closing his eyes.

"Thanks, man." Damon started to pull his hand back and decided against it. He patted Kendal's chest until his friend's breathing grew deep. There was no need to grab a six pack. Kendal needed rest and someone to listen and take care of him. Where Damon had no doubt in his mind that this Dana chick would be up for the task, he knew Kendal had already started to pull back from her. He wasn't sure why, but he would work to figure it out and help Kendal move past it.

Where Bethany was the right woman for him, he had no doubt that there was a woman who would heal all of Kendal's wounds and change him forever. Whether it was this Dana chick was yet to be seen, but Damon couldn't help but hope it was. The way the poor girl cried in the hallway as Kendal left spoke volumes.

What had happened between them to leave him pushing her away?

It had to be something related to his career. Where Damon wasn't willing to ask anytime soon, he figured it would soon come out in the wash. The next few days would be about Kendal healing. Nothing else.

Damon got his best friend into the apartment and tucked into bed before calling the office.

"I'm going to be out for the next few days. Reroute everything to my cell phone." Damon dropped down on the couch and closed his eyes as Linda went through the list of things he had scheduled. They worked to clear everything for him.

His next call was the most important he would make that day, but it also scared the hell out of him to do it.

“How is he?” Bethany answered the phone a little bit out of breath.

“He’s pretty fucked up.” Damon pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “I can’t imagine burying Matt.”

“When is the funeral?”

“I don’t know, but Kendal kept mumbling about Saturday, so I assume that’s what he was talking about. He’s asleep right now.”

“You want me to come over there?” The woman on the other end of the phone was the girl he’d fallen so deeply in love with.

“Yeah, but it would be for selfish reasons. I’ll give you a buzz later this week. I’m hoping maybe you’ll come to dinner with me on Friday. I need to talk to you, Beth. Kendal needs me for the next few days, but I need to see you. I can’t keep doing this shit. I need to clear the air completely between us.”

There was an awkward pause, and for a minute, he thought she might have hung up. He held his tongue and waited for her to speak.

“Okay. I have to be in court all day Friday for Krista’s hearing, but I can go to dinner later that evening.”

“All right. I’ll call you in a few days. Take care, okay?”

“You too. Take care of Kendal, Damon. He’s a good man.”

“Yeah. He is.”

They said their goodbyes, and Damon tossed the phone on the couch next to him. What would it take to have her say the same about him? He wasn’t sure, but he wanted to try and be that guy. He’d won her over the first time by standing beside her the moment she needed him to the most.

Friday would be another chance, a chance he wouldn’t be missing out on.

CHAPTER 88



BETHANY

Damon being with Kendal for the last three days gave her a lot of time to think through things. If nothing else, she was willing to hear him out that night. She had a lot to say, but it almost seemed like the old Damon was back for a minute. The one who stood beside her at Jake's apartment and made love to her in Jamaica. Maybe all the pressures of getting back to work trying to be everything for everyone changed him. Her being his step-sister and his fiancée had to have weighed heavily on him.

"I'm not a victim," she mumbled before walking into the courtroom. The place was packed with students from the look of things. She didn't know many of them, but something told her that word had gotten around. Everyone loved a good train wreck, no matter who was involved.

Kendal sat near the back of the room, his face blank and eyes haunted. Bethany made her way over to him and sat down in the seat beside him.

"Hey. I'm so sorry about your loss." She slid her arm into his and pressed her cheek to his shoulder, not caring who was watching. It would seem that having to watch Jake and Krista tear each other apart during the court hearing that day wasn't the only pain she'd have to live through. Having Kendal there only made matters worse. He was required to testify, but he was in no shape to be anywhere.

"Thank you." He glanced down at her. "The funeral is tomorrow morning."

“I’ll be there.” She sat up but kept her arm wrapped around his.

“I will be too.” Damon moved in and sat beside her, shocking her a little. He had to have been there with Kendal.

“I thought you were going to the office today,” Kendal leaned around her and whispered softly.

“No. I wanted to be here for you and Beth.” Damon glanced over at her and damned if her heart didn’t skip a beat. Between his dark hair that curled up on the sides to his warm brown eyes, she found herself wanting to drown in him. With so much sadness all around her, he seemed to be the warmth she needed.

Funny how quickly that could change.

“I’m glad you’re here.” She sat back and turned her attention toward the front as he slid his arm behind her and gripped Kendal’s shoulder tightly.

“I’ll always be here for you, Beth,” he whispered but kept his eyes on the front of the room.

There was truth in his statement.

The judge walked in, and everyone stood but Jake. He hadn’t gotten to the point where he could stand or walk without help. Too much nerve damage. The door opened on the far side of the room, and a guard brought Krista out wearing a bright orange jumpsuit. Bethany realized that it had been a few weeks since she’d gone to see her old friend. The girl had lost far too much weight. Her cheeks were sunk in, and the dark circles under her eyes left her looking like death.

“Shit,” Kendal murmured and shook his head. “She looks so much like Mandy.”

“You wanna get out of here?” Damon leaned around her and glanced up at Kendal. “Just say the word, man.”

“No.” Kendal turned his gaze toward Damon. “Thank you though.”

“You?” Damon glanced down at Beth.

“Yeah, but I don’t have a choice. I have to testify today.” She let her eyes move around his impossibly handsome face. There were so many things she wanted to tell him. I miss you being the first. It wasn’t time to reconcile just yet though. They had to set a few things straight between them as family, then friends and if they could make it to the last round, lovers.

“I’d take it from you if I could.” He reached out and brushed his thumb over her bottom lip as his eyes filled with foreign emotions.

“Somehow I believe that.” She smiled and pulled his hand from her face. It was too much to have him touch her. It felt too good. Too right.

“Promise me that you guys are going to talk after this.” Kendal turned to look down at Bethany and back up to Damon. “You’re both driving me crazy. Life is too short for this shit.”

“We are.” Bethany reached over and patted Kendal’s arm. “I promise.”

“And you should talk with Dana sometime soon, Kendal.” Damon’s voice wasn’t nearly as soft as Bethany thought it should be. It was obvious that Kendal was still trapped in a dark place due to his sister passing.

“She’s going to be my student in a few days, bro. I can’t do that. You understand.”

“Nope. I don’t.” Damon sat back. “I think love is far more important than your career.”

Bethany held her tongue as a million comebacks burst through her mind. Damon had forced her to put her engagement ring in a box when she came to work so that they wouldn’t upset the delicate balance of how everyone at work felt about her. He was far more willing to give up everything for his career than Kendal seemed to be.

“Bullshit.” Kendal leaned forward and narrowed his eyes. “You’re not the one to be giving me this advice.”

“All right, but I’m saying it because I love you like a brother.” Damon shrugged. “Take me and Beth for instance. I

fucked up big time with her at work. I tried to separate who we were when we were there and when we weren't. It caused her to feel like I was embarrassed that she was mine, right?"

Bethany nodded and turned to look up at him. "I know why you did it, but the reason doesn't matter. It hurt me."

"I know, baby. I'm sorry. I was wrong." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "I would take it back if I could. I don't give a shit what anyone thinks anymore. It's nothing but a lie anyway."

"So it's that easy? Just disregard the rules at UT and start dating a student?" Kendal barked a little too loudly. A few people turned around. He lifted his hand and apologized. "Sorry."

"No, man. Either tell her to drop the fucking course or stop teaching that type of accounting. Look at the options and stop pigeonholing yourself. You deserve love more than anyone else I know besides Beth. Fight for it, Kendal. Fight for it like life would stop without it." Damon patted Kendal's back. "We're going to figure this out. I'm not letting you mess this relationship up."

"There is no relationship." He glanced over at Damon with a sour look on his handsome face.

"You guys talk about this later." Bethany put her hand on Damon's thigh and glanced up at him, giving him a stern look. Only he could shut down the conversation. Kendal was too out of it to do anything more than react with whatever punches were thrown his way.

"Okay. You're right." Damon's eyes moved across her face slowly, holding her captive as if he had some sort of power over her. Sadly enough, he did.

The warmth of knowing that maybe not everything was lost between them caused her stomach to tighten. There was no one she wanted beside her, above her, all around her but the handsome asshole watching her so closely.

How did we let things fall apart?

She finally pulled her gaze from his and glanced up toward the front to find Krista turned around, her eyes locked on Bethany. Unsure of what to do, Beth did the only thing that seemed natural to her. She held her friend's gaze, trying like hell to push as much sympathy into her expression as she could. They'd been friends for far too long for Beth to deny Krista anything. Her breakdown and not taking her medicine was at the core of what happened between her and Jake. Where some of it was her fault, some of it had to be blamed on her illness.

"I'm sorry, Beth," Krista mumbled. No sound came from her mouth, but Bethany could make out the words.

"Me too," she whispered back and blinked back tears.

Had the moment really come to have to get on the stand and testify against her best friend? Even with all the shit Jake had been through, he didn't want to see Krista put away either. There was nothing to do but tell the truth of all the events that they would be questioned on, but damn if everything they had to say didn't leave Krista painted as a monster.

Hopefully her lawyers would be able to bring into the picture that she was a sick woman and her medication was the only thing that kept her from snapping. That was their only hope of saving her from prison for the rest of her life.

"You okay?" Damon whispered softly against Bethany's hair. The warmth of his breath and the dark scent of his cologne left her feeling far too emotional.

She leaned into him, taking comfort from his closeness even though it was the wrong thing to do. "Yeah. I will be when this is over."

After the opening statements were delivered by the attorneys, various people were called up to the stand. Bethany chewed on the side of her cheek, waiting her turn as the sickness in her stomach grew. Damon continued to hold her as the morning progressed, but with each new testimony, the situation for Krista grew more and more dim.

"The defense would like to call..."

Bethany faded out as fear raced through her veins.

“Beth. They called you up, baby.” Damon pressed softly on her back.

“Oh. Okay.” She got up and walked to the front, ignoring both Krista and Jake. She tried not to think too much about how badly her knees were shaking. She turned and faced the bailiff as he held out a Bible. “Lift your left hand and repeat after me.”

She did as she was told and took her seat afterward. Everyone was looking at her, and for the first time in a long time, she thought she might have a panic attack.

The DA started to pepper her with questions, and for the first few, she stumbled over her words, not able to think clearly due to the intensity of the situation. She turned her attention toward Damon as he smiled warmly at her.

Something about the calm in his face caused her to release the breath she’d been holding.

He mouthed for her to breathe, and she nodded, forcing air slowly into her lungs. Everything calmed inside of her, and she felt her mind clear and her pulse slow a little. Him being there changed everything, which was enough proof for her that their relationship was far from over. He’d come to support Kendal no doubt, but she couldn’t deny the way he watched her. It wasn’t his normal domineering glare, but something softer. The strong man that demanded life to bow at his feet still very much lay underneath his loving demeanor, but he was holding back.

He had to be doing it for her.

“Did Krista often miss her medication? I mean, someone with a tendency to go off the deep end and stab someone multiple times in the chest if she didn’t take her meds would most likely make sure she stayed on a schedule, right?”

“Leading the witness.” Krista’s lawyer stood, and Bethany shifted her eyes over to her old friend.

The woman that sat slumped over with tears running down her face wasn’t the girl Bethany knew. She was broken

because of all that had happened. Bethany turned her attention to Jake, only to find him crying as well.

“I retract the statement. Let me rephrase it.”

Bethany forced herself to pay attention. The trial would be over soon, and Krista would get the help she needed, and Jake would fully recover. The horrible event would forever be a part of their past, but everyone would move on.

We have to.

Bethany was dismissed much to her relief. She walked back toward the row where Damon and Kendal sat and moved in to sit between them again.

“Great job.” Damon kissed the side of her head, surprising her a little. Too bad she didn’t have the emotional energy to make more out of it than she needed to.

“Yeah, thanks to you calming me down.” She glanced up at him, letting her eyes linger on his lips a little too long. Why was lust so easily resurrected in the midst of tragedy? It was almost as if she were searching for something to warm herself against, and he was the perfect fire in the middle of the darkness around them.

“That’s funny.” Kendal leaned around Bethany. “I’ve never heard a woman use calm and you in the same sentence.”

“I kinda like it.” Damon smirked and glanced back up at the front. “I can be many things.”

Can you be mine again? Bethany forced herself to pull her attention from the handsome man beside her and turned back up toward the front as Kendal was called to the stand next. Funny how quickly true tragedy could put everything into its proper place. Damon wasn’t the enemy that she was fighting against.

Their past demons were.

CHAPTER 89



DAMON

“God, that sucked,” Kendal muttered as they walked out of the courtroom.

Damon put his hand on Kendal’s shoulder and moved his best friend to the side of the hallway to get them out of the rush of the crowd. Bethany wanted a moment to talk with Jake and hopefully see Krista. Damon offered to go with her, but she needed a few minutes to herself. He could respect that.

“No shit.” He glanced around and turned his attention back to Kendal. “Do you need me to do anything else for the funeral tomorrow?”

“No, and honestly, not to be a dick, but I need some time at home by myself tonight. I appreciate you being with me for the last few days, but I need to mourn the loss of my sister, Damon. My heart hurts so goddamn bad, but I’ve been trying to hold it in because you’re all up in my grill.”

Damon smirked. “All right, bro. I’ll take you back to your place and leave you be for the night.”

Kendal nodded and lifted his lips in a sad smile as he glanced over Damon’s shoulder. “I think you being here is going to melt her heart faster than anything else you could have done.”

Damon turned to see Beth looking for them. Her long brown hair played around her shoulders, and the innocent look on her face had his cock twitching in his slacks. They wouldn’t be getting naked anytime soon from the look of things, but he was okay with that. She was out searching for a

new man to warm her bed, and he wasn't willing to let his old fears steal his focus on being the kind of man she wanted, the one she needed.

How many times had she mentioned him using sex as the cure all? Sadly enough, he had. For him, it was healing when it was with her. Being one with her left him whole again and feeling like he could conquer the world. She didn't feel the same about it. Until she did, he was backing off as best as he could.

“Good. I miss her so fucking bad,” Damon whispered and walked toward his woman. “Beth. Over here.”

“Sorry.” She walked toward him and shook her head. “They're both a hot mess. I completely get it, but my chest hurts because of it. I wish I could take it from both of them.”

“It's going to get better.” Damon reached out and ran his hands down her lithe arms. “I'm going to drive Kendal back to his place and then go home and take a quick shower. You're still willing to have me for dinner tonight, right?”

Her cheeks colored pink, and he realized that his choice of words could be taken in several ways. The fact that she might be thinking about taking her time with his lower half left his body aching for her.

“Dinner sounds good,” she whispered as she glanced down toward her shoes. “We're talking about us tonight though. If you're not up for that-”

“I am.” He pressed his fingers under her chin and forced her to look back up at him. “I want to get everything out in the open and figure out where we are, Beth. I need to. You do too, baby.”

She nodded and moved toward him, lifting to her toes and kissing his cheek softly. “See you around seven.”

He turned and watched her go as his pulse spiked. “How am I supposed to get through a night of dinner and talking without thinking about seducing her? She's so damn hot. I swear she's the only girl that can turn me on by talking about washing dishes and having babies.”

Kendal snorted, showing signs of life for the first time in days. “Then you know she’s the one for you. Just be yourself tonight, man. If you want to seduce her and the moment is right, then go for it. Beth doesn’t want a cardboard cutout of the man you were. She’s not asking you to change everything, bro. Just the things that hurt her. Ask what they are and promise to work on them.”

“Yeah.” He pressed his teeth into his bottom lip as she glanced over her shoulder at him. She walked out of the courthouse and left him staring after her. “I’m not sure I can keep my hands off of her, but maybe it’s foolish to try. I don’t want to change who I am, but I can work on changing a few things or at least explaining myself a little, right?”

“Exactly. Get me home and go get the girl, bro.”

“What about you?” Damon turned and wrapped his arm around Kendal’s shoulders as they walked toward the exit door. “You going to think about what I said about Dana?”

“I don’t know, Damon. It’s not as simple as you think. She could drop the class, yeah, but she’s still a student at UT.”

“But why does-” Damon started, but Kendal cut him off mid-sentence.

“I don’t wanna talk about this right now. I have to bury my baby sister tomorrow. I want to dive into the agony of that and honor Mandy as best I can with my speech tomorrow. We can talk about Dana after I figure out how to get out of my funk, okay?”

Damon nodded, wanting so badly to push the fact that Dana was most likely the best way to *get* out of his funk, but it wasn’t the time. Just like he was going to have to do with Beth later that night, Damon needed to be himself with Kendal and yet tread lightly enough that his old friend wouldn’t feel threatened.

They got in the car and drove in silence back out to Kendal’s apartment. Damon parked the car and turned to face his oldest friend.

“I’m here if you need me.”

Kendal nodded. “I know. I’ll see you tomorrow. Go love on Bethany and remember, she fell in love with the real you. Nothing else. No one else. Fix this by being authentic, okay?”

“Yeah. Thanks, man.” Damon let his head drop back as Kendal waved and got out of the car. How in the world would he ever make it through losing someone like Kendal had without a relationship like him and Beth were capable of having?

Simple. He wouldn’t.



He parked outside of the apartments on campus and turned the car off. The need to sit in the darkness and gather his thoughts was a new sensation. He was so used to rushing into things like a bull in a china shop and getting his way. No matter what it was, or who it was, if he wanted it, it was going to be his. Where he wasn’t sure he could change that about himself, he hoped like hell he could at least try and soften it a little bit.

Getting out of the car, he grabbed the single red rose he’d picked up on his way over to get Beth and walked toward her apartment.

He knocked on the door and took a step back as she opened it.

The blue dress she wore fit her like a glove, the top tight and accentuating just how big her breasts were, and the bottom flaring out and forcing him to pay homage to her beautiful legs.

“Wow,” he whispered roughly. “I’m not sure how you keep getting more and more stunning, but you do.”

“Thanks.” She stepped outside the apartment and closed the door. “Is this for me?”

He handed her the rose and leaned down to kiss the tip of her nose. “Yeah. It’s to apologize for when I stop behaving like a gentleman and slip back into being the alpha male that fucked you on top of your desk like you wanted.”

She smiled, and he knew he was safe just to be himself.

“I wanted you to do that? I don’t think so.” She turned and locked the door, and he stepped closer and breathed in deeply, taking the scent of her deep into his lungs.

A soft yelp left her as she turned and bumped into him.

“I think you did.” He smiled down at her and moved back before offering his hand. “I have everything for us to make pasta from scratch out at the house. You good with going back to my place?”

“Yeah, as long as you hear me clearly.” She tugged at his hand. “I’m not sleeping with you tonight. The hell we’ve put each other through over the last month or so has to stop. I need to understand why you’ve done a few things you’ve done, and we need to figure out if we are still going to work on us, or if it’s time to move on.”

He tried to stop himself, but there was no use. He slipped his hand into her hair and gripped it softly as he leaned down and hovered above her.

“The answer to the last question is crystal clear in my mind, Beth. I don’t want another woman in my life now, nor will I ever. We’re going to work this out no matter what that looks like.” He brushed his nose by hers and growled softly. “You don’t have to sleep with me again until you’re ready to. I’ll wait forever.”

“No, you won’t.” She lifted to her toes and pressed her lips against his. The kiss was soft and tentative, and he left it at that. “I won’t make you wait that long.”

“I told you that you were the bad girl you pretend not to be.” He nipped at her lips before moving back and taking her hand into his. “I get to lay some shit on the table tonight too. Understood?”

“Absolutely.” There was no question in her tone. She seemed ready to lay all of their issues and problems on the table no matter how small or large they might be.

He walked her to her side of the car and opened the door for her. “My lady.”

She got in and licked her lips as she smiled up at him. “What are we having for dinner besides pasta and you?”

“Not fair.” He chuckled low in his chest as he walked around to the other side of the car. She might not want to sleep with him yet because it would muddy the waters and soften her, but by the end of the night, she’d be curled up beside him, his woman again if nothing else. That’s all he wanted. No twisting reality or promising shit he couldn’t deliver on either. He was just willing to open his heart up completely and let her poke around until she was assured of him being the right man for her.

There was no doubt in his mind that they belonged together. How things had gotten so incredibly fucked up felt like a mystery. He couldn’t even put his finger on half the things that had gone wrong between them.

He got in the car and started it, glancing over at her and falling in love all over again. “Let’s start the conversation part of this night now. You go first.”

“All right.” She buckled up and let out a long exhale as she stared out the front window. “Why did you rehire Philip? I want the truth.”

“You’re going to get the truth tonight. Just ask your questions, and I promise you that I’ll give you nothing but honesty. You do the same for me.”

“Of course.” She glanced over at him.

“I hired him for several reasons. The first is that I wanted you to know that I trusted you.” He started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. “The second was that I had a guilty conscience. I shouldn’t have fired him in the first place. HR told me to bring him back on board the day I did it, but I needed to think it through, to make it my decision. I’m usually a reasonable guy, but something about being your man turns me into a major asshole at times when I feel threatened. Philip threatens me because he’s the right kind of guy for you.”

“How do you know anything about whether Philip is the guy for me? You don’t know him.”

“No, I don’t, but I know his kind. He’s a hard worker, he’s respectful, and he tried to help take the blame for you punching Sadie in the face. He’s a good man.” Damon shrugged. “I wanted to repay that after I calmed down.”

“Okay. I’m sorry that I thought it was because you wanted me to be with him.”

“I wanted what?” Damon snorted loudly. “Is that a joke?”

“Watch your tone. I’m super sensitive to you right now.” She jerked her head toward him, pinning him with a hard stare.

He took a slow breath through his nose and nodded. “All right. I’m sorry, I just can’t believe that you would think I would want you with anyone but me.”

“Why did you tell me not to wear my ring in the office?” Her voice softened a little, and he glanced over to make sure she wasn’t in tears. She certainly sounded like she was headed that way.

“Because I’m an asshole.”

“Damon.”

“No. Wait, okay.” He reached over and took her hand, holding it tightly. “I was scared that everyone at the office would give you hell for being a part of the family when you first started, and then I realized it would be way worse if we were engaged. Throw the two things together and who the fuck knows what people would say around you.”

“I can take care of myself.”

He stopped at a stop light and turned his attention on her, narrowing his eyes a little. “Do you think for one minute that I’m the type of man that would let you take the brunt of that shit and not do something about it?”

“No, but I-”

“No, nothing. I was worried about what might happen. If someone said something to you that was offensive or harmful, I’d likely break their damn nose myself.”

“I understand.” She pulled her hand from his slowly. “It just hurt me so much. I kept thinking maybe you didn’t want anyone to know that I was yours because you were embarrassed.”

Her voice cracking caused his heart to ache.

“Baby. I want the whole world to know that you’re mine. If I knew then what I know now, I never in a million years would have asked you to take that damn ring off. The morning you left it on my nightstand felt like the world crashed in around me. I can’t remember hurting that much since the night I found my mother sleeping with another man.” He turned his attention back toward the front of the road and held his breath, working on not letting his emotions get the best of him.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you, Damon. I just couldn’t see spending my life with someone that was ashamed of me, had no respect for me and worked to leave me well aware of both.” She reached over and slid her hand onto his thigh. “Forgive me.”

“For what? Running from the monster? I can’t say that I blame you, to be honest.” He pulled over on the side of the road and let out a soft sigh. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe they couldn’t work things out. It sounded like she was dead set on painting him as the biggest fucking villain ever in her mind.

How in the hell could he salvage that?

CHAPTER 90



BETHANY

I *'m not the victim. He didn't do any of those things with malice or the intent that I thought he did.*

Against her better judgment, she unbuckled her seat belt and moved to her knees, leaning over and wrapping her arms around his neck.

“I told you that I was struggling, that I felt like you didn’t care about me. I know it’s stupid now, but those are the things that kept kicking me down each time I would try to work things out with you.” She pressed her face against his neck and breathed in deeply. “You’re not a monster at all. I just felt like a victim, which is stupid.”

He kissed the side of her face and rubbed her back softly. “You want me to take you back to your place? I honestly didn’t realize how bad all of this looked. I didn’t have the intent you thought I had, but I understand why you ran from me. Maybe you were right to run.”

“No.” She turned her face toward his. “I don’t want to run anymore. I just need to understand where you were coming from. You explaining it is clearing up a lot, okay?”

“My turn.” He slid his hand into her hair and pulled her down for a long kiss. The soft press of his tongue against her lips left her body waking up. She’d promised herself ten times that she wouldn’t let their physical attraction pull her down into worshiping him without getting clarity and clearing the air between them. If they were going to have a solid relationship,

it was going to start that night. She was tired of waiting to make a decision. It was shit or get off the pot time.

She opened her mouth and moaned softly as he pressed his tongue deep into her mouth and gripped her hair with the same aggression that left her wet and aching every time he reached for her.

“I want you so fucking bad, Beth.” He licked her lips and sucked her bottom lip back into his mouth. “You know that though, don’t you?”

“Yes,” she whispered roughly and pressed her lips back against his. He took full advantage of her going in for the kiss and ran his hands down her back and squeezed the top curve of her ass. Every part of him felt alive as she flattened her chest against his and took the fierceness of the kiss like a champ.

“Stop teasing me, or I’m going to break your promise to yourself.” He brushed his nose by hers and kissed her once more before she moved back into her seat.

“God, I forgot how good it felt to be close to you.” She pursed her lips and pressed her head to the seat behind her as she let out another soft sensual sound.

“Keep it up.” He licked his lips, trying to taste her again before they started to talk.

“Why did you let Delilah push me around at the office?” She lifted her eyebrow at him.

He shook his head and pulled the car back onto the road. “I didn’t know she was giving you such grief until Ben and Patrick came to see me the day you quit.”

“I should have been more clear about it.” Bethany shook her head. “The woman is a whorish bitch.”

“Good, then come back to work and put her in her place.”

“Why aren’t you firing her?”

“I am,” he glanced over at Beth, “but I have to have proper cause to do it. She’s been a little too flirty with me lately, which has me verbally beating her back each chance I get. I

can't fire her without proper cause. Come help me find a few good reasons.”

Bethany laughed sardonically. “You're just looking for a way to get me back up there. I'm not doing it. She's not worth the strain of working with you.”

“What if I change?” He reached for her hand, pulling it toward his lips and licking at her fingers one at a time.

She whimpered softly and tried to tug her hand free, but he gripped it tighter. Everything about him turned her on. The soft pulse between her thighs had moved from something that she was able to ignore to a violent ticking that demanded her attention.

“You're not going to change.” She bit her tongue as he sucked one of her fingers deep into his mouth, rolling his tongue around the digit and pressing his teeth against her flesh. “Stop, Damon. You said we would just talk.”

He released her and kissed her hand one more time before putting it back in her lap. Her request seemed ignorant all of a sudden.

“I've already started to change, Beth. I don't want to be a different man than the man I've grown into, but if explaining myself and working hard to make sure you and every other fucking person in our lives know that you're number one in my world, then so be it. Delilah's days are numbered. My father made a huge mistake in hiring her, and he knows that now. He feels like shit about it.” He glanced over at her. “I never would have brought her to the firm to work beside me. You thinking that I would lie about it is almost crazy.”

“It looked that way, but I'm starting to realize that a lot of things that looked that way were just me expecting the worst from you.” She shrugged. “My father woke me up the morning he left and kissed me on the cheek. He promised that he would be home that night and that we'd work on my bike out in the garage. It wasn't much of a bike, but it was all we had. We were pretty poor.”

“Beth.” Damon reached over and squeezed her thigh.

“No, let me finish.” She took a deep breath. “I went to school that day and came home to find my mom in the house and three big thugs tearing up everything. He’d skipped town because he owed them drug money, but he left us there without saying a word. He forced us to be the victims of poverty, of fear, of a whole host of other fucked up things.” Tears filled her eyes, but she kept going. “I’ve never been whole or complete. When we first got together, I kept waiting for the other shoe to fall, but it didn’t. I think I started just to assume that everything you did had some small seed of malice in it. Why wouldn’t it? We couldn’t last. You wouldn’t want a broken girl like me. I had nothing. I have nothing. I’m poor, and you’re rich. I’m average, and you’re beautiful.”

“Beth.” Damon pulled into the driveway at his place. “You’re everything I want in my life. You’re beyond beautiful to me. You’re talented and smart, and you could run circles around all of us put together if you believed in yourself.”

“But I don’t.” She pressed her fingers to her eyes and wiped at her tears. “I think that’s why I bastardized all of it in my mind.”

“I believe in you completely.” He got out of the car, walked around, opened her door and pulled her out, wrapping his strong arms around her. “And this isn’t just about you making yourself out to be a victim. It’s about me needing to have tight control on our relationship, so tight that I almost ruined it. It’s about my fucked up situation with my mother forcing me to turn every outing you had without me into a rendezvous with some incredible lover.”

“No one is better than you,” she whispered against the side of his throat.

“I just knew that you had something for Philip, and then Kendal and God knows who else. Every man I look at around me is better for you. I’m an asshole, and I deserve nothing for the way I’ve treated women, but I want you so goddamn bad.”

He licked up the side of her throat, leaving her knees weak. “I would pay penitence for the rest of my life if you were in it.

I'd do anything I could to make you happy, to give you anything you wanted, baby. I would do all of it for you."

His words softened her, driving the truth deep into her heart. He loved her. He had to. There was no way someone that loved her like the man clinging to her could have malicious intent toward her.

"Why were we fighting? Why did I leave my ring with you?" She turned and pressed her lips against his as a sob left her. "When did all of this shit start?"

"I don't know, but I need it to go away. I don't care about anyone else, Beth. I gave you that ring and asked you to marry me because I love you, baby. I love you so fucking much." He gripped her face and leaned down, consuming her with his kiss. She melted against him, letting go of her promise to leave untouched, her hope to work things out, her need to facilitate a full night of working through their demons. She didn't need to talk about their shit anymore. It was invalid, and both of them were in the wrong.

"I love you too. I've missed you so much." A fresh wave of tears rolled down her cheeks as Damon gripped the back of her thighs and forced her to wrap her legs around him. He kept his tight grip on the side of her face and wrapped his free arm around her rear as he walked them toward the house.

"Let's not do this shit anymore, okay? Just tie me down, and we can talk about things as they come up. Yes?" He kissed her again before letting her slide down the front of his body.

A moan left her as she brushed by his thick erection. Why in the world would she have thought that anything but love making would be the end result if things went right? Sex was his love language, and nothing felt better than being pressed beneath him, covered by him, spread wide open for him.

She nodded in response to his question and kissed him softly one more time before moving out of his way.

He worked on the door, and she moved up behind him, wrapping her arms around his narrow waist and pressing her cheek to his back. She breathed deeply, trying to stain her

lungs with his scent. Everything about him left her breathless and needy. All of the bullshit they'd put each other through slowly started to dissipate as she let herself consume the truth.

"Are we still making dinner?" She pressed her teeth against his shoulder and closed her eyes, not sure she wanted anything but him hovering above her, naked and sweaty.

"Anything you want, Beth." He opened the door and walked in, turning and pulling her against him as he closed the door.

She groaned as he pressed her to the wall behind her and ran his hands up her sides, cupping her breasts and squeezing. The firm press of his body against hers left her with little question where his mind was.

Some part of her wanted to make dinner and talk more, but it seemed irrelevant. They could make love and then get up and eat then. There wasn't much more to talk about other than the ring.

"You smell so good, baby. Like lust and roses." He pressed his lips against her ear and groaned as he rocked against her. "You know how badly I wanted to bed you over the conference room table the other day just to teach you a few lessons?"

"And what would you have done to me?" she whispered roughly as she slid her hands over his hips to squeeze his ass.

"Knelt behind you and forced you to scream my name a few times." He brushed his thumbs over her nipples. "Wear my ring again, Beth. We can work through anything you want to work through, but don't give up on us. I can't let you do that. I love you too much."

She closed her eyes and lifted one of her legs, locking her knee over his hip as he ground against her. Pleasure danced in the center of her stomach, and everything seemed so far away all of a sudden. The pressure building between her legs and deep inside her chest caused something to shift deep inside of her. She loved him too. More than anyone she'd ever loved in her short life. How could she fathom giving that up? The

hopeless situation wasn't at all hopeless. He was willing to open himself up and work it all out.

"Where is it?" She turned her head and brushed her nose by his ear. "The ring? What did you do with it?"

He moved back and reached into his pocket, pulling it out and turning it over in his palm. "I carry it everywhere with me." He smiled shyly, not looking like the aggressive bastard that would have her panting like a whore by the time the night was over. "I honestly couldn't let the hope die that you'd want it back. I'm not sure I could live with that thought."

"Damon." She reached out and plucked it from his palm. "I didn't want to let it die either. I was just so hurt."

He cupped her face with both hands and leaned in to kiss her. "I don't want you hurt. Marry me, Beth. Let me fix all of it and make it better. Let's build another house together and start a family someday, baby. Can we do that? Please?"

She leaned against him and closed her eyes. Nothing sounded better.

"And when things get rough?" she mumbled against his lips.

"We talk about it and work on it together."

"You promise?" She slid her hand between their bodies and cupped his cock, squeezing it as she ran her nails up the swell of his sack.

"Fuck yes." He licked at her mouth and shifted his hips, pressing himself against her hand. "Let me make love to you tonight. Don't deny me."

"I don't think I could if I wanted to." She nipped at his lips and leaned back, pulling her hands up to rest in front of her. "I don't want to ever take this off again. Don't ask me to."

"Never. I swear it." He reached out and plucked the ring from her before sliding it onto her left hand and leaning down to kiss it. "You're mine forever. Don't ever run from me again."

“I won’t.” She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Make love to me after dinner. Fuck me now.”

“Hell yeah,” he growled and picked her up, walking back toward the bedroom as he kissed her with a passion that left her insides trembling. “You’re all mine tonight, pussycat.”

She clung to him and licked at his mouth as he growled low in his chest, the promise one that she was more than happy to hold him to.

CHAPTER 91



BETHANY

She laid on the bed as he moved around the room. There were a million things she wanted to say, but he'd laid her down and told her to hush the minute she started asking questions. There was nothing left to do but watch him walk around the room, lighting candles. She'd pulled his shirt from him as he kissed her before getting up, which left the view from her vantage point beyond spectacular. Thick muscles bunched up as he reached up to pull the curtains closed. His arms and back were beautifully sculpted, as was his chest and stomach.

He glanced over his shoulder and gave her a sexy smile. "What are you thinking, Beth?"

"I was wondering what kind of pasta we were going to make." She tried hard not to smile in the middle of her fib, but much like her mother always warned her, the devil made you smile each time you lied.

"Oh yeah?" He turned around and unbuttoned his slacks, pushing them over his hips and letting them fall to the ground. The sexy bastard didn't have on underwear, which was less than surprising.

Her eyes moved down his body, coveting every part of him. He was well endowed and as naughty as it was, one of the things she would have missed about him was the way he forced her to take all of him, regardless of whether she thought herself capable of doing it. It was exhilarating.

“Your nipples budding so tightly against your dress tell a different story.” He reached down and stroked himself as he walked toward the bed.

“What story do they tell?” She moved to her knees and crawled to the edge of the bed as excitement raced through her center and played with the most sensitive parts of her body.

He stopped in front of her and reached out, brushing his fingers over the tops of her shoulders and down her arms. Chill bumps ran rampant on her exposed skin. He took his time, touching her everywhere as he reached for the bottom of her dress. He pulled it over her head and took a deep breath. “Wow. So fucking beautiful.”

“You’re avoiding answering me. Why?” She slid her hands up his strong chest and cupped his neck. She couldn’t help but revel in the softness of his skin and the way his muscles clenched under her feather-light touch.

“You already know the answer to that question, you bad girl.” He leaned in, wrapping his arms around her and undid her bra before leaning over to worship her breasts one at a time. The tenderness in his touch was almost surprising after her request for him to unleash every bit of himself all over her. Maybe he wasn’t capable of separating the lust and love anymore. The thought caused her heart to flutter as gratefulness rolled over her.

“Thank you,” she whispered and kissed the side of his face as he rolled his tongue around her nipple and pulled it deep into his mouth, flicking it hard a few times.

She groaned and ran her fingers through his hair as he pulled back and glanced up. “For what, baby?”

“For giving us another chance.” She pulled him down for a long kiss, giving herself over to him and trying like hell to push as much passion into the kiss as she could.

He nipped at her lips and stood back up as he pressed the back of his fingers against her stomach.

“You have nothing to thank me for, Beth. Both of us made mistakes and misunderstood the other. I should have been

more open with you. This is as much my fault as anyone's." He glanced down where his hand rested and smiled. "Tell me you're wet for me."

She nodded. "I always am when you're around. I hated myself for it when we weren't getting along, but it didn't matter how I felt. You've captured my body in a way I can't begin to explain."

"Then don't try to." He slid his fingers into the top of her panties and forced them down until he brushed through her wetness. He licked his lips and lifted his gaze to hers. "Lay back. I wanna clean that up for you."

"Damon, let's do that later. I want-"

"Good. You'll get anything you want, but I'm a greedy bastard, and I haven't stopped thinking about tasting you." He pushed softly at her shoulder. "Lay back and let me taste you."

She moved back and laid down as a shiver ran down her spine.

He reached up and pulled her panties slowly down her legs as his eyes dragged across her. The way he watched her left her without a doubt in her mind that he planned on taking his time and forcing her to remember that if nothing else, they had this. This burning passion that left her insides fuming, her inhibitions lost to his demands.

"I want to touch every part of you." He ran his hand up her stomach, between her breasts and gripped the base of her throat lightly. "There's a huge part of me that wants to hear you scream, to feel you cry out for more and more of me. Does that girl exist anymore?"

"Yes," she whispered roughly and bent her knees, rubbing them along his sides as he leaned down and pressed his mouth to the soft skin just below her breasts. "I want all of that with you."

"Good girl." He brushed his nose down her stomach and pressed his mouth to her mound, flicking his tongue over her clit as she cried out and arched her back. The intensity of having him between her legs again was almost too much. He

was so much more than she'd ever expected to end up with, but after having him and losing him again, she was ready to pony up, to put up anything it would take for him to feel as if he'd met his match.

She sunk her fingers into his hair and let her knees fall to the side, rolling her hips as he took his time lapping at her soft skin. He groaned and sunk two fingers deep inside her as she worked herself against them.

“Harder,” she murmured and extended her hands toward the top of the bed to grab a pillow. She wanted to see him better, to watch him enjoy himself in the ways that only he could.

“So demanding.” He brushed his lips down her sex and glanced up at her before sucking her skin back into his mouth. “Just tell me what you want if I don't give it to you. I don't want to leave you wanting for anything.”

She nodded and rolled her hips again as the delicious burn of orgasm resurrected in her stomach. There is no way in hell she could be with someone else after being with Damon. No one would love her the way he did.

“I'm so close,” she groaned and gripped the sheets as he mumbled across her skin and worked her harder. The cry that left her almost frightened her. It was needy and filled with angst.

“More.” He groaned and licked at her as his eyes moved up to lock onto hers. The sexy look on his face combined with the soft press of his tongue and wicked hard pumping of his fingers caused her to buckle as she came again.

She rode the high as he continued to stoke it. “No more.” She pushed at his shoulder with her foot and rolled over onto her stomach, squeezing her legs together and pressing her face to the cold sheets as she panted for air.

“So fucking hot, Beth.” He slid his hand up the back of her thighs and squeezed before crawling up on the bed with her. “I want you to ride me tonight.” He pressed himself down on top

of her and leaned down to kiss her neck and the back of her shoulders. “Can you do that for me, baby?”

“Anything you want.” She forced herself to calm down a little. Her heart was racing so fast that it felt like it was trying to break free from her chest.

“Good. I want to see you enjoy yourself.” He moved off of her and laid on his back, reaching for her as she moved up to her hands and knees.

“I’m sorry about being a bitch the last time we-”

“No.” He lifted his finger toward her and pressed it to her lips. “No more apologies tonight, baby. I was a cock to think that sex would fix everything. It makes me feel whole and complete when we make love, but that doesn’t mean you feel the same.”

She moved toward him and straddled his waist. The thick press of his erection against her sensitive skin felt good. Too good. She arched her back and rubbed herself along his shaft as he reached up and gripped her sides just above her hips. She wanted to apologize again, but she was just incredibly sensitive to making things work this time around.

“Do you have a condom?” She pressed her hands into his thick chest and rocked against him. A whimper slipped from her lips as he lifted her a little and thrust, pressing himself into her a little as she cried out.

“No. We don’t need one. You and I are going to start a family when you’re ready. If it’s tonight, so be it.” He slid one hand up her side until he gripped the side of her throat. “Press back and take my dick, Beth. It’s all yours. Every inch of it belongs to you.”

The sound of his voice accompanied with his wicked words left her body opening up quicker than she thought possible. She pressed back and lifted her chin toward the ceiling as stars danced around the edge of her vision.

“I love it so much.” She bounced on him a little as he helped set the rhythm by moving her hips.

“Good, baby.” He sat up and wrapped his arms around her as she gripped his shoulders and let every ounce of emotion from the last few weeks pour into their sex. “Let go with me. Forget about everything but us, Beth. It’s just you and me, and I want your pleasure more than my next breath.”

She whimpered again and lifted up before impaling herself with his thickness over and over. The sweet press of his mouth against the top of her breasts only added to the feeling of him holding her as if he might lose her again.

“I’m tired,” she murmured.

“I bet. It’s been a long day.” He picked her up and rolled them over, pressing her to the bed beneath him. “Just hold on to me and let me take care of you. I’m so proud of how strong you were today.”

“You are?” She wrapped her legs around him and dug her nails into his back as he rolled his hips, massaging her as he worked himself deep inside of her.

“So much, baby.” He licked the side of her neck and pressed his mouth against her ear. “Come for me again. I want to feel your body contracting around me. Lose yourself in me.”

“I want to.” She glanced up and locked gazes with him. The love she found in his expression was overwhelming. To have almost lost him left her emotionally bent over. “Don’t leave me.”

He brushed her hair back and pressed his chest to hers as he rocked against her, forcing her to open her legs wider for him.

“Never. Not in a million years. You’re stuck, baby.” He brushed his lips by hers before kissing her with a need that caused her heart to heal. She held on to him with all she had in her as he continued to make love to her throughout the night. The sound of him losing himself more than once left her yearning for the chance to hear it again.

He dropped back on the bed a few hours later, and she crawled back onto his lap, her back to him. “One more time.”

“Fuck.” He gripped the top curve of her ass and lifted his hips, impaling her again. “Do whatever you want, Beth. Anything.”

“I want you to come for me again.” She glanced back as his eyes rolled back in his head.

“Then make it happen, lover.” He ran his fingers down her lower back and smiled. “I know you can.”

“Oh yeah. I know I can too.” She pulled from her last bit of energy and pressed her hands to his thick thighs as she removed any concern about how she looked or what he might think. He was confident in bed and deserved a woman that was too. She could be that woman, no, she wanted to, and she would.

CHAPTER 92



DAMON

He laid on the bed beside her for what felt like forever the next morning. Nothing could have pulled him from her side other than the house burning down around them. Dinner never happened the night before, but he had plenty of stuff in the fridge for a great breakfast. She loved omelets, and he'd paid close attention over the last few months on what she liked in hers. She'd be surprised for sure seeing that they'd never talked about it before.

It was the little things. The communication between them was going to have to improve, but the little things would be a balm for the times when things got fucked up, and they would. There was almost no way around that. Sometimes life threw shit at him, and his only reaction was to be an asshole to anyone and everyone. It wasn't that he chose that reaction, it just happened. After thirty-one years of being the guy he was, it wasn't going to change overnight, but he sure as hell would work on apologizing and not directing too much of it toward her if he could help it.

"I love you so much," he whispered and reached over to pull the covers over her back. He kissed the side of her face and got up. His slacks were on the floor, but pajama pants sounded like the better option. He only had two hours before he needed to be ready to head to Amanda's funeral. He pulled his pants over his legs and tied the drawstring tight before looking for his phone.

The text on it was from Matt, just checking in. He texted his brother back that he would see him at Amanda's funeral.

He quickly gave him the name of the church too, seeing that Matt was too much of a knucklehead to figure anything out on his own.

“Or maybe I’m just not giving him enough credit.” Damon brushed his fingers by his lips and pressed the button for Kendal.

“Hey, man. What’s up?” Kendal sounded better, not good, but not nearly as lifeless as he had since Amanda passed.

“I was just calling to make sure you didn’t want me to come get you this morning.” Damon walked to the fridge, opened it and pulled out the various items he’d need to make breakfast.

“No. I’m able to get myself there. I was trying to decide between a black tie and a blue one. This is why I should already be married. I can never get the color scheme right for anything.”

“Black for a funeral.” Damon turned and leaned against the counter. “Is Dana coming today?”

“I would assume so, though I really wish she wouldn’t.” Kendal sighed softly. “She would come even if something hadn’t started between us. She was one of Mandy’s nurses and the two of them connected.”

“That’s awesome. It’s nice to know your sister had people watching out for her all of the time.”

“That’s true. I’ll see you there, okay?”

“All right.”

“Hey. Damon.”

“What?”

“Is Bethany coming? Have you talked to her since yesterday? Did you guys end up going out for dinner?”

“Whoa. That’s a lot of questions. I should charge you for information gathering.”

“Answer the questions, man. I just didn’t want her to feel like I didn’t invite her. I forgot to mention it yesterday at the

courthouse with everything going on.”

“She’s coming today. She spent the night last night. We worked everything out. I mean, we certainly have a long way to go to repair all the damage we both did to the relationship, but we agree on the fact that we’re willing to work on it. She’s wearing the ring again, and I didn’t have to pin her to the ground to force it on her finger.”

“Good. Damn, at least something is working out in the world.”

“Yeah, I’m stupid blessed. I’ll see you in a couple of hours. You know all you have to do is call if you decide you can’t get yourself up there. I’ll drop everything and come get you, man.”

“I know. That’s why you’re my best friend.”

“See you soon.” Damon dropped the call, set his phone down and worked on breakfast. The sound of someone walking into the kitchen behind him caused him to smile. He glanced back to see Beth wearing one of his white button down shirts, and it would seem nothing else.

Her hair was an unruly mess, her pretty mouth a little swollen from his licking and kissing at it all night. He could imagine what the rest of her beautiful body looked like.

“Sleep good, baby?” He walked across the kitchen and pulled her into his arms.

“Like a baby, funny enough.” She wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned into the kiss. “I need to go home to grab something to wear for the funeral. You want me to take one of your cars or can you run me over there?”

“Whatever you want me to do. I made you breakfast. Eat real quick while I change and then we’ll go.”

She inhaled as if trying to discern what breakfast he’d made. “Smells divine.”

“It’s a ham, egg and mushroom omelet with cheddar cheese on top like you like.” He kissed the tip of her nose, released her and walked toward the bedroom. “Enjoy.”

“Wow. You did this for me?” she called after him.

“Yeah. I figure I’d better stop saying how much I love you and start proving it.” He chuckled. “You could always wear this pretty dress in here on the floor. It’s wrinkled, but I could throw it in the dryer for you.”

“That’s a good idea. You think it looks good enough for a funeral?”

“Yeah. It’s perfect.” He closed the door to the bathroom and turned on the shower. He needed to wash the scent of their lust off of himself before changing. Nothing sounded better than calling her in to join him, but they’d never make it to the funeral in time.

Sadness welled up inside his chest as he let the hot water run across his skin. Kendal would have a hard time holding it together at the service, which was completely expected, but there was nothing that bent Damon over more than seeing someone he loved suffer.

At least Beth would be there beside him. Just a quick glance her way and he would be forced to consider the future. It was finally bright again now that she was back in the picture. Did she want a bigger house than the one he had? And how many kids? He smiled at the thoughts running through his mind. Never in a million years had he considered truly settling down with someone.

He finished up and got out about the time she walked in. “You getting in?”

“Yeah, just real quick.” She reached for him and kissed him a few times. “Thank you for making me breakfast. It was delicious. The best omelet I’ve ever had.”

“Good. I wanted you to enjoy yourself this morning like I did last night.” A nefarious grin slid up his face as he chuckled.

She shook her head and pulled his shirt over her head, leaving her beautiful ass on display. “You’re so corrupt.”

“You like it.”

“No, I love it.” She glanced over her shoulder as she got into the shower. “What are your plans after the funeral?”

“I need to swing by the office to talk with my dad today if he’s up for it. I know he’s got a conference call with a company that’s overseas and has no concept of taking off for a weekend.” He snorted and reached for his comb, running it through his hair a few times. “I want to try and clear the air between us.”

Bethany poked her head out of the shower. “Clear the air? Did something happen?”

“From when my mother died. My father is still upset with me for not going to the funeral, and not that anything could probably change that, but I need to get all of it off of my chest. I don’t want to let the pain of that shit continue to ruin my life. I can’t afford it anymore. I won’t take the chance of having it fester further and hurt this thing between you and me. It’s not worth it.”

“Do you want me to go with you?” The earnest sweetness in her voice melted him a little farther, as if possible.

“No. I need to close down the old hurt by myself. I’m honestly not sure if my dad knows that my mom slept around, and I wouldn’t want to bring that up with anyone in the room but the two of us.” Damon turned to face her instead of watching her in the mirror’s reflection. “I have no clue how he’s going to react.”

“Something tells me that with as much as your father loves you, no matter how he reacts, the two of you will work it out.”

“I hope you’re right.” He tightened the towel around his waist and walked out of the bathroom, rehearsing the same conversation that had run through his mind a million times over the last ten years. No matter the outcome, it was time to be truthful and give himself rest from carrying around the burden alone.



“Thanks for coming today.” Kendal reached out and pulled Damon into a hug.

“Of course, man.” Damon squeezed him and moved back to let Beth get in a quick hug as well. The pretty dark-haired girl standing just off to his left seemed to be trying not to watch Kendal too closely.

“Guys, this is Dana Young. She was one of Mandy’s nurses and is a friend of mine.” He put his hand on the girl’s lower back as Damon smiled and shook her hand.

“Nice to meet you. I think we got to see each other earlier this week at the hospital.” He smiled as she nodded. She looked a lot like Ana, but there was no way in hell Damon was going to mention it. The fact that Kendal was touching the girl was a good sign. Maybe Kendal had taken Damon’s advice and figured out a way to have love in his life despite the fact that it might hurt his career again. If not, the man was in the wrong damn career.

“We did.” Dana smiled back and turned to Beth.

“I guess we should sit down.” Damon glanced down at his girl as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder. He glanced back up to Kendal. “We’ll let all of your extended family sit up here with you, and my family will be a few rows backs if you need us, okay?”

“Just remember that you’re a pallbearer.”

“I know.” Damon walked Beth to the back, and they sat down next to an elderly couple who still seemed very much in love. Damon took Beth’s hand and brought it to his lips, kissing her fingers a few times. The fact that she had her ring back on her finger gave him more peace than he thought possible.

How quickly they both were moving away from not working things out and letting go of what could possibly be the best thing life had to offer them.

“I love you,” he whispered softly and kissed the side of her head as she snuggled against him.

“I love you too.” She turned and kissed him once before settling in beside him.

The preacher walked in, and Damon turned his attention from Beth to the front. He was grateful that Kendal had decided against an open-casket funeral. Seeing Amanda up front while the service was going on would have been too much. Especially for her older brother.

CHAPTER 93



BETHANY

Bethany held her breath as the funeral started. There seemed nothing worse in life than death to most people, but she'd been through a few days that felt like death might be a reprieve of sorts. The preacher was opening the service as Matt moved in quietly to sit beside her. Her mom and Kent were beside him, all of them trying to get into the pew as quietly as possible.

"Morning," Matt whispered as he reached over and gave her a quick hug.

She smiled and leaned forward, reaching out and squeezing her mom's hand too. Her mother eyed her and Damon, nodded and turned back toward the front.

"We're gathered here today to celebrate the life of Amanda Tarrington." A few snuffles lifted up around the room, and Bethany couldn't help but hurt for Kendal. Without his mom and dad, Amanda was the only family he had left, or so Damon had told her on the way to the funeral.

She reached over and took Matt's hand into hers. She still had her family with her, but how quickly it had started to dwindle before her eyes over something stupid and trivial. She'd have to be on guard with her wayward feelings and Damon's quirks. There was no way in hell she was going to let them get back to where they were before last night.

The preacher had spoken for a few more minutes before he called Kendal up.

Bethany's eyes lingered on the dark-haired nurse that sat beside him on the front row. Who was she? Was Kendal in love with her?

"I just wanted to thank you guys again for coming. My sister has been fighting MS for a very long time, and yet I can't help but wish she were still in that fighting stage. I know it's selfish, but I miss her already." He glanced up toward the ceiling and paused as Bethany's heart broke in her chest. "At twenty-five, you never expect life to be over. I guess what I want to say is that she was loved so much by me and everyone that walked into her hospital room. She'll be missed forever, and if there is something that Mandy would have said to us, it's to live your life to the fullest each day. I struggle with that, but she was right. We never know if tomorrow is coming or not, so live for today. Thanks."

Bethany reached up and wiped at her tears as Kendal wiped at his and made his way back to his pew.

The preacher went through the rest of the ceremony, and one of Kendal's cousins sang a beautiful old hymn that had most of the church in tears. Damon leaned over and kissed her cheek close to the end.

"I have to help out. See you outside when it's over. Just stay with Matt." He smiled and kissed her cheek again.

She started to respond with something cheeky about being a grown woman and not needing Matt or any other man to walk her outside, but she let it go. He was only trying to make sure she was taken care of. It was a good thing.

He got up, and Matt wrapped his arm around Bethany's shoulder. She snuggled against him and followed Damon with her eyes as he and several other guys moved to the front.

Kendal took the time to hug each of them before moving to lift Amanda's casket from the stand where it sat.

Everyone waited for the preacher to say his final words and the guys to move down the center aisle with Amanda before standing up. Bethany wanted to turn and talk to Matt, to

dive into something other than the death of a girl her age. It weighed heavy on her like it did on everyone in the room.

She moved out into the aisle after the family cleared the room and glanced back to make sure Matt was behind her. His dark blue eyes filled with warmth as he smiled.

“Hey, sis.”

“Hey,” she mumbled quietly and turned to walk out of the church. The sun was sitting high in the sky, but the cool breeze of fall made the day pleasant in a way that was hard to get in late October in Texas.

“What happens now?” Bethany’s mom moved up and pulled her into a hug as she turned.

“We go to the graveside, and the preacher says a few more things.” Kent moved in for a quick hug after her mom. “How are you this morning, Bethany?”

“Good.” She glanced up at Kent. “Really good.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” He smiled down at her and released her to wrap his arms around her mother.

Matt rolled his shoulders and glanced down at her. “You and Damon make up?”

“Yeah. Something like that.” She turned to face her step-brother and lifted her eyebrow. “What’s going on with you and Erica?”

“Nothing? Everything? I don’t know. I had a great time with her for the weekend, but it’s all too much.” He brushed his hands over the swell of his chest. He’d been working out in his spare time from what she could tell.

“Too much? I’m not sure I understand.” She put her hand on her hip. “Tell me what happened.”

“No.” He winked and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “There isn’t anything to tell. She still scares the fuck out of me, and I’m avoiding her until I figure out how to get over my fears.”

“Avoiding her? I’m not sure that would go over very well.”

“It’s not.” He nodded toward the car. “You want to ride with us out to the graveside?”

“Yeah. That sounds good.” She turned her head a little to find Damon.

He waved before getting into a long black stretch limousine with Kendal and the other pallbearers.

“I care about Erica, and am probably a little obsessed with her, though I’d never admit it to anyone but you and Damon.”

“But?” Bethany glanced up at her brother.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “I feel like if we let ourselves, we’d both be consumed by the other. It’s not fair to her or me.”

“You’re making no sense at all.” She pulled from his hold and reached for the door.

“Then it’s a normal day, and all is right in the world.” Matt wagged his eyebrows and walked to the other side of the car.

As much as Beth wanted to push the conversation, it was more than obvious that she wasn’t going to get anywhere with him. He wasn’t scared of Erica necessarily, but of the feelings that existed between the two of them. It could be a powerful relationship, something like she and Damon had, but there was no way Matt was going to let that happen. For some reason, the handsome nugget-head felt the need to protect himself.

Protect himself from love?

Weirder things had happened.



The graveside service was much faster, and everyone seemed okay until the end. The preacher looked down at the front row where Kendal sat and offered him a rose. Bethany couldn’t hear what the man said from where she was standing off to the side with the rest of her family, but Kendal took the flower and stood up.

The preacher turned and walked to the head of the casket, bending down and grabbing a handful of dirt. He sprinkled it over the shiny black box. “Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.”

Kendal moved up next and paused with his back to everyone. He was speaking, but it was impossible to hear what he was saying. The soft sound of crying rose up and almost tore Bethany in two.

She glanced over toward Damon, who moved forward to stand beside his best friend. He paused as Dana got up from her seat and moved up beside Kendal instead.

Kendal’s back shook as his shoulders rounded, and he laid the flower down. Dana wrapped her arms around him and pressed her cheek against his shoulder, holding him while he said goodbye to his little sister.

Bethany moved toward the back of the crowd as Damon walked toward her with tears in his eyes.

“Shit. I hate this kind of stuff,” he whispered roughly and pulled her into his arms. He leaned down and kissed her a few times before tucking his handsome face against her neck. “I wish I could take it from him.”

“Me too, but it seems like someone is going to help him move past it better than either you or I could.” She kissed Damon’s face and snuggled against him as he moved back and took his place beside her.

Dana still had her arms around Kendal as they walked from the grave toward the car.

Damon released Beth and walked after them, moving in front of the couple and giving his best friend a long hug. Bethany watched them from the side, letting the moment touch her heart in ways that it needed to be touched. Damon was a good man with a rough past, but he was willing to try and be someone better, someone different in all areas of his life.

That was all she could ask for.

She reached for him as he walked back to her a few minutes later. “Let’s go have lunch with our family and then we can take a nap. That sound good?”

He nodded. "I was going to talk with my dad today, but I got a text in the car that the Zarpeth team needs me to come sign off on a few things and help them work through one more kink. I'll eat with you guys and then get on a plane and head down to Florida."

"You're leaving?" She groaned and ran her hands up his chest. "I don't want you to go."

He smirked and leaned down to kiss her nose. "Then come with me."

"I'm not ready to make a decision about working at McKenzie and Bryant yet, Damon. I don't want to be pushed into making it either."

Matt walked up beside her. "So I heard you quit? Holy hell, I thought that place was like Hotel California. You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave."

Damon gave his brother a 'kiss my ass' look, and Bethany couldn't help but chuckle. The two of them were too cute together. Nothing alike and yet got along incredibly well most of the time.

"You don't have to come down there to work, baby. Just come with me so we can spend time together. You can go to the beach later today and tomorrow while I'm in the office." He pulled her close and leaned down to brush his lips against hers. "I'll even let you bring Matt if he promises to behave."

She glanced over at Matt and smiled. "You wanna go have some daiquiris and lay on the beach with me in Florida today?"

"Does it mean I don't have to make any big decisions in my own life?" Matt gave her a lopsided smile.

"That's pretty much every day in your life." Kent walked up and laughed before looking down at Bethany's mom. "You wanna take these kids to lunch together before I have to run up to the office for that call?"

"Absolutely." Bethany's mom moved out of Kent's hold and pulled Beth into a hug as the boys walked toward the car. "I can't imagine losing you at this age. I know Kendal's

parents are already gone, but maybe that's a good thing. There's one thing a mother should never have to do, and that's bury one of her babies."

"I agree." Beth rested her cheek against her mother's shoulder, letting the older woman cry a little as she clung to Beth. There were a million things to tell her about her relationship with Damon and such but now wasn't the time.

"I love you, baby." Her mom kissed the side of her head.

"Me too." She rested against her mom, grateful that if nothing else, this would always be a safe place to land.

CHAPTER 94



DAMON

Damon stood over the sink, washing dishes and listening to the sounds of his family laughing behind him. Martha had the day off to be with her son since he was graduating from college. Damon almost felt guilty for not being there beside her. She'd been a part of his father's household since he was a boy.

"What are you thinking about, handsome?" Bethany slid her hands around his waist and pressed herself against his back.

He closed his eyes, letting himself fully experience the warmth that radiated off of her. How in the world he thought himself capable of moving on without her beside him was a fucking joke. He'd have hated the man he would have become if their relationship didn't work out. He was already slipping back into being a full-time asshole.

"Martha. Her son is graduating college today." He turned off the faucet and grabbed a hand towel, wiping his hands and turning around to face her.

His father glanced up from talking with Karen and smiled. "I sent flowers to her house this morning as a congratulations from us. She knew we were at Amanda's funeral."

"Oh, good." Damon wrapped his arms around Beth and smiled down at her. "You need to go grab something to wear to the beach. We gotta get going."

"Do I need a fancy outfit for dinner tonight?" She rubbed the small of his back and tightened her arms around him as she

watched him in a way that left his body yearning for another romp in the sheets.

“Just something casual. I’m not sure what the schedule is going to look like yet.” He glanced up as Matt walked into the kitchen. “You got enough stuff here to pack for the overnight trip?”

“Yeah. Do I need something other than shorts, t-shirts, and flip-flops?” He gave Damon a goofy grin.

“No. That works perfectly.” He turned his attention back to Beth. “You need me to run you by your place before we head to the airport?”

“That would be great.” She lifted to her toes and surprised him with a long kiss. The sound of Matt grunting and walking out of the kitchen with false disgust was always a delight to hear.

Damon moved everyone along, and twenty minutes later had Beth in the car beside him and Matt in the back. They’d swing by and get Beth’s clothes and get on a flight to Florida.

“You think Kendal is going to be okay?” Beth’s voice was soft as if she were lost deep in thought.

“I think he will eventually. It’s going to take some time.” Damon swallowed his worry and reached for her hand. “I think that pretty girl standing next to him at the casket today might help speed up that healing if he lets her.”

“How pretty?” Beth gave him a look before laughing softly.

“Nothing compared to you.”

Matt groaned in the backseat. “Am I really going to have to watch you guys be lovey-dovey all damn weekend?”

“Yep,” Beth and Damon answered in tandem.

Matt made another noise and flopped down in the backseat. The sound of deep breathing filled the car a few minutes later, and Damon chuckled as Bethany looked his way.

“Is he seriously asleep?” she asked.

Damon nodded and pulled up in front of her apartment. “Yep. When he was little and would get all wound up, which was all the fucking time, Mom and Dad would put us in the car. Me with a word puzzle, and Matt with a blanket. They’d drive around the block a few times, and by the time we got back home, Matt would be sound asleep.”

“I hope we get a kid that trick works on.” She gave him a cute smile and got out of the car.

He reached over and popped her on the butt as she yelped, gave him a look and closed the door.

“Damn, I love you, woman,” he mumbled under his breath as he watched her jog toward her apartment door. Reaching up, he pulled the rearview mirror down and studied his brother. Why in the world was the idiot running from Erica? Damon had known the woman for the last few years, and she was perfect for Matt, but Matt would have to come to that conclusion on his own. There was nothing Damon, or anyone else could do to sway the sleeping giant.

Damon jolted as the door opened and Beth got back in. “Wow. That was fast.”

“I figured I only needed a few things seeing that we’re going together. I was hoping that most of the trip would be in the nude?” She gave him a cheeky smile and buckled up.

He leaned over, slipped his hand into her hair and brought her toward him for a long string of kisses. His pulse spiked as the smell of her skin filled his senses and left him wanting so much more than he was going to get of her in the car. Especially with Matthew in the backseat.

“Let’s go before I turn the car off and force you to take a quick detour into your apartment with me.” He moved back to his seat, adjusted himself and started the car.

“And that would be a bad idea because...”

He growled and pulled out of the parking lot quickly before he changed his mind. Matt was so out of it that he wouldn’t miss them, but the text from Florida sounded like the

shit might hit the fan over the Zarpeth account before it was all said and done. If that were the case, the quickie with Beth would have to wait.



“Why do you keep biting your lip and fidgeting? You okay?” Damon reached for Bethany’s hand as they walked off the plane in Florida.

“I don’t know. I just hate the idea of you going into work and Delilah throwing out her web of lies.” Beth shrugged and wrapped her arm around the back of Damon’s waist as they walked toward the black Lexus that sat off to the side of the private runway for them.

Matt moved up beside them. “I told you that woman is a viper. Dad should have never hired her. I bet she’s working up some fucked up concoction now to bring you down to your knees, bro.”

Damon glanced over at his brother and scowled. “Right. You’re not helping right now.”

“Oh shit. Sorry.” Matt gave them a sheepish look and walked toward the trunk of the car, popping it and reaching for Beth’s bag after tossing his into the back.

“You guys need help?” Beth asked as Damon released her and handed her bag to Matt.

“No, just get in the car, baby.” Damon waited until she was in the car to turn his attention to his little brother. “We’re working through our shit, but please don’t say anything that would cause her to be upset or worried, all right? Just help me keep things on an even flow until I take care of this shit with Delilah and get things back to normal.”

“Are you firing the beast?”

“She’s not a beast.” Damon chuckled and reached up to shut the trunk. “She was one of my best friends as a kid, Matt; you know this.”

“She’s always had it out for you. You know this. The woman would sell her soul and all of your future children’s feet to belong to you. Don’t be naive. That’s my role in this life.” Matt wagged his eyebrows and walked around to the other side of the car. “Get rid of her. Seriously.”

“I plan to.” Damon opened the door and got in, moving close to Beth and reaching for her hand.

“What were you two planning back there?” She smiled up at him.

“How to cut Delilah down at the knees and kick her off the island.” Matt gave Beth a wide grin as Damon narrowed his eyes at his brother.

“Really?” he grumbled and leaned back in his seat.

The driver turned around and nodded. “To the office, Mr. Bryant?”

“No. The Omni hotel first to drop these two off and then the office.” Damon let out a soft sigh, hating the fact that Beth wasn’t going to be working in the office with him anymore, and yet totally understanding why. Maybe it was a good thing that they wouldn’t have to behave in a specific setting. If all they had to be was engaged no matter where they were, then things had to get easier. It was the stress of having to be professional with his lover in the middle of the office setting that made things incredibly tense.

“You don’t have to fire her if you don’t want to, Damon. You need to make that call yourself.” Beth squeezed his leg and gave him a reassuring smile. “Don’t do it for me, okay?”

Matt chuckled. “Yeah, do it for me.”

“Stop.” Damon gave him a look, though Matt let it roll off his broad shoulders just like he always did. “I’ll deal with it when I get into the office. I want to make sure I have the proper documentation to let her go. She’s a devious bitch and has already started to pull my team apart, but I honestly can’t imagine why. What good would it do her? She’s been wanting to work for the firm forever. She’s ruining that opportunity right now.”

“She doesn’t give two shits about the firm, and you know it,” Matt mumbled and turned to look out the window closest to him. “Don’t be blinded by friendship, Damon.”

He bit his tongue and shook his head, unwilling to attack his brother again. Matt was right in a lot of ways, but there were parts of Delilah that didn’t at all resemble the woman she was slowly becoming. Where Damon belonged solely to Beth, it didn’t mean that he didn’t want to salvage whatever was left of his old friend. Sadly enough, there was probably not much to salvage, and even if there were, what would it cost him to do it?

“We’re here, sir.” The driver glanced back and nodded. “The Omni hotel.”

“You guys be safe and stick together. I got Linda to get us two rooms.” Damon turned his attention from Beth up to Matt. “Don’t let her go to the beach alone. You know this place is nutty.”

“Got it.” Matt got out of the car and moved back, waiting on Beth.

“I love you.” She leaned toward Damon, touching the side of his face and pulling him into a sweet kiss.

“Me more,” he mumbled against her mouth and cupped her neck, kissing her a few more times.

“Hey. I ain’t getting any younger out here.” Matt chuckled.

“Be careful, okay?” Damon brushed his nose by hers. “Promise me.”

“I promise.” She nipped at his lips. “Do whatever you think is best with the situation at work. Don’t let me or Matt sway you, okay?”

“All right.” Damon waited until she got out of the car to pull out his phone. He texted Ben that he wanted everyone on the team pulled together for a quick meeting when he got there. Time to close down the job and have everyone sign off on what they’d done.

If there were issues, he would solve them.

If Delilah needed to be fired, he would do it, but it wouldn't be in Florida. It would be sitting in his father's office back in Texas where they should be for such an event.

Maybe after he fixed everything to be as it should be in the office, Bethany would come back. If not, he was okay with it, but there was still some small hope that his girl would be just down the hall from him. He spent too damn much time at work not to have her close by.

But even if she still decided that M&B wasn't the place for her, he'd take a page out of James Talling's book and hire a few more strong executives. There was no way he was letting the momentum between him and Beth go.

Not then.

Not ever.

CHAPTER 95



BETHANY

“O kay, so this was the best idea, ever.” Matt glanced over and gave Beth a cute smile.

“Right?” She reached out and took his hand. “I know it might sound sappy, but I’m really glad you’re in my life.”

His expression softened as they stopped in the sand by the surf. “Me too. I’ve always wanted a sister, honestly. You’re exactly the type of sister I wanted too, but I do wish we would have grown up together. I’d have *loved* to have someone to blame all the shit Damon, and I did on.”

She laughed and released his hand before spreading out her blanket and lying down. “Tell me about your deal with Jonathan. Is he going to have a showing that features your work soon?”

Matt dropped down in the sand next to her and wadded up his towel. “Yeah. He said later this fall. I want to get excited about all the great stuff happening, but I can’t seem to move past this lump in my chest.” He rubbed his chest and glanced down at her.

“And that lump represents what?” She put on her sunglasses and cupped her hands behind her head.

“I don’t know. I messed things up with Erica, and my indecision to call her has probably pissed her off something horrible. She’s hostile like Damon when she’s pissed, and I hate confrontation more than anything else.” He turned to face the ocean. “I could fall in love with her so easily, Bethany. She’s perfect in a million ways, and she has this artist inside of

her that's starving for air. I want so badly to help her find an outlet for all of that."

"So stop being scared and call her." She reached over and rubbed his side with the back of her fingers. "She's totally into you."

"I asked her if I could paint a picture of her." He lifted his chin toward the sky. "She's nude in it."

"Oh. Wow." Bethany stifled the smile that rose on her face. Matt wasn't being silly or cheeky. He was hurting.

"Yeah. She's fucking magnificent too. I can still see her standing there with her back to me. It leaves my heart racing and chill bumps all over my skin."

"So tell her that. What the heck are you waiting for?" Bethany groaned and sat up next to him. It would seem a quiet afternoon of sunbathing was a pipe dream, not that she minded. Helping Matt get his life on track would be something to delight in when looking back ten years from the future.

"I don't know." He glanced over at her as a group of girls jogged by in front of them, kicking up sand and having far too much fun.

"I think you're being stubborn and trying to protect yourself from something that doesn't even exist. It's like being afraid of the monster under your bed." She pushed her shoulder against his. "You totally miss out on the comfort of slowly getting into your cold sheets and enjoying the peace that most people find there because you're full of fear and catapulting from the door into the bed like an action hero. The monster doesn't exist. Stop letting him steal your joy and your peace."

"Wow. That was deep. You come up with that on your own?" He chuckled.

"I did." She beamed. "You need to call her, Matt. You can't spend the weekend with someone and not follow up with them. She's not just the woman you're falling for, but she's an integral part of McKenzie and Bryant. What if she decided

she'd had all she could handle of you jumping in and out of her life and left the firm?"

"Like you did?" He pressed his shoulder against hers, almost knocking her over.

"That is true." She pursed her lips. Had she left too quickly? It was almost childish now thinking back on it. So she had a problem with Delilah. So what? She loved working with Patrick, Ben, and Philip when she got the opportunity. Being down the hall from Damon was a dream come true when he wasn't acting like a dick, and the job itself was the type of job she'd always wanted. She'd gone to college to be an accountant in hopes of working for a prestigious firm like M&B one day.

Why had she been so quick to give that up? Was Damon being truthful in his hopes to have her come back and work beside him? It was the family business. Her family.

"Are you going to go back?" Matt asked before standing up.

"Are you going to call Erica?" She stood up beside him, smiling as a look of challenge moved across his handsome features.

"You join the firm, and I'll try and get up the nerve to call Erica and at least apologize for not calling. She knows I'm a flake and a half."

"That's no excuse. Did you guys sleep together?"

"Are you always this nosy?"

"Yes. I'm the little sister, remember?"

He snorted. "We did sleep together. It was honestly one of the best nights of my life. She's so good at-

"Hey." Bethany held up her hand. "I'm good with no details."

He laughed deep in his chest. "I wasn't going to give them. I just thought it would be fun to watch you squirm a little, and I was right. It was fun."

“Why are we standing up?” She glanced around, enjoying the coolness of the Florida beach and the warmth of the sun on her skin.

“I’m going in the water. Last one there is a rotten egg?”

“What are you fifteen?” She smirked.

“In here, I am.” He tapped the side of his head. “Come on. It’ll be fun.”

“It’s freezing out there.” She glanced toward the water, trying to calculate the perfect moment to bolt toward the water so she could get a head start. Matt had been running in the mornings with his best friend Sophie, which meant he probably had a better chance of winning between the two of them.

“So? You don’t have nuts that crawl back up in your body when it’s too cold. You don’t-”

“All right.” She bolted, running toward the water and kicking up sand as she did. Why there was something so freeing about acting like a child with Matt was beyond her, but there was. She might have been the sister he was hoping would show up someday, but she had no doubt that he would fulfill two roles in her life.

Brother and friend. There wasn’t much more she could ask for.



“It’s fine, baby.” Bethany pressed the phone to her ear as she stood in the hotel room and watched the world outside of her window. The ocean was beautiful at sunset, so romantic and calming.

“I thought I would come in and sign a few things and go over the documentation with the team, but we have one more glitch that’s looking more like a control issue. I have to help fix it. James is flying out and should be here any minute. You and Matt grab dinner?” Damon sighed, and she could tell that

he was less than thrilled with the fact that he wouldn't be joining her for dinner or bed.

"We will. Just do what you need to do and come snuggle up to me when you get in. That work?" She moved back and let the curtains fall into place.

"Yeah. I love you, baby."

Warmth filled every part of her as she closed her eyes and smiled. "Me more. See you in a little while."

She wanted to ask about Delilah but figured it wasn't the right time. Hanging up, she tossed the phone onto the bed and changed into something more casual that she planned to wear for the evening. There was no reason for her and Matt to go to dinner at a fancy place. They'd be much more comfortable hanging out at the edge of the beach, drinking beer and eating fish tacos.

She turned to walk into the bathroom as her phone started to ring. A smile lifted her lips as she bounded across the bed and dropped down on her stomach to answer it. It had to be Damon.

No. It was Jake.

"Hey. You okay?" Fear rushed through her heart as she pressed the phone to her ear. Where she and Jake had been close all throughout their undergrad degrees, they hadn't talked too much since the situation with Krista happened.

"Yeah, I'm doing great. I got out of my wheelchair over and over today during therapy and the best part? I did it on my own."

"That's great news." Bethany rolled onto her back and let out the breath she didn't realize she was holding. "You were so brave during the trial yesterday too."

Was it just yesterday? It seemed like a week ago. Was the funeral for Amanda just that morning?

"Thanks, Bethany. It sucked to high heaven. I know I should be angry at Krista, and part of me is, but there's a much bigger part that feels sorry for her. She's not the monster she

believes herself to be.” He took a shaky breath. “That’s why I’m calling.”

She sat up. “You want to bust her out of jail?”

He snorted. “No, silly. I want us to take turns going to visit her. She needs to know that we care about her.”

“Have you lost your mind? Where I agree totally about her not being a monster, I still don’t think it’s a good idea to have you go up there. I’ll go if you want me to, but you’re just going to give her a false sense of hope.”

“I don’t think so.” He paused.

“I do. She’s in love with you, and even if she attacked you because of not being on her meds, she still has that desire inside of her. Seeing you isn’t going to help anything. It’s going to hurt. Believe me when I say this, I know what it’s like to have to come face to face with someone you’re in love with but can’t have. It feels like a form of death. We’re not doing that to her.”

“Interesting. I didn’t think about it like that.”

“I’ll go.” She moved to the edge of the bed, not sure she was comfortable going to visit her old friend or not. “She’s not in love with me, and maybe if she and I grow close again, it would help her to heal.”

“She’s going to be in the mental hospital forever.” He let out a soft sigh. “I hate that so much. I feel like part of it is my fault.”

“It’s not your fault, and the hospital is better than jail, right?”

“I guess so.”

“I’ll go see her soon.”

“Come see me too?” There was hope in his voice, but she couldn’t tell if it was a friend needing a friend, or a man still in love with a ghost from his past.

“Yeah, absolutely, and call anytime, okay? I’m here for you.”

“I know you are. Thank you for that.”

Someone knocked at the door, and she got off the bed and wrapped her free arm around herself. “I have to run, but we’ll figure this out together, okay?”

“Thanks, Bethany. I knew I could count on you.”

She dropped the call and walked to the door to find Matt in a nice shirt and slacks. A chuckle bubbled up inside of her as he handed her a white rose.

“My brother called and said I was your date for the night. What do you fancy, my lady?”

She snorted and took the rose. “Beer and fish tacos at the bar down the street.”

“Oh thank God. I’ll be back in five. I’m going to change.” He winked, turned around and walked back to his room.

She couldn’t help but stand there and watch him go. Life was good, but it was about to turn the corner toward great.

CHAPTER 96



DAMON

“Do you have a minute?”

Damon glanced up at the sound of Delilah’s voice. The innocence on her face caused him to stiffen. She was up to something. What the fuck happened to the girl he grew up with? Bridget was always the one getting into shit and causing problems for everyone around her. She’d come between him and Delilah so many times over their teenage years that Damon finally relented and asked the bitch out. It had been a wild ride, and his profession of love was more from not understand at all what love looked like. His mother and father being the guide left a little to be desired.

“Only a minute.” He stood from the makeshift desk the client had set up for him.

She walked in and sat down in the chair across the desk from him, leaning back and crossing her legs as a seductive look moved across her face.

“I honestly think if we worked on the report a little more that we could sell more services to Mr. Talling. We have that new adviser group opening up soon. Why not utilize it?” She brushed her hands down her thighs, but Damon made sure to keep his eyes locked onto her pretty face.

“What services are you referring to specifically?” He sat back down and leaned back, clasping his hands over his stomach.

“If we offer them a just-in-time inventory system from Pollock in Dallas, I could get us a kickback from them, and we

could offer to consult on the project. I know the system Pollock put together backward and forward. I helped to consult on the project when they built it a few years back.” She smiled. “It’s a great product. They’ll benefit from it and we will too.”

“You know as well as I do that we’re not legally able to recommend a system that we’re going to get a kickback from. There’s no way I would put the firm in that position. I’m honestly wondering why you thought I would.” He pressed his fingers to his lips, knowing that he had enough to fire her. Maybe she wanted to be released. No, that wasn’t her end game. Not by the look on her face.

“You chose Bridget over me when we were kids, Damon. You’d probably still choose her again. Why?” Her expression tightened. Fuck if Matt wasn’t right. “It has to be because she’s ballsy because she lives on the edge.”

“It was a mistake.” He stood and walked to the window. “You’ve been making a lot of mistakes yourself lately. What happened to the sweet girl I grew up with?”

“Lots of things.” She stood up and moved to stand beside him. “You being one of them.”

He glanced down at her as she reached over to touch him. “Don’t. I’m engaged and very much in love with the woman wearing my ring.”

“What?” She jerked back like he’d slapped her. “Since when?”

“I don’t share my private life at work much, Delilah.” He turned to face her. “I’m not sure why my father thought this was a good idea. I know your resume is heavy in the areas we needed most, but this thing between you and me doesn’t exist. It’s a toxic memory for you, obviously. I can’t let it continue. It’s not fair to you, and I can’t ignore the way you’ve behaved lately. This shit you just tried to pull was too much.”

“Is this about Bethany? Your sister caused this, didn’t she?”

“She’s my fiancée, not my sister.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “You caused this. Pack up and take an earlier flight back. We can meet next week to talk about your exit strategy for leaving the firm, and don’t plan on using us as a reference.”

“You can’t be serious.” She narrowed her eyes, making her as ugly on the outside as she was on the inside. How he hadn’t noticed it before was beyond him.

“Close the door on your way out.” He walked around her and sat down at his desk.

“Damon. It was just a suggestion.”

He glanced up. “You’re fired. Collect your things and get Linda to put you on an earlier flight. We’ll talk next week.”

“Your father isn’t going to let you do that.” She walked to the door and stopped before walking out. “He knows how valuable I can be. You just wait.”

“I’ll hold my breath.” He smiled and turned toward his computer, ignoring her as she huffed and slammed the door. She’d no doubt say a few things to the team about it, but it was all part of the show she’d put on. He would correct everyone’s thinking before heading back to the hotel that night.

Some part of him wanted to invite Beth back to give Delilah hell for how she’d treated her, but he knew Beth well enough to know that she wasn’t the type of woman to take an eye for an eye. Her demeanor and testimony at Krista’s hearing the day before made that more than obvious. Had she grown up in the last few months, or had she always been that mature? He wasn’t sure, but it made him even more proud that she belonged to him.

He picked up the phone, needing to check on Kendal before getting lost in his work for the next few hours. By the time he packed up, it would be well past midnight.

“Hey, buddy.” Kendal’s voice was more solid than he expected it to be.

“Hey. How are you?”

“I’m as good as can be expected.”

“You alone?” Damon leaned back in his chair, knowing that the answer wasn’t really any of his business. Oddly enough, it would have been comforting to hear that Dana was over there with Kendal.

“Yeah. Dana wanted to come over, but I’m just not sure where I am with all of that.”

“Really? Why does this have to be so damn difficult? Do you care about her?”

“Clearly, asshole.”

“Good. Then make an adjustment. You don’t want your gravestone to read that you were an incredible and ethical accounting professor from UT, right?”

“No, Damon, but this isn’t that simple. The school has strict rules. I’m not allowed to date a student. Period.”

“Then wait until she’s not a student. Just be friends with her until she’s graduated. She’s doing work at the hospital, so she has to be a resident, right?”

“Yeah. She’s in her senior year.”

“Good. Then be a close friend this year and when she graduates in May, take it to another level. If you care about her, you need to make sure you don’t let her slip through your fingers. I’d never in a million years expected you to let someone hold you like you did today. All I’m saying is that she obviously means something.”

“She does.” He let out a soft sigh. “I’ll think about it. I don’t want her changing the path that she’s on to suit me, which is what she wants to do. That’s not fair to her.”

“If she’s falling in love with you, then she’s being quite sensible in her thoughts. I’d do anything to be with Beth. That’s what love does. You know this. Look at what you did for Ana, what you almost gave up.”

“And that’s the distinguishing factor right now. I care about Dana, and I like her a lot, but I’m not in love.”

“And you shouldn’t be. You’ve known her a few weeks?”

“Something like that.” He cleared his throat. “My career is my passion. It’s my identity. I almost died six years ago when that shit went down with Ana and the school threatened to let me go. You know how hard and how long I worked for this position. It’s everything to me.”

“Right, and until a woman means more than your job, you’ll never be fulfilled. You’re too much like me. Having a relationship with a good woman that loves a frequent romp in the sheets is what makes life worth living.”

“I’ll agree with that. I’m just not there yet, man. Until I get there, I have to follow what my heart’s telling me to do, and right now, that’s to keep my distance. I’ll maintain a friendship with her as long as I can. I figure that won’t last long though.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I’m attracted to her. She’s beautiful, and I’ve already slept with her. She’s passionate and giving in the bedroom. I’m also totally into her because of the way she took care of my sister. She wasn’t just that way with Mandy. She is that way with everyone on the floor. She’s a great woman. Someone that deserves a great man.”

“A man like you.” Damon stood up and pressed his free hand to the desk.

“You’re a little bias.” Kendal snorted.

“Yeah, but it’s truth.”

“Thanks, man. Have a safe trip home, and thanks again for being here for me. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do for you. You know that, right?”

“I do. I’ll check in on you this week, but call if you need me.”

“Will do.”

Damon dropped the call and set the phone on his desk before lifting his arms toward the ceiling and stretching. A knock at the door caused him to drop his hands.

“Come in,” he called out.

Ben stuck his head into the room. His blue eyes were wide with what had to be surprise.

“Um, boss?”

Damon chuckled and motioned for him to come in. “Did Delilah come down there and blow up?”

“Yep. Something like that.” He crossed his arms over his chest and walked into the office. “She just told everyone down there that you were engaged to your sister.”

Damon nodded. “And?”

“And I thought you wanted that kept secret.”

“I did, but it would seem that our lovely senior manager wanted to throw one last punch.” Damon shrugged and walked around the desk toward Ben. “It was a shitty thing to do, but she’s a shitty person. I fired her, and that was the best retaliation she had against me. Shame.”

“Do you want me to tell them that she was full of shit? They’ll believe that she was lying. Hell, half of them can’t stand her.”

“No. I don’t want to lead them to believe something that’s not true. Beth is my fiancée and my step-sister. It’s a fucked up situation, but I wouldn’t deny that she belonged to me in front of anyone. We’re not blood, and it’s a little unconventional, but I love her with everything inside of me.” He patted Ben on the back as he walked past him and took a sharp left turn down the hall. “She still down here?”

Ben caught up quickly. “No, sir. She grabbed her computer and got out of here.”

“Good.” Damon glanced over at him and offered a tight smile. “Contact our IT guys and have her access codes shut down. A woman scorned is always a bit dangerous.”

“Hell yeah, they are.” Ben opened the door to the staff conference room as Damon walked in.

“Guys, let me have your attention for just a minute.” He paused as everyone turned their attention on him. There was far more weariness on the team’s face than condemnation. They were beyond worn out from working so much over the last few days. “I know Delilah just came in and said a few things that were less than appropriate in a working environment. She’s headed home shortly and won’t be joining us again, so please disregard her behavior here before she left. Her information was correct, but like most personal things in business, it’s no one’s concern but my own. If you’d like to discuss any of it, come talk to me, otherwise, enjoy the rest of your weekend here in Florida and expect a nice bonus from the firm for your efforts.”

A cheer went around the room, and the craziness was forgotten in lieu of something much better - money. It worked every time, and where it wasn’t his intent to divert their energy with him sharing the information about the bonus, it sure as hell didn’t help.

He winked at Ben as he walked out of the room and turned to head back to his office. A few more things and he was headed to the hotel to be where he should be - with his woman.

CHAPTER 97



BETHANY

The evening with Matt was just what she needed. The conversation and laughter were innocent and never once turned to her relationship with Damon or his lack of relationship. By the time they'd had their third round of beers, Bethany was feeling the weight of exhaustion. Between the trial, the funeral and traveling to Florida, she was spent. A hot bath and bed sounded far better than anything else she could imagine.

She hugged Matt's neck, walked into the room and pressed her back to the door, letting out a long sigh. Having Damon there with her would have had intense benefits, but in the state she was in, she wasn't sure she would have enjoyed any extra attention at all.

After her bath, she snuggled down into bed and texted him to let him know that she was thinking about him. She passed out before he responded, slipping into the world of dreams and resting peacefully.

The touch of someone's hand on her shoulder caused her to jolt up.

"It's just me, baby," Damon whispered softly and pulled her back down.

She turned and snuggled against his naked body, pressing her lips against his neck and breathing him in deep. His smooth, tight skin felt good under her fingers.

"I missed you," she mumbled with sleep in her voice.

“Good. I missed you more.” He rolled on top of her, pressing her to the bed with the weight of his perfect body. “Moan for me a little while I make love to you.”

She nodded and ran her feet up the outsides of his strong legs before wrapping her legs around his waist. The groan that escaped her as he pressed himself into her was low and shook her to the core. Pleasure stretched out of her center like the rays of the sun, warming her and waking her up.

“God, you smell so fucking good, Beth.” He ran his nose up her neck and rocked against her until he was fully tucked inside of her.

“Too much,” she mumbled and ran her hands over the muscles of his back down to his ass, squeezing softly as he chuckled and began to work her.

“No, baby. You’ve got all of it inside of you. It’s just enough for you.” He licked at her throat and slipped his hands down between her and the bed, cupping her ass and groaning softly against her ear. “And you love it, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” She rolled her hips, wanting to massage him as best she could. “I love you too.”

He chuckled and sucked her ear into his mouth as he picked up his pace, pumping in and out of her until she cried out and dug her nails into his lower back.

“Damon,” she panted softly as the orgasm pulsed in her lower stomach. “So good.”

“Mmmhmmmm, you are, Beth. You’re so insanely good.” He moved up to kiss her hard, stealing her breath and leaving her heart to race in her chest.

She forced her eyes open to catch a glimpse of him as he pressed his hand into the bed beside her head and rolled his sexy hips. She lifted her legs, pressing her feet against his chest as he moved up to his knees and gripped the front of her thighs. The position was deep and as per usual, left him in complete control. It’s where he thrived, and she was more than willing to hand over control in the bedroom. The man was a god.

Now if he could just behave outside of it. She reached up and grabbed the headboard as he let himself go, working her long and hard until he clenched up and his breathing got off kilter.

“I’m gonna come. You want me to find a condom?”

“No. I want everything you have to give.” She reached out and slid her legs down to wrap around his waist again as he leaned down and wrapped his arms around her.

“Such a greedy little bitch.” He smiled and pressed his lips to hers, consuming her completely as he tumbled over the edge of ecstasy. It was a feeling she wanted in her life every chance she got.

Something told her that he wouldn’t be one to deny her of anything though, least of all, lust.



“So she told everyone that I was your sister and your fiancée?” Bethany cringed at the news of Delilah getting in one more punch the night before. She reached for her coffee at the small cafe she and Damon were having breakfast at before they got back on the plane to head home. After knocking on Matt’s door more times than seemed necessary, Damon made her leave him alone. They’d pick him something up when they were done.

“Yeah, but it’s all right. The bitch probably did us a favor. I needed to get the word out that we were together. She just did it for me.” He shrugged. “I should have nipped the situation in the bud when it happened.”

“Which one?” Bethany reached for her coffee and sat back in her chair, studying her handsome man from across the table. He had to easily be the most beautiful thing she’d ever had the pleasure of seeing, much less holding or making love to. Lucky didn’t describe the way she felt sitting there across from him.

“Both.” He picked up his coffee and took a quick sip. “I should have told everyone at work about us the minute we got back from Jamaica. Asking you not to wear your ring was a huge mistake, and again, I’m sorry. I was trying to protect us more than anything, but last night I realized that I don’t need to protect us from anything. People are going to have their opinions and will talk all they want. At the end of the day, I sign their paychecks, and it’s a business I run, not a family. They’ll do their jobs and keep their opinions to themselves where my personal life is concerned, or they can work somewhere else.” He shrugged and gave her a cocky smile.

“And with Delilah? What happened there?”

“I knew the minute I found out that Dad hired her that it was bullshit. She has a great track record in the accounting field, but I felt a little slighted that he didn’t talk to me about it first. I’m CFO, yeah, but I run the day to day business for him and have for years now. He’s made a few errors in decision-making in my opinion lately. Delilah is just one of them, but how do I confront him with that? I should have taken care of her the minute she got there. I guess I was just hoping that she would be a friend and want nothing else. I was wrong. The small problem grew into a huge one, and as the owner of M&B, I deserved her blow up last night. I’ll talk to Dad about all of it and get it figured out, but she’s not going to be working for us anymore either way.”

“That’s a relief.” Beth smiled, feeling good about the fact that Damon was willing to talk to her about not only his mistakes but what he’d learned from them too.

“She’s coming into the office next week to sign all the final exit paperwork. If you want to come kick her in the tit or stand by with a smug look on your face, I won’t blame you one bit.” He set his coffee down and smiled. “She deserves it.”

“No, I’m good. She’s got issues, obviously. I used to get really upset when someone would treat me like shit, and I still do, don’t get me wrong, but now I try hard to let it go. She doesn’t matter to me. Now, if you or Matt, Mom or Dad treated me like that, we’d have a problem, but Delilah doesn’t matter. She’s nothing to me.” Bethany stood up and lifted her

hands toward the light blue sky. “You ready to get out of here?”

“Absolutely.” He stood and moved around the table, reaching for her hand and pulling her to his side. After dropping some money on the table, they took the long way back to the hotel. Damon glanced down at her as she looked up at him. “Do you want to move in with me?”

“Do you want me to?” Nervousness swirled in the pit of her stomach. It was the next step she’d been waiting for with him. Why was she so nervous about it?

“Yes. I want you to right away, actually. I don’t want to spend another night without you in my bed next to me.” He rubbed his thumb over her fingers softly. “I wanna wake up next to you every morning as well.”

“You leave awfully early. No waking me up, okay?” She chuckled as he gave her a wry smile.

“What if I wake you up the way I did last night? That change your mind any?”

“Yes. Wake me up anytime if you’re naked and willing to make me moan.”

“Fuck, that’s all the time.” He released her hand and held the door to the hotel open for her. “I’ll go get Matt up. You pack up your stuff, and we’ll head home. Let’s see if we can have a family dinner tonight the way we’re supposed to have them.”

“With all of us there?” She walked toward the elevator with him beside her, his fingers brushing over the top curve of her rear as she moved.

“Exactly.” He waited until the door to the elevator closed. Pulling her into his arms, he leaned down and brushed his lips against hers. “Forgive me again for all the bullshit we’ve been through. You’re the only woman I want in my life, and I want you forever. You’re stuck, did you know?”

She smiled and lifted up to her toes, kissing him until she had to pull back for a breath. “I’m happy to be stuck, and I’m sorry for my part in all of it too.”

“Still no talking you into coming back to the firm?” He ran the tip of his nose by hers.

“I’m not sure yet, but I’ll give it some serious consideration. When are you talking to Kent?”

The elevator opened, and he moved back, taking her hand and walking out into the hallway.

“Tonight. I gotta get some of this stuff off my chest.” He let out a sigh. “I just hope I can do it. I keep trying to tell myself that it’s for the best, that he needs to know.”

“He might not need to know, but one thing is for sure... you have to get it off of your chest. You can’t keep carrying this secret around. It’s toxic to you and everyone else. Your dad will love you no matter how it goes. You know that.” She squeezed his hand and released him as he paused before walking toward Matt’s room.

“I know he will. I just hate to hurt him. He’s in a good place right now with your mom.”

“And he’ll always be in that place. Tell him all of it, Damon, and then love on him. Mom, Matt and me will love on you both. Let’s just get it out and over with.”

“All right, but tell your mom and my brother to keep their paws to themselves. I’m only interested in one person *loving on* me.” He wagged his eyebrows and turned to walk down the hall.

She chuckled under her breath and enjoyed the view. The man had a fine ass if nothing else.

“You checking me out?” he called over his shoulder.

“Every chance I get,” she muttered and turned to walk toward their room.

Moving in together was a huge step, but one she was ready for. Next it would be time to plan the wedding.

The sooner, the better.

CHAPTER 98



DAMON

“Wow. Everyone is finally around the table. The apocalypse must be coming.” Matt glanced around as he reached for the mashed potatoes.

“Naw, Bethany and I just decided to forgive each other for any and all offenses. I think I got off lightly.” Damon reached over and took Beth’s hand into his as he smiled at her. “We’re going to move things along now too.”

“Oh yeah? How so?” Karen asked, giving him a look that he wasn’t quite sure how to decipher.

“We’re moving in together,” Bethany spoke up. “In the next week or so. I still have my lease through December-”

“But we’ll just pay it out and be done with it,” Damon finished for her, unable to take his eyes off of her. Something about knowing that they were moving one step closer to her truly being his left his heart racing. He’d almost lost her over a handful of stupid bullshit. “I want you with me.”

She smiled and glanced over at her mom. “Now all we need to do is talk Damon into letting us redecorate his bachelor pad.”

Matt snorted. “Good luck with that.”

“Redecorate all you want. I just want you there as soon as possible.” Damon winked at his woman and glanced down the table to find his father quiet and staring at his plate. “Dad? You okay?”

“Hmmm?” He glanced up. “Oh, yeah. Sorry. Just thinking about a few things.”

Karen reached out and brushed her fingers down his arm. “Like?”

“Kendal losing his sister just brought back a lot of memories.” Damon’s father let out a soft sigh and turned his heavy gaze to rest on Damon. “Have you checked on him since the funeral?”

“Yeah. We spoke late last night, and I told him I would check in with him again this week.”

“Good. Sometimes the death of a loved one doesn’t truly hit you until everything is over and everyone has gone home. Then you have time to sit alone in the silence of the house, and it slams into you like a brick wall.” His father shrugged and got up. “I’ve got a few calls to make. Forgive me?”

“Of course.” Karen stood up and leaned in as he moved over to kiss her. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Oh, yeah. I’m great.” He walked out of the dining room toward his study as Damon glanced across the table toward Matt.

“What’s up with him? Any idea?” Damon turned his question toward Karen.

“This is around the time that Mom died. Maybe he’s just having a hard time with the memories of her death?” Matt shrugged and grabbed another piece of fried chicken.

“Go talk to him.” Bethany rubbed Damon’s back softly, giving him the little bit of courage he needed.

“All right.” He leaned in for a quick kiss and stood. “Save me a piece of chicken. Matt will sit here and eat every damn piece if you’re not careful.”

“Hey! I’m right here.” Matt snorted. “I’m watching my weight too, so only three pieces tonight.”

Damon rolled his eyes and chuckled as he walked languidly toward the study. It seemed the worst possible time to talk with his dad about his mom’s infidelities, but Beth was

right. He had to get it off his chest. Lying was the one thing he wouldn't stand for, and not being honest with hidden information was the same as lying to him.

Maybe that was part of the reason for the truth being such a burden to him over the years.

“Dad?” He knocked softly on the door and pushed it open. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

“Yeah. I'd like that.” His father was kneeling in front of a large fireplace, tossing in small logs when he walked in. It was a rarity to need a fire in Texas no matter what time of the year it was, but his dad had always been good about letting them keep the air-conditioner down low starting in October so that fires were part of their fall and winter experience.

“Did you by chance get to talk to Delilah?” He closed the door and sat down in one of the large leather chairs in the center of the room.

“She called, but I didn't call back. Her message was a little hard to understand, and by the sound of her voice, I could tell it was something personal and not business related.” He stood, closed the fireplace and turned to face Damon. “What happened?”

“Lots of things.” Damon ran his fingers through his hair. “I should have told you the minute you hired her that it wasn't a good idea, or better yet, maybe next time just include me in the hiring process. I thought that was my job anyway.”

“It is, but you've been under a lot of stress lately.” His father sat down in the chair beside him. “I wanted to take something off of you. I thought you and Delilah had a great friendship when you were kids. Once I saw her resume and realized who she was, I thought she would be perfect for the position. Not only was she completely capable of doing the job, and doing it well, but you already had established some type of trust with her from your youth.”

“Yeah, I get it. Thanks for trying to help.” Damon moved to the edge of his seat and pressed his forearms to his legs. “I fired her in Florida. She's been an HR nightmare since she got

to the firm, both with Beth and me. And it's not just us. Patrick and Ben have complained about her antics and the poor way she's been treating the staff. She's manipulative and still has feelings for me, which drives her to make shitty decisions while at work."

"Oh, shit. I didn't know all of that." He let out a tight chuckle. "You need to document everything for when she tries to sue us."

When. There would be no question that the bitch would try, but Damon almost looked forward to slapping her back again for all the shit she put Beth through.

"I will."

"Good. Is Bethany rejoining the firm now that Delilah is no longer there?"

"I'm not sure. It's fine either way." Damon shrugged. "Where I'd love to have her with us, it might be best while we're rebuilding our relationship if we just see each other outside of work. It's sometimes a hostile environment in the office thanks to our deadlines and the stress to keep up with demands."

"Whatever the two of you decide is fine by me. You know that I'd love her up there with us because she's family, but if it's a better situation for your relationship to let her work somewhere else--"

"Or not at all. She doesn't need to work. I'll pay for everything."

He chuckled. "Good luck with that. If she's anything like Karen, she's not going to let you pay for everything. That woman is fiercely independent."

"And you love her even more for it?" Damon leaned back and smirked.

"Hell, yeah, I do. I never imagined finding someone that truly loved me for me, you know?" He shrugged and brushed his hands down his face.

“Mom didn’t love you for you?” Tension roared to life in the middle of Damon’s chest. He reached up and rubbed it. It was time to let his demons come rolling out, but fuck if he didn’t want to. It didn’t seem right all of a sudden.

“Your mom was a complex creature.” His father stood up and walked to the fire. “She wanted something more than what I was capable of giving her, but she never could articulate what it was. I tried so hard to make her happy in every area of our life, but it became an exhausting quest.”

“Dad.” Damon stood up and slipped his hands into his pockets as his father turned to face him.

“She started to sleep around on me somewhere around your junior year.” His father’s eyes filled with tears. “It was the most devastating time of my entire life. It outweighed my father beating me as a boy and my sister dying from fever when I was twelve. It was the most painful thing I have ever been through.”

Damon stood in silent shock. His father already knew? All the years of carrying around the lie that his mother was sleeping around on his dad and it was for nothing? He prepared for the fierce anger that should have accompanied the truth of knowing that his dad knew, but it never came.

His father walked to his desk, grabbed a Kleenex and wiped his nose. “I wanted to divorce her, but about the time I got the balls to do it, she got sick. I couldn’t let her die alone.”

“Dad, fuck.” Damon moved across the room and reached out, grabbing his dad’s hand as the older man shook a little.

“I hated her by the time we buried her, but I never in a million years would have let you and Matt know that your mother wasn’t the woman we all thought she was.” He pressed the napkin to his eyes. “It’s caused me to move away from more relationship opportunities than I care to discuss. Karen is the first woman in six years I’ve let myself get close to.”

“And why her?” Damon swallowed his confession. There was no reason to spill the truth now. His father already knew, and he’d fought the good fight, trying to hide it from Damon

and Matt. There was no way Damon was going to take away the honor in having to be the man his father was for them and their mother during that time.

“Because she’s beautifully broken. Her heart has yet to heal, and she’s as scared as I am about love and marriage, but she’s willing to let me in. It gives me the courage to let her in as well.” He wiped at his nose again and let out a long sigh. “I’m sorry I held the information back from you and Matt. Can you forgive me?”

“There is nothing to forgive. You did what you thought was best as our father.” Damon moved up and hugged his dad, resting against the bigger man and closing his eyes to enjoy the moment. “She was incredible at the beginning of the marriage, and I’ve analyzed a million times what I could have done differently, but the answer always came up the same. Nothing. There was nothing else I could have done. I was more than enough. She was just looking for a different experience.”

“I’m sorry, Dad.” Damon squeezed him one more time and stepped back, holding in his emotions as years of struggle came to an end. No more. No more having to worry that he wasn’t enough, that his woman would find someone else if he didn’t go over the top in life, at the office, and in the bedroom.

It was almost as if a huge weight had lifted from his shoulders.

“I’m so thrilled to hear that you and Bethany are working things out. I know it’s going to be a hard road to hoe, but we’ll all do it together, okay? You two aren’t alone in any of this. You have me, Karen and Matt. And Kendal.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Speaking of, you need to tell that boy to find a woman that can help him heal. With his parents gone and now with Amanda’s death, he’s going to need someone other than us.”

“You’re preaching to the choir, Dad.” Damon smiled and studied his father. “Thanks for telling me about Mom.”

“Of course. Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.” Damon’s chest constricted.

“Why didn’t you go to her funeral, son? It was shocking and a little disappointing. I still can’t help but wonder about it.” He tilted his head to the side. “You were so close to your mom for a long time.”

“She wasn’t the woman I thought she was, Dad. I couldn’t pretend that she was, not even in the midst of her death.” He nodded and walked to the door before glancing back. “Thanks for being someone I could look up to.”

“You still can, right?” His father gave him a cheeky smile.

“Absolutely.”

CHAPTER 99



BETHANY

Two Days Later

Peace was a feeling she wasn't used to feeling too often, but between Damon being relaxed from talking with his father, Delilah gone from the firm and Bethany starting to pack up her apartment for the next step in her relationship with Damon, peace belonged to her.

She walked down the long hall in the accounting building and let her smile grow wide on her face. Life was good, and as long as she and Damon communicated about the parts that weren't so great, everything would work out. It would be time to start planning the wedding soon, and the only two people she really had that could help her were Matt and her mother. Erica might be willing to do some of the decorating and such, but maybe it was better just to hire someone to come in and take care of all of it. That had been Damon's vote the night before when they lay in bed, talking about the future.

"Bethany," someone called from behind her.

She turned to find Jake rolling toward her with a smile on his handsome face. His hair was hanging in his eyes, and she couldn't help herself from reaching over and moving it off his forehead.

"Hey. You look great. You doing okay?" She smiled down at him.

"Yeah. I've been making great progress like I told you." He locked the wheelchair into place, gripped the side of it and stood up as she held her breath. "See?"

“Oh wow. That’s incredible.” She kept her hands locked to her side but wanted so damn bad to reach out and help him sit back down. He wouldn’t have appreciated her doing so, no matter the intent. He seemed to thrive on pushing himself to walk again. She understood all too clearly.

“I’m joining you and Dr. Tarrington in class today. I have an extra physical therapy session tomorrow, so I’m going to get in my TA hours today.” He unlocked the wheelchair and moved along beside her. “What’s new in your world? How is everything going?”

“It’s good.” She pushed the doors to the auditorium open and glanced up to see Kendal leaning over his podium, studying something.

“You and that jackass back together yet?” Jake glanced over his shoulder and gave her a grin.

“Yeah.” She extended her hand to show off the ring. “I’m going to move in with him soon. I love him with every part of me. I was falling apart trying to figure out how to *not* love him that much.”

Kendal glanced up, his face pale, dark circles under his haunted-looking eyes. “Morning, guys. Glad to hear you and Damon are working things out.”

“I’m not,” Jake muttered and winked playfully before rolling to the other side of the room.

“Me too.” Bethany set her bag down and moved up to the stage, climbing up and standing in front of Kendal. “I would ask how you are, but it seems like a trivial question. I know you must be suffering.”

He glanced up, his green eyes dull. “I’m just taking each day as it comes. Some part of me knows that it’s going to get better, but it feels like a promise that’s just out of my grasp right now.” He turned toward Jake. “Thanks for your help last week. Guess we were lucky that Bethany showed up on a day she wasn’t scheduled to.” He turned back to Bethany. “And thank you for teaching for me. It’s nice to know I have someone I can count on.”

“I loved it. I hated the reason I needed to step in but getting to do it was exhilarating. I don’t think I realized how much information I retained from this class when I took it.”

He nodded. “It’s pretty hands-on because of it being more about product accounting. Have you thought about going into teaching? Not everyone that gets an accounting degree has to become a CFO of a large organization. Some of us dive into academia and enjoy life immensely.”

She thought about his question before responding. What kind of life did she want for herself? What kind of career? With her raising being so rough, the only thing she had focused on since starting college was to get a degree in something that would pay lots of money. There was no way in hell she was going to let her future family suffer the way she and her mother had.

“It’s something to think about for sure.” She brushed her hair off her shoulder. “I haven’t given it much thought. I figured I would end up in public accounting like everyone else seems to.”

“I didn’t.” Kendal gave her a tight smile and glanced back down at his notes.

“Very true. I’ll think about it, and maybe we can have coffee sometime soon and talk about it.” She didn’t wait for a response seeing that he wasn’t in a mood to talk from what she could tell. Time would help to heal the wounds of losing his sister, but having someone hold him at night would certainly speed up the process.

Damon had already tried to get Kendal to think more about giving Dana a chance. Bethany was going to hit the same nerve, but meeting the girl and trying to put her in a position where Kendal would have to pay her attention didn’t seem like a bad idea at all.

She bit her tongue, grabbed her bag and waited for the students to start filing in. Maybe she should just leave good enough alone and let Kendal find his own way.

Maybe, but what was the fun in that?



“So, when are we having this wedding?” Bethany’s mom asked through the phone.

Beth shrugged and turned down the long road that would lead to the mental hospital. The last thing she wanted to do was visit with Krista, but she promised Jake that she would.

“I think it would be nice to do in the spring next year. Maybe around March?”

“That sounds great.” Her mother paused. “Christmas would be fun too, but it’s late October. There is no way in hell we’d have everything done by then.”

“Exactly. Let’s shoot for March.” Bethany tugged at her seatbelt as nervousness ran through her. “I really don’t want to do this.”

“Then don’t.” Her mom let out a sigh. “You don’t have to be everything to everyone, baby. Just because Jake feels the burden for the two of you to help Krista through this transition doesn’t mean you need to.”

“I know, but I don’t want him out here, and some part of me wants to help her, you know?”

“I know, but she’s not going to be the same girl, Bethany. They have her medicated until they can figure out if there is something deeper going on besides her being bi-polar.”

“I understand. I’ll just go in, talk to her for a few minutes and get out of there.” Bethany reached up and rubbed her chest just above her left breast. It would have been incredibly comforting to have Damon with her, but he was at the office, putting out fires from what she understood. Their conversation moments before had been quick and very to the point. Where she’d have gotten upset in the past with him for being so short, she worked on understanding the why behind his actions.

“All right, well, when you get done, come out to the house and let’s start picking colors and looking at dresses. Are you going to want a destination wedding like Kent and I had?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t have a ton of people that I want to invite. Maybe going somewhere would be a good idea. Could be fun for sure.”

“I like the idea, but it’s your wedding. Talk with Damon about it, and I’ll see you in a little while. I’ll have lunch waiting for you when you get here.”

“Perfect, Mom. I love you.”

“Love you too, baby. All my heart.”

Bethany dropped the call and reached over to put her phone back in her bag. “What in the world am I going to say to Krista? I’m sorry you didn’t take your meds? I’m sorry your life is ruined? I’m sorry you ruined Jake’s life and scarred his body?”

She pulled into the closest parking lot and parked the car, but didn’t get out. It took a few minutes to gather her courage, but finally, she forced herself to simply get out of the car. What the hell was she afraid of?

Lots of things.

“Just breathe,” she mumbled and walked toward the building, forcing a tight smile on her face as various doctors and nurses passed by her, each smiling kindly.

She pushed the doors to enter the hospital and walked to the front counter. “I’m here to see my friend, Krista Grey.”

“Sure, honey.” The nurse stood and pointed down the hall behind Bethany. “She’s down that way in four twelve. She’s not very talkative, so don’t let it bother you, okay? She’s on some light sedation drugs that keep her calm.”

“Right.” Bethany glanced over her shoulder before returning her attention to the nurse. “Has she not been calm up to this point?”

“She’s been okay. It’s a rough transition for everyone. They don’t understand it. It’ll do her some good to see you, I’m sure. She hasn’t had a visitor yet.”

“Her father hasn’t come out to see her?” Sickness rolled around in Bethany’s stomach.

“No.” The nurse’s expression saddened. “We’re taking good care of her, but we’re not family, you know?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” She turned and walked down the hall, trying to convince herself that Mr. Grey just hadn’t had time to get over there. By the time she reached out to grab the handle, her heart hurt so bad she was having trouble breathing.

Pausing, she closed her eyes and tried to find the source of her fear. Was she scared that Krista would attack her? No. That was ridiculous.

That her friend would look like death? Not really.

That she would be hallowed and unresponsive at all? Like the world had forgotten her and no one cared?

Tears blurred Bethany’s vision, and she reached up and pressed her fingers to her lips. That was it. She was scared to see what her not being there for Krista looked like. How many times could she have come by and she hadn’t? The fear was tied to the guilt of not reaching out when she should have.

She forced herself to push the door open and walked in.

Krista sat in a wheelchair with a blanket over her legs by the window; her attention fully focused on whatever was going on outside. Her long dark blond hair was halfway down her back, and she’d lost all of her extra weight.

Bethany’s phone buzzed in her pocket, and she pulled it out before wiping at her tears.

***Damon:** I figured you were in the hospital with Krista. I know you didn’t want to go there today, but I’m proud of you. I’m thinking about you, and I hope that visit turns out to be something that frees you from all the shit you’ve been through with your friends. If you’re too scared to go in to see her, come get me and I’ll go with you. I love you, baby. All my heart.*

She smiled and put the phone back into her bag. She could do this.

“Krista?” She spoke softly as she moved to sit down on the couch near the window where Krista sat. “It’s Bethany. Jake and I wanted to see if you were okay and to let you know that we’re here for you.”

Krista turned her head slowly, her blue eyes filled with tears that broke Bethany’s heart. She extended her hand toward Beth as the first tear dropped.

“I’ve missed you,” she mumbled softly.

“Me too.” Bethany let her fears subside as she got up and walked over to pull her friend into a tight hug. Jake was right. No one else was going to pull Krista from the darkness but the two of them. Maybe there would even come a day when she was completely healed and could leave the hospital.

Warmth raced through every part of Beth to know that when that day came, she would be there to pick her friend up. It wouldn’t surprise her much if Jake and Damon were with her.

Krista wasn’t alone, and neither was Beth anymore.

CHAPTER 100



DAMON

“Damon, your father is on the phone for you.” Linda gave him a warm smile as she leaned into his doorway.

“Great. Thanks, and close the door behind you.” He pushed away the financials he was in the process of reviewing and grabbed the phone. “What’s going on, Dad?”

“Hey there. I just wanted to touch base with you on Mitch Roberson. Remember I mentioned him a few times?”

“Sure do. Did he accept the position in Seattle?”

“He sure did. He’s our new director of advisory. I sent him up there to introduce himself to Erica today. You probably need to touch base with her though. I’ve been so busy lately, and you know once she gets me on the phone-”

“There’s no getting off.” Damon snorted. “I’m well aware. I’ll call when we get off the phone in a minute.”

“I spoke with your brother this morning too. It sounds like he’s made his decision to move up to Seattle. You think that’s a good thing for him?”

“Yeah, I do.” Damon leaned back in his chair and let relief run through him. Matt had been dancing around the topic of moving up to the northwest and working on his future for far too long. Now that he’d made the decision to go, Damon would be interested to see what happened with his little brother’s career and with his budding relationship with Erica. He’d made some stupid mistakes with the pretty director of

marketing, but knowing Matt, he'd figure out a way to win the woman back over.

"I do too. I think I almost have him willing to work with Erica for fifteen to twenty hours a week if she's still interested in that. Let's see if we can get her on a conference call just before six today so we can all work on him together. He needs one more push, and we should be good to go."

"I'm hoping that you're right and all of this meddling in his life doesn't blow up in our faces."

"Nonsense. When is Delilah coming in to sign her exit paperwork and such?"

"Not sure. Why?"

"Because I'll handle that mess. I created it, and I'll close it down."

"You sure?" Damon stood and pressed his free hand to his desk.

"Yep. Just have Cindy let me know when and where, and I'll take care of it. You just call Erica for me, and we'll consider it an equal trade."

"I'm not sure what that says about your feeling toward Erica, but all right."

"Nothing to do with her and everything to do with the fact that I can't stand advertising and marketing." His father chuckled softly. "Enjoy your day. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks, Dad." Damon hung up and dialed Erica's work number, not really knowing what to expect.

"Erica Hall." Her voice was tight, but maybe it was because she was working to be professional.

"Erica? This a good time?"

"Sure. I just met Mitch. He seems like a nice guy."

She'd already met him? Damn. The guy was more efficient than they'd expected.

“Yeah. I think he’s going to be good for the advisory practice we’re setting up. The man has a resume that impressed my father. I’m thinking we’re going to do well to have him on our side.”

“Awesome. What can I do for you?” She was far more business-like than usual. Something was wrong, but he wasn’t sure it was his place to ask what.

“I wanted to see if we could have a conference call around five thirty today. Dad and I have been talking with Matt, and I think we have him convinced to at least try out a twenty hour a week schedule. He might work remotely from his new place, but I’m not sure.”

“His new place?” Her tone lifted a little.

“Yeah. I think he’s going to come up there later this week and try to find a place.”

“That means he’s moving up here?” She sighed heavily.

Had Matt not worked things out with her since going up there? He and Damon had spoken a little bit about it, but nothing in depth. Damon tried not to let the guilt of not checking up on his brother drag him under. He had a ton of shit in his own life that was going off track, and Matt had Sophie and several other friends that he was most likely talking to.

“He’s still being noncommittal, but yeah, I think he’s going to keep his place here in Dallas and get one up there too. You know Matt.”

“Yep. I do.”

“What’s up with you? You sound... tense.”

“Yeah, I have things going on in my life that I’m not exactly able to ignore today. Forgive me for having an off day. Shit happens.” Something was wrong. This wasn’t the Erica he knew at all, outside or inside of work.

“Wow. I’m here for you; you know that. Talk to me and let’s work this out. We’ve been friends a lot longer than we’ve been co-workers, Erica.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.” Her voice became thick as if she were fighting tears. “I’m good.”

“Liar. I’m not getting off this phone until you spill.”

“It’s my mom. She’s not doing well, and Daniel isn’t visiting her anymore. He’s too sensitive about her getting older and dying on us like Daddy just did.” The soft sob that echoed through the phone caused his heart to ache. Was she being honest? The poor woman had a ton of family issues she seemed to be dealing with all the time, but her sadness almost seemed tied to something bigger, something more painful. Had she lost someone?

“What can I do to help?”

“Nothing. I just need to take some time off soon and figure things out.”

“Is this just about your mom?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because my brother has been moping around here for a week, ignoring most of us and acting like a ten-year-old boy lost in the woods.”

“I don’t care what Matt’s doing, and if you expect me to try and talk him into coming up here, you’re shit out of luck. Tell your father that too. Matt’s a twenty-eight-year-old man. He doesn’t need any of us pushing him to do anything. If he’s not willing to make the decision to move forward with his life, none of us are going to change that.”

“No truer words have been spoken.” Damon cleared his throat. “Why are you upset with him? What happened?”

“You know how I feel about your brother, Damon. Or rather how I felt. I’m getting over it.”

“Yeah, of course, I do. You guys would be-”

“Don’t. I’m not interested in hearing it. He came up to visit, and we had a good time for the weekend, or at least I did. I haven’t heard a fucking word from him in seven days. Not ‘thanks for letting me crash at your place’ or ‘I really appreciate you helping me with my contract with Jonathan’ or

better yet, how about, ‘thanks for the all-night fuck. I needed that in my life’.”

“Wow. Shit. He didn’t say anything after you guys spent the weekend together? That’s more something I would do than Matt.” Damon stood up and brushed his hand down his face. She was destroyed by his brother’s ignorance. The stupid bastard was walking around, trying to decide what to do with himself, and here Erica thought that he didn’t care. How could Matt not know that ignoring her would leave her feeling used? Was he that naive? Had to be. Matt was a lot of things, but he wasn’t at all malicious.

“Exactly. And tell me something, and be fucking completely honest.”

“Of course.” Damon walked toward the wall of windows in his plush corner office, suddenly wanting to feel the warmth of the sun through the thick glass.

“Why would you do that to someone? Why would you lead them on and walk away without a word?”

“Because in my past life, I was a user. I would walk away because I never had any intention of being with you in the first place. You were just a warm body and pretty smile to spend the weekend with. But, Erica-”

“No. Fuck it. That’s exactly what happened. You and Kent are so concerned that Matt isn’t going to turn out like the two of you, but you’re wrong. He’s already everything you used to be.” She hung up, leaving Damon staring out the window.

“Shit.” He dialed the number for his secretary in Seattle and asked the woman to check on Erica. Just to poke her head in there and see if she was all right.

“She’s not here, sir. I’m not sure where she is.”

“All right. Thanks.” Damon dropped the call and called his father back.

“What’s up, son?”

“Matt fucked things up with Erica, and I think one of us needs to fly up there and fix it. She’s pretty upset and didn’t

sound at all like herself a few minutes ago.”

His father growled. “Your brother is going to fix it. I’ll call him now. Don’t worry about a thing. Erica is dedicated to her job and to us. Matt can clean up the mess he made, or deal with the consequences.”

“Which are?”

“Taking her job if his actions cause her to leave it. Then he can grovel at her feet until she comes back.” His father’s voice was loud and reminded Damon much more of his dad in his younger years. “She’s the best ad director we’ve had. We’re not losing her over your brother sowing his wild oats.”

“All right, Dad. Don’t be too hard on him, okay? He’s trying to-”

“I don’t care. He needs to stop trying, grow the fuck up and do it. Do something.”

“Keep me in the loop.” Damon hung up and walked back to his chair, dropping down into it and closing his eyes. Poor Matt. He was in love with Erica and yet would never do a damn thing about it. He was too scared to.

“How can I help you?” Damon mumbled and glanced up as the door opened to his office. A smile lifted his lips as the prettiest girl in the world walked in with two coffees in her hands.

“I thought you maybe could use a break.” Bethany smiled and kicked the door shut.

“You thought right.” He got up and walked toward her, taking the coffees and setting them down. He turned and pulled her into his arms, breathing the scent of her perfume deep into his lungs and leaning down to consume her mouth.

She tilted her head a little and opened up for him, sucking on his tongue and dragging him from every fucked up thought he’d had that morning. Nothing mattered when she was there and had her arms around him. Everything gained clarity and could be solved with simple solutions.

Matt needed to apologize to Erica.

Kendal needed to let Dana into his life and ask her to drop the damn class.

“Wow.” Bethany smiled up at him. “What was that for?”

“For you loving me.” He kissed her again a few times softly. “It’s been a long day already. I needed to see you.”

“You having trouble with me not being part of your day more often?” She gave him a cocky smile that caused him to laugh in spite of his troubles.

“Yes. How much do I have to pay you to come back and work for me?” He slid his hands down her back and squeezed her ass softly as his body woke up.

“You don’t have enough money.”

He glanced toward the door and smiled. “I wasn’t planning on paying with money. Lock the door, and I’ll give you a taste of the currency I have on hand.”

She pulled back from him, her eyes a little wide. “Are you serious?”

“As a heart attack. Go lock the door and let me remind you who you’re dealing with.” He smiled wickedly. “Because this thing between us is happening. Whether you want it in my bed or with you trembling across the top of a desk. Your choice.”

She turned and walked toward the door, stealing his heart for all time. “Across your desk, please?”

“Good girl, pussycat.”

CHAPTER 101



DAMON

“Damn, woman. How much stuff can one person shove into a two-bedroom college apartment? Don’t they have rules about this type of hoarding?” Damon glanced over his shoulder and smirked at the pretty girl behind him.

Bethany cocked her head to the side and put a hand on her hip, drawing his eyes down to the lovely curve. “I told you we could get a mover to come over and help clean this place out, but nooooo... you wanted to do it instead. All the money in the world and we’re spending our Saturday cleaning this place up.”

“I kinda like seeing you work it.” He shrugged and turned back to the stack of boxes in front of him.

“Work what, exactly?” Her arms slid around him from behind, and the soft press of her breasts against his back had his heart rate accelerating a little.

“Work anything,” he grunted and gripped her hands, pulling them down until she cupped him. “Maybe we should lock the front door and christen this place for the next horny college kids that rent it.”

Beth’s laugh was short, endearing. “You’re going to hell.”

He turned in her arms and wrapped his around the top of her shoulders, the smile on his face feeling good - right. “Am I now?”

Her smile faltered a little as her eyes moved around his face. She was nervous. It was endearing, and yet such a

fucking turn on. He could still intimidate her sexually. How long would that last? Forever? He couldn't help but hope seeing that forever is what he'd asked her for.

“What are you thinking?” She ran her hands up his back and pressed herself against him.

“I was trying to decide if the paint color was cream or more taupe.” He snorted as she pushed back and growled.

“You're impossible.”

“Nope. Just a warm meal, soft bed and pretty girl on my arm, and I'm set.” He turned and picked up two of the boxes before walking to the door and kicking it carefully to get her attention. “Open.”

“Bossy ass.” She pulled the door open and gave him a flirty smile. “And I'm the only girl you'll ever have on your arm from here on out.”

“This is true. There's still time to run.” He winked and walked out into the far-too-warm October afternoon. He grunted and shook his head. How the hell Texas could be above eighty and it be deep in the heart of fall was a conundrum.

“Why in the world would I run?” Beth jogged past him to the parking lot, stopping beside the truck he'd rented.

“Because I love the way your ass jiggles when you do.” He moved to the back and lifted the boxes high enough to get them in the back of the truck.

She lifted her eyebrow. “I'm thinking you deserve to see it jiggle this afternoon for helping me move out of the apartment.”

His cock twitched. “Up close and personal or not at all.”

She chuckled. “You're corrupt.”

“I'm going to hell. We've established this.” He reached for her, running one hand down her back toward her ass, and the other caressing the side of her face. “I should be granted one last meal before I head south.”

She snorted. "I love you so much."

Her words penetrated his heart, waking him up like she did every time they were together. Having known nothing but lust, he was often shocked by how good love felt. "You're not going to ask what I wanted you to prepare for me?"

Beth wrapped her arms around him and lifted up to press her lips to his softly before pulling back. "What would you like me to cook you for your last meal?" Her expression said that she was playing along, but only for his benefit.

"Cook? No, baby. I don't need anything cooked. Just wash up real good for me, or don't? I could care less if you're clean or not." He leaned in and pressed his lips to hers as her eyes grew wide, her cheeks flushing a pretty pink color.

Nothing was better than the sound of her panting, the feel of her trying to catch her breath because of something he did or said. It was power they shared. He just hid the side effects a little better.

Beth pressed her hands to his chest and took a step back, breaking the spell. "It's almost five. Stop flirting and teasing me and let's get this place packed and go *home* and make dinner together."

Home. Together. *Weird*.

"You sure you still want to do this?" He turned and walked back toward the apartment, forcing air through his nose and out his mouth. He had to calm down before he stripped her bare and licked every inch of her in the parking lot.

"To move in together?" She gave him a quirky smile and slipped her arm into his. "We're getting married in May. I think seeing if we're capable is important."

"Hmm... trying out the goods before you buy? I like it." He opened the door and moved back, letting his eyes move down her back, over the steep curve of her rear. She hated it, and yet he couldn't imagine anything more sensual.

"Brother..." She walked into the apartment.

“Speaking of brothers, when is ours coming home again?” He stopped by the kitchen to tape up a few more boxes and tried hard not to think about the fact that Bethany was his step-sister. No blood relation, and yet, everything would be out in the open soon at the firm. They were engaged, and he’d fucked up pretty badly over the last month or so by *not* letting her wear the ring or tell anyone. Fucked up badly enough that she’d left the firm. *Probably for the best.*

“No clue. After his showing a few weeks ago, I’m pretty sure he’s not coming back home for anything more than a visit.” Beth ran her fingers through her long chestnut hair, causing her breasts to bounce a little.

Damon licked at the corner of his mouth and stifled a growl. “Did he talk to you about him and Erica?”

“A little. Not much. He’s gotta finish patching things up with her, but you know Matthew. He’ll win her heart back with his humor if nothing else.” She moved around the large boxes in front of him and reached for the tape. “It’s weird packing up Krista’s stuff. Do you think she’s okay?”

He took the tape from her. “She’s in the mentally insane ward of the prison, baby. I think she’s okay in that no one is going to hurt her there, but she’s around people who are far gone mentally. How much interaction is she getting? That would be my question.”

Beth let out a soft sigh as her head dropped. “I don’t know. I should go see her.”

“I’ll go with you.” Damon leaned in and touched the bottom of her chin. “Next subject. I’m going to get emotional pneumonia. I was ready to fuck in the parking lot; now I feel like I need to find some Kleenex and a bucket of ice cream for us to share.”

She laughed, and the room brightened a little. “You don’t mope around and eat ice cream.”

“No? Okay.” He pulled at the tape, ignoring the way she watched him.

“Do you?”

“According to you... no.” He gave her a cocky smile and taped up the box.

“Wait... do you?” She knelt down and cut the tape with a knife. The angle had her looking up at him, which jolted his hormones again. It didn’t take much with her.

“You’ll never know, pussycat.” He pulled his bottom lip into his mouth and gave her a look he knew she would understand. *I want you.*

She pushed at the box, moving it away from them before motioning for him to come closer. “I know that look.”

“Such a good girl, Beth.” He reached down and ran his fingers through her hair as she leaned in and brushed her cheek past his erection. A growl bubbled up inside of him, and he tightened his fingers on her silky locks.

“Your girl,” she whispered and nipped at him.

He stiffened and smiled. She’d come out of her shell a lot over the last year, and yet something told him there was still more to explore. “My woman.”

“That too.” She ran her hands over his arousal, squeezing his head as she glanced up and licked at her pretty mouth. “Go lock the front door.”

“No. Getting caught is half the fun. Stop talking and do what you want to do. I’m all yours. Have at me.” He brushed his thumb across her lips as he kept his tight grip on her hair. The look in her eyes had his balls tight, his pulse spiked, every part of him on guard for what was coming.

“You think I don’t know your tricks?” She reached up and unzipped his fly, leaving his pants buttoned.

“You know them well, but they’re for you, and you like it.” He reached down and pulled his cock from his jeans, tilting it toward her and running the tip down her tongue as she extended it to lick at him. “No, I take that back.”

“What?” She glanced up in confusion as she wrapped her hand around the base of his swollen flesh and swatted him away.

“You don’t just like it.” He winked and pulled at the back of her head, pushing himself into her mouth a little. “You love it.”

She mumbled something, but he was lost to the delicious sensation of having the most beautiful woman in the city on her knees before him. She would be his wife in seven months, but for now, her being his woman was far more than enough.

Closing his eyes, he let his head drop back as he released his hold on her and reached back to grip the counter behind him. The sound of her moaning against his flesh, the wet wicked-hot pull of her mouth on his cock, all of it, every sensation from it left him driving toward orgasm faster than he’d ever experienced.

An unfamiliar voice sounded behind him at the door. “Hey there. You guys need some help?”

Beth started to pull back, but Damon reached down and gripped the side of her face carefully, keeping her in place as he undulated his hips. No way he was letting her go without tasting his release.

He glanced over his shoulder and smiled. “Naw, man. Close that door too, please. I must have left it open.” He stifled the need to groan as she sucked hard, pulling at his skin, begging him to come.

“Yeah, no problem. You sure? It looks like you’re all by yourself.” The guy pressed his hands to the doorframe and looked around.

“I’m good. Shut the door.” Damon turned his attention back to Beth, glancing down and watching her enjoy the exhibitionist moment. The girl played good for everyone else, but she wasn’t as proper as her momma thought she was. “So beautiful, baby. Tug on my sack. Bring me over.”

She mumbled her compliance and petted him, tugging carefully and then harder as he groaned loudly. So cool. Too close. The need to glance over his shoulder rode him hard, but he ignored it. Dude would have closed the door or gotten a

show. What the fuck ever. The kitchen counter hid them well enough.

“You’re so damn big,” Beth mumbled as she dragged her lips down his thick shaft. “I want you inside of me.”

“Good. Finish the job, and we’ll get the fuck out of here. Inside of you is the only place I plan on being tonight.” He ran his fingers down her cheek. “Drink me.”

She nodded and used both hands and her soft mouth to bring him over the edge violently. Stars burst in his vision, and he reached back and gripped the counter tightly as his beautiful woman feasted on him. Everything about the moment locked into his mind’s eye. All the shit they’d been through, and his fuckups in the relationship over the last few months. All of it. Gone. Nothing mattered but her belonging to him.

Step one was her moving into the house, and step two was the wedding. He was halfway there and surprised himself with how much he was ready to wrap up the deal and sign the papers. Whatever they had to deal with as a result of her being his step-sister and soon his bride. Fuck it, they’d deal with it together.

CHAPTER 102



BETHANY

“Why do you keep watching me like that?” Beth glanced over at Damon as they walked through the grocery store later that afternoon. Everything hurt from moving hers and Krista’s stuff out of their old college apartment. She and Damon had finally decided to move in together, and where she was excited, she was a little nervous too. They were just getting back on track with their relationship, but being in each other’s space all the time had to help facilitate that bonding faster. At least she hoped it would.

“Like what?” He ran his hand up her back and gripped the back of her neck as she leaned over the shopping cart.

“Like you’re going to consume me? You scare people with that look.” She turned down another aisle and glanced down at the buggy, finding it a little humorous that Damon liked Cheetos and ice cream. He was beyond fit, his body tight and muscular, and yet the snacks were all his idea.

“I am going to consume you.” He released her and reached up to grab a packet of beef jerky, tossing it in the cart and moving up behind her. The firm press of his body to hers had her standing up straight and stiffening. He wrapped his arms around her, brushing his fingers over her breasts, teasing her. “You want me to start here or at home?”

“You wouldn’t,” she whispered and turned her head a little to catch a glimpse of him in her peripherals. “There are people everywhere.”

“And?” He slipped his hand down the front of her jeans, brushing his middle finger through her folds as he breathed in deeply and bent down to kiss her.

She swatted at him and moved away, her body aching, her cheeks and chest burning with a mixture of excitement and embarrassment. “Damon. Jeez.”

“What? No one was around.” He grabbed a bag of popcorn and tossed it into the buggy before licking at his fingers. “I want more of this.”

Pleasure danced in her stomach. Would their relationship always be so sexually charged? Something told her that Damon would have it no other way.

“Good. You can have anything you want if you can just behave until we get back to the house. They have cameras here.” She put the popcorn back. “Too many snacks in this cart. We’re going to go broke, and you’re going to get fat.”

He tossed the popcorn back into the cart. “We’re wealthy, baby girl, and I’ll work off anything I eat in one way or another.” He chuckled and wrapped his arm around her shoulders from the side. “You’re my favorite playground to get sweaty on. You know that?”

“You have other *playgrounds*?” Beth knew he didn’t, but teasing him was a rare opportunity. He was almost too on-the-ball.

“Yep. The gym, the track, the beach, you name it, I can get a good workout from it.” He kissed the side of her head and released her. “How was Kendal this last week?”

A change of subject. Thank God.

“He’s doing okay. I’m not sure what’s going on with him at home because he keeps to himself, but the bags are gone from under his eyes.” Beth shrugged. “Maybe you should make time to take him to lunch or out for coffee.”

“Yeah. I’ll do that. I’ve been putting all my spare moments into you and trying to help facilitate this move, but I’m sure he could use a friend.” Damon slipped his hands into his pockets.

Concern moved across his face, but he didn't say anything else, and Bethany didn't push him.

Kendal was Damon's best friend, and most days, his *only* friend. The poor guy had been through hell with losing his sister and then realizing that after not dating for years, he was dating someone with an unknown tie to his past. He just couldn't catch a break.

"Did you find out what happened with that Dana chick he wanted to date?" Damon pulled at the front of the cart, forcing them toward the checkout.

Beth glanced down into the cart. "No, but I'll ask him soon if you don't. Where are you going? We have snacks and soda like we're throwing a ten-year-old's birthday party. We need veggies and something to cook for dinner."

"Oh no, I got that covered." He glanced back and smiled, melting her. The man was hotter than sin itself, his dark brown eyes filled with mischief.

"Got it covered?" She stopped pulling back on the cart and let him lead the way. After being raised to take care of herself and stand alone on her own two feet, she was ready to hand the reins over to a strong man that loved her. That was Damon without a doubt.

"Yep. Trust me." He reached down and pulled out a few items, laying them on the belt as Beth moved up beside him.

"Let me help." She reached down but stopped as he glanced over and gave her a look.

"No, woman. I got this." He continued to unload the cart as she moved by him, making sure to squeeze his perfect rear as she did. The soft grunt she got in return was delicious. He wasn't the only one with the power to make someone moan.

"Hi, there," the cashier mumbled and glanced up, the boy's smile growing a little wider. "Find everything you need?"

"We did." Damon's voice surprised her. "I'm paying, baby."

"No, I got it." She reached into her purse for her wallet.

“Nope.” Damon extended his card. “Here you go, man, and stop eye-fucking my girl. Get your own.”

“Damon!” Beth’s cheeks burned for the third time that day. Were men always so straightforward with each other? It was beyond embarrassing.

“I’m sorry, sir... I-” the cashier started.

“I know what you were doing. Charge the card and stop trying to fix it.” Damon handed him the card, and Beth walked off, not sure if she were mortified or turned on by Damon being the alpha asshole he’d always been. Some part of her knew that would never change, but did she really want it to? No. Not in the slightest. He made life fun, entertaining, sexy.

“You ready, baby?” He moved up beside her with a few bags in his hand and his other one extended toward her.

“Yes.” She grasped his hand and tucked herself against his side. “That poor guy wasn’t eye-fucking me. He was just being friendly.”

Damon laughed sardonically. “You’re so innocent. I almost want to put you across my knee and spank you for being blind to what the moron was up to. You gotta protect yourself from other men trying to get your attention, lest I beat up the whole damn city.”

“Protect myself?” She stopped beside the truck, a little weary as she took in all of the boxes piled in the back. Their evening didn’t look at all like it was going to be a relaxing meal, good wine, hot bath and love making. It looked like they’d be unpacking her shit for hours.

“Yes, Beth.” He reached for her, tugging her close and capturing her against his chest with his strong arms. “Philip tried to get your attention, Ben, hell, I’m sure Matt or Kendal would have tried if they didn’t know you were mine. You’re beautiful, baby. Sexy and feminine.” He tightened his hold.

“Can’t breathe,” she squeaked out, trying to be funny.

He smiled and leaned down to kiss her hard. The soft press of his tongue against her lips had her opening up and tilting her head. The world melted away as he made love to her

mouth, his expertise in kissing leaving her knees weak, her chest filled with the fluttering feeling of love.

“Protect yourself for me, all right?”

“Anything you want,” she mumbled and pulled him down for another kiss.

“You keep promising that, but what if I want something naughty?” He licked her lips before releasing her.

Beth tried to get a hold of herself as she walked to her side of the truck and opened the door.

Damon got into his side and leaned over, offering her a hand. “Answer the question, Beth.”

“Then I guess you get it.” She took his hand and hoisted herself up into the truck. “What *exactly* were you thinking?”

“I don’t kiss and tell. You want my fantasies? Come after them.” He started the truck and pulled out of the grocery store parking lot. “You like fish, right?”

“Yeah. Anything sounds good.” She buckled up and pulled her legs into the seat, letting the peace of belonging to him roll over her. He would be a great husband, and she would learn to help support him in his obsession at work while still forcing him to spend time building the business and their family life together.

His phone buzzed as if on cue. The radio from the truck came to life, the voice electronic. “Caller Mitch Roberson from McKenzie and Bryant.”

Damon reached out but didn’t press the button to pick up the call. “I’ll call him back later.”

“What?” Beth was a little surprised by his actions. “You can get it now, baby. I’ll just be quiet, and he won’t know that I’m here. Unless you had something confidential to talk about?”

“No. I just want to spend the rest of the afternoon and evening with you.” He put his hands back on the wheel and shrugged. “It’s Saturday, and if it were an emergency, he would have called my father. No big deal.”

It was a small gesture, and yet it meant everything to her. She wasn't going to be the only one working to make their lives all she wanted it to be. He would be changing and shifting right beside her. Warmth filled her chest and tears burned her eyes, but she turned her face toward the window beside her and forced herself to calm down. Funny how it was never the big things, but the small, seemingly insignificant things that caused her heart to swell.

“Hey, I know we’ve talked a little about you moving to my place, but it’s your place now too. So redecorate however you want to, okay? I don’t give two shits about the colors, the decorations or anything else. Make it home for you, baby. I’ll hire someone to come and do whatever you want, so have fun with it.” He reached out and squeezed her hand as a few tears trickled down her face. “Beth? You all right?”

“Just overwhelmed.” She pulled her hand from his and wiped at her face. “I’m sorry. I just can’t help but feel grateful because of all of this.” She forced herself to look his way. “By you. I wasn’t sure we were going to make it.”

He reached over and brushed his fingers down the side of her cheek. “I wasn’t sure either, but I knew without you in my life, happiness would be a thing of the past. I’ve never really been in love before. Shit’s scary.” He smiled, and she laughed.

“Yeah. It is.” She cupped her hand over his and kissed his palm. “We’ll figure it out together.”

“I like the sound of that.” He pulled his hand back as he turned into their driveway. A white Toyota sat in the far-left corner of the circle drive. Martha?

“Is that Martha’s car?” Bethany unbuckled as he parked and got out of the truck, not waiting for an answer.

“Yeah. She’s helping me with your welcoming party. It’s just you and me, but you know I can’t cook as well as I’d like to.” He shrugged and reached for her hand. “Let’s eat and then we’ll unpack. We can just take our time and enjoy the night together.”

“You had Martha come over to cook dinner for us?”

“Something like that.” He walked to the door and opened it, moving back to let her in. “My lady... your new house and our new life.”

Bethany swallowed the emotions rising up in her. Seven months and she would be a Bryant in the only way she wanted to, as Damon’s wife, not his step-sister.

The smell of garlic, butter, and fresh bread filled her senses, and her stomach growled loudly. “It smells like heaven in here.” They turned the corner for the kitchen to find the table set and the food on the stove. “Where’s Martha?”

The sound of a car starting and pulling out of the drive at the front of the house gave her the answer she was after.

Damon moved up beside her and handed her a wine glass. “To this next step together. It’s just the first of many.”

She hit her glass against his and took a sip of the tart wine. “Does this have anything to do with your naughty desires, or are you talking about our wedding and having kids together?”

He laughed and pulled her close. “All the above, baby. All the above.”

CHAPTER 103



DAMON

Seven Months Later

“James, come on in.” Damon moved back and smiled at Linda, his secretary. “Hold all of my calls for the next thirty minutes.”

“Not a problem, Mr. Bryant.” Linda returned the smile and glanced down at her desk.

She was a beautiful older woman and should have been married. Crazy how many people had been handed a shitty situation in life and yet seemed to still get up and smile in the face of all of it. He needed to give Linda a raise or take her out to lunch soon. The poor woman put up with a lot of shit, his in particular.

“How are you, Damon? You look good. Last time we saw each other, you were having lady problems if I recall.” James unbuttoned his coat and sat down, the CEO of Zarpeth looking much better than Damon had seen him look in months.

“I’ll always have problems if a lady is involved. It’s just the natural evolution of things. You know this.” Damon sat down and pressed his forearms to his desk. “Beth and I are getting married in a couple of weeks. Did you get the invitation we sent to you?”

“Sure did.” The older man leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands together over his stomach. “I’ll be there for sure. My whole family will, actually.”

Damon lifted his eyebrow. “Including your wife?”

“Yeah.” James’ smile told Damon all he needed to know. “Everything is going great between the two of us. I wasn’t sure love was enough, but it seems like it is.”

“I’m not sure I agree with that.” Damon leaned back in his chair, studying his client and good friend.

“Explain.”

“Love pushes you to do all the things you’re doing to mend the relationship. Without loving your bride, you would just walk away and find someone new. That’s probably the easier answer.”

“True.” James nodded. “Love is the instigator, but it’s also the thing that’s fixing, binding, reviving our relationship. I still stand by my statement. Love is enough. It’s all you need to push yourself into action.”

Damon ingested James’ thoughts and nodded. “Maybe so. Either way, we both look better and thank God our love lives are back on track. Leaves us more energy to rule the world of business.”

“Speaking of... You know I’m walking away from Zarpeth. June first is my last day with the company.” James’ expression was hard to read. Relief? Sadness? Numbness?

Damon couldn’t help but dive into his thoughts for a moment. How would he feel leaving M&B? A sickening feeling rolled across him, but he forced it back down.

“My father told me about your departure around the holidays. I wanted to wait until we had a chance to talk face to face before bringing it up.” Damon ran his fingers through his hair and studied James. “You know that we can help get everything in line with your firm, James.”

“It’s not that. I have more money than God. I’m going to retire a little early and spend my time with my family. They deserve it. I’ve reached the top, which was the place I was after.”

“And how’s the view?” Damon couldn’t help but ask.

“Beautiful... and lonely.” James winked. “You don’t want to traverse the mountain alone.”

“I don’t think I’m going to have to, though Beth still hasn’t decided if she’s coming back fully. She’s working on a special project down the hall, which is far more than she was willing to do back in October when we reconciled and got back together.”

“It’s a start.” James leaned down and pulled something out of his briefcase. “I own fifty-one percent of the shares in Zarpeth, so I was hoping I could twist your arm to recommend a private accountant that would help me with my personal affairs. I’m willing to pay top dollar.”

Damon snorted. “You came all this way to try and mooch one of my staff off of me?”

“Not one of them. Your best.” James extended the packet. “Here are the details of my personal assets and liabilities, as well as the offer I’m extending. I don’t want to interview anyone. I just want you and Kent to help me find someone.” He lifted his hand as Damon started to speak again. “I know you’re not in the HR business. I get it, but you’ve been good to me and my firm. Give me someone that I can trust and that will do things the M&B way.”

“Are you still wanting us, the firm, to do your personal taxes and investment accounting?” Damon wasn’t quite sure what to make out of James’ request. It wasn’t too surprising, but it wasn’t every day that a client showed up wanting to poach one of Damon’s staff members.

“Absolutely, and the new accountant doesn’t have to live in Florida or Seattle where I live throughout the year. They can stay here and work remote, maybe have an office here with you guys that I can reimburse you for?”

“Let me look at the rules of engagement before I say yes. We’re still your auditing firm.” Damon tapped the desk in front of him as his mind moved through who would be good for James as well as who it would be nice to get rid of. Philip’s face popped into Damon’s head, but it would have been for selfish, silly reasons.

The kid had a crush on Bethany or did at one time.

A knock at the door surprised him. “Come in.”

Beth poked her head in and smiled. “Sorry to bother you. Linda wasn’t out here, so I wasn’t sure if you were alone or with a client. I’ll come back later.”

Beth. Bethany didn’t want to work for him, and yet she wanted to be close to him, to be an extension of his company.

Damon motioned her to come closer. “No, it’s fine. Come on in, Bethany. Let me introduce you to James Talling. He’s the-”

“The CEO of Zarpeth. I’m aware.” She gave him a cute smile and extended her hand as James stood up and turned to greet her. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Talling. I enjoyed your article in Entrepreneur last year. It was brilliant.”

James chuckled. “Well, that’s nice to hear that someone enjoyed it. I swear I had to up my security measures. People in my generation don’t like the idea of remote working arrangements and employee ownership plans. It’s the way of the future, but it’s going to be like pulling teeth to get some of the old guys on board.”

“We just need more trendsetters like you to lead the way.” Beth shook his hand, her expression soft and welcoming.

Damon studied her, falling even more in love with her. She wasn’t just his woman, but could one day become his partner at the office if he played his cards right. It was a simple exchange between her and James, and yet every company initiative he’d worked up over the last five years centered around excellent customer service. She got it, without even trying.

“I like her.” James glanced back and winked at Damon.

“Well, don’t like her too much. I’m quite protective of her.” Damon walked around his desk and pulled Bethany to his side, leaning over to kiss the side of her head. “This is my fiancée.”

“What?” James put his hands on his hips. “You’re marrying this scoundrel? A beautiful, intelligent, *young* woman like you? Brother. What is the world coming to?”

“I am, and I can’t wait.” Beth turned and wrapped her arms around Damon’s waist, making him feel like the only man in the room. “He’s brilliant, bold and everything I’ve wanted my whole life.”

Damon chuckled and kissed the tip of her nose. “Your check is in the mail.”

“Well, I’ll be at the ceremony. I love that Damon’s found someone. He is a good man.” James reached out and patted Damon’s back. “Now, isn’t Beth here a CPA?”

“She will be soon, but it’s Bethany.” Damon released her and turned to face James. “She’s graduating with her master’s in a week or so.”

“From UT here in Dallas?” James smiled.

“Yes, sir. It’s been a long five years, but I’m almost done with my master’s.” Her smile caused Damon to smile as well.

“She’s got a 4.0, James. Not only is she beautiful, but brilliant as well.” Damon reached over and ran his hand down the back of her hair. “And bossy as hell too.”

“Hey!” She popped him in the chest and extended her hand to James again. “It’s nice to meet you. Don’t let him tell you any lies about me.”

James shook her hand. “Something tells me that he wouldn’t dare try.”

Bethany gave a soft laugh and turned, walking out and leaving Damon staring after her. It was weird to feel so many things at once, especially in the middle of his office. It was the only place he was steady, secure, strong. The other parts of his life, it appeared he was that way, but it took a lot of effort to keep up the facade. At the office, he was simply himself. Beth was unraveling that.

“I like her.” James patted him on the back again. “How about when she gets her CPA certificate, we talk about her

being my accountant? It's not healthy for you two to work together at M&B, but maybe she can work for me and still be right down the hall from you. What do you think?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I think she would love the idea. Let's get through her graduation and the wedding and revisit it. I'll bring it up with her soon too and see what she thinks." Damon extended his hand to his old friend. "Anything else I can do for you?"

"Nope. You've done enough already. Take care of that one. She seems like a keeper." James shook Damon's hand and walked over to get his briefcase.

"She is... and let's hope that love is enough."

"Let's not hope, let's just acknowledge that it is. That's the greatest bit of wisdom I could drop on anyone." He patted Damon's shoulder. "Love is enough. Believe it."



"Boss?" Linda stuck her head into the office a little later that afternoon. "You free for a minute?"

"Of course." Damon finished typing the letter he was working on and stood up from his seat, lifting his hands in the air and stretching. "What's up?"

Linda walked in with a notepad and pen, tapping it frantically as she sat down across the desk from Damon. "You know we're having Ben's promotion party on Friday night, right?"

"Yeah. I'll be there for sure." Damon crossed his arms over his chest, waiting for Linda to trickle out the news, the issue, the whatever that had her a nervous wreck.

"Right, well, the restaurant we were going to use is closing down because of something with the owners. I'm not sure what, but do you have another place in mind? I know you wanted this to be special because it's Ben, and he's been with you for a long time."

“Hmm...” Damon walked to the windows in his office and let his eyes move out across the city. “What would Ben enjoy doing?”

“Office party instead? I could get it catered.”

“No, that’s so overdone.” Damon reached up and pressed his hand to the glass, trying to mull through all of the events Ben had scheduled for the interns over the last few years. Some of them were simply because the interns were young and wild and enjoyed crazy team building activities, but some of them were because *Ben* enjoyed those activities and wanted friends to join him in doing them. “Let’s reserve the top floor of Masquerade. It’s a night club downtown that I know Ben enjoys. He tries to get the group to go all the time. Hell, he tries to get *me* to go all the time.”

Linda chuckled. “I love that place too. I doubt they’re going to have the top floor available, but I can check.”

Damon glanced over his shoulder. “Offer them more than they’re asking for it. Make it happen for us. For Ben.”

“Okay. Will do.” She stood up, her shoulders straighter, her nervousness gone.

“Linda,” Damon called after her as he turned to face her. “You okay? You seem a little off today.”

“I don’t know. There’s just so much change lately. I just hope everything goes okay.” She shrugged and walked to the door.

“What are you specifically worried about?”

“Anything. Everything.” She opened the door and turned, smiling. “It’s nothing. I just hope that you’re making the right decision with Beth.”

“You don’t think I am?” He’d never had Linda voice a concern about Beth and was a little surprised to hear she had any concerns at all.

“I think it’s a good decision for you, but she’s young. People change, Damon.” Linda shrugged again. “I married young, and it didn’t work out too well for me.”

“When is the last time you went out?”

She seemed stunned by the question, but Damon didn't backtrack. Linda had *never* mentioned a date or a boyfriend or anything. “I don't know. Two years.”

“Why?” Damon tilted his head, studying her.

“Because it didn't work the first ten times. Why would it work now?” She crossed her arms over her chest, her voice growing tight - defensive.

“Because the next guy isn't the first ten guys. Take off this afternoon and get on a dating site. By tomorrow morning you need to tell me the name of three guys you're going to have a casual date with. It's required.” Damon turned back to the window, trying to hide his smile. He loved her as a friend, and she'd been beside him for the entirety of his career. She needed truth in her life. He could be that truth.

Time to give back to a few people.

“Um. Yes, sir?” Her voice was unsteady.

“Perfect. Close the door behind you.” He waited until she left to grin like the tomcat he was. Everyone deserved love, even him.

CHAPTER 104



BETHANY

There was something about James Talling that Bethany liked. He seemed almost like a warm, fatherly figure.

“What’s that smile for? Looks like trouble.” Ben glanced up from the large conference room table where he, Philip and Sadie were gathered around his computer.

“What?” Beth forced her smile to fade - a little. “I just met Mr. Talling. I like him.”

“Should we inform Damon?” Sadie gave a shit-eating grin. “Kidding.”

Bethany chuckled. “No, but if we’re going to lunch and still trying to make the Accounting Controls meeting at UT this afternoon, we need to get a move on. Who’s driving?”

“Damon coming with us?” Philip stood and twisted his torso as he swung his arms around.

“No, he’s still talking with Mr. Talling, I believe. I’ll text him where we are, but he could probably lead the meeting or discussion this afternoon.” Bethany reached down and grabbed her purse. “Sadie, you coming with us?”

It was almost comical to watch the way the girl’s eyes lit up when Bethany spoke directly to her. She had to have been the biggest bully in the whole damn company when Beth started as an intern. The old adage must have been true - smack the bully back and they become your best friend.

“Yeah, I think so.” She stood and picked up her purse. “I’m going to dinner with a new guy tonight at six. You think

we'll be done by then?"

"A new guy? Jeez. What's he, the fifth one this week?" Ben winked at her and stood, walking to the door. "I'll drive."

"Fifth one? You on a dating spree?" Bethany followed after Ben, ignoring the way Philip's eyes lingered on her. They could have so easily moved into having a relationship, but the sexy Aussie became the friend she needed instead. She still wasn't sure how he felt about her and Damon moving forward, but he was playing the supportive friend role from the side.

She was grateful. The last year had been more drama than she wanted to think about.

"Yeah." Sadie moved up beside her and brushed her thick red hair over the shoulder. The girl was beautiful and knew it. "I don't know... I'm just tired of being alone."

"I second that." Ben lifted his hand in the air. "However, I've decided to turn a new leaf."

"By doing what?" Philip moved up on Beth's other side as they stopped at the elevator.

"By being true to myself." Ben pressed the button and turned to face everyone. The tight expression he wore left Bethany a little concerned about what he was going to confess.

"Keep going..." Sadie walked into the elevator and turned to face them. "Stop leaving breadcrumbs and spit it out. You're gay, aren't you."

"Sadie. Shit." Beth rolled her eyes and walked into the elevator. "Ben isn't gay."

"Yeah, I am." Ben shrugged and joined the group. "Time to stop living a lie. I hate myself every day I get up and think, 'today I'm going to ask a woman out.'" He visibly shivered. "Gross."

Bethany laughed and reached up to clamp her hand over her mouth. "Sorry."

"Good for you, man. I'm not gay, but I'm proud of you." Philip reached out and patted Ben's back. "There's nothing worse than wearing a fucking mask all the time."

“Here. Here.” Sadie waved her hand around. “I’m just going to stop dating if this guy tonight doesn’t work out. I keep thinking the next one is going to be *the one*, but it’s just not happening.”

“Can I be honest?” Philip spoke up, his eyes on Sadie.

“Oh hell,” Ben muttered and pressed his hand to his face. “This is never good.”

Bethany crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back against the wall behind her, waiting for the show to start. Philip was a ballsy guy, and Sadie was a firecracker.

“Yes. Please do.” Sadie turned to face him, her expression growing tight.

“You throw yourself at guys, and where you think that they want that, in fact, they don’t. Play hard to get. You’re worth the chase, Sadie. Don’t run after the next guy that takes you out. Let him come after you.” Philip gave her a knowing look, and Bethany held her breath.

The look on Ben’s face said that he was bolting the minute the door to the elevator opened.

Nothing but silence. Tense, thick, uncomfortable silence.

The door opened, and Ben jogged through. “I’ll get the car. Meet you guys out front.”

“Me too.” Bethany moved out of the elevator, ready to jog after Ben.

“No. You stay here with me.” Sadie reached out and gripped her wrist, pulling her to a stop. “And tell me the truth. Do I throw myself at guys?”

Fuck. Bethany gave Philip a ‘really, right now’ look and forced herself to face Sadie. The girl didn’t have many people in her life from what Bethany came to know over the last year. And of the people she did have in her life, rarely would anyone confront her or tell her the truth. She was too mean for that shit.

“Did you throw yourself at Philip?” Bethany asked, keeping her expression welcoming, her voice soft.

“Yes,” Philip responded as Sadie responded, “No!”

“Right.” Bethany let out a quick sigh. “Let’s wait outside for Ben.”

“I didn’t throw myself at you, you big, ugly oaf. You were the one that wanted to sex it up in Ben’s office. Not me.” Sadie’s voice was a little loud.

“Did you think this would go well?” Bethany glanced over at Philip, who looked sick all of a sudden.

“Yes. I still do.” Philip reached out and grabbed Sadie’s hand, pulling her closer to them. “Stop screaming and act your age. I’m trying to help you because I care about you. You can’t throw yourself on the bed for any stiff dick that shows up. You hate yourself because of that shit. Don’t act like you don’t.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I have to go.”

“Sadie.” Bethany reached out and pulled the girl to her, hugging her and giving Philip the biggest ‘go to hell look’ she could muster. “It’s fine. Philip is just jealous. He’s interested in you, and you giving attention to every guy in the world is pissing him off. He’s lashing out.”

Sadie pulled back and glanced over at Philip as she wiped at her eyes.

Bethany was simply trying to throw Philip under the bus, even though there was no way in hell Philip had feelings for the wild redhead that had most of them rolling their eyes at the office.

“You do?” Sadie’s voice softened, her expression changing from anger to neediness.

Oh hell. Bethany started to answer to save Sadie from really thinking that Philip had any feelings for her.

“Yeah. I do.” Philip glanced over and stuck his tongue out at Bethany. “I’m tired of you looking everywhere else. I’m right fucking here.”

Bethany stood in stock. Philip had been after *her* seven months ago.

Seven months.

That was plenty of time to move on and find someone else to fall for. But Sadie?

“Wow. I’m so sorry.” Sadie shook her head. “I didn’t-”

“I know you didn’t.” Philip reached out and grabbed Sadie’s hand, turning his face toward Bethany. “We’ll catch up with you and Ben later. We need to figure this out.”

Bethany didn’t get a chance to answer as Philip half-dragged Sadie back toward the elevator. Were they sleeping together?

“Didn’t see that coming,” Bethany mumbled and walked toward the door, numb. She pushed the door open and walked toward Ben, who was waiting in his car out front. Opening the door, she paused to glance behind her. “Weird.”

“What happened? Did they blow up at each other?” Ben asked as Bethany got in the car.

“Yeah, but they care about each other.” Beth closed the door and buckled up. “How weird is that?”

“Not that weird at all. You haven’t been around lately. They’ve been sleeping together for the last four months, more of a ‘friends with benefits’ type thing from what Philip said.” Ben pulled out into downtown traffic. “They need to work it out. Sex without commitment always has consequences.”

“I couldn’t agree more.” Bethany settled into the comfort of her seat and turned her face toward Ben. He was a little overweight and not too terribly attractive, but he had a great heart, and he would find someone to love before too long. “Hey.”

“Yeah?” He glanced over at her, his cheeks pink.

“Thanks for sharing your news with us. I think it’s great that you’re going to start being more the man you know you are.” She reached over and squeezed his arm. “I think you’ll find someone in no time.”

“Right, but if I find someone before the wedding, do you think Damon would flip his shit if I-”

“What? No, not at all. You’re one of his groomsmen, Ben. He’s planning a party for your promotion for Friday. He cares about you, no matter what choice you make. That’s your business.” She smiled and dropped her hands into her lap. “I’m still in shock that Sadie and Philip are... were...”

He chuckled. “You jealous that you don’t have the office foreigner with the sexy accent chasing after you?”

“Hell no. I like Philip, but that was miserable, honestly. Damon is extremely territorial. I was concerned for Philip’s safety on more than one occasion.” She wrapped her arms around herself and let out a sigh. “Anyway, I’m looking forward to this session at UT.”

“Me too. Isn’t Kendal doing it?”

“Yeah.” Bethany smiled, unable to help herself. Stiff Dr. Kendal Tarrington, always on his toes and beyond proper. He was finally calming down some, thanks to his new love interest. Dana was exactly what he needed.

“Why the grin? I swear you wear your emotions on your face more than anyone else I know.” Ben chuckled. “Damon doesn’t have to guess much with you, does he?”

“He can’t figure out what the expressions mean. He needs a treasure map key to decipher me.” She laughed and sat up, rolling her shoulders. “I was smiling because my life has changed so much, but for the better, I think. Kendal is a big part of it. You know I TA’d for him this last year in his Cost Accounting class, right?”

“Yeah, I knew that. It went well?”

“I loved it. I could see myself becoming a professor after ten to fifteen years in the corporate world.” She shrugged. “I like the classroom, but I love customers and the puzzles they throw our way all the time.”

“So do both. You have the freedom to choose what you want to do. Come back and work for M&B until you’re sick of it, and work on your doctorate on the side.” Ben pulled into one of Beth’s favorite restaurants, a quaint tapas bar near the campus.

“I’m not sure working with Damon is the best idea.” She smiled and unbuckled as the valet walked toward the car.

“Maybe you should talk to him. He has opportunities all the time to do new things. Maybe he’s got one that would fit you perfectly.”

“You know something you’re not telling me.” Bethany turned and pinned Ben with a hard stare as the valet opened her door. “Spill.”

“Talling is looking for a personal accountant. Maybe that’s you.” Ben winked and got out of the car.

First Ben being gay. Then Sadie and Philip. Now James Talling needed a personal CPA? Things just couldn’t get weirder, or better.

CHAPTER 105



BETHANY

Kendal's speech went well the day before, but there was no getting to him for the hordes of people who crowded the stage when he finished. Bethany gave up after a few minutes and left with Ben to head back to the office. After a long afternoon of working on the special project she promised Damon she would help with, she headed back to their place and spent the evening unpacking. Something came up at the office that had him tied up, and at eleven, she gave up and fell asleep on the couch.

She woke in the bed the next morning, the smell of his cologne lingering in the room around her. He must have toted her to the bedroom sometime during the night. Where she missed seeing him like crazy, she refused to get pissed over it. He had to do what he had to do. She'd already witnessed him trying to be home more often and ignoring the business when they were together if at all possible.

"So... no being upset." She rolled over and sat up, stretching. The memory of him stripping her down and wrapping himself around her the night before raced through her mind. "Oh." She smiled and laid back on the bed, letting the visual warm her. They hadn't made love, but they might as well have. The strong grip of his hands on her skin, his mouth against her neck, the soft promise that he would make him being late up to her, it was everything to her.

The phone buzzed beside her, pulling her from her reverie and causing her to groan. She was due to be at UT for her last session as Kendal's TA in an hour. There was just enough time

for a quick shower before she had to head up to the school. She'd grab a muffin and coffee for both her and Kendal.

The number on her phone wasn't one she knew, so ignoring it, she got up and stripped on the way to the bathroom. Graduating with her master's should have felt like a monumental occasion, but in light of the wedding. It didn't. She was thrilled to be done with her studies, but not working with Kendal anymore was depressing.

"Maybe in the future," she mumbled and turned on the shower. The phone buzzed again, and she paused. "Who the hell?" She considered going back into the bedroom to check, but the thick haze pouring from the top of the shower called to her. The only thing better than a hot shower was a hot shower with her man behind her.



"You look... alive." Kendal smiled as he opened the door for Bethany. "Getting excited about the wedding or graduation, or both?"

"All the above?" She walked into the auditorium and breathed in deeply. "I can't believe this is my last day with you."

"Don't sound so sentimental." He chuckled and walked up the stairs onto the stage. His brown hair was a mess, and his glasses a little crooked. He was beyond cute. Dana was a lucky woman, but one that had better do Kendal right.

Bethany forced down the need to protect Damon's best friend. "Maybe I'm a little down about not being here with you." She put her hand on her hip and gave him her full attention. "I liked you from the first day we met. You know, the day you gave me your speech about who you were, what you put up with and how you were completely hands off."

"Hey. I worked hard on that speech." He glanced up and smiled as he adjusted his glasses. "It's worked for the last few years."

“And now it’s time to retire it. You don’t need it anymore. You’re with someone. A good someone?” Bethany lifted her eyebrow.

“Yeah. Dana’s incredible. More than I deserve after all the shit we’ve gone through.” He turned and walked to the white board, scribbling out something that was hard as hell to read.

“I’m just glad everything worked out.” She moved toward the stage. “You have your tux and everything for the wedding?”

“Sure do. Dana helped me get everything together.” He chuckled.

“What?” Bethany couldn’t help but grin. Kendal had been *so* damn serious from the first day she started to work for him. He was changing, they all were.

He glanced over his shoulder, his expression kind. “I was just thinking about how ridiculous this last year has been. I mean, what are the odds that you would end up TA’ing for me and you just happen to be my best friend’s girl? Mind you, my best friend that swore he would never settle down, not in a million years.”

“Things just work out somehow.” She shrugged and turned to find Jake struggling to hold the door and wheel into the auditorium. “Hey. Let me help you.” She jogged over to him and pulled the door open wide. “I was hoping you were coming today.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for anything, silly.” He turned and reached up, raking his thin fingers through his floppy blond hair. “You excited?”

“Yes. You?” She glanced over to find Kendal watching them. Both her and Jake would graduate with their master’s in a week or so. It was the next step in their journey, and yet her path looked so different from Jake’s.

“Absolutely. I go in for one more surgery two weeks after we graduate. I was hoping they could get it done before so that I walk across the stage,” he sighed, “but it wasn’t meant to be.”

“You’ll get it done soon, man.” Kendal hopped off the stage and walked toward them. “Now, stop talking about the future and get your sights focused on today. We have finals, and word in the professors’ lounge is that some of the finals got out among the students about a week ago. You guys know anything?”

Jake snorted. “No, but I’d love one for Dr. Dickman’s marketing final. I’m lost in there. I’m going to have to be the worker bee in a firm because if I’m left to sell my own services, me and my family are going to go hungry.”

Bethany smirked. “I haven’t heard anything, but seeing that you have... what are you going to do about it?” Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she pulled it out to see another unknown number. “Sorry about that.” She put it back and ignored it. Bill collectors? Krista? No. Maybe someone just had the wrong number.

“I changed the test. What else could I do?” Kendal put his hands on his hips and lifted his eyebrow. His devilish expression had to be one of the many tricks he used on women in his younger years when he and Damon were slutting it up in college. Bethany had, unfortunately, heard a few too many of their stories over beers and burgers before.

“That was a forty-page test, Dr. Tarrington. You changed all of it?” Jake’s eyes widened.

Bethany’s phone buzzed again, and she growled, pulling it from her pocket and turning. “I’ll be right back. I need to get this.”

“Yeah, I changed it. There’s no way in hell I’m going to give someone a test I know they’ve already seen.” Kendal snorted.

“He loves his rules,” Bethany called over her shoulder before pushing the door open and putting her phone to her ear. “Hello?”

Nothing. Silence.

She pulled it away from her face and checked to make sure she connected with the caller. Yep. Telemarketer? She pressed

the phone to her ear again. “Hello? Who’s there?”

Nothing. Soft panting, but it was more the sound someone afraid would make. “Krista? Is that you?”

A click resounded in her ear, and the call died.

“Really?” She searched through her missed calls and realized that same caller had been the one calling all morning. Something didn’t feel right about it, but she forced herself to ignore it. If someone wanted to get in touch with her, even Krista, they would.

She dialed Damon’s number, wanting to hear his voice as she found a bench to drop down onto. He picked up on the second ring.

“Damon Bryant.”

A smile lifted her lips. His voice even sounded delicious.

“Hi, Mr. Bryant. Any chance you might make it home to your girlfriend before the sun goes down tonight?” She glanced around as nostalgia raced through her. Five years of struggling her ass off on the UT campus and she was almost done. It felt too good to be true. She’d almost done it. And honestly, most of it had been by her own doing, with her strength and money.

Damon chuckled. “Hi, baby. I’m not sure about tonight. I’m trying to work through a few new accounts so that I can have off for our honeymoon in a few weeks. I’ll do my best, all right?”

She held in the sigh that sat on the edge of her tongue. “Absolutely. I’ll cook some dinner, and if you’re not there when I go to bed, there will be a plate in the fridge for you.”

“Sounds amazing. Are you not working with Kendal today?”

“I am. I just keep getting calls from some unknown number, so I finally decided to answer it.”

“And?” His voice grew tight.

“And who knows. The guy or girl never answered, just breathed on the phone.” She stood up. “Probably Krista.”

“She wouldn’t have access to a phone without someone next to her, Beth.”

Why had she mentioned it to him again? He overreacted worse than she did in most situations.

“Right, then, I have no clue. I’m not worried about it. I’ll see you tonight, okay? Nothing to be concerned about.”

“I don’t like it,” he barked out.

“Then I’ll let you answer it the next time we’re together and it rings.” She walked toward the accounting building as the wind picked up, blowing her hair about.

“All right. Be careful, okay? I love you.”

“Me too.” She dropped the call and smiled at a big football-looking guy who opened the door for her. “Thanks.”

“You bet.”

She shook her shoulders and let out the breath she was holding. Graduation was coming soon, then the wedding and then the honeymoon. Back to Jamaica, but this time, just her and Damon. Funny enough, the best part about all of the upcoming events was that Matt would be back in town. Him moving to Seattle left a hole in her heart she hadn’t expected. Being an only child left her yearning for a sibling, and Matt was just the guy.

Too bad a beautiful, creative, dominant woman had him wrapped around her fingers. No, that wasn’t the rough part. That was great. Too bad she lived in Seattle. It might as well have been a million miles away.



The rest of the day went off without a hitch, and Bethany considered just going over to her mother and Kent’s for dinner instead of eating at Damon’s alone again, but Damon’s was home. She had to get used to that.

“Feels more like home when he’s here.” She walked languidly to the front door with a large bouquet of roses in her arms. Kendal had outdone himself, and the whole class got to witness her blushing because of it. He was a good man. “I need to get a dog, or a cat, or something. Something to greet me when I walk into the house.”

Bethany had barely gotten in the house when the doorbell rang behind her. She put her stuff down and walked back to the door, peeking through to see her mom standing on the other side with a bag of groceries in her arms.

“Mom.” Bethany pulled the door open and reached out to take the bags. “What are you doing here?”

Her mother smiled. “I heard Kent say that Damon was working late again, and I thought you might like some company?” She shrugged and walked in, hugging Bethany around the bags. “That okay?”

“Of course it is. I was just preparing myself to be a good sport about another night alone in his big beautiful house.”

“Speaking of the house,” her mother moved past her, “we need to get a new color scheme going. This modern white and cream-colored boringness has to go.”

“Agreed.” Bethany walked to the kitchen and set down the bags before digging out the contents inside. “Yum. I love goat cheese and Canadian bacon. What are we making?”

“Pizzas. Your favorite.” Her mom moved up beside her and pressed her shoulder to Bethany’s. “Only now they are a little more upscale. No more sauce and Parmesan packets stolen from the pizza place down the road. Man, life sure has changed.”

“This was our real life all along.” Bethany pulled out a bottle of red wine. “I’ll open this, and you finish getting everything out so I can ogle at it before we start making our pizza.”

“Sounds like a deal.”

Bethany worked on the wine as her mother went on about graduation and the wedding, just the sound of her voice a

complete comfort.

“Do you think Dad will show up at the graduation?” Bethany turned and lifted her eyes as her mother glanced over her shoulder.

“Your father or Kent?”

“My dad.” Beth picked up two wine glasses and handed her mother one as the older woman turned around.

“No, baby. I haven’t heard from him since the day before he left.” She reached out and touched the side of Bethany’s face. “Don’t count on that, okay?”

“No, of course not.” Bethany scowled. “It’s not like I want to see him anyway. He abandoned us.”

“He did.” Her mom lifted her hands and glanced around. “And as much as I hate to give him *any* credit, because of all he did... we ended up here. It sucks to high heaven, but a lot of times our brokenness becomes a mosaic of beauty, if we let it.”

“Wow. Did you come up with that yourself?” Bethany poured them both a glass of wine.

“What? Hell no. I read it on a plaque at the mall today.”

They both cracked up and lifted their glasses, toasting the past, the present and the future. Together.

CHAPTER 106



BETHANY

“You came back?” Ben glanced up as Bethany walked into the office the next morning. Sadie and Philip were huddled at one end of the table together, deep in conversation about something work related.

“Of course I did. I don’t have another job right now.” She smiled and set her briefcase down. “Have you seen Damon this morning?”

“Yeah. He was in a meeting earlier this morning, but I’m sure he’s out by now.” Ben turned his attention back to his computer.

“Hey, guys.” Bethany walked down toward Sadie and Philip. “Everything okay?”

“Couldn’t be better.” Sadie smiled, but couldn’t seem to take her eyes off Philip. “We’ve decided to try dating.”

“Workplace romance.” Bethany put a hand on her hip. “They’re a little tricky. Let me tell you. I know from experience.”

“You know what?” Damon’s voice surprised her.

She turned and let her eyes move across him. Perfection. His dark slacks hugged his hips, his light blue button-up shirt looking as if it were made for him.

“I know you.” She turned on her heel and walked toward him. He wasn’t one for letting business and pleasure mix, but things changed. People changed. She stopped in front of him,

whispering softly so only he could hear. “I missed you last night. And the night before.”

“Same.” He reached out and touched the side of her face. “My office. Ten minutes.” He turned and walked down the hall, his broad shoulders stiff, his chin up. *As if he owns the place. And me.*

“All right. We’re going to have a conference call with the partners this morning. You down?” Ben stood as Bethany turned to face him.

“Nope. You got this. I’m going to work on a few details with Damon on the event tonight.” She wagged her eyebrows. “You excited?”

“About a promotion? No. The money that comes with it? Hell to the yes.” Ben smiled and shut the top of his laptop. “Any clue on where we’re going?”

“Nope. Damon and Linda have been tight-lipped on it. I know it’s a surprise.” She walked out into the hall and Ben joined her. Sadie and Philip seemed to be lost to their own world, which was odd. Almost too odd. “Have they been like that all morning?”

“Yes, and all day yesterday when you were out.” He rolled his eyes. “I almost wish they were still at each other’s throats. I walked in after lunch yesterday, and they were making out. I had to have a serious chat with Philip last night. He’s lucky it was me that caught them. Damon would have kicked both of them out.”

“True.” Bethany stopped beside Damon’s door. “I’ll find you later.”

“Ride with me to the event tonight? I’m a little nervous.”

“Nervous about what? You’ve been here forever. Everyone loves you.” She reached out and squeezed Ben’s shoulder.

“I know, but still. I hate surprises.”

“Me too.” She released him. “I’ll drive. Meet me down in the lobby at six.”

“How are you going to drive if you don’t know where we’re going?” Ben gave her a look and walked off.

Damon moved up to stand beside her, just inside of his office. “Ben still trying to drag the info out of someone?”

“Of course he is.” Bethany walked into his office and turned to face him. “Close the door.”

“That’s my line.” He winked at her and closed the door, locking it as he watched her like the predator he was. “You know we’re going to have to hire a few more people up here if I ever expect to be at home.”

“Then hire them, because I’m tired of sleeping alone and it’s been two days.” She reached out and slid her hands up his strong chest and over his shoulders. “I love that you wake me up in the middle of the night to snuggle me, but I’m greedy. I want more.”

“What more do you want?” He smiled and gripped the back of her head, pulling her in for a long probing kiss. They were both panting by the time he released her. “Just ask, and it’s yours.”

“You cooking dinner with me.” She pressed her hand to his chest and pushed him back step by step. He smirked. She was only in control because he allowed her to be.

“Done.”

“Cleaning up with me.”

“Maid service. Don’t be silly.”

She laughed. “Watching TV on the couch after dinner.”

“How about I work on my laptop, and you snuggle up beside me. No woman should ask a man to watch never-ending reruns of *The Bachelor*. It’s pure hell.” He reached up and gripped her wrist, squeezing softly as his back hit the wall behind him. He used his hold to spin her. “What else?”

“Taking a hot bath with me.” She gasped as he pressed his hips against her, his erection thick and hard as it lay trapped between them.

“Shower please.” He leaned in and nipped at her mouth as his hands raced down her sides and around to cup her ass. “That way I can have access to every part of you.”

“Then we make love in the bed for hours.” She closed her eyes and let out a soft moan as he rolled his hips and ran his nose up the side of her neck.

“In the shower, then the hall, the living room, the kitchen, and then maybe if you’re a good girl... the bed.” He licked at her ear, and she shivered.

“Define good girl.” She lifted a leg, wishing like hell she’d worn a skirt instead of slacks. Damn complicated washing machine at Damon’s place.

Our place.

“You, lover.” He gripped the back of her thighs and hoisted her up, pinning her to the wall and pressing his mouth to hers. The slow thrusts of his hips left her aching in all the right places.

“Let me get my slacks off,” she whispered roughly against his lips.

“Not a chance. You have graduation rehearsal at two. There’s not nearly enough time to do all I want to do to you.” He brushed his nose by hers. “Tonight I’ll be home. I swear it.”

“Lies.” She held back her disappointment. He was right. She had graduation rehearsal, and then they had Ben’s party. She’d simply come back up to the office, and they could fuck on his desk if he didn’t come home after Ben’s celebration.

“You know I hate lies.” He moved her away from the wall, holding her tightly to him.

She clasped her hands behind his head and leaned in for a few more kisses as he moved them to his chair. He sat down, and she rocked against his arousal. “Are you sure we don’t have time?”

“Not even close.” He leaned back and ran his hands down her shoulders, over her collarbone and down to knead at her

breasts. “I can smell your perfume mixed with your lust.”

“I haven’t been with my man in the better part of a week. It sort of causes a girl to go nuts when he’s near.” She pressed her hands into his chest and let the feel of him between her thighs drag her into depravity. He could so quickly do it.

“I owe you some attention for sure.” He moved his hands up and cupped her throat carefully. “Get up and take your slacks off. I’ll clean up that mess you’ve made in your panties.”

“No. It’s okay.” She moved off his lap and took a step back, only to have him reach up and grab her wrist.

“I wasn’t asking, baby. Do what I said.” He tilted his head to the side, watching her intently.

Her pulse spiked, and she nodded, unbuttoning her slacks and glancing back toward the door. Had they locked it?

“It’s locked,” he mumbled as he pulled at her waistband.

The slacks dropped to the floor, and she stood there, not quite sure what to do. Sex in Damon’s office always threw her off a little.

“I can make sure.” She reached for him as he gripped her hips and pressed his face to her panties, breathing in deeply and groaning.

“Hush talking. No one is coming in. I locked it already.” He nodded toward the desk. “Get on the desk unless you want me on my knees.”

The thought was almost too much. “No... I might come just seeing that.”

He chuckled. “Naughty self. Get up there and try not to scream too loudly. I don’t want to scare anyone.”

She ignored his comment and leaned over to clean off the papers scattered on his desk. Her white g-string was useless against him as he popped it in several places and tossed it across the room.

“Hands and knees on the desk, baby. Then shift back so I can taste you.” He gripped her waist and helped her onto the desk.

“I feel like-” Her voice shook.

“Like a woman who’s about to make her man’s week. Good.” He ran his hands over her ass, squeezing soft, then harder. “Goddamn, you’re fine, Beth. I’m the luckiest bastard ever.”

“Shut up and taste me.” She tensed as he ran his finger down her folds before replacing his hand with his mouth. She couldn’t help but cry out as he took his time, licking and sucking at her while his fingers took turns encircling her ass, dipping in, but only a little.

She moaned loudly and tucked her hips as he pressed his thumb inside her tight slit, opening her up and beckoning her toward release.

“Slow down.” She let her head drop, the idea of someone coming into the office all but gone. She didn’t care who walked in. As long as he didn’t stop.

“Who’s in charge?” He sucked her clit into his mouth and assaulted her with the strong flicking of his tongue.

“You are.” She whimpered and pressed back on his fingers, accepting the pleasure he so readily offered her. “God, you are.”

“And I always will be.” He licked her a few times before gripping her ass tightly and burying his face in her wetness.

Bethany cried out and gripped the edge of the desk as the room exploded. A myriad of colors moved around her vision as pleasure rolled through her center and out to touch every part of her. She rocked against him, riding the high for as long as she could before pulling away.

“Not yet,” he grumbled and pulled her back down, licking at her in a slow, methodical rhythm. “I wanna taste it.”

She whimpered and gripped the desk tighter. Never in a million years would she understand a man like him wanting a

simple girl like her.

“Enough,” she whispered and pulled forward. “You keep it up, and this isn’t going to be enough.”

“It never is.” He gripped her hips and helped her off the desk. “Lean forward.”

“What? Why? I need to get to-” She leaned forward as his hand pressed the top of her back, forcing her down.

“Because I thought I could be good with drinking you and letting you get on with your day. I was wrong.” His voice sounded as if he’d chewed on broken glass. “Tell me if I hurt you. It’s been too long.”

She moaned loudly at the sound of him unzipping his slacks. “God, yes. Don’t stop until you explode.”

“You first, baby girl.” He gripped the back of her neck and pressed into her, his thick shaft opening her up wide.

They cried out together as pleasure rolled through her stomach. Nothing felt better than having him completely tucked inside of her.

“I love you so much,” she mumbled and pressed back, wanting more of him.

“You have no idea, Beth.” He gripped the back of her left leg. “Knee on the desk. I want in deep.”

She lifted her leg and pressed her knee to the desk, ignoring the bite of the wood against her flesh. His thrusts forced her to focus on nothing but him. His fingers pressed into her upper back as he reached around and squeezed one of her breasts.

“Feel good, baby?” He pressed his face against the side of her hair, fucking her slow and hard. “Tell me you enjoy it. That you crave it.”

“I crave every part of you.” She pressed back and rolled her hips, smiling as he growled.

“Good, because we’re just getting started.” He slid his hand holding the back of her neck to the side of it, forcing her

to turn her face a little as he leaned over farther and kissed her.
“You know where I want.”

“I do. Soon.” She kissed him as the world exploded again, her body his to play with, to train, to enjoy every night for the rest of their lives. He wanted her to open up fully, and she would. Soon.

CHAPTER 107



DAMON

The smell of Beth clung to him, leaving the rest of the day difficult to get through. Focusing wasn't usually an issue at all, but he wanted more, so much more of her. Something had to give.

After kissing her goodbye, he closed himself in his office and muddled through a few more projects until it was time to head over to Masquerade for Ben's party. Bethany had promised to get Ben over to the club and to blindfold him just for shits and giggles. Everyone would be there. Ben was one of the beloved members of Damon's staff.

A knock at the door caused him to glance up. "Come on in."

Surprisingly enough, Damon's dad stuck his head in the office. "You got a few minutes?"

"Of course, Dad. You don't need to knock." Damon leaned back and let out a sigh. "What's going on?"

"You're going to Ben's promotion party, right?" His father gave him a stern look.

"Of course I am." Damon snorted. "You should be too."

"I am, but only for a few minutes." His father dropped down in the seat in front of his desk. "I learned a long time ago that getting home to the pretty woman waiting on me is far more important than anything else. Weddings are a maybe, but funerals are a must."

“Wait. What?” Damon brushed his hand down his face, trying to clear his mind. The scent of Beth on his fingers caused his cock to swell. *Not now.*

“The old saying, ‘Weddings are a maybe, but funerals are a must.’ You’ve never heard that?” His father seemed amused.

“No, I haven’t. Do you mean, literally, I should go to all of the funerals I’m invited to, but none of the weddings?”

“Basically, but it could be said for business too. Drop in for a quick hello at the parties and celebrations, and be at the office when the shit hits the fan, but only then. I messed up with your mother. I was never there.” Kent shrugged and reached up to run his fingers through his hair. “She made the decision to cheat, but I can honestly tell you that I don’t blame her much for it. She must have lived a lonely life. I was *never* there, and I mean never.”

“Dad. Cheating is a choice.”

“So is abandoning someone, Damon. I’ve thought about it a lot over the years.” He leaned back. “The things I would have done differently. My mistress was this place.”

“Are you in here like the ghost of Christmas past to warn me?” Damon smirked.

“Something like that. I know you’ve been here a lot lately, and I honestly appreciate it, but your happiness is far more important to me than this place. Karen went over last night to have dinner with Bethany, and they had a good girls’ night together, but I know your soon-to-be bride misses you, son. That’s not a good way to start your marriage.”

“I understand that.” Damon nodded and tried to take his dad’s advice for what it was worth. No need to get defensive or explain his actions in being at the office half the night, though he wanted to. His dad was only trying to help. “I’m working on it.”

“No, you’re not.” Kent rubbed his chest and watched Damon. “But you need to be. Why don’t we talk about bringing in a few more senior executives when you get back?”

Damon chuckled. “Right, because your selection of people has been stellar lately.”

“Okay, so I deserved that.” Kent smiled. “But, you can interview them when you’re back from your honeymoon. This place can’t be your mistress, or you’re going to repeat my mistakes, and that’s something I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.”

Damon nodded. “All right. We’ll bring in some more people, but for now, get out of here. I need to finish a few big projects before the wedding next week. I’m running out of time.”

“You’re horrible at delegating. Have Linda help you. She’s not.” His father stood up and walked to the door. “See you at Ben’s event. Don’t be late.”

“I won’t.” Damon waited until his father left to get back to work, his focus spot on and desire to get out of the office stoked. Had his father just picked up some of the blame for his parents’ divorce?

He had. Interesting.



“Is everyone in place?” Linda glanced back and smiled, her excitement almost palpable. Ben had made an impact on everyone’s life at the firm. It was obvious by the hordes of people gathered on the third floor of the club. “Here he comes!”

Damon pressed his hand to his mouth as Ben stumbled out of the elevator with Bethany holding on to him, Sadie and Philip behind them. Ben was blindfolded and less than happy about it.

Damon’s father pressed his shoulder against Damon’s. “Whose idea was the blindfold?”

“Who knows.” Damon chuckled.

Beth caught his attention, and he winked at her. She'd found time to go home to change into a pretty black cocktail dress and heels. She looked like a goddess. One he wanted to spend a long time worshiping.

"You ready?" Beth called out, but poor Ben must have thought she was talking to him.

"Yes. Can I please take this damn blindfold off? I feel like I'm in an S&M nightmare," he barked, and everyone laughed as she pulled it off.

"Surprise!" the group yelled, and Damon joined in. It was nice to be around everyone in a different setting, but he couldn't stop himself from wanting to throw Beth over his shoulder like a caveman and take her home. They'd fucked off and on for the last few weeks, but making love was overdue. It wasn't about grinding body parts, but connecting in a way that reminded her that he was her man, her number one fan, her future.

"No fucking way." Ben glanced around, his eyes wide, his face red. "It's just a promotion, guys."

"Senior manager is a big deal, dude. It's partner next or death. We're like the mafia, move up, but you don't get to move out." Damon moved through the crowd and walked toward Ben.

The guy's smile widened as Damon approached. "Thanks, boss."

"Boss at the office. Friend everywhere else." Damon reached out and pulled Ben into a quick hug. "The night's on the firm, so drink, eat, be merry."

"Just don't get the cops called on us, buddy." Philip patted Ben's back as he walked toward the large dance floor in the center, pulling Sadie along with him.

"Are they?" Damon turned and put his hand on his hip. "Really? I thought he was into you?"

"He was. Thanks for the reminder that I'm old news." Bethany pushed out her bottom lip, looking too cute for her own good.

“You’re always front and center for me.” Damon reached for her hand as the music started to play from the speakers in the ceiling. “Ben... the DJ is over there, man. Tell him what you want to hear. It’s your night, buddy. Congrats.”

“Thanks, bo- Damon.” He smiled and jogged toward the bar as several of the staff followed him.

The dance floor filled up, which was good. Damon was used to playing the stiff asshole at the office. No one at the firm had seen him let his guard down, and he wasn’t sure he necessarily wanted that to start tonight but dancing with his woman? Hell yes.

“Remember this place? Bottom level, the dance floor, you in a skimpy something with a mask and me pressed to the back of you?” He moved behind Beth, wrapping his arm around her and pressing his hand to the front of her tight stomach. “You were so fucking hot that night.”

She moaned and rolled her hips as more people piled in around them. Glancing back, she stole his heart. Everything about her. He didn’t let her answer, but leaned in and pressed his lips to hers, kissing her several times softly.

“What was that for?” She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“Because I couldn’t help myself.” He memorized the way she watched him with interest, the look of love in her eyes, the sexy smile tugging at the side of her perfect mouth. “You were horny the last time we were here, remember? Demanding and shit?”

“You were a bastard.” She pressed herself to him and licked her lips seductively. “You threatened to take me on your desk or in your bed, and then you took me home and left me wanting. Asshole.”

“I had to make sure you wanted me for me and not my money.” He brushed her hair back. “Never in a million years did I expect this.”

“You thought we’d just sleep together and then become family and what?” She laughed, the sound of it causing his

heart to flutter. How the woman had so much power over him was a mystery, a concerning, disturbing mystery.

“No... I thought we’d fuck a few times, you’d get addicted and become a stalker, and I’d have to put a restraining order on you.” He laughed deep in his chest as she yelped and pulled away. “I’m teasing you, baby. I didn’t know what would happen.” He wrapped her in a tight hug, moving her around the dance floor, but never taking his eyes off of her. “I still don’t know what’s going to happen, but I wouldn’t be anywhere else in the world besides here with you.”

“You’re getting sappy in your old age.” She gave him a cheeky grin and pulled him down for a few short kisses. “I like it. A lot.”

“Good. I’m pretty sure I’m just going to keep aging.” He wagged his eyebrows as she grumbled something softly. “It’s the best option I can see.”

“My turn, boss.” Ben cut in, stealing Bethany from him.

Damon moved back and smiled. Ben was about the only guy that could take his girl for a spin around the dance floor and Damon not be upset about it. He would come out of the closet sooner or later, but that would be his choice. Damon would support him no matter what. Ben’s future was locked in with M&B without a doubt. The guy had given them 150% of himself since the day he was hired.

“Boss.” Philip moved up beside him, a beer in one hand and the other tucked into his pocket.

“You get through that audit I put on your desk last week?” Regardless of the fact that he actually liked Philip and found his work to be outstanding. The guy had been interested in Beth. There was no getting around that.

“Sure did. Linda has the final files for you. She was typing up the opinion letter, and then it’s all yours.” Philip grinned. “It’s two days earlier than the deadline you gave me.”

“Yep. Buy yourself a beer on me tonight. Good job, kid.” Damon patted his back and walked toward his dad and Karen,

who were laughing about something in the corner together. “What are you two up to?”

“Just enjoying each other.” His dad moved toward Karen and pulled her into a side hug. Bethany’s mother looked like an older version of Beth. It was almost uncanny how much they resembled one another.

“It’s not hard to do.” Karen glanced up at his father. “I think we’ll always enjoy each other though. He’s soft when I’m not and hard when-”

“Too much info.” Damon pressed his fingers to his ears and gave them a look of false disgust.

“Oh, hell.” Karen pressed her hand over her mouth as her pretty face turned bright red.

“Damon. Jeez.” His father rolled his eyes and popped Damon in the chest. “You’d be grounded for a week for that comment if you were just a little younger.”

“A little younger?” Damon smiled. “I was teasing.” He glanced around. “I know this is an office party, but I’m ready for Matt to get his ass home. When did he say he would be in?”

“Sometime on Sunday. We’re picking him up unless you want to.”

“This Sunday?” Damon’s interest was piqued. “So he’ll be here all week with us?”

“Yeah, Bethany wanted him involved in all the stuff for the wedding this week. You know she didn’t want to do most of the stuff until the week of, which is insane, but she enjoys the last minute rush of getting things done.” Karen rolled her eyes.

“She’s a pantser.” Damon glanced over his shoulder to find her dancing with another one of their associates. “Good thing I’m a planner.”

“Yeah, well, just let her be who she is. That’s who you fell in love with.” Damon’s dad patted the side of Damon’s face as he turned back to them.

“You’re just full of advice today, aren’t you, old man?” Damon responded.

“I guess I am.” Damon’s dad shrugged. “It feels like you’re growing up, finally. You’ll have kids of your own soon, and then you’ll understand.”

“Wait a minute. Let us get married first and then-” Damon started.

“Kids! I cannot wait. Please tell me it’s going to be sooner than later.” Karen moved toward him, pressing her hands to his chest. “I would love to hear the sound of little feet filling up the hallways. You have to have three, or maybe four, or five.”

“Or more,” Damon’s father chimed in.

“Or more what?” Beth moved up beside him, her breathing off kilter from dancing.

“Five or more kids.” Damon wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “Your mom’s request.”

“What? Not only no, but hell no.” Bethany reached out and took her mother’s drink. “You want more kids; you have them.”

To his surprise, Karen glanced up at Damon’s father and smiled. “You wanna?”

“Oh God,” Bethany mumbled and dragged Damon back to the dance floor, saving all of them from yet another awkward conversation. It would seem they were getting good at them, without Matthew being there to facilitate.

The world was suddenly a strange, strange place.

CHAPTER 108



BETHANY

“Did you have fun tonight?” Damon reached for Bethany’s hand as they walked toward the house.

“Yeah. You sure you don’t need to go back to the office? I honestly understand if you do, Damon.” She squeezed his hand and moved in front of him.

He wrapped his arms around her as she fumbled with the keys. As silly as it was, there was something so right about them being there together, waiting to walk into the house they shared. It was dreamy and a little overwhelming.

“No. I’ll put in some extra hours next week. Tomorrow is your graduation, and then Matt comes in on Sunday. I have my office here at the house if I need to wrap something up. Stop worrying. I’m yours for the next few days.” He kissed the side of her neck, causing chill bumps to race down her back.

“Good. That sounds incredible.” She pushed the door open and walked toward the kitchen, the sound of her heels filling up the hallway. “You go change, and I’ll make us something to drink.”

“That’s my line.” He popped her butt. “Go get out of those heels and that dress. I’ll meet you in the living room in a few minutes with a bottle of wine.”

She purred and walked toward the bedroom, shaking her hips a little more than was necessary. Her phone buzzed in her purse as she walked into their bedroom. Pausing, she pulled it out to see the same number that kept calling the day before.

Bethany dropped down on the bed and pressed the phone between her ear and shoulder as she worked on her first heel. “This is Bethany. Hello?”

Nothing. Complete silence. Then, breathing. Soft, masculine?

“Hello? Who is this? I’m hanging up and blocking your number if you don’t-”

The call ended, leaving her with silence again.

“How frustrating.” She reached up and grabbed the phone, tossing it onto the bed behind her before getting her heels off. It rang again, and she turned and flopped down on her stomach, barely able to reach it. “What do you want?” she screamed into the phone.

“Um, a cheeseburger, a massage and for you to enjoy your graduation tomorrow?” Matthew’s voice surprised her but brought her to her senses.

She narrowed her eyes. “Have you been calling me and breathing into the phone like a weirdo?” She got up and pressed the phone between her cheek and shoulder again as she started to work on getting her dress unzipped.

“What? Oh man, I wish. Hell no. I’ve been knee deep in this art showing tomorrow with Jonathan. Erica was too busy with the firm to help me with this one, so it’s been all me. I thought you weren’t *actually* an adult until you hit forty. I’m not sure it’s fair to have to act like one this early in the game,” he growled.

Bethany finally got her zipper down and moved back as her dress fell to the floor. It would have been the perfect time for Damon to come in and find her half naked, but he was in the living room by the sound of the TV in the background.

“Okay, well, someone keeps calling. Never mind.” She huffed. “I wish you could be here tomorrow. I know it’s selfish, and I’m sorry for that, but I miss you. Like, bad.”

“I miss you too. I’m so sorry I didn’t coordinate being back home with our showings better. That was stupid of me. I swear I only have so many brain cells to use, and walking and

breathing are taking up A LOT of mine right now.” He chuckled, and Bethany smiled.

There was no use in trying to be mad at Matt. It was impossible.

She walked to her dresser and pulled out a black nightie, the silk soft in her hands. “It’s okay. I’m just ready to see you.”

“Good. I called to make sure you or Damon were picking us up from the airport.”

“Us? Is Erica coming early with you?” Excitement filled Bethany’s chest.

“I’m not sure. I think so. Either way, she’s going to work from the downtown office for most of the week, but she’ll be free when we need to do this or that. It’s going to be a pretty busy week, right?”

“Yeah. I saved a lot of stuff for the end just because I work better under pressure and I hate making decisions too far out. I always change my mind ten times, so this time I just waited.”

“Smart girl.” Matt cleared his throat. “Is Damon around? He’s been so fucking busy that I haven’t talked to him in a week. It’s getting old trying to leave a voicemail message on his already filled up phone.”

Bethany walked toward the living room with her nightgown in her hand, hoping to give her man a show. “Let me see where he is. He misses you too. He mentioned it yesterday.”

She rounded the corner and stopped. The wine glasses sat on the table, the wine next to them and the TV playing softly in the background. Damon was on the couch, his hands clasped across his stomach, his eyes closed. The soft snoring coming from him was endearing and yet disappointing. He’d put himself under too much as of late. Why wouldn’t he be exhausted?

“Well, not sure if you’ll believe this, but he’s passed out on the couch.” She turned and walked back to the bedroom, trying to keep her voice down. “He’s been working non-stop

trying to get ready for the time off that I asked him to take for the wedding.”

“Guess that’s good and bad. At least he was willing to take the time.”

“True. I’ll have him call you tomorrow.”

“No, I’ll be in the showing all day. I’ll just text you the time and flight number for Sunday. Just make sure someone is there to pick us up. If nothing else, send one of my dad’s drivers.”

“All right. Be safe. Love you.” She tossed the nightie onto the chair beside her.

“Love you too. See you Sunday. I can’t wait!”

She smiled and pulled the phone away from her ear before setting it down and undoing her bra. No need to wear something sexy seeing that Damon wasn’t going to get up again until morning. She yawned and walked to her dresser to pull out a cotton t-shirt and sleeping pants, almost happy to get to wear them instead.

“Maybe him falling asleep early isn’t such a bad thing.” She snorted as she pulled the shirt over her head and the pants up her legs. She’d muscle him into the bed and lay in the circle of his arms until she passed out. It was something she loved to do, watch him sleep and wonder what he was dreaming about.

Hopefully her.



“You ready to go?” Damon moved around the bed, working on his tie and trying to get his feet into his shoes as Bethany stood behind him, checking out her dress in a full-length mirror.

“Yeah. I’m sorry about the alarm. That was stupid of me. I finally got you in the bed last night, put the wine up and crawled into the bed to snuggle with you a little before you fell back asleep. I figured I would get back up and read a little. I

never got back up.” She huffed and brushed her hands down the front of her dress. “Does this-”

“It’s beautiful.” He moved toward her, gripping her hip and pulling her toward him. “Fix my tie and let’s get out of here. You have to line up in thirty minutes and traffic is going to be a bear.”

“Okay. I’m sor-”

“No more apologies, Beth. It was an accident.” He touched the side of her face, smiling as she worked on his tie.

“What? I keep thinking I know that grin, but it means something new every time I see it.” She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and tilted her head, trying to concentrate on getting his tie just right.

“I’m not telling you. My secrets are my own, but I will say this... I’m proud of you. You’re graduating with your master’s from a great school and you’re doing it with a 4.0. I’m rarely impressed, but you just keep pulling off feat after feat.”

She finished with his tie and touched the sides of his face. “I just expect a lot from myself. High standards. High rewards.”

“Who taught you that?” He pulled her hands down from his face and leaned down to kiss her a few times. “You know what? Tell me in the car. We’re late!”

“My dad did, though I don’t know why. He obviously had no standards at all.” She pulled back and walked toward the hallway. “We’ll be fine. It’s not like the ceremony starts anytime soon. We practiced the lineup yesterday. What in the world could they want from us now?”

“It takes time to get that many excited people in the right order.” Damon moved up behind her. “Just look for us in the stands.”

She smiled and reached for the door. “Am I going to be able to find you out of the thousands of people there?”

“Yep.”

“Why does this worry me?”

He laughed. “Because it should?”



The big pink signs Damon, Kent and Bethany’s mom waved for her as she walked across the stage weren’t easy to miss. Their voices weren’t very loud, but their efforts were heard loud and clear. Her eyes filled with tears as she walked down the far end of the stage, diploma in hand. It was a great honor to complete her master’s, but even more than that, she had three people in the stands that thought the world of her. And a few more coming into town the next day.

“I’m proud of you.” Kendal stood at the bottom of the stage with a smile on his handsome face. He was decked out in his master’s attire and looked studious.

“Thanks. I’m pretty proud of me too.” She extended her hand, knowing that he hated any public display of affection. His past didn’t allow for too many questions to be asked about involvement with a student.

“Cocky thing. You’re taking after Damon now.” Kendal shook her hand before pulling her into a quick hug. “You know I could always get you a job at the college. Just say the word.”

She smiled. “Maybe down the line, but for now, I’m going to figure out *where* my place is beside Damon at M&B. I’m not sure it’s there, but we’ll see.”

“Good. We’ll talk soon. Congratulations.” Kendal moved back to let her pass.

She glanced back and noticed that the line was getting a little ridiculous behind her. Time to let everyone else have Dr. Tarrington’s attention. It was coveted in the accounting department, no doubt.

Bethany made her way toward her seat, but something caught her eye. A man stood by the exit closest to the graduate seats. He turned about the time she really got a good look at

him, but she didn't need much more than a few seconds. She'd know him anywhere.

"Dad?" She walked past her row, ignoring the urging of the professor in charge of getting the graduates seated again.

The guy walked out of the Coliseum and into the chilly night air, stopping just outside the door and glancing up at the sky.

Bethany picked up her walk to a jog. Maybe she saw what she wanted to see. Maybe he wasn't who she thought he was, but she couldn't not test out the theory. If it was him? What the fuck was he doing there? Did she really want to see him after all the years of living without him? She was only twelve when he left. Seemed like ages ago.

She stopped just in front of the door, her hands on the bar, shaking. "No way. There's no way."

The guy stiffened as if he felt someone's eyes on him. He turned slowly, the moment engraving itself in Bethany's memories.

"Bethany." His eyes widened, and the horror on his face told her all she needed to know.

She pushed the door open though everything inside of her screamed to pull it closed. To protect herself. "Daddy?"

"Yeah, baby." He stood stone still, only his lips moving. A million words crossed between them, but nothing was said. The air around them crowded with the white clouds coming from their lips as their breath hit the cold.

She waited as long as she could, her mind trying like hell to process what to do next as her heart ripped open in her chest. She asked the question that had plagued her for years after he left, night after night, crying herself to sleep with the same useless question on her mind.

"Why? Why did you leave us?" The sadness in her voice melted into anguish as she reached up and pressed her hand to her mouth.

Where was Damon? Or her mother? Or Matt for crying out loud. Anyone would have been a comfort.

“I had no choice, baby. I had to run. I made some horrible choices when I was younger, and your mother put up with them, but one night I decided no more. I didn’t deserve either of you, and you didn’t deserve the life I led you into. So, I ran... so they would follow me. I got what I deserved.”

“And what about what I deserved?” Anger burned through her so bright it almost blinded her. She stepped forward, closing the gap between them and slapped him as hard as she could. “What about what mom deserved? We went through hell without you, because of you.”

He nodded and glanced down, his shoulders rounding. “And for that, I’m sorry. You can’t see it from my side of the street, Beth. Because you’ve never stood over here, and I pray to God you never have to. I’m sorry for coming tonight. They had your name in the paper, and I wanted to see you. Forgive me.”

He turned and walked toward the street, his demeanor that of a broken man.

“No. You don’t get to show up and walk away again,” she called after him.

“What would you have me do, Beth? Tell me, and I’ll do it.”

“It’s Bethany, and I don’t know!” She forced her tears back down. She could cry later. She wasn’t a broken little girl anymore, and he wouldn’t get another tear from her.

“It’s always been Beth, baby. That’s my nickname for you.”

“Well, don’t-”

“Beth? You okay?” Damon’s voice pulled her from her thoughts, and she turned to face him as a sob rose up in her chest.

“I was just... this is my...” she glanced back to find him gone. “Wait. Wait!” She jogged toward the street, half-tripping

on her gown as Damon called after her. “Where did he go?”

“Who, baby?” Damon caught up to her and pulled her into his arms. “What’s going on?”

“My dad was here, Damon. He watched the ceremony, and I followed him out.”

“You sure?” He pulled her in tighter and kissed the top of her head. “Come back inside with me.”

“Fine, but yes, I’m sure. He was standing right here. I slapped him in the face and talked to him for five full minutes.” The fact that she’d slapped him hurt her. She could have let out her rage another way. He was still her dad.

“Bethany?” Her mother called from the exit door, her and Kent walking out. “What’s wrong?”

“Don’t say a word.” She glanced up at Damon. “Promise?”

“Anything for you.” He leaned down and kissed her before turning to her mom and Kent. “Nothing. She got a little overheated and came out for air. Everything is fine. No biggie.”

Bethany let her eyes scan the street one more time. It was a biggie. A really big biggie.

CHAPTER 109



DAMON

“You sure you don’t want me to go?” Beth lifted her head, her eyes sleepy, her voice thick with exhaustion.

“No, baby. I’ll get Matt and Erica, and we’ll come back here so you can see everyone. Sleep in. Last night was crazy. I didn’t know your mother could drink like that.” Damon leaned down and kissed the side of her head as she grumbled something incoherent.

The girl was sexy bent over his desk, but nothing beat her morning look. So innocent and beautiful. He forced himself to take a few steps back from the bed. If he didn’t leave soon, he’d find himself tucked up behind her in exploration mode. Nothing sounded better.

“Love you,” she mumbled and rolled over to her other side, leaving her back to him.

He waited until her breathing slowed to lift the covers. Her shorts had tangled around her thighs, and a little bit of her ass was hanging out near the bottom. Sucking his bottom lip into his mouth, he stifled a growl and reached out to caress her.

He’d almost made contact when his phone buzzed, and she woke up.

“Bye, baby.” He turned and walked down the hall, cursing the situation. He should have let his father and Karen pick up Matthew and Erica. “No, you know Matt would have been pissy like a school girl who lost her favorite toy.”

The call was from his father. He grabbed his keys to the Mercedes and walked out of the house before answering.

“Hey, Dad. What’s up?” The sun was out, but it was still chilly.

“I’m turning off the freeway. I’ll go with you to pick up Matthew and Erica.”

“You sure?” Damon unlocked his car and got in to find his sunglasses.

“Yeah. I want to see you both.”

“Something serious?” He located them and got back out of the car, putting them on and locking up his beauty.

“No, not at all. Just wanted to spend some time with you guys. Karen is dead to the world.” He snorted.

“So is Beth. I didn’t realize they could drink like a fish.” He walked around the car as his father pulled up. Damon dropped the call and got in. “You sure you’re up for being around the living? You drank like a whale yourself last night.”

“Yeah, right.” His father rolled his eyes. “Boy, I’ve been drinking since I was in junior high. Last night was no big deal.”

“Lush.” Damon pulled on his seatbelt and leaned back. “Matt’s bringing Erica with him, right?”

“I don’t think so. She was working hard to fix a few bloopers we had on a new TV ad this week. Nothing that ended up being her fault, but I put her in charge of cleaning it up.” Damon’s father pulled the car out of the driveway as the sun blinded them both.

“Anything I need to get involved with?” Damon reached up and flipped down his visor. “I can head up there for a day or so this coming week if-”

“No way. Karen and Bethany would both kill me. No, Erica can handle it, and she’ll just be a little late getting here, but she’s not going to miss any of the festivities.” Damon’s dad glanced over at him. “Are you having a bachelor party?”

“Why? Are you wanting to come?” Damon smirked.

“Hell no. I’m too old for that. Besides, I don’t want to embarrass you in front of your friends.”

“Dad, you wouldn’t embarrass me. Come with us. We’re just going to hang out and maybe go to a bar for a few drinks. Nothing big.”

“Embarrass you by drinking you all under the table. You boys just can’t hold your liquor like we could in the old days.”

“Old days?” Damon laughed. “Okay, Dad. Think what you want. I’d drink you under the table any time you’d like to try me out.”

“Now who’s the lush?” His father smiled and turned onto the freeway. “What airline is Matthew flying?”

“I don’t know, but I’ll check my phone.” Damon leaned back in his seat and ran through the messages on his phone.

“Who all is going with you guys to the party, anyway? Not that I’m really interested.”

“To the bachelor party?” Damon glanced over at his dad. They were close, but his dad was almost too talkative. Something was up.

“Yes.”

“Me, Kendal, Matt, and Ben.” Damon shifted a little to turn more toward his father. “Okay, spill. What’s going on with you?”

“What?” His father sounded surprised.

“You’ve been chatting like a little old lady, and you keep bringing up Friday night. What’s going on?” Damon pinned his father with a hard stare. He was almost too predictable.

“Nothing, I’m just trying to get my mind on something fun. Your wedding is that thing. Is that not okay?”

“No. It’s not. Something is up. Tell me, or I’ll have Matt plague you to death until you want to throw his ass in the nearest lake we come to.”

“Fine.” His father sighed, his shoulders rounding, his expression softening. “Karen thinks she saw her ex-husband last night at the graduation. She’s not sure, but she was pretty torn up about it. Don’t say anything to Bethany, please. She shouldn’t have to bear that, seeing that it was just a figment of Karen’s imagination.”

“And that upsets you, why? Doesn’t seem like something that should affect you at all.”

“Seriously?” His dad glanced over, the look on his face telling too much.

“Are you jealous? No fucking way. You’re everything this guy isn’t and a lot more.” Damon turned back to face the front window as he chuckled. “Please tell me you’re pulling my leg.”

“Karen *loved* him deeply, Damon. He’s not some punk that went in and out of her life. They half-raised each other as kids. Experience and history add up to a pretty big connection.” He ran his hand over his chin and let out a sigh. “If it were me, I would be confused. Discombobulated.”

“Right, but it’s not you. It’s Karen, and this man put her through absolute hell. He abandoned them.”

“There’s a reason for everything that happens, Damon. You know this.”

“Not this shit with Mom again.” Damon glanced out the window, feeling all of seventeen again. “Let’s talk about something else. Seriously. You have nothing to worry about. Karen loves you. I’ve seen it over and over again over the last six months.”

“I know. I’m just being stupid. Seems weird having you get married and Matt in a relationship.” Another soft sigh. “I don’t know... I guess it’s a good thing, but it fucks me up a little.”

Damon chuckled before reaching over and squeezing his dad’s shoulder. “Well, it shouldn’t. You should be proud and relieved.”

“Proud of you and relieved for Matt or the other way around?”

Damon smiled and pointed to the airline’s sign. “Both for both of us. That’s our turn there.”

They rode in silence the rest of the way to the terminal, but Damon couldn’t help but notice how withdrawn his dad was. It was almost as if he was waiting for Karen to leave him for the thug that left her and Bethany high and dry.

He was being ridiculous. There was no way in hell that would happen.

Not in a million years.



“Hey, you!” Damon walked toward his brother, Matt, as the big oaf jogged off the plane and used the rope as a hurdle.

“I’m home!” Matt wrapped Damon in a tight hug and lifted him off the ground as Damon grunted. Matt might have been the *little* brother, but he wasn’t little at all. Not by a long stretch.

“Hi, son.” Damon’s father moved up and wrapped Matt in a hug as soon as Damon released him. Matt’s smile was so big, it had to have hurt his face, but he didn’t seem to notice.

“Sick of Seattle already?” Damon asked as they walked toward baggage claim. He could only imagine that Matt would have one to two bags. He was a groomsman in the wedding and Karen might kill him if he didn’t have his shoes and accessories that she and Bethany had picked out and shipped up to Seattle. Why in the fuck they expected Matt to keep up with anything was beyond Damon.

“No, it’s beautiful up there, but there’s no place like Texas. It’s early spring, and it feels like heaven.” Matt gave a goofy grin and glanced over at their father. “Where’s Karen and Bethany? I figured they would be with you guys.”

“Too much to drink last night.” Damon’s dad shook his head. “These are some wild women your brother, and I have chosen.”

“Me too. Erica is...” Matt let out a long whistle. “She’s something else.”

“So, how did the showing go last night? You sell out?” Damon wrapped his arm around Matt’s shoulders, ignoring the fact that his brother was a tiny bit taller than him.

“I sure did. Jonathan actually had a pre-sale, so by the time everyone got there and the show got started, we only had two of my paintings still for sale. The man is a genius.” Matt pulled away from Damon. “My bag’s already coming down the shoot.”

“Good. Go get it.” Damon reached out and pulled Matt’s backpack off his shoulders. “I’ll take this one.”

Matt started toward the baggage claim and glanced back. “You excited? Terrified? Exhausted?”

“I’m good. Peaceful, funny enough.” Damon gave his brother a warm smile, excited to see the nugget-head for a week. Though he would never say it in a million years, he missed Matt like crazy.

“Peaceful, huh?” Damon’s father moved up beside him. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you use that term when referring to yourself.”

“I have Beth. I’m good. She’s honestly all I need.”

“Now that’s new.” His father glanced over at him. “I’m going to get the car. I’ll meet you guys up front.”

“Really? Playing chauffeur? You’re a billionaire, Dad.”

“Yeah, but not the typical one. You’re not either.” He walked off, turning back to wink at Damon before he disappeared into a sea of bodies.

“Where did Dad go?” Matt stopped beside him with a big suitcase fit for a horde of women traveling together.

“He went to get the car.” Damon backed up and let his eyes move across the suitcase. “What the fuck are you doing with a bag that big?”

“What? This?” Matt said in a high-pitched voice. “Leave me alone. I need my stuff!”

“Oh shit. Seattle is changing you.” Damon reached out to take the suitcase as Matt swatted him again.

“Naw, I painted you and Bethany something and didn’t want it jacked up on the flight, so I brought Erica’s luggage.”

“And what’s she going to use?” Damon moved toward the exit.

“Mine, I guess. Should be interesting.” Matt laughed. “I wish she could have come down with me, but she’s working on something for Dad.”

“You guys doing okay?” Damon wasn’t sure where things laid after all Matt and Erica had been through. For rough starts, theirs took the cake. Well, Kendal’s and then Matt. No one seemed to have a normal courtship. Maybe that meant the relationship would last?

“Hell yeah. She’s my lady, and I’m her man.”

Damon couldn’t get his hand up fast enough to tell Matt not to start singing Celine Dion. He belted it, and Damon simply walked beside him, ignoring the looks they got. A few people gawked, and several clapped, but Matt enjoyed himself nevertheless.

“I see you’re still on strike?” Damon held the door open for his brother and stifled his smile.

“To grow up? Oh yeah. That’s never gonna happen.”

“Not even for Erica?”

“She loves me just the way I am. It’s one of the reasons I keep her.” Matt moved toward the car as their father pulled up. “Don’t tell her that though. She thinks she’s doing charity work by keeping me.”

“That’s because she is.” Damon snorted and moved toward the trunk. “Dad needs to give her a raise. Someone should show her some appreciation.”

“Oh, I do.” Matt wagged his eyebrows. “I could give you details.”

“Nope. I’m good.” Damon lifted his hand and walked to his side of the car.

They would be in their eighties, and Matt would still be as childish as he was when they were teenagers. It was just part of his charm.

CHAPTER 110



BETHANY

Four Days Later

The week had been far too much fun with Matt back home. Shopping and movie watching, eating out and going through old photos had been the go-to activities. Damon had been there for the majority of the time but had to slip off to the office every once in a while. With Matt home, it was hard to be upset about Damon needing to work. The only problem was that the week went by far too fast.

Bethany woke up on Thursday morning and lay in the darkness beside Damon, her mind racing with the fact that they were going to be married on Saturday. She was thrilled and yet terrified. She was just learning how to be a good girlfriend to the wayward alpha male. But being his wife?

“Is there any difference?” She rolled onto her side and reached out to run her fingers down his arm. His muscles flexed, and he groaned softly as she traced his bicep.

“You talking to yourself, sweetheart?” He was still half-asleep from what she could tell.

“Maybe.” She moved up behind him, pressed her chest to his back and leaned down to kiss his neck below his ear. “I was coaching myself on how to be a good wife to you.”

“And what was your advice?” He yawned loudly and moved over, rolling onto his back and reaching for her.

“I don’t know, honestly. Do you have any advice?”

“Of course I do.” He licked his lips and moved the covers, leaving his hard body on full display. “Let’s start with you crawling up here to sit in my lap. I’m the kind of man who loves to have his woman in his lap whenever possible.”

“Easy enough.” She moved onto his lap, spreading her softness over him and rolling her hips. She rarely slept naked, but he’d talked her into it the night before. His warm skin pressed to hers throughout the night had her convinced that it might be the *only* way to sleep in the bed with him.

“And then all you gotta do is love me.” He reached up and palmed her breasts, squeezing before tugging at her nipple.

“And how would you recommend I do that?” She leaned toward him and pressed her hands to his chest as her hair cascaded forward.

“Take me into you and make love to me.” He reached up and pulled her down, gripping her ass with one hand and tangling his fingers in her hair with the other as he kissed her deeply.

The idea of morning breath being a problem left her as he shifted his hips and impaled her. All conscious thought left, and she let her need take over.

They worked their hips against each other as she pressed her hands to the bed, and he touched every part of her.

“It’s as simple as this?” Beth asked before sitting back up and lifting up to work the full length of him with her body.

“Absolutely. I’m not complicated. I just want you to love me with your heart,” he reached up and touched her chest, “your mind,” he touched the side of her head and groaned as she bobbed on his cock, “and your beautiful body.”

He gripped her hips and jerked her down, filling her up before rolling them over and pressing her to the bed. “That sound like something you might be interested in?”

“How long is the job?” She wrapped her legs around his taut waist and tried to still her racing heart. It didn’t take much attention from him, and she was panting and shaking.

“Well, that’s the catch.” He lifted up and glanced down the length of her body. “Open your legs wide. I wanna watch you take me.”

“There’s a catch?” She moaned as he pressed down into her, taking his time, inch by inch.

“Always a catch, baby girl.” He glanced up, his eyes dark with desire. “It’s a job that lasts forever. You think you can handle that?”

He drove into her again as she dug her nails into his sides and cried out in pleasure.

“Harder.”

“Answer me.” He pulled out, rubbing the tip of his dick along her center. “Now.”

“Of course I can handle that, and much more.” She pressed her heel into the bed and rolled them back over to gain the upper hand. “Now, stop teasing me. I’m supposed to be at the spa in forty minutes.”

“Smelling like sex and candy?” He smiled and gripped her hips again, fucking her fast from below. “Better?”

“Much.” She pressed her fingers against the strong muscles of his stomach and whimpered as he brought her over the edge. “So good.”

“You are so good, Beth. You should see how well you’re taking this big dick. It’s fucking hot.” He pulled her down and kissed her hard as she jerked against him. “But, it’s my turn.”

He rolled them back over and reached down to grip her hands before pulling them far above her head. He took both of her wrists in one hand and pinned her down. “Milk me before you go, lover?”

“Hell yes.” She jerked her hips, working him as he rolled his body, fucking her fast and deep. His eyes fluttered shut a few minutes later, and she enjoyed every second of watching him lose himself above her. His groans filled the air, accompanied by the delicious scent of their sex and her panting.

“Damn, woman.” He collapsed on top of her. “Remind me why we’re just now finding each other.”

“Because you’re old and I’m not?” She laughed as he came to and gave her a look of challenge.

“Old is relative. Let’s see who can keep up and who’s lagging behind.”

“That’s about experience, and I’m not exactly running with the champs on sexual experiences.”

“I like that about you.” He leaned down and kissed her a few more times. “Lock the bathroom door behind you.”

“Why? You leaving?” She ran her fingers through the damp hair at the side of his head.

“No. I’ll follow you in there if you don’t. Then you’ll be late, and I’ll have to hear it from Erica and your mother.” He kissed her again and rolled off.

She rolled off the other side and walked to the bathroom, wagging her ass for him. “And what if I want to be late.”

“Lock it!” He leaped over the bed, looking like a sex god as he barreled toward her.

She yelped and slapped the door behind her, locking it before laughing hard. It felt good to belong to him in the bedroom, but even more so, out of it.

“You almost got me.” She pressed her forehead to the door.

“Almost? Woman, you underestimate me.” The sound of the lock popping had her screaming in delight.

It was going to be a long morning, in a good way.



“Hi, baby!” Bethany’s mom stood up from a chair in the lobby of the spa. “Erica got in this morning. She’ll be here any minute.”

“Hi, Mom.” Beth smiled at the attendant to her left. “We’re here for the Bethany Bryant spa day?” Why her mother had forced her to put it in her soon-to-be name was beyond her, but there was something right about it.”

“Of course. We have everything ready for the three of you. Did you want to wait for the other member of your party?”

Bethany pulled her mom into a quick hug before turning her attention on the attendant. “Yeah, I guess we should. Do we all go into a room together?”

“No. The first part of the spa day is for each of you to get an hour and a half massage of choice. Then we’ll put you in a private room in the back for lunch and send in our nail and hair specialists one at a time. Are you the bride?”

“I am.” Bethany felt odd even saying it.

“Good. So it’s up to you what you’d like to do.” The lady smiled and glanced over toward Bethany’s mother.

“I think we should go back. They’ll put Erica in a room as soon as she gets here, and we’ll go from there?” Bethany’s mom wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “We’ll be good and relaxed before she even shows up.”

“I like the sound of that.” Bethany shrugged. “Okay, so let’s get started then. Oh, wait. Is Aunt Patty not coming in today?”

“No, but she’ll be here tomorrow for your bachelorette party. Who all did you invite?” Her mom turned to face her, reaching up to smooth down her hair.

“It’s just a fun night out with dinner and drinks. I’m not interested in doing anything too adventurous.”

“I understand that but who’s coming? Is it all right if Patty and I come, or would you rather we just stay at the house? It won’t hurt my feelings at all.”

“It’s me, Erica, you and Aunt Patty. There’s no way I would ask you to stay at home. You guys will be the life of the party.” Bethany smirked before turning to follow the attendant

toward the back. “I wish Krista were with us, but that’s not going to happen.”

“No, baby. It’s not. Don’t even focus on it. We’ll have a good time together tomorrow just like we will today. This is about you and Damon. No one else.”

“You’re right.” Bethany let out a long sigh, releasing the tension in her shoulders and letting her mind wander through the events of the last year. Life had been a whirlwind of activity and not all of it good, but it ended up being incredible.

“Just get undressed and on the table and one of our masseuses will be with you shortly. We’ll knock before we come in.” The woman smiled and opened a door, moving back to let Bethany in.

“Great. Thank you.” Beth walked into soft music and a barely lit room. Exhaustion tugged at her, and she happily stripped down and got on the bed. She couldn’t remember having a massage before in her life, not one that wasn’t followed up by someone’s stiffy poking her in the back in expectation.

Memories of her and Damon’s first meeting rolled through her mind as her eyes grew heavy. She didn’t even hear the door open and close before she slipped into the darkness and let sleep take her.

Bliss.



“You fell asleep?” Bethany’s mom chuckled as they sat across a small table from each other, Erica sitting to Beth’s left.

“I did too.” Erica lifted her hand. Her thick blond hair was in a messy bun on top of her head, but she looked incredible regardless. Bethany wasn’t sure the woman ever had a bad hair day in her life. It was part of her charm.

“See? Thank you, Erica.” Bethany lifted her hand toward Erica before leaning back in her chair and studying her mom. She was aging some but still looked like a million bucks. “I’m

glad you guys are here with me. It's been a weird year, losing my best friend to her being locked up for attempted murder and having to survive Kendal, Matt, and Damon."

"Yeah, one is bad enough, but all three?" Erica picked up a roll from the basket between them, her robe sleeve dipping into the olive oil. "Damn. It never fails. Matt and I have a joke about who's going to end up covered in the meal first. Him or me."

Bethany and her mother laughed. "Kent and I do the same thing."

After reaching for a roll, Beth shrugged. "Damon and I have our quirks too, but getting messy at dinner isn't one of them."

"So tell me what else we need to get done. Anything I need to do for tomorrow night? Is Dana, Kendal's girlfriend, coming with us? Or Sophia, Matt's best friend?" Erica asked.

"Shit. I didn't even think about them. I've been out of it." Bethany ran her fingers through her hair. "I need to invite them both."

"I'll invite them," Erica offered. "I've met them both and know Sophie thanks to Matt."

"I don't know her too well, but I've been around Dana quite a bit this year because of Kendal."

Erica took a big bite of her roll and tried to talk around it. Bethany was grateful that she wasn't the only one assured to get in trouble for talking with her mouth full. "It's been a rough year for everyone."

"No talking with your mouth full." Bethany's mom raised her eyebrow.

"Ha! I knew you were going to get busted." Bethany pointed to Erica. "I love it."

"I was kidding. Do what you want." Bethany's mom chuckled. "I just didn't want to let Bethany down. She thinks I'm so damn predictable."

“Well, let’s just prove her wrong tomorrow night at the bar. It’s bachelorette party time.” Erica lifted her hands in the air and danced to the music which had to be playing in her head. Her moves didn’t match the soft, serene music pumping out of the speakers above them.

“Oh Lord.” Bethany rolled her eyes. “It’s just dinner and some drinks.”

“And strippers?” Erica cocked her head and smiled.

“Yes. We must have strippers.” Bethany’s mom clapped her hands and bounced in her chair.

“That’s it. I’m dreaming. I’m still on the table lost in a dream.” Bethany glanced between her mom and Erica. “I’m going to wake up any minute.”

“Sure, it’s a dream.” Her mother laughed. “Seems like it might be more like a nightmare!”

CHAPTER 111



DAMON

Damon waited until Bethany left to meet up with her mom and Erica to take a long hot shower. He'd been honest about her locking the door. Something about wanting more of her rode him the hardest after just having her. It was like an addiction. One he didn't mind at all. As long as his need to feel her against him didn't get out of control, he'd be good. She'd accused him in the past of using sex to settle hard emotions between them, and truth be told, he had. It was his love language and the deepest way he knew how to connect with her.

Maybe that would change over the future, but for the time being, he was happy with who he was and thrilled with the woman she was becoming.

He took his time in the shower and let his mind wander through his life, enjoying each and every part of it as he focused on his relationship with Beth, then with friends, then work and then family. Everything was in place. Now all he needed was to enjoy the next few days celebrating a new life with his almost-bride. Hanging out with Kendal and Matt would be a blast. The two of them apart were great, but together? He was in for a wild ride. They would egg each other on, and him as well, until they all ended up knee-deep in trouble. Maybe the three of them having women now would change things.

"Doubt it." Damon reached up and turned the knob on the shower, cutting off the water flow. He dried off and dressed in jeans and a t-shirt before dropping down in front of his

computer. Matt and Kendal wouldn't be by to pick him up for another hour to play a round of golf. He'd use the time to get through a few more e-mails. Where he was trying like hell not to focus on the firm during their wedding week, he didn't have a choice on some matters. He'd hit those up and let the rest rot in his inbox until he could get to them.

The sound of someone beating on his front door had him groaning. Matt was early. "So much for getting anything done." Kendal would have plopped down on the couch with a magazine, or the TV for entertainment, but Matt would want attention, and rightly so. He wasn't living in Dallas anymore. His time with Damon was limited, and this week was promised to be focused on fun and family.

"I'm coming, you big oaf." Damon pulled the door open and moved back as Matt and Kendal walked in. "You guys are early."

"Yep. We figured it would be better to bring breakfast over and interrupt your work time than have you think you got away with something. Cause ya didn't." Matt poked him in the chest and carried a few boxes to the kitchen. "Come eat. We emptied out the Kolache shop down the road. Freaking Washington doesn't have Kolache. What the hell?"

Kendal smiled and followed after Matt. "Maybe that means you and Erica should get hitched and move back here. We have art galleries in Texas, Matthew. Hello."

"Not like Seattle." Matt turned as Damon walked into the kitchen. "You ready to get your ass handed to you in golf today?"

"Not happening." Damon moved past his brother and opened one of the boxes, grabbing two large Kolache out and shoving half of one in his mouth. "And you and Erica belong in Seattle. In Texas, we're interested in business and making money."

"Oh yeah?" Matt snatched the extra Kolache from Damon's hand. "You're trying to tell me that you don't miss me?"

Damon popped him in the stomach and grabbed the Kolache as Matt let out a groan and bent over. “I miss you every day, but you moved up there for a reason. Your dreams are up there. Keep living them.”

“Oh, brother.” Kendal rolled his eyes. “Living your dreams is overrated. The minute you get it, you gotta come up with a new dream. With something bigger or better. It’s exhausting.”

“No, you don’t.” Damon turned to face his best friend. “And you’re really one to fucking talk right now. You got the girl you wanted.”

“Against all the odds.” Matt threw in his two cents. “Pretty fucked up situation and shit.”

“Yeah. That.” Damon nodded toward Matt. “And you’re teaching at the college that you wanted to teach at. Tell me you’re not living your dreams.”

“I am, but I can’t help but think I need to start looking for a new dream.” Kendal shrugged and took a bite of his breakfast. “Not another woman or career, but something more. Something bigger.”

“Not this shit again.” Damon walked toward the living room. “You talked yourself out of being content in college too, bro. That’s why every relationship before Ana was a struggle.”

“And after her?” Matt followed Damon, Kendal taking up the rear.

“I didn’t date after her.” Kendal leaned against the door frame at the entrance of the living room. “Enough of this girly bullshit. Get your shoes on and let’s go play golf. I need to get some aggression out.”

“Aggression out?” Damon snorted and dropped down on the couch, enjoying his breakfast. He lifted one of the half-eaten Kolache in the air. “Thanks for breakfast. I love these things.”

“I’m not sure golf is the right sport for you if you’re looking to let off some steam. Maybe boxing?” Matt offered and sat down beside Damon, leaning back and putting his feet on the coffee table.

“Or fucking more often?” Damon shoved the rest of his meal in his mouth and worked on his shoes.

“We fuck all the time. She’s far more woman than I deserve, but she’s giving, and I’m not. Maybe I should find a charity to get involved with, you know?” Kendal finished his breakfast too and wrapped his arms around himself. “Do you guys do charity work?”

“No. I hang out with the two of you. That’s charity enough.” Damon stood up. “Let’s go. Ben’s meeting us out there, or that’s the last thing I heard from him last week.”

“He’s coming. I texted him this morning.” Matt stood up and walked to the kitchen, grabbing the boxes. “We taking these in the car?”

“As long as we’re riding in something besides my Mercedes. You both eat like ten-year-old boys. I don’t want greasy fingerprints on my shit.” Damon gave them a look.

“Yes, your highness.” Matt popped Damon in the chest and walked to the front door.

Damon got a running start and jumped on his brother’s back, wrapping his arms around Matt’s neck. “Watch it, or I’ll make sure Erica catches the flower thing this weekend.”

“She already did at Dad and Karen’s wedding. You don’t remember?” Matt opened the door and walked out. He was struggling, but Damon wasn’t relenting. Not yet.

“I got it. Just tote his childish ass to the car.” Kendal smiled at both of them and took Matt’s keys. “We can take my truck. I grew out of the need to be fancy a long time ago.”

Damon snorted and slid off Matt’s back as they reached the car. “Speaking of fancy,” Damon started, “did you guys get your shoes polished and your suits fitted for Saturday?”

“Yep. All done.” Kendal nodded and got in the driver’s seat.

“Yeah, about that,” Matt mumbled and jumped back as Damon grabbed for him.

“Matt. You know Bethany wants everything perfect for this wedding. You dick it up and-”

“I got it done. Jeez. She’s my sister too.” Matt smirked and got in the back of the truck as Damon walked to the other side.

“Oh fuck.” Kendal glanced Damon’s way as he got into the truck. “What’s the deal with telling the office that your sister is now your wife? So risqué.”

“That is a great tagline for your Time Magazine feature.” Matt snorted.

“Keep it up, and you two will find yourselves tied to some random girl’s bed with your own underwear in your mouth as a gag tomorrow night. I’m not beyond roofieing you and paying someone to play along... or are they playing?” Damon glanced back at his brother.

Kendal lifted his hand in the air and flipped Damon off. “Promises, promises.”

“Naw, I’m good. I’ll shut up.” Matt lifted his hands in the air. “I wouldn’t put anything past you. Sick bastard.”

“Just don’t tell Bethany he’s one.” Kendal chuckled.

“She already knows.” Damon shrugged. “It’s one of the things she likes most about me.”

Damon couldn’t help but laugh as both Matt and Kendal gave him shit for the next twenty minutes on the drive to the golf range. Beth might know his secrets, but she certainly didn’t like them. No woman in her right mind would. Beth wasn’t just *any* woman.



“So, James Talling got back with his family? That’s crazy.” Matt walked beside Damon down the fairway as Kendal stopped to pick up his ball.

“Yeah. He cut back on everything at the office and made sure his wife and kids knew they were first.” Damon shrugged. “As much as I enjoy my work, I’m going to have to do the

same. Dad's looking at bringing in a few more executives this year to help balance things out. I think he and Karen realize how much I'm working, and where it wasn't that big of a deal in the past, it is now."

Ben moved up on Damon's other side. "You're there all the time, but a lot of that is your own doing. You have control issues, dude."

"Nooooo..." Kendal jogged to catch up, finding his place on the far side of Ben. "Not Damon Bryant. Head of everything and follower of no one."

"Keep it up." Damon glanced over at his best friend, enjoying the teasing more than he'd ever admit.

"I think maybe this time you should interview the candidates first. Dad hired some idiots that almost fucked up my relationship and yours this last year." Matt gave Damon a hard stare. "I'd still love to wrap my hands around Mitch's throat for jacking with Erica."

"Me too," Damon admitted. "Dad's been off a little lately, but he's still got a good eye for people. I just need to be his second on the review chain."

"Mitch, the guy that propositioned Erica for sex?" Kendal asked, his voice innocent.

"We don't talk about that." Damon smirked as Matt growled low in his chest.

"New subject?" Kendal asked before turning his attention to Ben. "What about you, man? You finally found a woman?"

"Or a man?" Damon stopped as Ben whipped around.

"Bethany said something, didn't she?" His eyes went wide, and Damon almost felt bad about springing it on him, but someone needed to rip the fucking band-aid off. They'd been friends too long for Ben to walk around with a big secret that Damon wasn't privy to.

"That you're gay?" Kendal asked and moved around to stand beside Damon.

“I knew that too. Wait... were you not gay last year?” Matt crossed his arms over his chest and gave Ben an apologetic look.

“Really? It’s that obvious?” Ben ran his fingers through his hair and groaned before turning his back to them.

“Yeah. We’re dudes, Ben.” Damon reached out and squeezed his old friend’s shoulder. “And it’s fine. Honestly. You are who you are. It’s not for me.”

“Or me.” Matt patted his own chest as if reminding himself that he was a lady’s man.

“Or me.” Kendal raised his hand. “But if it’s for you... whatever.”

“Agreed. Stop holding that news to yourself, acting like we’re going to disown you. You’re stupid, and we’ve known forever.” Damon tugged on Ben’s arm. “Let’s go. You’re my partner for the day. We gotta whoop Matt and Kendal’s ass good. They were bragging in the car.”

“Bragging is what you do... when you’re the best in the world!” Matt’s voice boomed across the quietness of the day.

“Shhhhhhhhh,” resounded all around them.

They cracked up and walked to the next hole, talking about the bachelor party and how it was *not* going to get out of control. They were all taken men, well, all of them besides Ben. Their women would have a meltdown if they did anything stupid.

“Wait.” Kendal pulled Damon to a stop. “What are the girls doing for their party tomorrow night?”

“Dinner and drinks, I believe.” Damon shrugged. Bethany wasn’t a party animal, and her mom and aunt were going with them for shit’s sake.

“No, I heard they were going to a male strip club and then bobbing for cocks.” Matt rolled his shoulders. “I told Erica that was fine, but only for this night because it was for Bethany. I didn’t want her-” He didn’t get another word out before Damon tackled him.

“Oh shit.” Kendal reached down and tried to pull Damon off him, but he was on a mission - to make Matt squeal like a pig. “Ben... a little help.”

“Don’t you dare.” Damon glanced back and gave his co-worker a wicked smile. “He’s going to scream like a girl before I let him up, and anyone else that wants to talk about my girl bobbing for cocks with some other guy.”

“Guys, not guy.” Kendal backed up and shrugged as Damon growled at him. “What? It’s just a friendly blowjob. Shit.”

“Oh hell no.” Damon scrambled up and turned as Kendal laughed and turned toward the lake nearby.

He ran hard, and Damon barely reached him before he took off into the lake. The sound of him yelling had Damon laughing so hard his sides hurt.

“You think this lake is going to stop me?” Damon put his hands on his hips and gave his best friend the death stare. “Your ass is mine.”

Kendal yelled one word before ducking under the murky water. As if it would help him at all. “Matt!”

Funny thing. Matt couldn’t swim.

CHAPTER 112



BETHANY

The spa day was relaxing, but more than spending time with the girls, Bethany was ready to spend time with her man. Between a few needs at the office and Damon's groomsmen taking up all of his day, she didn't get to see him until lunch the next day.

"You looking forward to your bachelorette party tonight?" He wrapped his arms around her from behind and kissed the side of her neck as they stood in their kitchen.

She slathered mustard on half a sourdough loaf and pressed back against him. "Not really. I'd much rather be here with you. We're not going anywhere too exciting. Just to dinner and maybe to have a few drinks."

"What? No club where you can shake your ass safely for the last time?" He cupped her breasts and moved his kissing-assault up to her ear, licking a few times.

Chill bumps raced down her back and coated her arms. "I'm not exactly the shake-my-ass kinda girl."

"I like it when you shake it." He kissed her again and moved back. "You want something to drink with your sandwich, baby?"

"Yeah." She finished making his and started working on hers. "What do you boys have planned for tonight?"

"Men. I haven't been a boy in twenty years, and Matt was growing a beard at three."

They chuckled together. “How is Matt? You guys went golfing yesterday and then to the office and the bar. I didn’t even get to see him last night, which is a little upsetting. I was hoping for a family dinner out at your father’s place.”

“Then you should have said something, beautiful.” Damon walked past her and moved around to the other side of the breakfast bar, taking a seat on one of the stools and watching her. “We’re going to grab a bucket of beers and just chill out at a sports bar, I’m sure. None of us are dancers, not that we’d go without our women anyway.” He shrugged.

Bethany slid his sandwich toward him. “Everything okay at the office?”

“Sure is.” He pulled the plate toward him but kept his eyes on her. “Have you told your mother about your dad showing up at graduation?”

She stiffened. It would have been nice to pretend it was a dream or more a nightmare, but it hadn’t been. Guilt rolled through her. She should have mentioned it the day before at the spa. Now she was holding back info from her mom, which was no different than lying.

“No.” She shook her head and picked up her sandwich, nibbling on the edge.

Damon’s stare was almost heavy as it rested on her. His dark eyes filled with a bit of concern, his expression caring. “Do you think you should? What if he shows up at the wedding? Do I need to have security detail out there?”

“What?” She came to from her thoughts. “No. He’s not dangerous. I don’t think he’s into drugs anymore, or at least, it didn’t look like it. He was dressed in clean clothes and looked more alive than I remember him looking when I was a kid.”

A torrent of emotions raced through her.

“Dad mentioned it to me in the car yesterday, but I didn’t say anything about you seeing him. I guess your mom thought she saw him too in the crowd at the graduation.” Damon reached out and took her hand, brushing his fingers across the top of hers. “You need to talk to your mom. I know you hate

deception as much as I do. She's not telling you what happened, and you're not telling her. You guys need to talk it out. You know that."

Bethany nodded and set her sandwich down. "You're right. I need to wash my hands, and then I'll join you." She pulled her hand from his and walked to the bathroom as tears filled her eyes.

What was her father doing there? Simply celebrating her success? After ten years of being gone? A mixture of anger and sorrow wrestled inside of her. There was no easy answer to it.

A huge part of her wanted to pull him into a hug instead of slap him. Shit happened and whatever made him leave all those years ago, without a doubt, she knew it wasn't her, nor was it her mother. She made it to the bathroom as a sob rose in her throat.

After closing and locking the door, she turned on the water in the sink and pressed her hands to the cold countertop as tears rolled down her face. It wasn't a time for being broken.

But maybe somewhere in the pieces of her heart she could find healing.

"I want to," she mumbled and looked up at herself. She had to talk to her mom. Maybe there was more to the story. A part she never heard because she was a little girl, or because she was *their* little girl.

Either way, Damon had closure on his mom. She needed it on her dad.

No matter how she looked at it, his actions and her mom's reactions led her to that very moment, and where hating him sounded appropriate, thanking him for forging her into the fighter she was and causing her to survive Damon Bryant long enough to love him. Priceless.



“Dana, this is Erica. I know you guys have met, but just in case.” Bethany moved back as the dark-haired nurse who’d captured Kendal’s heart smiled and extended her hand to Erica.

“Nice to meet you. I’ve heard a little bit of your story through Kendal. You’re up in Seattle?” Dana asked and moved closer to Erica.

Bethany moved out of the way to let the two girls talk and lifted up on her tippy toes. Her mother and Aunt Patty were flirting with the bartender, or rather, Aunt Patty was. It was almost funny to watch, and yet Bethany’s aunt was a looker, a strong woman with a sense of direction, but quite demanding on men. She would find someone eventually. She had to.

“Damn... I should have jogged with them,” Bethany muttered, referring to Matt and Sophia. She hadn’t met the girl before, and it seemed odd to invite her to the bachelorette party, but she was Matt’s best friend from grade school, and at one time, she practically lived with Damon’s family. She needed to be there. Bethany was just aggravated that she’d never *seen* the girl. Trying to find a new face when she didn’t know what she was looking for was damn-near impossible.

“Bethany?” The unknown voice was almost welcomed.

Beth spun around and smiled as a pretty brunette with eyes the color of a light blue-green ocean extended her hand.

“You must be Sophia?”

“Yeah. Nice to meet you. Matt’s told me so much about you.” She glanced around. “I’m going to grab a beer, and then I’ll meet everyone. Is that okay?”

“Absolutely.” Bethany motioned toward the bar. “I’ll go with you. We’re just going to have a few drinks and then head to dinner. Nothing too exciting.”

“Shit, I just got off a flight from Saudi about five hours ago. Anything American is exciting.” She chuckled and walked toward the bar. She was petite, but very feminine, almost like a living doll. Beth was surprised that Matt wasn’t

in a relationship with the girl, but maybe their friendship was more important? That, and now Erica was in the picture.

“Matt told me that you’re a reporter.”

“Yeah, for one of the major networks, but it took all of my twenties to get there.” She moved up to the bar and ordered a Corona. “Are you working at McKenzie and Bryant again or-”

“Sort of.” Bethany smiled before lifting her beer to her lips. “I’m working on a special project for Damon, but I’m not sure what’s going to happen after that.”

Sophia took her beer from the bartender and lifted it toward Bethany. “Well, congrats on graduating with your master’s and on the engagement. How exciting.”

“And stressful.” Beth hit her glass against Sophia’s and pointed toward her friends. “Everyone is over there. My mom and her younger sister, Patty, are with us, then Dana is the dark-haired girl. She’s dating Kendal and, of course, you know Erica is with Matt.”

“Yeah. I love that girl. We only got together a little bit before I left in January, but she’s *perfect* for him, and I swear he’s had a crush on her for the last five years or something nutty like that.” Sophia gave Bethany a sideways look.

Beth liked her. It was easy to see why Matt got along with her so well. Where she looked like perfection, a stuck up type of girl that no one would want to be around; she wasn’t that at all.

“What are you doing over in Saudi? That’s a long way from home.”

They moved through the crowd and Bethany struggled to hear her answer, but got enough of it to know one thing; she wanted to know more.

“... so they asked me to check him out... and honestly, he’s a bastard, but what do you expect?” Sophie turned back around and walked farther into the crowd. She paused at the edge of the bartops and turned. “He’s a prince and over there, they worship royalty as if he were a descendant of the gods.”

She snorted. “He doesn’t exactly like me, but they want the publicity, so he’s putting up with me.”

“This is the prince of Saudi?” Beth took another swig of her beer as Dana and Erica walked their way.

“Yep. He’s under investigation for trafficking. He says he’s not involved, but I’m there to figure that out.” She glanced around. “Keep that to yourself though. I’m horrible at keeping secrets. I swear to God.”

“Hey, Sophia.” Erica moved up beside them and hugged Sophia.

“Hey, yourself. You look like a million bucks. Why in the world are you dating Matt Bryant?” Sophia chuckled, and Beth noticed the uncomfortable look on Dana’s face. She needed to be pulled deeper into the group. The four of them would be friends forever because their men were close.

“Did you finish up your residency at the hospital?” Beth moved around Erica and Sophia to stand closer to Dana.

“Yeah. Finally.” Dana’s shoulders lowered a little. “It’s been a long year, but I’m glad it’s over. After Kendal had lost Amanda last fall, I wasn’t sure anything was going to work out.”

“I know. It was horrible. He had that and the hearing for my best friends to deal with.”

“Oh right. Jeez. It was one thing after the next, and then to find out he dated my older sister a few years back.” She reached up and ran her fingers down her face. “I swear you can’t make this stuff up.”

Beth chuckled. “And yet, everything works out because love forces it to.”

“Agreed, and usually love has some help from a demanding, needy guy with great teeth and a sexy voice.” She smirked and took a drink of her tea. “Thanks for inviting me tonight. I know I’m new to the group, but it means a lot to me.”

“I’m thrilled you could come.” Beth scanned the bar for her mother. “We need to finish up and get up to the restaurant. It’s on the second floor. I’m going to find my mother and her wild younger sister. You grab Sophia and Erica? Meet you up there in five minutes?”

“Just over there? Those stairs?” Dana pointed toward the stairs.

“Yep. That’s them.” Bethany waited until the woman nodded to turn and go in search of her mom and aunt. She found her mom beside the bar, nursing a highball glass of Coke. “There you are. Where’s Aunt Patty?”

“Necking with the bartender.” Her mom smiled so big it had to hurt her face.

Bethany reached over and rubbed the top of her mom’s back. “Brother. We should have known better. Bringing her here where there are men and alcohol.”

“Always a dangerous combination for Patty. She’s great at making mistakes one glass at a time.” Her mom laughed, and Bethany did too.

“Mom.” Beth moved around to stand beside her. “I need to tell you something.”

The smile slid off her mom’s face. “Me too.”

“Me first.” Beth took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I saw Dad at my graduation. That’s what I was doing outside alone when you and Kent walked up.”

“I saw him too.” Her mom’s expression softened as she visibly deflated. “I was hoping I was wrong, but I’d know him anywhere.” The hurt was a little too raw on her mom’s pretty face.

“We spoke for a few minutes and-”

“What? You spoke to him? What did he say?” Her mom put her glass down and reached over to grip Bethany’s shoulders. “You shouldn’t have done that alone.”

“He wouldn’t hurt me, Mom. I don’t believe that.”

“There you girls are!” Bethany’s aunt wrapped an arm around both Beth and her mom. “Let’s get something to eat before I make another life mistake.”

“I know he wouldn’t hurt you. He loved you with all of his heart.” Her mom ignored Patty. “What did he say, Bethany?”

“That he was sorry.” Beth’s eyes filled with tears. “I slapped him and screamed in his face. I was horrible.”

“Good. You need to get it out. I’m sure he understood.” She pushed Patty’s arm off her shoulder. “Just a minute.”

“He looked so hurt.” Beth took a shaky breath.

“Who is he, guys?” Patty looked between them.

“We’ll talk about it later. Tonight’s not the night for that, but thanks for telling me...” Her mom glanced down at her hands. “There’s more to the story, but there always is, right?”

“Right.” Bethany reached out and touched the side of her mom’s face, wiping away the single tear that dripped down her cheek. Regardless of the *story*, her mother had been the one to pick her up when she fell and love her when she felt completely unlovable. The story could be told, but honestly, it wouldn’t change much.

CHAPTER 113



DAMON

“Let’s get this party started!” Matt walked into the kitchen at their father’s house, a floppy clown hat on his head and a party toy sticking out of the side of his mouth. “Here. We got you this...”

Damon caught the t-shirt Matt tossed to him and glanced over to find Kendal holding back tears. “You guys are fucking stupid. We’re in our thirties. We should be playing another round of golf, eating a steak dinner and flipping each other off.”

“What?” Kendal choked on a laugh. “We’ve been waiting for this moment since we met. Remember we used to talk about fucking up the town at our bachelor parties together?”

“That’s when you guys were still fucking women together. Duh.” Matt rolled his eyes and walked to the fridge.

“Wait. What?” Ben glanced up from the paper and gave Damon an odd look.

“Long story, and not one you want to hear. I promise.” Damon held up the shirt and rolled his eyes before tossing it back to Matt. “I’m not wearing that shit.”

“No? Can I?” Matt held it up and chuckled. “I love this thing.”

“Lemme see.” Ben got up from his seat and walked around the breakfast bar to stand next to Matt. “Oh shit. Please don’t wear that.”

“What’s it say?” Kendal leaned against the counter, looking more alive than Damon had seen him in years. Dana was doing something to breathe life back into his best friend. He’d have to pull her aside and thank her.

Matt turned the shirt around and snorted before laughing again.

Kendal rolled his eyes. “Touch my balls for a dollar? Fuck me. No one is wearing that.”

“I am.” Matt pulled the party toy out of his mouth and tugged the t-shirt over his head.

Damon watched in humor as his brother squeezed his fat ass in the t-shirt that was obviously made for him. Matt tried to put his arms down but got nowhere. He was stuck with his arms out.

“Take some pictures.” Damon pulled out his phone and tried not to cry he was laughing so hard. “Post them up everywhere.”

“No. Don’t you dare. Erica will kill me.” Matt spun around and wrestled the t-shirt off of himself as the rest of them laughed their asses off.

“You don’t even need liquor to be the life of the party, buddy.” Kendal walked past Matt, patting him on the back and heading toward the door. “Let’s go. We’ll grab a burger at the bar. The strippers are due in our private room at ten. We need to roll.”

“Strippers?” Damon’s heart skipped a beat. No way he was watching someone strip. Bethany would flip her shit, and honestly, he wasn’t interested. He’d seen a million naked women during his single years, which was plenty. “Fuck that, guys. I’m good with drinks and dinner, but no strippers.”

“Oh come on, bro. Some of these girls are just trying to make a living.” Matt wrapped his arm around Damon’s shoulders as they walked to the front door.

“They should get an education.” Ben walked behind them, his voice tight with what Damon assumed was angst.

“And pay for it how?” Damon snorted and walked out to find his Mercedes done up for the night. There wasn’t an inch the guys hadn’t written something offensive across the windows in shoe polish. “Awww... fuck. Not my baby. I’m going to get you dicks back for this.”

“Yeah, yeah. Stop bitching and get in. The strippers are joining us for dinner. BJs on me.” Kendal got in the driver’s side.

His words gave Damon pause. No fucking way was Kendal or Matt going to cheat on their women, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to get within ten feet of another woman. They were pulling his chain. Time to pull back.

“You guys aren’t serious, right? Cause I’m not good with a woman rubbing herself all over me while we try and eat dinner.” Ben walked around the car, giving Damon an ill look.

“It’ll be all right.” Damon nodded at his friend. “Matt and Kendal will keep the girls off of you.”

Damon couldn’t help but notice Matt’s smile fading. It wouldn’t take much and Kendal and Matt would be crying uncle. Trying to play a trick on him? No fucking way.

“So you ready for this?” Kendal glanced over and wagged his eyebrows.

“Hell yeah, I am. Last night of freedom. Good thing you two assholes aren’t married yet either. Might be fun to share a girl one last time. Maybe three or four of them.” Damon buckled up and watched his best friend through his peripherals. Kendal visibly paled as he muttered his agreement.

Oh yeah. Let the games begin.



“Hi, boys. Any special occasion for visiting us tonight?” A busty blond stopped by the high-top table they’d found at the bar, along with the rest of Dallas, who was obviously there that night.

“My bachelor party.” Damon winked at the girl. “We’ll take a bucket of beers and four burgers. That all right?” Damon glanced around at the guys.

“Yeah. It’s great,” Matt muttered, looking like someone had swiped his favorite pair of jeans from high school and burned them in front of him.

Such pussies. Damon tapped the table. “What the fuck? You guys were dry humping the air at the house, and now you’re like a bunch of wet rags. What’s up?”

“I’m *not* letting a stripper touch me. No fucking way.” Ben glanced down at the table, but he was the *only* one to say something.

“Oh hush, Ben. It’s going to be great. You can just stand guard and make sure no one walks up. Matt can take the girl’s mouth, Kendal her ass, and we’ll leave the good stuff to me.” Damon wagged his eyebrows and hopped off his seat. “Fun times coming up. I gotta piss. Make sure they bring ketchup.”

He walked off, and before he could get out of earshot, all three of them were losing their shit. Damon pressed his fist to his mouth as he walked toward the john. Just pulling the wool over his friends was enough to make the night a hit. As if he’d get anywhere near another woman when he had Beth. Fuck that. It was almost crazy that Kendal, or really Matt, would believe him. The fact that Matt hadn’t blown up and acted like a complete psycho over Damon’s suggestion told him that Matt was still chewing on the truth of Damon’s words. He wasn’t quite convinced yet.

“Hi there.” A cute brunette with a nice body and very few clothes moved in front of Damon. “I’m Lyndsay.”

“Hi, Lyndsay. I’m engaged.” He smiled and pulled her hand from his chest.

“Oh shit. All the good ones are gone.” She huffed and glanced around the bar.

“You assume I’m one of the good ones.”

“This is true.” She smirked. “I wasn’t hitting on you to get anywhere. I locked my keys in my car, with my wallet, and

was hoping to get close enough to pick your pocket.” She gave him a grin as if she were proud of her nefarious ways.

“And you’re telling me this why?” Damon patted his pockets just to make sure she wasn’t the diversion, and four of her friends hadn’t moved past him, draining him dry of his cash and cards.

She shrugged and laughed. “Not sure. Okay, well, have a great night, Mr. Engaged. If you see a single guy who needs a cute girl to flirt with him, just-”

“Wait. How much do you need to get into your car?”

“Around a hundred bucks. I swear the lock-pick guys are complete criminals.” She rolled her eyes.

“How about this... I’ll pay you a hundred bucks if you pretend to be the stripper for my bachelor party.” Damon lifted his hand as she started to protest, her hand already on her hip. “Wait. You don’t have to strip. Just let me run into the bathroom and grab a handful of condoms. We go to the table, and you just snuggle up to my side and play along. I’m just fucking with my friends who thought they were going to fuck with me. Yeah?”

She smiled. “I like it. I’ll wait here. Hundred bucks, right? No stripping?”

“I would never ask that of you, and any man that did, you need to punch him in the dick and walk away.” Damon left her and walked in the bathroom as excitement bubbled up inside of him. If only he could record the whole event. Beth was going to love it.

He grabbed a handful of condoms from a basket on the sink and tucked them in his pocket. He found the girl waiting patiently outside the john and reached for her hand.

“What’s your name?”

“Let’s go with Candy?” She snickered, and he did too.

“Awesome. Thanks again for doing this.” He paused and pulled out a hundred dollar bill. “It’s going to help me make some great memories. Just act oblivious and play along. These

guys are going to shit themselves.” He felt like a fifteen-year-old boy playing pranks on his little brother again. Nothing felt better, nothing but Beth.

“You bet.” The girl shoved the money in her pocket and snuggled against his side as they walked back to the table.

Everyone’s eyes grew wide as Damon moved up to the table with his arm wrapped around the girl. “Guys, not sure who you had stripping for us tonight, but Candy here found me near the bathroom and is totally game.” Damon glanced down at her and licked his lips. “You’re good taking on three of us?”

“Why not four?” Her lip turned down in a pout. “I can strip for all of you, but I really like a challenge.”

“Oh no, Ben here isn’t into women. No offense to you, angel cakes, but he’s just not interested.” Damon glanced up at Ben, who looked completely petrified.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Matt exploded. “We have women. There’s no way in hell we’re sharing anyone tonight. You’ve lost your fucking mind. I should beat your ass all over this bar for even thinking about doing that to-”

“Wait. This was your idea.” Damon reached into his pocket and pulled out the condoms, tossing them onto the table and glancing over at Kendal, who was completely white, his eyes wide and mouth agape. “Come on, buddy. You wanted a stripper that would bend over for us. I got us one.” Damon smiled wickedly and gave Kendal the nod he used to give him back in college when it was go time.

Kendal lifted his hands as he swallowed hard. “You’ve lost your mind, dude. We were kidding. I ain’t touching anyone.”

“You aren’t either.” Matt got up, his face completely red.

Damon lifted his phone and took a picture of each of them, the one of Matt a close-up thanks to him getting in Damon’s face. “And this is what a chump looks like.” Damon chuckled and glanced down at the girl. “Thanks a million, Candy. Good

luck getting home, sweetheart. Need one of us to walk you out?”

She laughed. “No, but thanks for the help. Good luck with your party.”

“Oh, it’s all downhill from here.” Damon released her and turned toward his brother. “Not interested in a *lap dance*?” he mocked Matt and then Kendal. Everyone deflated.

“No fucking way you just turned that on us.” Kendal pressed his fingers to his forehead. “I seriously thought you’d gone off the deep end.”

“Hell yeah I did, and you bitches fell for it. Trying to pull one on me. That shit isn’t ever going to fly.” Damon took his seat and reached back to push on Matt’s chest. “Where’s your t-shirt, bro?”

“Fuck you. That wasn’t funny.” Matt walked around to the other side of the table and gave Damon the death stare.

“Damn, man,” Kendal started, “when you gave me the look, you know the *look*, I knew we were in trouble. I haven’t felt that sick since finding out Dana and Ana were sisters. Shit. I think I need to go home and lie down. Fuck me.”

Damon laughed low in his chest and glanced over toward Ben, who was nursing his beer. “And you, buddy? You okay?”

“Yep. You gave me the out. I owe you one.” Ben lifted his beer toward the center of the table. “To Damon Bryant. There’s no one quite like him, and though he’s a complete bastard, he’s our bastard. Here. Here.”

They all lifted their beers and smacked the bottles against each other.

Some random dude jacked the moment by leaning in between Damon and Kendal. The poor guy couldn’t have been over twenty. “Dude! Are there really condoms on the table? Fuck-freaking-tabular!”

Damon reached over and grabbed all of them, handing them to the kid. “Knock yourself out, man.”

“Awesome!” The guy took them and turned, running through the bar, yelling something incoherent.

“Ahhh to be young and dumb again.” Kendal smiled over at Damon. “You almost had me a few minutes ago.”

“I was ready to beat your ass.” Matt was still in a mood.

“You were ready to try. There hasn’t been a day in twenty-eight years where you’ve beaten my ass.”

“Yeah, but you’re getting old.” Matt tilted his beer toward Damon, who reached out and snatched it from him.

“Just means I’m more wise with my moves.” Damon finished Matt’s beer and set the empty bottle in front of him. “I’ll always win.”

“I believe that shit,” Ben muttered.

“Yep. Nothing has changed. Not even the girl’s name.” Kendal snorted and moved back as the food was delivered.

“Please tell me you guys boned some poor girl named Candy back in college.” Matt leaned back in his chair, amusement on his face.

“Several,” Damon and Kendal said at the same time.

The table erupted in laughter. There was no need for strippers, loose women or condoms. They had good women, and nothing was going to fuck that up. Not ever.

CHAPTER 114



BETHANY

“Get everyone up front please.” The wedding coordinator wasn’t exactly the type of person Bethany was excited to work with, but Kent’s sister, Allison, had been adamant about hiring the chick. They weren’t doing a rehearsal dinner because the world was *starving for authenticity*, so the ceremony should be done from scratch.

Damon, Bethany and the rest of their wedding party were walked through the details of what would happen at ten that next morning, the day of the wedding. It was fast and furious, but that was usually the way they did things. Why change now?

“You all right?” Damon turned and ran his hands down Beth’s shoulders.

“I’m ready.” She smiled up at him and moved in to kiss him.

“No kissing! Save that for tonight. It’s bad luck.” The wedding coordinator pulled Bethany back.

Damon growled before pursing his lips.

It was going to be a long day of dealing with her. Bethany couldn’t even remember the lady’s name, but maybe it was for the best. Damon’s Aunt Allison walked into the church and glanced around.

“Where are the flowers? Have the bows been fluffed? Is your dress here?” She turned and pinned Bethany with a death

stare before walking into the sanctuary. “Why isn’t the unity candle centered on the table? Good grief.”

Damon rolled his eyes and turned to walk out the other side of the church. He paused and glanced back. “Just a few more hours and you’re mine.”

“I’ve been yours since the moment I first saw you.” Beth wrapped her arms around herself and tilted her head to the side. “It was just a hard road getting you to see that.”

He walked across the foyer and pulled Beth into his arms, leaning down and brushing his nose by hers. “I wrote vows for you today. You just do the ones the preacher gives you and I’ll say mine. I had a few things I needed you to know.”

“What?” She stiffened as he kissed her, softly at first, and then with a bit more hunger. It was a good thing everyone was rushing around trying to get things ready. For an engagement that happened seven months before, everything seemed last freaking minute.

Bethany melted against him and opened her mouth, welcoming him inside of her, where he belonged. She ran her fingers up the side of his smooth face and tucked herself against him, prolonging the kiss.

He finally broke it, his eyes glossy, lips a little red. “God, I love you. Tonight I’m going to worship every inch of you. Let’s just get through the formalities.”

She smiled. “Let’s enjoy them. We’re only going to get to do this once in our lifetimes. Let’s savor the moment.”

“How about you do that, and I savor you?” He nipped at her lips. “Don’t overdo yourself for the ceremony. You, first thing in the morning, is enough to stop my heart. I’d hate to keel over up there at the front of the church.”

“You’re not allowed to die until we’re old and can look back on a full life together.” She leaned in for another kiss as a lump formed in her throat.

“Thank you, baby. For giving me this.” He reached up and pressed his palm to her chest above her heart.

“My breast?” She snorted, and he laughed as his eyes filled with tears.

“Your heart. It’s healed mine.” He leaned down and kissed her again, jerking back as the wedding coordinator’s shrill voice filled the foyer.

“No kissing! It’s bad luck!”

Damon smiled at Bethany. “We make our own luck. See you tonight.”

“I love you,” she called after him.

“Not as much, but that’s all right. You can make it up to me in other ways.” He shook his ass before walking out of the church.

Bethany laughed and glanced over at Damon’s Aunt Allison and the coordinator. “What? He loves sex.” She shrugged and turned, enjoying the gasps behind her. How in the world Kent had an eccentric sister like Allison when he was so low-key and laid back was beyond Bethany. It was only a day they had to get through with the whole family and then her and Damon would be on a beach, just the two of them.

“There you are.” Erica walked out into the hall from one of the little Sunday school rooms. “The make-up lady will be here at four, but the stylist needs us to come down to her salon. It’s just five minutes down the road. You ready?”

“Yes.” Bethany stuck her head into the bride’s dressing room they fixed up to find her mom and Aunt Patty laughing about something. They already looked like a million bucks.

“You guys ready to get our hair done?” Bethany lifted her eyebrow as her mom bent over, laughing harder.

“We’re good. We’ve already got ourselves ready. We’re just laughing about some of the times we had when we were your age.” Patty lifted her hand and wiped a few tears from her face. “Life has been good.”

“And it’s only going to get better.” Bethany’s mom stood up and walked toward her. “You and Erica go. We’ll stay here

and make sure Allison and her pet don't change all of the colors or throw out the flowers before you get back."

Patty laughed loudly in the background.

Bethany smirked. "Right? I swear I don't know what gets into her."

"Control, baby doll." Patty got up and walked toward the door, moving up beside Bethany's mom. "It's all about control. Some people need it to feel important, but the rest of us know that we're already queen of the world, in some part of the world."

"Hell yeah to that." Bethany's mom lifted her hand, surprising her a little.

Patty hit it, and Bethany moved back. "Okay, you two weirdos. Erica and I are going to get our hair done. The make-up chick is supposed to be here in a couple of hours, so make sure you help her find her way back here if you see her."

"Will do. Have fun, baby." Bethany's mom moved up and pulled her into a warm hug. "I love you. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks, Mom." Bethany glanced back at Erica. "You ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be." She lifted her hand and dangled a set of keys. "Damon's going to be looking for these, but we should totally use that to our advantage."

Beth snorted and put her hand out. "Are these to his Mercedes?"

"Yep. I know it's his *baby*, but the thing rides like sex on wheels. He's going to be here for the next four hours. Let's take it?" She smiled nefariously.

"It has shoe polish all over it." Beth rolled her eyes. "You sure we wanna-"

"Drive Damon's car? Are you kidding me..." Erica laughed.

"Alright. You're right." Beth pulled out her phone and texted him, asking if they could. He responded back right

away that anything that was his was hers. She handed the phone to Erica and wagged her eyebrows as Erica glanced up with surprise on her face.

“You’re a magic woman. A regular witch from the days of old.” She smiled and handed the phone back. “I never in a million years expected someone to tame Damon Bryant.”

“I’m not quite sure tame is the right word. He’s still his own man and does whatever the hell he wants. It’s part of his charm.”

“And you’re good with that?” She smiled and walked around to the other side of the car.

Beth nodded. “It’s one of the *many* things I love about him.”



“You know, this is honestly unfair,” Bethany grumbled as she turned her head to look at Sophia who sat beside her in the bride’s room later that afternoon. Hair and make-up were done, and her toes and fingernails looked like a million bucks. She felt like a princess, a grumpy one at present.

“I agree, but let’s do the best we can. Here, let me see what you have.” Sophia snatched the paper in front of Bethany and gave her a look. They were becoming fast friends. Too bad the woman was working in Saudi for the next year. “You don’t even have anything down. It’s just a bunch of doodles.”

“How am I supposed to write my vows? I just keep hearing the words from the traditional vows in my mind playing over and over again. It’s useless.”

“What are we getting upset about?” Erica walked into the room and sat down across from Bethany at the table.

“Damon just sprung on me a few hours ago that he’s written his vows, but it’s okay... I can just use the old, crusty, traditional ones.” Bethany huffed. “I’m being dramatic.”

“Very.” Sophia laughed and stood up. “We’re going to leave you alone and we’ll close the door behind us. Just text me or Erica if you need anything. Get your vows done. Just think about how you *really* feel about Damon. Concentrate on him, not the task.”

“You’re right.” Bethany took the paper back and waited until the two of them were out of the room. She sat back and closed her eyes, letting her mind wander through their last year together. From the first day of meeting him at the office to that evening at home for their first family dinner. Desire raced through her as she envisioned him pressing her to the brick wall of the house on the outside patio, and Matt interrupting them.

Sex in his bed, on a plane, in his office, in the pool.

She whimpered and set her pen down as her skin felt prickly. “Stop it. Think of the other stuff. The fights and road blocks and people who tried to tear us apart.” She let out a short breath and let her head hang, her chin touching her chest.

They’d been through so much.

And every turn in the road was another moment of validation that things shouldn’t have worked out, but they did. Every obstacle only made them stronger. His obsession that she would cheat and lie like his mother did with his father.

Her worry that his money made him different and no man as wealthy and accomplished as him would *ever* really want a poor girl like her.

She pressed her fingers to her eyes and tried not to let her make-up run.

“Shit.” Getting up, she walked to the mirror and snatched a Kleenex from a box of them, being careful to wipe up the tears, but not the two hundred dollars of make-up.

Ridiculous.

A soft knock resounded at the door behind her, and she half-hoped that it was Damon.

“Come in.” She turned as her mother slipped into the room.

“Don’t tell Erica and Sophia that I bothered you. They’re standing guard, but they aren’t very good at it.” Her mother laughed and closed the door behind her before walking across the room. “You look incredible. Like a princess from a storybook.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Beth moved toward her mom, letting the older woman pull her into a long hug. It was a place she’d gone many times in her life. It was home when no other place was. “I love you.”

“Me too. Nothing sad or I’ll cry and mess up my ten dollar make-up. Shit’s expensive.” Her mom moved back, and they shared a laugh. “I got a call from your dad while you were getting your hair done.”

“He’s not coming, right?” Bethany stiffened. The day was about her and Damon and their future. Not about her past.

“No, he’s not. We had a good talk. He apologized for coming to the graduation. He feels like shit for wanting to see you and potentially messing up your special day.” Her mom reached out and squeezed her shoulder.

“He messed up lots of days before that one, Mom.” Bethany pulled from her mom’s touch and walked back to the mirror to straighten her dress and check out her hair.

“That’s true, but you’ve messed up before too. And so have I.” Her mom moved up beside her. “He didn’t want to leave us, baby.”

“It was a choice, and he made it.”

“And how does that make you feel?” Her mom’s voice was soft but firm. “Thinking that your dad didn’t want you and left to punish you for not being enough?”

Bethany’s heart ached in her chest. Her mother had slammed the hammer into the most sensitive nail that poked out of her. “I am enough.”

“Oh, I know you are, Beth. But tell me how it makes you feel to think the other thought. The one I just offered you.” She wrapped her arms around Beth from behind and pressed her cheek to Beth’s head. The embrace was warm, and yet Beth was struggling with keeping herself together.

“Dead inside.” She lifted the Kleenex back to her face.

“And what if I tell you that you meant everything to him? That you were the reason he rushed home after his shitty job? That he started selling drugs so that he could buy us a bigger house and give you anything you asked for? It was a stupid decision on his part, but what if I told you that everything he did was for you? For me?” Her mom squeezed her tighter as Beth let out a sob.

“Then my anger and hate was for nothing.”

“No, not for nothing, but it doesn’t serve you, baby. It’s killing you. You have a bright future with Damon and with all of us. Let the past stay where it is and offer your dad forgiveness.”

“Have you?”

“Yes. The night I said yes to Kent... I forgave your father for everything. It wasn’t easy, but my chest doesn’t hurt so much anymore, my dreams aren’t so tainted with pain and loss.” She kissed Beth’s head again and forced her to turn. “Unforgiveness is like drinking poison and hoping someone else will die. They won’t, but you will. Let it go because your understanding of it is wrong. I should have corrected it a long time ago, but I wanted him to lose you, to hurt because I was hurt. I’m better now. Kent’s love, and your love. They’ve freed me.”

Bethany glanced down and let out another soft cry. “I can’t mess up this make-up. Damn.”

“Then don’t, but tonight when Damon is asleep, spend some time letting go.” She kissed Bethany’s forehead and moved back. “Now... let’s get this wedding done so you can go lounge on a beach somewhere as a billionaire’s wife. It’s fun. I should know.”

Bethany glanced up and nodded. "I love you. Thanks, Mom."

"Anything for you." The older woman turned and walked to the door, pausing only when Bethany called out to her.

"Mom."

She turned back. "Yeah, baby?"

"Is Dad happy? Does he have another family now and stuff?" Bethany held her breath.

"Yeah, he does. He has three kids. All teenagers." Her mother smiled. "He deserves that hell."

Bethany nodded not sure what to say.

"I got his address for you should you ever want to visit him." Her mom opened the door. "See you in the sanctuary in a few minutes. It's almost time."

As soon as her mother left, Beth moved over to the table and sat down, picking up the pen and scripting out her vows. They flowed out of her as if she were created to write them. The knock at the door scared her, but she was done.

"You ready? It's time." Damon's Aunt Allison stood there with tears in her eyes. "Damon looks amazing, but nothing like you."

"Thanks." Bethany smiled and stood up, walking toward the door. She hugged Damon's aunt before moving out into the hall.

Erica turned and squealed softly. "You look amazing."

"Thanks." Bethany moved up to hug her. "Matt's up front with Damon?"

The coordinator moved up beside them, the woman more calm than Bethany had seen her all day. "Yes. The guys are up front. Erica is going to walk down the aisle before you, and then we'll have everyone stand and cue the music, and it will be your turn."

Bethany nodded and moved up as Erica walked in. The church door shut and everything seemed almost *too real*.

Everything had fallen into place. All of her hard work had paid off. No more poverty in her bank account or bankruptcy in her heart. Damon had helped to fix all of that.

“You ready?” The coordinator’s face lit up. “It’s time, dear.”

“Yes. More than ready.” Bethany moved up to the door and took a deep breath as they opened the doors and the music started to play.

Kent reached for her arm and smiled. “You look beautiful. I’m glad to call you mine.”

“Thanks. I feel beautiful.” She slipped her arm into his and walked toward the main aisle. They paused at the back and Bethany glanced up, her groom waiting at the front. The look of anticipation mixed with desire on his face melted her.

With shaky knees and her heart trying to pound its way out of her chest, she took the first step toward forever. She’d never been more terrified or elated before in her life. This was it.

Just don't trip. Just don't trip. Just don't trip.

CHAPTER 115



DAMON

His breath caught in his chest as Bethany rounded the corner at the back of the church. The crowd of people that had gathered in the church had helped to block his view until that moment. He'd never in his life seen anything so beautiful, so perfect.

“Wow. Damn...” Matt mumbled beside him.

Damon's hands were clasped tightly, his arms hanging comfortably. He had to look like the picture of confidence and assurance, but his insides were a fucking mess.

What if he messed things up with Beth? What if he lost her like James almost lost his wife? What if she cheated on him like his mother did with his father?

Was love enough? Was he enough?

He'd never contemplated the questions before, but standing there at the front of the church with his bride walking toward him. It was all he could think about.

Her eyes never left him; her lips turned up in a beautiful smile as the crowd shifted to face her with every step she took. His father held on to her, his face filled with the type of pride that's hard to catch on camera, the kind people only see a few times in their lives.

“You okay?” Matt whispered softly beside Damon.

“Never better.” Damon moved down the stairs and stopped beside Beth, leaning down and kissing her a few times, locking eyes with her. “You look incredible. Not as good as

you did this morning all sleepy in the bed, but stunning nevertheless.” His words were soft, whispered just for her to hear.

Her eyes filled with tears, and his heart swelled in his chest. He came out of the trance with her to hear the congregation laughing, and the preacher focused on him.

“The kiss usually comes at the end, son.” The older man chuckled.

“He’s always been one to race ahead.” Damon’s father glanced over at him. “I’m proud of you.” And down to Bethany. “And you too, sweetheart. This is the best day of my life.”

“Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” the preacher spoke up.

“Her mother and I do.” Damon’s father bent down and kissed Bethany’s cheek before handing her off to Damon, patting his shoulder and walking to sit down beside Karen.

“You okay?” Damon glanced down toward his girl. She was shaking like a leaf.

“Yes. Never better. Just a little overwhelmed.”

“Well, focus on the preacher and me and you’ll be fine.” He squeezed her hand and turned back to the preacher as the man dove into the ceremony. Damon’s thoughts scattered, his desire to think about work nowhere to be found, thankfully.

Beth had put up with a lot of shit to become his. He’d pushed back hard when she wanted anything more than sex, and several times, he’d attacked her intelligence and her worth. He hated himself for it, but it was a defense mechanism. After watching his mom and dad tear apart the family in his younger years, he just wasn’t interested in going through the same thing in his life.

The error of his past thinking was ever-present as he stood there in front of five hundred people with the woman of his dreams holding his hand tightly.

All of them had been through shit, and yet he knew without a doubt that his and Bethany's wedding was just the first in a string of weddings that would occur. Kendal and Dana would hook up, no doubt, and Erica would steal Matt's last name if she had to force it on him.

All was right in the world. At least his world.

"Now comes the time in the ceremony where the vows are proclaimed." The preacher turned and walked up on the stage.

Bethany tugged at Damon's hand as a sweet smile spread across her lips. "You coming?"

"Yeah." He bit his tongue, wanting to answer with something naughty, but his timing was off. No need to have an audience to witness his depravity, though it wasn't something he usually hid.

"Damon and Bethany have decided to write their own vows today, so let's have the rings, and we'll let you go first, Damon." The older man turned as Erica and Matt moved up on the stage as well. Erica placed Damon's ring in the preacher's hand, and Matt put Bethany's down.

Damon smiled at his brother, who seemed as nervous as Damon was. "Your turn soon, buddy."

Matt grunted, and Damon laughed, as did Bethany.

"Place the ring on Bethany's left hand and please read your vows." The preacher backed up as Bethany and Damon turned to face each other. A mild look of panic raced past Bethany's expression, but Damon ignored it. He should have given her more time to come up with vows. She was an overachiever. There was no way in hell she was going to let him do something special and her not match it or even overdo it if possible.

He took her hand and slid the ring halfway on it, pausing as he glanced up and looked deep into her eyes. "From the moment I met you, you've challenged me. Not only to be a better man but to change my way of thinking. Love isn't given just to be snatched away, and happiness lasts for more than a few moments. Forgiveness isn't the way of the world, but it's

your way.” He paused and took a shaky breath. “You’re beautiful and kind, beyond brilliant and will soon rule not only my heart but my home, my business and anything else you want that belongs to me.”

Tears welled up in Beth’s eyes, spilling over and stealing his heart. He must not be dicking it up too badly.

“Where are your notes?” she whispered and he laughed.

“I don’t have notes, silly. Do you?”

Her lips pursed tightly. Him memorizing it wasn’t a good thing from what he could tell.

“We both had so much to overcome to bring this relationship together, but I want you to know, that I overcame each obstacle because of you, for you. I want warmth and love in our lives, playfulness and passion in our bedroom, and the sound of little feet filling up our hallways. You’ve opened a new world to me, Beth, one I didn’t even know existed. You’re my everything, and I take you to be my wife. I want to hold you, care for you, provide anything you need from this day forward, in good times and in bad, when we’re rolling in wealthy and when we’re not, when we’re strong and healthy and when we’re not. From today on, I take you to be my wife, my partner, and lover, my best friend. Until death do us part.”

He leaned in and kissed her as the crowd chuckled and the preacher grumbled playfully.

“Not fair,” Beth whispered and reached up to wipe her eyes. Her hands shook, as did her lip. Damon pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head, wanting to comfort her, to hide her from the crowd, to do anything to give her a sense of security.

He moved back as she nudged him to do so.

“Okay. My turn.” She took the ring from the preacher and put it on his finger before looking up. “I wrote my vows twenty minutes ago when you informed me we were doing this-”

The crowd chuckled again, and Damon gave her a cheeky grin. “You love a good challenge.”

“Which is why I love you.”

Another round of laughter.

“And I thought I would need my notes, but I don’t.” She took a deep breath and lifted her chin, stealing his heart for the millionth time. “I’ve never wanted to be with a man that scared me, that intimidated me and had the power to melt my heart within a few minutes of nothing more than being in his presence. I wanted the control to run my life the best way I saw fit, which included putting safety as my number one goal. I chose those type of boyfriends in the past. Safe.”

Damon held his breath, his heart racing so hard it hurt. They should have gone over their vows the night before. Hearing them fresh was hard, scary. It left him feeling vulnerable not only for himself but for her too.

“But when we met, I knew I would never be the same. I’ve lived in a scarcity mindset, always afraid that my life of poverty would not only stain my past, but be part of my future, but it wasn’t about money. It was about love, freedom, happiness, joy. Those things were hit and miss before us. Never in my life have I felt such passion, never have I been so pissed.”

Damon smiled as the crowd chuckled. He reached up and touched the side of her face. There was nothing he wanted more than to pick her up and find a room to strip her down and worship her. It screamed his feelings where words were only a whisper.

“And through the last year, I’ve come alive again. My heart has begun to beat, and it’s because of you.” She pressed her face against his hand as his eyes filled with tears. “You’re strong and brilliant, capable and determined. You’re my protector, my rock, the biggest challenge in my life, and the lover of my dreams. My past matters no more. I only see my future. I only see you.”

She swallowed hard as he released his hold on her cheek and let out a breath he didn’t realize he was holding in.

“So today I take you, Damon, as my lawful husband. I want to have and hold you forever. Starting today. I want us to cling to each other whether the world is right, or rain clouds hover above us. I want us to stand strong beside each other in sickness and in health, in riches and in poverty, no matter what form it comes in. From today forward, I’m eternally yours, and you’re mine. Until death do we part.”

The crowd went wild as Bethany pushed the ring onto his finger. Damon let the tears spill onto his cheeks as he pulled his bride in for a long kiss.

“Well, let’s just go ahead and pronounce them husband and wife. You may kiss your... wait; you’re already doing it.”

More laughter filled the sanctuary, but Damon was lost to the woman in his arms. It was nothing new. He had been hers since their first encounter.

“I now present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Damon Bryant.” Damon turned and clasped Bethany’s hand as she beamed. The place filled with clapping, and Damon walked down the aisle beside his best friend, his girl, his wife.

CHAPTER 116



BETHANY

“**Y**ou okay?” Damon asked her for the tenth time as they walked into one of the Sunday school rooms.

Bethany laughed. “Yes, baby. Are you okay? You keep asking.”

He was a little wide-eyed. “I think so. You were just shaking in there. I was worried.”

“I was nervous.” She slid her arms around his waist and pulled him in tight. “Your vows were beautiful.”

“Shit...” He scoffed. “I should have known better than to give my beautiful wife a challenge. You blew me out of the water. I worked on mine for a fucking week, and you had twenty minutes and took me down fast.”

She lifted to her toes, and he moved down, pressing his lips to her as his strong hands gripped her lower back. She relaxed against him, enjoying the feeling of him holding her up.

“I feel so damn sentimental.” She moved back and wiped at her eyes. “It’s driving me crazy.”

“It’s just gratitude.” Kent walked in behind them. “When you get something in life that makes your life better, you’re overwhelmed with gratitude.” He shrugged. “It’s a beautiful place to be, but it’s emotionally exhausting. Hang in there, kiddo. You’ll feel better tomorrow.”

“I kinda like the feeling, but I keep wanting to cry. *That’s* annoying.” Bethany moved into a side hug with her father?

Father-in-law? It was too confusing to figure out, and it didn't matter. Kent was family, a father figure in some way or another.

"It's a good thing." Bethany's mom walked up and wrapped her arms around Bethany and Kent, smiling up at them.

Matt bounced through the door, his voice loud, his smile huge. "Yeah! I'm so excited for you two. Congratulations. The ceremony was beyond beautiful."

Erica joined them. "I couldn't agree more. It was simple and small in the way of the wedding party, but so many people came to help celebrate."

"Yeah. Who were all those people?" Bethany moved out of the group hug and took her place beside Damon. "Did you invite all of them?" She glanced up at her husband.

"Me? No. I know twenty people, tops." Damon chuckled. "Most likely your mom and my dad."

Bethany glanced over toward her mom and lifted an eyebrow. "Is it true?"

"Maybe." She shrugged and turned toward Kent. "Let's go get a few pictures on the stage before the kids come in there for their pictures."

"Race you there." Kent released her and jogged to the door as Bethany's mom took off after him.

"I hope I can still run like that when I'm older." Kendal walked into the room, barely missing getting run over. Dana moved up beside him and smiled, but remained silent. The poor thing still wasn't comfortable around everyone yet.

"They're not that old," Bethany pointed out. "All right... so pictures and then over to the reception hall at the hotel on the corner? We have it until midnight."

"Free liquor on Damon's tab?" Matt wagged his eyebrows.

"Yep. It's all set up for your pleasure, buddy boy." Damon released Bethany and moved over to rest his hand on Matt's

shoulder. “And then Beth and I fly out in the morning at ten for Jamaica. Can you take us to the airport?”

“Sure can.” Matt glanced over at Erica and offered her a hand. “We’re staying with Mom and Dad tonight, but I’ll come by your place in the morning?”

“Sounds good.” Damon glanced over at Beth. “Ready for pictures, baby?”

“Yeah, but why are we making plans like we’re not all going to see each other at the reception? We have the next four hours dancing and eating together. Weirdos.” She smirked.

“Have you ever been to a big reception?” Erica asked, her smile welcoming. “We won’t get another word in after the pictures. If you and Damon aren’t dancing, then you’ll be hugging necks, eating cake and kissing random babies. It gets crazy, and if I heard right, you have about six hundred people at yours.”

“Damn!” Bethany yelled with a smile on her face.

“Six hundred?” Damon released Matt and put his hands on his hips. “I don’t even think Dad knows that many people.”

“You’d be surprised. They start coming out of the woodworks for weddings.” Kendal patted Damon on the chest and walked out. “We’ll meet you guys over there after pictures. Dana and I will get you a plate just in case seeing that you’re going to be bombarded when you first get in the door. It’s hard to find time to eat from what I heard.”

“I pay for the food and don’t get any?” Damon shook his head. “This is the worst business deal ever.”

“It’s not a deal at all, and it has nothing to do with business. Get ready to mingle, Mr. Unsocial.” Erica walked toward the door, directing her teasing toward Damon. “Matt, come on, handsome. I want a few pictures with just you and me too.”

Bethany let out a soft sigh as everyone left the room but Damon. “That was beautiful. Thank you for a perfect wedding.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bryant.” He moved toward her, reaching out and running his hands down her back to squeeze the top of her rear. “I know we have to mingle and choke babies and shit-”

“Kiss babies.” Bethany laughed.

“That too, but when we get back to my place... I’m gonna need to see what’s under this big fluffy white dress.”

“You’ve seen it a million times already.” She smiled up at him and pressed herself against his strong chest.

“That doesn’t mean I don’t want to see it again.” He brushed his nose by hers. “How much would I have to offer you not to have to take too many pictures?”

“Nothing. You’re stuck.” She lifted up and kissed him. “I talked to my mom about my dad being at the graduation the other day.”

“And?” Damon’s eyebrow lifted.

“And she thinks I should forgive him. Kinda like you did with your mother.” She glanced down, not quite sure she felt the need to bring up the situation with her dad again. It was their day and had nothing to do with him.

“I think that’s a great idea. It frees you to heal.” He pressed his fingers softly under her chin. “But, that’s something only you can decide for yourself, baby. I’m here to support you, but it’s going to be up to you how you deal with your father and your past.”

“I know. Give me a minute, and I’ll be in there for pictures.” She leaned in as he moved down to kiss her a few more times.

“Anything you want. It’s yours.”

She watched him go and waited until he left to move toward the large stained-glass windows in the small Sunday school room.

“I don’t want to forgive you, but some part of me knows I already have.” She reached up and brushed her fingers by her lips. “Forgiving you doesn’t mean I have to let you back into

my life, it just means that I don't have to hurt because of you anymore."

"Baby?" Bethany's mom's voice caused her to turn. "You talking to God?"

Bethany chuckled. "No, Mom. I think he's probably busy with people that have real problems."

"Baby, the only people that don't have problems are in cemeteries." Her mother smiled. "You want me to leave you alone?"

"No. I'm good. I just needed a minute to forgive Daddy." She shrugged and walked toward her mom, not at all surprised by the expression on her mom's pretty face.

"Oh. Wow. You want his number or address?"

"Maybe his address when I get back from our honeymoon. I don't want to see him or talk to him, but maybe I can write a letter and get everything out. I'm not sure he'd want to get an ass-chewing from me, but who knows." She snuggled against her mom as they walked down the hallway toward the sound of laughter.

"I think you'd be surprised. A tense relationship, at times, is better than no relationship at all. At least with the open line of communication, there's some hope still alive."

"Hope for what?" They stopped outside the large sanctuary doors.

"Hope for reconciliation, Bethany." Her mom touched the side of her face. "You're always living in the future, sweetheart. Deal with your dad when you get back from Jamaica, but right now, stop thinking about anything but the here and now. This moment right here is precious, and you're never going to get it back. Cling to it."

Bethany nodded. "You're right. You're always right."

"Yeah, can you tell Kent that?" Bethany's mom laughed as they walked into the sanctuary.

Kent, Damon, Matt and Kendal were up front trying to look like gangsters for the next pictures. Bethany ran her

fingers down her face and snort-laughed.

“You have got to be kidding me,” she called out.

“What?” Matt responded. “We’re tough. We could be in a gang.”

“Yeah, maybe the chain-gang.” Erica laughed as she walked toward Bethany. “You need anything?”

“Nothing other than a fun night with my friends and family before I head off to a week of sun, fun and fruity drinks.”

“Make us some grandbabies while you’re there.” Bethany’s mom wagged her eyebrows and walked toward the stage.

“Ugh. Really? Gross.” Beth rolled her eyes as Erica slipped her arm into Beth’s.

“That was gross, but you should have responded with, ‘We’ll try!’”

Beth nodded. “The practicing part is Damon’s favorite. Mine too if I’m being honest.”

“It’s all of our favorites.” She shook her head. “What are we going to do with these crazy Bryant men?”

Beth sighed softly, letting her eyes roam all over Damon. “The only thing we can do. Love them.”

CHAPTER 117



BETHANY

“Well? That was a hit.” Bethany reclined in the back of the limo beside Damon as they pulled away from the reception. There had been far too many people to keep track of anyone. After hugging the hundredth person, the faces and conversations started to blend together.

“It was incredible. I’m fucking beat though.” He reached over and touched the side of her face. “How about a quick shower and bed?”

“How about a long shower and bed?” She moved closer, pressing her shoulder to his as they slumped against the soft leather behind them.

“I like the sound of that too.” His fingertips skimmed down her cheek. “Our flight leaves at ten in the morning, so we need to get up at six or so-”

He paused as Bethany sat up and moved into his lap, her huge wedding dress billowing down the sides of his legs.

“Stop talking about all the to-dos on our list tomorrow. Tonight is our first night as a married couple.” She ran her hands down his firm chest and purred. “I don’t want to focus on anything but each other.”

His eyes darkened as he ran his hands up her skirt, dipping under it to brush the back of his fingers by her center. “You’re not tired?”

“I’m beyond tired, but I’m not going to sleep without feeling you on top of me, buried deep inside of me, moaning

all around me.”

“Fuck, woman.” He slipped his fingers into her panties and licked his lips. “I’m not sure we can do too much without you making a mess of this pretty dress that my daughter’s going to wear one day.”

She whimpered as he pushed her panties to the side, adding his other hand under her skirt.

“I love how you touch me,” she whispered and leaned back, reaching behind her to grasp his knees for stability.

“Good. I’m going to be touching you for the rest of your life.” He pressed his palm to her clit and slipped two fingers inside of her from his free hand. “Ride me, Beth.”

She closed her eyes and let her head fall back, not caring about anything other than being close to him. There was nothing she wouldn’t do for him.

“I want you so bad.” She moaned and rolled her hips, forcing more of him inside of her.

“You need my cock, lover? Just say the words.”

“Yes.” She sat up further and reached for him.

“Not enough. Say what you want, and it’s yours.” He pulled one hand from her body and reached up, pulling her flush against him as he continued to pump his fingers in and out of her. “You’re so wet. Tell me what you need from me. No need to beg, baby, just demand it.”

“You’re the demanding one.” She reached between them and undid his slacks. “I want my cock.”

He chuckled. “Your cock?”

“You heard me right.” She smiled and moved back, moaning loudly as he moved his other hand from underneath her skirt.

“I guess I did.” He kept his eyes on her, but reached down and helped her pull his arousal from his pants. “Come get it.”

She growled as exhaustion beat against her. It could take a back seat. There was something so thrilling about making love

to Damon in a car, or a plane, or anywhere for that matter.

Moving up, she straddled his waist and pressed back on his shaft, letting the girth of it open her up fully. They groaned together as pleasure shot across Bethany's center.

Damon pulled her down and made love to her mouth as he took control of their sex, his hands gripping her ass under the dress, setting the rhythm so slow and deep. She shook with need by the time he released his hold on her and smiled.

“Do what you wanna do, baby. I can see it in your eyes, feel the tension in your body. Come for me and then I'll take back over.” He looked up from beneath her, the man a god in his own right.

“Yes,” she mumbled and reached up, gripping the top of the seat behind him as she pumped her hips, bouncing on his cock. Between the pressure and the delicious encouragements he continued to give, she didn't last more than a few minutes.

Her cries filled up the back of the cab, and she glanced over her shoulder, finding relief that the darkened window was raised between them and the driver.

“Focus on me. Come again.” Damon gripped the side of her neck and forced her to turn back toward him.

“No. It's your turn.” She cupped her hand over his and lifted up slowly, just the way he liked it.

“There are no turns, Beth. I want to feel you come again, to experience how good it is when your body contracts around mine. There's nothing better. Nothing.” He lifted his hips, pumping into her body as she hovered above him, preparing for the next wave of heat and it didn't disappoint. It blasted through her, and she cried out again, so close to the edge.

“I want you in the bed, in the shower.” She pressed her fingers into his chest.

“And you're going to have me in all those places. Moan for me. I love the sound of you getting off.” He reached up and squeezed her breast, brushing his thumb over her nipple. “I'll come with you, just be loud. Let yourself go. No one is

watching but me. I wanna see it. Feel it. Hear it. Come for me.”

She glanced down at him and cried out as her orgasm hit. If the show was only for him, it needed to be from deep inside of her.

Lifting up, she locked eyes with him and let herself go, rolling her hips and working them both over the edge of orgasm. She rolled and bounced, moaning and whimpering as he panted and held on tightly to her.

“That’s it, beauty. Give me your all.”

She moaned and pressed back as the high faded. “I’m so tired.” She slumped down against him, resting in the cradle of his arms. “I love you so much.”

“Me too, baby. That was amazing. You were amazing.” He held her for a few more minutes until the car stopped. “Roll over and let me put myself together. We’ll get you out of that dress and into the shower in a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered before rolling back to her seat. She couldn’t remember being so weary before, but they’d been through a lot over the last few days, and even more so *that* day. It had been picture perfect though. Nothing was out of place or got messed up or fell apart.

Funny enough, if it had, she wasn’t too sure it would have mattered. As long as she ended the night as Mrs. Damon Bryant, all would be well.

Damon put himself back together and helped her out of the car, thanking the driver and walking with her to the house. He unlocked the door and paused to put the key in his pocket.

“What are you doing?” She smiled as he reached for her and picked her up. Excitement filled her, forcing the tiredness to fade away.

“Carrying you across the threshold.” He smiled and kissed her before walking toward the door.

“I thought you didn’t like tradition.” She reached up and touched his face, her heart swelling in her chest.

“Some things are worth respecting.” He walked with her into the house and put her down, wrapping his arms around her. “Like a woman who’s committed to an asshole like me. Who knew you had the power to change me.”

“Are you changed? I don’t think so.” She laughed and ran her hands down his back.

“You don’t?”

“Nope, and I would hope that you never change. I love you just like you are.”

“Why does that turn me on?” He gave her a cocky smile.

“Because everything turns you on?”

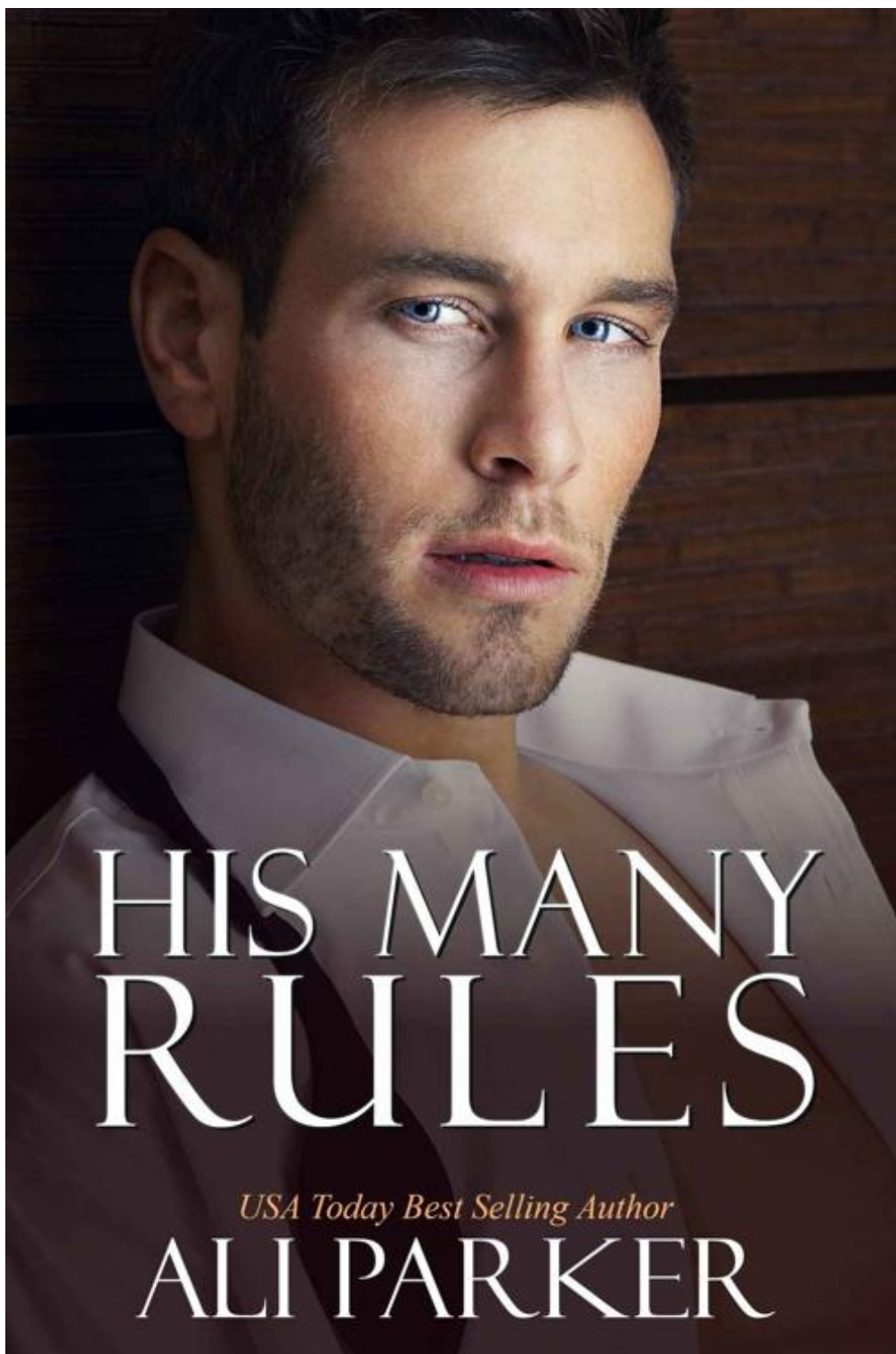
“Right. You can get a head start.” He nodded toward the bed. “But take it now.”

“What?” She turned and jogged toward the bedroom, squealing as he barreled after her.

Nothing had changed, and yet everything had.

Beth knew without a doubt that nothing would ever be the same.

She was a Bryant now. In the right way. As Damon’s wife.

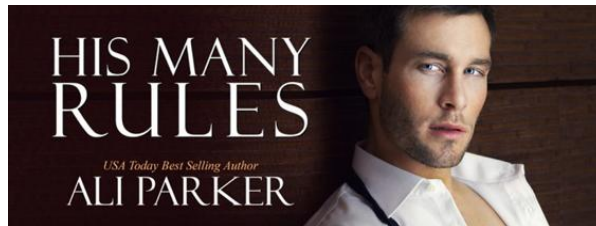


HIS MANY RULES

USA Today Best Selling Author

ALI PARKER

DESCRIPTION



Never Again...

Love almost stole everything from me. My career being the worst possible loss.

I never should have bent the rules and dated a student.

And now finally, after years of being alone, a pretty nurse has my attention.

Caring, curvy, and so damn smart.

She has me pacing the floor at night and wishing for things I thought were long since gone.

Every part of me aches for a chance at stealing her breath, her heart, her body—forever.

But the joke's on me.

She's not just a nurse. She's a student at the college where I work, and the past seems to replay itself over again before my eyes.

Only this time, it's so much worse than before.

I put restrictions on myself to make sure I don't have to suffer ever again.

Too bad she wasn't aware of my rules.

Or maybe she was...

CHAPTER 1



KENDAL

I 'd never seen Damon look so dejected, so fidgety, so lost.

“What can we do to fix this?” I leaned back in my chair and let my hands drop into my lap. We had ordered lunch, but it had yet to be served. Where I'd usually love to hang out with my best friend for an hour, today wasn't one of those days. I was sliding into a dark place in my own life, and watching Damon head-dive into depression wasn't helping much.

“Nothing.” He glanced up from staring at his hands and shrugged. “I fucked up.”

“Everyone messes up, Damon.” I reached for my water, enjoying the coolness of the glass in my hand. Life was a torrential accumulation of painful fuck-ups, but I thought it was only my life that told that story. It would seem that I was wrong.

“Right.” He chuckled and let out a sigh as his eyes moved around the quaint restaurant in front of us. “All these women and any one of them would be mine with very little effort.”

“But you don't want any of these women.” I took a quick sip of my water as I tried to think through the various ways we could get Bethany, Damon's ex-finance to forgive him, to see him in the light I saw him in. He might have been a shallow asshole from time to time, but deep down inside of his puffed up chest was a good man with a lot of hurt.

“No, I don't. I want my woman back.” His shoulders stiffened as the waiter appeared beside us and set down our

lunch.

I reached across and traded the burger in front of him for the grilled salmon in front of me. I ran every day so I could eat like shit... it was one of the only real pleasures in life that seemed to be constant.

“It’s going to work out. You have to give her some time to think things through.”

“Is it?” He picked up his fork and pushed the fish around his plate. “And what if it doesn’t? Am I willing to change? To soften? Can I even if I wanted to?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged and picked up my burger, pausing only briefly. “If Ana needed me to change all those years ago, I would have.”

“Bull shit.” He lifted his eyebrow, challenging me. As much as I hated to be the center of his attention when he was in a foul mood, it was better to see him aggressive and moody than dull and non-responsive.

“No?” I spoke around a mouthful of burger.

“You didn’t quit your job. That would have solved the problem, Kendal. The university couldn’t have stepped in between the two of you because she wouldn’t have been your student anymore.”

“No, you’re right. I love my job, but don’t let her off the hook that easily, please.” I forced a tight smile, hating that the bastard was forcing me to go back to the most painful time of my life.

Misery loves company, even if it has to push its friends to the party.

Damon chuckled as his eyes darkened a little. “Do you miss her?”

“Nope. I used to, but I’m over it.” I lifted my napkin and wiped my mouth.

“Then why aren’t you dating, old friend?”

“I haven’t found the right woman. Unlike our college days, I’m not looking for a hot woman to bend over a bench somewhere. I want a relationship that matters.”

“Pussy.” Damon snorted.

“That would be delicious as well.” I took another bite of my burger and gave him a toothy grin. He could work to bait my emotions all he wanted to. I was used to him, and cared too much about him to let him push off his own hurt onto me. He wouldn’t learn anything from doing so.

“She’s going to be insanely pissed at you.” He took a bite of his fish, but kept his brown eyes focused on me.

“And she should be.” I shrugged and reached for the ketchup. “I set her up to have you run into us. It’s no better than lying. The things I do for you, I swear.”

The tight line of his mouth softened a little. “I’m sorry about that. I know she’s your TA. I shouldn’t have-”

“You didn’t.” I shook my head and reached for my water. “Stop being an emotional roller coaster and pull yourself together. You fucked up. Big damn deal. Get the girl back, or sell the ring and find another woman to worship you.”

“Worship?” He snorted and sat back in his chair. “Is that a joke?”

“Nope. Look around. Half the women in this place are either staring at you, or pretending not to. It’s disturbing.” I laughed as a smirk lifted his lips. He needed to go after Bethany and soon. She was the kind of girl most men would trip over themselves to get to. Beautiful, young, incredibly brilliant and strong-willed. He’d almost felt something the first day she walked into his classroom not a month before.

The memory of their first encounter caused a laugh to bubble up inside of him. He stifled it and forced himself to keep his mind locked in the present instead of dipping into the past. Memory lane would quickly lead back to where it always did - to Ana. To her soft white sheets and caramel-colored skin. To the sound of her moaning his name as her back arched, her breasts jutted out.

“Hey. You here?” Damon thumped my arm as I came to.

“Yeah. I was just thinking about the first day Bethany came in.”

“What about it?” Damon pushed his plate away, his food barely touched.

I chuckled. “She was considerate and nice, and I took it as a come-on.”

His brow pulled tight. “She came on to you?”

“No, you idiot. Listen to what I’m saying and stop reading into it a million meanings. She was nice and I took it as a come-on because I’m hyper sensitive to women as I should be. I can’t tell you the number of innocent looking college girls that basically throw their panties at me. It’s disturbing.”

Damon’s turn to laugh. “Wait, are you saying that all these women are attracted to you, and you, being the upright citizen that you are, turn them down?”

“Of course I do, asshole.” I picked up my burger. He was getting to me... though I promised myself he wouldn’t. “It’s not like I have a choice. I don’t own my company, and my fingers aren’t stuck up my dad’s ass, timing his pulse for the right moment to seize the opportunity.”

“Oh shit. I hit a nerve.” Damon laughed and glanced around the room. “You assume these women are stealing glances at me, Kendal. What if they’re not? What if it’s you they’re looking at?”

“It’s irrelevant.” I worked on my burger while he glanced around as if interested in truly assessing which of the two of us were being studied. Funny enough, he most likely hoped it was me, and I hoped it was him. Unwanted attention was a burden both of us were sick of sharing.

“Tell me about the first day my girl came into your classroom. How was she being *nice*?” He lifted his eyebrow and picked up the glass of red wine in front of him.

“We made small talk, and then she asked how old I was. The way she asked it left me concerned that she was busy

calculating the math in her head between our ages.” I shrugged as Damon snorted. “I gave her the speech.”

“Oh man, I haven’t heard that in years. Give it to me.”

“You’re a bastard, you know that?”

“I do, and now make me feel better and give me the speech.”

“Having to recite my ‘hands off speech’ is much better than what we used to do in college every time one of us felt like shit.” I shook my head as the images of sharing woman after woman came up. “At least I won’t have to take a shower after this.”

“You might.” He smiled and glanced around again. “You enjoyed all those orgies. Stop acting so fucking proper. It’s me you’re talking to.”

“Maybe, but those days are long gone.” I brushed my fingers by my lips as my eyes locked with a pretty blond. She waved, and I smiled to be polite. *Far too thin.*

“Stop eye-fucking that chick behind me and give me the speech. Pretend I’m a horny college girl that is all over the idea of getting you in bed.”

I rolled my eyes. “I swear I hate you.”

“No you don’t. Get to it.” He glanced at his watch before giving me a smile. At least he was coming back to life a little.

“Fine, but don’t give me shit over it.”

He lifted his hands in the air. “Never.”

“Right. Anyways, I’m not a model, nor do I care to be. I’m a guy that loves math, football and I’m an extreme stickler for the rules. I don’t date students or TAs, so keep things staunchly professional between us, or I’ll dismiss you.”

“How about other professors?” He used the best female voice he could muster, which was fucking horrid to say the least.

I laughed and pushed my half-eaten burger away. “No one at the college. I’m going to have to join a dating site soon. I

haven't taken a woman to my bed in two years."

"Two years? Shit, man. Does your dick even work anymore?"

"I can pee out of it. Does that count?" I reached for the bill when the waiter appeared with it. Damon might have been insanely wealthy, but paying for lunch had little to do with the size of our bank accounts. He was hurting over Bethany, and where I'd have given anything to help, my hands were tied. Lunch would have to do instead.

"I'd love to tell you where to find a great woman, but I've been searching since Christa myself." He picked up his wine glass and tossed back the rest of the contents before standing. "It's not like you want to hang out in a club or a bar at thirty-one."

"Nope. I'd be the old creepy guy in the back. I have very little interest in that." I stood up and wiped my mouth as my phone buzzed in my pocket. I needed to get back to the university to wrap up a few things before heading out to the gym and yet another lonely night at home.

"Hey, man," Damon's expression softened, "I really do appreciate you trying to help me with Beth. Just redirect her if she starts talking about what a piece of shit I am around you."

"I doubt that's going to happen, but you know I have your back. I'll do anything I can to help out, brother."

"Good. You're my only friend." He reached out and gripped my shoulder, staring as if he had something else to say, but wasn't sure he could get it out.

"Stop being a pussy and walk to the door. All these women are going to think we're gay."

"That might be our way out of being the center of attention." He lifted his eyebrow and released his hold on me.

"Fuck no. Your tits aren't big enough for me." I walked past him as he chuckled again.

The number on my phone was one I'd seen too many times in the last year. Memorial Hospital.

“Thanks for lunch, old friend.” Damon extended his hand and smiled.

“Anytime.” I shook his hand and turned to walk out to the parking lot as he moved toward the valet. We’d been given the same opportunities and yet had very different lives. Where he was a billionaire, I was living a little better than paycheck to paycheck, but happiness meant far more than money ever would.

“This is Kendal.” I pressed the phone to my ear.

“Dr. Tarrington. This is Tinsley at Memorial Hospital. Amanda had another episode this morning. We need you to-”

“I’m on my way right now.” I tucked the phone into my pocket and ran toward my car. My little sister was all the family I had left in the world and with her MS getting more and more aggressive, it seemed like I’d soon lose her too. Fear wrapped around my heart as I fumbled with my keys and dropped them on the hot pavement. “Shit.”

She needed me and yet I couldn’t provide the kind of care that would allow her to stay with me out at the house. She needed help twenty-four seven as her body began to give out. There wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it either.

Hard emotions raged through me as I got in the car and started it before slamming my foot to the gas pedal.

“Why couldn’t it have been me? Why didn’t I get it instead?” I murmured the words I’d been mulling over for twenty-something years since Amanda got diagnosed with the degenerative disease. Where I couldn’t seem to get life going, my sister would never get the chance to even try. Tears blurred my vision, and I shoved the thought away as I always did. The situation was what it was. All I could do was offer her comfort, my time... my heart.

CHAPTER 2



DANA

The loud crying that filled the hallway broke my heart. I quickly finished tying my scrubs and tugged my shirt over the top of my pants before jogging that way. Amanda Tarrington was one of my favorites on the floor, and I'd only been at the hospital for a few weeks. My internship with Memorial was turning out to be an overwhelming and eye-opening experience, if nothing else.

"It's okay. I'm right here, Mandy." The deep rumble of a male voice rolled over me as I stopped just inside the hospital room. Two nurses were standing on the far side of the bed, one giving the thrashing girl a shot while she wept loudly.

The handsome man leaning over the top of her had to be her brother. I'd yet to meet him, but the girls on the floor spend half the damn nights talking about how handsome and good-hearted he was. From what I could see from behind, handsome wouldn't exactly cover it.

I moved back out into the hall and took a shallow breath before turning and heading for the nurses' station. I wouldn't be welcomed into the room with Amanda, though I knew I could settle her down without the use of sedation. I'd spent a lot of my time in her room, singing to her, talking to her... just being there. It fulfilled her need to have company and mine to take care of someone who was so beyond undeserving of the shitty card life had handed her.

"Dana. Come over here and tell me what this dosage is. I can't read this doctor's chicken scratch handwriting to save my life." Jackie handed me the clipboard as I paused in front

of her. She was the other intern from UT Dallas, and we got along great, but fuck was I intimidated by her. Long blond hair, ruby red lips and the figure of Marilyn Monroe. I, on the other hand, was short, curvy and a little overweight.

“It’s twenty milligrams.” I handed her the clipboard back and turned to watch one of the nurses walk out of Amanda’s room. “What happened with Mandy?”

“She’s not getting any movement in her arms today.” Jackie shook her head as her expression fell. “I swear MS has to be one of the worst fucking diseases on the planet.”

“Agreed.” I let out a soft sigh and picked up the clipboard with my rounds on it. The hardest part about working in the hospital was going to be my empathetic nature. I wanted to cure and heal everyone, which led me to believe that maybe my life would take a drastic turn after graduating from UT the next spring. Maybe that wouldn’t be the end of my education, but instead the beginning. Maybe med school was next.

I glanced up as Tinsley walked up to the nurses’ station, shaking her head.

“I swear I hate to see that girl in pain, but having her sexy-ass brother come running each time is almost worth it.” She snorted. “He is honestly the hottest guy I’ve seen in years. I’m going to give him my number.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Amanda being in pain was *worth* it because her brother came running every time something happened? How fucked up was that? “I don’t think that’s very professional.”

“Right, and no one asked you, did they?” She gave me a cocky grin and tapped the tip of my nose with her finger. “Keep your lips closed and get your ass in gear. People are close to death around here and need their meds. That’s all you, intern.”

I forced the anger burning inside my chest to dissipate enough that I could breathe past it. She wasn’t the only bitch in the group of nurses I was being forced to work with, but the head bitch for sure. I gathered the supplies I needed and

started down the sterile hall in front of me. An odd peace settled on my shoulders as I started to stop by each room, greeting the patients and offering a little bit of hope where I could.

I saved my favorite for the last. Mr. Jackson. The grumpiest old man on the whole damn floor.

“Morning, Mr. Jackson.” I checked the chart and picked up the small cup of pills before walking toward him.

“Morning yourself, fruit fly,” he grumbled and covered his mouth with his hands, shaking his head.

“Come on, now. You know this will make you feel better. It always does.” I reached out and brushed my fingers along his hand.

“Stop hitting on me. It’s sexual harassment.”

“But you’re cute.” I lifted my eyebrow and tried hard not to smile.

“This is true.” He dropped his hands and took the cup from me. “You know these damn pills make me have to piss like a fire hydrant, right?”

“Fire hydrants don’t piss.” I tilted my head to the side as a smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth. He was close to ninety and still giving everyone hell every chance he got.

“You kids nowadays have no damn imagination.” He huffed and popped the pills into his mouth, chewing them and swallowing. He grunted and leaned back. “Those taste like shit.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. He said the same thing every day, did the same thing, and yet I wasn’t able to keep my composure.

“Why don’t you just swallow them with water like everyone else?” I took the cup from him and poured him a cup of water, which he refused.

“I need to know what’s in them. If I don’t chew them, I don’t know.” He shrugged and tugged his covers up toward his throat. “Now, get out. I’m in the middle of my favorite show.”

I glanced back at the TV to find it off. “I love this one too.”

“Silly girl. There’s nothing on.” He rolled his eyes and waved me off.

“Old people nowadays... no imagination.” I turned and walked out to the sound of him cackling.

“I like you, kid. Stick around?” His voice followed me into the hall.

“I plan to,” I mumbled under my breath before dropping off my tray and walking out to the smoke break area. Where I didn’t smoke, I still took a few ten minute breaks to get some fresh air and clear my head. I moved out onto the patio at the back of the hospital and pulled out my phone. Olivia would be at lunch, which meant I had a few minutes to catch up with my best friend.

“Hey!” The sound of her voice caused me to release a breath I didn’t realize I was holding.

“Hey. How are you?” I found a bench on the side of the hospital under several large shade trees. September in Dallas meant it was still hot as hell. Summer had very little respect for fall or even winter some years.

“I’m good. I was just thinking about your offer to come visit.” I let my eyes move across the bright green and blues that accented each other beautifully in front of me.

“New York in the summer isn’t much better than Texas, I’m afraid.” She chuckled. “But... I would love to have you anytime you want to come.”

“I’m thinking around Christmas unless you’re coming back here to see your mom.”

“I’m not sure what I’m going to do just yet. There is still a little bit of hope around Luke giving me a ring sometime soon.” She huffed loudly.

“You don’t even like him.”

“Yes I do.”

“Liar. You haven’t sounded happy since high school and you know it.” I smiled at the memories we had from high school. Growing up sucked seeing that it took away your excuse for being a relationship-idiot. I was still floundering around on the topic of making a relationship work. It would seem I was handicapped in that area, as I’d always been.

“Don’t start this again. Luke and I are going to get married eventually. It just works.”

“It? What’s it?”

“Him and me together.” She cleared her throat. “Enough about me... how are things at the hospital? You started your internship, right?”

“Yeah.” I glanced back as the door opened and three nurses I didn’t know walked out. “It’s good. I love the work and the patients. The nurses are bitches, but I guess that happens to some people after years of working around misery. There has to be some way to protect yourself from feeling too much.”

“I can see how you might get emotionally wasted by it day after day.”

“I love it here.” I stood up and lifted my free hand to the sky, stretching.

“And what about Cameron? How’s that going?”

“Ugh,” I groaned and let my hand drop. “We’re still together, but it’s more like roommates who are borderline tired of each other. If he mentions me going to the gym one more time, I’m likely to drop-kick him in the balls.”

“Ouch. He’s still doing that shit?”

“Yes, and the other day, he packed me a bag of carrots and grapes for lunch.” I shook my head and walked back toward the hospital.

“Just carrots and grapes?” She laughed.

“Yes. Obviously I need to shave. I look like a fucking bunny rabbit to him.” I rolled my eyes and tried to ignore the glares I got from the three women puffing away to my left. Why everyone had to dump on the interns was beyond me. It

would have made more sense that they support and help those of us just starting our careers, but that wasn't at all the experience I'd been given.

"You need to drop him, Dana."

"Maybe, but being lonely is worse than being chastised all the time, or at least today it still is." I figured when I got fed up with Cameron's not so subtle hints about me losing weight that I would either lose the weight or tell him to fuck off. One or the other was soon to happen with the way things were going lately.

"Come here to New York when you graduate in May. We can get an apartment together and—"

"You're getting married, silly." I pushed the door open and walked into the coolness of the hospital. "I gotta go. I'll call you later. Go make some money in that big investment firm you're sure to be running soon."

"All right. Call me later though. It's all going to work out."

"I agree. I just wish I could see around the edges of what's to come so I could prepare a little better."

"Where is the fun in that?"

"Very true. Love you." I dropped the call, slipped my phone back into my pocket and turned the corner to hear Amanda cry out again. The sound of her wailing filled the hall. "What the hell?"

I jogged toward the open door, wondering why the sedatives didn't calm her down, but then again it was my assumption that she'd been given a sedative and not something else. I walked in to find Jackie standing on the other side of the bed, her face pale, eyes wide.

Amanda's brother was bent over the bed, rubbing her long brown hair back and trying to soothe her with his promise that everything would be okay, but it wouldn't... it couldn't...

"Move," I mumbled to Jackie and took her spot on the other side of the thrashing girl. She was a year younger than me, but she looked ten years older. "Amanda. Look at me."

I reached out and gripped her chin, turning her and forcing her to look at me.

“Hey. Be careful with her.” Her brother’s voice was sharp, condescending.

I ignored him and smiled down at her. “Remember what we talked about yesterday? Old Mr. Jackson?”

She panted as her eyes moved about wildly, but she stopped thrashing for a minute.

Releasing the tight hold I had on her, I leaned down and pressed my elbows to the bed beside her, leaning my chin on my balled up fists. “You should have seen him this morning. He chewed up those damn pills again.”

Her brother took a few steps back and let out a shaky breath. I wanted to glance up and get a good look at him, but she needed me to remain locked on her for a little while longer.

“No w-w-water?” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as tears spilled down into her hair. “I’m scared.”

“I know, sweetheart.” I leaned forward and pressed my forehead to the side of her head like I would do my older sister when life had dealt her a shitty blow. “I’m right here, though. Your brother is here, the nurses are here, hell, old man Jackson is still here. We’re not going anywhere.”

A soft sob left her, and I glanced up and locked eyes with her brother, motioning for him to come closer.

He moved in and bent over, wrapping her in a tight hug and tucking her face into the side of his neck as she cried softly. The moment wasn’t mine to have, so I moved back and wiped my eyes before moving out of the room. I wasn’t sure I’d seen a more stunning man in my life.

Messy brown hair, strong shoulders, sensual lips and deep green eyes. My heart fluttered in my chest as I pressed my back to the closed door.

Of course he was gorgeous... As if I needed another thing to fantasize about. As if I had a choice now.

CHAPTER 3



KENDAL

The dark-haired beauty that calmed Mandy walked out of the room, and I was grateful for the quiet. My baby sister slipped into a restful sleep as I brushed my hand down the back of her hair and rocked her as best I could. Every part of me hurt for her, longed for a way to transfer my good health to her and let me take on her disease for her. It wasn't going to happen, but it didn't stop me from wanting it.

I laid her down and moved back from the bed as my heart ached in my chest. She was the perfect replica of our mother at twenty-four. Long brown hair and green eyes, pale skin and a huge smile that pulled everyone in to see what she had to say. Too bad I hadn't seen it for the last two to three years.

I glanced over my shoulder, wanting to chase down the nurse that had the power to calm my sister. I needed to thank her, and truth be told, I wanted to study her unabashed. Her long dark hair was a beautiful accent to her tanned skin and hazel eyes. She had to have been a head shorter than me, but not petite. Her curves were feminine and thick. I took a shaky breath as my body reacted in ways that were less than appropriate in the middle of a hospital room where my sister was suffering. Shame crashed into me, and I turned and walked out into the hallway, just needing a minute to gather my thoughts.

“Kendal?”

I turned at the sound of my sister's best friend's voice. “Terri, it's good to see you.”

Lies. Terri was the last person on the face of the planet that I wanted to run into. She'd been Amanda's best friend since they were in grade school, and where I was more than grateful for her loving my sister, she wanted to love me too, and not in ways that I could return the favor. Having slept with her a few times over the last five years, she was hopeful that something would start between us, but that was impossible seeing that I planned to avoid her for the rest of my days.

"It's good to see you too." She extended her arms and I couldn't deny her a quick hug. "You look incredible."

"You do too." I tried to ignore the neediness in her eyes.

"Thanks. I've been working out." She moved back and turned around slowly.

I gave her a tight smile and ran my fingers through my hair. "Mandy's having a hard day today. I left her in there sleeping, but she's losing feeling in her arms."

"Oh no. That's horrible." She pressed her hand to the center of my chest. "I'm going to go in and spend some time with her unless you wanted a little more time to yourselves?"

"No, I'm going to go up to the college for a while. I'll tell the nurses if they need me to just call." I glanced around, hoping to find the pretty girl that had the power to calm my sister with only a few words.

"I'm sure they know that." She chuckled as I turned back to her. The subtle shift in her expression let me know she was moving from a friendly encounter to asking me out... again. "I was thinking maybe we could have a drink sometime. You know... talk about what the plans are for Mandy after she gets back out of here?"

There. The pretty brunette who had my stomach tightening walked toward me with a smile on her face. She was nothing less than stunning, and yet the way she carried herself told me quickly that she didn't think much of herself.

"I'd love to, but I can't." I licked my lips as a thought filled my mind.

“Why not? It’s been two years, Kendal. We were so good together. Don’t you-”

“Hey, Terri, this is Dana.” I reached for the nurse’s hand, grateful that her name tag was evident. “We’ve been dating for about six months. She’s been taking great care of Mandy. Have you gotten the chance to meet her?”

If the nurse was surprised, she hid it well. I wrapped my arm around her narrow shoulders and smiled down at her. Fuck she was hot.

“Um... no.” Terri extended her hand. “I’m Mandy’s best friend. Are you new here?”

“Somewhat.” She shook Terri’s hand and slid her arm around the back of my waist as she glanced back up at me. “Did you get her to go to sleep?”

“Yeah. She fell asleep while I was holding her. How did you-”

“Well, I’m going to leave you two to it... whatever *it* is.” Terri turned and walked into Mandy’s hospital room.

I released the pretty girl and tried hard not to breathe in deeply. It would have been more than obvious that I was the creep of the century for trying to smell more of her perfume.

“How did you get her to calm down?” I turned to face her and let my eyes run down the front of her beautiful body as she glanced down the hall as if expecting someone to catch us in something inappropriate.

“What was that all about first?” She turned back to me and smiled.

My cock twitched in my slacks, and for the first time in a really long time, my pulse spiked. Ana. She reminded me of Ana more than I cared to admit. With the flood of hormones came the pain of loss.

“I just needed to get her off my back. She’s Mandy’s best friend and hits on me every time I see her. She’s too young for me, and honestly... I’m not interested.”

“But you slept with her?” The girl lifted her eyebrow.

I laughed. “Why would you think that?”

“It’s obvious.” She crossed her arms over her chest, accentuating just how full her breasts were. Need pulsed through me as my mouth grew dry. How nice it would be to make love to a woman and feel her body bend to my will, to touch her and taste her in ways that left her begging for more. There wasn’t much I wasn’t willing to do for the girl I took to my bed, but it had been too long, and I was almost too needy. Damon would have had a field day giving me shit over my sensitive nature should he have known about it.

“How so?” I slipped my hands into my pockets and tried to turn my attention to anything but her. I failed in my efforts and decided flirting wouldn’t be a bad thing necessarily.

“I could just tell.” She shrugged. “Your sister is a great girl. I’m sorry for all she’s going through.”

My bravado waned a little. “Yeah. It’s been a long life for her.”

“You as well.” She tilted her head to the side a little. “Are you always having to fend off women?”

I chuckled. “More often than I care to discuss with a beautiful stranger.”

Her cheeks colored pink as she glanced toward the nurses’ station. “I’m not a stranger. We’ve been dating for six months, right? Did I get that part right?”

The desire to reach out and touch her face drove through my center. “Six months, two weeks, three days and two hours.”

“Wow. You’re a romantic, aren’t you? Do you bring flowers?”

“Only if I want sex.” I lifted my eyebrow and chuckled as she gave me a look.

“You’re as corrupt as the next guy.”

“Maybe, but I like to think not.”

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Mr. Tarrington.” She extended her hand and studied me in a way that made me want to open up and share with her whatever she was after to find.

“Kendal. Nice to meet you, Dana.” I gripped her hand softly and breathed in subtly. “How long have you been a nurse here at Memorial?”

“Now you’re just stalling.” She laughed and pulled her hand from mine. “Have a nice day.”

“No flirting? No date? No hitting on me?” I couldn’t help but tease her.

“Heavens no.” She turned and walked down the hall, not looking back at me as I’d hoped she would. The thick swell of her ass filled up her scrubs in a way that had my body reacting violently. I needed to get laid. Here I was hitting on the youngest girl in the hospital like the idiot I was. For some reason I had a bend toward finding women that were all wrong for me in the worst of ways.

“Why not?” I hated myself for asking.

“Because you expect me to, Kendal.” She turned the corner as I let out a long sigh and pulled my keys from my pocket. I had no clue who she was other than her name, but for the first time in a long time, I wanted to.

I walked to my car languidly as thoughts of Ana filled my mind. It was going to be beyond unfair to every woman I took to my bed, because they all became Ana. Where I wasn’t in love anymore, the memory of what might have been filled every part of my mind. I wanted a partner in life that I could adore, dote on, spend endless amounts of time with and still want more. One time would never be enough, one more kiss would fall short, one more dance would leave me yearning. Ana had promised to be all of that and more.

“Why? Why me?” I walked out into the sunny afternoon and paused to breathe in deeply.

“Kendal. You leaving so soon?” Tinsley turned from where she was perched on the side of the building smoking. The

woman was pretty in her own right, but had a cattiness about her that drove me mad.

“Yeah. Amanda is sleeping and seems to be okay for now. I’d really love to get a call when you guys get the test results back from what’s happening with her.” I ignored the way the woman let her eyes roam freely over me.

“Of course. I always call you when something comes up.” She bit her lip and glanced around. “How’s work going?”

Small talk. Great.

“It’s good. Speaking of...” I smiled and spun my keys on my finger. “I gotta get up there. Thanks for keeping an eye on my sister.”

“For you? Absolutely.”

I moved past her and bit my tongue to keep from commenting on the fact that watching out for Amanda had very little to do with me and more to do with a code of ethics she should have as a nurse. I didn’t have the right to talk about ethics though, seeing that I’d thrown mine to the wind six years before and bedded one of my students. I hadn’t had the desire to do the same to anyone since, but Dana might have changed that.

The sadness over Mandy was overshadowed for a minute by the idea of asking Dana out for a drink or maybe even dinner. I couldn’t date anyone in my classes, and wouldn’t dream of asking out another professor, but a pretty nurse at the hospital? Absolutely.

What were the odds that I might find the right girl for me standing over Mandy’s hospital bed? She had to be kind and caring if she were willing to give up her life to serve others in the capacity that the medical field deserved.

“Stop it,” I grumbled and got in the car before letting out a long breath. I was a hopeless romantic in search for the type of relationship that probably didn’t exist. After all the shit I’d done in my past regarding women, I didn’t deserve a good one. I deserved a Terri or Tinsley. The type of woman that would slut herself out for me for a few weeks and move on to

the next man. The promise of sex was the initial hook, but when they soon discovered that I wasn't anything like my alpha best friend, they'd most likely go running for the hills. Love stories were a dime a dozen.

Too bad mine only felt worthy of pennies.

CHAPTER 4



DANA

“Happy hour!” Jackie bounced on her feet beside me as I tried to finish logging in my rounds for the afternoon.

“It’s Monday. Where is there a happy hour around here?”

“No clue, but we’re going to find it, and if not, we’ll flirt with the right group of guys to get a free beer or two out of the deal.” She pushed her blond hair off her shoulder and gave me a warm smile.

“Maybe you can flirt your way into free liquor, but I’ve yet to learn that skill.” I smirked before glancing down and trying to wrap up. It’d been a long day, and the encounter with Kendal had me second-guessing my relationship with Cameron. It was sad that meeting someone new would leave me recycling the same tired conversation in my head, but there it was again...

I deserved someone better. Someone that would see me for who I am and not pick at the extra fifteen pounds I’d gained. Someone who could appreciate me as a nurse and not see me as a student who needed to be coached through life.

“You want me to invite the other interns to go with us?” She lifted her eyebrow and leaned closer.

“Why? Is there a cute boy in the bunch?” I submitted the report and stood up.

“No, but there’s a hot surgeon that’s visiting for two weeks from New York’s St. Mark’s hospital. He’s fucking blistering hot.” She fanned herself and gave me a knowing look.

“Oh Lord.” I walked to the locker room and glanced over my shoulder. “You slept with him, didn’t you?”

“Hell yes, I did. He’s busy taking some other doctors out for dinner tonight, but I’m hoping he’ll call after he’s done.”

“You’re corrupt.” I pushed the door to the locker room open and walked to my locker, avoiding the older nurses around me.

“You’re just jealous.” Jackie moved up and pressed her shoulder against the locker beside mine.

“I really am. I have nothing to share that would even come close to comparing.” I started to give her a smile, but yelped as someone tugged on a strand of my hair. I turned to find Tinsley standing behind me, hands on her hips.

“Just a word to the wise... When dealing with a patient, you never treat them like family. You’re making a big mistake in doing that.” She shrugged as if I was a dumb-ass and she was saving me from myself.

“That so?” I turned back to my locker and pulled out my jacket. “Thanks for the advice, though I’m not really sure how you would know how I treat patients unless you’re watching the monitors late at night alone.”

She snorted. “They’re talking about how nice you are, Dana. Our job is to take care of people, not care for them.”

“Says who?” I turned and ignored the ‘shut-the-fuck-up’ look I got from Jackie. I’d never been one to back down from a fight, and it wasn’t starting now.

“Says our code of conduct.” Tinsley shook her head and turned on her heel to walk back toward her group of friends. “Just do your job and stop acting like this place needs your soft touch. It doesn’t.”

“I-”

Jackie grabbed my arm and smiled. “Beer... on me. I’ll flirt for us.”

“Fine,” I grumbled and walked toward the door. Someone needed to put the rest of the nursing staff in their place, but as

an intern it wasn't going to be me. I had a few more months of keeping my head low and just getting through the evaluation process. After that, I could get back to life and make some hard decisions.

Business or nursing? Or both?



“Here!” Jackie sat down and handed me a beer.

I glanced around the overcrowded bar and wondered where the hell all these people's spouses were. Surely there weren't that many single people in the medical center in Dallas on a Monday night. It was concerning.

“Thanks.” I took the beer and took a long drink as my eyes scanned the crowd.

“Okay, so the guy's name is Parks. He's got spiky black hair and deep green eyes, huge muscles, and his dick is-”

“Whoa. Hold up.” I lifted my hand and shook my head. “I'm not interested in talking about the size of anyone's dick. If I meet the guy, all I'll be thinking about is what you said about his man parts. No thank you.”

She laughed. “Fine, but he's so damn hot, Dana. I honestly think I'm going to try to get a job at St. Mark's when we graduate in May.”

“For him? You'd move to New York for some random doctor you've been sleeping with for what, three days?”

“Two, and yes.” She shrugged and took a long drink of her beer. “You haven't seen him.”

“Looks fade, and sex gets old after a while.” I leaned back in my seat and stared at the menu, trying to decide if eating buffalo wings or potato skins would piss Cameron off more. To say he was controlling would have been a mild understatement.

“Whatever. I'm going to live while I'm young.” She tapped the table in front of me, pulling my attention from my

menu. “Unlike you. You need to drop that idiot you’re dating.”

“We’ve been together for a few years now. It’s not that easy.” I shrugged and let the menu slide from my grasp. “Besides... he’s a good guy. He’s got a great job, a good family and he’s trying to help me become a better person.”

“He’s a controlling dick-wad who thinks you need to get braces, change your hair color and lose weight. What kind of boyfriend is that?”

“One that cares? I don’t know.” I pushed the menu around and tried to find the will to fight against her accusations. Most of them were true, leaving my efforts wasted even if I did resurrect the desire to defend him.

“Bull shit. Are you guys having great sex or something? He’s an okay looking guy, but you could do so much better. There has to be more to it. Is he black mailing you?” She lifted her eyebrow as she pressed her beer to her lips.

I snorted. “That’s rich. No, he isn’t black mailing me. He’s just a good guy I met a few years ago in a business class. We hit it off, had okay sex and things just comfortably moved into the relationship we have now. He’s controlling, big damn deal. I bet this Parks character is controlling too.”

“In the bedroom, yes.” She sighed in a girlie fashion and giggled. “I’m so in love with him.”

“You’re delusional. He’s probably got a wife and kids back in New York.”

“He does not!”

“And he’s probably in his sixties.” I smiled, enjoying myself far more than I should have. Bursting her bubble was a bitch-move, but someone needed to. She was professing love for some pompous-ass surgeon she’d been sleeping with for two days. The need to dump a bucket of ice water over her pretty head and scream ‘wake-up’ was almost overwhelming.

“He’s thirty-one, which is no older than the sexy guy you were wrapped around in the hall earlier today.”

Her words stunned me. “Sexy guy that I was wrapped around? Oh... Kendal.”

“Right... Kendal.” She wagged her eyebrows and giggled again. “Are you guys sleeping together?”

“Is everything about sex with you?” I’d known her for four years since starting the nursing program together at UT Dallas. Everything was most certainly about sex for her, and from what I could tell, no one was going to be changing that anytime soon.

“I take that as a no.” She sat back as the server appeared beside us and smiled warmly.

“Ladies. Can I get you anything to eat tonight? It’s happy hour in the bar, and I’m happy to give you those discounts if you want something.” His eyes lingered on me a little longer than was comfortable, which was odd. Jackie was stunning, and I looked like a tired, overweight nurse with no hope for a good time anytime soon.

“Buffalo wings or potato skins?” I asked her and tried not to let the guy’s stare unnerve me.

“Both.” She handed the server the menu and waited until he was gone to let out a sharp laugh. “Did you see the way he was watching you? Did you know him?”

“No.” I turned and let my eyes follow him as he disappeared behind the bar. “He’s cute, but not someone I know from anywhere.”

“You should hit on him. See where it goes.”

“I’m dating someone, remember? We just talked about this.” I finished my beer in a few long pulls from the bottle and sat back. “Besides, I don’t want a new relationship, Jackie. My old one sucks just to the point of me handling it.”

“That’s stupid. You know that’s no way to live. You need to get out there and find the right guy, not the safe one.” She leaned forward. “We know better than anyone else that life can snatch your ass up in the blink of an eye. We see it every day in the hospitals, in our studies, fuck, you’ve had it happen in your own life.”

“Don’t.” I shook my head, warning her. My father had been killed by a drunk driver at the start of my freshman year in college, causing me to fail most of my classes and struggle like crazy to get back into the program. He’d been my hero, my rock, my everything. After losing him, the world darkened a little. Jackie was right though... life was too short to cling to people and situations that continued to let me down. It was just easier to think about it than actually have to *do* anything.

“I’m sorry. No more talking about sad shit. Forgive me.” She reached across the table and squeezed my forearm. “How is your mom anyway? Last question about family and I’ll leave you alone.”

“She’s good. She’s still living life as if she expects dad to come walking into the house any minute, but I get it, you know? She’s not delusional that he will, but she’s protecting herself from the truth.”

“That’s not healthy, but I get it too.” She pulled out her phone, glanced down and squealed. “Yes! He’s free tonight. I want you to meet him, Dana. He’s so damn hot.”

I laughed, unable to help myself. “I’m good, but thank you.”

“You’re missing out.”

“He’s your man, and newsflash, for the tenth time, I have a man.”

“You have an asshole with a stick up his ass and a collar dangling from his hand.”

“We said only happy things from here on out.” I reached for her beer and took a drink before she snatched it back.

“All right, let’s talk about Amanda’s brother.” Her smile grew wider. “I hear he’s a professor at the college.”

“What? No way. He’s in his late twenties. How in the world could he be a professor?”

“I’d say he’s early thirties. He’s got this mature look that says he’s past his twenties.”

“Is he married?” I shouldn’t have asked. Fuck, I shouldn’t have cared.

“No clue, but I can find out.” She dropped her phone back into her purse and pushed her beer toward me. “Want me to?”

“No. Yes.” I sighed. “How would you go about doing this?”

“I’m not giving away trade secrets. You want me to or not?”

“Yeah, I guess, but only because you want to know.” I finished the beer and tried not to let myself get excited. I was with Cameron and right, wrong or indifferent, I wasn’t changing that anytime soon.



It was after nine by the time I walked into the apartment. The smell of Chinese lingered in the air, causing my stomach to turn. Too many beers and greasy food wasn’t helping much either.

The sound of Cameron snoring softly on the couch left guilt racing through me. He was a good guy by most standards. He was willing to provide for us, hold me at night and cared about my health. The sex was pathetic at best, and he was a little more condescending than I wanted to admit, but everyone had to take the good with the bad.

I walked toward him and forced the thoughts of Kendal out of my mind. I was being an idiot about all of it, and I knew it. I’d text Jackie later and tell her not to dig into the handsome professor. I was good where I was in life, and letting anything rock the boat would just cause heartache and trouble that I wasn’t willing to deal with.

“Hey baby.” I sunk down on my knees between Cameron’s legs and ran my hands up his thighs, squeezing softly.

He jerked awake and inhaled loudly as his dark brown eyes moved about the room.

“Just me,” I whispered and moved closer, pressing my breasts between his legs and leaning over to wrap my arms around his thin waist. He wasn’t a hunk by any stretch of the imagination, but kept his body in good shape, though far too thin for me. Being around him made me feel about three times bigger than I was, or so I hoped that was the case. Maybe I was the delusional one, not my mother.

“Did you eat good tonight? I made you some brown rice and veggies.” He ran his hand down the back of my head and dropped back down against the couch.

“Yeah, sure did.” I turned and brushed my lips by the outline of his cock in his slacks.

“Not now, Dana. I’m tired.” He moved backward, sitting up more and let out a soft sigh. “Did you exercise today yet?”

“No. I just walked in the door from a work happy hour.” I tried to hide the burn of rejection and climbed to my feet.

“You know how fattening beer is, right?” He grumbled under his breath something about trying to help me and me never accepting it.

“Yeah, I know.” I walked to the kitchen and stood in front of the stove as tears burned my eyes. Veggies, brown rice and a diet pill. Fucking awesome.

“It’s only nine. Get on the treadmill in the bedroom for twenty minutes while I take a shower and then we can crash. It’ll do you good.”

I glanced over my shoulder and tried to remember why I’d decided to let him in my life.

“You love me, right?” I asked, hating how soft and needy my voice sounded.

“This again?” He ran his fingers through his hair and turned to walk down the hallway, calling after me, “Treadmill, Dana.”

CHAPTER 5



KENDAL

I couldn't seem to shake the desire to make a stop by the hospital to check on my sister. Part of it was to make sure she was doing better today than she was the day before when she had her melt-down. The other part was the hope of running into her nurse, Dana.

Jogging up the stairs to the business building, I tried to let my wayward thoughts go and get focused on the meeting with Dean Durham I had in twenty minutes. He was a great guy, but a hard-hitter. He was the kind of guy that could look at someone and assess any situation in a matter of minutes. He was classy and the kind of guy I wanted to be when I got older. Running the accounting department was a dream I hadn't shared with anyone, not even Damon. It seemed too farfetched after being put under probation for two of my six years on staff. Getting tenure was at the top of my list of things to do just to ensure I could cover my ass should another false allegation arise.

"Kendal. You got a minute?" Eliza Turner moved up beside me as I walked toward my office.

"Of course, Dr. Turner. What can I do for you?" Eliza was the other cost accounting professor on staff, but she also had several of the master's courses on her plate.

"What is your schedule looking like for the later part of the fall?"

I held the door open for her and waited until she moved inside to join her. She was twenty years my senior and

someone I looked up to as a mentor of sorts. There wasn't much I wouldn't do to support her, seeing that she'd supported me a few years back during my latest debacle at UT.

"It's the same as it is now unless something new comes up. I have my five cost accounting classes and that's about it." I smiled warmly and motioned for her to exit the elevator before me. "You need my help on a new project?"

"No, though I might get you to review my work for the submission to the SEC on intangible assets."

"I'd love to. You know I'm happy to help you with anything you have going on." I paused by the main door to the hallway of offices where we spent very little time.

"Thank you, but the other thing I need help on is teaching one of the mini-mester classes. It runs from October fifteenth through the holidays."

"Oh." My heart skipped a beat. I was a nerd and a half when it came to teaching accounting classes. After two years of teaching basics I finally got to move to cost accounting, but the hope of teaching something more advanced was part of what kept me going from day to day.

"I'd love to, Eliza. Just let me know the subject matter and I'll spend my nights getting up to date on it."

She chuckled. "It's financial statement analysis. Why is it so disturbing to hear that a handsome young man like yourself is spending your nights reading old dusty textbooks and not wooing some beautiful young woman."

I smiled. "We know how well my track record is with women. Books are far more safe as far as I'm concerned."

She reached up and touched the side of my head like my mother used to do. "You can't only live in here for the rest of your life, Kendal."

"No? It's safe in there." I gave her a sad smile as she moved her hand down to my chest, just over my heart.

"Ah, but that's the beauty of loving someone. It's the thrill of the risk you take, the value of the hope you invest in. Live

here before you forget how it feels to love.”

I cupped my hand over hers and smiled. “Better stop feeling me up, or everyone is going to start talking about us.”

“Please. My Fred’s been dead ten years, and there are days when I miss him like crazy, but most days... I’m singing hallelujah for the quiet. The man was a horn-ball and a half.” She grunted and walked toward her office, leaving me to stand in shock. She was as unpredictable as the wind.

“More than I needed to know, Eliza.”

“Dr. Turner to you, boy.”

I chuckled and walked into my office with just enough time to grab my files and march back up to Dean Durham’s office. His secretary gave me a curt smile and nodded to the vacant chairs outside of his office.

“He’ll be right with you, Dr. Tarrington.”

“Great, thanks.” I sat down and stifled the desire to tell her that her hair looked nice. It did, but there was no way in hell I was giving out compliments. Everything I said got taken the wrong way, no matter how innocent my words were. Between falling in love with Ana six years before and having one of my junior students allege rape against me two years after that... I was blacklisted. Nothing I did or said was ever taken at face value again, no matter the fact that everything was cleared up and cleaned up in both situations.

“Kendal. Come on in, buddy.” Mark leaned out of his open door and extended his hand to me as I walked into his oversized office. The large bull head sitting on the wall never failed to pull a chuckle from me. “You laughing at my talents?” He glanced up at it with pride in his eyes.

“It smells like a goat in here, Mark.” I dropped down in the seat in front of his desk and smiled. “You been hunting lately?”

“Hell no. My wife is pregnant again. I swear I’m going to have to get both of us fixed to make this shit stop.” He snorted and pulled out a file.

“Or stop being so active.” I shrugged as he glanced up. He was the only other man in our department and to say we were close would be an understatement. His support was about all I had going for me outside of Eliza’s trust and friendship.

“Fuck that.” He opened the file. “Speaking of...”

“I’m not talking about my sex life with you. That had to be the most uncomfortable hour of my existence last month. Leave it be.” I rolled my eyes as he gave me a quirky smile. The bastard was a Kappa Alpha, and though he was ten years older than me, brothers were brothers for life in the fraternity. He honored that... and I did too.

“Fine, but my wife has a cousin that-”

“No. Let’s talk about this new master’s class you guys are finally letting me teach.”

“Eliza told you? That old goat. I wanted to tell you.” He got up and walked toward his bookshelf, pulling something off and handing it to me. “Here is the curriculum. It’s electronic too, and I’ll have Eliza unlock the files for you, but I know you like the smell of old shit, so there’s the book for you to enjoy as well.”

I laughed and took the book from him. “What else am I here for?”

A knock at the door resounded behind me, and I stiffened.

“We have a new financial accounting professor joining us seeing that Daisy Jackson decided to up and quit last week.”

“Daisy quit? Why?” I turned in my seat as he opened the door and glanced over his shoulder. His thick upper body blocked my view from seeing who was standing on the other side, but the shapely legs I could see had my attention.

“Family problems. You’re going to mentor our new professor.” He turned and spoke to the woman for a few minutes as I tried to figure out how I was going to nicely tell him no. Where we were close enough to talk sex, women and past failures, he was still my boss.

I stood up and figured I would suck it up and help him out until we found someone else to do it. No reason to deny him my help when I had the time and he'd finally come through on the promise to give me an advanced class to teach. Hopefully the woman's legs were no prediction of her body. I didn't need a fox beside me to tempt me into being the man I was in college. I'd buried him in the sand six years back, and fuck if he didn't try to poke his ugly head up from time to time.

"Kendal, this is Heather Turner. She's from UCLA and has been highly recommended for this new spot with us. You'll be her mentor until she gets her feet wet." He moved back, and I nearly choked. Not only was she ten steps past gorgeous, but I didn't need an introduction at all. Heather was the vice president of the sister-sorority that partied right alongside the Kappa's back in college. The number of times Damon and I had taken turns fucking the woman was embarrassing.

My luck couldn't have gotten any worse.

I extended my hand and gave her a warm smile. Maybe six years of life had forced both of us to grow up and move away from being the sluts we were in college.

"I'm Kendal. Nice to meet you." I'd have to feign ignorance about who she was. Hopefully I'd changed enough to get by on a wing and a prayer.

"Nice to meet you too. I've read up on you and your research on just-in-time inventory. Riveting stuff." Her smile was genuine.

I sighed internally. She didn't remember me, or if she did, she was playing it off really well. Good. Drunk sex in the back of a car or in a laundry mat or... I let my thoughts go. Whatever we'd done in the past was locked back there with every other stupid decision I'd made.

"Thanks." I turned to Mark. "All right, man. I'm off to teach brilliant young minds how to better balance their income statements. Need anything else from me?"

"Just show Heather to her office and we'll be good." He patted my back and smiled at Heather. "Welcome, Dr. Turner.

You're in good hands."

She smiled. "Thanks. I'm sure I am."

I held the door for her and moved up beside her as she glanced over at me with a smile on her pretty lips. Dark red hair billowed over her shoulders and down her back, silky hair that I'd gripped tightly too many times to forget.

"So why Dallas? California seems so much better." I pressed the button on the elevator and turned to face her.

"I was ready to come home." She took a step toward me as her eyes narrowed a little. Fuck. She was playing in front of Mark. "I'm quite thrilled to hear I'm not only in good hands, but ones that know exactly where I like to be touched."

I swallowed hard and glanced over my shoulder. "Heather... that was the past. We're grown up now and I'm not interested in-

"Tough." She smiled and pulled a card from her purse. "You're not married, nor are you dating."

"How do you-"

"I checked." She tucked the card in my clasped hands and leaned in closer, breathing in deeply. "You know how many times I called out your name while I fucked myself?"

"Heather," I whispered, lost to how much I enjoyed being a bastard with the beautiful woman in front of me.

"Right. You know, don't you?" Her dark blue eyes studied me, the look in them leaving my stomach turning. I was in deep shit - Again.

I moved back as she got into the elevator and let the door shut. I'd have to tell Mark that I couldn't mentor her in any way, shape or form. She was the same slutty girl I'd owned all four years of college when Damon wasn't busy owning her. I hated myself for being a part of something so vile - using women for pleasure and making them beg for the next round.

Bile rose in my throat as I walked down the stairs and pulled my phone from my pocket to call my best friend.

“This is Damon.”

“Do you not have my name in your phone? What the fuck?” I barked into the phone as I looked for a quiet place to sit.

“Oh wow. Someone’s pissed in your cheerios. Let me guess, you’re in love with your stepsister, who works for you, is at every fucking family dinner, and she’s over you. That your deal? Oh no, wait... that’s my fucked up life.”

I dropped down on a bench and let out a painful sigh as I pressed my free hand to my face. “I’m sorry. Fucking Heather Turner just walked into the accounting office as the new Accounting professor, and of course I’m assigned to be her fucking mentor. I can’t look at her without seeing jizz all over her face and tits. I’m going to hell.”

“You’re a man. Fuck the woman and make her beg for more, Kendal. She’s a grown woman and isn’t one of your students. Get laid and call me back.”

“You’re an asshole, you know that?” I dropped the call and closed my eyes tightly. Why couldn’t something work out? Anything? Fucking Damon. He deserved that shit with Bethany. She was too good of a woman for him anyway.

I should know. Every woman on the fucking planet was too good for me.

“Piece of shit,” I mumbled under my breath, hating myself more than I had in a long while.

Funny how the past could remind you of who you were trying *not* to be in the future.

CHAPTER 6



DANA

The smell of bacon and eggs woke me up the next morning, my stomach grumbling loudly at the idea of something beyond delicious to start the day. I rolled onto my back and let out a long sigh. Cameron's side of the bed was made already, his pillow in its place. What I wouldn't give to wake up to a man wrapped around me, his body hard and ready for another round of what happened the night before. Where I couldn't help but tease Jackie about everything in her world being about sex, the truth of the matter is that I was hella jealous. Love seemed a far off desire, incapable of being reached by the average commoner, but sex? Lust? They were waiting for a spin around the dance floor of life, and weren't choosy at all about which partners they got.

So why not me? I slid my hands over my breasts and down my stomach to linger at the top of my panties. How nice it would have been to lay there and enjoy the softness of my skin, the tight warmth between my thighs, but by the sound of things down the hall, Cameron was still there. He'd frowned upon the idea of masturbation a hundred times over the last few years, as if he was the only man on the earth that didn't give in to self-love.

"You need to get up," he hollered down the hall. "I'm leaving soon."

"All right. You're right." I groaned as I rolled onto my side and moved to the edge of the bed before sitting up. I pulled on a pair of sleeping pants from the floor and worked my long hair into a ponytail before walking into the kitchen. There was

no point in prancing around in my panties. That would only leave me turned on by the possibility of him being turned on, which wasn't going to happen. He was far too much of a practical kind of guy to allow for spontaneous sex.

"I usually am." He smiled over at me and got up with his empty plate in his hands.

I walked into the kitchen, half expecting to see cold eggs and bacon sitting in the pan for me. That would have been upsetting, but seeing nothing on the stove was disturbing.

"Did you not think I would want breakfast?" I turned to face him.

He brushed his napkin by his lips and tossed his trash before moving toward me and sliding his hands over my shoulders.

"You don't need bacon and eggs, baby. You're trying to stick to your diet this time, remember? You asked for my help, so I'm giving it. Don't give me that sad look. I'm here to help you like you requested. If you don't want my help, don't ask for it." He leaned down and kissed my forehead like a brother or father might.

I didn't have words as he released me, picked up a grapefruit and tossed it over his shoulder to me.

He didn't say another word as he grabbed his briefcase and whistled as he walked out of the apartment, leaving me standing there in shock. Where I had most certainly asked for his help in watching what I ate a few months back, he was going overboard with it - so much so that I wanted to crawl back under my covers and hide from the world. Surely it would be better for everyone if I did.

My phone buzzed, saving me from a torrential meltdown. I put the grapefruit back in the fruit basket and picked it up before sitting down on the couch and answering.

"Hi Mom," I mumbled as I leaned back and closed my eyes.

"Hi baby. I haven't talked to you in three days. Tell me everything. How's school? Work? Cameron?"

The negative energy buzzing through me started to dissipate at the sound of my mother's voice. She was a strong Hispanic woman with a hard past and a great love story thanks to my dad. She didn't appreciate drama or too many tears, but then again, she'd been raised by a mother that felt the same way.

"The internship is great, but isn't really a job, Mom."

"I know, but you're still getting paid, right?"

"No, but they are helping to fund the rest of my semester. Being poor helps you get grants. Remember I was telling you about this financial aid stuff."

"Yes, yes. How is your man? Are you cooking more often like I told you to?"

"No, Mom. I'm working at the hospital a lot and trying to do most of my business classes by correspondence. I can't come home and cook a meal for Cameron morning, noon and night. Besides, he's a health nut. He wouldn't like what I know how to cook."

"What?" She huffed. "What's wrong with the food I taught you to cook?"

"It's either Mexican or southern fried food, momma. He's into woks and vegetables right now."

"Did he Asian on you?"

"Mom. Really?" I rolled my eyes and got up from the couch. "How is Kevin?"

"Good. Being an ass. What's new?" She chuckled. My little brother was a big handful and always had been. Little was an understatement seeing that he was twice as big as any of the other men in my extended family.

"And my sister?" I walked to the kitchen and pulled out the bacon. The thought of frying it and pouring the bacon grease on Cameron's perfectly made side of the bed had me second-guessing my thoughts of wanting marriage and kids with the jerk. He hadn't started out so controlling and

condescending, but after getting comfortable, it would seem the real him had come shining through.

No thanks.

“How are your classes doing? Are you still thinking of double doing it?”

“Double majoring?” I smiled as my mother cursed me in Spanish. “I’m graduating in May, momma. I’ll have both degrees and finally be done.”

“And then we’ll get married and have some *bambinos*?”

“Yes, Mom.” I turned on the stove and tried not to dive into a conversation over how much my heart hurt. It wouldn’t be received well by my strong-willed mother. She was too old-school for talking about *feelings*. “I gotta go or I’ll be late.”

“Never be late. It shows your unwillingness to finish anything.”

“Okay Mom.” I rolled my eyes and dropped the call. There was no way in hell I was going to marry someone like Cameron. “So what are you doing with him now?”

I had no clue. Protection? Apathy? Loneliness?

The image of Amanda’s handsome brother rolled through my mind. I couldn’t imagine why he was alone, but maybe his story was similar to mine. Maybe he had a girlfriend that took him for granted, treated him like trash, acted as if his feelings didn’t matter at all.

“What’s your story, Kendal?” I turned to the stove and made a breakfast that would make Cameron cringe.



“Why do you let him talk to you like that?” Jackie walked beside me as we finished making our rounds together.

“What exactly am I supposed to say? I did ask for help on watching my weight.” I put my hands on my hips and tried to keep my voice down.

“Helping someone with their diet is different than demeaning them. You don’t even need to be on a diet. You look great, Dana. So you have curves... kick-ass awesome. Most men would love to latch on to your hips or your ass while fucking you half the night. Don’t you know how this works?”

Heat burned my neck and face as a group of doctors walked through the hall, the youngest-looking one turning to look over his shoulder and smile.

“Ahh... you’re so fucking embarrassing.” I ran my hand over the top of my hair and tried to think of some way to get away from her. I loved Jackie like a sister, but she was far too open for me. My family was close, but we didn’t talk about intimate things - ever.

“Dana! They need an extra set of hands in the ER. Go. Now.” One of the older nurses, whose name I couldn’t remember to save my damn life, yelled from the nurses’ station at me.

I turned and jogged toward the stairs instead of the elevator. Seven flights of stairs later, I was sucking wind like a freight train going uphill. I forced myself to jog toward the ER and swallow my need to lay down and beg for an oxygen mask. Cameron was right about one thing... I did need to get in better shape. Not for the way I looked, but for my job.

“Are you Dana?” A nurse jogged past me, not stopping to confirm the answer to her question.

“Yes.” I turned and picked up my walk to a run to keep up with her.

“Good. Second room on the left. Public bus got flipped over in an accident. We have about thirty injured. We just need extra hands on deck. Assist Dr. Parks with anything he needs.” She moved down the hall as I stopped and ducked into the OR room.

The handsome young guy washing his hands furiously glanced up and smiled. “Dana?”

“Yes, Sir.” I moved up beside him and washed my hands as well. “I’m just an intern.”

“Well, today you’re going to be just a doctor’s extra hands like any great nurse would be. That sound good?” His smile was contagious, and I could see why Jackie was so ga-ga over him. He was sexy in a playboy way, but his warmth radiated around the room.

“Anything you need.” I nodded, washed my hands and helped him with his gloves before we moved into the operating room.

“Great answer.” He moved to the other side of the body on the table and started barking out commands. I moved to the sound of his voice, the message in his directives. Everyone did. He worked efficiently, and within a matter of minutes had multiple repairs done to the woman below us.

He glanced up and winked at me. “You ready for the next one?”

“Am I with you for the rest of the day?”

“Yep, and I bite, so watch out, okay?” He chuckled, and I couldn’t help but smile. Maybe New York was a good move for Jackie, hell, maybe it was a good move for me.

“Don’t make promises you don’t keep.” I went for ballsy and followed him and two other nurses out into the wash room. After scrubbing down, we reloaded for the next person that got brought in.

“Are you studying to be a nurse or doctor?” He glanced up and lifted his hands toward me. I helped him get into a new pair of gloves and followed him back into the room.

“A nurse for now. I’m graduating with a double major. Two bachelors next May.”

“Which two.” He turned to the nurse on his left and barked out several orders. The room exploded with movement, but he kept his voice steady, his eyes on the dying man beneath us.

“Business and nursing,” I murmured and watched in awe as he worked with incredible precision.

“Why both?” He glanced up and back down. Jackie hadn’t been joking about how sexy the man was, though that wasn’t what drew me to him at all. Sexy was everywhere, but the way he spoke to me like I mattered, like I was somebody... it was beyond attractive. I paid attention and realized that he did that with everyone in the room. Everyone was someone to him.

We finished up and scrubbed out one more time before walking into the hall. He patted my back and smiled down at me.

“Great job today. Did you see the way I patched up that tight curve in Mr. Sanders’ neck?”

“Yes. I don’t remember seeing that stitch in school.”

“No, you wouldn’t unless you go to med school, which you should. You weren’t fazed by anything in there today.”

“Why should I be?” I lifted my eyebrow.

He chuckled and crossed his arms over his thick chest. “You shouldn’t, but most nursing students are. The resident cardiologist told me that you’re his top intern. Ever think about moving to New York?”

“Not until today.” I laughed, deciding to leave shy at the door. I wanted a different future, a better one.

“Great answer. I’ll give you my card before I go. You decide to head up that way, and I expect a call, all right? Deal?” He extended his hand.

“Deal.” I shook it and watched him walk toward the cafeteria. Maybe Jackie and I could go up there together after college and share an apartment. Maybe med school wasn’t just a pipe dream, but something I could reach for. Maybe, but probably not. I’d need lots of emotional support, which I didn’t have anywhere in my life.

“Get over yourself,” I mumbled and walked toward the elevator, letting the high dissipate before I resumed my normal course of business.

CHAPTER 7



KENDAL

The hangover I was struggling with was well deserved after losing myself in a bottle of jack the night before. Between Damon being a dick, the situation with Heather joining the university, and my sister's condition worsening, I was lost. Emotionally I wanted to crawl in a ball in the closet and hide for a week or so, but it wasn't going to happen. Over two hundred students were showing up in the next few hours to learn about the weaknesses in inventory systems, and I was the guy teaching it.

For the first time in a long time, I didn't wanna teach anything. My passion was tucked behind the dark cloud of shit life was kicking my way once again.

"Hi Dr. Tarrington. How are you?" Jake opened the door and gave me a warm smile as I moved past him. Bethany's best guy friend from college was my second TA for the semester. The poor kid had been through hell recently. The other part of their friendship trio, Bethany's roommate Krista, had fallen in love with Jake and not taken it so well when he rejected her. The boy had multiple stab wounds in his thin chest to prove it. That he was up and moving around after a couple of weeks was a miracle itself.

The memory of having to walk through his apartment right after it happened washed over me, and my knees grew weak. Something about massive amounts of blood always left me crippled.

"I'm great, Jake. How are you feeling? You look good." I reached over and gripped his shoulder lightly as we walked

toward the auditorium where my first class would be held that morning.

“I’m feeling better than I have in a few weeks for sure.” He opened the door and walked into the oversized room.

I reached over and turned on the lights. “That’s great news. Any more trips to the doctor’s office, or are you cleared now?”

“Not just yet, but soonish.” The boy walked toward the stage and slowly made his way up the stairs. I could see the struggle he was having, which he’d hidden quite well in the hallway. It still shocked the fuck out of me that love could cause someone to go ape and stab someone else, but it was on the news all the time. Having it hit so close to home was eye-opening.

“Well, let me know if you need my help.” I pulled out my briefcase and emptied it before putting my glasses on.

“If you were offering help for my advance tax class, I’d totally take you up on it. That class is eating my lunch.” He chuckled as I glanced up.

“You know that Bethany is a tax wizard, right? She loves all of that stuff.” I wasn’t trying to not help the kid, but rather put him in a situation where he felt more comfortable.

“Why are you telling my secrets?” She walked up to stand beside me, jolting me with her presence.

“I didn’t even hear you come in.” I smiled sheepishly. She looked good, almost too good, as if her breakup with my best friend wasn’t dragging her in the dark hole it was him.

“I’m stealthy like that.” She brushed her long brown hair off her shoulder and turned to face Jake. “You need me?”

“I always need you.” He wagged his eyebrows as she scoffed.

“Please... Let’s talk taxes, which is the only thing we might have in common.” She moved up to the edge of the stage, and I hated myself for listening to their conversation, but it was my classroom, and they were both aware that I was standing there.

“I think we could have more in common now that you dropped that jackass you were dating.” Jake walked slowly to the edge of the stage, the poor guy obviously didn’t know that I was Damon’s best friend.

“Hey, I don’t want to talk about that right now.” She pressed her hands to the edge of the stage and hoisted herself up to stand beside him. She turned and glanced down at me. “I don’t think of him as a jackass.”

I shrugged. “None of my business. I’m just glad you’re still talking to me.”

She laughed. “This is true.”

“What are you guys talking about? What am I missing here?” Jake glanced between the two of us.

“Damon and Kendal are best friends.” Bethany smirked as she poked Jake in the side.

“Oh shit. I’m so sorry, Dr. Tarrington.” He lifted his hands.

“It’s no matter. I’m rather pissed at him right now too. Jackass works.” I smiled and busied myself with getting notes together for my lecture.

Bethany hopped off the edge of the stage and handed me a file as her expression clouded with worry.

“Why are you two fighting?”

“We’re not.” I took the file and glanced down at it. “We’ve been friends for a long time. We don’t fight. One of us acts like an asshole and the other ignores it. It’s his turn this week.”

“So you’re not speaking?” The softness in her voice left me not able to believe her ‘everything is great’ attitude. She was hurting... just like he was.

“Why does it matter?” I glanced back up and smiled. “He’s not your problem anymore, right?”

“He’s still my stepbrother. He’s family.”

“Right. In that case, no, we’re not speaking.” I closed the folder and moved around her to join Jake on the stage. The door opened to my right and Heather walked in, looking like

sin in a black skirt and white button down. The woman was going to cripple me with lust if I wasn't careful. I didn't wanna be that guy anymore, but she was going to push and push until I broke. I could almost taste the depravity on my tongue.

"Dr. Tarrington. Are you all right with me sitting in today? I want to watch your lecture style." She gave me an innocent smile before introducing herself to Bethany and then Jake.

"Of course not, Heather. Make yourself comfortable." I turned and kept myself busy until class started. I was going to have to talk with Mark. Another strike on my record no doubt, but it was better than being caught half-naked with a fellow co-worker because I couldn't deny myself any longer.

I needed to find someone - anyone who could help me remain the type of man I could respect.

I could be him... I had been since college. Damon and I both had been.

"And look where it has both of you," I mumbled under my breath before turning on my mic and starting the lecture.



Bethany was waiting for me when I walked to my car that afternoon, which surprised me. I needed to get up to the hospital, but I would delay the trip for a few minutes for her.

"Hey," she mumbled as she wrapped her arms around her chest. Her intelligent green eyes were filled with unshed tears.

"Hey." I reached out and touched the side of her arm before pulling my hand back. I couldn't be kind or loving toward anyone on campus. Everyone would start to talk. "You all right?"

"Yeah." She sighed and pursed her lips as a tear dripped down her face. "No. I'm not."

"Beth." I reached for her, not caring for a few minutes about myself. I wrapped her in a tight, friendly hug and

brushed the back of her hair like I would Amanda. “You guys don’t have to keep this shit up, you know.”

“He hired Christa’s sister, Kendal. His ex-girlfriend’s twin sister. Why would he do that?” She moved back and brushed her tears away angrily. “He hired Philip to come work for the firm. He knows Philip has feelings for me, that I would have feelings for Philip if it wasn’t for him.”

“Maybe he didn’t hire Delilah, Beth. Maybe your father did.” I let my hands drop to the side as her hurt seared me. I hadn’t known her for more than a month, but if she was hurting, so was my best friend. I’d given him the cold shoulder before, and he fucking deserved it now, but my timing was shit. He was suffering far more than I was.

“And what about Philip?”

“You know anything I say is going to support Damon. You’re putting me in a shitty situation.” I slipped my hands into my pockets and glanced up at the setting sun. “He loves you and you love him. You both are being so damn stubborn right now. I would give anything for someone to love me.”

The softness of her fingers on the side of my face caused my heart to soften.

“You’re going to find her. I promise.” She brushed her fingers down my cheek, leaving me a little uncomfortable.

I gripped her hand tightly. “You know my rules.”

She laughed softly and pulled her hand free of my hold. “I’m in love with a bastard, Kendal. I’m not after you or anyone else. I belong to one man. I just wish I didn’t.”

“Then let him go.” I regretted implying that she was hitting on me. She was broken, like the rest of us.

“No way.” Anger burned past her gaze. “Never.”

“Then what the fuck are you guys doing? You’re just tearing into each other. Is that your purpose? His?”

“No. I don’t know.” She pressed her hands to her face and let out a soft sob.

“Beth.” I reached out and gripped her shoulders. “Look at me.”

She pulled her hands down, and my heart constricted in my chest. “It’s over, but I can’t let go. He’s going to have to let go of me.”

“You gave the ring back.”

“I know.” Her voice grew in volume. “It was my way of pushing him to grow up or give up. Sex doesn’t heal everything. It’s not the fucking answer to everything.”

“It’s not?” I asked earnestly. “I can think of the times in my life when I was most broken, and sex would have been quite appreciated to bring the balm of pleasure. I can’t think of anything that links two people together more than making love. Why would that bother you?”

“Because, Kendal. Damon uses sex as a tool or a playing piece in his games. It’s not the connecting of souls, which would be beautiful. It’s dominance, control, ownership.”

“I see.” I let my hands slide down her arms. “And you don’t want to be dominated, controlled, owned by a strong man?”

“Fuck you for that.” She closed her eyes and took a shaky breath.

“Love is messy, Beth. You know this. So do I. If Damon’s love language is touch, then sex is all he understands. It is healing and right to him. It’s the answer to every question where the two of you are concerned. You need to talk this through with him. Ignoring it in hopes of him smashing your heart is just pure ignorance, and selfish too.”

“Selfish?” Her anger was coming back.

“Yes. Communication is key in a relationship. Stop acting like it isn’t.”

“Why am I talking to you? You’re his fucking best friend.”

“Because you know that I’ve seen him since you gave the ring back. Ask your question. Get it off your chest.” I was goading her, but she needed me to. She loved Damon with a

fire I could only hope to find in a woman of my own. For either of them to let it die would be beyond stupid.

“How is he?” She pursed her lips again and glanced down at the ground as another wave of pain shook her shoulders.

“He’s torn in half. He’s devastated and has sunk down into being the bastard we both hoped he would never be again.” I reached out and pressed my fingers softly under her chin to force her to look up at me. “If you’re angry, hurt, lonely, curious... if you care at all - go find him and tell him.”

“I can’t, Kendal.”

“Then lose him. It’s your choice.” I released her and walked around her to my car.

She’d see my words and actions as heartless, but I’d planted a seed that might save both of them from living a life of what could have beens. They deserved better. Hell, I did too, but I wasn’t standing on the precipice of making the worst decision of my life, at least it didn’t seem like I was.

I got in my car and drove to the hospital in complete silence. My thoughts moved through the past like a movie reel, never stopping on one thing and yet letting every ounce of it dry up my hope.

Why was I fighting to become someone that I wasn’t? Was it to gain love or acceptance? To be able to look at myself in the mirror and not cringe?

What did it really matter?

CHAPTER 8



DANA

“Oh hell, you again, fruit fly?” Mr. Jackson glanced up from the paper he was reading and gave me a wry smile.

“Morning, Mr. Jackson. How are you today?” I set my tray down near the door and picked up the cup of pills I had ready for the ornery older man.

“I’d be better if you’d stop bringing by this damn poison.” He huffed and crossed his arms over his frail chest like a small child might.

“You don’t really believe that, right?” I extended the cup to him.

“What? That I’d be better off without you coming by?”

I chuckled. “No, that this is poison.”

“It tastes like shit! Have you had these things? Here... I’ll share.” He extended the cup back toward me, still full of pills.

I laughed and pushed it back toward him. “You’re the best part of my day. Did you know that?”

He grunted and popped the pills in his mouth as I walked around and opened his windows.

“Your day must suck to high heaven.” He snorted as I turned around and smiled.

“Nope. It’s really an okay life. It’s not great or anything, but it’s okay.” I shrugged and reached out to take the cup from him.

He only had a few weeks at most to live, and he wasn't willing to let his family hover over the top of him while he 'wasted away'. Having been a patron of the hospital, they made a special exception and let him stay there instead of an assisted living home.

"Why is it just okay?" His voice softened a little.

"Let's see..." I started to walk to the door.

"Dana, come sit here." Him calling me by my name was a little surprising. I didn't realize he knew it, even though the damn thing was printed on a name tag above my left breast. He patted the bed beside him as I turned.

"My boyfriend is an asshole who makes his side of the bed before I even wake up in the morning." I sat down on the edge of the bed and clasped my hands in my lap.

"Wait a minute. I thought you broads like to have the bed made."

"Us *broads* don't really care about the bed as much as we do being held."

"Ah, I see." He nodded at me. "Keep going. This okay life can't be all about the bed being made and nothing else, right?"

I laughed softly. "He thinks I'm overweight and need to be on a diet and running on a treadmill all the time."

"Hogwash. You're the prettiest thing in this whole damn hospital." His heart monitor beeped loudly, and I reached out, gripping his hand.

"Hey, no getting all hyper on me, fruit fly."

He chuckled and cupped his hand over mine. "You gotta be who you are, youngin. Find a man that appreciates that."

"You think he exists?" I glanced over my shoulder to see Jackie standing at the door with a smile on her face.

"I do. When you find him, bring him by here so I can make sure he's the one, or have your daddy do it. Us old farts know when we're dealing with a real man or a fake. Put him through

the dad test.” He released my hand and laid back, letting out a tired-sounding sigh.

“My father died a few years back, but I’ll bring him by here if I ever find him.” I smiled and patted Mr. Jackson’s shoulder. “Why do you call me fruit fly?”

“Because you’re always buzzing around.” He smiled and closed his eyes. “Better hurry if you want my help.”

“Why’s that?” I pulled his covers up to his neck like he liked them.

“Because my time is almost over.”

“You don’t know that.” I rubbed his chest softly and watched him slip into sleep.

“Dana?”

I turned, realizing I’d left Jackie standing in the doorway. “Sorry. I was just taking care of Mr. Jackson.”

“So I see.” She moved back into the hall as I grabbed my tray and walked out with her. “He’s supposedly the hardest patient on the damn floor and you just worked him like a charm.”

“I didn’t work anything. I acted like a human who cared to another human who needed care. I think all of us would go a lot farther in this place if we did that.”

“Some of the nurses do.”

“Very true.” I stopped by the nurses’ station and glanced up to see Tinsley rushing into Amanda’s room. “Oh shit. Let me see if I can help.”

“Okay, but I need to see you later.” She gripped my arm softly. “I think I want to go to New York after graduation.”

I smiled and nodded. “I might just join you.”

“Really?” She bounced on her feet and released me.

“Yep, really.” I jogged toward the room as the thought of living in a big city with all new people filled me with an odd sense of hope. Not only could I start over with a group of

close-knit friends, including my childhood bestie Olivia, but I could possibly talk Parks into being my mentor. There was no real reason to stay in Dallas anyway besides my mother, who didn't need me thanks to my brother and sister being around all the damn time.

"It's okay. Just calm down." Tinsley moved in toward Amanda as she screamed and thrashed in the bed below. It would seem she had use of her arms again. She reached up and clawed at Tinsley's face, getting her good.

"Ouch! Dammit." Tinsley glanced up. "Get a sedative."

"No." I moved to the other side of the bed and grabbed Amanda's chin tightly, forcing her to look at me. "Guess what I learned today."

"What?" She calmed almost immediately as tears filled her eyes. "What did you learn?"

Her speech was slurred thanks to the drugs mixed with terror.

"I'm getting a doctor." Tinsley walked away from the bed as I moved to my knees beside it and leaned in with a smile on my face. I moved my fingers from underneath Amanda's chin and rubbed the top of her chest softly like I would my brother's when he was scared.

"I learned why Mr. Jackson calls me a fruit fly."

"I'm scared, Dana," she whispered and glanced around, her eyes growing frantic.

"Don't be. I'm right here, and Kendal will be here as soon as I can get ahold of him, okay?"

"Call him, please?" She gripped my hand tightly and forced me to stop rubbing her.

"I'm here." He walked in and moved to the other side of the bed, dropping to his knees and placing his strong fingers around her hand and mind. "I'm right here. I was on my way up here. Were you throwing another fit just to see me?"

"No." She turned her face toward me and let out a sob. "I don't wanna die, bubba. Please make it stop."

Tears blurred my eyes as I leaned toward her and pressed my cheek to the side of her face. I couldn't look at Kendal, but the soft panting coming from his side of the bed let me know that he was hurting beyond anything any of us could heal. The results were back for Amanda's decreased use of her limbs. She was getting worse... fast. There was little they could do, but the doctor was hoping for a few more good months for her. No one had told Kendal yet, or not that I knew of.

"Fuck," he mumbled and got up, walking to the window and pressing his hands to his face as his shoulders shook violently.

I glanced up as Dr. Lewis walked in. "Hi there, Dana. You doing okay, sweet girl?"

"She's worn out." I stood up, but kept my hold on her hand.

The doctor glanced over at me and nodded. "Let's get you a good nap and then we'll grab anything you want from the cafeteria or get your unruly brother to run down to Burger King like you like. That sound good?"

Amanda nodded and turned a little to look at Kendal. "I'm sorry, bubba. Forgive me."

He turned and shook his head, walking to the bed and reaching down to brush his fingers by her cheek. "No, hush that. I'm just lost right now. I'd give everything I had to have me in that bed and you up here wasting your life on stupid shit."

"What stupid shit?" she mumbled and closed her eyes as Dr. Lewis gave her an injection.

"Nothing, sweetie. Rest and I'll be here when you wake up."

"You promise," she whispered.

He leaned down farther and kissed her forehead several times. "Promise."

My heart ripped in two as he glanced up at Dr. Lewis with so much pain in his expression. "Save her, Nick. Find

something that will slow this down.”

“I wish I could, old friend.” He extended his hand toward Kendal. “You need to start preparing for end of life.”

“What?” He pushed Nick’s hand back and walked around the bed, his expression crumbling in grief. “You save her. You promised my mother that you would.”

“I know, Kendal. I’ve done all I c-”

“Well, it’s not enough!” He walked out into the hallway and turned toward the cafeteria.

“I’m going after him.” I got up and walked toward the door, half expecting the lead physician for the floor to tell me to mind my own business. He didn’t.

I rounded the corner and saw him standing outside of the hospital in the small garden area out back. I pushed the doors open and stopped before going any farther. What the fuck was I doing? I didn’t know Kendal and he was lost in a moment of grief. He had a girlfriend or maybe a mom or dad that he could call, right? Where was everyone?

He turned and slipped his hands into his pockets as he glanced down at the ground. “I’m sorry.”

“What? For what?” I let the door close behind me and walked toward him, stopping at a comfortable space between us.

“I don’t know.” He glanced up and took a long breath. “Fuck me. She’s all I have left.”

“Where are your parents?” I shouldn’t have asked. It was none of my business.

“Mom’s dead from MS and dad left us a long time ago.” He shrugged and pulled his hands from his pockets to wipe at his face. “It should be me in there.”

“Why do you say that?” I reached out and touched his shoulder, knowing that I shouldn’t but I couldn’t help myself. I was an empath to a fault.

“Amanda would live her life to the fullest. She’d find someone to love and change the world beside him. I can’t even match my socks most days.” He laughed, but the sound fell flat.

“You wanna grab a cup of coffee? She’s going to be resting for a few hours at least.”

He didn’t respond right away, but instead searched my face as if looking for the meaning to life. I met his stare, unwilling to shy away for fear of seeing something I could come to covet. So much passion and life lay trapped behind the dullness in his eyes. The promise of losing someone had the power to overshadow all else.

“I’d like that.” He moved around me and held the door open. “Help me get my mind off of all of this. I’m close to cracking for the first time in a long time.”

“Right. It’s understandable.” I swallowed my questions about his mother’s bout with MS and walked beside him to the cafeteria. “I’m an intern here, not sure if you knew that.”

“An intern? Really?” His expression softened a little. “And you’re studying to be a nurse or a doctor?”

“A nurse for now, but I think I might move to New York next year and try to get into premed.” I shrugged. “It’s a pipe dream seeing that we’re not exactly teeming with money, but who knows.”

“No boyfriend or husband to hold you here?” He opened the door to the cafeteria and moved back to let me through. His dark brown hair always seemed to be a little messy, which made me want to reach out and run my fingers through it. The man was dangerous.

“I have a boyfriend, but if we’re not talking about any of your depressing stuff, we’re certainly not talking about mine.” I forced a smile and stopped in front of the coffee machines. I grabbed two cups and handed him one as he moved up close beside me, his shoulder brushing against mine. He was far too handsome not to be swept up in some fantastical love affair.

“Your boyfriend is a depressing conversation?” He smiled down at me. “I almost want to hear this story.”

“Misery loves company?” I laughed and pumped the coffee machine as I let my imagination run wild.

His phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket. “Damn. I need to get this. Rain check?”

“Of course. Any time.” I took the cup back and forced my disappointment to fade. It was stupid.

“Dinner? Friday night?”

“Just friends?” I turned and lifted my cup to my nose, breathing in deeply.

“Of course.” He winked, turned and walked back toward the belly of the hospital.

Could anyone be just friends with a man like Kendal? I doubted it, but I was determined to try.

CHAPTER 9



KENDAL

Three Days Later

Prepare for end of life? How the fuck did someone do that?

I hadn't told Damon or anyone else about my conversation with Dr. Lewis. I just couldn't handle the sympathy that would come from such a conversation, especially from Damon. Bethany had ignored me on Tuesday when she showed up for her TA duties, which was fine. It was easier than having to talk about bullshit when the real stuff that mattered sat on the tip of my tongue.

I needed to get the dark emotions rolling inside of me out, but I wasn't quite sure how.

Having lunch with Damon and dinner with the pretty young nurse from the hospital would help. Maybe.

Eliza was waiting outside of my office as I approached that morning, a smug look on her face.

"There you are." She lifted her watch and tapped it. "Late. Late. Late."

"I'm fashionably late." I shrugged and dangled my keys between us. "Move and let me open the door. You can come in and give me hell while I take a load off."

"You do look like a man with a lot on his mind." She moved back as I got the door opened and unloaded my stuff.

I turned and motioned for her to take the seat across from my desk. "I'm a single thirty-one-year-old professor with a

pretty face and a motorcycle. Why wouldn't I have a lot on my mind?"

She laughed and dropped down across from me. "You missed our department meeting yesterday. Why?"

"Ahh shit. Did I really?" I turned and looked up at my calendar. The meeting was written in red handwriting and circled four times. "Did I write that?"

"No, I did." She chuckled. "Yesterday while you were out of your office, after you missed the meeting."

"I did it on purpose." I gave her my full attention as I rested my forearms on my desk. "I couldn't handle another room of people staring at me."

"I get that." She tilted her head to the side a little. "Tell me what's up with you and Heather. Are you seeing her?"

"What? Hell no." I leaned back in my chair and tried to figure out where Eliza was going with the conversation.

"You should. She's beautiful, young, funny..."

"We fucked in college. A lot." I blurted it out before I lost my nerve. "Like more than you'd want to know about. We're both pretending not to know each other, but I fucking can't stand seeing her, Eliza. It's like having someone dig up your worst memories and slash them in your face over and over."

"Oh. Wow." She crossed her legs and stared at me for a few seconds before speaking again. "She talks so highly of you."

"She wants to get together again."

"Like, sex?"

"No, well, I don't know. Whatever she wants, I'm not that boy anymore. I'm a different guy altogether. That bastard was buried when I got my diploma." I brushed my fingers over my lips wondering why the hell I felt comfortable enough to blurt out my darkest shit to a colleague, especially an older woman like Eliza. She was all I had at the moment and it was eating me alive.

“I see. Have you told her all of this? That you’re not at all interested anymore?”

“Yes.” I stood and slipped my hands into my pockets before I started to pace the small space behind my desk. “She’s not going to take no for an answer.”

“She said that?”

I glanced over at Eliza. “Yes. She did.”

“Go tell Mark, Kendal. That’s sexual harassment.”

I snorted. “Very funny. As if anyone would take my word over hers.”

“All of us would.” She stood as well.

“No, you would, but no one else would. I have two strikes against me. One more, whether it’s my fault or not and all my years of working hard to come teach right here at UT are gone. Lost.” I started to pace again as I studied the carpet beneath me. “She’s going to cut my legs out from underneath me unless I give in to her.”

“And you really believe this?”

“Hell yeah. I’m half tempted to just give in, but some part of me believes in love. What she and I would have...” I pointed to myself and to the door, “it wouldn’t be anything but two people using each other. I just can’t do it.”

“Good for you. Most men would fall over themselves to get a woman like Heather to notice them.”

I snorted. “And they would soon realize the error of their ways.”

“Maybe.” She walked to the door and paused. “You need to talk with Mark, Kendal. This isn’t something to play around with.”

“Maybe so. I’ll think about it.”

“Is there someone else? Another woman who has your attention?”

Dana fluttered by my mind, but I released it quickly. She was a young nurse with a boyfriend who was headed halfway across the country in a year. She was off limits too. It was almost concerning how bad the idea of not getting to invest any of myself in her felt. She wasn't a pupil who needed training or instruction.

No, she seemed like a woman who needed a man. A good one. Something I wasn't.

"Kendal?" Eliza spoke softly.

"Hm? Oh, sorry. No, there is no one else. I'm not that lucky, my friend. Not yet at least."



"Wait a minute. You're letting this slutty bitch run all over you because why?" Damon pressed his hands to his face and let his head drop back.

The sun sat high in the sky as we lounged by the pool at the back of his bachelor pad. I could have spent the day laying there, doing nothing, but Damon seemed to be incessant on giving me advice. It must have been to keep him from taking any himself.

"Dude... she's not *running all over me*." I rolled my eyes and leaned back, closing my eyes and trying to remember why I'd come over in the first place.

"Yes, she is. Put her over your knee and spank her fine ass, or turn her in for being the slut she is." He was resorting back to being the asshole he was in college. Bethany's lack of influence on him was frightening.

"I'm not a twenty-year-old kid with nothing to lose, Damon."

"Do you wanna fuck her?"

"Yes, of course I do. I have a dick. Jeez." I grabbed it for good measure.

He busted out laughing and stood up. “Have I apologized for being so insensitive the other day?”

“No, but there is no need. You’re a jerk. I get it.”

“Come on, man. Don’t do that.” He turned toward me and rolled his shoulders. “I’m going nuts without her, Kendal. I need to get her back.”

“Then go get her.”

“She’s gotta come back. Don’t you know how this works? I’m not chasing her down after she left her damn ring on my nightstand. How desperate would that be?”

“How desperate are you?”

“Not that much.” He walked toward the house. “I’m getting a beer. You want one?”

“Yes.” I let my eyes move across the perfectly manicured lawn and felt grateful that money wasn’t the solution to my problems. Here Damon had everything and his life was just as fucked up as mine, just in a different way.

“Why aren’t you sleeping with Heather again? The woman is willing to do anything in the bedroom.”

“You sleep with her.” I took the beer as he growled.

“I’m not sleeping with anyone but Beth.”

“You don’t have Beth.”

“It’s temporary.” He shrugged and popped the top on his beer. “She’s going to come around.”

“You need to grow the fuck up.” I tossed the top to my bottle at him. “She’s not one of the usual whores you take home, Damon. She’s a sweet girl with a great heart.”

“You getting sweet on her?”

“And if I was?” I was more than willing to toss him around the yard a little if he wanted to get aggressive with me. It would do us both some good for sure. Even at thirty-one, we were both fit enough to give the other a run for his money.

“Shit. You’d be a better match for her.” He lifted his beer to his lips.

“Then let her go.”

“Never. Are you kidding me? She makes me feel alive, even now. I can’t remember hurting this bad since walking in on my mother and that fucker she was cheating on dad with. Emotions... all of them are welcomed in my life. I hate the devastation of loss fucking me up right now, but it’s still mine to own. I love her.”

“You guys are idiots.” I drank deeply of the cold beer and closed my eyes. “I’m not sleeping with Heather.”

“And you’re a good man for it. Now, who are you sleeping with?”

“No one. It’s been two years, and no one.” I got up, not wanting to get in a discussion about sex with the king of cum himself.

“We need to take you out, man. Seriously? How are you surviving?”

“Just fine.” I shrugged and finished the beer.

“You always have been a horrible liar.”

“Yeah, I know.” I tossed the bottle in the pool just to hear him bitch about it.

“Come on, asshole.” He got up as I laughed.

“There is this one girl. She’s an intern at the hospital.”

“An intern?” He handed me his beer and picked up the pool net to fish out my bottle. “How old is this intern?”

“I don’t know. Twenty-four maybe?”

“Cradle robber.” He smiled over his shoulder.

“You’ve no room to talk.”

“I’m a single man. What are you talking about?” He tossed the wet bottle at me, spraying my button down and slacks with a handful of water.

“I deserved that.” I finished his beer and pitched it into the pool and he growled loudly. Why pissing him off felt so good was beyond me, but boy did it.

“Tell me about this girl. Does she know CPR because I’m seriously considering drowning your ass if you throw another thing in the pool?” He worked on getting the bottle out as I sunk back down into my chair.

“She’s beautiful, man. Long black hair, full lips, hazel-colored eyes, big round bottom and thin waist.” I groaned loudly and closed my eyes.

“Don’t come in my pool chair, dude. I’ve seen enough of your shit in my day. We’re grown up now, remember?” He snorted as I smiled.

“You miss it.” I tossed the bottle in my hand at him and he caught it.

“No, I miss my woman. I just have to move past my pride and figure out how the hell to get her back.”

I nodded and checked my watch. “I gotta get back. I need to grade some papers before my date tonight.”

“Hold up. Date tonight? The nurse?” He walked back toward me and offered me a hand.

I swatted it away and got up. “Yeah, the nurse.”

“Why’ve you been up at the hospital so much lately? Mandy not doing well?”

“No, man. She’s not.” I shrugged. “Dr. Lewis said to start preparing for-”

The air in my lungs left me as I struggled to make out the rest of my sentence.

“Hell no, Kendal. When did you talk to him?”

“On Tuesday.” I glanced down at my hands and took deep breaths through my nose. “I can’t even imagine life without her.”

“Shit, dude. Why didn’t you call me?” He gripped my shoulders tightly before dragging me into a tight hug. “We’ll

get through this, okay? I'm right here. I'd do anything you need me to. You guys need more money? You can have all of mine."

"No." I pushed at him and forced the hot lump in my throat back down. "We need more time. You got any of that?"

"I wish, man. If I did... it would be yours." He gripped my shoulder and gave me a sad smile. "How long?"

"I don't know. I didn't have the balls to ask."

"I wouldn't have either."



I spent the rest of the afternoon grading papers, grateful for the solitude. Diving into my work was the best thing for me as I tried to ignore all the shit swirling around above my head. It was only a matter of time before everything came crashing down. I only hoped that it wouldn't happen all at once.

Seeing Dana later that night was the small ray of light I needed in the day, though I knew where things would lead. I didn't honestly care that she had a boyfriend, or that she was moving. I wanted to make her laugh, to see her smile, to hear her story. She was nothing more than a stranger to me and yet her kindness to my sister had me wanting to push our awkward friendship into something more.

What did she taste like? Sound like when she cried out in orgasm?

"Stop it," I growled under my breath as my cock throbbed in my slacks. I reached down and pressed my hand against it. Pleasure shot through my center and embarrassment stained my skin. Even if Dana let me take her to bed, how long would I last? Not long seeing that I'd been denying myself the touch of a woman for fucking ever.

"You always talk to yourself?" Heather.

I was grateful the bitch was behind me as I worked from the opposite side of my desk. I pulled a folder into my lap and

turned slowly, giving her a pleasant, professional smile.

“Hi, Dr. Turner. What can I do for you?”

“Such a loaded question, Kendal.” She moved into the office and pulled the door toward her before stopping. “Mind if I come in for a few minutes?”

“Nope. Not at all, but make it quick. I have a date tonight.”

“A date. How fun.” She closed the door and walked around to sit in my large black leather chair. “And who is this lucky girl that’s going to get her first real fuck?”

I pursed my lips and shook my head. “You haven’t changed a bit, have you?”

“Not in the slightest.”

CHAPTER 10



DANA

Above everything else going wrong with my Friday, Mr. Jackson wasn't in his usual room. It seemed silly to ask around about him, when most of the catty women on the floor with me would have poked fun at me rather than just answering the damn question. I'd have to look into it later.

A text came through on my phone from Cameron, asking if I wanted to go to dinner. Guilt ran rampant inside of me as I walked to the break room and sat down at the nearest table. He was the one I should have been going to dinner with, not Kendal. Though it was supposed to be nothing more than two friends going out for a shared meal, I knew I wanted more. I wanted to take away his pain, and there was only a few ways I could think to do that... none of them appropriate for a woman in a committed relationship.

The phone rang and I answered it.

"Hey," I mumbled into the receiver.

"Are you not wanting to go because of us fighting over your food?" Cameron's voice was pinched with anger.

"No. I have plans already with an adviser from school, but if you want me to cancel, I will." I realized just how much I disliked him as I considered changing my evening around to suit his desires.

"No, it's fine." He cleared his throat. "I figured you were just pissed over me helping you, but remember you asked for help. I was fine sitting on the sidelines and quietly supporting you in your fight against your flab."

“Fight against my flab?” I glanced down as tears filled my eyes. Was I flabby? Is that the word he used for my body?

“Oh hell. Here we go again.”

“Nope. Here we don’t.” I hung up and set the phone down on the table in front of me.

“Dana, you all right?” Dr. Lewis. The older doctor reminded me a lot of my dad with his thin body, long mustache and kind eyes.

“Yeah. Just fighting with the significant other in my life. It’s okay though. I’m good.” I forced a smile and wiped at my eyes. “Drama just seems to follow me like a bad omen.”

“Well, that’s because you’re a good person.” He patted my back as he stood beside me. “I appreciate all you’ve done for Amanda Tarrington. That poor boy, Kendal has been through hell. His daddy left when they were kids and his mother started to show signs of MS soon thereafter. Kendal’s been in this hospital for most of his teenage and adult years, caring for Melinda and now Amanda.”

“And she died when?”

“Melinda? His mom?”

“Yes, Sir.” I pushed my chair back and stood up.

“About six years ago.” He shook his head. “Sometimes the worst part of our job is having to watch people suffer in an endless cycle of death. The boy deserves a good future.”

“He’s not so much a boy anymore, right?” I laughed as Dr. Lewis’ face softened.

“I guess you’re right. He’s not.” He slipped his hands into his pockets. “Thank you again for caring. It’s going to make you one of the best nurses in this hospital.”

“Thanks, doctor.” I didn’t comment on my date with Kendal or the fact that New York was looking more and more like a possibility in my life. I didn’t know Dr. Lewis any more than I knew Tinsley. Everyone was just a name to remember and another person to impress.

Indecision raced over me about whether having dinner with Kendal was a good idea. I sure as hell wasn't going out with Cameron, but that didn't mean I wanted him to see me out with someone as good looking as Kendal. He'd never believe that it was just a friendly dinner, hell, I wasn't sure if I believed it. The only thing that gave me comfort was the fact that Kendal Tarrington would never fall for a girl like me. I wasn't nearly enough woman for him.

I couldn't go. Plain and simple. Pulling out my phone, I texted him quickly that having dinner would be great, but just didn't seem right since I was dating someone. Maybe coffee again sometime or a sandwich at the hospital.

It was a shitty move on my part, especially seeing that we were supposed to meet up in the next couple of hours.

I forced the ill feeling that was working its way up my chest back down and went in search of Jackie. She was my only friend in the hospital, and at times it seemed like the whole damn city. Olivia would understand my concerns and help walk me through what to do, but she was a zillion miles away and had her own problems.

"She's dating an asshole of her own," I grumbled. Luke Taylor was a douche bag and a half, and I'd yet to meet him. Just hearing about the way he treated Olivia had my blood boiling. Funny enough, I wasn't doing much better with my choices either.

I checked every nurses' station on the fifth through seventh floor of the hospital looking for Jackie, but came up short. I remembered the small room she liked to sneak away to at the end of the eighth floor and headed there. I wasn't sure her advice would be any better than the shit running through my head, but it was worth a try.

The racing around left me winded, and I stopped outside the small room and tried to catch my breath as I panted loudly. It was embarrassing. Cameron might be a total ass, but he was right about me being a couch potato, which was his favorite nickname for me.

The panting coming from inside the room was louder than my own, which gave me pause. Was she?

I pushed the door open and yelled.

Parks glanced over his shoulder, his shirt off and slacks down over the smooth curve of his ass.

“I am so sorry.” I couldn’t seem to take my eyes off of him and shut the fucking door. He had to be every woman’s wicked fantasy. His dark hair was spiked high on his head as if he was a rebel leader for a group of sex gods, his skin tan and stretched across miles of muscles.

“Hey. Stop checking out the goods.” Jackie leaned around him, and I realized he was fucking her as she sat on the examination table.

“Oh shit. Sorry.” I jerked backward and slammed the door. “Stop panting so loud. I can hear it out here.”

Worry raced through me as I glanced around. She was going to get caught. They both were.

How exciting. I groaned as I swallowed the need pumping through me for that type of thrill, to live a little beyond my comfort zone with someone like Dr. Parks.

By the time I made it to my car, my whole body ached for a strong, aggressive man to hold me down and lay waste to my two months of chastity. It wasn’t by choice.

A groan left my lips as I pulled out into traffic and tried to clear my mind. Cameron was at home. I could just force myself on him and keep my eyes closed. I could pretend he was Parks.

“No. Kendal.” Another groan as a dull ache rose between my thighs, quickly turning into a violent pulse.

Tears blurred my vision, but I wiped them away. Why did Jackie have thrilling sexcapades in the hospital and I didn’t? I could come up with a few reasons, one being that I was a responsible adult, but sadly enough, the idea of her being beautiful and me being just me kept racing through my mind and throwing ice water on my lust.

By the time I made it to the apartment, all I wanted was a hot bath, a cold beer and a gallon of ice cream. Wicked-hot sex was for extreme people with naughty agendas and the balls to fuck where they wanted to.

That would *never* be me.

I parked the car and walked up to the apartment as dread filled my insides. I had a fight coming, not a long night of passion. Cameron and I had ended our conversation much like all of them had ended over the last years. One of us hanging up on the other.

“Baby?” I pushed the door open and walked into the dark apartment. After flipping on lights and trying to figure out what was out of place, I realized what it was. His stuff was gone.

“What the fuck?” I walked through the apartment and stopped to check my watch. We’d talked an hour before, and then he came over and took all of his stuff out of the house? Why?

I dropped my stuff on the kitchen table and choked back a sob. It was a good thing that he’d ended the relationship. I wouldn’t have had the nerve to, but for some reason, it didn’t feel so great that he had.

Relief would come soon, but rejection seemed to be the only feeling worthy of my time in the moment.

I walked to the bedroom and stripped out of my clothes, not caring where anything landed. No one was going to bitch about me being a slob or not cleaning up after myself. No more badgering me over my food or how fat I was.

After taking a deep breath, I face-planted on the bed and let out a long scream into my pillow. It was a good thing that he was gone, but if so, then why did it sting so damn bad?

Sliding my hands along the cold mattress, I brushed my fingers over a piece of paper.

“A note?” I sat up and moved to the edge of the bed in the darkness. Leaning over, I flipped on the light and unfolded it as my unhealthy lunch rose in my chest.

Dana,

I'm sorry this is ending like this, but I just can't do this anymore. As a man who takes good care of my car, my office, my clothes, my body... I'm tired of hoping that you'll do the same. Hopefully through this loss you'll figure out how to start caring more about yourself. You're a pretty girl, but you've got a lot of growing up to do. I thought I could hang out in hopes of you doing it faster, but I can't. I left everything that we bought together as a gift. I know you're struggling financially. If you need help with the rent, just call and I'll spot you for a month or so until you figure out what you're going to do. Moving in with your mom might be a good choice, or not, seeing that she cooks the worst food in the world for you. Anyway, I'm rambling.

Good luck to you. Take care of yourself - like really take care of yourself.

Cameron

“Wow.” I let out a shaky sigh and forbid myself to cry. There was no way in hell I was going to shed another tear for that asshole. Take care of myself? Was I so fucking grotesque that having an ice cream or a beer from time to time was going to break me?

Obviously in his jacked up opinion. I wadded up the note and pitched it across the room before flopping down on my back and pressing my palms to my face. My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I wrestled it out angrily to see a text from Kendal.

Kendal: It's just a friendly dinner between two people who care about Mandy. Don't leave me hanging unless it's going to

mess up what you have going with your man.

Me: I'm not sure I'm in the mood for company, Kendal. This day has been... so fucked up.

Kendal: Then come out with me. We'll get drunk and talk about the state of the world today.

Me: LOL. If you insist, but I'm getting in my pajamas and testing the theory that a gallon of ice cream will melt before anyone can fully eat it.

Kendal: Ha. I'd say save me some, but you seem hell bent on having all of it. Enjoy it then. Give me your address and I'll come by and shake your guy's hand before I take you to dinner.

I texted him my address, but didn't have the nerve to tell him that there was no man in my life anymore. Where it would free me up to spend the night in his arms if he offered, it was a stupid hope. It would only serve to crush me more when he patted me on the head and dropped me back off at the apartment later that night. Men like Kendal Tarrington didn't date broke, overweight girls like me. Those stories were reserved for fairy tales.

Besides, I couldn't even keep Cameron.

There was little to no hope for doing better.

CHAPTER 11



KENDAL

I glanced down at my phone as it buzzed, and responded to Dana's messages as Heather sat across from me, watching me with interest that I couldn't return. She was a huge contributor to the depravity Damon and I let ourselves get sucked into the belly of in college. Where I wouldn't change much, I sure as fuck didn't want to relive any of it.

A smile lifted my lips at Dana's confession of wanting to take out a gallon of ice cream. I'd have my man card taken if I mentioned that I'd done just that on several occasions.

"You like her." Heather's tone was almost playful.

I glanced up. "Yeah. She's a great lady. I'm looking forward to getting to know her better."

"And she's aware of your appetites?" She licked her lips and lifted her eyebrows.

"I'm not who I was, Heather. I don't have appetites."

"Shame, really." She reached toward my desk and slid a piece of paper around in a slow circle. "You're being stubborn for no reason at all. I know you're not seeing anyone. I'm not either. It's a damn shame to not take advantage of us being single together."

"And why would we degrade each other by fucking like rabbits when we have no desire at all to be in a relationship with each other?" I tucked my phone into my pocket as I tried to work through how I was going to get out of the room

unscathed. The woman before me had been such a good pet, such a plentiful whore to me only six short years before.

“What does a relationship have to do with any of it, Kendal?” She got up and walked around to my side of the desk before resting her perfect ass against it and lifting her beautiful leg as she dragged her foot up the side of my leg, under the folder resting on my lap and by my sack.

I grabbed her ankle and stifled a groan, biting my lip and glaring at her.

“Don’t.”

“Why not?” She leaned forward, pressed her knee to my chest as I slid my fingers over the top of her heel and tried not to envision the night we could have together. I didn’t want a woman beneath me for just a night. If I was going to try again, it was going to be something long-term, something pure and right that I didn’t have to feel like shit over.

“Because, I’m not interested.” I leaned over and put her foot back on the floor as she slipped her fingers through my hair and gripped tightly.

“I doubt that’s the truth. You might be a little gun shy because of all the shit that’s happened to you while you’ve been here, but you’re interested.”

I swatted her hand away from me and stood to my full height, tired of her games. I reached out and gripped the base of her pretty neck and leaned against her.

“I would think you had grown tired of being a slut.” I breathed in deeply, letting the scent of her perfume and arousal work its way down into my lungs. I wasn’t with anyone. Dana was just a pretty girl I wanted to know, but it was futile, wasn’t it? She had a man already. Who the fuck was I kidding anyway? She wouldn’t want a man like me anyway. I was far too damaged for a hopeful young woman with the world laid out before her.

Heather’s hands slid down my sides and over my hips to grip my ass roughly. “I love being your slut. You know just where to touch me, how hard to fuck me.”

“Stop.” I slid my hand down her chest, between her ample breasts and stepped back. Every part of me wanted to tear her skirt up her thighs and bend her over my desk for a long hard session of picking which hole would make her moan harder, but I couldn’t. If I started down that path again, I’d be stuck there. I fucking hated that guy. “Get out.”

“What? No way.” She reached for my belt and tugged at it while cupping me with her free hand. “You’re hard as a rock.”

“I was sexting with my girl before you barged in. If you’re here for a reason related to work, we can talk, but if you’re here to offer yourself up, I’d rather you didn’t bore me.” I pulled her hand from my cock and walked around to the other side of my desk. “Close the door behind you.”

“Kendal. You’re being ridiculous.”

“No, you are. You come into my place of employment and hike up your skirt like we’re still fucking kids who act like nothing matters but our next high. I’m a grown-ass man. This is my life. This is what matters most to me. Not you...” I pointed to my phone as anger burned through me, “not her. Nothing. No one but this job. It’s what I’ve wanted my whole life. If you’re not here to respect that, then get the fuck out.”

She laughed and walked toward the door. “You just fucked up big time.”

“No, I didn’t, but thanks for the threat. I already spoke with Mark today about your bull shit, so expect him to call you into his office soon. Sexual harassment goes both ways, Heather.”

“I call your bluff.” She opened the door and paused to look over her shoulder. “You’d never call attention to me.”

“And why’s that?” I put my hands on my hips, hating that she was right. I’d have to go to Mark now that I’d said I’d done it already. There was nothing worse than letting her know she got to me.

“Because that would fling wide the door to the past and the last thing you want is for them to dig just a little into the sorry bastard you were before you walked across that big ass stage

and got your ticket to a cleaner life, right? You're still that guy, and I'm going to prove it." She slammed my door so hard that the pictures shook on the walls.

"Fuck." I ran my fingers by my lips and tried to swallow the need pulsing through me. I hated myself for wanting her, but it wasn't some longing for her specifically, but for someone - shit, anyone.

I was in no mood to try and play it safe around Dana tonight, but letting her down sounded far worse than suffering myself. I could get through the night. She had a man, and she was going to New York. I just needed to keep those two things in mind and we would be good.



I took the longest route offered to me from my phone to get to Dana. I needed a chance to cool down completely before I vomited all my dirty deeds in front of her. I wanted someone to tell me that things were different, that there was a chance to find happiness with someone else for more than just one night. Ana had been all of those things. She knew all about my past and was fine with pushing her limits in the bedroom with me. She accepted the parts of me that I was proud of, and those I hated most.

"And she's gone. Get over it." I ran my fingers through my hair as I pulled into the parking lot for Dana's apartment. The pretty girl who had been more than good to my sister didn't need any of my emotional baggage dragged in behind me, not even for a night.

I pulled the mirror down from above my head and checked my reflection. I put my glasses on and turned from left to right, trying to decide if looking studious was better.

"You freaking pansy." I got out of the car and let out a long exhale as I walked toward the apartment complex. Number three ten was on the third floor, and for some reason I figured taking the stairs would help me bleed out some of the piss and

vinegar racing through my veins. I lifted my hand to knock on the door and paused. Was I making a mistake?

It's not sex. It's just dinner. Shit.

I knocked before I could talk myself out of it and walk back to my car, forgoing the night, which seemed to almost be what both of us wanted.

Dana looked beyond cute in her tank top and sleeping pants. I was taken aback by how much of a sex kitten she was. Her long dark hair danced around her shoulders as she gave me a sweet smile. Praise God she had a bra on. I'd not have survived otherwise.

"I told you it was a rough day. Where are your pjs?" She lifted her eyebrow and moved back, her gallon of chocolate ice cream held closely to her.

I reached out and took the spoon sticking out of it, slipping it in my mouth and nodded as she laughed. "I sleep naked." I tried to speak around the spoon, causing her to laugh more. I loved it. Simple. Beautiful. Sexy.

"Get in here." She reached out and grabbed the front of my shirt, pulling me toward her. She moved at the last minute to keep us from colliding, and I lamented over the lost opportunity to touch her. We were in deep shit, at least I was.

"Why the rough day?" I licked the spoon and went for another spoonful. She grabbed it from me and sucked on it as she turned her back to me and walked back into the living room.

"I don't want to talk about it."

A groan lodged in my throat as I caught a perfect outline of her panties under the soft Bugs Bunny pants she wore. A tight little G-string from what I could make out.

"Why not?" I forgot why I was asking what I was, but it seemed to fit the conversation by the look on her face as she turned around and dropped down on the couch.

"Because. I'm tired of feeling like shit thanks to other people fucking me over. I'd rather just wipe my hands clean of

the madness and move forward.”

“I like that.” I sat down next to her and reached for a small white couch pillow to cover up my raging erection. I was acting like the nineteen-year-old idiot that apparently still lived in my head and controlled my dick.

“Good. You wanna watch a movie?” She cleaned off the spoon and dipped it back into the ice cream, offering me the spoon.

Where I was sure she expected me to take it from her, I decided to risk it and lean in. I kept my eyes on her as I opened my mouth and pulled the cold ice cream from the spoon.

She glanced down toward the bucket as her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink.

Was she a virgin? Innocent still? Sure seemed like it. The fact that I wanted to know left me with one conclusion. We had to get out of the house or I was going to replace one treat with another.

“I’d rather take you to my favorite pizza place. You promised me dinner.” I licked at my lips and glanced around the small living room, looking for evidence of a boyfriend.

Must not be a live-in, which was a point in my favor.

“Are you okay with me wearing my pjs?” She gave me a cheeky grin and got up.

“Anything you’re comfortable with, I most certainly am.” I leaned back and let out a long sigh, feeling a sense of peace that made little to no sense. “Wanna hear about the latest bull shit going on at my work?”

“I’d love to.” She walked toward the kitchen. “Talk loud so I can hear you though.”

The soft jiggle of her rear had my body aching far past anything Heather could have caused. What was it with this sweet little nurse that left my heart racing? It wasn’t her. Surely not. It had to be me denying myself too long.

If that was the case, then Heather's attention would have left me coming on myself. It wasn't anything other than a carnal attraction to her.

She looks like Ana.

She did in some ways, but all beautiful Hispanic women did, at least to me. Maybe it was my desire to see her everywhere I went. It had died down a lot, but there were still times where I would find myself searching for her, praying to catch just a glimpse of her again.

"Kendal?" Dana walked out of the kitchen and leaned against the doorframe.

My eyes dragged across her and I swallowed. "Yeah?"

"What happened at work?"

"Get dressed and I'll tell you in the car." I leaned back and closed my eyes as my pulse raced. I could get through a dinner with her and keep things friendly. I'd been pushing women away for six years.

Tonight would be no different.

CHAPTER 12



DANA

I tried to convince myself that I was being stupid as I walked to the bedroom. There was no way Kendal was undressing me with his eyes, and yet I'd seen the look on his face on plenty of men I'd dated before Cameron. It was the look I'd get just before I found myself naked, panting and pinned to a bed.

Pursing my lips, I let it go and found a cute blue sundress and sandals that would work. I checked my hair in the mirror and decided to leave it down, though it was still a little muggy this time of year.

"You ready to tell all?" I stopped by the couch and indulged in the sight of him. His dark blue button up brought out the tan of his skin. His dark messy hair was almost too much, but it was the need in his eyes to be accepted, to be cared for, that almost crippled me. I was most likely assigning him issues he didn't have, but either way, I wanted to know his story. There was more to him than he'd shared thus far, which was understandable. We'd had coffee once - sort of.

"You gonna open me up like a diary?" He got up and adjusted his slacks before walking to the door and holding it open for me.

"If you let me. I'd love to hear your story." I walked out into the hall and forced myself to not reach for him. It would have been so easy to slip my hand into his or wrap my arm around the back of his waist, but we weren't a couple. Shit, we were barely friends.

“It’s a tragedy. You okay with that?” He waited for me to go down the stairs and then followed me.

“I’m sure there are good parts along the timeline, right?”

“Yeah, of course. I love my job. Teaching has always been something I wanted to do. It just took for fucking ever to get my PhD so that I could teach.” He smiled and reached out and grabbed my arm as I started to trip over an uneven patch of concrete.

“Thanks,” I mumbled as I righted myself. “Jeez.”

He chuckled. “And I assume you love nursing as good as you are at it.”

Warmth filled me as I smiled. “I do love it. It’s a good fit for my personality. I’m one of those sad souls that just wants to help everyone and I usually end up burned because of it.” I shrugged as if it were really no big deal.

“I’m right over here. The white Lexus.” He nodded toward the car and glanced over at me. “I don’t think that’s a sad situation at all. Thanks to you, my sister isn’t having continuous panic attacks. I think her knowing that you’re just down the hall has helped out a lot.”

“I care about your sister.” I got in the car and watched him through the front window as he walked around to get into the driver’s side. His slacks hugged his hips tightly, leaving the bulge at the front of his pants accentuated, or maybe not. Maybe he was a little bigger than I was used to.

As if that matters.

“You look beautiful, by the way. Tell your man I said that if he forgets to compliment you tonight.” He winked and started the car.

I chuckled and decided to leave that part of the story until later in the evening. Telling him that my boyfriend of two years dropped me like a sack of rocks with nothing more than a note didn’t seem like a positive start to the evening.

“Thank you. Now... tell me about the situation you’re dealing with at work. Maybe I can help.”

He reached up and turned on the air conditioner. “All right, but it’s embarrassing. You up for hearing something a little too personal?”

I nodded as excitement raced through me. “Absolutely. Spill all of it.”

“This coming from the pretty girl who blushed when I ate ice cream off the spoon *she* offered me.”

“What? I did not.” I buckled up as he teased me.

“You did. It was cute.” He glanced over at me and winked. “All right, I’ll tell all, but no judging me. Promise?”

I held up my fingers. “Scouts honor.”

“Were you a girl scout?”

“No and you’re getting off topic.” I pushed at his shoulder as he pulled out of the parking lot.

“True, but I had to validate your scouts honor. You know it doesn’t mean shit if you weren’t actually in the scouts, right?”

“Really? I thought it-” I shook my head. “Get back to the story.”

He laughed deep in his chest. I loved the sound of it, and wanted to find ways to hear it again throughout the night. His whole face lit up as he smiled over at me. How easily I could fall for someone like him.

“So my best friend in the whole world and I were head of Kappa Alpha for the four years we were in it.”

“Oh no.” I groaned, having heard so many tainted stories about the KA frat. “They’re like the worst frat house on campus.”

“Right, and we were too.” He gripped the steering wheel tightly and glanced over at me. “You said no judging.”

“You’re right. No judging. Go ahead.”

“So we had a little too much fun with our sister-sorority and did some things I’m not really proud of, but none of us

were in our right mind back then. It was college, we were fucking stupid... enough said.”

“Please tell me this is going somewhere other than you getting herpes.”

He laughed again. “No, I deserved it, but I’m clean.”

“Good to know.” I shrugged as if it didn’t matter, which got me another quick chuckle from him. The man at the hospital I’d seen was overwhelmed with burdens, and not that this version of Kendal wasn’t, but there was something suddenly lighthearted about him. I wanted to know what had changed.

“So one of the girls I slept with a lot-”

“What’s your best friend’s name?” I hated the thought of him sleeping with some random chick all the time, which was juvenile and stupid. I didn’t even know him back then, and even if it were now, it was none of my damn business.

“Damon Bryant.”

“From McKenzie and Bryant? The accounting firm downtown?” I lifted my eyebrow as shock rolled through me.

“You know them? Or Damon?” His turn to lift an eyebrow. “You haven’t slept with him, right?”

“What? No.” I shook my head and snorted. “There is no way I would sleep with him. He’s like Dallas’ most eligible billionaire bachelor, which means he’s a whore. Sorry, but it’s gotta be true.”

“No, it’s true, or was. He’s really a-” He shook his head and pulled into a small hole-in-the-wall Italian place. “Enough about him. So the girl I slept with through college was a real bitch, just a hooker and a half.”

“Sounds lovely.” I got out of the car and smiled as he gave me a stern look.

“You promised no judging.”

“I lied?” I gave him a cheeky grin and opened the door for us. The place was packed, but Kendal pressed his hand to my

lower back and moved us to the bar.

He leaned over and pressed his mouth beside my ear, speaking loudly.

“You good sitting at the bar?”

“Yes.” I turned my face a little, putting us too close together.

He moved his hand back as his eyes widened a little. “Sorry. I forget most women don’t appreciate a man leading them around like he owns her.”

I moved toward the bar and waited until we were seated in a high-top table in the corner and addressed his comment.

“I think most women like a man who takes charge. I do.”

“Good to know.” His eyes lingered on me a little longer than was comfortable.

I’d have given a million bucks to look more like Jackie. He deserved a long, lean, beautiful girl to sit across the table from him and yet he was stuck with me. Just friends. Nothing to worry about.

“So the dean calls me in the other day, and guess who the new professor in my department is? And before you answer, let me add in that I’ve been set up as her mentor, you know, someone to guide her through the next year of her career.”

“Oh my God. Are you kidding me right now?” I sat back in shock. With everything going on with his sister, I wasn’t sure how he could honestly handle much more.

“No, I wish I was.” He picked up the menu as the server walked over.

“What’ll it be, love birds?”

“Oh, no, we’re just-” I tried to save us, but Kendal cut me off.

“What are you having tonight?” He winked and handed me the menu.

Warmth raced up my chest and coated my cheeks, leaving me to realize that I was blushing around him. How fucking embarrassing.

“Bud light, please.” I glanced up to find him studying me again.

“Me too.” Kendal handed the guy the menus, but kept his eyes on me.

“Stop staring at me. You’re making me uncomfortable.”

“What? Why?” He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. “Because you have a boyfriend?”

“No, because it’s just uncomfortable. I don’t know.” I shrugged and glanced around the bar, thinking it was a good time to go to the restroom. What was I doing? I was setting myself up for the motherlode of all heartaches. The beautiful man across the table wanted a friend and I was going to what, pretend to be one?

“Why is it uncomfortable, Dana?” He leaned forward, forcing me to return my attention back on him.

“Because Kendal. I look like your ugly-duckling little sister. It is what it is, but it doesn’t mean I want to dwell on it.” I was making no sense.

“You’re shitting me, right?” He reached for his beer as the waiter returned and lifted it to his lips.

“Whatever. So this woman... did she hit on you?”

“Oh yeah. She’s a whore and a half. I have no clue how I’m going to get her off my case. She’s trying to blackmail me into sleeping with her.” He chuckled. “Have you ever heard of something so ridiculous?”

“No, I mean, I can see why she would, but still...”

“Why would she? Because she’s damn desperate?” The way he watched me left me feeling nude, bare, unraveled in front of him.

“Because you’re attractive.”

“Am I now?” He wagged his eyebrows. “Like what you see?”

“And all of a sudden ballsy.” I reached out and grabbed his beer, taking a quick sip. “Nope. No drugs in your liquor.”

He laughed loudly. “Because I’m flirting I have to be drugged?”

“Perhaps.” I turned a little and lifted my beer to my lips, taking a long drink of it. “What kind of pizza are we ordering?”

“What’s your boyfriend’s name?”

“Why?” I glanced over at him, a little put off by how quickly he could leave me dreaming of something that had to be impossible.

“Because I wanna know who to apologize to.”

“It’s Cameron. Apologize for what?”

“For wanting to sweep you off your feet.” He took another drink of his beer and ordered a large pepperoni pizza with extra cheese and bacon on it for us.

I laughed and leaned back in my chair. Was this guy for real?

“What’s so funny? You don’t like bacon?”

“I love bacon, but it’s horrible for your body.” I glanced down at mine.

“I don’t give a shit what it does to my body. It tastes like heaven, and I’m starving.” He lifted his beer toward me and tilted his head to the side. “To Cameron and his last great relationship.”

I laughed loudly. “Stop teasing me. You fucking flirt.”

“I’m not usually, but I so wanna be with you tonight. The fact that you’re running off to New York forces me to pull back.”

“And not the fact that I have a boyfriend?”

“I’m not so sure he exists.” He gave me a knowing look.

“Oh, he’s exists all right.” I glanced down at my hands. “He’s an asshole and a half.”

“Get rid of him. You can do better. I promise.”

I wanted to believe him, and sitting across the table from him, I had some insane sense of false hope inside me that he would be my ‘doing better’, but it was a pipe dream. A woman hadn’t passed us that hadn’t eye-fucked him ten ways to Sunday, and I couldn’t blame any of them. I was doing it every time I got a chance too.

“I don’t need to anymore. He got rid of me today.” Tears burned my eyes more from embarrassment than from losing Cameron. I should have lied and let the night keep going the way it was, but it felt too wrong to keep up the facade. Besides, it was better to let Kendal know that I wasn’t really worthy of whatever the hell he was up to. At least Cameron didn’t think I was. I wasn’t so sure where I stood on the matter anymore.

“Hey,” he whispered and reached across the table to wipe one of my tears with the back of his fingers. “He’s a fucking idiot and this is his loss.”

“Maybe.” I shrugged and picked up my beer. “I’m okay. Seriously.”

“You like to dance?”

“What? No.” I glanced out toward the dance floor to see three people on it. It was an Italian restaurant. People didn’t dance in the middle of a-

“Come on, beautiful. Let’s go jitterbug.” He pulled me off the stool and kept my hand tightly in his as we walked on the floor.

“Kendal. No. I don’t know how to do this.”

“Me either. Just follow my lead and we’ll be good.” He laughed and spun me around the floor. Pretty soon I didn’t care who was watching or how well we were doing. I was lost to him and the feel of his strong hands gripping various parts of my body.

Worthy or not, I wanted anything he might offer.

CHAPTER 13



KENDAL

“I ‘m stuffed.” I leaned back from the table and took note of her barely eating one piece of pizza while I’d put away four. “You don’t like it?”

“No. I do. I’m just watching what I eat, you know, trying to be a little more health conscious.” She picked up her half-eaten piece and took a small bite.

“Why? Do you have high blood pressure or something?” I picked up my fourth beer and drained it. The desire to get up and dance some more swelled inside of me, but I denied it attention. Dancing with a full stomach sounded about as good as fucking the pretty girl across from me against a wall with too much in my stomach. Though, I had no doubt that if she were up for it, I’d make all of it work.

“No. I just...” She glanced around and shrugged.

“Hey. Look at me.” I reached across the table and ran my hand over her forearm as I let my eyes move across her in a way that she would know how beautiful I thought she was. Who the fuck told her differently.

“What?” She gave me a tight expression as if protecting herself.

“Eat the other half of this pizza and enjoy yourself. You’re fucking hot and whoever told you that you weren’t is a damn idiot.”

“Why would you think-?”

“Did someone?” I shouldn’t have pushed her. I was getting a little too comfortable and my guard was coming down. I almost felt sorry for her for having to deal with me.

“Yes, but he was right.” She set the pizza down and pushed the plate away. “I’m honestly full. Two beers was past my limit.”

“He wasn’t right. I promise.” I reached across the table and picked up her pizza. “You’re going to make me eat all of this by myself and throw up later. I hate wasting food.”

She reached across the table and snatched it from me. “Give me that. You’re such a pain when you’re drunk.”

“I’m not drunk.” I glanced up at the ceiling and laughed. “I feel good for the first time in weeks, but I’m not drunk. I’d be professing my undying love to you and every other woman in this place if I was wasted.”

“Oh no. A lovie type drunk, hmmm?” She took a big bite and closed her eyes, moaning softly.

“Very much so.” I licked the tips of my fingers and imagined her quivering beneath me. So perfect and soft. She might hate her curves, but I wanted to sink my fingers, my tongue, my dick into all of them.

Fuck. I was diving off the deep end.

“You okay?” She took another bite and dropped the crust on her plate.

“Yep. I’m just a little too relaxed.” I forced a laugh and got up. “You wanna go walk down to the park at the end of the street? It’s a beautiful night outside.”

“Yeah, absolutely.” She wiped her mouth, took a quick sip of her beer and took my hand.

I led us through the restaurant, out into the street, before releasing her hand. She moved up beside me and smiled shyly.

“What?”

I wrapped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her into a side hug.

“You, that’s what. That day you saved me from Terri, the man-eater, I knew we would be friends.” I moved us off the main path toward the grassy knoll where the park was.

“That was like a few days ago.” She laughed softly.

“And? When you know, you just know.” I released her and sat down in one of the two swings moving back and forth with the pressure of the wind.

“I guess you’re right.” She sat down beside me and pushed off. Her dress fluttered up her thighs and gave me a quick glimpse of white panties before she yelped and slapped her hand over her legs. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be.” I pushed off and leaned back, feeling so fucking free for a few minutes. My sister was dying in a hospital, my best friend’s life seemed ruined and mine was soon to follow, but for a few hours, I could just be carefree and let everything go. “Did you love him?”

“Who?” Her hair flew behind her and caught my attention.

“Cameron.” I reached out and let it run past my fingers as she flew by me.

“I don’t know. I wanted to, but we’re so different. He’s reserved and quiet, picky and likes everything in order.”

“And you’re messy?” I laughed as she slowed down and gave me a look.

“No, but I like to live. My mother was fine with fingerprints in the dust on the furniture. It meant we were living instead of cleaning.”

“Very true. I like things put up, but I’m not anal about it, or I don’t think I am.” I pushed off harder. “So if he was reserved and quiet, are you outgoing and wild?”

“I wish I could tell you. After two years of being told what I’m not, it’s hard to say what I am.” Her voice lost the joy it held only moments before.

I slowed down and reached out, latching on to one of the chains that held her swing in place. She jerked to a stop and I

pulled her toward me, causing my legs to spread as her knees pressed to my groin.

“I say you’re brave, empathetic, stunning and as wild as you wanna be.”

“You think I’m stunning?” She glanced down where her knees pressed tightly against me and took a shallow breath.

“Hell yeah I do.” I reached out and ran my fingers through her hair as I memorized the soft curve of her lips, the regal slope of her nose. “Beyond beautiful.”

“You’re just being sweet.” She laughed, brushing my comment off. “It’s the beer.”

I gripped the side of her head as warning bells sounded deep inside of me.

“No, it’s just you.” I pulled her closer and pressed my lips to hers as she whimpered. Every cell in my body woke up with a raging need like I hadn’t felt since Ana was trapped beneath me.

She mumbled something against my lips just before I pressed my tongue deep into her mouth and lapped at her with indecent intent. I wanted her thoughts to force her into the naughtiest places where nothing existed but her cries for more and me giving it to her.

Her fingers ran through my hair, and it was my turn to groan.

I broke the kiss, but gave her another one quickly as she panted softly against my mouth.

“Kendal,” she whispered. “I’m not like those other girls.”

“I know. I’m counting on that.” I kissed her again, taking my time to explore her soft lips, wet tongue. The strong pulls on my tongue as she sucked me deeper into her mouth left my body close to exploding. I pulled back and reached down to grip her thighs.

“Shit. It’s been so damn long.” I let my head drop as I tried to catch my breath. My body had gone beyond betraying me as cool and collected. My erection was thick and solid, stretched

down my thigh like something from a porn movie. I reached down and tried to adjust myself. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to take it this far.”

“Stop.” She reached out and gripped my hands. “I don’t want anyone but the carefree guy who’s letting himself breathe tonight. So what if you’re turned on. I am too.”

I pulled her in for one more kiss before standing and bringing her with me. It was hard as fuck not to let my hands explore, gripping and squeezing her hips and the top of her ass, but I held back. Public displays of affection had never been my thing, and I wasn’t planning on changing that anytime soon.

“Come on, we should get you home.” I touched her lips, brushing my finger across them softly. “Before I take our friendship to a place that would destroy any hopes of return.”

She laughed and moved back, saving me from myself.

I was grateful.

“The pizza was great, by the way. You were right. Best place in the whole damn city.” She walked toward the parking lot, pausing only briefly as I caught up with her.

“I’m usually right, but don’t tell anyone about it. They’ll expect me to start acting right too, and that’s just out.” I reached for her hand. “I’m sorry if I took that too far back there. I haven’t been with anyone in two years.” No fucking way was I telling her that Terri was the last girl I’d boned in an effort to shut the girl up from asking and getting a bit of release in the process. Women were strange, but I couldn’t fault them too much for the offer of pleasure. Maybe I was just a bastard for taking them up on it.

“What?” She stopped. “Like haven’t had a girlfriend?”

“No, that’s been six years.” I ran my fingers through my hair and scanned the parking lot. A group of nerdy-looking fuckers were standing near the door to the pizza parlor, being loud and rambunctious. It was almost comical. Almost.

“So you haven’t slept with anyone in two years?” The tone of her voice caused me to turn my attention back to her.

“No, why?” I tried not to smile, but it was a waste. Looking at her in the moonlight left my heart pounding harder than it should have been. *So pretty and delicate.*

“I don’t know. That just seems crazy to me.” She turned as one of the guys yelled something else. “Oh no. That’s Cameron. What’s he doing here?”

Ice water raced through my veins as we moved into the parking lot and the tallest of the guys turned to face us. I’d let go of Dana’s hand a few seconds before, but I honestly contemplated reaching out and taking it back. The bastard needed to be taught a lesson about how to treat a woman.

Yeah, cause you’re the asshole to teach it.

“Dana? What the fuck are you... who’s this douche?” The guy walked toward us and kept his eyes on Dana, not acknowledging me at all. What a mistake.

“He’s a friend, and you-”

He reached out and grabbed her arm. “Whatever. You’re coming home with-”

“Hey. Let her go, mother fucker.” I gripped his wrist and squeezed hard. I could take all four of them out without blinking an eye. Being raised on the poor side of town taught me more than I would ever need to know.

“Are you kidding me? Go find a blond bombshell to fuck tonight, frat-cock. This woman isn’t at all your kind of girl. She puts out once a-”

She slapped him hard in the face as I increased the pressure on his wrist.

“How dare you. How many times did I hit you up for sex only to have you fall asleep with your hand in your pants? Fuck you for being lame.” She slapped him again, and I took advantage of the situation as he shifted.

It took a second to kick his feet out from under him, roll his lanky ass over and put my knee in his back. I almost felt sorry for the kid. He couldn’t have been twenty-four years old.

My six years on him wasn't much from a number perspective, but from living life? I was a man and he was a boy.

"Touch the girl again and you'll lose a few of your teeth, pretty boy." I pressed my hand against his head as he screamed out.

"My face. The rocks are digging into my face." He pushed against the ground. "Aren't you a professor at UT?"

"Go get in the car, Dana." I reached into my pocket with my free hand and tossed her the keys as tears dripped down her pretty face.

"I'm your worst nightmare, asshole. That's what I am." I leaned over and pressed harder as he cried out again. "Don't come near the girl again. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah. I got it. Shit. Please. Don't hurt me."

"I didn't plan to." I smacked him in the back of the head and got up, giving the other three goons with him a stern look. "That's what you get for being a pussy and trying to muscle a woman around."

"Not me man," they muttered and lifted their hands.

"Right. Not you either, asshole." I pushed on his side with my foot.

"You won't see me again. She won't either."

"Good answer." I turned and ran my fingers through my hair as I walked to my car. What a fucked up end to our night. The bastard knew I was a professor at UT. If one thing wasn't going to bust me, another was.

CHAPTER 14



DANA

“I ‘m so sorry, Kendal. You didn’t have to defend me.” I reached over and touched the side of his shoulder. My heart was racing inside my chest, not over the drama, but over the fact that he’d stood up for me. No one had done that before... no one.

“Of course I did.” He started the car and gripped my hand before lifting it to his lips and kissing my fingers. “You’re a woman and I’m a man. That’s what we do. We protect women from assholes like your ex. Let’s just pray someone protects you from me.”

I pulled my hand from his and let out a shaky breath. “Why would I need protecting from you?”

“Because you’re obviously not with your boyfriend anymore, and as much as I wanna keep talking about being good friends, I’m interested in far more than friends should discuss.”

He glanced over at me, and the preditorial look in his eyes blistered my insides with desire. I’d only been sexual with a few men over the years, and none of them were worth remembering.

“What do you want then?” I tugged at my seatbelt as the air grew harder to breathe.

“I don’t know about tomorrow, but tonight I wanna hear you moan.” He pursed his lips and turned back toward the front windshield as the leather under his tight grip squealed.

“Shit,” I panted softly and turned to look out the window as he drove like a bat out of hell toward my place. I wanted to moan for him a million times, but sleeping with someone outside of a relationship seemed risky. Far more risky than I’d let myself be in the past. It was this damn heart. It got involved too quickly in hopes of having love, or at least building it.

He stopped in the parking lot of my apartment building and put the car in park. “We can end the night here. I don’t wanna push you into something you don’t want.”

I turned to face him, which was a damn mistake. His expression promised pleasure like I’d never experienced before and what his eyes weren’t doing to me, the scent of his cologne was working to remedy.

“If you’re just looking for a good fuck, that’s not me. I mean, I am a good-”

He pressed his fingers to my lips and smiled. “I know what you mean. It’s all good. I’m so glad you let me take you out tonight. Seems like we both needed it, or I know I did.”

“I did too. I was so embarrassed about Cameron leaving me.”

“And now?” He ran his fingers over my cheek and sunk them deep into my hair, tightening his hold on me just enough to cause a moan to rip from my lips.

“And now I’m good with it.” I reached out and pressed my fingers to the front of his shirt. “I’m not good enough for you, Kendal.”

“Why do you get to decide that?” He moved forward and pulled me toward him at the same time.

“Because you’re established and poised and so fucking hot.” I brushed my nose by his when he got close enough.

“Let me take you upstairs and touch every part of you.” He nipped at my lips, showing me a side of him I didn’t think possible based on the nice guy I’d seen a few times around the hospital. “So much pleasure, Dana.”

Indecision raged inside of me. I was being an idiot. Not a few days back I was crying over *not* having sexcapades like Jackie and here one was being offered to me, and I was mulling over whether it was a good idea or not. I didn't deserve passion in my life, obviously.

"I can't," I whispered and closed my eyes.

"It's okay. I respect that big time. I wish I would say the same, but I'm not as strong as you." He leaned in and brushed his lips by mine. "I'll see you at the hospital soon?"

"Yeah, of course." I moved back as the intense burn of regret drove down the center of my chest.

Do this. You're going to miss out if you don't take him up to your place.

"You want me to walk you up?" He reached for the keys. It was another offer. A subtle one, but still an offer to reconsider.

"Yeah. That would be great." I got out of the car and smoothed my dress down. There was no hiding how turned on I was thanks to my nipples being budded like pebbles at the front of my dress.

"Is Cameron usually that aggressive? I mean, do you have anything to worry about by staying here? I have an extra room at my place. Grab some clothes and you can stay there until you can get the locks changed."

"No, it's okay. He's really laid back. I have no idea what all that shit was about." I walked up the stairs and tried to catch my breath. This time from the excitement pumping through me.

"I don't like it." He stopped behind me and slid his hands onto my shoulders. "Just get some stuff. I'm ten minutes away."

"We're barely more than strangers, Kendal." I walked into the dark apartment as a shiver ran through me. Was I safe? Of course I was. Shit, he'd left me. I didn't leave him.

"We're friends, and we'd be lovers if you'd stop turning me down." He laughed and I couldn't help but smile.

“All right, but I’m not sleeping with you tonight.” I walked to the back bedroom, hating myself for saying no again.

“Can we at least make out a little more? I haven’t even gotten to-”

“Don’t say it, please. I’m already on the fence about saying yes to you.”

“That was the wrong thing to say.” He stopped in the doorway to my bedroom and flipped on the light.

“Oh yeah? Don’t like the truth?” I pulled out a duffel bag and quickly filled it with a few pairs of scrubs and some pajamas before gathering up my bathroom stuff. “Do you think I can get the lock fixed quickly?”

“Oh yeah. That shouldn’t be a problem at all. We’ll call someone tomorrow.” He moved back as I walked past him. “Are you working at the hospital this weekend?”

“Yeah. I only have Sundays off every other week.”

“Shit. That’s a lot, Dana.” He moved into the living room and stopped behind me again, his fingers brushing down the back of my arms.

“You sure this chick at work isn’t rubbing off on you?”

“She definitely wants to rub something on me, but it’s nothing I want.” He shivered and walked to the door. “You ready?”

“I guess.” I walked back out into the humid night’s air and tried to logically think through if I was making a huge ass mistake. Yes, I was insanely attracted to him and not just physically, but emotionally and mentally. I could see something great happening between us, but he had a lot of baggage, and obviously I did too.

“I’ll behave as long as you want me to.” He wrapped his strong arm around my shoulders and gave me a cocky grin that could melt panties.

“That’s part of the problem. I’m not sure I want you to.”

“Well, then. All bets are off.”



“The kitchen is right over here. Help yourself to anything you want.” He pointed to the various rooms as he gave me a tour of his large four-bedroom house. I couldn’t help but wonder why he would have such a big place all to himself.

I dropped my bag off in one of the spare rooms and walked down the hall, stopping to look at all the pictures of him and Amanda. Several had an older woman in them as well, whom I assumed was his mother.

“There isn’t much I wouldn’t do to save her.” He crossed his arms over his chest and pressed his shoulder against the wall. “I’d give up my house, my money, my nice car, my job that I’ve worked so damn hard for...”

“Your life?” I whispered and turned to walk toward him. I hated his pain, and yet I understood it all too well. Losing my father gave me far more experience with pain than I would have ever wanted.

“Absolutely.” He reached for me, gripping my hip and pulling me flush against him. “Why are you here?”

“Because you said I wasn’t safe in my apartment. Did you lie?” I ran my hands up his chest and leaned against him, loving how hard he was already. I didn’t have plans to sleep with him, but knowing that he wanted me to was more than enough to drag my tattered ego from the dark depths where it lay shattered.

“I never lie.” He brushed his hand down the side of my hair. “Why do you take such good care of Amanda? She has to be more than you’re used to handling as an intern.”

“She needs me.” I lifted my gaze up to his and cupped his sides as my stomach tightened and warmth pooled between my thighs. He was going to have anything he wanted from me... I had no doubt as to the lack of sticking power I had over my decision to walk away from his offer for a long night with him.

“What if I need you?” He leaned down and licked at my mouth as he dragged the back of his fingers over my breast, brushing by my nipple as I moaned loudly. “What if you need me?”

“I don’t,” I whispered and lifted to my toes to press my lips against his.

“Doesn’t taste like you don’t.” He smiled against my lips before picking me up and forcing my legs around his waist. He pressed me tightly to the wall behind us and ground into me as pleasure raged through the center of my body.

“And what does need taste like?” I panted softly as he rolled his hips and massaged my softness with his body.

“Like you, Dana.” He gripped my ass and turned to walk me toward his bed. “How about you just let me taste you tonight? No strings attached to letting me drink you.”

“Fuck,” I mumbled and buried my face against his neck. A million thoughts drove through my mind, each more useless than the last.

“We can do that too, if you’re up for it.” He laid me down on the bed and ran his hands over my breasts, squeezing softly as he rocked against me.

“I’m not like these girls you keep talking about, Kendal.” I pushed at his chest, far more scared of being judged by him than losing the chance at being taken violently by him.

“I agree.” He leaned down and ran his teeth over my nipples, tugging softly as I arched my back and cried out. Maybe I was just like them.

“Why do you agree?” I whimpered as he pushed my skirt up over my legs and petted my sex rhythmically over my panties.

“Because I came after you, Dana. You didn’t come after me.”

“I wanted to.” I spread my legs wider, wanting to release myself to the fact that I was a whore if it meant being with him

for the night. The strong independent woman in me was long gone as he continued to hover over me.

“But you didn’t. That makes all the difference in the world.” He moved down my body, kissing here and there as he pushed my skirt up to my belly button.

I glanced down as he slid his finger under the covering of my panties and dragged his finger through my wetness.

“I don’t know if I can do this,” I cried out and gripped the sheets.

“If you don’t want me down here... close your legs, baby. I’m a grown man. I know how to take no for an answer.”

I reached down and brushed two fingers by his lips, letting him suck both of them into his mouth.

“I’m just scared.” I pulled my hand away from him and tried to catch my breath.

“Don’t be. Just lay back and relax. I just wanna taste you tonight.”

A soft yelp left me as he tugged my panties to the side and pressed his mouth to the center of me. A deep grunt left him and slid across my wet skin, leaving my heart racing and pleasure dancing along my pleasure points.

“So fucking delicious, Dana. Come for me as many times as you can, okay, pretty girl?”

I glanced down and moaned loudly as he sunk two fingers into me and lapped at me with an expression of ecstasy on his face. Between the sounds and smells of our sex, my body buckled within minutes, the cry leaving me far too loud and guttural for the little bit of work he’d done.

“Mmmmm... Again, baby.” He pressed his mouth back to my center and drove his strong fingers deep inside of me until I came again, and again.

CHAPTER 15



KENDAL

A huge part of me wanted to crawl on top of her and make love to her until she couldn't stand, but it wasn't right to do it. I'd just berated Heather and Terri for being whores, and here I was wanting to be one. Besides that, a one-night stand wasn't in the cards either. I was ready to try again, and Dana was the woman I was hoping to try with.

I left her a note the next morning on the night stand closest to her and changed into a pair of oxfords and a golf shirt. I had forgotten about scheduling a golf game with Damon and Matt, but thanks to the reminder going off on my phone at five that morning, I was on my way to see them both.

The taste of Dana lingered on my lips, and I couldn't seem to get the sound of her moans out of my head. It was like getting access to something new and exciting and having to play with it later. It was less than couth to think of her that way, but the old parts of me would forever be lingering around in the dark, hoping to come out and stretch from time to time.

"What are you smiling about?" Damon called to me as I walked up to the country club.

"A girl I took to my bed last night." I popped him in the chest and extended my hand to Matt. "Hey man. Long time no see. How are you?"

"I've been better." Matt gave me a big brotherly hug and opened the door for us. "I have another girl you can take to your bed too."

I laughed and walked into the country club. “Erica still have you?”

“I swear, I’m going to wake up one day and find out that she’s swallowed my dick whole.” He shook his head and shivered as Damon chuckled.

“You’re so damn dramatic. You’d be lucky to have a woman as hot as Erica Hall get near your dick.”

“True.” I shrugged and pulled out my phone to see if Dana texted. The note for her asked her to let me know when she was up. I didn’t want to leave her alone too long.

She’s got a shift at the hospital. Stop being so damn protective.

“So who is this hot piece of ass that has you checking your phone every two minutes?” Damon tossed me the score card and the pencil.

I jerked forward to catch them and growled at him. “Don’t call her that. She’s a great girl, a real sweetheart.”

“What’s she doing with a chump like you, Tarrington?” Matt pushed the door open to the cart rental area and gave me a knowing look over his shoulder.

“I’m praying I’ve finally turned a new leaf. After two years of celibacy, I’ve earned another shot at a relationship, wouldn’t you think?”

“I do.” Matt got on the back of the cart.

“I think you deserve far more than you give yourself credit for.” Damon got in the driver’s seat and patted the seat beside him. “Tell me all about her.”

“She looks a lot like Ana, but more curvy. She’s twenty-four or so and is a nurse at the hospital.”

“Is this the intern?” Damon turned and pulled his sunglasses off his face.

“Yeah, why?”

“Kendal. If she’s an intern, then she’s a student at UT, man. Aren’t you banned from dating all students, or is it just

yours?”

Sickness pulsed through my stomach, but I tried to not overreact. “She doesn’t go to UT, dude. There is a nursing school here too. Lots of them, actually.”

“Have you asked her?” Matt turned around as Damon pressed the gas and the cart lurched forward.

“No.” I let out a long sigh.

“Good. Don’t.” Damon patted my chest and drove down the cart path as Matt hummed something in the back. I needed to change the subject. I was going to talk myself out of something with Dana before it really started.

It has started.

“What’s going on with Beth? Any news on that front that you wanna share?” I turned to face Damon as Matt bounded off the back of the cart. He was always first in line no matter what we were doing. Damon and I had gotten used to just giving him his way, especially when the fucker got bigger than us somewhere along the way.

“She’s going to dinner with me sometime next week. That’s all she’ll give me.” He ran his fingers through his hair and reached down to grab a beer from the cooler between us.

“You’re drinking at seven in the morning? That’s the sign of an alcoholic.”

“Right. You want one?” He offered me one and I took it.

“Of course. I’d not let you go down a dark path alone. What kind of friend would I be?”

“A shitty one.” He took one more drink and got off the cart. “I sent her flowers and told her after a meeting the other day that I missed her.”

“And? How did she respond?” I cringed at the thought of what happened. By the scowl on his face, it wasn’t good.

“She said ‘that’s nice’ and walked off. She’s not interested anymore.” He grabbed a club and shrugged. “She’s got a few more weeks and I’m going to move on.”

“What? You’re not moving on. You’re in love with her. How many women have you ever been in love with?” Panic raced through me. I cared about Damon and Beth. They were too good together to let the newness of the relationship and all the extra bull shit that society wanted to sling at them fuck it up for them.

“One, Kendal. I’ve been in love with one woman. I’ve told several a lie, but this time I meant it.” He shrugged and turned to walk toward the tee box. Damn. I was going to have to pull her aside and see what the hell was going on. After talking with her the week before, she seems to still be in love with Damon, but now... who the fuck knew. Women were so far beyond complicated at times.

As if we weren’t.

“So how was the art show thingie?” I took Matt’s club as he offered it to me.

“It was a private showing, and it went really well. Jonathan wants to pick up all that I’ve done and has a few ideas for some pieces that some of his clients are looking for.”

“That’s great news. Are you moving up there or staying down here?” I pulled my phone out as it buzzed.

“I’m not sure yet. I know Erica wants me up there, but something tells me that if I do go that we’ll end up together.”

“Because she’ll force you into submission?” I lifted my eyebrow as I tried to imagine Matt Bryant being forced to do anything. He’d somehow circumvented his father from pulling him into the Bryant Empire and not fooled a damn person in the process. His childish act was an epic fail and we all knew it.

“No, because she’ll tease me until I force her into it.” He rolled his shoulders and stretched as Damon walked back. “You guys think I’m sweet and fruity because I love art. You don’t know shit.”

“He’s a beast in the bedroom. Puts us to shame.” Damon patted me on the back as he moved toward the cart.

“Do I wanna know how you know this?” I mumbled and pulled my phone out to read Dana’s text. She was on her way to the hospital and would get the new locks done hopefully that day. The beautiful girl was already trying to run out of my life and we’d not even gotten to really know each other yet.

I didn’t wanna overreact, so I didn’t. After hitting the ball past both of my friends’ balls, I got back in the cart and took a long drink of my beer.

“So what the fuck is up with Heather Turner?” Matt turned around and pressed his forearms to the back of our seat.

“She has a job at the college and is promising to ruin my life if I don’t give her blow jobs from time to time.” I smiled over at Damon. We’d spent four years jacking around with Heather in college and had agreed more than once that the woman had far bigger balls than we ever would. She was insatiable.

“So do it,” Matt huffed. “Or have Damon do it. He’s fucked up things with Sis and needs a bit of a release.”

“Fuck you too.” Damon jerked the cart to a stop and waited until Matt was in the tee box to turn toward me. “You need to get rid of Heather, Kendal. You know that bitch is nothing but trouble. Where you might call her bluff, she’s not going to call yours. She’s mean and when she wants something-”

“Did she come see you?” Realization rolled over me. He wasn’t nearly as shocked about her being back in town as he should have been. Granted, I mentioned her being at the college to him when she first showed up, but even still...

“Yeah. You know she was close to Christa and Delilah.”

“Speaking of the twins.” I made sure to show my disgust on my face. “Why the hell would you hire Delilah to work for you? I swear you look for trouble, invite it in and fucking knit it a bed for it to sleep on.”

“I didn’t hire her, you dick.” He got off the cart. “My father did, not thinking anything about it.”

“Oh. Shit.” I contemplated calling Bethany and decided against it. I could talk to her on Tuesday when she came in for her TA duties. “Why didn’t you tell Beth that?”

“Because, matchmaker, she should have already known that. I asked her to marry me, remember? I’m not a complete asshole.”

“True, but you mostly are.” I lifted my beer to him as he sneered at me and walked toward the tee box.

Matt jumped onto the back of the cart and bounced on it, shaking the shit out of the rickety thing.

“Damn, man. Chill out.” I swatted at him and caught him in the nuts, hitting home.

He groaned and dropped down into the seat behind me as he swatted me in the back of the head.

“What are we going to do about Damon and Beth? I can’t handle this fucking tension at the house much longer.” Matt groaned again and cupped his crotch.

I got off the cart and shook my head as I walked around to the back. “I don’t know. They’re just both being stubborn.”

“I get that, but one of them is going to have to bend a little or the whole damn relationship is going to break. That’s not acceptable.” Matt sat up and pressed his hands to his knees. “We gotta fix this.”

“We’re grown men, and we’re not fixing this. We’re not in high school anymore or college. Life is what you make it, and if we patch this shit up for them, they’ll just find a new way to tear it down.” I was almost surprised by the words coming out of my mouth, but damn if they weren’t true. Damon didn’t need me riding in to save the day. I’d done that and hurt Bethany’s trust and left Damon without his woman anyway.

“Maybe you’re right,” Matt mumbled as Damon walked up.

“Right about what?” He handed me the club.

“About you needing to get cock enlargement. I saw something on TV the other day.” I pushed at his shoulder as

Matt laughed loudly.

“That sounds like you, Kendal. Watching the home shopping network during porn hour.”

“That wasn’t even funny,” I called over my shoulder and positioned myself to smack the ball one more time. I didn’t need to play like a pro. I just needed to beat the two knuckleheads I was spending my Saturday morning with.

“What ever happened to old what’s her face?” Matt asked as I walked back to the cart and got on.

“Which what’s her face are we referring to? I’ve been with a lot of women over the last few years, Matt.”

“That’s a damn lie.” Damon gave me a sideways glance. “You’ve been with one woman since college. What’s her face?”

“Oh. You’re talking about Ana.”

“That’s the one!” Matt bounced on the back of the cart as Damon growled and tried to keep it on the cart path.

“I have no clue where she is, and I don’t want to.” I rubbed my chest absently as thoughts of her resurrected in my mind. I wanted to push Dana into her place, but it wasn’t the same, not in the slightest. It could be over time. I could see my relationship with Dana growing into something far better than what Ana and I had, but time was a cruel bitch who took far more than she gave.

“So you don’t want me to hire her at M&B next?” Damon chuckled as I whipped my head around to pin him with a hard stare.

“You wouldn’t dare do that shit.” Had he seen her? Was she around?

He laughed and stopped the cart. “No, I wouldn’t, and I wouldn’t hire Delilah to hurt my woman either. You bastards are getting on my nerves with who you think I am. Haven’t I proved myself trustworthy?”

“Yeah, you have, buddy.” I reached for him as he got off the cart.

“Good. Tell her that next time you see her.”

“I will. I promise. I will.”

CHAPTER 16



DANA

I dropped my phone on the bedside table and let out a long sigh as I lay in Kendal's bed the next morning. The smell of him rolled over me and I flipped over to lay on my stomach so I could press my face to his pillow and breathe in deeply. I was class-A stalker material, and didn't give a shit about getting caught. Not that it would be him catching me. He was out playing golf with a few friends from what his note said.

After snuggling down into the covers for a few more minutes, I decided it was time to get my happy ass up and get to the hospital. I had another hour before I had to be there, but being in someone else's house without them there was less than comfortable.

The kitchen was stocked with all kinds of fruits and goodies, like Kendal had a private chef that came. Did college professors make that much money?

"Maybe so," I mumbled and made myself something quickly, cleaned up and changed into my scrubs. I realized as I walked toward the front door that I was stranded without a car. What the hell was I thinking the night before? I could have at least driven over to Kendal's place. I called an Uber and was grateful to have it pull up twenty minutes later. I was going to be cutting it close, but it was the best I could do.

I called the apartment complex and explained the situation about the locks on the door as I rode back into the heart of the city. The lady promised to get it taken care of by Sunday afternoon, which was better than I expected and yet not soon enough. Where the idea of staying another night with Kendal

was beyond exciting, it felt like a burden I didn't want to put on him. What if he'd had enough of me the night before? The last thing I wanted to do was make things awkward for us.

His sweet note to call him when I got up was the only thing keeping my shitty thoughts at bay.

The Uber pulled up into the large overflow parking lot at Memorial Hospital and let me out. I paid the guy and walked into the building with a crowd of new residents. Their excitement was contagious, and I once again couldn't help but revisit the notion that nursing wasn't enough for me. Maybe I did need to push my education another few steps to become a full-fledged doctor. Surely some of my credits would transfer to the new degree.

The thought of another round of student loans left my chest aching, but they were a means to an end. I would pay them off before I died... hopefully.

I made my way to my assigned floor and stopped by to find Amanda sound asleep. Tinsley stopped beside me in the open door and gave me a scathing look.

“Why are you so concerned with this girl over all the other patients on our floor? Don't you know that it's unethical to have favorites?”

I glanced over at her, not at all concerned with what she thought about me caring for Amanda. It was none of her business and if she thought it was only because of Kendal, she was wrong. I'd been stopping by to offer Amanda attention since getting the internship. The fact that she had a devastatingly handsome older brother that might be the love of my life eventually was a huge bonus, but it was just that - a bonus.

Turning, I walked out of the room without another word. The nasty huff behind me caused a smile to spread across my face. I wasn't a nefarious person at all, but if there was a way to bring our head nurse on the floor down just a little and offer her a great taste of humility... I was all for it.

I checked all of the normal spots for Jackie before walking down to her private hideaway with trepidation. The last thing I wanted to do was walk in on her and Parks again, but in an effort to get her on her rounds and keep her from getting in trouble with Tinsley, I was willing to take one for the team.

Pressing my ear to the door, I held my breath and heard something I hadn't expected to hear. Crying.

I knocked softly and pushed the door open as Jackie called out.

"No, don't. Someone is in here."

"It's just me." I stuck my head around the edge of the door and after seeing that she was alone, I moved into the room and closed the door behind me. "What's going on? What happened?"

She sobbed softly and pressed her hands to her face. "I'm a whore. That's what."

"No you're not." I walked over to her and wrapped my arms around her shoulders as she cried harder.

"Yes I am. I thought maybe after spending a few days sleeping with Parks that I might mean something to him." She choked on a sob and pulled away from me as she started to cough loudly.

"Did he say you didn't mean anything, or are you assuming that because he had to go back to New York?" I reached out and rubbed her back softly. The poor girl was in a full-scale meltdown, and as much as I loved her, she had ten minutes before I turned into my apathetic mother and told her to pull her shit together and get up.

Nothing was worth getting bad marks on the internship, least of all a hottie from New York that probably slept with anything that looked good and walked on two legs.

"He didn't say anything, Dana. He just left last night on a red eye. I tried to get his number before he left, but he was really weird about it."

My conversation with Kendal the night before raced through my mind.

“Did you go after him or did he come after you?” I put my hand on my hip and realized that it was a pretty fucked up time to test the theory that Kendal had used on me, but it was already out there now.

“What? Neither. He left without a word.” She sobbed loudly again.

I reached for a handful of Kleenex and handed them to her. “No, originally. When he got here at Memorial. Did he hit on you first, or did you hit on him?”

“I hit on him. Why? What does that have to do with anything?”

Whore. I cringed at the thought. Was that some kind of fucked up alpha male code? Did they not like strong women that knew what they wanted? How shitty was that?

“What? Nothing. I was just wondering where this all started. Come here.” I reached for her again and wrapped my arms around her. “You’re not just a piece of ass. He’s either a bigger idiot than we thought, or he got called back to New York in a hurry. He seemed like a great guy when he was here. I’m going to vote on him getting called back and not having the time to call you or not wanting to because of how late it was.”

“He didn’t have my number.” She huffed and pulled away from me again before wiping at her face angrily. “It’s just so fucking messed up. Every time I find a guy that I’m compatible with, poof, they fucking disappear. I’m obviously not worthy of anyone’s time or emotional energy.” She walked to the door. “I’ll be fine. I’ve been through this a million times. Let’s go do our shit and then I’m faking death.”

“How about just sickness?” I walked out of the room behind her and stopped short as they wheeled an empty bed out of the room near the end of the hall. Mr. Jackson?

“That’ll work too.” She reached for me as I moved past her in a haze. “Hey. Where you going? Our rounds are back here

at the nurses’-”

“I know. I’ll meet you there.” I pulled from her and walked quickly to the room, pausing only as I reached the door. “Where are you?”

I turned to find the hall empty. Where was he? Had he finally gone home to let his family offer their comfort until he passed? Had he gotten better? That had to be it. He looked great the last time I saw him.

After standing there for a few more wasted minutes, I turned the corner and jogged down toward the south wing of the hospital. For some odd reason, they were much more friendly to interns than anyone on my floor ever was.

The sweet older woman that glanced up from her computer gave me a warm smile. “What can I do for you, dear?”

“I was looking for Mr. Jackson. He’s usually-”

“Oh yes. Such a nice older man.”

“Right. Did he go home?”

“He sure did. Peacefully too.”

“Peacefully?” Confusion rolled over me, though it shouldn’t have. “He went to his son’s house?”

“No, dear. He died in his sleep last night. He went to his final resting place.” She stood and reached out to touch my hand. “Oh, you’re Dana. One of our interns, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I tried to push past my shock. It wasn’t as if I didn’t expect there to be death in a hospital, but not getting to say goodbye left too many open wounds in my heart. It felt far too much like the situation with my own father. Abrupt. Unfair.

“He left you a note, dear. He delivered it a few days ago as if he knew the end was close.” She turned and shuffled through a few things as I stood there in stony silence. What did it say? Why did it matter so much?

Because I wanted to take Kendal by to see him, to let him pass the old father’s test over Kendal and give me the nod of

approval. I knew without a doubt that he would. How could he not? Kendal was the best guy I'd ever dated.

Were we dating?

“Here you go, hon. Let me know if you need to talk to a grief counselor. Sometimes being new to all of this is a little overwhelming. Most of the other nurses will tell you that it's just better if you don't get emotionally involved with anyone, but I think that's hogwash. I love letting my patients know that they're cared about. It's too sterile in here in the first place.” She sighed and dropped back down in her seat.

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” I lifted the letter in the air and turned to go. I needed to find a quiet place to sit down and read the letter, but now wasn't the time. Even though my heart ached for my loss, there were things to be done. If Jackie could move past falling for a playboy doctor and being made to feel like a piece of ass and still get her rounds done, then I could too.

I made my way back to my side of the floor and stopped beside Jackie as she counted out pills.

“You okay?” She glanced over at me.

“Yeah, I think so. I just really liked that old man.”

Tinsley poked her head up and caught my attention. “This is why I told you not to get too connected with anyone. It's not because I'm an ass. It's because people die all the time around here. The diagnosis the doctors give is usually spot on.” She shrugged and turned back to her computer. Lucky for her, her tone wasn't nearly as demeaning as it usually was. I was in the mood to smack someone around emotionally and she would fit the bill beautifully.

“I hate that part of this job. It's one of the reasons why I was determined not to be like my mother and become a nurse.” Jackie pulled her long blond hair down and ran her fingers through it before pulling it back up.

“I'm still not sure if I'm going to stick with it or go farther.”

“And be a doctor?” Tinsley glanced up again.

“Yes, but this conversation is between me and Jackie. I’m sorry we’re in earshot of you, but mind your own damn business.” I turned back to find Jackie staring at me with her mouth wide open.

“You sure you’re okay?” she whispered and stiffened as Tinsley moved to stand in front of me.

I returned my attention back to her, ready for a fight. Her words took the wind out of my sails and left me defeated.

“Good luck with being a doctor instead of a nurse. We might have to change the sheets when they die, but you don’t have to stand in front of the family and give them bad news. Kind of like Dr. Lewis sort of, kind of did to Mr. Tarrington.”

“What do you mean sort of, kind of? He told Kendal to prepare for end of life for Amanda.” Even repeating it hurt me. I wasn’t sure how Kendal was getting through it, but avoidance and ignoring the truth of the matter had to be part of it. He hadn’t really brought it up much more than to say he’d give up everything for his little sister.

“Nick is an old friend of Kendal’s mom. He’s uber sensitive about the whole situation, obviously.” She huffed and turned to walk back to her desk.

“Nick?” Jackie leaned toward me and whispered.

“Dr. Lewis.” I walked around the counter and stopped beside Tinsley’s desk. “Stop being so damn cryptic and tell me what you’re getting at.”

“Go get Amanda’s file and see for yourself. There’s a timeline on it. Nick just doesn’t have the balls to tell Kendal.”

“What?” Shock ran through me. “Is he required to tell him?”

“Nope. He should. I mean, it’s just good business practice, but I can see why he’s not doing it. Would you be able to, Dr. Young?” She snorted.

Anger burned through me, and I backed up before I grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her up from her comfortable chair. She had no humanity inside of her.

“Where is the file?” I glanced around until my eyes stopped on Amanda’s room. The file sat in the plastic file holder affixed to her door. Without thinking any more about it, I walked to stand in front of her room and plucked the file from the door.

“You sure you want to do that? You’d kinda feel obligated to tell Dr. Tarrington about his sister’s rapidly approaching end, right?”

I coddled the file to my chest and turned to face her. “Have you looked at it?”

“Hell no. I don’t want that pressure in my life. I don’t like very many people, but Kendal is one of the few. There is no way I could tell him that the last member of his family is headed out sooner than any of us might imagine.”

“How the hell do you know it’s soon if you haven’t looked at the file, Tinsley?”

“Because, *Dana*, Dr. Lewis told Kendal to prepare for end of life. Doctors don’t say that shit months in advance. It’s usually weeks.” She dropped back down in her chair and went back to typing.

I turned to find Jackie watching me with something like horror on her face.

“I wouldn’t do it. You know you can’t *not* tell him, Dana.”

I glanced down at the file. Kendal deserved to know.

“I can’t hold the truth in my hands and not have the balls to tell him about it, Jackie.” I opened the file and glanced down as I scanned the pages and pages of notes. The last few lines on the front page were almost unreadable, but the date grabbed me by the heart and squeezed tightly. “What’s today’s date?”

Tinsley glanced up with sadness in her eyes. She knew what the fucking file said.

“It’s the date on the file, Dana. She’s supposed to die today.”

CHAPTER 17



KENDAL

Golf with my friends was exactly what the doctor ordered.

Between listening to Matt whine about Erica being too much woman for him, and watching Damon mope around the fucking golf course all day, I was reassured that dating Dana was a great idea. I didn't wanna search for someone else who might be a little older, or look less like Ana. Neither of those things mattered seeing that the level of physical attraction I felt for her was off the charts. That combined with the fact that I loved her sweet spirit, her honesty and innocent persona, and I was sold. The thought crossed my mind to call the apartment and tell them to *not* fix the locks until Monday, but that would have been a dick move and knowing my luck, I would have been caught in the center of it all. I rarely got away with anything and usually got blamed for things that I had nothing to do with.

I walked into the house and called out to her, hoping that she was still there. "Dana?"

Nothing. I realized after searching the house for her that I'd left her with no way to get to work. I growled at myself and walked back into the kitchen as the sound of a car driving up in my driveway stopped me in my tracks.

Dana.

I walked to the front door and opened it in time to see her get out of her car and move toward the trunk.

"Hey there." I walked out of the house and let the smile that tugged at my lips force me into what had to be a goofy-ass

grin. “I’m sorry about not thinking about you needing a ride this morning. How did you get to the hospital?”

She popped the trunk and leaned around the side of the car. “It’s okay. I called an Uber and got there just fine. Jackie gave me a lift back to my house to get my car. Looks like the apartment complex is going to have the locks changed by tomorrow, so I should be good to stay in my own place tomorrow night.”

“Leaving me already?” I moved up behind her and gripped her shoulders, rubbing softly as I leaned down and kissed the side of her neck. I was far too familiar with her, but I didn’t care. I was going to enjoy the feeling of being close to someone so right for me until she pushed me away.

“Gotta keep the chase up for a while, right?” She lifted a bag from the trunk and handed it to me. “I got some stuff for dinner. I figured we would make some pasta unless you have other plans.”

“Nope. I’m all yours for the night. Lucky you.” I grabbed the other bag in her arms and walked back toward the house. Cooking with her almost sounded too intimate. I loved it. Damon would call me a puss for even thinking such a thought, but I found myself not caring much about what anyone thought of my upcoming love affair. It was damn time to make myself happy and something told me that the beautiful girl unpacking her car in front of my house was part of the equation for making that happen.

“I’d call that lucky.” She closed the trunk and moved up behind me as I walked into the house.

“Did you say you went to the hospital today?” I walked into the kitchen and set the bags down before turning back to her and grabbing for the last one she had in her arms.

Her expression dropped, and something about the look in her eyes caused a mild flare of panic to rise up inside of me. Amanda.

“Yeah, I was there for my shift today.” She moved past me, but I wasn’t letting go of her wordless expression that spoke

volumes.

“What’s the matter? What happened, Dana?” I forced her to turn and face me before sliding my hands along the smooth skin of her neck and cupping her face in my palms. “Talk to me.”

“I just lost a patient that meant a lot to me today. Mr. Jackson. He called me fruit fly because-” Her eyes filled with tears and she pulled away from me.

“I’m so sorry.” I wrapped my arms around her, not thinking anything of my wanting to offer her comfort. It had been so damn long since I offered myself to a woman, that the foreign feeling should have lingered far longer than it did, but I tried not to overanalyze it.

“It’s stupid, I know. I’m a nurse and I shouldn’t get close to people that are going to die.”

I chuckled and brushed my hand over her silky hair. “Everyone is going to die. Does that mean you don’t get close to anyone?”

She gave me a go-to-hell look and moved back over to pull random items from the grocery sack closest to her. “You know what I mean.”

“I do, but my little sister is going to die sooner than I want her to, and I love the fact that you care about her. Caring about someone in the hospital that you’re watching over isn’t a weakness. Those people deserve attention and love probably more than the rest of us do. Can you imagine those people who sit in those beds day after day and no one gives them attention or shows them love?” I kissed the side of her neck and stiffened as she turned to face me and gripped my sides tightly.

She froze in place as her eyes moved around my face. Concern took over her features as she blinked a few times, sighed and turned back around.

“Dana. What’s going on? What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing. I just feel like shit over not seeing Mr. Jackson one more time before he died.” She sniffled and picked up a handful of stuff before walking toward the stove. “Help me

cook this spaghetti and let's talk about something else. Tell me about your golf game."

"I won, which isn't too rare, but still rare enough that it felt good." I opened the bottle of red wine she got and lifted it to my nose, breathing in deeply. "Both Matt and Damon are going through some shitty life experiences, so beating them wasn't nearly as joyous as it usually is."

"Matt and Damon are friends or brothers?"

"They're brothers. Matt is a few years younger than us and looked just like Damon's mother, who cheated on his father, but his father still doesn't know about it."

"But Damon knows?" She grunted as she worked to open a jar of tomato sauce that appeared to be giving her hell.

I reached for it and opened it for her with ease. "Damon walked in on her during high school. It almost consumed him our junior year. He skipped school a million times trying to make sure she wouldn't cheat again."

She lifted the jar and smiled. "I loosened this for you."

"I know you did." I opened the ground beef and dropped it into the skillet she'd pulled out while I ogled at her rear in her scrubs. I was grateful for the opportunity to eat her out the night before, but I'd have much preferred her on her knees during the event so I could worship her ass at the same time.

"What?" I glanced over at her as my heart started to race in my chest. Dinner and then a long conversation and then sex. Sex could come later, although I wanted to say to hell with dinner and get to dessert - her. For some reason, Bethany's complaint over Damon wanting sex to heal everything continued to bounce around inside my skull. Was I as much like him as I thought? And would it be a bad thing if I was?

"I asked if his parents were still married." She moved over to the counter beside me and started to work on chopping tomatoes and cucumbers for a salad.

"No. His mom died awhile back from cancer. About the time Damon decided he was going to tell his dad everything, his mom got sick and that ended his bravado." I shrugged and

let out a soft sigh. “The poor guy just can’t seem to catch a break either. He’s never been in love before, but finally found the right woman.”

She turned and lifted her eyebrow. “Uh oh. Why does this feel like the good part isn’t coming?”

“Because it’s not.” I pushed the meat around the pan as my stomach contracted tightly. “He’s fallen in love with his father’s new wife’s daughter.”

“Wait...” her eyes moved around my face slowly, “... his stepsister?”

“Exactly, and things were fine between their family because they’re not blood, but who knows what the hell went wrong. Beth is a young woman with too much fear over losing everything and Damon is a hothead who doesn’t think he should have to explain himself. Their communication sucks and it’s going to be the end of them.”

“How serious were they? Sounds like something that just started recently.” She lifted a cucumber toward my lips and licked hers as I gripped her wrist and pulled her hand closer. I sucked at her fingers and ran my tongue over each of them, cleaning them before I let her go and chewed on the cucumber.

“Just a few months ago they met.” I licked at my lips and gave her a naughty smile. “Stop being sexy, or dinner will grow cold while I take my time getting to know every crevice of your body.”

“You’re so different than what I expected.” She pushed the bowl of cucumbers toward me and laughed. “Get your own damn snack if you’re going to threaten to take away my dinner.”

“Take away your dinner?” I laughed and dropped the spatula in the pan before moving up behind her and wrapping my arms around her. I cupped one of her breasts and leaned over and pressed my lips to her ear. “That was all you heard?”

“Yep.” She turned her face and I pressed a kiss to her cheek. “That and something about a wild night of me hearing you scream my name.”

I squeezed her again and released her. “You think you have the power to make me scream? This I gotta see.”

“Just because you’re an old school slut does not mean you’ve still got your moves, Kendal.” She picked up the various bowls of salad toppings and walked to the table, impressing me once again with the small things she was capable of.

“Oh, I still got my moves.” I walked in behind her and waited until she put everything down to reach out and grip her hips tightly. “You wanna see them?”

“Where is the strict professor with a tight smile and unassuming personality that I met a week ago?”

“He’s lost somewhere under this newfound comfort I have around you. Do you not like it?”

“I love it.” She turned and slid her hands up my chest, clasping her hands behind my neck as I leaned down to devour her sweet mouth. We shared a long, sensual kiss before she pulled back breathless and shook her head. “Behave. I’m still not ready to sleep with you.”

“Lies. All lies.” I released her and walked to the kitchen to finish working on the pasta. I quickly assembled it and turned to find her extending a glass of red wine toward me.

“Here. To me and to you. May we both find everything we’re looking for in life.” She lifted her glass.

“And hopefully a good handful of those things we’ll find without having to look much farther than right here.” I tapped my glass against hers and reached for her, wanting another kiss.

“Give me this.” She took my wine from my hand and set the glasses on the table in the other room before walking toward me with a gleam in her eye.

“I must say that I love that look you’ve got on your face. Looks like you’re starving for something that only I can provide.” I brushed my fingers by her soft lips as my mind exploded with possibilities.

“Good, then my momma was right. I do wear my feelings on my shoulders and can’t hide my desires to save my life.”

“Smart woman.” I gripped the counter as she moved a step closer and worked to loosen the belt on my pants. They dropped to the floor and she pressed herself to the front of me, slipping her hand in between us and stroking my cock a few times as I closed my eyes and groaned. “What about dinner?”

“Fuck dinner.” She kissed me again before moving down to her knees and pulling my briefs over my hips. I tugged my shirt off to keep anything from getting in her way or making it impossible for me to watch her suck me off.

“My kind of girl.” I grabbed a handful of her hair and forced her to look back up at me. “I’m a different man in the bedroom, Dana. I wish I wasn’t but hear me clearly before we go any farther. I like you a lot and I think this thing between us could turn into something neither of us could survive without but-”

“Hush.” She leaned forward and ran her tongue over the sticky wet head of my cock before sliding her lips down my shaft and sucking far more of my dick inside of her than I thought possible.

I groaned loudly and gripped her head, holding her in place as I bent my knees a little and rolled my hips, working myself into her over and over as she took every inch and forced herself to reach for more. By the time I was dangling over the edge of orgasm, she had both hands wrapped around my cock and her pretty mouth was swollen from far more of a fucking than she expected to get.

“Just your mouth. I’m on the edge of coming.” I didn’t ask if she was interested in drinking me down. If she was going to be my woman, there was no question about her willingness to take all of me, just as I’d licked every drop of her pleasure from her taut pink lips the night before.

She glanced up at me, her pretty hazel eyes wide with the type of excitement I’d yet to see in my long life. She was more than what I wanted, and exactly what I needed.

CHAPTER 18



DANA

The rest of Saturday night had been spent around the dining room table, eating pasta until our sides hurt, and telling stories until we knew each other better than we might have wanted to. We fell asleep snuggled up on the couch, and after a long kiss at the door on Sunday morning, I headed home. I wanted to get my life back in order and to make sure that I was still capable of breathing without Kendal snuggled up beside me.

I missed his warmth the minute I left. It wasn't until I woke up alone on Monday morning in my bed that I realized just how guilty I felt for spending the whole afternoon and evening with him on Saturday and not mentioning anything about Amanda. I just couldn't force myself to share an estimate that had turned out to be wrong. She wasn't dead or the hospital would have called him. I urged him to go up and see her a few more times in the coming week while we snuggled on the couch and he promised that he would, but of course questioned my reasoning for poking him to do so. I made something up, though I hated myself for doing it.

Knowing the time of someone's death did very little to prepare anyone, and I could see Dr. Lewis' reasoning behind not giving Amanda or Kendal a date. It was a death sentence in itself.

My alarm went off again beside my head, and I swatted at it before finally pulling myself up. I had to meet with my nursing adviser at UT before heading over to the hospital for a late afternoon, early evening shift. Knowing that I wasn't

going to get to visit with Mr. Jackson had me feeling shitty and sluggish before my feet ever hit the floor.

The letter. I hadn't opened the letter from him.

I got out of bed and wandered into the living room in search of my bag from the hospital. I emptied it on the couch and pushed the various articles of clothes and random shit around until I realized that I didn't have it. It had to be in my locker if nothing else. I'd get it later.

My alarm went off again from the bedroom, forcing me to jog to the back of the apartment to turn it off.

"I hear you already. Shit." I turned it off and pulled my t-shirt over my head and shorts down my legs before mulling through my closet in search of *real* clothes to wear. I was so used to going from the hospital to the house and nowhere else really that scrubs were all I'd been wearing lately. That and pajamas.

I found my favorite pair of jeans and pulled them over my legs, feeling better than I had in a long time about how I looked. It had nothing to do with losing weight and everything to do with the handsome man who seemed to be sweet on me. How I'd gotten so lucky was a mystery, and one I was good leaving alone. I didn't want to fuck up anything where Kendal and I were concerned.

A laugh left me as I slipped my feet into a pair of slippers and grabbed the only fresh thing sitting on my kitchen counter. The lone grapefruit that Cameron had tossed at me only a few days back.

"Asshole." I grabbed my keys and walked to the car, peeling the fruit as the events of the last week raced through my mind. It was crazy how when good things started happening, they really happened fast. Now, to get them to start happening was like pulling teeth.

I got in the car and took a few shortcuts to get to campus as fast as I could. I had twenty minutes until I was meeting with Nurse Barry, and she didn't mess around. If we were one minute late, we might as well not even knock on the damn

door, because she wasn't opening it. Rule number one - respect other people's time and be on time. Period.

After finally finding a parking spot, I got out and jogged toward the campus. I had to weave in and out of several large groups of students, but was thrilled to make it to Nurse Barry's door three minutes ahead of schedule.

I knocked on the door and opened it as she called out from inside. "Come in."

"Hi, Nurse Barry." I walked in and set my backpack on the floor beside me. I didn't need to carry it, but I'd always felt so odd not carrying a bag while on campus, like I was up to no good, or a shitty student that didn't care one way or the other about her classes. It was nuts, but just a habit I couldn't break.

"Hi, Dana. Have a seat and let's get started." She pulled a folder from the filing cabinet nearest her and opened it. "I have quite a few positive comments that have come in from some of the hospital staff as they are working with you or even evaluating you."

"That's great." I leaned back in my seat and crossed my legs. "Any bad reviews or things that I need to work on?"

"Not really. I have a comment from several doctors that you seem a little too involved with the patients, but from my point of view, that is a strength, not a weakness."

"I'm glad to hear you say that. One of the nurses told me the other day that caring for the patients, or showing them loving-kindness wasn't appropriate."

"Really? Unless you're doing something inappropriate like kissing or touching-"

"Absolutely not." I shouldn't have interrupted, but I couldn't let her keep going down that line of thinking. I would never do anything with a patient but take care of them. Surely they knew that.

"Right. Of course not." She picked up her pen and scribbled a few things into the file. "Have you been thinking about your mini-mester classes? I don't think you have any

more nursing classes that you need to take, but you're still a double major, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm hoping to graduate in May with a degree in nursing and in business."

She smiled and shook her head. "You're looking to run a hospital one day, right?"

"That's the current plan, but to be completely honest, there is a part of me that wants to throw caution to the wind and try for med school."

"Really?" She glanced back down at the file. "I'd say with your grades that wouldn't be a problem at all. The only issue might be funding, but a lot of hospitals will support your educational goals if you pledge a certain number of years to them."

"Interesting. I didn't know that." I glanced around to take in all the medals and awards she had on the wall behind her. "And do you know if Memorial does that?"

"Oh no, we're talking St. Mark's in New York, Zion in Los Angeles. The bigger hospitals." She made a few more notes and handed me a list of courses. "Looks like you need to get in a marketing class and maybe something in economics or accounting."

I scanned the list again and smiled as my eyes moved down to the master's-level accounting class entitled, *Financial Statement Analysis*.

"What about this one?" I pointed to her and handed it back. "Who's this Dr. Tarrington?"

"Kendal. He's a great guy, fantastic teacher. He's got a lot of baggage thanks to some less than ethical decisions he made earlier in his career, but from what I hear, the Dean of Accounting really has his back.

"Kendal? Interesting name for a man." I took the file from her and tucked it into my backpack as my heart swelled in my chest. How fun would it be to have the rest of the semester to stare at him from the front row? He would kill me for signing up for his class, but he would get over it.

Besides, it would be a fun surprise to just show up the first day the semester started. I could almost feel the excitement associated with teasing him silently like the bad girl I wasn't.

"All right, well, it looks like you're all set to go. Any questions for me?"

"Nope. You can put me in for the accounting class with Dr. Tarrington and the only marketing class I have left."

"Consider it done, kiddo. Have a great day, and keep up the good work."

"I will." I got up and walked out into the early morning sunlight, pausing to take a deep breath and enjoy the warmth of the sun on my skin.

"Dana?" Jackie's voice surprised me simply because it was out of place. We were rarely on campus together since starting our internships.

"Hey. What are you doing up here?" A smile spread across my face as I walked toward my closest friend.

"I'm going to talk to Nurse Barry about transferring."

"What? Where to?"

"To NYU." She ran her fingers through her long blond hair and let out a tired sounding sigh. "I keep thinking I'm going to move past this thing with Parks, but I can't. I think I'm in love with him. Is that stupid?"

"Yes. It is." I gripped her shoulders. "You can't transfer now. You have a few months and then we start our last semester. If you want to move up there in May when we're done with school, then I'll help pack you up and drive you up there myself, but not right now."

"That's freaking eight months, Dana."

"Have you guys spoken since he left in a hurry?" Worry clouded my thoughts as I tried to figure out what it was about Parks that had my friend acting like a lunatic stalker. Surely he wasn't that great in bed.

“No. I told you that he didn’t give me his number before he left me hanging.”

“And he doesn’t have your number either.”

She didn’t answer, but pinned me with a hard stare.

“Okay. Okay. Shit.” I lifted my hands in the air. “What if we went up there over Christmas and tried to find him? Maybe it would be better if we visited first and then made the decision to uproot everything for this dude after you see if he’s wanting a relationship.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Tears filled her eyes and my worry crept up another notch. She was close to going off the deep end.

“Then we’ll find another guy who’s way better for you, Jackie. You’re not yourself at all. You need to get some sleep.”

“Maybe you’re right.” She pressed her hands to her face, and I took the opportunity to move up beside her and wrap my arm around her shoulders. I guided her back toward the parking lot and stopped beside my car, fumbling with the keys to get the damn thing unlocked.

“Let me take you back to your apartment and you can get some sleep. Does that sound okay?”

“I guess. I’m so tired, but every time I try to get some rest, all I do is think about how much I miss him, or how good we were together.”

“I have some sleeping pills at the house. Let’s just go back to my place instead. How does that sound?”

“I like that idea too.” She pulled me into a tight hug and pressed her cheek to my shoulder. “Don’t let me turn into a lunatic.”

“I’m working on that, but you’re not being much help in the matter.” I forced a laugh and helped her into the car.

Cameron’s red Honda was sitting outside of my apartment complex when I drew up, causing the morning to go from bad to worse. First Jackie acting like a psycho and then having to deal with Cameron?

Shit. Kill me now.

I got out of the car and reached for Jackie's hand as she got out of her side and glanced around.

"What are you looking at?"

"Nothing. Come on." I helped her up the stairs and barely got her settled in the darkness of my bedroom when a knock resounded at the front door. "Get some rest. I'll wake you up for our shift later today."

"Okay. Don't forget."

I closed the door and let out a soft sigh as the person knocked again.

"I'm coming," I mumbled and walked to the door, making sure to peek through the peephole in the door first. Cameron. Of course. Who the hell else was I expecting?

I opened the door a little bit as a chill ran down my back. "Hey there."

"Hi Dana. Can we talk for a few minutes?"

"I'm kind of busy right now."

"Is Jackie okay? I saw you almost carrying her up the stairs."

"She's fine. Now isn't a good time."

"Please? I'm not here to do anything but talk. I promise. I fucked up and I wanted to apologize. I don't know where we went wrong, but I take one hundred percent of the fault for it."

"And you should." I slipped out into the hallway and closed the door behind me. "I was completely sold out on us being together forever."

"I still am."

"Right, well, that ship has sailed. You treated me like shit, made me feel like the most unattractive woman in the world and wouldn't make love to me if I begged you."

The snicker from the guys that passed behind Cameron only caused my anger to burn brighter.

“I was a fucking idiot. You’re a hard working woman, you’re intelligent and so far beyond hot it’s painful to think about never making love to you again. Give me another chance. Please. Two years shouldn’t be thrown down the drain that fast without us trying to get it back. I’ll do anything.”

“No.” I shrugged and pressed my back to the door. It wasn’t even about me finding Kendal and starting to dream about all that we could become. It was about me being unwilling to let the fucker in front of me weasel his way back into my life only to push me down again before I could blink twice.

“No isn’t going to work. Maybe? Yes? Those are great, but no isn’t what I’m looking for.”

“Fuck you then. You don’t scare me, and you’re not going to intimidate me. You walked out on me and left me trying to pay rent in this expensive ass place without any notice at all.” I poked my finger into his chest. “You didn’t even have the decency to call.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out to see that the hospital was calling.

“Dana-”

“No. I need to take this. We’re done. Through. Leave me the fuck alone.” I turned and walked back into the house, locked the door and dropped down on the chair nearest me. “This is Dana.”

“Hey. It’s Tinsley.” Never in a million years would I have expected the bitch on the other end of the phone to have an almost caring tone when talking to me.

“What do you want?”

“It’s Amanda. She just flat lined. They’re about to call in Kendal. If you’re anywhere near him...”

“Fuck.” I jumped up and grabbed my keys as horror raced through me. “Give me ten minutes to get to him. Please.”

“You have five minutes at most.”

“Thank you.” I dialed his number and ran down the stairs, almost tripping three times before I made it to my car. It went straight to voice mail, which left me with no choice but to race from accounting room to accounting room in search of him. I’d never make it in time, but I certainly had to try.

CHAPTER 19



KENDAL

I wasn't sure anything could get my mood down as I walked into the classroom on Monday morning, not even having to meet with Heather later that day. She could push and shove as much as she wanted to, but I had Eliza on my side, and I would soon be meeting with Mark to let him know what was going on. If she made it to him first, I would count my blessings and explain my side of the story. Though sexual harassment cases were rare with a male being the victim, it still happened. I would just start being smarter about my private interactions with Dr. Turner and would tape them on my phone from here on out.

"Bethany." I stopped at the opening to the large auditorium where I taught.

"Hey, Dr. Tarrington."

I closed the door behind me, and almost told her to call me Kendal, but we both knew better than to be too casual with one another on campus. We could be friends outside of UT, and would be a part of each other's lives for a long time thanks to her being part of Damon's family now, but in the classroom, we were strangers.

"It's not Tuesday, right? I don't have my days mixed up do I?" I forced a smile and moved to take the seat beside her.

"No. I just wanted to stop by to see you." She glanced down at her hands and let out a shaky breath. "I went on a date last night with Philip."

My heart almost stopped in my chest. Where she and Damon were technically apart, I knew my best friend. If she slept with this Philip character all bets were off. I tried to think through how to ask her and yet not be too crude about it. She trusted me and was there for advice from me. I couldn't deny her my thoughts or my attention, even if it felt like stepping on Damon's dick in some way.

"All right." I leaned back in my chair and dropped my hands into my lap.

"And all I could think about was Damon." She pinched the bridge of her nose and shook her head. "He's not the right man for me, Kendal. I know he's not, but I can't get him out of my head. It's driving me insane."

"Love does that." I swallowed hard and clasped my hands together. "Bethany, you didn't, you know..."

She glanced up, her expression tight. "Didn't what? Tell Damon? Hell no. He would kill Philip with his bare hands."

"No, you didn't sleep with this guy, right?"

"With Philip?" Her incredulous tone let me know that there was no way in hell she slept with the other guy.

Relief raced through me in large waves, leaving me panting softly as my heart tried to catch up to the news that my best friend still had a chance to make things right with his woman.

"Thank God." I stood up and walked toward the stage. "He wouldn't forgive that."

"I know that. I wouldn't forgive it either. We might be on a break, but he still belongs to me." The fierceness in her voice caused chill-bumps to break out along my skin. She still loved him. I wanted a woman to be that possessive over me. I wanted Dana to demand my time, my attention, but it was still too soon.

"And he believes that you still belong to him." I turned to face her. "He didn't hire Delilah. Kent did."

"How do you know that?"

“We played golf together on Saturday and I asked him.”

“Was he angry about your asking? Did you tell him it was for me?”

“No, because it wasn’t for you. I wasn’t even sure I was going to tell you what I found out.” I sighed and rubbed my forehead. “You two are acting like fucking children over this thing, Bethany. You’re not a young girl looking for your prince charming, and he’s not a broken soul who can find healing in anyone but himself. You can’t make each other complete.”

“Says who?” She took a few steps toward me and pressed her fingers into my chest. “Love has the power to do anything it wants to do.”

“And what does it want to do, Bethany? Save you both?”

“I don’t know, but I can’t hold on too much longer.” She pressed her free hand to her chest as her face crumbled. “I’m hurting so bad right here. It feels like someone has a fucking vise grip around my heart and I need him so badly.”

“Then go to him. Let him hold you and remind you how much he loves you. Stop fighting this shit and embrace it.”

“Then he wins.” She pushed at my chest as an ugly cry rose up out of her pretty mouth. “If he wins he’ll never respect me for who I am.”

“You don’t know that.” I gripped her hand tightly and pulled her toward me as a flash of color outside the window to the auditorium caught my attention. I ignored it and the buzzing in my pocket as I gave Damon’s girl my full attention. “Stop speaking for everyone around you. You don’t know what he has to say about his feelings for you or the reason he hired Philip. Maybe that was to show you that he trusted you to make the right decisions, but you’re not doing that.”

“I’m not a fucking puppet.” She pulled her hand from mine and walked toward the door. “Your class roster is on your desk. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bethany, go talk to him. I can’t solve this for you guys.”

“I wasn’t asking you to.” She paused by the door and glanced over her shoulder. “What would you do for love? Would you give up your rights and become whatever your lover wanted you to?”

“Is he asking that of you or are you forcing yourself to believe a lie to stay protected from possibly the greatest thing you might experience in this life.” I hated to push her, but someone had to, and it wasn’t going to be Matt or Jake.

“Would you change everything, Kendal? That was the question.”

I pulled my phone from my pocket and swallowed the worry that rose up my chest at seeing that both the hospital and Dana had called several times.

“Yes. I would change everything for the kind of love that promised to sustain me through loss and death, through fear and loneliness. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t give up for that.”

“Not even your rules?” Her eyebrow lifted and she had me.

“Perhaps that’s the only thing.” I smirked and shook my head. “Get out of here and go mend what you’ve almost let get broken. It’s not worth all that, and if I stand correct, neither you nor Damon have rules.”

“Thank God for that.” She patted the door and mumbled her thanks before walking out.

I dialed Dana’s number and pulled the phone to my ear as my heart hammered in my chest.

“Dana?” I barked into the phone as someone answered it.

“Who was the girl, Kendal?” Her tone was ugly, her voice filled with a thick hurt I’d felt myself far too many times.

“What girl?” I glanced around. Was she on campus? If so, how did she find me and why was she looking for me? What was going on?

“The pretty brunette you had pinned to your chest a few minutes ago.”

“No, baby. That was Damon’s girlfriend, Bethany. She’s my TA.”

“I know what I saw.” She sniffed. “I’m outside. Come out here please.”

“Of course. Wait right there.” I put the phone in my pocket and moved out into the hall as students started to file into my classroom. The phone buzzed again and I pulled it out as I side-skirted running into a handful of kids and finally got outside.

“Hey. Where are you?” I stopped and glanced around, unable to find Dana in the mass of people milling about.

“I’m at the hospital. It’s Tinsley, Dr. Tarrington. We need you to come up here now.”

“Is it Amanda? Is she okay?”

“Just get someone to bring you up here, Kendal. No rush, okay?”

“What? Why isn’t there a rush? What the hell is going on?” I glanced around as white-hot fear filled up my insides.

“Did Dana not tell you what she and I discussed on Saturday?” Tinsley’s voice was almost too soft to hear, or maybe I was shutting her out. Reason would ring true if they needed me up there, but if there was no urgency to it than my sister had lost her fight with MS. There was no fucking way I could accept that. I hadn’t seen her in a couple of days and...

“What discussion with Dana?” I closed my eyes as my knees went weak. My latest obsession had been so adamant about me going up to the hospital to see my sister. Why? What did she know?

The look on her face as she cried in the kitchen swam past my closed eyes. She knew something that night. She’d played it off as having lost her favorite patient, but it was more than that. Why the fuck hadn’t I pressed her on it?

Simple... I trusted her to tell me without having to push.

“The date of your sister’s prescribed end.”

“Prescribed end? What the fuck does that even mean?” I pulled the phone from my ear and glanced down at it as the world spun around me. “Is Amanda dead? Tell me.”

“Just come up here, Dr. Tarrington.” Was Tinsley crying? It sure as hell sounded like it.

I put the phone in my pocket and jogged back toward my classroom as bile rose up in my throat. I was going to lose my breakfast the minute I bent over and took a deep breath.

Hold on. Everything is fine. Amanda is perfectly fine. You're overreacting and reading something into nothing. Chill the fuck out.

I made it back to the classroom and walked toward my bag as some of the students greeted me. I nodded politely and prayed like hell that I didn't look nearly as bad as I felt. Not only was my sister quite possibly dead, but the woman I was hoping to start dating knew that Amanda only had a few days left and didn't tell me? Why? Was she trying to protect me, and if so, did that make it okay that she left me fucking waste the last few times I could get up to see my baby sister before she left me?

Was it really Dana's fault or my own?

I needed it to be mine. Something that important left me wanting to pull back and not let anything else develop between the two of us. I was being unfair and overreacting, but it was what it was. Holding myself in check was all I had the strength to do as I stopped by my desk and grabbed my bag and keys.

Jake walked up and patted me on the back before jerking his hand away. “Dr. Tarrington? What's wrong? You having chest pains?”

“What? No.” I glanced over at him. “Do tell Mark that I need a sub for today. My little sister just died.”

I wasn't sure of my own claims, or maybe I was and wanted to deny them. And where the fuck was Dana? She said she was on campus and then disappeared when I went to look for her. Had she come to confess about Amanda's death date

or maybe offer me comfort when I got the news? What the fuck was going on?

“Holy shit. You need me to drive you to the hospital?”

“Hm? No. I’m good, just go tell Mark for me.”

“The dean?”

“Yeah. Thanks.” I grabbed the registration list for my mini-mesters, my keys and my bag and walked for the door. I kept my eyes on the paper as a ploy to keep from having to acknowledge anyone around me. I made it to my car about the time I heard her call my voice from behind.

“Kendal. Wait.”

I turned and started to tuck the papers under my arm as something left me disturbed far beyond anything else I’d encountered lately. I pulled the paper back toward my face and scanned the names on the list of students taking my master’s-level financial statement analysis class.

Dana Young.

“What the fuck?” I glanced up as my heart broke in my chest.

“Did they reach you? Did you hear about Amanda?” She reached out, but I stepped back as shock rolled over me.

“What the fuck is this?” I ignored the situation she was going on about and shoved the paper toward her.

“What? What is this?” She took it and scanned it before handing it back to me. “Snap out of it and get in the goddamn car. Amanda didn’t make it through the night. We need to get up there. Who the fuck cares about the class schedule. It was supposed to be a surprise. Give me the keys to the car.”

“No.” I gripped them tightly. She was going to be my student in seven days. My goddamn master’s student. As if her lying about the situation with Amanda wasn’t enough... this was too much. I had rules. I’d made them to protect me and no matter what, I wasn’t breaking them.

Not for her.

Not for anyone.

Not even for love.

CHAPTER 20



DANA

Watching Kendal drive away with anger all over his handsome face left me broken in two. The schedule clutched in my hand was the reason behind his pissy attitude or was it more than that? Most people in the middle of grief will turn to anything and everything else in hopes of hiding the soul-wrenching reality they're forced to face.

Amanda was dead. Kendal's little sister hadn't made it through the night. Her MS finally won the battle and now he was forced to face death with no one by his side. Both of his parents were gone from what I'd read in Amanda's file at the hospital.

Tears burned my eyes as he tore out of the parking lot at UT and never looked back. Maybe it was for the best... Sadly enough, it didn't feel that way.

I glanced down at the schedule and folded it up slowly as students moved all around me. I'm sure the spectacle of Kendal screaming in my face would be the talk of the campus for a few days, but it was irrelevant. I didn't know many of them, and they didn't know me.

The one person I wanted to know wasn't going to allow any closeness between us from what I could tell.

"Hey. You okay?" A thin guy in a wheelchair moved up beside me and glanced up. His blond hair was cut in a way that left his bangs dripping into his line of sight.

"Hm?" I glanced toward the parking lot and nodded. "Oh yeah. Just having a fight with a friend."

“I’m Jake, Dr. Tarrington’s TA.” He extended his hand, and I turned to shake it while wiping tears from my eyes with my free hand.

“Nice to meet you. I really should get up to the hospital. I’m one of the nurses that was taking care of his sister.”

“Oh.” The guy’s face fell. “That sucks. He just told me about her passing. Tell him we’re all thinking about him if you get a chance.”

I nodded and walked toward my car, not willing to point out to the guy that I was the last person that Kendal seemed to want to see. After buckling up, I pulled out and glanced back toward the school one more time. Maybe I was making a mistake by getting involved with one of the professors on campus. Maybe that’s why he was pissy with me.

“Or maybe his sister just died, idiot.” I let out a long sigh and drove back toward my apartment. Kendal needed a few minutes to himself with Amanda and Dr. Lewis, and it wasn’t like anyone would let me into the room until Kendal was done with his final visit. I’d left poor Jackie in an emotional breakdown on my couch and Cameron at my door after bitching him out.

Everything was a fucking mess.

I grabbed my phone and held on to it tightly as I made my way back toward my place. Some part of me wanted Kendal to call so we could work through whatever he needed to work through. Was he pissed about me not saying anything about Amanda’s death date? Surely not. How would he know that I’d read her folder? And why would it be my job to say anything to him in the first place? It wasn’t. It was Dr. Lewis’.

A mixture of anger and sadness swirled in the pit of my stomach as I parked just outside my apartment and hoofed it up the stairs. I wanted a relationship filled with heat and passion, and something told me that’s exactly what I would have gotten with Kendal.

How the fuck was it over before it began?

Because of Amanda or something else?

I was grateful to find the door to my apartment shut and locked. The hope was that Jackie was more put together and Cameron had figured out what was best for him and left before I got back. I opened the door tentatively and walked in.

“Jackie?” The smell of sugar and chocolate wafted my way.

“I’m in the kitchen.” She stuck her head around the corner. “What the fuck happened? One minute you and I were walking in, and the next, you were gone.”

“Kendal’s sister, Mandy, died.” I dropped my purse and ran my fingers through my hair. “I wanted to get to him just in case he needed me.”

“Oh shit. I’m so sorry to hear that.” She walked toward me as she wiped her hands on a blue apron she had around her waist.

“Are you cooking something?” I accepted the quick hug before dropping down into a chair at the kitchen table.

“Yeah. I figured we could use something sweet. You had everything to make chocolate chip cookies from scratch, so I thought, ‘why the hell not’.” She squeezed my shoulder and walked back toward the kitchen.

“Did Cameron bother you?” I pulled my legs into the chair and ignored the screaming voice inside of me that said to run to the hospital as fast as I could. It wasn’t my place, and being the brunt of Kendal’s pain didn’t sound like much fun. I’d eventually go because I needed to know that he was okay, but now wasn’t the time.

“No. He came in, walked around and left. Weird.”

“Sounds like him.” I wrapped my arms around my legs and pressed my face to my knees. “Is there a policy at the college that a professor can’t date a student?”

“I’m sure there is. We have that at the hospital too. It’s part of our professional code of conduct.”

I snorted as my emotions started to soften a little. “You’ve read the professional code of conduct for the hospital?”

She walked out and chuckled. “Yeah, of course. I need to know where the line in the sand is.”

“Why, so you can apologize when you cross it?”

“Hardy, har.” She brushed her long blond hair over her shoulder. “Guess what?”

“What?” I watched her closely.

“I finally found Parks’ number.”

“And? Did you call him?” Parks was a hot doctor from New York that had come down for a few days to show our surgeons a few tricks of the trade, and somewhere along the way, stolen Jackie’s heart and her favorite pair of panties. The man was a player and a half.

“I left a message.” She got up as the timer on the oven went off. “He’ll call back. I just know he will.”

I rolled my eyes, got up and followed her into the kitchen. “You think I should go up to the hospital and see how Kendal is?”

“Do you?” She glanced over her shoulder.

“We were almost dating as of yesterday, but he was crazed when I went to the campus to check on him a few minutes ago.” I crossed my arms over my chest, wishing I could protect myself from what felt like the brinks of depression.

“He just lost his baby sister.” She turned back around and plated the cookies. “Go up there and just play it cool. If he needs you, be there for him, and if he doesn’t, then give him his space.”

“I guess.” I brushed my fingers by my lips and paced the floor. “He shoved his class schedule in my face when we were arguing a few minutes ago, as if me being in his mini-mester class was the worst fucking thing that could happen.”

“That’s because there’s a code of conduct, remember?” She put her hand on her hip and lifted her eyebrow. “Is he a rule follower?”

“No clue. I think so, but he’s got two different sides to his personality.” I grabbed a cookie and walked toward the bedroom. “I’m going to change and go up there. Maybe they need my help and I can just pick up a shift. Then it won’t be too awkward if he’s still upset with me.”

“You’re going to have to talk to him and see what’s up.”

“Yep,” I mumbled as I walked down the hall. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”



Every nerve in my body was buzzing by the time I got to the fourth floor of the hospital. Now wasn’t the time to try and talk with Kendal about what was going on with us. It was time to support him and hold him if he would let me anywhere near him. Just the thought of seeing him in pain left me panting for air and wanting to bend over in hopes of catching my breath.

How someone could cause me to feel so much when we’d just met was a mystery.

“Dana?” Dr. Lewis’ voice brought me from my thoughts.

I walked off the elevator and stiffened as the older doctor paused in the hallway.

“Hi Dr. Lewis.” I glanced both ways down the hall, noting that Kendal wasn’t in sight.

“You heard that we lost Amanda Tarrington, right?” He reached out and squeezed my shoulder as a fatherly look moved across his features.

“Yes. I’m heartbroken over it.” I glanced down and took a sharp breath before looking back up. “Is her brother still here?”

“Yes. Kendal’s in her room, though we’ve moved the body out. Just let him stay in there as long as he needs to. The poor boy has no other family to lean on.” He shook his head. “I’ve been friends with his parents since we were kids. I’ve never known a family to have so much tragedy in one lifetime.”

As if I didn't feel like shit already, Dr. Lewis' words were dragging me farther and farther into a hole of despair.

"I'll go check on him." I nodded toward the doctor and walked languidly toward the room. It felt as if my feet were pushing through mud. Tinsely, the head nurse on our floor and chief-bitch most days of the week, said something from the nurses' station across from Amanda's room, but I ignored her. She was a pain in the ass that I could deal with after I made sure Kendal was holding it together.

I knocked softly on the door and pushed it open as I held my breath.

Kendal stood by the window, his hands in his pockets, his shoulders rolled in, head slightly bent toward the ground.

"Kendal?" I closed the door and stood there until he looked up and glanced over his shoulder.

"I'm sorry I attacked you." He turned back toward the window. The reflection of lifelessness showing from his reflection in the glass left my heart aching. "I just really wanted whatever was happening between us to work out. To turn into something."

Pushing the conversation felt like the natural thing to do, but I had to force myself to hold my tongue. He was lost in grief over his sister. I could respect that and discuss us later.

I moved up behind him and wrapped my arms around his waist. Some part of me expected him to pull from me, to reject my touch, but he didn't.

"I'm so sorry about Amanda." I pressed my cheek to his strong back and closed my eyes. "I wish there was something I could do."

He turned in my arms and put his hands on my shoulders, his beautiful face completely expressionless. "Thank you. There was nothing anyone could have done, I don't suppose. Life is a bitch and then you die."

I moved back and slipped my hands into my pockets, ignoring his morbid comment. "Can I take you home? Get you something to eat? Tell me how to help."

He shook his head and turned back toward the window. “I don’t need anything but time. Just let me hang out for a while and then I’ll get out of your hair.”

Out of my hair?

“Do you have someone I could call to come up here and sit with you? I’ll stay if you want me to, but if there is someone else-”

“No. I’ve already called my friends. Just leave me be.” He wrapped his arms around himself and tucked his head toward his chest as I stood in an awkward silence.

A part of me was grateful that his anger had dissipated, but maybe anger was better than no emotion at all. He didn’t seem at all like himself, not that I expected him to be. I stood there for another minute before slipping out into the hallway and wiping away the tears that had gathered in my eyes. Hopefully someone would show up and give him a shoulder to lean on, a chest to cry against, something...

I would have offered him all of the above, but after our fight at UT an hour before, I was more than assured that he wouldn’t take it.

CHAPTER 21



KENDAL

The last few days had been nothing but a blur. A thick numbness had settled over the top of me, and at times I was grateful for it. Between losing Mandy and having to testify in Jake's court case from his stabbing, I was spent. The school was good enough to give me a few days to myself, or really the whole fucking semester if I wanted it. My answer had been short and sweet. Hell no. There was no way I was sitting around in my misery for three months under the guise of trying to heal.

There was no such thing as healing from death. It lightened its sting over time, but the bastard stood beside the living, ready to remind them at each turn in the bend of what, or rather who, they'd lost.

If it hadn't been for Damon, I'd probably have missed every meal between Mandy's passing and the funeral. I was grateful for his friendship before my sister passed, but ever indebted to him after it. I wouldn't have made it without him.

"I miss you," I whispered softly as I stood at the front of the sanctuary. The dark black suit Damon picked out for me fit like a glove, leaving me to want to tease him about knowing me too fucking well. The words never left my lips, but he knew what I was thinking.

The large picture of my sister set up beside her casket showed her laughing with so much life in her eyes that it scored my soul. I slipped my hands into my pockets and took a shaky breath. One more hour of living her death and then I could retreat back to the house and drown myself in a bottle. It

wasn't my usual way of doing things, but I felt as if I had little choice.

"Kendal. I'm so sorry for your loss, son." An older man that I faintly recognized patted me on the back and shook my hand as I turned toward him.

"Thank you, sir. It's sad that death isn't a respecter of age." I glanced over at Mandy's picture as I released the guy's hand. I'd cried enough tears over losing her that I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to cry again. The pain had turned from excruciating to a dull wave of agony that rolled through my body from top to bottom. The moments of rest I got from it were moments where I let myself dream of Dana.

"Dr. Tarrington." Jake rolled his wheelchair up beside me as I stood at the front of the church. The poor kid was one of my two TAs at UT and had been through hell himself over the last few months. A love story gone bad had almost taken his life. How the young woman that said she loved him could stab him repeatedly in the chest until he was lifeless was beyond me.

We live in a fucked up world.

"Jake. How are you?" I wanted to push a bit of positive inflection in my voice, but couldn't seem to muster the energy.

"I'm better." He glanced toward the picture of Mandy. "Your sister was a beautiful woman."

I reached over and squeezed the kid's shoulders. "Thank you. She looked just like my mom."

"Are your parents here?" Jake glanced over his shoulder.

"No. They passed away awhile back. It was just me and Mandy."

The sadness in his eyes would be a common theme for the day. I was almost prepared for it. My parents' death had almost torn me and Mandy in half, but somehow by leaning on each other, we made it through. I wasn't sure who the fuck I was going to lean on to get through losing her.

“Oh shit. I’m so sorry.” Jake glanced up with a look of horror on his face.

“You didn’t know.” I tucked my hands back in my pockets. “Did Bethany come with you?”

“No. I think she and Damon are working things out.” He rolled his eyes. “Don’t get me started.”

I nodded, wishing I could fake a chuckle. “You were brave at the hearing yesterday. I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks.” He nodded. “That means a lot to me. I’m sorry again.”

“Me too,” I mumbled and turned back to face my sister’s casket. A few extended members of my family were greeting everyone and taking care of everything, which gave me the right to simply stand stone still wherever I wanted to, which was beside Mandy.

“I assume that Damon’s been taking care of you?” Dana’s voice had the power to soften my tough exterior without even trying. The poor girl had sustained me verbally smacking her all over the parking lot at UT in front of a handful of her peers and still seemed to care.

I didn’t deserve her time or her affection, but fuck if I wasn’t greedy enough to want it with every fiber of my being.

“Yeah.” I turned to face her. “I’m sorry about the other day. I overreacted.”

She moved toward me, sliding her arms around my waist and pressing herself to my chest. The subtle move melted me completely. I wrapped my arms around her and kissed the top of her head as I closed my eyes. I was close to tears again somehow.

“Don’t apologize. Whatever upset you about the class schedule,” she glanced up at me, “we’ll figure it out and change it. Don’t push me away right now. You need me and I need you to need me.”

I nodded and brushed her long dark hair off her shoulder. “I do need you.”

She rubbed my back softly, wooing me to rest against her. If it hadn't been for the fifty people milling about behind her, I would have collapsed in her arms.

"I'm so tired," I whispered before leaning down to press my face against the side of her neck. I breathed in deeply as she pulled me into a warm hug and cupped the back of my head.

"Let me take care of you, okay?"

"I'd like that," I murmured and let out a breath I felt like I'd been holding for the last four days. Where Dana and I would have to draw the line at friendship, it was still more than enough to help me survive the coming weeks. I could repay the favor by helping her with her degree or maybe offering her a TA position as well.

Our love affair was over, but our friendship could continue to develop. If only she wasn't my student, or a student at all.

"Hey buddy." A tap on the back had me pulling from Dana and turning to face Damon.

"Thanks for coming today." I reached out and pulled Damon into a hug.

"Of course, man." He returned the gesture before moving back to let Beth get in a quick hug as well.

"Guys, this is Dana Young. She was one of Mandy's nurses and is a friend of mine." I put my hand on Dana's lower back as Damon smiled and shook her hand.

"Nice to meet you. I think we got to see each other earlier this week at the hospital." He smiled as she nodded.

"We did." Dana smiled back and turned to Beth.

"I guess we should sit down." Damon glanced down at Beth as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. He glanced back up toward me and gave me a sad smile. "We'll let all of your extended family sit up here with you, and my family will be a few rows back if you need us, okay?"

"Just remember that you're a pallbearer."

“I know.” They walked toward the back as Kendal nodded toward the front row. “You mind sitting up front with me?”

“Not at all.” She slid her arm into mine and walked with me to the front pew. I unbuttoned my jacket, nodded at a few University friends and old college buddies before sitting down. How in the hell had my life turned from going in the right direction to losing Amanda and Dana all in the same day?

Luck. It was my shitty luck. It’d always been that way.

The preacher walked to the front and began the ceremony as I sunk down into my darkness. I didn’t need to hear the words of grace, or be reminded that my baby sister was in a better place. I needed to mourn, to scream and throw a fit at the unfairness of life. Everyone else could get comfort from the event, but I simply wanted to get through it.



“Thank you,” I mumbled and glanced over toward Dana as we drove back toward my place. She’d only been there twice, and I was giving shitty instructions from dipping in and out of my thoughts.

“For what?” She reached over and took my hand in hers. The softness of her skin and the warmth of her touch thawed me a little.

“For sitting with me at the funeral, and loving on me at the graveside service.” I lifted her hand to my mouth and kissed her fingers softly. “I don’t deserve your kindness.”

“Of course you do.” She pulled into the neighborhood where I’d purchased my house a few years back. “Are you up for telling me what happened at UT?”

“What happened with what?” I pulled my hand from hers and unbuckled as she parked in front of my place.

“You were so mad at me over the class schedule.” She reached for her door handle. “Why?”

“Oh. That.” I opened my door and walked to the front of the car. “The University has strict policies against a professor dating a student or another professor. Seeing you on my class roster was just a kick in the nuts.”

“So I’ll drop the class.” Her voice was non-confrontational, and damn if I didn’t fall a little in love with her for being willing to change whatever needed to be changed to make *us* work out.

“It’s not that easy.” I unlocked the door and pulled my coat off as she moved into the house behind me.

“Then we’ll figure it out.” She walked around me as I paused at the opening to the living room. “I’m not giving up on what we have starting between us, Kendal. I can’t.”

I reached out to run my fingers down the side of her beautiful face, memorizing the curve of her lip, the slight slant of her eyes. Her long dark hair moved over her shoulders as she shook her head ‘no’.

“Let’s just work on being friends for right now. I want you as badly as I did early this week when we spent some time together, but my rules are in place for a reason. I’ve been through hell and back because I didn’t adhere to them. It wouldn’t be fair to you or me if we didn’t slow this thing down while we still can.” I licked my lips as my body purred to life. How good would it feel to pick her up and spend the afternoon rolling around in the bed pressed against her? To steal her warmth and force her to love me in a million ways until the sun stole the day from us?

“Fuck your rules.” She pulled me down into a long kiss that felt too fucking good to break.

I turned my face a little and let my fingers slip into her hair as I pulled her flush against me. It wasn’t my rules I wanted to fuck.

After kissing her until we were both breathless, I pressed my forehead to hers and closed my eyes. “I can’t bend my rules or I’ll lose my job, Dana. I’ve worked so fucking hard for the position I have. It’s been my whole adult life.”

“I understand, but there are other ways around it.” She cupped my face and lifted to her toes, dragging me down for another round of much-needed kisses. “Please don’t push me away.”

“I’m not.” I kissed her once more before pulling back and walking to the kitchen. “I just need some time to figure things out. You being a student means one thing for sure.”

“Which is what?” She paused by the opening to the kitchen.

“That we’re not going to be anything more than friends until you’re out of UT.”

“Then why did we start seeing each other?” The hurt on her face should have stung me, but I was too far past numb to know what to do with her disapproval.

“Because I didn’t know you were a student.” I pulled out a beer. “You want something to drink?”

“No.” She wrapped her arms around herself. “I should go. I can’t be here and not want to touch you, to hold you. It’s not fair to ask that of me.”

“I agree.” I popped the top on the beer and tried hard to think of something I could say that would help our relationship get back on track.

“Call me if you need me, Kendal.” She turned and walked toward the door, pausing before she walked out. “Even if you just need a friend.”

I leaned against the counter and watched her go. I needed so much more than a friend, but life wasn’t going to do me any favors anytime soon. She would graduate in eight months. I could hold on that long, but it wasn’t fair to ask her to do the same.

There had to be another way.

CHAPTER 22



DANA

“I just don’t get it,” I barked into the phone as I paced the floor in my living room.

“He’s in a weird place right now, Dana. Give him a little bit of space and he’ll come around.” My best friend Olivia was forever trying to patch up the world with Band-Aids and butterfly kisses. How she was a top investment advisor in a cut-throat city like New York was beyond me.

“I don’t think he will.” I ran my hand through my hair and sat down on the couch. “I’ve been moping around this stupid apartment all weekend. Thank God I have a meeting with my adviser in an hour and a shift at the hospital, or I’d still be moping.”

“Just call him. You guys have a friendship, right?”

“It’s not that easy.” I wanted to pull the phone away and glare at it in hopes of getting my point across, but it was useless. Everything was, as far as I was concerned. “Maybe I should just change schools. If the problem is me being at UT, then I’ll just look to see about transferring to another-”

“Hold up.” Olivia’s voice changed, and I knew the momma bear was coming out. “You’ve been working your ass off for six years and now you’re going to change schools just to get some guy to start dating you? Fuck that. He can figure it out from his end. Maybe he needs to change jobs. Is he willing to do that?”

“No. I don’t know. I’m just saying... he’s a great guy, Liv. He’s the kind of guy I want to take home to see my family and

I feel like purring every time he walks in the room.”

“You just met him. You did this same madness with Cameron, remember?”

I started to deny her claims, but she was right. I had been the same way with Cameron and every other guy I’d dated over the last few years.

An ugly sigh left me and I slumped back into the couch. “You’re right.”

“Don’t say that. It means you’re giving up. I’m not telling you to give up on this guy. I’m just saying that if he’s worth you moving mountains over, then maybe you guys should talk about how to make your relationship work. There’s no reason why either of you should have to change your entire life to be together.”

“He’s a professor at UT and I’m a student.”

“So change your financial statement analysis class. That’s the one he’s teaching, right?”

“It’s not that easy. Professors can’t date *any* student on campus. Even if I changed my class, he’d still be off limits, or rather, I would.” I brushed my hand down my shirt and tried to still my thoughts. I’d gone through a hundred and ten different ways that Kendal and I could make our relationship work and none of them were plausible. Hell, I wasn’t even sure if he wanted to work things out. He seemed perfectly content with just being friends.

But that kiss... The one in his living room where he wrapped me in his strong arms and made the world disappear. That wasn’t a friendly kiss. It was hungry and needy. I just needed to know if it was due to his pain or because he still felt something for me.

“So just be friends with benefits until May. You guys can keep things under wraps. Get creative if this really means something to you.” She snorted. “You remember when you really wanted to win homecoming queen our senior year?”

“Oh Lord.” I covered my face with my free hand. Why was she going there? She always resorted back to some crazy

ass story from high school that left me feeling like I could rule the universe.

“Exactly. You did everything you had to do to win that title, and did you win it?”

“You know that I did.” I shook my head and let my hand drop from my face. “I really like this guy, Liv. I really want this to go somewhere, and some part of me knows that it could. It could be one of those great love stories that you see on the Hallmark Channel.”

“Ugh. You know I hate those shows.”

I laughed along with her. Somehow she always had the ability to make me feel better.

“All right.” I stood up. “You’re right. We can work this out if it’s something he’s up for. I almost like the idea of sneaking around. It’s sexy.”

“Right? Then get to it.”

“I’ll talk to him today. Love you.” I dropped the call and tossed the phone on the couch. All of a sudden, going up to the school and then the hospital didn’t sound like much fun. Necessary evils in my life. Everything felt that way except looking for a solution to the issue of me and Kendal getting to be together. First thing first though... I needed to make sure he still wanted me as badly as I wanted him.

Somehow that almost sounded like fun.



Nurse Barry had a note on her door that said she was unavailable because of an emergency at the hospital. I was almost grateful to see it seeing that I wasn’t really sure what I was going to tell her. I’d met with her the week before and locked down my schedule and my graduation. The only other thing she could help me with was dropping my classes and trying to transfer to another University for graduation, but after talking with Olivia, that option felt ignorant.

I'd been at UT since I was a starting freshman. With my mom being a single mom and having to raise three kids, paying for the prestigious college had taken its toll on all of us. Me turning my back on that in hopes of being more *available* to Kendal was over the top. It was eight months. Eight months until graduation. If nothing else, I could wait that long for him. The only real question was whether he would wait for me.

I walked back through the nursing building at UT and waved at a few people who greeted me. No matter how I looked at my life at that moment, it was better. It was better because Cameron wasn't in it. He wasn't berating me for my weight and leaving me to feel like I was less of a woman than he deserved. I wasn't struggling to find myself at the hospital anymore either. I'd come to terms with the fact that I could do my job and care for my patients. Amanda and Mr. Jackson had taught me that. It was okay to love those that you cared for. Loss was part of the deal, but so were all the great things that happened between the heartache.

I smiled as I got into my cramped car and rolled down the windows. It was almost October, and the fall day was beautiful. I needed to talk with Kendal to see where his heart was. We hadn't gotten very deep into our budding relationship, but it was enough to know that he was exactly the kind of guy I wanted beside me for the long haul.

The song on the radio was one of my favorites. I turned it up and sang all the way to the hospital, making sure to engage the cars around me as we pulled to various red lights. It was silly and childish, but it left me feeling more like me than I had in a long time.

My conversation with Olivia moved through my mind as I walked up to the hospital. I had been a wild child once, an unmovable force, but over time I'd let that part of myself fade away - die. I wanted it back - wanted her back. The girl who was unafraid to risk it all because of the promise of something incredible waiting on the other side of the door.

"Hey! What's that smile for?" Jackie came down the main hall of the hospital toward me, surprising me a little by her presence.

“Oh hey. I was just thinking about some of the stunts I pulled when I was younger.” I stopped in front of her. She looked like a million bucks with her long blond hair, warm brown eyes and big boobs. How many times had I let myself feel like an ugly duckling in her shadow, and why? She was beautiful, but the girl had more problems than a one-legged man in a butt-kicking contest.

“I think I need to hear about these stunts.” She turned and slid her arm into mine before pulling me down the hall. “We’re going away for a girls’ weekend. My treat.”

“Oh yeah?” I waved at one of the orderlies and pushed the button for the elevator.

“Yes. I got ahold of Parks.” She released me and bounced up and down on her toes.

“Don’t do that. It’s disturbing.” I gave her a silly smile and reached out to make her stop. “Tell me what he said.”

“He got wrapped up in work like all doctors do. He misses me like crazy and is so insanely sorry. He wants me to come visit.”

“Awesome. When are you going?” I didn’t like the sound of her going anywhere near the playboy who’d come down for a few days, fucked her silly and broken her heart. Obviously she was still lost in the euphoria of what the man could do with his tool. She was blinded by him.

“We’re going this weekend. My dad’s buying us the plane tickets and we can stay with Parks.”

“What? No way.” I held the door to the elevator open for her. “I have things to do.”

“Like what?” She walked out of the elevator and waited for me to join her.

“Like... stuff.”

“Nope. You’re going.” She wagged her eyebrows before grabbing a clipboard from our nursing station. “By the way, you have the new patient that was brought in this morning. We drew straws and you got the short one.”

“What? I wasn’t even here.” I took the clipboard and glanced down.

“So you’re coming with me to New York?”

“I don’t know, Jackie. Let me think about it.” I turned on my heel and walked back down toward the other end of the hall. New York didn’t sound like a bad idea. I could hook up with Olivia for some of the time and maybe get my head on straight where Kendal was concerned.

“Don’t make me go up there by myself. I’m scared!” Jackie called after me.

“Liar,” I mumbled and stopped in front of room four fifteen. I knocked once and opened the door. “Mrs. Delmaz? I’m Dana. I’ll be one of your nurses today.”

“Well, it’s about damn time!” The woman’s voice was full of authority and loud enough to jolt me.

I stepped inside and gave her a warm smile. “I just came on shift, so you’ll have to forgive me. Is there something you need?”

“Yes. I’ve been asking to see Larry since I got here. No one will tell me where the hell he is or why he’s taking so long to bring my magazines up here. It’s getting on my last nerve!” The woman had to be in her late seventies, a hundred pounds overweight and looked to be as mean as a snake.

Perfect. Exactly what I need to take my mind off of things.

“All right, well, I’ll find out how to get ahold of Larry.” I handed her the clipboard and a pen. “You write down the names of the magazines he’s supposed to bring and we’ll make it happen. Do you need a drink or another pillow or blanket? Dr. Lewis will be by shortly to see you, I’m sure, but what can I do right now to make life better?”

“Get me the fuck outta here.” The woman lifted her eyebrow as if challenging me. It was almost comical.

“All right. Get yourself in this wheelchair and I’ll wheel you outside for a breath of fresh air.”

“Really?” Her tone faltered as she sunk back toward the bed.

“Of course.” I moved the wheelchair beside the bed and smiled. “If you’re too weak to get in the chair, then we’ll just open the window up here, but if not...”

She didn’t say a word, but I didn’t need her to. If she wanted to boss someone around and scare them, she’d have to find someone else.

I was always the one that drew the short stick with rowdy new patients and they usually became like family to me. Funny enough, I was never involved in the actual stick-drawing part.

CHAPTER 23



KENDAL

I called in on Monday and moped around the house, sleeping off and on until the sun set and another day was officially over. I'd planned to do the same the next day, but the sound of someone banging on my front door at seven in the morning said otherwise.

"I'm coming. Shit." I grabbed a pair of sleeping pants and pulled them over my legs before stumbling down the hall. The last few days had been a blur and not the good kind. I was pretty sure I'd kissed Dana in my living room after Mandy's funeral and then told her we were nothing more than friends, but maybe not. My daydreams were starting to mix with my reality and I wasn't doing so good at telling which way was up.

Damon gave me a cocky look as I opened the door. "You look like shit. Get dressed. We're going to breakfast."

"No. I'm not hungry." I growled as he moved past me, hitting me with his shoulder.

"Don't care. I'm hungry and it's your turn to buy. Get dressed or I'll fucking dress you myself."

"This I gotta see." I closed the door and turned. "I'm seriously thinking about calling in today. I'm not feeling up to-"

"I see that, and where I think you taking some time off from the University is a smart move, it's not happening today. You've been holed up here since the funeral on Saturday. Get a

t-shirt and a pair of flip-flops and let's go. The Chicken and Waffle is screaming my name this morning."

"Seriously?" I walked past him toward the bedroom. "You're not going to let me go back to bed, are you?"

"Nope." He followed me into the bedroom and dropped down on my bed. "Beth and I are back together."

"Good." A little bit of warmth rushed through me. Damon and Beth were meant for each other, but fuck if they hadn't been suffering over it lately. It would seem that it was mine and Dana's turn to take that torch and carry it for a while.

"Good?" He chuckled. "That's all you got for me?"

"Really good?" I walked to my closet and worked to get dressed as Damon hummed something from the bedroom behind me. "Is she coming back to work for you?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'm good with it either way. I just want her beside me."

"Wedding back on?" I pulled my shirt over my head and walked out in flip-flops and jeans.

"Yeah." He got up and tossed me a ball cap. "Wear this. Your hair looks like you took a shower and went to bed with it wet."

"Thanks, mom." I put the cap on and smiled at him before walking to the front door. "Am I going to be the maid of honor or the best man?"

"Both?" He patted my back before reaching around and opening the front door. "You'll be with me, you joker. I'm sure Beth has some cousin or someone that she'll have on her side. Maybe Erica if nothing else, though the last time I spoke with her, she sounded seriously upset."

"Something company related?" I glanced over my shoulder as we walked toward what had to be Damon's newest obsession. A candy red Shelby Cobra sat in my driveway. "Wow."

"She's pissed at Matt." He stopped by the driver's side door. "You wanna drive her?"

“Fuck yes.” Every last drop of darkness inside me melted away for some odd reason.

He tossed me the keys as we walked by each other in front of the car. “Just treat her like you own her or you and I will have words.”

“Why does that sound less than intimidating?” I chuckled and got into the driver’s side. Closing my eyes, I let my head fall back against the headrest and took a deep breath.

“Because we’re getting old.” Damon patted my chest, but I kept my eyes closed and tried to push through the heavy emotions dancing inside of me. “You okay, buddy?”

I nodded and pursed my lips. There was too much to say and it was all wrapped in a wave of tears I didn’t want to shed. I was grateful for him in so many ways, and I needed to start showing it. He was all I had left in my life, the closest thing I had to family.

Dana.

“Come on, let’s go, emo-boy. I’ll drive if you need to blow your nose.” He popped my chest again playfully.

I wiped at my eyes and started the car. “Fuck you too, asshole.”

“Nope. My girl does that for me.” He wagged his eyebrows as I glanced over at him. It was good to see him back to being his old self.

“How is Beth? She better now that you guys have kissed and made up?”

“I think so.” He tapped his knee to the song coming from the radio. “I hope so. You tell me after you see her today. She said she’s going to TA for you this afternoon, unless you’re not going in.”

I hit the gas and stifled a smile as the car took off down the long road that led to my house.

I could seriously get used to a car like this.

“I’m going in. I wasn’t going to, but seeing that you’ve ruined my ability to go back to sleep...”

“Which is a good thing.” He gave me a sideways glance. “What’s up with you and Dana? She still taking good care of you?”

“You want to poke me with a hot poker instead of asking all the wrong questions this morning? That might be faster.”

“Don’t be sensitive.” Damon leaned back in his seat. “It’s not your style and you know it. Tell me what’s going on with her. You fucked it up again, didn’t you?”

“I didn’t fuck up anything. She came over and we kissed in the living room and then I told her we could be friends.”

“Oh brother.” Damon ran his hand down his face, looking far more exasperated than was necessary.

“She’s my student, Damon. You know that’s not permitted at the college. How many more times do I have to go through this shit before everyone understands why I have rules? They fucking protect me.”

“Right, from everyone and everything.” He pointed to the left. “Turn that way. The new restaurant I want to take you to is up on the right.”

“Chicken and Waffles?” I gave him a concerned look.

“Don’t smack it until you’ve tried it.”

“I like Dana, a lot, but I’m not dating a student. Period.”

“So ask her to remove herself from your class, Kendal. I saw the way you guys interacted at the funeral. You’re already into her.”

“It’s hard not to be.” I pulled into the parking lot of the restaurant and shook my head. “Why the hell haven’t I noticed this before?”

“You come from the other direction I bet, and honestly, you’re a pretty distracted guy. All those rules running around your head, making you crazy all the time.”

“Really?” I got out of the car and handed him the keys as we walked in.

The smell of maple syrup caused my stomach to grumble. When was the last time I’d eaten?

I couldn’t remember, which wasn’t good.

We sat down and gave the waitress our drink orders before Damon turned the conversation back to Dana. Something told me that he wasn’t going to relent until I made a few promises to get my love life back on track. Sadly enough, she was the only woman I wanted to do that with, and she was officially off limits.

“So tell me specifically what these rules say. It’s the UT code of conduct? Like the exact verbiage.”

“I don’t know the exact verbiage, but I know as a professor, I’m not allowed to date *any* student or another professor on campus. It’s pretty simple. She’s a student at the college I’m teaching at, and she’s off limits.” I narrowed my eyes at him, as if I had any hope of intimidating the dick in front of me. He’d been muscling me around since we met a million years ago.

“So you sneak around.” He shrugged and pulled his napkin into his lap. The look on his face said that his idea was not only brilliant, but something we should have thought about already.

“No.” I smiled up at the waitress as she delivered our drink.

“Yes.” Damon shrugged. “It’s perfect. There’s something so sexy about sneaking around to see the woman you love. I might ask Beth to role play with me, actually. That would be fun.”

I shook my head. “Do you hear yourself? Sneaking around is not at all fun. It’s scary.”

“Exhilarating.”

“It’s like cheating.”

“It’s nothing like cheating.” His smile faded. If Damon hated anything, it was a cheat or a liar.

“How is it not like cheating? Please explain and enlighten me.”

“You and Dana like each other. If your bullshit rules weren’t in the way, you’d be dating, right?”

“Absolutely.” I took a tentative sip of my coffee and tried to keep my thoughts on the conversation at hand. It would be so easy to slip off into another daydream about the beautiful Hispanic woman who’d stolen a part of my heart without even trying.

“Then it’s sneaking around the system, Kendal. It’s like her being a part of an all-girls school and you wanting into her panties. You sneak around and get what you both want.”

“You’re corrupt. You know that?”

He nodded. “I’m aware.”

“Yes, but does Beth know that?”

“Absolutely. It’s one of the things that she loves most about me.” He waved his hand around. “Look, I’m serious about this. You need some light in your life.”

“I have you.” I picked up my menu. “It’s tainted light, but you’re doing a great job.”

“And I’m not going anywhere, but guys like us need a woman, and you know it.” He tapped the top of my menu, forcing me to look up.

“I know, man. It’s been a long two years of sleeping alone, but if the lessons from my past have taught me anything, it’s this... don’t date anyone affiliated with UT. Period.”

“Then let’s find you someone else. I’ll start looking around.”

“What? No.” The thought left my insides tight with disgust.

“Why not?” He gave me a knowing look.

“Fuck you too.” I glanced back down at my menu. “I’m not sneaking around.”

“Then leave UT and go do something else. Fuck, come work for me. Stop hoping that you’ll finally find someone off-campus when you never leave campus.”

“I don’t want anyone else, Damon. I want Dana. She has eight months left. I can wait.”

“Right, but can she? Is she willing to? Do you really want eight months of your life to be gone when you finally give in to each other?”

“I don’t know, dude.” I slumped down in my chair and let out a long sigh. “After losing Mandy, it feels like being without love and affection for a day is stupid. I could die tomorrow.”

“There’s my morbid best friend.” Damon glanced up to the waitress and ordered as I watched him. The cocky bastard knew what he was talking about, and I’d have to own up to it sooner or later. I was so weary from being by myself that I could feel the loosening of my morals as he spoke.

“What can I get you, hon?” The lady moved over toward me.

“Whatever he’s having.” I handed her the menu, not sure what would show up, but it would be greasy, cheesy and covered in syrup most likely. I needed a jolt to the system, and food would just be the beginning of it all.

“Just be friends to the public and behind closed doors, be everything you both need each other to be. Don’t deny her or yourself. Turn back into that guy who used to live for passion. I know he’s still deep down in there. I’ve seen him show his face a time or two over the last six years.”

I nodded and glanced down at my hands. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe we can get out of town once a month and try to keep things undercover until then.”

“Exactly, and what’s the very worst thing that could happen. Honestly. How bad could it get?”

“I could get caught and lose my job, fuck up my reputation.”

“And what would your next step be if that happened?”

“I’d call you and get a job at McKenzie and Bryant.”

He glanced up toward the ceiling and pressed his hands in a prayer-like state. “Please, please, please let everything get fucked up for my best friend here. I want him to work for me like I want my next breath.”

“You’re an idiot.” I reached over and popped his hands.

“No. You are.” He gave me a stern look. “Start living, Kendal. Do it for your folks. Do it for Mandy, for shit’s sake... do it for yourself.”

“All right. Sneaking around it is... if she agrees.”

“She’ll agree.” Damon smirked. “How could she not? You’re Dr. Kendal Tarrington.”

The high-pitched feminine voice was enough to make me roll my eyes and laugh. No one could cheer me up like he could, and for that... I’d keep around for another day at least.

CHAPTER 24



DANA

After another restless night of sleep, the last thing I wanted to do was head back to the hospital the next morning. I was almost looking forward to the mini-mester starting just so there would be something in my life that wasn't the hospital or my empty-ass apartment.

The flashing lights by the ER entrance caught my attention as I drove toward my usual parking spot. Where it wasn't anything out of the ordinary to have several ambulances at the hospital, I couldn't pass up the curiosity bubbling inside of me.

I jerked the wheel to the right and parked in the first spot I could find. After grabbing my backpack, I jogged toward the ER entrance and walked in to see a bit of mayhem.

"Young, good." Dr. Lewis walked by the entrance and motioned for me to join him. "Multi-car pileup on I-45. We need you in trauma. Wash up and be prepared to help however we need you to."

"Yes, sir." I jogged behind him as adrenaline filled me completely. I loved the rush of knowing I was heading into a scenario where I could help save a life. Nothing brought me to life more. Well, almost nothing. A certain handsome accounting professor seemed to have a strong pull on my emotions as well.

I dropped my bag in a locker and ran back down the hall toward the nurses' station.

“Where do you need me?” I stopped in front of an older nurse who looked as steady as I felt.

“In trauma, room ten. Wash up before you go in.”

“Absolutely.” I turned and jogged back down the hallway as various other members of our staff raced about. After washing up, I walked into trauma and moved to the various requests of the doctors around me. I went from holding a clamp to monitoring someone’s vitals to helping stitch up a few cuts.

“Where do you need me?” I walked into another room and found Dr. Lewis trying to work with the nurses as a large guy thrashed about the table.

“I need you to help calm him. He’s fighting the drugs in his system and we’re going to have to put him under if he doesn’t calm down.” Dr. Lewis gave me a stern look.

I nodded and moved toward the man’s head. “Hey there. I’m Dana. Look at me, okay. We’re here to help you. You need to just breathe through your nose.”

“I want out of here,” the guy mumbled as blood dripped down from his mouth.

I cupped his face softly in my hands and rubbed back and forth with my thumbs. “I know you do. Just stay right here and I’ll talk with you while they get you comfortable. Everything is going to be fine. I promise.”

“I’m scared.” Tears formed around the sides of his eyes.

“I know you are. It’s perfectly normal to be scared.” I gave him a warm smile and continued to massage the side of his face with my thumbs. “Everyone is doing great though, especially you. Were you headed into work this morning or to see someone you love?”

“My mom.” He took a shaky breath and closed his eyes as his voice broke. “My mom was in the car with me. Can you check on her? She wasn’t moving when-”

“Hey. I’ll check on her for you, but you have to stay right here with me. Do you have a brother or a sister or something?”

I brushed his hair back and stayed close to him as the medical team moved around both of us.

“A sister. Sandy. Her name is Sandy.”

“That’s a beautiful name. Is she older or younger than you?” I listened to his response and kept him talking until his eyes fluttered a few times and he finally let the medicine do its job. I laid his head down on the bed carefully and backed up. “Where do you need me now?”

Dr. Lewis let out a long exhale and shook his head. “We’re all good. You did a great job, kiddo.”

“Thank you. I’m going up to my floor but if you need me...”

“You’d be the first one I called.” He winked at me as I turned to walk out of the room. “And Dana...”

“Yes, sir?” I glanced over my shoulder.

“Come talk to me, okay? I’ve heard whispers around the hospital that you might be more interested in pushing your career a little farther. There’s a pretty cool opportunity that might be opening up in May next year when you graduate.”

“Okay. Thank you, Dr. Lewis.” I walked out of the room, covered in blood and feeling like a million dollars. Regardless of what else was going on in my life, I was right where I was supposed to be. Helping people was my calling. It was my life.



“Wow. I swear you always end up at the right place at the right time.” Jackie pulled her hair into a high ponytail and gave me a cheeky grin.

I dipped my spoon into my frozen yogurt and glanced around at all the mall-goers before turning my attention back to her.

“Are we really going to New York this weekend?”

“Yes.” She tilted her head a little. “You’re not backing out. I already got the tickets.”

“And where are we staying when we get there?” I already knew the answer.

“At Parks’ apartment. It’s the top floor of some ritzy apartment building right near Times Square.”

I shook my head and took a quick bite of my yogurt. “You’re not going to be completely butt-hurt if I stay with my best friend from high school, right? She lives in the city. I’ll hang out with you when you want me to, but you know you’re just going for a bootie call.”

She snorted. “I don’t care if you stay with your friend or me. I just want you to go with me up there. I hate flying by myself.”

“All right. I’ll call her tonight and see if she has extra room for me. If not, I’ll just stay with you guys.” I hated the thought, but Jackie was one of my only friends. She was a nutcase for thinking she could wrangle a guy like Parks, but I wasn’t going to leave her on her own to do it.

“We’ll behave.” She wagged her eyebrows at me.

“Doubtful.” I licked my spoon. “I hate to be the one to piss in your cheerios, but do you really think this is a good idea? You know this guy is a total player. You were crushed last week by the way he was ignoring you. Remember?”

She nodded and ran her hand over the top of her hair. “I know. I just can’t back off yet. He’s so good, and Dana... he’s a Scorpio. You know what that means.”

“He stings like a bitch?”

“No, silly. He’s fantastic in bed and a beast at the office.”

“You know that’s not all there is to life, right?”

“At my age that is.” She stuck out her tongue.

I started to respond, but decided against it. Thank God my phone buzzed on the table next to me. Kendal.

“It’s Kendal.” I picked up the phone and stood, feeling a little lightheaded at the idea of getting to talk with him again. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’m eating the rest of your yogurt.”

“Go for it.” I pressed the phone to my ear as excitement mixed with nerves in my stomach. I hadn’t talked to Kendal or seen him since dropping him off at home from Mandy’s funeral on Saturday. “Hello?”

“Dana?”

“Yeah. Who’s this?” I rolled my eyes. Surely he would know that I knew it was him. How freaking childish.

“It’s Kendal. Is now a good time?”

“Yep.” I leaned against the railing and let my eyes move across the various groups of people walking in and out of overpriced stores.

“I wanted to start by apologizing for Saturday. I was a little out of it.”

“It’s totally understandable, Kendal.” I softened immediately. “Don’t apologize. I’m good with us being friends.”

Lies. All lies.

“Good, I’m glad to hear that, but I don’t want the conversation to end there.”

“Okay, so let’s continue it then.” I moved back from the railing and pressed my hand to my chest, hoping to slow my racing heart.

“Come over tonight for dinner.”

I glanced around as if someone were watching me. “You sure? I know you wanted to keep a low profile between us.”

“Yes. I’m more than sure, Dana. Come over and let’s figure this out.”

“Okay. What time do you want me?”

“All the time?”

I smiled, unable to help myself. “At least I’m not completely alone in this.”

“Not at all. Come over at six and we can cook dinner and talk.”

“Just talk?” I pressed my teeth into my lip. How did I go from wanting to protect myself to wanting to hear that he needed me as badly as I needed him?

He chuckled. “I’ll see you at six.”

I dropped the call and pressed the phone to my chest as excitement raced through me. Suddenly shopping all afternoon with Jackie didn’t sound like much fun. I wanted to get home so I could take a shower and shave my legs. It might just be a friendly date where we could discuss if there was a future for us, but I wanted to be prepared for anything.

Kendal was proper when it suited him to be. Something told me tonight wasn’t one of those times.



I sat in my car outside of Kendal’s house for a good five minutes before I worked up the courage to get out of the car. How awkward was the night going to end up being?

Glancing down, I ran my hands over the front of my cream-colored summer dress and finally forced myself to get out of the car. The dress was a little more fitted than I’d usually wear, and honestly made me feel chunky.

“Why the hell did I wear this stupid thing?” I knocked on his door as a million excuses worked through my mind. I needed to go home, get in my pjs and pile up. The night was sure to be nothing more than an extension from Saturday. I’d been friend-zoned before we’d even gotten our relationship off the ground.

Kendal opened the door. “Hey there. I’m glad you decided to get out of the car. I was wondering about you.”

I pressed my hand to my face and breathed in deeply. “Really? You weren’t supposed to see that.”

“I’ll pretend like I didn’t.” He moved back. “Come on in and make yourself at home.”

The fitted white tee he wore tucked into a pair of tattered low-waist jeans looked damn good on him. His hair was a bit disheveled as if he’d run his fingers through it a million times. His deep green eyes were locked on me behind a thick pair of black glasses that made him look far too cute for his own good.

I breathed in deeply and moved toward the living room, stopping only to kick my sandals off. If we were just playing friends, then I needed to get myself in the right frame of mind. He was just like hanging out with Olivia or Jackie, only I wanted to strip him down and lick every inch of his body.

So not like Olivia or Jackie at all. I rolled my eyes and walked into the kitchen.

“Something smells like heaven.” I opened the oven and bent over, breathing in deeply.

“It’s a pot roast. My grandmother taught me and Mandy how to make one before she passed a few years back.” He moved up beside me and smiled.

“Nice. I love pot roast.” I wanted so badly to reach for him. It felt so natural to do it. “How are you? You holding together?”

“I’m better now.” He reached out and took my hand. “Forgive me for Saturday.”

“You already said that.” I pulled his hand toward my chest and cupped it in both of mine as I leaned down and pressed my cheek against his palm. “I’ve been so worried about you.”

“Thank you for caring.” He stepped closer. “I’m not sure how this is supposed to work out between us, but I can’t *not* see you. I haven’t dated in two years and if I’m being completely honest, it’s sucked so damn bad.”

“I can imagine so.” I pulled our hands down and took the last step between us. “I’m not the kind of woman who would ever be okay with a friends with benefits relationship, but if there’s the promise of something more in the future...”

“When you graduate?” He leaned down and brushed his nose by mine, stealing my heart completely. He was into me. I could almost feel heat rolling off of him in suffocating waves.

“Yes, or sooner if I can make that happen.” I lifted to my toes and brushed my lips by his. “I’m sorry for not saying something about Amanda. I didn’t know what to say.”

Fuck. I wasn’t going to bring up anything controversial. Getting comfortable around him had me speaking my mind without filtering my thoughts.

“What about Amanda?”

“Her death date. Or expiration date or whatever fucked up term they use.” I moved back and wrapped my arms around myself. “I just don’t believe in that, you know? People can hang on as long as they want to. The human spirit is unquenchable.”

“Don’t I know it?” He reached out and touched the side of my face.

CHAPTER 25



KENDAL

Was she beating herself up over Mandy still? She had no control over when my sister died or how long she lived.

“No one knows the day and time of our deaths. That date on a folder doesn’t mean shit. Let it go.” I brushed my fingers down the side of her neck, her skin like silk. “And honestly, I’ve heard of people dying on the date the doctor prescribed as if they had no other choice. I wish they would do away with their fucked up estimates. People would do better with not knowing.”

“I couldn’t agree more. I wanted to tell you that I’d seen the date the last time you and I shared dinner, but I couldn’t force myself to do it. It felt too much like a death sentence.”

“Is that why you were so upset? It wasn’t Mr. Jackson, then?” My lip lifted in a smirk. She wanted to condemn herself and there was no way I was letting that happen. The two of us had been hurting enough already. It was time to move past the darkness and take for ourselves what little bit of happiness we might find in each other as friends.

“It was him, but it was Mandy too.” She turned and walked to the fridge. “Do you have the stuff for a salad?”

“Sure do. Grab it and I’ll whip us up one.” I walked toward the counter and hopped up to watch her move around. She was everything I wanted snuggled up to me at night, confident, caring and curvy as fuck. My body hardened just watching her juggle cucumbers, carrots and lettuce. I was in for a long night.

“I got it.” She laid everything on the counter and glanced up at me. “Why the change of heart?”

“I think I mentioned about six years ago that I fell in love with one of my students, and her parents had a fit over us being together. She somehow decided during all of the bullshit that I wasn’t the right man for her because I wasn’t willing to quit my job at the University and I ended up with a nasty hand slapping and a tarnished reputation that I’ve been trying to rebuild since.”

“I’m sorry Kendal. People are such shit sometimes.”

I nodded. “I totally fell in love with her. I thought we would be together forever, but I was being an idiot, obviously. I was a total slut in college, which I know you know.”

She held up three fingers as if giving me a Girl Scout salute, which made me chuckle. God, she was beautiful. “No judging?”

“Judge all you want, but know that I’m too tired to defend myself.” I reached down and snagged a carrot as she chopped various vegetables. The view from where I sat let me see down into the top of her pretty dress to the creamy tops of her breasts. How badly I wanted to coax her into staying for the night. I could take my time making love to every part of her, but where would we be in the morning?

“What can I do to help you feel better?” She set the knife down and moved in between my thighs.

“What are you offering me?” I slid my hands around her jaw to cup the back of her head as I watched her with deep interest.

“I’m honestly not sure. Something inside of me wants to say that I’m offering you anything you want or maybe everything I’ve got.”

“I’m not worth that type of devotion, Dana.” I brushed my fingers through her thick hair and let my eyes move around her face down to the thick swell of her bottom lip. How badly I wanted to worship her for what she might provide me. Love. Release. Acceptance. Wholeness.

“Was the girl six years ago the only problem you’ve had?” Her fingers pressed into my legs about mid-thigh. Lust drove through the center of my stomach, fully hardening my cock and leaving it more than obvious that I was completely turned on.

“No. Two years ago one of my junior students claimed a rape.” I took a shallow breath. “They reviewed the evidence and the cameras and found out that she was lying, but it didn’t matter. I took another hit, and if it wasn’t for Mark, our current dean, I’d probably be looking for another job.”

“And you love teaching?” Her fingers moved up toward my hips.

“More than anything else I could imagine doing.” I leaned down and brushed my nose by hers. “We’re going to miss out on the best dinner ever.”

She gave me a quick kiss and moved back, laughing. The sound of her enjoying herself loosened something inside of me.

“No. Let’s eat together and keep talking.” She brushed her hair over her shoulder and put our salads together as I watched her.

“You look so fucking good tonight. Did I tell you that already?” I got off the counter and moved up behind her, letting my own restrictions fall away for a little while. Leaning down, I kissed the side of her neck and dragged my lips up to brush by her ear. “This dress looks like it was made for you.”

“You like it?” Her innocence awakened the hungry male deep inside of me.

“Love it.” I licked at her ear and pressed myself against her back. “What are we going to do? Should I start looking for another college to teach at?”

“What?” Her voice rose two octaves. “No. Hell no. You’ve worked too hard for where you are, and you obviously love it.”

“Then what?” I couldn’t deny myself any longer. I wrapped my arms around her from behind and cupped one of her breasts and kneaded it softly as I rocked against her.

“Cause I’m not sure I’m going to be able to deny myself the pleasure of belonging to you in one way or another.”

She pressed back, forcing me to step back and release her. “I think we can figure out a way to make things work until I graduate. Grab the dressings and come join me.”

How she was still holding herself together was beyond me, or maybe she wasn’t as interested as I was. My body was riddled with delicious tingles that pulsed along all of my pleasure points, keeping me ready for the moment when we decided to move from the living room to the bedroom. I wanted that now.

I grabbed the salad dressings and sat down beside her. “Damon suggested that we sneak around, which sounds so ridiculous considering that we’re both consenting adults, but I guess it would work.”

“Do you want me?” She turned her attention toward me, searing me with the need in her pretty hazel eyes. “Like really want me.”

“Yes. One hundred percent.” I reached out and brushed my thumb over her lip. “I want to get over this shit with the school or figure out another way. I need you in my life, Dana. You’re the first bit of warmth I’ve allowed myself since that shit with Ana. And now that Mandy’s gone, I have nothing. It’s so fucking weird, but for the first time in my life I really have nothing.”

“You have me.” She tilted her head to the side as her eyes filled with tears. “If you want me.”

“Baby.” I reached out and pulled at her wrist. “Come here.”

She moved into my lap and I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her down for a long kiss. I took my time exploring the soft wetness of her mouth, worshiping her tongue and running my fingers down every inch of her back before she finally pulled away.

“I’m going to New York this weekend. Come with me. We can be a couple there together without having to worry about

anything, right?" She cupped my throat and leaned in for another long kiss, leaving me to my thoughts.

Getting out of town for the weekend sounded like a plan. I needed to get outside and breathe the air a little. I'd been cooped up in the house every chance I got since Mandy died. Being with Dana and getting to hold her hand in public, or pull her close when I wanted to sounded blissful.

"Will you come?" She smiled, already so full of herself.

I chuckled. "Yeah. I need to get a plane ticket, but I'll come with you."

"Yes!" She jumped up and did a little jig that caused my libido to spike into overdrive.

"That's hot."

"Oh hush." She sat back down in her chair and wiped at her eyes. "I thought we were over before we started."

"No. I just needed to figure out what the fuck to do seeing that you're a student at UT. I honestly didn't even consider it a possibility when we met."

"I would have mentioned it had I known of your rules." She picked up her fork and took a quick bite of her salad.

"The wine. Let me get us something good to drink." I got up and walked back toward the kitchen. "I'm surprised you still want anything to do with me. I've been a complete asshole."

"No you haven't, Kendal." She turned and looked over her shoulder. "You're going through a lot of stuff."

"Maybe, but it's still no excuse for my behavior on campus. I just felt like the world was closing in on me because of Mandy's death, and then I saw you were soon to be my student, and that was it." I opened the bottle of wine, grabbed two glasses and walked back toward the table.

"It's understandable." She reached for the glasses. "What's going on with that other professor on campus? I'm good with us sneaking around to be together when we can, but you being

involved with another woman is completely out of the question.”

I snorted and poured the wine. “I’d never do that. I’m a one-woman man. Honestly.”

She nodded and took a sip of the dark liquid in her glass. “Is she leaving you alone?”

“Not exactly, but one of my mentors is aware of the situation and thinks I should bring it up with the dean.” I shrugged and leaned back in my chair to study the beautiful woman I had sitting across from me. “I really don’t want to get Mark involved in it. It’s just high school bullshit drama.”

“Unless she sets you up or does something to tarnish your reputation.”

“I’m probably going to do that on my own.” I reached out and ran my fingers over her forearm. “I’m not sure how good at being secretive I’m going to be. I usually want what I want and that’s it.”

“But it’s whose held you back in the past. Just make a commitment to keep doing that until May. I’ll honor it too.” She brushed my fingers from her arm and gave me a look as I chuckled.

“Good luck.” The beeper on the oven went off and I got up. “Do I need to get us a room in New York?”

“I’m not sure. I’ll know better later this week. I want to stay with my childhood best friend. I’m pretty sure she has several rooms. Is that okay?”

“Anything you want. As long as I get to let down my guard and call you mine for a few days.” I walked to the kitchen and pulled the roast from the oven. I’d have to let Damon know he was right. The bastard was always right. Sneaking around would suck, but if it meant being close to Dana’s warmth... I was all for it.

The rest of the evening was relaxed and far more enjoyable than I expected. She had to run right after we had dinner thanks to her friend Jackie locking her keys in her car, but we promised each other that we’d make up the night in New York.

I kissed her several times as we stood by her car and thanked her for giving me a chance. She was young and yet full of grace and forgiveness. There was an agelessness that sat behind her dark eyes that stole my breath.

It took a good fifteen minutes of me breathing in and out to slow my heart after she left. It wasn't just about lust and the need to drive into her from every angle known to man. It was about the promise of love. She was the kind of woman who could heal my wounds and drive me toward being the man I dreamt of becoming. I wanted to own myself in a way that had others looking up to me, not whispering in the shadows about all of the fucked up mistakes I'd made in my search for love and acceptance.

I wanted a woman like her to fall deeply in love with me. To worship me in the ways that I planned to worship her, to be proud to be mine for the rest of her life.

It all seemed like too much to ask for, and yet the hope of such a promise followed me around for the rest of the evening until I finally crashed in bed and let my dreams take over where reality ended.

Dana would be mine behind locked doors for the time being, and honestly, it was more than I could ask for. I didn't deserve even that. Not after the way I'd lived my life. But I was just greedy enough to be willing to take it.

CHAPTER 26



DANA

Two Days Later

Olivia still hadn't returned my call about coming to stay with her in New York for the weekend, which was starting to get on my nerves. I knew she was under a lot of pressure and had been traveling a lot with her job, but still.

I put the broom up after running it across the kitchen floor in an effort to feel like I was doing something domestic. I hadn't seen Kendal in two days, which was good and bad. He was working to get himself back in the groove of being at the college, and we were playing lovers under cover. The only thing missing was the sex. Damn Jackie for losing her keys. There was no way we'd have ended the night with a few kisses and nothing else if she hadn't jacked everything up.

"It was for the better," I mumbled and picked up my phone to try Olivia again. My definition of "better" felt rather fucked up at the moment. The best thing would have been spending the night trapped beneath Kendal, letting him take out every torrid emotion he had on my willing body.

"Hey you! I'm so sorry about not getting back to you. It's been stupid busy up here." Olivia answered the phone and jolted me with the volume of her voice.

I pulled the phone back. "It's all good. I just wanted to make sure you were okay with me staying at your place this weekend. I thought I would be coming alone like last time, but I'm bringing a friend with me. Is that okay?"

“It’s perfectly fine. I’m still dating Luke though. Are you going to be okay with going out with him for a drink on Friday or Saturday? He’s not going to give me the whole weekend to myself.”

“Ugh.” I rolled my eyes and pressed my hand to the kitchen counter. “Why are you dating this guy? He’s a total cock.”

“Because he’s rich, he’s great in bed and he’s hot as sin.” She laughed.

“That is not the right list for a man that you’re looking at marrying, Olivia.”

“Sue me. Life is short and I gave up on real love a long time ago.” She paused for a brief second. “Wait. Did you say that you’re bringing a friend with you?”

“Yeah. Kendal. He’s a great guy. You’re going to love him.”

“I like his name. It’s... different.”

I scrunched up my nose. “What are you talking about, crazy girl?”

She laughed again. “Never mind. Of course you can come stay with us. You know that.”

“Us? Are you living with Luke now?” The thought caused my stomach to sour.

“Off and on. I still have my own place, but we’re slowly transitioning over to his.”

I groaned and walked toward the living room. “You know marriage is supposed to be about love and forever and all that great stuff.”

“That’s a fairy tale you keep telling yourself.”

“Where’s my sweet friend that believed in true love when we were kids?”

“She’s long gone, Dana. You know that.” Her voice softened, losing some of the natural cockiness that I always enjoyed hearing in it. She was a beast, a confident woman with

intelligence, looks and a fierceness that was only matched by her sweet heart for those she truly loved.

Life had pulled out the stops to stomp her in the ground, and unfortunately the guy wearing the boot was the only boy she loved. Was she still suffering from that heartbreak?

“Nope. I refuse to believe it. I’m going to find Caden Taylor and get your heart back.” I smirked, knowing I was setting myself up for an ass chewing. We promised not to talk about Caden a long time ago, and I usually kept up my end of the bargain. He was the high school quarterback that everyone loved, and my best friend was head cheerleader.

“Kick him in the nuts if you ever find him.”

I snorted. “I’ll be up there on Friday night. I don’t want to mess up your weekend, so if you want me to just get a hotel...”

“No. Never. I want you to stay with me. Period.”

“All right. I’ll let you know when we get in. Text me your address.”

“I’ll do it now. Love you. Can’t wait to see you.”

“Me too.” I set the phone down on the counter and walked toward the bedroom, letting my thoughts run wild. “How weird would it be if I actually ran into Caden somewhere around town? What would I say?”

I’d kick him in the nuts for hurting Olivia so bad. It was a hot mess that none of us wanted to revisit. Our glory days of high school definitely ended with a bang and would remain locked in the past forever if any of us could help it.

I finished cleaning up the house before taking a shower and packing up my bag to head to the library. I could get in a few hours of studying before a quick lunch and an afternoon shift at the hospital. A knock at my door left my heart skipping a beat.

Where I didn’t expect it to be Kendal, I couldn’t help but hope that maybe it was. He was the only person outside of Jackie that I’d have expected to stop by my apartment.

I pulled the door open to find Cameron standing on the other side with a handful of flowers.

“You have got to be kidding me.” I tilted my head to the side and put my hand on my hip. “I already told you that we’re over.”

“And I heard you, but I don’t think you really meant it.” He extended the flowers toward me. “Come on, Dana. Let me just explain myself. Please, baby?”

“You were horrible to me the other night in the parking lot when I had dinner with Kendal. Why in the world would I give you even a second of my time?” I took the flowers and chucked them toward the kitchen table. “I’m not letting you in.”

“Fine. Then come out for a quick sandwich with me.”

“It’s not lunch time.” There wasn’t even a seed of desire inside of me to hear this asshole out, and yet I knew that to deny him was to invite him to get violent. I wasn’t sure what he was capable of, and I wasn’t exactly scared, but after his off the wall behavior, it seemed like a better idea to get him away from the apartment, even if that meant sharing a quick meal with him.

“Then breakfast.” His jaw locked. “Just give me half an hour and if you’re not convinced that I’m truly sorry and deserve another chance, I’ll walk away for good.”

“You promise? No more of this showing up on my doorstep at random hours of the day bullshit?” I put my hand on my hip again and glared at him.

“I promise. I’ll wait in the car. Just get dressed and come down.”

I closed the door without answering, locked it and walked toward the bedroom. “I am dressed, you asshole.”

Was I really going to do this? What if we ran into Kendal? The chances were less than likely, but with the way my luck had been lately, it wouldn’t surprise me. I changed into a blue blouse and a pair of jeans before slipping my feet into sandals and walking toward the door.

I texted Jackie just so someone would know where I was in case I never showed back up from the date. At least the cops would know to come after Cameron and not Kendal. I smirked at the thought.

“Thank you for this.” Cameron’s voice was soft and friendly as I got into the passenger’s side of his car.

“I’m just ready for this to be over.” I buckled up. “You left me, not the other way around. It should be me who’s begging you to come back, but when you left, I realized how good it felt not to have someone shutting down my throat all the time.”

“I know, baby, and I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.” He reached over to take my hand, but I slapped his away.

“Don’t. Touch. Me.”

“Okay.” He nodded and pulled out of the parking lot. “How’s the hospital been? Work going okay?”

“It’s an internship, but it’s been going great. I’m starting my mini-mester now.”

“You know if you need any help with your business classes that I’d be happy to help you, right?”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.” I clasped my hands in my lap and concentrated on breathing. I half expected him to talk my ear off as we drove toward one of his favorite breakfast cafes, but he didn’t say another word. A comfortable silence fell between us, and I used the time to try and decide what I was going to wear to New York. I wanted to impress Kendal, but at the same time be comfortable and enjoy myself. It sort of felt like we were past the point of the flirting stage. He wanted me in his life and I sure as hell wanted him in mine.

“Why so quiet?” Cameron glanced over at me after he parked outside the cafe.

“Just lost in thought.” I shrugged and reached for the door.

He gripped my wrist, stopping me. “And what are you thinking about? Us?”

“I was thinking about all of the patients I’ve lost at the hospital lately. It’s been rough.” I tugged my hand free from

his and got out of the car. Going anywhere with him was a serious mistake. I could only hope that we'd eat, chat and be on our way within the hour. Anything more than that and I was going to have to ask Jackie to call with an emergency and come get me.

“Yeah, I can't imagine having to deal with losing someone you've been caring for.” He opened the door and moved back. “Well, I can. I mean, it feels like that's what happened between us.”

A patient dying at the hospital feels like him losing me? The guy was a fucking nut case. How had I not seen it before?

“How is your family?” I tried to change the subject as we walked into the cafe.

“They're doing fine. Same old same.” He put his hand on my lower back and moved me through the restaurant behind the hostess. Chills ran down my back and warning signals went off inside my head, but I was stuck. It was just an hour. Just one meal. I would simply tell him at the end of it that I wasn't interested in anything, not even a casual friendship and he'd walk away. He said it himself.

“Hi kiddos. What can I get for you?” An older woman in a blue and white apron stopped by the table and smiled down at us.

“I'll have two eggs, bacon and toast. My girlfriend here will have a grapefruit and small cup of oatmeal.” Cameron glanced up from his menu at me. “You like fruit on your oatmeal, right?”

I glanced up at the woman and gave her a shit-eating grin. “I actually want a ham and cheese omelet with extra butter and cheese. Toast with smothered hash browns and a Coke, please.”

“Wow. That sounds awesome.” The woman chuckled and glanced back toward Cameron, who was staring at me wide-eyed. “Is that all?”

“Yep.” I handed her the menu and leaned back in my seat, letting out a soft sigh. “And I'm not your girlfriend.”

He seemed to ignore the last part as he leaned back and blinked a few times. “You know what you ordered is horrible for you, right?”

“Absolutely, but I only live once and it tastes so fucking good.” I smiled warmly, trying to remind the cock that I was my own person. He started to yap about something related to my health or his job, of which I wasn’t sure. I’d tuned him out.

The memory of being at the pizza place with Kendal was all I could see. He didn’t mind my curves, and almost seemed to prefer them. A laugh bubbled up inside of me as the visual of us dancing in the little restaurant that night to a 1950’s song moved through my mind.

“What’s so funny?” Cameron tapped the table in front of him, bringing me back to reality.

“I’m falling in love with this guy at the hospital.”

“That professor guy? You know that’s against their code of conduct, Dana. He’s a professor. He cannot date a student. Period.”

“Not him, but thank you for the update. I’m sure he’s aware of that. He’s far too much man for me anyway.” I shrugged and pulled my soda near me as his eyes narrowed.

“And I’m not?”

“Nope. You’re not nearly enough. Now... what were we talking about?” I was probably headed for the bottom of a deep freezer with the way the weirdo was watching me, but I was getting tired of being someone I wasn’t. The only person I could be was me, and somehow that seemed like more than enough sitting in that diner across from my ex-boyfriend. At least I wasn’t with him anymore. I couldn’t figure out why I ever was in the first place.

CHAPTER 27



KENDAL

“Thanks for meeting up with me. I know you have a lot going on.” Mark lifted his coffee cup as if to somehow salute me with it. We weren’t necessarily friends seeing that he was dean of the accounting department, but he was a brother from my fraternity back in his day. Kappa Alphas always worked to respect and help one another in life, no matter the situation or circumstance. I was more than grateful for the connection if nothing else.

“Of course.” I took a quick sip of my coffee and set the mug down before leaning back in my chair and giving him my attention. It was early Thursday morning and where I’d gotten back in the routine of being back on campus the last few days, I was still a little unsure of myself. Getting over my sister’s death wasn’t going to be easy, but keeping busy seemed to help.

“How are you holding up?” Mark lifted his thick black eyebrow at me.

“I’m doing all right. As good as can be expected.” I clasped my hands in my lap and let the excitement of going out of town with Dana the next day keep me warm and awake.

“Good. Well, you know if you need time off, you just need to ask for it. Eliza has stopped by here twice this week already offering to take your classes if you need some time.”

Eliza Turner was a good mentor to me, and an excellent friend. She was the only one aware of Heather’s advances toward me at work, and she wanted me to spill all of it to

Mark. I just couldn't. It wasn't in my nature to complain or cause trouble and in all actuality, Heather hadn't done anything but rub up against me a few times and offer herself naked on a hot platter.

She hadn't changed a bit since college.

"I appreciate that, but I'm good. I'm headed to New York for the weekend to see some old friends and just hang out away from home. I think it'll do me some good to have a few beers and a handful of laughs."

"I bet it will." He took another drink of his coffee. "How are things going with Heather?"

My throat tightened, making it hard to breathe or speak. "Heather?"

"Yeah. Dr. Turner. You're still mentoring her, right?"

"Somewhat. With everything that's been going on in my personal life, I hate to say it, but I think she's had to work through most of the newness of being here on her own." I gave him a sympathetic look. "She's a strong woman though. She'll do great."

"She told me that you guys went to college together."

I nodded, not sure where the conversation was going. "I wasn't sure that was her the day we first met in your office, and I didn't want to look like a fool, so I didn't mention it."

"No, it's good. It's been like six or seven years, right? People change."

"Something like that." I sat up and reached for my coffee. "Did she mention needing help on something?"

"No, not necessarily. She seems to think highly of you, so I'd like you to stay involved with her." He set his cup down. "I'm not sure if you're aware, but her father is a big oil tycoon. Her family is from there and the man is loaded. He's thinking about donating a new wing to the business department, and our dean has asked that we help facilitate that if at all possible."

"Oh wow." I faked surprise. Everyone knew that Heather was loaded back in college. It was half the reason we kept her

around. The other half was her willingness to drop her panties at the mere sign of someone getting a hard-on. “How can I help?”

“Just help me keep her happy.” He shrugged. “Not sure what a woman like her wants or needs, but figure it out and give it to her if you’re able.”

I snorted. “I’m happy helping Heather with anything work related. Outside of that... consider me off limits.”

“Of course.” He shook his head. “I didn’t mean anything of a personal nature. I would never ask that of you or anyone else.”

Right. Why didn’t I believe that all of a sudden?

“Who’s running Beta Alpha Psi now that Daisy left? Did Heather take over for her?”

“The accounting honors fraternity thing?” He looked less than interested, which was humorous. The group of students that ran it were the top of our business program and would be key decision-makers in big businesses around us in the next three to five years.

“Yes.” I pulled my phone from my pocket and turned the vibrator off to keep it from going off in my pocket. Damon had called a few times, which meant he was in desperate need of my attention, or simply impatient like he’d always been.

“Let’s have you and Heather run it together. That would be good for both of you, and perhaps give you a better opportunity to interact with each other. That sound all right?”

It sounded like a question, but it wasn’t. It was a request from my boss to spend more time with our rich new accounting professor that just happened to be a whore from my past.

“Absolutely. I’ll check with one of your secretaries to find out if the club has an upcoming meeting and who their current president is.” As if I didn’t have enough on my mind.

“Excellent. Let me know if anything comes up, or if you have too much on your plate Kendal. Eliza seemed awfully

worried about you.”

I got up and picked up my mug. “I’m good, but I’ll let you know.”

Eliza was worried because she knew the truth of who Heather was and what she was after. It wouldn’t surprise me a bit if Eliza told Mark all about my run-ins with Heather in an effort to save me from myself. Hell, she might have already done it.

It wasn’t like Mark was going to do anything to make ripples in the pool. Heather’s family was too wealthy for that, and it would seem that our new dean was just as greedy as the last.



“Hi Dr. Tarrington.” Jake greeted me as I walked into the auditorium after my meeting with Mark. I half expected to see Bethany there, but she wasn’t anywhere to be found.

“Hey Jake. Is Bethany scheduled to come in today?”

“Yeah, but she texted me earlier to let me know that she’s not going to be in. She’s working with Damon on a new project at his accounting firm.”

Jake looked less than happy to be discussing Bethany in the context of her boyfriend, boss and my best friend.

“Really? I thought she quit.” I walked up on stage and pulled a few papers from my briefcase. My class would be there shortly, and though they were all sympathetic to my situation, I wanted to get life back on track. The sooner, the better.

“She did, but I guess the bastard talked her into coming back.” He shook his head. “Sorry, Dr. Tarrington. I know he’s a friend of yours, but the guy just gives me the creeps.”

“It’s all good. It’s one of his superpowers.” I pulled out my phone and texted Damon that I was in class and would get

back to him later. A smile formed on my face at the look that most likely formed on his. He hated to be left waiting.

“All of your notes are already put together in handout form, and I got your PowerPoint loaded as well.”

“Very cool. I love having you guys up here. You need to let me know if you’re interested in teaching a little and if so, I’ll move over on a subject that you feel confident about and let you have the mic.”

“Really?” Jake’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. Something about seeing the kid brighten up considering his situation left me feeling good about myself.

“Absolutely.” I glanced down at my notes and flipped through the PowerPoint on the screen below me. “Hey, Jake, are you a member of Beta Alpha Psi?”

“Yes, sir. I was president last year when I was a senior.”

“Awesome. I need to find out who their current president is and get the list of events. Is that something you can get for me while I’m teaching today?”

“Yeah. I have the e-mail somewhere on my phone. The president is Dani Bruce. You had her last year for cost accounting, I bet. She’s a junior this year.”

I groaned internally. Dani Bruce was another Heather Turner in the making. The girl wore clothes that shouldn’t have been legal and looked far more like a pole dancer than an accountant. Of-fucking-course Dani Bruce was the head of Beta Alpha Psi. Heather might have to take the lead with the group seeing that I wasn’t coming near their president with a ten-foot pole.

“Awesome. Just e-mail it to me. I think me and Professor Turner will be taking over as co-advisers for the fraternity.”

“Oh nice. That’ll be fun. Heather is her first name, right?”

I glanced up to see the gleam in the boy’s eye. Where I wanted to warn him that she was a piranha with ten-inch teeth, it wouldn’t go over well. I needed to remain completely

unconnected to Heather, and an emotional response would tie me to her faster than anything else I could do.

“Yes, but she goes by Dr. Turner, I believe.”

“I can see why.” Jake snorted and rolled his wheelchair toward the door. “She needs to keep things professional or she’ll be mobbed by every guy on campus with a pulse.”

“And most of the girls.” I gave him a cheeky grin as he glanced over his shoulder and snorted again.

“I’ll be back in a minute with the schedule. I’m actually glad to hear you’re getting involved. It’s going a little off track lately.” He opened the door and left before I could ask what he meant.

I had no doubt that I’d find out sooner than later on my own and be quite disappointed when I did.



“Great job today, class. We’ll pick back up next Tuesday on page seventy-five. Have your point-of-sale diagrams completed and come ready to discuss.” I glanced around the room and smiled as everyone mumbled their responses and walked to the door like a bunch of zombies. Teaching cost accounting was the fucking pits. I’d be picking up the master’s level financial statement analysis class in a week or so, which would be far more interesting and intellectually stimulating because of the level of the student.

I couldn’t help but wonder if Dana was still planning on taking the class. The naughtiness of seeing her behind closed doors and yet having her right in front of me, watching me with the same eyes that held all of my secrets was terrifying - and exhilarating.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Dr. Tarrington.” One of my students stopped by the stage and gave me a warm smile. Several others stopped beside her, echoing her thoughts.

“Thanks guys. Losing my sister was one of the hardest things I’ve ever gone through. I think it was because she was

so young and she's all I had left." I shrugged and gathered my things. "Anyways. Tell those closest to you that you love them. You just never know about tomorrow."

They all shared my sentiment and walked with me to the door, patting me on the back and giving away a few more sympathies. It felt good to let my guard down just a little and be human in front of them. I'd worked so hard for the last six years to be anything but. Maybe change was in the air. I sure as fuck needed it.

I walked to my office with my eyes cast toward the ground in an effort to avoid anyone else. Dana, Damon or Bethany were the only three people in the world I was willing to talk to at the moment, and none of them were around. After checking in to find Eliza gone, I walked to my office and half-shut the door behind me. I dropped down at my desk and turned on my computer as the door opened and Heather poked her head in.

"Bad timing?"

"Depends on what you want." I lifted my chin and sat back in my seat. Her suit looked like it was tailor-made for her, and some part of me wanted to beg her to grow up and find a man she could invest in, one she could possibly even love, but it wasn't my place. She'd obviously not had her ass handed to her the ways I had over the past thanks to my flirty attitude and laid back persona.

Sitting in front of the President of the University at a hearing over sexual harassment will burn any playfulness right out of you fast.

Hell, maybe that's what she needed too.

"I heard we're going to be running the nerd squad together." She gave me a sexy smile and pressed her back to the wall beside the door. I was surprised she left the damn thing open.

"We sure are." I glanced down at my computer and pulled up Jake's e-mail. "Damn. Looks like there is a meeting tonight."

“Where and what is it about?” She arched her back a little, causing her breasts to jut out.

“It’s in room twenty-five sixty.” I glanced down at my watch. “In an hour. Looks like a normal business meeting. One of the big accounting firms is presenting.”

“I have plans tonight. I can cancel them if you’re interested in maybe getting a drink after the event?” She lifted her eyebrows and bit her bottom lip.

“One minute you’re threatening to tear me down, and the next you’re offering to buy me a drink. I’m not sure what to think, Dr. Turner.” I leaned forward and put my arms on my desk.

“Is that a yes?”

“No. I’m dating someone, Heather.”

“Dating is such an arbitrary word.”

“I’ll do the event. You go have fun. We’ll work out a schedule sometime soon together.”

“You sure?” She moved toward the door and paused. “We would be so good together, Kendal. I know you remember all those times when we were.”

“I actually don’t remember most of them.” I stood up and stretched. “It’s either the aging process that’s burning them away, or the fact that we always started with a bottle of vodka. Maybe a little of both?”

I didn’t want to fight with the bitch, and I didn’t want her under my skin, looking for any means to bring me down to heel in front of her. It wouldn’t happen, and somewhere along the way, I’d snap and choke her out. Then sexual harassment would be the least of my worries.

“Liquor makes things slicker.” She chuckled and walked out, leaving me to stand there and shake my head.

How the hell did Damon and I ever get mixed up with a nut case like her? Simple. We loved sex and so did she.

Sadly enough, not much had changed - not for any of us.

CHAPTER 28



DANA

I only had time to grab a muffin from the corner store before getting to the hospital on Friday morning. Between my nerves about going out of town with Kendal and the weariness that hung on me like a well-worn coat, I was fried. The date with Cameron ended better than I expected, but I needed to talk with Kendal about the guy. Not that I expected my handsome new beau to defend me against my ex, but I wanted to be on the up and up. Something told me that it wasn't the last time Cameron would end up on my doorstep.

My stomach grumbled angrily as I parked in my usual spot and grabbed my stuff. I had half the muffin in my mouth by the time I walked into the bustling halls of the hospital. It was twenty-four seven, a place that never slept nor rested. I loved it.

“Morning, Dana.” One of the nurses from the first floor waved and gave me a warm smile.

“Morning,” I mumbled around my muffin and gave her an apologetic smile. I jogged toward the elevator as a large group of nurses and doctors piled in. “Hold the door?”

“Of course.” One of the doctors reached out and held it open for me.

“Thanks.” I got in and put my back to them as a feeling of rightness swelled in my chest. Being a nurse was one of the greatest decisions of my life, but I wanted more. I wanted to push farther to see what I was capable of. Maybe with the right scholarships and focus I could eventually get my master's in

medicine. It would be a long road, but one that would light me up along every step on the path.

Kind of like Kendal being a professor. Guilt tugged at me.

He loved his profession with a passion - obviously. Was I asking him to taint his own first love just so we could be together for the next eight months? I was. Or maybe he was offering, but either way... I wasn't just falling in lust with the man, I was falling in love. I wanted something long-term and solid to exist between us.

Maybe we should wait?

I walked out of the elevator on my floor and caught Tinsley's eye. A groan lodged in my throat. I was good with the morning shift so long as she wasn't there. The woman had it out for me and every other intern on the floor. Whether she was forever lamenting over her youth slowly slipping away or she was just naturally hateful, I wasn't sure, but starting the day with her badgering me wasn't something I was looking forward to.

"Oh, good." She stood up and pushed her hair over her shoulder. "Mrs. Delmaz threw a holy hell fit last night because no one has brought Larry to see her yet."

"That's because no one knows who Larry is." I paused by the nurses' station and tried to keep my tone even. "Her husband's name is Frankie and he's been dead for twenty years."

"You're shitting me." She rolled her eyes and huffed again. "Well, see what you can do to calm her, please? You're the only one around here with the ability to help keep the crazies at bay."

"I'll take that as a compliment." I walked to the far end of the hall and locked my stuff up. I wanted to blast her with the reason that I was able to help people the way I was, but it would come off as me being an ass, and I didn't want to go there just yet. I was compassionate and caring. It was that simple. It was the part of me that they kept giving me grief

over. I snorted and walked back down the hall toward Mrs. Delmaz's room.

I knocked before sticking my head in. "Mrs. Delmaz?"

"Thelma. Just call me Thelma, girl." She glanced up from reading something and gave me a tight smile. "You promised that you would help me, but like all these other uppity nurses with too much to do and no care in your minuscule hearts, you didn't."

"That's because I can't figure out who Larry is." I offered her a genuine smile and moved to stand next to the bed. I reached down to work her IV out of the tangled mess she'd somehow gotten it in and continued our conversation. "Tell me who Larry is and I'll bring him in to see you."

She pulled her glasses down off her nose and narrowed her eyes. "He's my best friend. Duh. I put his name on all of the emergency contact information. He's where he always is. He's at my house."

"He lives with you?" I finished working on the IV and cupped her wrist lightly.

"I just said that. Open your ears up, kiddo." Her tone was demeaning, but she was scared and out of sorts being in the hospital for the last few days. Her chart showed that she was without additional family members and her dementia had set in to the point of her not remembering much of anything.

"Got it." I rubbed her arm softly and gazed down at her. "I'm headed out of town this weekend, but on Monday I'll bring Larry in to see you, okay?"

"Good. If you break your promise, I'm going to throw a fit that will have everyone talking. I want what I want when I want it!" She accented each word, making me smile. She was a firecracker and a half. Some part of me wanted to see her back in her hay day when she was ruling the corner of the world she inhabited.

"Will do. Let me know if you need me. I'm here for most of the day. I'll stop by a little later and you can tell me all about Larry, okay?"

“Fine.” She pulled her glasses back on and glanced down at her magazine as I released her. The sly smile playing on the edge of her lips was enough to let me know that she enjoyed my company. Now I just needed to figure out who the hell Larry was, and get the guy up to the hospital on Monday morning. Otherwise, things would get more interesting than any of us really wanted them to.



“Wait. Who is Larry again?” Jackie gave me an odd look as we hoofed it through the airport. Kendal was supposed to meet us at the gate and might be a little late, but he’d promised he would get himself there.

“No clue.” I dropped my bag on the floor by a row of chairs in front of our gate and sat down. “She said that he was her best friend. I assume he’s some skinny guy with no teeth.”

Jackie put her hand on her hip and shook her head. “Maybe he’s a dog.”

“What? You think he’s a pet?”

“Why would a woman like Mrs. Delmaz have a man living with her? That doesn’t make any sense at all.”

“She didn’t seem to know what the hell she was talking about. Poor thing.” I waved my hand around. “Forget it. I don’t want to dwell on this anymore. I need a break from everything. Whoever or whatever Larry is, I’ll find him on Monday and bring him to the hospital to see her.”

“You’re sure going out of your way for someone you don’t really know. Especially considering that the woman isn’t going to remember asking you to do it.”

“You’d be surprised.” I grabbed my purse and stood back up. “I’m going to grab a Coke and some chips for the flight. You want anything?”

“No. I’m good.” She dropped down loudly and pulled her legs into the seat with her. “I’ll watch out for your handsome boyfriend.”

I smirked, turned and walked toward one of the corner stores just down the hall a little ways. Boyfriend? Was that what Kendal was? I wished.

After flipping through the magazines and purposing every type of chip they had in the store, I found myself standing in front of the glass case near the register. Condoms. Did I need some? Were we going to-

“Should I ask?” The sound of Kendal’s voice made me jump.

I turned around and popped him softly in the chest as heat drove up my chest and covered my neck and face.

“You scared me.”

He leaned around me and glanced down. “You planning on hitting the mile high club?”

I forced my nerves to settle as I reached out and slid my hands around his waist. “No, but I was hoping that maybe we could get to know each other better.”

“Hmmm.” He leaned down and kissed me quickly before moving back. “I’ll get these for us.”

“I’m not being too forward, right?” I moved back and crossed my arms over my chest.

“Not in the slightest. I love a woman that knows what she wants.” He glanced over his shoulder and winked at me. His dark brown hair was getting thick on top, which just left him looking more like a frat boy and less like the distinguished professor he was.

I didn’t respond, but turned and picked out a few snacks. Butterflies danced deep in my stomach and the very idea of him buying condoms had my insides turning to mush. Was I ready for what we were headed into? *Yes. God yes.*

“Put those up here too, Dana.” Kendal moved back and motioned for me to drop my snacks on the counter.

“No. I got these.”

“Now.” He tilted his head a little toward me and gave me a stern look. *Hot.*

“Yes, sir.” I moved up and placed them on the counter, making sure to brush my hip by his outer thigh.

He paid and grabbed the bag. “Come on. Let’s get to the gate. Is Jackie already here?”

“Yeah.” I wanted to reach for his hand, but with us still being in Dallas, it was better if I didn’t. We could play the couple in New York, but not until then.

“Let’s see if we can’t get our seats together when we get over there.” His eyes lingered on me as we walked back toward the gate.

“What?” I could feel myself blushing again. Something about him left me flustered.

“You’re just beautiful. I haven’t stopped thinking about you all week.” He set his stuff down and extended his hand toward Jackie. “I think we’ve seen each other around the hospital, but I’m Kendal. Nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” Jackie stood up and shook Kendal’s hand.

He turned toward me. “Give me your ticket and I’ll go see what I can do to get us together.”

“No, just take my seat.” Jackie pulled out her ticket. “Dana and I are sitting together already. We’ll all check in together and the two of you can fit in our seats and I’ll take the lone wolf seat.”

“No, you don’t have to do that.” I glanced over at Jackie. She was far too good of a friend. I hadn’t even had to beg her with my eyes to help me and Kendal end up sitting together.

“Yes I do. You’ll owe me a favor in the future and those are priceless!” She smiled and sat back down. “Besides, I like to read on flights.”

“Sounds good to me.” Kendal turned to face me, his dark green eyes moving across my face. “How was your week? As miserable as mine?”

“It was okay.” I reached out and brushed something off of his chest, just looking for a reason to touch him as often as I could. Eight months. Just eight short months and we could be fully together.

A voice came over the loud speaker with the announcement that our flight would begin boarding now. Jackie got up and we moved into line, my friend in front of me and the sexiest man in the whole damn building behind me.

“It’s about to get much better.” Kendal moved up behind me and slid his free hand around my waist, pulling me flush against him. The thickness of his arousal surprised me a little. A thrill of desire rolled around deep inside of me, warming me from the inside out. He leaned down and pressed his mouth to the back of my hair. “I’ve had a million dreams this week and you were in every one of them.”

I pressed back against him and cupped my hand over his, forcing him to hold me tighter. “What are we doing?”

“I plan on showing you.” He nipped at my ear before moving back.

Chill bumps raced across my skin and the air seemed so damn hard to breathe all of a sudden.

“Next!” The attendant in front of me reached for my ticket and lifted her eyebrow at me.

I stumbled toward her and tried to keep my cool. It was going to be a long weekend, but I for one was more than ready for it. I’d been playing it safe for far too long and my life was a clear reflection of security. Time to up the ante and see what the return might look like.

If nothing else, pleasure would be my reward.

CHAPTER 29



KENDAL

She smelled so fucking good as I hovered over the top of her in the line. Every inch of my body was on fire for what was to come. Where I didn't want her to think that all I was interested in was sex, I knew without a doubt that we'd have to get past a few times in the sheets to let things calm down between us. A fiery passion I couldn't remember feeling before had me buzzing on a high I more than needed in my life.

Dana glanced back and gave me a shy smile before walking down toward the gate that led to our flight.

I handed the woman taking tickets mine and moved up behind my girl again. "It was nice of your friend to give up her seat." I reached out and slid my hand into hers, squeezing softly and pulling her fingers toward my lips so I could take my time kissing each of them.

"You're not being very subtle." She turned and pressed her chest against mine. Where I would normally frown on a public display of affection, something was different with her. I was greedy to get my hands on her, no matter where we were. Getting to leave town for three days where we could just be ourselves no matter who was watching? Bliss.

"It's hard when you're so damn fine." I leaned down and brushed my lips by hers. "Eight months, hmmm?"

"I think one of us is going to have to get an extra job to pay for out of town travel." She laughed, lighting up the hallway around us with her energy. She was the type of fire I

could warm myself beside forever. If we could make it through the next year together, we were set.

What would I be willing to give up for her?

“I’ll pick up the tab.” I leaned down and brushed my lips by hers again, reveling in the softness of her kiss. I wanted her lips, her mouth all over me. Was she adventurous in bed? Would she let me explore every inch of her and teach her new things?

“You look lost in thought.” She gave me a cheeky grin as someone cleared their throat loudly behind us. “Oh! Sorry.”

“I was thinking about all the things I shouldn’t be.” I adjusted my cock, trying to make it less than obvious that I was sporting a hard-on for the pretty girl in front of me. What was I, twelve?

“That so?” She moved up and glanced over her shoulder, stealing whatever part of my heart I thought remained my own. I’d have to thank Damon a million times when everything was said and done. Without the bastard pushing from his angle and Dana being persistent from hers, we wouldn’t have a chance in hell. I’d been protecting myself for too long to let the wall crumble without someone beating against it. Lucky for me, I had two people who cared enough about me to pick up a sledge hammer and go to town, no matter how much I pushed back.

“Absolutely.” I moved up behind her in the plane and took her backpack from her, helping to stow it away before dropping down beside her. The sundress she wore played above her thighs, leaving her long tanned legs on display.

I reached out and squeezed her knee before sliding my hand up just a tad bit more and clamping down. I crossed my legs in an effort to keep everyone from noticing just how intensely she affected me.

She turned and leaned toward me, putting her mouth right beside my ear. “What happens if you get caught fucking in the bathroom of a plane?”

I tensed as images burned across my vision. It was like the guy I'd locked away after college got a few minutes to storm around in his cage without chains strapped across him.

"I don't know." I reached out and cupped her face tightly. "You wanna find out?"

Her cheeks turned pink, making the monster inside of me lift his head. I was starved for affection and yet it had been all my own doing.

"Maybe on the way back." She leaned in and licked at my mouth as I growled softly.

"Promise me you'll tell me what you want when we finally get alone. I don't wanna waste time figuring it out and possibly getting it wrong. I wanna know where your treasures are so I can beat against them with a fury that's going to steal your breath." I pulled her toward me and pressed my lips to hers as the delicious burn of desire pulsed down my stomach and settled in my sack.

"Fuck," she whispered against my lips and gave me another long kiss before moving back and letting out a shaky breath. "I'm not going to survive you."

"You have to." I gripped her hand and brought it over to rest on my leg. "You're the only woman I see in my future. I have lots of plans for you, but you knew that, didn't you?"

She closed her eyes and didn't utter a word. She didn't have to. The soft panting coming from her, combined with the vein in the side of her neck pumping blood furiously through her body was enough. I couldn't help but completely adore how much of an effect I had on her. Little did she know, she had the same hold on me.



"All right, so tell me who this woman is again?" I clasped Dana's hand between mine and held it in my lap as she and I rode in the back of a New York cab with Jackie.

“She’s my best friend from high school. Well, really from elementary. We’ve known each other all our lives.” Dana snuggled against my shoulder and let out a soft sigh.

Jackie leaned forward and looked back at us. “Did Olivia grow up in Texas or were you raised somewhere else?”

How close were Dana and Jackie? Not very close from what I could tell. I’d always assumed that girls knew every intimate detail about their friends. Maybe not. Or maybe Dana was a private type?

“We all grew up in Houston, but my family moved up to Dallas when I started at UT five years ago.”

“Five years?” I smiled as Dana turned to give me a look. “You just like college, or what?”

“I have a double major.” She released my hand and moved more into her own seat. “Business and nursing, though to be honest, I’m not sure that’s where my heart is leading me.”

“No?” Jackie pulled out a piece of gum and popped it in her mouth before offering us one. “What are you thinking? Med school?”

“Maybe.” Dana shrugged, and the conversation died as the cabbie pulled over in front of a large elegant-looking cafe.

“We’re here. Twenty-five Elm Street. Cafe Udo.” He turned and extended his hand. “Forty-three dollars.”

“Rape.” Jackie shook her head and opened the door as I pulled out my card.

“I got this.” Dana tried to push my hand away, but I wouldn’t let her.

“No. You’re my girl and this is our weekend away. Don’t deny me the opportunity to act like a good southern man and pay for everything.” I gave the card to the cab driver and turned to smile at the beautiful woman who was sure to steal every part of me before the weekend was over.

I signed the receipt as Dana got out and spoke with Jackie for a few minutes. I didn’t have a clue where we were headed

or what was next on the agenda, but I hoped like hell it was food. I was finally getting my appetite back.

“All right, well, I’m going to walk down the block to St. Mark’s Hospital. Parks said just to meet him there.” Jackie pulled Dana into a hug before giving me a smile and a wave and walking off with her backpack strapped to her back.

“Something I did?” I wrapped my arm around Dana and offered her a cheeky smile as I tugged my bag over my shoulder.

“Not at all. She’s trying to win the heart of a playboy doctor. I wish I could talk her out of it.” Dana nodded toward the cafe. “You want to grab a sandwich before we walk down to Olivia’s apartment?”

“Love to.” It felt so damn good to have her pressed to my side. I’d have to memorize the feeling for when things got rough back in Dallas. “I’m finally starting to feel like I’m alive again.”

“That’s great news.” She wrapped her arm around the back of my waist as we moved into the line inside the cafe. “You’ve been through a lot.”

“Yes, but thanks to you and Damon, I’m making it through.” I leaned down and kissed her, unable to help myself.

“What was that for?” She smiled up at me.

“Just because. Get ready for a lot of those. I’ve been saving them up since the first night you came over to my place.” I wagged my eyebrows as she blushed again. It was almost too cute how innocent she was.

“I remember that night... really well.”

“Good. I plan on revisiting it this weekend.” I licked at my lips and growled softly.

She popped my chest and laughed before releasing me. “Behave or we’ll never make it through this line.”

“Speaking of...” I pulled at the strap of my bag as it hung over my shoulder. “What *are* our plans? Are we having dinner with your friend or hanging out with a group tonight or what?”

“I know that we’re having dinner with Olivia and her boyfriend, Luke.” Dana’s lip turned up in disgust as she mentioned Luke. “But I don’t think that’s until later tonight.”

“You don’t like her boyfriend?” I moved up to the counter and pulled out my wallet.

“Not in the slightest. I’ve never met him, but he’s turned my friend into a cold-hearted bitch.”

“And she wasn’t one before.” I let my eyes run across the menu and tried to focus. It was so hard to do anything with Dana standing so close to me. My hungers were competing with one another deep inside of me, and my stomach was sure to lose out sooner than later.

“Not at all.” She ordered a sandwich and moved to the side as I ordered and paid.

“Does that mean we get a little bit of time together this afternoon before our dinner?” I walked toward the pickup counter where she stood and pulled her into a hug.

She pressed her hands to my chest and smiled. “It does. I’m thinking a nap sounds good.”

“Is nap code word for a long hard fuck?”

“Kendal!” She laughed loudly and pressed her forehead against my chest. “You’re really corrupt under all those rules and that nice professional pair of glasses you wear, aren’t you?”

“I’m a regular superman stuck in a Clark Kent world.” I touched the soft skin under her chin and forced her to look up. “I just wanna be fully me while I’m here.”

“Good. I want that too.” She slid her arms up my chest and clasped her hands behind my head. “Our nap can include anything you want it to include.”

“Good answer.” I leaned down and kissed her a few times before walking over to pick up our lunches. She had the power to melt me, to unwind all of the tightness inside of me and offer me a different future than the one I’d seen myself in for so long.

We walked down Elm Street together, my hand tightly around hers, my thoughts dragging me farther and farther into a deep hole of depravity. I released her and pulled out her sandwich.

“Let’s eat while we walk. Something tells me that the minute I get you fully alone... all bets are off.”

“Wow. That’s hot.” She unwrapped her sandwich and snuck a glance at me as I unwrapped mine and took a huge bite.

The city was busy as ever, which wasn’t too surprising. It was Friday afternoon in the heart of New York.

“What don’t you like about this Luke guy? Prepare me, please.” I licked at my fingers before pulling out the other half of my sandwich and going to town on it too.

She glanced up from the map on her phone. “He’s just not the right guy for Olivia.” She shrugged.

“And why is that?” I was going to have to prod her for the truth.

“Because he’s all about his business and making money. He doesn’t love her, and honestly, she doesn’t love him. They’re just using each other for sex and status. It’s... I don’t know... gross.”

“I see.” I finished up my sandwich as we walked up to a beautiful cream-colored high rise.

“It’s not Olivia at all. She’s always been more about love than lust, but this guy has her acting like a completely different person.” Dana glanced up. “We’re here. Twelfth floor. We just need to check in at the front.”

Lust over love? The age old discussion about which comes before the other. Couldn’t they both show up at the same time? That felt far more like the story in my own life, or maybe I was reading more into it than necessary.

“You coming?” She glanced back and offered me a beautiful smile.

“Not yet, but hopefully soon.”

“Oh Lord.” She shook her head and walked into the building, delighting me in so many ways.

And I’d almost pushed her away. All because of my fucked up rules.

Funny how protection has the ability to quickly become a prison instead.

CHAPTER 30



DANA

The building Olivia lived in was far more grandiose than anything I would have imagined my childhood best friend wanting. We were simply country people, or used to be. Olivia having her reputation ruined our senior year by the boy she thought she would spend the rest of her life with had changed her - dramatically. Not so much that I didn't still enjoy being around her, but enough that the trajectory of her life took a completely different path altogether.

After checking in at the front desk like one might a hotel, we walked to the elevator and pressed the button for the twelfth floor.

"Wow. This is beautiful." Kendal stood at the back of the glass-wall elevator and glanced down. "Would you ever want to live in a big city like this?"

"No. Dallas is as big as it gets, and honestly, I'd love to move back to one of the suburbs of Houston eventually. I'm from the country."

"No... I couldn't tell." He moved up and wrapped me in a warm hug. I loved how often he reached for me now that we were free to be together. I enjoyed affection immensely. It would seem he did too.

"It's the accent, isn't it?" I pressed against him and reached up to smooth his eyebrow down. It would have been so easy to tell him that I was falling in love with him, but the timing was off. It was too soon by the world's standards and we had a

long road ahead of us. Neither of us deserved the burden of love if our relationship wasn't truly meant to be.

"I love the accent. It's sexy as hell." He brushed his nose by mine and smiled. "Thank you for being there for me at Mandy's funeral, Dana. I'm not sure if I really got across how much that meant to me. I didn't deserve to have you stand beside me after my blow up at the college."

"It's not about deserving anything." I ran my fingers through his thick hair as my pulse spiked. The dark scent of his cologne had been playing with me all day, but being in a smaller space, it was stronger, thicker. *So damn good.* "It's about following my heart."

"I like the sound of that." He leaned down and brushed his lips by mine softly before leaning into a deeper kiss. I welcomed his tongue deep into my mouth and sucked at his offering as he groaned against me. I wasn't sure what the rest of the weekend might hold for us, but I knew the next few hours would be a crash course in pleasure.

The door opened and I pulled away from him as a bellman cleared his throat and gave us an odd look.

"Sorry," I mumbled and moved out into the hallway. The code on the door was on my phone from an earlier text from Olivia, and it took me a few seconds longer than it should have because of Kendal's nearness.

"You said you have an older sister and a brother?" Kendal leaned against the wall and watched me with a preditorial look that did nothing for my racing heart but speed the fucker up.

"Yeah," I responded breathily before finally getting the door open. "My sister doesn't come around very often, but my brother stays with my mother. It's nice, seeing that my father isn't with us anymore."

"I'm sorry to hear that." He reached for my backpack. "Which room is ours?"

I scanned through the text. "First door on the left."

"I'll put our stuff up." He turned and walked down the hall, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Were we really going to have sex in the middle of the afternoon? I glanced around at the lofty elitist apartment and groaned. There were so many windows and so much light. There was no way to hide some of the parts of myself that I intended on working on before Kendal saw me fully naked.

Every insecurity Cameron had burned into my flesh reared its ugly head inside of me. By the time Kendal walked back toward me, I was wide-eyed and panting a little.

“Hey. What’s wrong?” He gripped my shoulders and glanced down at me with concern on his handsome face.

“I just feel self-conscious.”

“What? Why? You’re the most beautiful woman in this whole fucking city.” He reached down and plucked my phone from my hand. “And you’re mine, right?”

“I wanna be,” I mumbled as he gripped my hand and half pulled me down the hall.

“Stop fighting me. I’m spending the afternoon exploring your body whether you like it or not.” He glanced over his shoulder and I simply nodded. There was no telling him no, not that I ever wanted to. I was simply scared that he would find something that turned him off or left him cold.

“I’m just worried about Olivia walking in on us.” I walked into the bedroom and let out a yelp as he pressed the door closed and trapped me against it.

“No, you’re not.” He ran his nose up the side of my face, breathing in deeply and leaving me covered in goose bumps. “Let go and let me in, Dana. I need you so fucking bad.”

“Me too.” Tears burned my eyes as self-hate raced through me. We wanted a weekend away - no - we needed it, and here I was, letting the worst parts of my personality threaten it before it even started.

“Good girl.” He smiled and moved down my body, nipping at my dress until he was on his knees in front of me. “You’re so damn perfect. Do you know how many times I imagined feeling you shaking beneath me as I bring you to come over and over and over again?”

“Shit,” I grumbled and let my head press against the door behind me. “Just don’t stop, okay?”

“I don’t intend to.” He slid his strong fingers up my thighs, dragging my skirt with him and mumbling various things about my beauty and how soft I was. It was all I could do to stand there without turning into a trembling mess. No one had ever paid me much attention in the way of worship, but the beautiful man on his knees in front of me was making up for everyone else I’d ever given my heart away to.

He pressed his mouth to the front of my panties and glanced up as I moaned loudly. “Someone’s already wet.”

“Clean it up.” I slid my fingers into his hair and closed my eyes at the sound of his dark chuckle. He was so proper outside of the bedroom, convincing everyone around him that he had rules that he intended to keep, but that wasn’t the real him. This was.

He tugged my panties to the side and ran his tongue over my sensitive skin before pulling at my clit playfully with his lips.

A groan ripped from me as my legs began to tremble.

“On the bed, sweet girl.” He moved back before standing up and pulling his t-shirt over his shoulders. “You’re tired. Let me take good care of you.”

I nodded and walked to the bed as I pulled my dress over my head. The white cotton panties and bra I had on were all I had left in my drawer that morning, but at least they matched.

“On your back.” He worked his jeans over his taut hips and moved toward me with nothing but his black briefs clinging to his perfect body. Lean muscle covered every inch of him, and a small spray of black hair covered his chest and ran down into his underwear.

I reached for him, running my fingers over his shoulders and down his chest as he pressed himself to the top of me.

“You just tell me if you want anything from me. It’s yours, okay?” He pressed his elbows to the bed beside my head and

gazed down at me lovingly. There would be no denial, which left me fully open to ask for anything I wanted from him.

To murmur “love” would seem silly in the midst of our passion, but it was the top desire on my list.

“Make love to me.” I pulled him down for a long kiss as his hands moved down my sides, caressing me, his nails scraping me softly.

“I can do that.” He smiled and moved back down my body as he licked at his lips. “Open your legs for me, Dana. Come for me, baby.”

My stomach contracted tightly as I dropped my knees open and groaned.

He wasted no time tugging my panties off of me and leaning in to pick back up where he left off. Pleasure blossomed in my stomach as he ran his fingers down my sex, petting me between long licks and strong pulls against my flesh.

“So delicious,” he mumbled against me.

I gripped the sheets as every wicked hot fantasy played behind my eyes. The image of him pressing me to the bed, to the wall, to a counter somewhere and losing himself inside of me was more than enough. I’d never wanted to be anyone’s whore, but the man hovering above me seemed to have the power to change that. There wasn’t anything I wouldn’t be willing to try if he was involved in it.

“So good,” I whimpered just before my orgasm burst through the center of my stomach and forced me to arch my back and ride the high as long as I could manage it. I thrashed about, unable to help myself. Never had something felt so fucking good.

Kendal gripped my thighs tightly and forced me into submission beneath him as he drank deeply from me. The moment seemed to go on forever, wearing me down, leaving me emotionally raw and willing to make a few promises I wasn’t sure I could keep.

I wanted him more than I could remember wanting anyone or anything before. It had to be the lust, right? Had to be.

“God, I love how you let yourself go and enjoy the pleasure of coming.” He stood up and walked back toward our bags. “Feels good to forget about anything else and just dive in head first, doesn’t it.”

“With you? Hell yes.” I sat up and worked my bra off my shoulders before lying back down and trying to suck in a little. Funny how the minute he wasn’t in front of me, my mind went back to all the things wrong with me physically.

He walked to the edge of the bed and extended his hand. “I want you to put it on me.”

I reached for the condom and opened it before giving him a cheeky grin. “Has it been so long that you don’t remember how to do it?”

He smirked, stealing my breath with how incredibly sexy he was. He had no clue, or maybe he did, and I was the ignorant one.

“It’s been two years, so go easy on me.” He ran his fingers through my hair and gripped tightly as I rolled the rubber down his swollen shaft and stroked him a few times. He was far bigger than anyone I’d been with before, so going easy on him was a must. I had no clue if I was capable of handling him.

“I don’t know how to go easy.” I leaned back and pulled him down to rest on top of me again.

His expression softened as he brushed my hair back. “I’m falling in love with you. I keep telling myself it’s just your beauty, or your incredibly giving heart, but it’s more than that.”

I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled at him a little as he pressed just inside my body, stretching me in ways that were beyond delicious. I wanted to echo his thoughts, but I couldn’t find the right words, so I stopped searching.

He ran his lips over my chest as he moved down to suck one of my nipples into the warmth of his mouth. A deep moan

left me as he shifted back up and pressed himself deeper inside of me.

“Let me know if I hurt you, baby. Okay?” The look of love in his eyes was more than I could have asked for. It was everything to me.

“You’re not going to hurt me. Let go like you asked me to do, okay?” I reached up and pulled him down, enjoying almost too much how well he fit against me.

“If that’s what you want.” He hovered above me with a naughty smile on his lips.

“More than anything else in the world.” I lifted my knees a little to give him more room and cried out as he reached up and grabbed the headboard. The position opened me up farther and left me vulnerable to whatever he wanted to do.

“Then hold on tight, Dana. Don’t let me go.” He rolled his hips, impaling me and leaving me lost to the intense pleasure of being the center of his lust. He knew how to make me purr and he used every inch of his body to make it happen again and again and again.

CHAPTER 31



KENDAL

“You know we’re going to have to get up soon, right?” I leaned down and kissed the top of Dana’s shoulder as she lay in the bed on her side, her back pressed against me. I’d come three times during our afternoon love making session. I should have been exhausted, but I was alive again, completely on fire for the woman beside me. She’d offered herself up for my pleasure in a beautiful way that felt natural and right.

“No...” She glanced over her shoulder and up at me. “Are you really falling in love with me?”

“Yes.” I wrapped my hand around her throat lightly and leaned down to make love to her sweet mouth again. “But don’t feel like you have to return anything, okay? Just ease into this with me.”

“I’m already there.” She pulled from me and turned on her other side to face me before cuddling back up. “I just didn’t want to admit it to myself.”

“Why is that?” I brushed her hair back and ran my hand down over her arm slowly. “Does love scare you?”

“No. I just can’t imagine waiting eight months to be together like this.” She tilted her head back and locked eyes with me. “Maybe I should honestly look at transferring to another school. There are lots of them in Dallas.”

“Maybe I should go work for Damon. It’s not like I’m ever going to get my reputation to the place I want it to be at UT. I’m fighting an uphill battle all the time.” That she was willing to transfer during her senior year spoke volumes.

“You love it there, and you’ve worked really hard to get into the position you’re in. You’re not giving that up for me. It will be easier when I’m out of school.”

“Will it?” I kissed her again before rolling onto my back and tucking one of my hands behind my head. “I’m dealing with Heather and her bullshit as well as several students that think flirting with their professors is not only normal, but accepted.” I rolled my eyes. “Maybe I’m just living a pipe dream.”

“Or maybe they are.” She moved closer and leaned against my side. “You know every young girl dreams of having a sexcapade with their teacher. It’s part of growing up from girl to woman.”

I snorted and laughed. “Is that so?”

“Absolutely. The main problem is that most guy teachers aren’t exactly attractive.”

“No?” I lifted my eyebrow and worked to memorize the cute look on her face.

“Nope.” She sat up and moved to the edge of the bed. “I would assume that’s probably why you’re getting so much attention.”

I rolled on my side and watched her get dressed, grateful that she seemed to leave her modesty behind. She didn’t need to be anything but herself around me.

“So it’s not because I’m good looking. It’s because everyone else around me is shit?” I chuckled as she glanced over her shoulder and gave me a look.

“That’s not what I said, and you know it.” She worked on her bra and picked up her panties, but paused. “Maybe I should go commando tonight.”

“And give me a heart attack? No. Don’t do that to me, please.” I got out of the bed and walked toward the window to let my eyes run across the busyness of the city.

“I thought you might like the idea of me being risqué while we were out to dinner.” She pressed herself to my back, fitting

against me beautifully.

“I’d have a raging hard-on the whole time, so it’s up to you.” I turned in her arms and leaned down to kiss the tip of her nose. “Would you honestly consider transferring schools for me? For us?”

She didn’t blink before responding. “Absolutely. If that’s what we need to do... I’m all for it.”

“It’s not, but I love that you’re willing.”

“Would you think about moving from Dallas in a year or so if I wanted to attend medical school somewhere else?”

She assumed we were a long-term thing. I loved it.

“Like where?” I smiled as she swatted playfully at me and moved back. “What? I’m just asking where you’re thinking about dragging me off to. I’m a Texas boy through and through.”

“I’m thinking here.” She shrugged and picked up her dress, shaking it out.

“I’d go anywhere you wanted to go, Dana. I just want to make this thing between us work. I can see you beside me in the future and it feels good. I wasn’t sure I’d find anyone after all the shit that happened between me and Ana. It was like having someone rip my heart out and stomp all over it in front of me. She went from loving me like I’d never been loved before to denying me like I was a monster after her innocence. It was sickening.”

“I’m sorry.” She brushed her hands down the front of her dress and moved to stand in front of me. “That’s not going to happen with me. I’m here for the long haul if you’ll have me.”

“I don’t want anyone else.” I cupped her face and leaned in for a soft kiss. “You’ll have to get used to Damon though. He’s part of the deal.”

“He’s back with Bethany now though, right?”

“Yes, and thank God for it. He’s much more like his old self.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Her cheeky grin caused me to chuckle.

“A bit of both?”



Dana’s friend Olivia was beautiful and seemed like a sweet girl from what I could tell. She’d gotten home about an hour after Dana and I finally pulled ourselves from the sweaty sheets and made ourselves presentable. I’d rather have stayed in the bed for the rest of the evening, but Dana seemed pumped over getting to hang out with her best friend again.

“Olivia. This is Dr. Kendal Tarrington. He’s a professor at UT in Dallas.” Dana moved back with a huge smile on her face as Olivia extended her hand toward me. If I didn’t know better, I’d say Dana was rather proud of my accomplishments, which just seemed to make me love her all the more.

“Just Kendal, please.” I shook the busty blonde’s hand and gave her a warm smile. “Dana says you guys grew up together.”

“We sure did.” Olivia shook my hand firmly and moved back. “We ran the town and the school back in the day, didn’t we?”

Dana chuckled. “Something like that.”

A knock at the door interrupted the conversation.

“That’s Luke. You guys grab whatever you need, and let’s go to dinner. Luke got us reservations at this exclusive steakhouse. The man knows everyone who is someone.” Olivia turned and walked toward the door as I reached for Dana’s hand.

“Should be fun. I love a good steak almost as much as I love hearing you moan.” I wagged my eyebrows at her as she gave me a “behave” look. As if.

I was just starting to breathe again. There was no way in hell I was forcing myself into submission just yet. It felt too

good to let the more passionate parts of my soul out for a stretch.

We moved toward the door as Olivia opened it wider. The guy standing in the doorway was a little shorter than me, but didn't look at all like someone I'd associate with. He had a cocky look on his face that resembled every frat brother I'd ever encountered. The night was sure to be interesting if nothing else.

"I'm Luke Taylor. Partner at Taylor, Taylor and Barden." He extended his hand and I smiled. Of course the guy introduced himself by what he did. Most people who craved significance did.

"Kendal. Nice to meet you, man." I shook his hand and introduced Dana to the prick. We made small talk for a few minutes before Olivia shuffled us out the door and into the hallway.

Dana and I walked hand in hand behind them, but I couldn't help but overhear their conversation.

"Why didn't you wear the blue dress I like?" Luke sounded put off.

"Because it's at the cleaners." She pressed the button on the elevator and turned toward us. "I wish you guys were going to be in town longer. I'd love to show you the city."

"It's New York, Olivia. I'm sure they've seen it." He snorted and held the door open as we walked in.

"Actually, I've never been here." I threw in my two cents. "Maybe we can come up over the holidays and spend a little more time looking around. I think Dana was just being nice to one of her nursing friends and came up to support her."

"Yeah, my friend Jackie that I mentioned." Dana moved closer to me, wrapping her arm around the back of my waist and tucking herself to my side. It was so natural to play the couple we both wanted to be. How hard was it going to be back home to have her beside me and *not* be able to reach out and claim her as my own anytime I wanted to?

“And what was Jackie wanting to do in New York this weekend?” Luke eyeballed me and Dana before reaching out and taking Olivia’s hand. She looked a little surprised by his actions. Sad.

“Some hotshot doctor came down to Dallas a week or so ago and she fell for him hook, line and sinker.” Dana shrugged and smiled up at me. “Never know where lust might turn into love.”

“What is hook, line and sinker?” Luke’s tone was slightly demeaning.

“It’s a southern term that refers to catching a fish.” Olivia pulled her hand from Luke’s and walked out of the elevator in front of us.

I let them get a few feet ahead before glancing down toward my girl. “They’re tense.”

“Hell yeah they are. Order a bottle of wine at the restaurant?” She wagged her eyebrows at me.

“Liquor makes me horny.” I kissed the side of her head as we paused by the front door.

Olivia turned to face us as Luke walked out to talk with the valet. “I’m so glad you guys are here. This place is honestly one of the best places to have dinner in the whole city. And we’re buying. No fussing about it.”

“That’s not fair.” Dana pulled from me and put her hands on her hips. “You’re already giving us a place to stay. I’ll pick up the tab for dinner.”

“Nope. Luke will just charge it to the company. He always does.” She glanced over her shoulder and I couldn’t help but notice the way her smile faded as she watched him. She wasn’t in love. Hell, she wasn’t in lust from what I could tell.

“You’re not going to give on this are you?” Dana reached out and took Olivia’s hand.

“Nope.” Olivia pulled her into a tight hug and glanced up at me. “I haven’t had time to check into you, but you better be a good guy. This girl is a gem and a half.”

I smiled, liking the woman even better for her stance to protect Dana. “I’m well aware. I don’t deserve her, but fate’s obviously smiling down on me for the time being. Now to keep her is the challenge.”

“Oh, you’re stuck for sure.” Dana moved back into my arms. It felt almost too right with her in my arms. As if she was supposed to be there. Just having her close left my thoughts on the present and not locked in my painful past.

“I’m thrilled to be stuck.” I leaned down and brushed my nose by hers.

Luke’s chuckle caused me to glance up. “You guys just start dating or what?”

“Yeah. Why?” I moved back and took Dana’s hand.

“Just asking seeing that you can’t keep your hands off each other. It’s cute.” He didn’t look like he thought it was cute.

“I’m pretty sure we’ll be doing this forty years from now.”

Olivia nodded with a look of approval on her face. “I want that in my life too.”

“Then don’t pull away every time I reach for you, woman.” Luke pulled her into an awkward hug and kissed the side of her face before releasing her and popping her butt. “All right, come on. Enough of this lovey-dovey bullshit. We’re going to be late.”

Dana glanced up at me and rolled her eyes before we followed the odd couple out to the car. Thank God we spent the afternoon wrapped around each other. It was all I’d be focusing on for the remainder of the night. Surely after I played a good boy during dinner with her friends I’d be rewarded in some way or another. I wanted only one thing.

Her... naked and panting again.

CHAPTER 32



DANA

Luke hadn't shut up about his firm from the time we got into his overly pimped out sports car until they served dessert at the high-end restaurant. I couldn't tell if Olivia was as over him as I knew Kendal and I both were, but either way, I felt like shit for my best friend.

"I'm going to run to the ladies' room." I stood up and glanced down toward Olivia, trying to give her a look that would urge her to join me.

"Yeah. Me too." She stood up and put her napkin on her plate.

"You girls are weird." Luke shook his head and turned back to Kendal, bringing up another point about his firm.

"Does that guy ever stop talking about himself?" I mumbled as we walked toward the back. I hated to dump on Olivia's man, but there was no way in the deepest parts of hell that she was happy with him. If she was, then she wasn't at all the girl I'd grown up with.

"He's pretty proud of his accomplishments." She pushed the door to the bathroom open. "He keeps trying to get me to come work for him, but I just can't see that being a good idea."

"That's because it's a horrible idea. I think you putting up with him being your boyfriend should get you sainthood." I paused by the mirror and leaned in to check my teeth.

“So you and Kendal seem to be really into each other.” Her smile was sweet and yet I could tell she was hurting behind it.

“It’s been a roller coaster so far. I met him at the hospital. His sister Amanda was one of my patients. I think I told you that already, right?”

“Some of it, but tell me more. What was wrong with her?”

“She had MS.”

“Had?” Olivia’s expression tightened.

“She passed away about a week ago.” I stepped back from the mirror and turned to face my oldest friend. “He’s been having a rough time with it, but I think that’s because he lost his mom and dad when he was younger. The poor guy doesn’t have anyone but his best friend.”

“At least he has that.” She ran her hand through her hair and turned toward the mirror. “I didn’t mean that the way it came out.”

I moved up behind her and wrapped her in a hug before pressing my cheek to the back of her shoulder. She was more of a sister to me than my own sister was. We’d been through so much shit, but her leaving Texas caused a fissure between us. Proximity was power, and I missed her like crazy.

“I miss you too.”

“I’m sorry.” She let out a shaky breath. “I just keep thinking that I need to get over everything and move on. It’s been fucking six years since all that shit with Caden went down. We were just kids for God’s sake and yet I look for him everywhere I go.”

I moved back and waited for her to turn to face me. “That’s because he’s living up here in New York now.”

“I know.” She glanced down and closed her eyes. “I can’t shake the fact that he’s right around the corner. That if I just keep my eyes open, I’ll find him again.”

I touched her shoulder gingerly. “Do you really want to open all of that back up?”

She glanced up and shrugged. “I don’t know. He’s a man now, not a boy. Who knows who he really is or what he’s up to? Best to stay with the evil you know than go seeking in the dark for something that could turn out to be bigger and scarier.”

I snorted. “I’m not sure Caden would turn out to be anything but a country boy with a great smile in a suit, trying to pretend to be someone he’s not.”

“Like I’m doing?”

The sadness in her tone tore through me. There had to be something I could do to help.

“So come back home. Move in with me and we’ll find you a job in Dallas. There has to be investment firms worth your time down in the south.”

“There are, but I can’t just up and leave, Dana. My whole life has been built here.”

“So rebuild it.” I knew she wasn’t going to budge until the pain of being stuck in a life that didn’t really fit her became overwhelming. How it hadn’t for the last six years was a mystery to me, and yet here she was - enduring.

“Maybe in the future.” She pulled me into a quick hug. “So you and Kendal just started dating, but things already seem to be going so well.”

“He’s a professor at UT, remember? I’m a student, so the honest truth behind all of it is that he’s not supposed to be dating me. We used this weekend to get away and enjoy each other like we wish we could at home.” I shrugged and turned to wash my hands. “We’ll get back to Texas on Sunday and things will go back to normal. I think that’s why we can’t keep our hands off of each other. Back home we really don’t have much of a choice. He could lose his job over us being together.”

“Oh. Wow.” She rubbed the top of my back. “Well, you know that you’re welcome to come up here and hang out at my place any weekend you’re free.”

“I appreciate that.” I dried my hands and nodded toward the door. “You ready? They probably thought we fell in.”

She chuckled. “I wish. It would be a better ending to the night than having to tell Luke that I’m not sleeping with him.”

“No?” I opened the door and walked out with her behind me.

“No. I need a break from him in general. You guys being here is a great excuse. I won’t be in your way back at the apartment, but I will be using you as an alibi.”

“You need to drop him, Olivia. He’s not right for you, and it’s obvious, even to you.”

“It’s good sex.” She shrugged. “He’s a warm body to hold on to at night and he’s got great style and fun friends.”

“And I bet you close your eyes and pretend he’s Caden, don’t you?”

She flinched. “Stop hitting so close to home and mind your own damn business.” Her smirk let me know that she wasn’t offended, but I knew the truth of the matter. She’d been in love with the same boy our whole lives. Growing up and changing everything about herself wasn’t going to change the truth. It would mask it for a time, but it would seem that her mask was growing thin.

Maybe it was time for me to step in and see if I couldn’t cause an intervention. A by chance meet up?

I smiled at Kendal before taking my place next to him at the table. He leaned over and pressed his mouth next to my ear as Luke and Olivia fought over who was staying with who later that night.

“What are you up to? I can see something nefarious playing behind your pretty eyes.”

“Really?” I moved back and studied his face, falling even more in love with him. I reached out and touched his cheek softly as my heart fluttered in my chest. “I just want Olivia to find happiness.”

“Like we have?” His voice was low, soothing, delicious.

“Exactly.” I leaned in and pressed my lips to his as the world disappeared.

It was weird to be twenty-four and understand for the first time ever what love not only looked like, but what it felt like too.

The realization made me want to fight even harder to make sure it remained mine.

What would I give up for us to be together? Everything.



We suffered through dessert and finally headed back to Olivia’s place. By the silence in the front seat, it was more than obvious that Luke was pissy over Olivia denying him.

I couldn’t handle the silence anymore. It was driving me mad.

“Olivia. You remember during our junior year when your mom and dad let us throw that party out on your father’s back forty?” I snorted as memories raced through my mind, leaving me to feel young again - adventurous.

“How could I forget?” She glanced over her shoulder and smiled. “It iced over that winter and we skated on the old pond for hours, busting our asses until we were covered in bruises.”

“You guys are talking about 2008, aren’t you? I remember being in college and me and Damon enjoying that freeze. It was nuts for Texas. All the schools closed and businesses took the day off.”

“And this is an unusual phenomenon?” Luke’s tone was less than friendly.

“Absolutely.” Olivia turned to face him. “It usually gets cold back home, but nothing like it did that week. We had such a good time.”

I snuggled against Kendal and glanced up at him, grateful that he was mine. I wanted to know everything about him, to

dig out all of the skeletons from his closet and help patch up his hurts if he still had any.

How close we'd come to not being anything more than acquaintances.

"We're here," Luke announced. "You guys enjoy the rest of your weekend. I'll see you next week?"

Olivia nodded. "Sounds good."

I got out of the car and turned back to watch her try to pull herself together. I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and pulled her close to my side as Kendal opened the door for us.

"You could always get in my suitcase, you know." I kissed the side of her head as she chuckled.

"I might do that." She pulled away from me. "I'm going to check in with the front desk to see if I have mail. I'll see you guys in the morning."

"You sure?" I reached for her.

"Yes, honestly. I'm good." She forced a smile before waving at Kendal and turning to walk toward the front of the luxury apartment complex. Her shoulders were rounded in and her head slightly down. I almost hated Luke without really knowing him.

"She needs to get out of that relationship." Kendal wrapped his arms around the top of my shoulders. "She seems like a good woman."

"She is. She's just forgotten somehow." I pulled out of his hold and walked to the elevator. "Tell me about the situation with Bethany and Damon. You never filled me in. What happened?"

"I really don't know." Kendal moved into the elevator and pressed himself to the front of me. "I've been so lost in my own shit that I haven't reached out. Make me do that when we get home."

"Oh, and I meant to tell you, I met your other TA, Jake?"

“Yeah. Jake’s a great kid. He’s in the honors fraternity that I have to take over when we get back.” He brushed my hair back from my neck and leaned down to suck softly at my skin.

“What honors fraternity? You didn’t tell me about that.” Warmth pooled in the center of my stomach, and I couldn’t help but hope for a night that mimicked our afternoon.

“Beta Alpha Psi is the name of the group.” He moved back and adjusted himself. “Unfortunately, Mark wants me to work with Heather as a co-adviser.”

“Heather? The other professor that’s trying to get in your pants?” Ice water hit my veins, effectively taking away any desire to strip down. Was Kendal really going to put himself in a situation like that? Could he help it? Maybe he didn’t have any say over the matter.

“Yes.” He moved out into the hall and stopped in front of Olivia’s door to punch in the code. “I’m going to try to get her to take a handful of events for the group, and I’ll take the other. There’s no reason for the two of us to be at an event together. It’s inefficient.”

“And something she would be totally interested in.” I hated how my voice betrayed the concern pumping through me.

“And she’d be the only one.” He closed the door and moved toward me, surprising me as he bent over and swept me into his strong arms.

“Put me down! You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“Hush, woman. You don’t weigh anything and I’m a big country boy, remember?”

I laughed and wrapped my arms around his neck. “Can you be my big country boy?”

“I already am.” He leaned down and kissed me before walking into the bedroom we’d stained with our lust earlier that day. “You have nothing to worry about with Heather, Dana. I’m all yours. We just need to get through these next few months and we can start living the life we want to live.”

“Together?” I couldn’t even imagine how good it would feel to let the couple we were able to be in New York be us back home. Would I become friends with Damon and Bethany? With all of Kendal’s other friends from college? It was like being offered a whole new place to belong. I loved it.

“Absolutely.” He put me down and reached for my dress. “Now... no more talking. I still have unexplored places that are begging for my attention.”

I glanced down as my cheeks grew hot. “They are?”

“Mmmhmmm.” He pulled his shirt over his head and nodded toward the bed. “Get up there on your hands and knees for me. I’ll show you every one of them.”

There was nothing left to say. I wanted exactly what he was willing to give - so damn bad it hurt.

CHAPTER 33



KENDAL

I shouldn't have brought work with me to New York, but something told me that Dana would be a late sleeper. It had to be her laid back persona. Seeing that I usually woke up at five on the dot unless the world was falling apart around me, I knew I'd have a few hours to myself to get some grading done.

After kissing her back and shoulders a few times in the darkness of the early morning, I slipped on my jeans and t-shirt and snuck out into the living room with my briefcase.

The coffee pot in the kitchen was set to go off in two hours, but I quickly adjusted it and made myself comfortable at the kitchen table. I plowed through a handful of grading assignments before I heard someone moving around behind me.

I glanced up and peeked over my shoulder to see Olivia standing in front of the coffee pot.

"I started it about an hour ago." I stood up and stretched as I turned to face her.

"Oh good. I usually let myself sleep in on Saturdays and use Sundays to catch up on all the work I didn't get done from the week before." She rubbed at her eyes before tugging her robe closer. "Let me go put something on."

"Don't do it for me. You're all covered up and it's your place. You deserve to be comfortable." I picked up my empty coffee mug and walked into the kitchen. "Thanks for letting us crash here. I love the place. It's elegant and in the perfect location for being downtown."

“Of course.” She poured herself a cup of coffee and moved out of the way to lean against the counter beside me. “I miss home a lot more than I’d ever let on.”

“I think you’re fooling yourself.” I lifted my cup to my lips.

“What? Why? You don’t think I miss it?” She gave me a quirky smile. We could be friends for sure. She had a pureness to her that shone like a beacon. I could see why Dana was invested in her. She was good people.

“No, I’m sure you miss it. Hell, I miss it and I’ve been gone a day.” I leaned back against the counter nearest me. “I’m just saying that it’s hard to leave part of who you are somewhere and try and start over.”

Her eyes flashed with recognition. “It hurts like hell.”

“I know.” I shook my head and set my coffee down. “I never left home, but I’m a very different man than I was in my younger years. Being that guy still haunts me and yet I miss parts of him so damn much.”

“Tell me about him.” Her smile spread across her face as if she were preparing for something great.

“He was a whore, firstly.” I chuckled as she did. “He wanted the world to bow down to him and he was beyond passionate about everything.”

“So leave the whore part and the egomaniac and find your passion again.” She took a sip of her coffee and studied me.

“I think I’m doing just that. Dana’s like a fresh breath of air for me. I haven’t dated for six years because it’s hard to meet people when you’re working all the damn time.”

“Don’t I know it?” She moved from the counter and walked to sit down at the kitchen table. She glanced down at my stack of papers and smiled. “Are you passionate about accounting?”

“Actually, yes. I love puzzles and the structure they provide. The final picture at the end is usually worth the effort to get it there.” I moved toward the table, but remained

standing. “I honestly never thought I would end up teaching, but when I chose that path, it just fit. It’s part of who I am now.”

“And does it scare you to let that part go?” She glanced up at me.

I had to think about my response for a few minutes. If she’d have asked me before meeting Dana, I wouldn’t have hesitated in telling her that it scared me shitless, but now... I wasn’t sure.

“I don’t know.” I moved around the table and sat down as the door opened down the hall. “I think in the past my job defined who I was. It was the only good thing about me, but that’s changing because of Dana.”

“You guys talking about me?” She padded out into the living room in a t-shirt and panties. Her dark hair was a holy hell mess, and fuck if I didn’t love it.

“Always.” Olivia glanced over her shoulder toward my girl. “There’s coffee in the kitchen. Get a cup and join us.”

“How long have you been up?” Dana walked over toward me and leaned down to kiss me a few times before moving slowly toward the kitchen.

“For a couple of hours. I’m used to getting up early in the morning. I used to jog all the time, but over the last few months I’ve slipped out of the habit.”

“I wanna start jogging.” Dana glanced over her shoulder at me.

“We can do it together after you graduate.” I settled back in my chair to find Olivia watching me. “What?”

“That just sucks. It’s still eight months away. That’s a lifetime.”

“Tell me about it.” Dana groaned as she walked back into the dining room to join us.

“Then say to hell with the rules and do what you feel is best for the two of you.” Olivia glanced between the two of us.

My phone rang from down the hall, giving me a chance to get out of having to discuss my situation all over again. It would inevitably lead to me talking about the situation with Ana and my other students, which was something I'd be grateful to *never* talk about again.

"My phone's ringing. Let me grab it and Dana can explain." I jogged down the hall and closed the door behind me before scooping it up. Damon. "What's up, buddy?"

"Where the hell are you? I'm sitting outside of your house and you're not here. Did you sleep over at Dana's place?" He sounded more curious than perturbed.

"Oh fuck. I totally forgot to tell you that I was going out of town." We played golf every Saturday morning with Damon's younger brother Matt. We'd been doing it for years. How could I have forgotten?

"You get a mulligan for this one, but know I'm due some serious payback. I left a sexy woman in a white g-string to come get your dumb ass." He grunted and threw a few more punches at me.

"Please don't tell me what Bethany wears under her clothes. She's my fucking TA." I stood up and walked toward the window to pull back the curtains. The sun was sitting in the far side of the sky, and the city was empty, which was odd.

"Where are you? And who are you with?"

"Well, mother... I'm in New York with Dana. I took your advice. We're going to sneak around for the time being until we figure out what our best course of action is."

"Nice!" His tone changed immediately. I was still in trouble, no doubt, but if Damon loved anything, it was to be right, and this time, he was spot on. Dana and I did belong together.

"It's been great. I'm not sure what we're going to do for the next eight months, but-"

"Take it day by day. Get out of town when you can and be smart about your relationship. If things go south, you always

have a job with me. You know that.” It was good to hear his voice and to be reassured by his position on things.

“I appreciate that buddy.” I moved back from the window and glanced around for my shoes. Going down to Central Park and walking around in the coolness of the morning would be romantic. I wanted to be *that* guy for Dana. The one that swept her off her feet and left her heart racing every time I walked into the room. I wasn’t sure if it was possible, but Damon seemed to have Bethany in that trance. If he could do it...

“You still there? Did I lose you?” Damon’s voice brought me back from my thoughts.

“Sorry. I’m just not myself lately. Dana leaves me feeling so full of life.”

“I like full of life. Beth does the same for me. Hold tight to that, brother. It’s what a good woman has the power to do.”

“I will. I’m not sure how, but I’ll figure the shit out.”

“When can I expect you back in my neck of the woods?”

“Monday. Why? You need something?”

“Beth’s excited about this wedding planning and has picked out the colors for our suits. I told her that you probably weren’t ready to go out and live just yet seeing all the shit you’ve been through, but when you are ready-”

“I’m ready. Mandy’s passing isn’t going to go away anytime soon, but thanks to you and Dana, I’ll get through it. I already am.” I brushed my fingers through my hair.

“Awesome. We’ll grab Matt and Bethany’s friend Jake and go try on suits sometime in the next few weeks.”

I snorted. What a motley crew we were pulling together. “Sounds like a plan.”

“It’ll be painful, but at least Matt will keep us on our toes and make the day an adventure.”

“Your brother is definitely good for that.” I turned as the door opened behind me. “I’ll give you a buzz next week. Let me know if you need me.”

“Same here, brother.”

I hung up and tossed the phone on the bed as Dana gave me a questioning look. “Damon?”

“Yeah.” I sat down on the edge of the bed and put my socks and tennis shoes on. “I want to go down to Central Park and walk around while it’s still cool outside. Come with me?”

“Oh yeah. That sounds like fun.” She closed the door and picked up her bag from the floor, opened it and dumped out the contents on the bed. She pulled her t-shirt over her head, leaving nothing but lots of silky tanned skin and a pair of pretty pink panties that were far too tiny for the curves the woman was sporting.

My cock twitched in my jeans and my heart skipped a beat. “God, you’re beautiful.”

I moved up behind her and ran my hands up her sides to the front of her body to cup her breasts. I tugged softly at her nipples and leaned down to press kisses up the side of her neck.

“That feels good,” she whispered sensually and leaned back against me.

“Maybe the park can wait.” I smiled against the side of her neck and let one of my hands move down over her tummy toward her mound.

“No. I want to go. We can make love again later this afternoon before we take a nap.”

“You’re seriously the perfect woman for me.” I slipped my hand down the front of her panties and patted her silky skin as I continued to play with her tits. “Naps, pizza, sex and parks? I’m thinking I might have to keep you.”

“Might?” She bumped me with her butt and laughed as I released her and backed up.

“No might to it.” I stuck my hand in my pants and adjusted myself in an effort not to scare any of the kids in the park that morning. “What’s on the agenda for tonight?”

She pulled her bra on and got dressed far too quickly. Where she looked exceptional in her shorty shorts and t-shirt, I'd much prefer her in nothing but panties.

"We're supposed to have drinks with Jackie and Parks, but I haven't been able to get ahold of her just yet." She pulled her long hair into a high ponytail, making her look five years younger. I almost suffered a moment of feeling like a cradle robber, but forced myself away from the thought.

"Should we track her down?" I opened the door to the bedroom and moved out into the hall behind her. I couldn't seem to keep my eyes from moving down the swell of her perfect ass to her legs. She'd taken me so good, so deep from behind the night before. For someone who appreciated sex as much as I did, not having it for a long time left me wanting to make up for it.

I needed to keep myself on lockdown so my newest obsession didn't think any less of me. I was a well-rounded guy, but not taking care of myself for so long had me twitching for more of her.

"No. I'm sure they're just having a fuckfest." She walked into the kitchen as Olivia turned around from the dining room table.

"Who's having a fuckfest? I wanna go."

I chuckled. "Jackie, Dana's friend that we came up from Dallas with."

"She's fine. We'll get ahold of her later." Dana shrugged. "We're headed to Central Park. You wanna come with us?"

Olivia shook her head. "No. You guys go have fun. I just wanna lounge around. I'll see you after awhile when you get back."

"Suit yourself." Dana winked at her friend and walked to the door. "Come on, handsome. Let's go make out behind a tree."

"The cops will fine you." Olivia gave us a cheeky grin. Something told me that she knew from experience.

“Might be worth it.” I took Dana’s hand as we walked out into the hall. Being with her in another place where I could breathe easy was exactly what I needed most. We’d have to make our out of town trips a regular occurrence.

Or I could go work for Damon. I might actually enjoy it.

It was a thought if nothing else. There was comfort in knowing that I might be getting closer to trying something new - something less restrictive - something that would open the door to usher love in the way I wanted it. The way I needed it.

CHAPTER 34



DANA

“It’s beautiful out here.” I breathed in deeply and intertwined my fingers with Kendal’s as we walked down the main path in Central Park. A slight breeze blew along my neck, tickling my skin and leaving me feeling like I could take flight.

“Most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” His eyes were on me.

I rolled my eyes and snuggled against his side. “Thank you for coming here with me. I really needed this.”

“Don’t thank me. I’m enjoying myself a lot. I feel like I can breathe for the first time in a long time.” He released me and moved over to sit down on one of the many benches around us. “Come here and let me hold you.”

“I like the sound of that.” I moved toward him and turned, sitting down beside him and leaning into his warmth. “Were you really going to walk away from us when you saw my name on your schedule?”

“Absolutely.” He let out a slow sigh. “I didn’t feel like I had a choice. I still feel a little off having to sneak around behind the school’s back, but Damon was right. I have to start living my life soon before there isn’t much of it left to live.”

“Tell me about Ana?” I glanced up at him and waited patiently as he seemed to work through a million emotions.

“What do you wanna know?” He glanced down at me, his eyes sweeping down toward my mouth as if he were lost in his

need to kiss me repeatedly. It was mesmerizing.

“Did you love her?”

“Yes. With all of my heart.” He leaned down and kissed me softly. “I hadn’t really been in love before her, and I fell hard. Deep.”

“Do you still love her?” I pressed my hand to his chest as he moved in for another kiss.

“No.” He moved back and rested against the wooden bench beneath us. “I stopped years ago. She drove a dagger into my chest with her denial of our relationship. I have no clue what turned the tides for her or why she stopped believing in us as a couple, but somewhere along the way, she gave up on us. On me.”

The pain in his face was palpable. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought it up.”

He turned his attention back toward me. “No, I’m glad you did. I want you to know everything.”

“Then tell me anything you want to tell me about her or anything else.”

“Okay. Well, I grew up in a loving family and just had Mandy as my only sibling. She didn’t have MS until she was a teenager, which was a shock to all of us. Before that she was so full of life, so fun and joyful. I’d try to pick on her and start fights because I was an asshole boy, but she never let me have my way with anything. I always bent when she started poking and prodding, especially after she got MS.”

I reached over and ran my hand over his chest as I rested my head against his shoulder. “And you became her sole caregiver after your parents died.”

“Yeah.” He wrapped his arm around my shoulders and brushed his lips by my forehead. “I’d have done anything for her. I wish she could be here now to experience the simple things, you know?”

“So many people take them for granted.” I touched the side of his face, running my fingers by the dark brown stubble that

covered his cheeks and chin.

“That’s why I decided to bend my rules. Life is too goddamn short and you never know when it’s going to be snatched away from you. Where I still feel a little off sneaking around, I can’t imagine not working through this with you. You light me up in ways I thought were forever dead.”

I smiled and let out a content sigh. “Are Damon and Bethany getting married?”

“They sure are. I was just on the phone with Damon back at Olivia’s place before you walked in. He wants to go shopping for the tuxes soon.”

“Fun! I wanna go.”

“Absolutely. I’d love for you to meet Damon’s brother Matt. He’s quite a character.”

“How so?”

“He’s the artsy type. Loves to paint and sing, but looks like a quarterback for the Dallas Cowboys. You’d never imagine him holing up in a paint studio unless you really knew him.”

“What’s he do for a living?” I sat up and stretched my arms toward the sky as a yawn bubbled up inside of me. Being around Kendal was relaxing, almost too much so.

“He lives off his dad’s money.” Kendal stood up and bounced on the balls of his feet. “I think he’s getting ready to move to Seattle, but we’ll see how that goes. Matt’s the noncommittal type. He always has been.”

“This coming from a man who has rules that guard his life.”

“Hey. Those rules protect me.” He reached down and helped me up before pulling me close. “I have a spiel I give everyone who comes close to me too. You wanna hear it?”

“A spiel?” I laughed as delight raced through me. “Like something you’ve memorized?”

“Yep. I gave it to Bethany when she started to TA for me, just in case.”

“Even though she was dating your best friend?”

“I didn’t know that at the time. It’s a small world, right?”

“Give me the spiel.” I lifted to my toes and kissed him quickly on the lips before moving back and crossing my arms over my chest. “And do it like you would if I were your new student.”

“Speaking of... did you drop your mini-mester class that I’m teaching or are you still planning on taking the class?”

“I haven’t dropped it yet, but we’ll see what happens. Eight months all of a sudden feels like fifteen years. I’m not sure what I’m going to do.”

“Don’t do anything irrational please.” He reached for my hand. “We’ll figure it out together.”

“I know. Give me the spiel. Impress me.”

“Right.” He cleared his throat as I lifted my hand.

“Wait. Let me play the part.”

The confused look on his face was almost too cute. “Okay...”

I closed the gap between us and put my back to him, bending down a little and rubbing my ass over the thick bulge between his thighs as I glanced up at him over my shoulder.

“Hi Dr. Tarrington. I’m your new TA. If you need *anything* and I do mean *anything*... don’t hesitate to ask.”

“That’s not fair.” He wrapped his arms around me and leaned down to kiss my ear. “How about your legs spread wide and your tits spilling out of the top of your cute little shirt?”

I yelped and turned around, smacking him playfully. “You’re horrid!”

“You love it.” He seemed so full of himself, and sadly enough... I did love it. I could see why working at the college was so incredibly dangerous for him. “You ready for the spiel, you naughty little TA?”

“Lay it on me.”

His eyebrow lifted and he shook his head before clearing his voice. "I'm thirty-one. I'm not a model, nor do I care to be. I'm a guy that loves math, football and I'm an extreme stickler for the rules. I don't date students or TAs, so keep things staunchly professional between us, or I'll dismiss you."

I couldn't help but laugh out loud. He was beyond cute.

"If you really think that's going to keep someone away, you've lost your mind. That would make me want to get closer."

"That's because you're a bad girl pretending to be innocent." He pulled me close again. The thick press of his arousal against my stomach forced my body to grow warm.

"You think so?" I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him down toward me.

"Mmmhmmmm." He pressed his lips to mine and ran his hands up and down my back, pressing into my muscles and massaging away any tension I was carrying with me.

"Are you really thirty-one? You old man." I laughed as he gave me a stern look.

"See? Completely bad girl."

"Only because you make me one." I kissed him again before releasing him. My phone was going off in my pocket, which was a good sign. "Hopefully this is Jackie." I pulled it out and answered it. "Hello?"

"Hey. It's me." Jackie. "Sorry for not answering earlier. Parks was showing me around the city, the hospital and the inside of his penthouse apartment, which is awesome!"

"Nice. Are you guys wanting to get together for a drink tonight?"

"Ummm... I don't know. I'll ask him and text you later. Would that be okay?"

"Of course. Just let me know."

"Thanks, Dana! You're the best friend a girl could have."

We hung up and I gave Kendal a look. “I really hate that she’s spending the weekend with this guy.”

“He that bad?”

“Worse.” I tucked my phone back into my pocket and motioned for him to join me as we walked deeper into the park. “He fucked her a good ten times over a four-day period when he was visiting and most of those times were at the hospital.”

“Is it horrid to say how hot that is?”

I snorted. “Yes.”

“Then it’s just deplorable. Creepy bastard.” He wagged his eyebrows, causing me to soften even more toward him.

“She’s falling in love with him, or at least the idea of him.” I slipped my arm into Kendal’s, wanting the touch of his skin against mine seeing that I wouldn’t get it for a while once we got back home.

“And he’s not the type to reciprocate the feeling, I suppose?”

“Not at all. He left town without giving her his number, he didn’t call, he doesn’t care.” I ran my hand over the top of my head and exhaled loudly. “He’s a playboy and Jackie doesn’t seem to mind, but she’s going to lose her shit when we get back home and he goes back to ignoring her.”

“I’m not trying to be a dick at all here, but when women throw themselves at a guy, the guy usually takes advantage of that and keeps moving on. I mean, honestly, if Jackie were willing to throw herself at this Parks guy, then who else is she opening her legs to?”

“What? No one.” I jerked back as if he’d slapped me.

“Just hear me out.” He reached out and gripped my shoulders. “I’d never give Heather the time of day because of who she is. She doesn’t respect me or herself. She cares about an hour of passion so that her icy heart will melt and feel something for a few minutes. If she’s looking for that hour with me, then who else is she looking for it with?”

I forced myself to relax. “I agree, but in the world we live in right now, being a prude doesn’t get you any favors. Not opening your legs on the first date is almost like a sentence to be forever alone. I can see why Jackie did what she did... and honestly, why Heather does what she does.”

He nodded. “Maybe you’re right. It’s all just a big game anyway.”

“One I’m glad we’re not playing anymore.” I moved into his arms and glanced up at him. “I don’t want lust nearly as much as I want love.”

“Agreed.” He leaned down and kissed me a few times. “How about a fifty-fifty partnership. Half love and half lust? A relationship where your heart is filled with all the warmth it can handle, and your body still percolates when I walk in the room because you know what I’m capable of.”

“I do?” I teased him as he gave me a cocky grin.

“If you’re not aware, then maybe we should cut this stroll in the park short. I’m quite capable of slinging you over my shoulder and spanking your ass all the way back to Olivia’s.”

“And then what would you do once you got me there?” Love and lust were definitely taking turns pulling at my emotions each time Kendal was around. I wasn’t sure which was winning out, but the battle between them was exhilarating.

“Drown you in kisses, open you up like a flower and force you to cry out my name until your throat hurt.”

“Wow.” My pulse spiked and my legs felt weak. “Can we do that soon?”

“How about now?” He bent down and picked me up again, surprising me and yet not.

He was a helpless romantic, whether he knew it or not.

CHAPTER 35



KENDAL

The flight home was a bit of a blur after staying up most of the night before making love to Dana. The way she took me left me wanting to promise her the world, but I held my tongue. We would be together soon no matter how it happened. I could be mature enough in our new relationship to take things day by day. That was the only way Damon and Bethany were surviving.

It would work for us too.

I left her and Jackie at the airport in Dallas and spent the rest of the evening lying around my place, reliving the weekend in my head. Monday morning couldn't come fast enough. At least by being busy, I could force myself to think about something other than being drastic and leaving UT. Having her in my life left me wanting to consider all the possible options to us moving forward. I felt like a basket case by the time the alarm went off Monday morning.

I showered quickly and changed into a pair of slacks and a pressed button down shirt before heading to the campus on my bike. It wasn't exactly frowned upon, but I knew it would do me no favors with the students or the faculty. Everyone could bite it as far as I was concerned. I needed to feel alive more than I needed acceptance.

After locking up the bike behind the business building in the faculty lot, I walked as if I had purpose toward my office. It was the best way to keep people at bay. Just look busy or occupied in thought.

I made it to my office without being bothered, which was a miracle of sorts.

Someone cleared their throat just outside my door and caused me to turn from staring at my bookshelf.

“Dr. Turner. How are you?” I offered her a warm smile and nodded to the chair across from my desk. “Come on in. Make yourself at home.”

“Eliza, please.” She pulled the chair toward her and sat down gracefully. The older woman could be my mother and yet I considered her a dear friend and the only mentor I truly had.

“Now, just a minute.” I tapped my lips and pretended to be lost in thought. “I’m pretty sure you told me to call you Dr. Turner the last time we spoke.”

“Must have been someone else.” She shrugged and gave me a quirky smile. “Tell me that you finally spoke with Mark about this *situation* you’ve been dealing with.”

“No.” I sat down in my chair and leaned back. “I really don’t want to start anything, Eliza. Heather hasn’t been around much, and I think I’ve earned a little bit of sympathy because of my sister passing.”

“Right, well, I’m so sorry about your sister. Several of us came to the funeral, but didn’t want to bother you in the middle of your grief.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the support.” I clasped my hands and laid them on top of my desk. “Mark is actually asking me to draw closer to Heather, which I don’t plan to do.”

Her voice dropped as her eyes narrowed. “Draw closer, how?”

“We’re co-sponsoring Beta Alpha Psi, which is honestly the last thing I need to do. Their president is a bit of a...” I searched for the right word seeing who was sitting in front of me. Being vulgar was out.

“A skank.” She crossed her arms over her chest. “Neither of you need to be involved in BAP. It’s time consuming and

you've just lost your sister and Heather is brand new. What was the purpose in that?"

Her frustration was palpable, and I couldn't help but wonder where it was coming from. Had something else happened that had her on edge? There were always school politics running amuck, fucking up everyone's plans, but she seemed a little too sensitive for her usually calm demeanor.

"Heather's father has some additional funds that I believe he's looking at spending in the world of academia. I think the business school dean is putting pressure on Mark to make sure they are spent here. Part of that is keeping Heather happy."

"And he wanted you to do that?" Her expression tightened as her cheeks burned pink. "That's absurd!"

"Hey..." I tilted my head to the side and studied her. "What's going on with you? You seem way more on edge than usual. Did something happen? What did I miss?"

She closed her eyes and let out a long sigh before pressing her hands to her face. "I just feel like everything is falling apart. I should have taken the dean position last year when they asked me to, but I didn't want the burden of working so goddamn much. And now... ugh."

"And now, what? You can't keep worrying about me and Heather. I'm going to work all of it out, Eliza. I'm a smart guy."

"It's not about you being smart, Kendal." She glanced up. "I had lunch with Daisy Jackson last week. I wanted to know why the hell she just upped and quit. She was a great professor, and between me and you, a good friend."

"And?" I glanced up as Heather moved into the doorway behind Eliza. "Morning, Heather."

Eliza stiffened and smiled before getting up. "Well, I still think you should take some time for yourself, Kendal. It's a lot to put on anyone... even you."

"Thank you." I stood up, wishing like hell that she wouldn't go. I wanted to know what happened with Daisy and why she was so fired up. "I'll come see you later?"

“Yes. If you can catch me around.” She moved around Heather without a word and walked out into the hallway.

“I don’t think the old bat likes me.” Heather shrugged and moved to stand in front of my desk. She leaned over and pressed her balled up fists to my desktop, opening her blouse beautifully for anyone who might want to see what she looked like under her clothes.

“She’s a good woman. She’s just got a lot going on. Don’t call her names.” I turned my back to her and worked to pull the rest of my papers from my briefcase.

“Oh. I hit a nerve.”

“What did you need?” I forced a calm into my voice that I didn’t at all feel.

“There’s a BAP event on Wednesday afternoon. I think we should both be there.”

“That seems a little inefficient.” I glanced over my shoulder. “It’s an extra-curricular activity.”

“And it’s the best and brightest in our programs. Mark agrees that we should be at something together. Just once at least.”

“All right.” I turned back around and closed my eyes as I pretended to fumble through my things. “We’ll meet up at the event and stand in the background together.”

“How was your weekend away? Where did you go again?” Her voice was getting louder, which meant she was moving closer.

I turned to find her standing in the tight space between me and my desk. “It was fine. Can you go back to the other side of the desk? I really don’t need people speculating what’s up between us.”

“We’re both single, Kendal. What would it matter?” She pressed her fingers into my chest and dragged them slowly toward my waist.

“I’m not single, and you’re aware of that.”

“I think you’re lying.” She shrugged, as if I gave a shit what she thought.

I gripped her hand and narrowed my eyes a little. “I’m more than willing to help you with your career, with any issues you have with students, with lesson plans or to run this silly honors fraternity, but I’m not interested in anything else you have to offer.”

“Why didn’t you tell Mark that I was hitting on you? Scared that I would flip the story the other way?” The glimmer in her eye said that she would do exactly that. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she hadn’t already won Mark over in more ways than one. Where he was a married man with another baby on the way, he certainly seemed like the type that would welcome the advances of a beautiful woman like Heather.

What was the story on Daisy that Eliza was going to share? Did something happen that pushed her out of her position at UT? The position that Heather ended up scoring though there were a good handful of applicants that had been promised an interview if anyone in the department left.

What the fuck was going on?

“I’m just not interested in drama of any sort. If you knew me at all, you’d know that.” I moved around her and picked up a packet of tests for my next class. “I gotta run. I’d rather not leave you in here to dig around. I don’t exactly trust you.”

She put her hand on her heart and gave me a wounded look. “That hurts. After everything we’ve been through.”

“You know...” I moved to the door and held it open for her. “For a beautiful woman like yourself who could get anyone you wanted, you sure are wasting a lot of time that could be spent investing in a good relationship. Youth is fleeting. You’re not going to look this good forever.”

She snorted and walked past me, stopping to close the gap between us. The tight grip she had on my balls was almost pleasurable. Too bad it was the wrong woman clinging to the front of me.

“Don’t insult me. I know you’re up to something.”

“Am I?” I licked at my lips, not wanting to let her think she was getting anywhere with me, but wanting her to feel the deep sting of rejection that was headed her way.

“Yes. You would never have denied me before. I don’t know who you think you’re falling for, but she’s a waste of your time. You know as well as I do that you and I... we’re going to be together.”

I reached down and tugged her hand from my crotch. “Is that how you shake hands with all the boys? No wonder you’re so popular.”

“Keep it up, Kendal.” She moved back as her face turned into a mask of anger. “I don’t have a problem bringing you down to your knees if it means getting what I want.”

“And what is it exactly that you want?” I adjusted myself and held her attention. “Because if it’s what I think you’re after, they sell them in varying sizes at the sex shop down the street. Big ones for girls like you who need a little extra tension after years of taking it so good.”

“I don’t want your dick. I want your heart.” She shrugged and turned to walk down the hall. “And I intend to get it. No matter what.”

“Good luck, toots.” I walked back into my office and ignored the sickening feeling in my stomach. Eliza was right. I needed to go to Mark and tell him what the fuck was happening. That sounded like a great idea before I started to get the uncanny feeling that maybe I wasn’t seeing all sides of the picture. Mark had been pushing me closer and closer to Heather. There was something to be said about that.

I just wasn’t sure what it was yet.

CHAPTER 36



DANA

The last thing I wanted to do was go over to Mrs. Delmaz's house to find this Larry character, but there was no way I was showing up at the hospital empty handed. Her throwing a fit wasn't necessarily my worry, but her not trusting me would mess up everything. She needed someone at the hospital that she was comfortable with while she was slowly losing her memories. I wanted to be that person for her.

I walked up to her home and knocked on the front door. Nothing. I waited a few more minutes and knocked again. The hospital wouldn't approve of me coming to a patient's house, and they had her keys locked up with the other things they'd gathered from her when she was admitted by one of her neighbors. The poor woman had been walking around in her nightgown in her front yard at three in the afternoon, lost as to where she was or who she was.

"Really?" I groaned and lifted to my toes to see if maybe there was a key above the front door. I yelped and moved back as something sharp stung my hand. I pulled it down to find a splinter buried deep in my skin. "Great."

I moved back and glanced around, making sure no one was watching me. The neighborhood was extremely nice, but there was no security gate upon entering, which was a bit surprising. After pacing in front of the door for a few more seconds, I finally decided to go around back. I could check for a dog before going into the backyard and if there wasn't one, then maybe there was a key hidden in a pot somewhere. The fear that I might find a dead man in Thelma's living room was the

only thing that kept me moving forward, that and not wanting to disappoint her. Maybe Tinsley was right. Maybe my empathy for our patients was going to become more of a detriment than anything else.

“Anyone back here?” I pulled myself up on the side of the fence that surrounded her enormous backyard and looked around. Everything looked as if it had been manicured that morning. Maybe Larry was inside, but just asleep. Or maybe he was out running errands. I’d leave a note if nothing else.

I hoisted myself over the fence, almost breaking my neck as I landed and walked up toward the back door. Something was moving inside, but I couldn’t really make out what it was.

“Larry?” I pressed my hands to the glass at the top of the backdoor and leaned in, trying to catch a glimpse of this mystery man. “This is so fucking stupid. Just go back to the hospital and tell her that Larry is on his way. Just lie.”

As much as I wanted to, there was no way I could force myself to do it. By the looks of things, whoever this guy was, he was living high on the hog while Thelma was in the hospital. Why would he not come check on her? Was he her son?

I lifted to my toes and used my other hand to check for a key. Something fell in front of me, and I screamed and jumped back as a golden key hit the ground.

“Yes!” I reached down and grabbed it. Hopefully Larry wasn’t dangerous. I paused as the thought ran through my mind. No one knew where I was. How stupid was I being? I pulled out my phone and shot off a quick text to Jackie that I was over at Mrs. Delmaz’s place, looking for her friend.

“There. At least if I don’t make it back alive-” I forced myself to shut the hell up. I was being dramatic, which wasn’t at all my style. I popped the key in the lock and let out a sigh of relief as the door handle turned in my hand. I pushed the door open a little and stuck my face in the crack. “Larry? Are you in there? I’m a friend of Thelma’s.”

I smirked at the situation. I couldn't make this shit up and yet to tell anyone would be insanely embarrassing. The things I did for my patients.

"I'm coming in, so don't be scared. I'm a nurse at the hospital and Thelma just misses you."

"Larry misses Thelma." A bird squawked from somewhere in the house. "Larry misses Thelma."

"Seriously?" I walked around the corner to find a parrot sitting on top of a large cage, his beady eyes watching me closely. "You're Larry?"

"Larry misses Thelma." He squawked again and turned his head to the side. "The mail is late. The mail is late." Another squawk. "Larry misses Thelma."

I rolled my eyes and smiled. "All right, well, I need to take you up to the hospital, Larry. Just a quick visit to see Thelma before I figure out who can take care of you, all right?"

I glanced around, looking for the bird's cage and finally founded it sitting in the corner. The little turd had done a number on the kitchen, but with him being alone for five days, it was no wonder the whole damn house wasn't torn up. Mrs. Delmaz had a bird for a best friend. Was it too much to consider?

"Nope," I mumbled, then I picked up the cage and set it down on the counter. After opening the door, I patted the front of the cage and tried my best to get the bird inside. Nothing. The bastard wouldn't budge.

I looked around the kitchen and found a few snacks that looked like they might belong to Larry.

"You want a treat? Come get it, boy." I slipped the treat through the back of the cage and wagged it around. The bird flew right to it and landed on a limb that looked like it was growing out of the floor of the cage. I slammed the door and yelped like a girl before shivering. Birds were beautiful from afar, but having one so close was creeping me the fuck out.

"All right, man. We're headed up to the hospital." I looked around and found a blanket to put over the top of the cage. I

wasn't sure it would work, but I'd seen it in the movies or somewhere before.

Lucky for me, the bird didn't make a sound all the way back up to the hospital. I walked in and rode the elevator to the top floor before anyone stopped to ask if I was all right. I must have looked a little out of sorts.

"Hey. What's going on?" Jackie moved in front of me and reached out to grab my arms. "You look upset."

"Nope. I just found Larry at Mrs. Delmaz's." I shook my head in disbelief.

"Oh shit. Was he dead?"

"No, he's a parrot."

"Wait. What?"

"Larry is a parrot. I have him in my car. I'm going to get Thelma to get in her chair and I'll wheel her outside for a little while to see him."

"Oh my God. Seriously? That's insane." She dropped her hands from me as a smile lifted her lips. "You seriously did all of that for some old woman that's losing her mind?"

"Yes. I did." I moved around her and walked toward Thelma's room.

"Well, I'm proud of you. You're a good person, Dana, and a great nurse."

I smiled at her compliment and stuck my head into Thelma's room. A shoe came flying at me, and I moved back, barely missing getting smacked in the face with it.

"Where is Larry? You promised you would ask him to come visit." There were tears in her voice.

"I have him downstairs. If you want to get in your wheelchair, and you promise not to tell anyone that I have him with me," I leaned into the room and wagged my eyebrows at her, "I'll take you to see him."

"Really?" Her face lit up like a child during the holidays. "Oh my God. You really went to get him?"

“I did. Get in the chair and I’ll take you to him.” I moved into the room as she pressed her face to her hands and began to weep. “Hey... it’s okay. He’s in great shape.”

“Thank you so much. He’s all I have left in the world.” She brushed away her tears and glanced up at me. “He’s the only thing I can remember.”



I finished up my shift feeling like a million bucks. Working as a nurse wasn’t just about helping to heal the human body, but offering occasional balm to the human spirit. Watching Thelma come alive for the hour that I let her sit in the courtyard with Larry was worth all the trouble of having to go get the damn bird, including the tetanus shot that Dr. Lewis made me get.

He wasn’t excited about me stepping outside the boundaries of the hospital to risk going to someone’s private residence, but when I fully explained my reasoning behind it, he softened a little.

I should have gone home after my shift, but I wanted to see Kendal. I could make the trip about checking in with Nurse Barry on my new schedule and accidentally being in the business building around his classroom if needed, but either way, I wanted to check in on him.

After circling the parking lot for what felt like forever, I finally squeezed into a compact car spot and made my way toward the center of campus. I smiled at the thought of telling Kendal how weird my day had been. He would think it was humorous as well, or at least I hoped he would. Knowing that there was a side of him that was all about following the rules, he might lecture me for an hour over how stupid it was to put myself in a situation where someone could have hurt me.

I pulled out my phone and texted Kendal to let him know that I was just down the hall. His reply was to swing by his office and he could chat for a minute, but no more. He had a

lot on his plate after coming back from taking the weekend off.

After grabbing a Coke from the machine by the auditorium, I walked up the three flights of stairs that led to the accounting department offices and made my way down to where Kendal's name was posted on the door. I moved into the open doorway and watched him work for a few seconds before knocking on the doorframe.

"Hey there. How's your day going, Dr. Tarrington?"

"It's good. Come on in." His eyes lingered on me a little longer than would have been acceptable.

I sat down in the chair across from his desk and crossed my legs. "So I've decided that I'm going to drop my classes and transfer to Baylor for graduation. I might have to stay an extra semester, but it will all be worth it."

"What?" Confusion moved across his handsome face as he leaned back in his chair and pulled his glasses off. "You're not doing that, Dana. We worked all of this out. It's just eight months."

"And that's too long for me." I took a quick sip of my Coke and offered it to him.

He politely declined. "Then I'll talk with Damon about coming to work for him. You're not changing your future for me."

"You are my future." I leaned forward and pressed my free hand to my knee. "I've seen so many things in the hospital over the last six months. People come and go, some survive and some die there, but all of them want the same thing."

"Love?" His voice was soft and drew me in like a moth to the flame.

"Yes. I don't wanna wait another minute to experience what we experienced this weekend. I don't care if I graduate from UT or Baylor. I'm going to most likely drag you halfway across the country to join me while I'm in medical school anyway, or I hope I am."

“I’m fine with us going wherever you need to go to finish up your schooling, but you’re not adding more time on the clock because of me.” He got up and walked around the desk as I stood.

“Kendal.” I lifted my hand and pressed it to his chest, hoping to warn him to keep his distance. The look in his eyes said he didn’t give two fucks who came by.

“I’m blown away that you would seriously consider changing your life for me.” He slid his hands into my hair and brushed his thumbs across my cheeks. “Let’s get out of here for the night.”

“I can’t. I picked up another shift at the hospital tonight just to help out. I wasn’t sure what your plans were, but I assumed that you were working late.” I cupped my hand over his and turned my face to kiss the side of his palm. Someone walked by the hallway, and I pulled back as nerves raced through my belly. “I need to go.”

“Yeah, but we’re not done with this conversation.”

“I know, but until we make our decision on who’s doing what, I’m not interested in you being caught in a position that could make the decision for us.” I moved back and pulled my bag back on my shoulder. “See you around?”

“You’ll see me as soon as I can get away. Keep your phone with you.” His eyes moved down the length of my body, sending me back to the long weekend we shared at Olivia’s place. There wasn’t a part of me he hadn’t touched. He owned me and I was more than happy to flip the entire universe upside down if it meant we were going to be together sooner.

I winked and turned to walk down the hall, noticing the pretty woman with long red hair shaking her hips a little too much just in front of me. Was that Heather? The woman who was after my man?

She turned and walked into an office, leaving me curious.

I glanced toward the office as she lifted her phone toward me and smiled. “Friend of Kendal’s?”

“Nope, just a student.” I shrugged and walked down the hall to the exit. The look on her pretty face haunted me. She knew something and planned to use it against us. Or maybe I was just overthinking things.

And another thing... why hadn't Kendal mentioned that the bitch was a supermodel? That was an important piece of the puzzle he'd kept to himself. Why? To protect me or himself?

CHAPTER 37



KENDAL

I had far too much work piled on my desk the night before to chase after Dana like I wanted to. Her coming to my office was a little too risky, and yet there was no way I was going to get onto her about it. The woman was willing to turn her world upside down to try and have me beside her as soon as humanly possible. It meant the world to me.

The only thing that could fuck things up for sure was Heather.

After shoving a piece of toast down my throat the next morning, I drove to the school in silence. I had to talk to Mark. He was the only one who could pull Heather off my back. I could do it myself, but it would be ugly as fuck, and I'd be cleaning up the remnants of that conversation for days.

I pressed the button to call Damon as I turned onto the freeway.

“Sup, buddy? You headed to the office?” He sounded far too chipper for six o'clock in the morning. Being with Bethany changed everything for him.

“Yeah. I'm going in to talk with Mark this morning. Heather is all up in my face trying to get me to bend her over the nearest piece of furniture. I'd never do it, but the bitch is crafty. She'll figure out a way to make it look like I did.”

“And you think Mark is going to help you?”

“Why don't I like the way you just asked that question?”

“Because I was reading an article in the paper yesterday that was an interview of big daddy Turner. You know her fucking family is loaded.”

“Of course I know.”

“The bastard is pledging two million dollars to a new project at UT. I’m thinking Mark might know a little something-something about that.”

“He does.” I ran my fingers through my hair and pressed the gas, needing so badly to feel like I was in control of something. “He told me the other day that he wants Heather to be quite happy with her position in our department and it’s my job to keep her there.”

“Oh wow. This is seriously getting better by the minute.”

“I have to go talk with him. I don’t really have a choice Damon. He might be under pressure to make Heather’s family pony up for whatever project they’re interested in helping to build, but he’s still got a fiduciary duty to the professors in the accounting department. Including me.”

“That’s true. We’ll see if he abides by it.” Damon snorted. “I would just record the cunt making demands of me and play it over the loud speakers during the first class period. That should shut her up.”

I rolled my eyes. I had no clue how Bethany could deal with him. He was forever a child stuck in the body of a man.

“All right. Good talk, buddy. I’ll check in later.”

“Take care of yourself, Kendal. No one else is going to do it for you, man.”

“Not even you?” I smiled.

“Oh yeah, I for sure will. Come work for me and I’ll give you all the freedom you want, a plush corner office and more money than you’d know what to do with.”

“Your offer just keeps getting more and more attractive. Too bad I hate Corporate America.”

“Pick the lesser of two evils, my friend. You know what I’m saying.”

“I can’t give up just yet. I’ve worked too hard for it.”

“You’ll figure it out. You always do.” Damon dropped the call and I let out a long sigh. He was right. I was fighting a battle for something that wasn’t paying dividends. Where I loved teaching, it wasn’t nearly as attractive as it had been when I was younger and still believed the world to be a relatively good place.

I pulled into my parking spot and sat there a few minutes until someone knocked on my window. Eliza.

After turning the car off, I got out and gave her a warm smile. “I’m glad to see you. We have a conversation that you owe me the other half of if I’m not mistaken.”

“We do.” She moved back as I grabbed my bag and joined her in our short walk to the business building.

“Tell me about the meeting with Daisy. Why did she leave?”

“Because she fell in love with her boss, and he didn’t return the favor. She was nothing more than a nice warm body to snuggle up with when he grew tired of his pregnant wife.” She glanced over at me with disgust on her face.

“Oh no.” I shook my head as my heart fell. “That’s horrible. Daisy was a great professor. So bright and friendly.”

“And young and stupid.” She took a deep breath as I opened the door to the business building and waited for her to walk inside. “You’re being the same way.”

“Young and stupid?” I moved up beside her, already knowing the answer to the question before I asked it.

“Yes.” She stopped in the middle of the hall and turned to face me. “You need to take care of this before it ruins everything you’ve worked so damn hard for.” She poked me in the chest and glared up at me. “I cared about Daisy, and I care about you. Fix this before it’s not able to be fixed. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Eliza, but it’s not like Mark doesn’t have his fucking fingers in the pie. He wants me with Heather. There’s not a whole lot he’s going to be willing to do to help me out. It does him no favors to crucify her even though the bitch deserves it.”

“Then you go above his head, Kendal. He’s not the final voice in this organization. You go up as far as you have to go and you figure this out.”

I ran my hand down my face as my stomach tightened. “I don’t want any drama. I just want to teach my class and try to live my life.”

“Well, tough. Your life is suddenly locked into the middle of a huge vat of shit and you can paddle to the side and take care of making sure that no one else ends up where you have because of slutty women with hidden agendas, or you can just stand still until you eventually sink underneath the muck and wonder what the hell happened.” She poked me again. “You’re smarter than this. It isn’t going away. Fix it.”

I watched her walk away, hating the part of myself that wanted to simply turn in my resignation and walk away forever. Mark wasn’t going to be an ally in the fight I had against Heather. He was playing her part on the other side of the street and Daisy was me, just under very different circumstances.

“So... who was she?” Heather walked down the hall toward me, catching me off guard by her question.

“Sorry?” I muttered before walking to the elevator.

She got in beside him and pressed the button for the top floor before turning and moving to stand right in front of me.

Reaching out and wrapping my fingers around her perfectly pale throat sounded like the best choice at the moment, but it wasn’t me anymore. My days of playing asshole alpha male were over. I hated that prick and promised myself I would never subjugate another woman to who I could be. No one. Not even Heather, though the bitch was begging for it.

“Who is she?” Heather extended her phone toward me.

It took a second for me to realize what I was looking at. Dana.

“Why the fuck?” I snatched Heather’s phone and pushed at her chest as she moved in to snatch it back. “Why do you have a picture of her?”

“Because she’s the girl you’re dating... isn’t she?” She muscled her way closer to me, and I snapped.

“It’s none of your goddamn business who I’m dating.” I gripped her throat tightly and pressed myself to the front of her as something inside me snapped. “If you think for one second that you’re going to come into this school and push me around after all the shit I’ve been through to be here... You got another thing coming, bitch.”

“Let go. Kendal. Let go.” She clawed at my hands, and after watching her squirm for a minute I released her and walked out into the hallway.

Fuck her. Fuck Mark. I was going to the top. I’d go sit in the goddamn president’s office all day long until I got his attention. Or better yet... I’d pick up Daisy and her and I could take a trip down to the local news station. I wasn’t being pushed around anymore. Not by anyone.

“Kendal. I wasn’t going to do anything about it. I just wanted to know who she is.” Heather followed me to my office and stood like a wounded bird just inside the door as I set my stuff down and glared at her.

“She’s the woman I’m going to marry one day. The one who’s going to give me babies and hold me at night when I’m tired. She’s everything you’re not. Get the fuck outta my office. This shit ends here.”

“Be careful.” She brushed her hair back and lifted her phone to take a few pictures of herself. The angry fingerprints around her throat were incriminating, but I didn’t care. If she wanted to ruin my career and the University let that happen after hearing my side of the story, then so be it.

I didn’t belong there anyway.



She finally left my office after slinging a few more threats and promises to bring me to my knees again. Something about me bowing before her seemed to turn her on good. Funny. She was usually the one reaching up from the floor when we were together before.

I moved through the rest of the day like molasses, hating myself and wishing there were a safe way to tame the bastard inside of me back into his cage. I hadn't come face to face with the part of me that wanted to rule the world for a long time, and I didn't care to for the rest of my days, but here he was... out of the bag, unloosed.

"You all right?" Bethany walked into the auditorium a few minutes before my first class started and put her hands on her hips.

"I've been better." I wasn't going to lash out at anyone else around me, but that meant keeping to myself as best I could. "I'm just dealing with a few things here at work that are driving me toward rage."

"What can I do to help?" Her voice was soft and kind.

Dana. I needed to see Dana. To feel her against me. To remember why we were willing to fight for each other. I wasn't in the right frame of mind to see her, but fuck if I didn't want to. If she could take me when I was angry, then she could handle anything I could throw her way.

"Nothing," I mumbled and pulled a few folders out. "Just help me get ready for the day and we'll be good."

"You know I'm here for you, right?"

"Yeah. I'm glad you are. I just need to work through some shit and figure out where I need to poke the bear and where I need to break the stick and run for my life."

"Sounds... complicated."

“The things that matter most in life usually are.” I winked at her and turned back to my notes. She and Dana would come to be good friends, I had no doubt. That being if Dana and I survived the shit storm that was headed my way.

Heather was a conniving bitch with a hard-on for fucking up my life and Mark was hungry for success. Things weren't looking too good, but like Eliza advised... I was being forced in a corner. I could crouch down like a little bitch and hope for the best, or I could come out with my claws drawn and expect a bloody mess.

Time to get dirty.

CHAPTER 38



DANA

“Yes, Mom. I’ll be there. I might be bringing a friend if that’s all right?” I pressed the phone to my ear and leaned against the glass window at the end of the hall in the hospital.

“A girl friend or a boyfriend?” My mom’s probing was never subtle.

“A boyfriend. I’m dating this guy on and off and I think you’ll really like him.”

“Oh nice! I’m so excited for you. Why didn’t you mention this earlier?”

“Because I know you like to get up in my business, and I wasn’t sure I was ready for that.”

“And now you are?” I’d hurt her feelings.

“I think so. Is it just you tonight?” I turned as someone tapped me on the back. Jackie stood behind me, bouncing on the balls of her feet like she was about to burst at the seams with great news.

“No. Your sister and brother will be here, and your Uncle Pino.”

“All right Mom. I’ll be there around six tonight, okay?”

“See you then, Mija.”

I pulled the phone from my ear as Jackie let out a long squeal. I smiled in spite of myself. “What?”

“He called! He totally called me.”

“Who? Parks?” I crossed my arms over my chest, still not quite sure how I felt about this guy that Jackie was regularly losing her shit over.

“Yes! I was just there on Sunday and it’s only Tuesday and he called!” She danced around in a small circle in front of me, chanting that he called over and over again.

“Did you expect him not to call? You just spent a shit-ton of money flying up there to spend the weekend with him. Why would he not call?” I hated to piss on her parade, but her obsession with this guy was getting creepy.

“Because he’s busy, Dana.” She put her hands on her hips as her smile faded. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” I moved around her and walked back down the hall.

“That.” She pressed her shoulder against mine and groaned. “You’re making me feel weird about wanting him to call. It’s natural when you really like someone to want him to pay you attention.”

“Oh, I know.” I stopped and turned to face her. “But this guy hasn’t exactly been on the up and up with you.”

“But he called.” She put her hands together and gave me a cute frown. “That’s something... right?”

“Yes. It’s something.” I reached out and tugged at a long strand of her hair. “Please don’t let your heart get invested in this guy. He’s a player.”

“And so am I.” She turned and skipped over to the nurses’ station, leaving all the older women to watch her with confusion on their faces.

“She’s in love.” I lifted my hands to the side as if surrendering to the idea.

“Oh. I see,” one of them muttered and rolled her eyes playfully. “Just make sure it’s not with a doctor or a surgeon. Those guys are users all the way.”

“What?” Jackie turned as her smile faded again. “Not all of them are that way. That would be like saying all of us are

calloused.”

“We are.” Another looked up and smiled. “Well, all of us but Dana.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” I grabbed one of the charts that had my rounds on it.

“And you should.” Tinsley moved around and dropped down in her chair with a loud sigh. “Mrs. Delmaz has been improving over the last twenty-four hours. It’s almost like you bringing that stupid bird up here triggered something inside of her. Dr. Lewis is talking about releasing her to assisted living by the end of the week if she keeps it up.”

“Really?” Excitement buzzed through me.

“Yep. Did you take the bird back to her house?”

“No. I took him to the shelter, but I’ll call right now and have them pull him to the side. I’ll go pick him up.”

Jackie moved up beside me. “That’s a lot of effort for someone you don’t know.”

“It’s worth it.” I glanced over at her. “Healing someone isn’t always about shoving a pill down their throat.”

“Oh Lord, we got a dreamer.” One of the older nurses stood up and stretched before giving me a warm grin. “But... I love that about you, kiddo. Don’t let go of the thought that it’s the small things in life that matter most.”

“Thanks.” I pulled the clipboard to my chest and turned to walk down the hall. It didn’t matter what anyone else thought. Thelma was getting better and if I had any part to play in that, big or small, I was thrilled.



After finishing up my shift, I finally got over to the pound and picked up the bird in the nick of time. They’d lined up a buyer for the next day, and my luck couldn’t have been better. I dropped him off at my apartment, not knowing where else to put him and I headed out to my mother’s.

Kendal hadn't returned the text I sent right after I got off of work asking him to come to dinner with me. I knew he was busy. I didn't expect him to join us, but damn if I didn't want him to. There was an old run-down hotel just a mile from my mother's place that we could stay at for the night if he was up for it. I just needed to feel him against me something desperate.

I pressed the button with his number on it and held my breath, half expecting him not to pick up. When he did, it took me a few seconds to find my voice.

"Dana?"

"Oh... Yeah. Hey. Sorry." I rolled my eyes and took a quick breath. "I wanted to see if you might be willing to come out to my mom's tonight for dinner. Nothing formal, but she lives in the suburbs near Plano. It's about a forty-minute drive north of the college, but we could eat and hang out. There's a hotel about a mile down the road we could-"

"Yes." The relief in his voice left my heart melting. Good. He wanted me as badly as I wanted him.

"Okay. I'll text you the address."

"You want me to bring anything with me? Dessert? Wine? Flowers for your mom?"

I smiled at the thought of him showing up with flowers for my mom. "Bring anything you want to bring. My father passed away a few years back, so it's just her now. My sister and brother might be joining us, but regardless, I want to see you."

"Me too, baby. It's been a rough start to the week."

"Agreed. Be safe and I'll see you soon." I dropped the call before it got awkward. I wanted to tell him that I loved him, but it seemed like a silly ending to our conversation, though it was true. He was all I could think about when I wasn't knee deep in the hustle and bustle of the hospital.

I needed to make some firm decisions about my schooling. The mini-mester started on Monday, and if I was going to transfer, I needed to do it soon. I'd wrap up my internship and

take a round of winter classes to hopefully catch up. The tuition at Baylor was fifty percent more than UT, but I could handle taking out another loan. I'd figure it all out if it meant spending more time with Kendal.

"Shit." I pressed the gas, almost missing the turn to my mother's neighborhood. I backed up and turned the car to the right as someone honked loudly and drove by me a little too closely for comfort. "Jeez. Asshole."

A few minutes later I was sitting out in front of my mother's small two-bedroom house. She'd had a beautiful place back in Houston, but wanted to be up north where there was more opportunity. If it was there, she hadn't found it yet. She was still working two jobs, breaking her back in manual labor. I needed to consider her when I made all of the decisions I had coming up too. My brother was useless and my sister rarely came around anymore since my father died. She was a daddy's girl and for some reason she couldn't bear the thought of being around the rest of us.

She said it hurt too much.

"Well, so did losing you and dad," I grumbled and got out of the car. My brother's beat-up blue truck was up on cinder-blocks near the back of the house, which was never a good sign.

I walked in the side door that opened to the kitchen and smiled as my portly little mother turned from the stove and her face brightened.

"Oh! My baby is home." She motioned for me to come to her. "You look so beautiful, Dana. I love these scrubs. What is this... little hearts?" She pulled me into a tight hug and buried her face against the side of my neck.

I wrapped my arms around her and cradled her against me. I had to find a way to make her life better. She'd given everything she was to our family and had very little to show for it.

"Where's Brandon?" I kissed her on the cheek and released her.

“He’s in the back... asleep. You know your brother is useless.”

I glanced around at the small house and cringed on the inside. Did Kendal come from money? Were his parents wealthy before they died? Would he accept how laid back and down to earth my mom was? She was going to want to hug him. Fuck.

“What are we making for dinner?”

“Is your guest coming to join us?” My mom wiped her hands on her apron and walked back into her minuscule kitchen.

“Yes. He’s bringing wine, I believe.”

“He didn’t have to do that. I just made a pitcher of sweet tea.”

“He’s a classy guy, Mom. I don’t even know if he drinks sweet tea.” I walked around her and squeezed my way into the far end of the kitchen to pour myself a glass of tea. She made the best of everything, and we were in for a treat by the various ingredients laid out on the countertops. “Please tell me you’re making chicken fried steak.”

“I am.” She put her hands on her thick hips and wagged her eyebrows. “I figured if you really like this boy, then we should impress him with your momma’s cooking from the start.”

I laughed and moved to sit down at one of the chairs around the dining room table. “Well, I’d offer to help, but-”

“There is not enough room in here, Mija.” My mother was half Hispanic, half Caucasian, but you couldn’t tell it by looking at her. Long black hair and beautifully tanned skin mixed with her thick accent left people believing she was full-blooded Hispanic. Either way, I loved that I resembled her more than my dad. It made me feel special. Unique.

“What’s all the fuss in here?” My brother poked his head around the opening of the kitchen and gave me a big grin.

I laughed and got up to give him a hug. For just living forty miles away, I never really got to visit with any of them anymore. I needed to change that. After losing my dad, we all sort of crawled in our various holes and lived our lives in segregation of one another.

“What have you been up to?” I hugged him and pinched the spare tire around his waist.

“Hey. Get off the goods.” He popped my hand and turned toward the back door. “We expecting someone else?”

“Yes. AnaMarie and your sister has a friend coming to join us tonight.”

“Oh... like Olivia?” Brandon wagged his eyebrows and walked toward the back door. “It’s a guy in a white Lexus. He must be lost.”

I laughed and moved around my brother. “That’s Kendal. He’s my new boyfriend.”

“Oh. Moving up in the world are we?” My brother tugged gently at my hair as I moved around him and walked out into the yard to greet Kendal. He was in a pair of slacks and a button down shirt, his black glasses perched on his regal nose and his eyes filled with a torrent of emotion.

I closed the door behind me and offered him a warm smile. “You look like you need a good meal and a long night of loving.”

“Do I?” He moved toward me and reached out, pulling me in his arms and not stopping until I was pressed flush against him and his mouth was locked against mine.

I leaned into the kiss, giving myself over to him. Something was off about him, but I didn’t care. He was there and he was mine. That was more than enough.

CHAPTER 39



KENDAL

I kissed her a few more times, not really considering how inappropriate it might have been to make out with her in front of her family.

She pulled back and smiled up at me. “I’ve missed you.”

“Me more.” I leaned down and stole one more kiss. “I got flowers, dessert and a bottle of wine.”

“Well, my mother made sweet tea, so even if you don’t drink it, do yourself a favor and have a small glass.” I turned and opened the door. “It’s like a party in your mouth.”

He chuckled softly behind me. “I’m from Dallas, remember? I love sweet tea.”

“Good.” She moved to my side and took the bag from me as her mother turned around and paused. Something about her was so incredibly familiar. Had we met before?

“Mom... this is Kendal. Kendal, this is my mother.” Dana wrapped her arm around the back of my waist and moved me toward the small portly woman. I could see where Dana got her looks from. The woman was stunning though she’d let herself go. Life had a way of doing that when loss showed up at your door. I could almost feel it in the house around me.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Young.” I extended my hand and shook hers.

“Have we met before? You look so familiar to me.”

“Maybe. I’m not sure.” I gave her a warm smile before turning and shaking Dana’s brother’s hand. The guy looked like a greaser from the seventies, but he was friendly or so it seemed.

“Here you go.” Dana handed me a glass of tea and sat down at the table, her eyes locked on me as a smile played along her lips.

I’d started to tell her mother that I was a professor at UT, so maybe we’d somehow met when she was up there helping Dana register a few years back, but I stopped myself. Dana and I were still sneaking around for the moment, which meant I needed to remain guarded and anonymous as best as I could.

“Do you like chicken fried steak?” Dana reached out and took my hand into hers.

“I love it.” I glanced over at her mother. “Ms. Young, do you need any help in the kitchen?”

“No, but thank you.” Her tone was soft, but something was off. Dana seemed to notice it to by the way she got up and walked over to pull her mom into a hug from behind. Maybe I reminded her of her husband?

“Can I run to the restroom? Is that okay?” I got up and turned to face the women who would hopefully be a part of my family sooner than later.

“Yeah. It’s the second door on the left down the hall.” Dana winked at me before turning back to her mom.

I couldn’t help but hope that I’d have a few minutes of her to myself before dinner. I needed to unload everything going on with Heather and Mark on someone, and other than Damon, she was the one I was willing to let into the deepest parts of my heart. For her, I’d open up my secrets and let her search around until she felt like she knew me.

“Everything all right?” Her brother glanced up from the couch and gave me a goofy grin.

“Oh yeah. I was just running to the bathroom.”

“Second door on the left down the hall, man.”

I nodded. “Thanks.”

The events of the last few days rolled through my mind as I made my way down the tiny hall and found the bathroom. Dana’s family was no better off than mine. I could see quickly why she’d decided on a profession that could help lift her mom out of poverty if done right. I wanted to help make that happen all of a sudden too.

Closing the door behind me, I let out a long sigh and turned on the water. Where did I know Dana’s mom from? Why did it seem like whatever it was wasn’t necessarily a good thing? Had Brandon been in one of my classes? Did Ms. Young work at the school?

I finished washing my hands and dried them off slowly. Something about figuring that one piece of the puzzle seemed intensely important. Why?

Dana was standing at the edge of the living room with her hands on her hips, yelling at someone in the kitchen when I walked out. I paused, not really sure if it was a good thing that I was there. Were they usually verbally violent with each other? Dana didn’t seem like that kind of girl.

I hung out in the hallway, feeling a little awkward, but waiting for the minute when things calmed down so I could make my way back through the living room. Maybe coming out to see her wasn’t a good idea at all. It seemed like her mother had gone from a little tense to upset.

The pictures on the wall were covered in dust, but I stopped by and ran my fingers over each of them, finding Dana in each and forcing myself to enjoy the moment instead of dreading whatever the hell was going down in the kitchen. My family never fought. Never. We rarely spoke unless it was me and Mandy.

Everything seemed to die down, and I took the opportunity to walk back toward the kitchen. The last picture on the wall before I stepped to the living room grabbed me by the throat, forcing me to stop.

I pulled it off the wall and swallowed hard before glancing up to see Dana standing beside me.

“Who is this?” I whispered roughly.

“My sister.” She took the picture from me. “My mother is being ridiculous. I don’t know where she thinks she knows you from, but whatever it was, she’s highly agitated. Let’s just grab something in town and get a hotel.”

I stood in stony silence, letting my eyes move back up to the picture on the wall. The beautiful girl smiling back at me had stolen my heart in a million ways and left me a broken man.

“What’s her name, Dana?” I called after her, but she didn’t respond.

The kitchen door opened and I didn’t need validation where Dana’s mother knew me from or what her sister’s name was. Every horrid memory from six years before swept through my vision as the beautiful woman from my past stepped into the kitchen and turned her head toward me. The shock on her face had to echo my own.

“Kendal?” she whispered, tearing me in two with nothing more than a word.

I nodded and walked toward her. I should have known from the beginning. These things never work out well for me. Everyone else deserves love, but not me. “Hello, Ana.”

CHAPTER 40



KENDAL

I took a deep breath and reached up to knock on the door, my heart aching at the thought of having to spend the night in the presence of my friends. They would all know that I was faking the calm I wore. It was more like being numb than calm. A facade I'd been practicing for a while. It served me many times over my long life.

Two weeks of dragging my ass through life, wondering what cosmic genie I'd pissed off and how I'd done it. Not only was the last member of my family gone, but any hope for a torrid love affair with Dana was over.

"Dude. Good to see you!" Matthew Bryant, my best friend's little brother smiled like a tom-cat and reached for me, pulling me into a warm hug.

I wrapped my arms around him and patted his back. "Hey, man. Good to see you. Seattle treating you okay?"

"Better than you." He moved back and gripped my shoulders. "Damon said that out of all of the women in Dallas you ended up with Ana's sister? That's just so far beyond fucked up. I'm mind-blown."

"Matt! Really?" Bethany moved up beside him and reached for my hand, pulling me into the foyer of the Bryant mansion. "I swear you have no filter what-so-ever."

Why I let Damon talk me into dinner with everyone was beyond me.

“I’m good. He’s right.” I reached up and ran my hand through my hair as Bethany released my wrist and moved into the kitchen. “It’s pretty fucked up.”

“How did you not put two and two together?” Damon walked in behind me, brushing his shoulder by mine as he made his way toward Bethany. He brushed his fingers over the curve of her ass, and I turned my attention the other way.

“I don’t know. How could I have?” I walked toward the fridge and pulled out a beer. “Anyone want a drink?”

“Yeah. Toss me one.” Matt took a seat at the breakfast nook, lifting his hands as if he were ready to catch a football.

I chucked it at him and glanced over at Damon. “You and Bethany want one?”

“No. We’re holding out for wine.” Damon turned and leaned against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest as his dark eyes narrowed. “Is there a reason why you’ve been avoiding me along with the rest of the world?”

Bethany popped him in the chest and then went back to cooking something over the stove. “Leave him alone.”

“Yeah. Leave me alone.” I popped the top on the beer and walked over to take a spot next to Matt. “I’m still trying to figure it out, to be honest. How in the fuck did Dana end up being Ana’s sister? They don’t even look alike.”

“Mixed family?” Damon offered up and moved to stand in front of us. “You guys want all the fixings for your burgers or what?”

“Where’s your Mom and Dad?” I glanced around, suddenly aware that I hadn’t seen or heard Kent or Karen.

“They’re out of town. Spending *quality* time together.” Matt took a long drink of his beer.

Damon made a gagging sound that caused my lip to lift. “Anyway. Jeez.” He rolled his eyes and turned his attention fully on me. “You know this isn’t that big of a deal.”

“Hey.” Bethany moved up beside him, wrapping her arms around him and glancing up.

My heart ached. She looked at him the way Dana looked at me before things went to shit - *again*.

“Hey what, pretty girl?” He turned in her arms and leaned down, nipping at her lips.

“Gross. And you think Mom and Dad going off for some quality time together is disturbing? At least they keep that shit in the bedroom.” Matt moved off his stool and walked toward the living room. “Call me when dinner’s done.”

“Hey! Damon asked if you guys want the fixings?” Bethany gave Damon an incredulous look before turning to me. “Lettuce, tomatoes and pickles?”

“Whatever is easy.” I took another drink of the beer and got up. “I can help with that stuff.”

“No. Sit down. Damon’s got it.” Bethany gave my best friend a stern look which quickly bled into a sweet smile. It was good to see them back together. At least something was going right in the world.

“What are you going to do to fix this?” Damon turned and walked to the fridge as I let my eyes move along my beer bottle, my mind a mess.

“I don’t know, man. She’s not returning my calls. I should have stayed for dinner that night, but I freaked out.”

Bethany turned from the stove. “So, can I ask what happened after Ana showed up? If you don’t want to talk about it, you-”

“No. It’s fine.” I took another quick swig of the beer, wishing it was a bottle of Tequila instead. Anything to burn away the same memory that played in my mind over and over.

Ana, standing in the doorway at her mother’s house, looking like a goddamn model. She was everything I thought I ever wanted, but in that moment... I realized clearly that she wasn’t. Dana was.

“Kendal? You still with us, dude?” Damon’s voice brought me from my reverie.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah. Sorry.” I brushed my hand down my face and let out a low groan. “I gave Ana a quick hug, pulled out my phone and told them that I needed to run. Emergency.”

“What kind of emergency?” Bethany tilted her head to the side.

There was no one in my life that would have called with an emergency. We both knew that, hell, Ana and Dana knew that. With my sister, Mandy gone, there was no one *left* in my life.

“I told them it was Damon.” I shrugged. “Dana followed me to the car and wanted to know how I knew her sister. She put two and two together before I could answer her.”

I paused and took a shaky breath as Damon moved toward me.

“Hey. You don’t have to-”

“Shut the fuck up!” I barked at him and pressed my fingers to the bridge of my nose. “I’m so in love with her that it feels like another death to lose her. I just keep wondering who the fuck I pissed off. How can I make up for whatever I’ve done so that maybe-” My voice broke and I got off the chair, moving past Damon and walking toward the front door. “I’ll catch you guys later. I can’t do this right now.”

Neither of them tried to stop me. They knew me too well to get in my way. I hadn’t cried too many times in my life, but losing Mandy a few weeks earlier had me scared, raw. Now Dana was gone too.

I drove home in silence, my heart pounding in my chest, my stomach tight, and a million regrets running through my mind.

One decision to date a student six years before and I was still living the after effects of fucking up.

Damon had been wrong. Sneaking around with Dana until she graduated wasn’t a great idea. It was shit. It caused me to dream again, to believe in love and security, to see a future with someone.

The sound of her laughter filled my ears, the sweetness of it causing my throat to burn and more tears to blur my vision. How badly I needed her to forgive me for something I had no control over.

Ana's sister. I'd fallen in love with Ana's sister.

And the worst part... she'd fallen in love with me.



“You sure you’re okay, man? We’re worried about you.” Damon’s voice filled up the living room as I had him on speaker phone.

“Yeah. I’ll get it over it, man. I just thought this was my turn. That it was time to breathe again.”

“Kendal. It is time. Go after her and explain yourself. You didn’t set this shit up. You didn’t know-”

“Stop, okay? I love that you care about me, but I’ll be okay. Someone else will come along in a few years and she’ll be the right person.” My words got lodged in my throat. Dana was the right person. She was my woman, the one I wanted to make love to every night and hold until we grew old together.

I could see us building a house and having kids. Becoming the type of couple that other’s would become jealous over. We’d have something they didn’t have. We’d have what they all wanted.

What I wanted. Deep, intense love.

“What can I do to fix this for you? I’ll go talk to her.”

“No, Damon. We’ve been friends for a long-time man, and you’re all I’ve got. Please stay out of this and let it die. I’ll be okay. Just give me time to heal.” I rubbed my chest over my t-shirt and walked toward my liquor cabinet. “I’m going to figure out what to do about Heather and Mark at work and then we’ll see where we go from there.”

“You always have a job with me. Any type of job you want. I’ll create it for you, man.”

“Now who’s being the pussy?” I smirked and knelt down in front of the cabinet. I had a few old bottles of liquor tucked away.

“Call me what you like, but let me fix this shit. I hated seeing you torn up at Mandy’s funeral and now this? You deserve a break.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I pulled out a bottle of Jack. “I’m going to let you go. Jack and I have a date for the evening. He’s pretty good about helping me forget anything and everything.”

“Stay at home if you’re going to drink.”

“Thank you, Mother.” I snorted and dropped the call. Damon was rarely over protective or up in my business, but I understood why he was now.

I mean, shit... what else could go wrong?

I could lose my job, but that didn’t seem to matter too much at the moment.

I could die in a house fire.

“Yup.” I dropped down on my couch and opened the bottle, taking a long drink and growling as it burned its way down my throat.

Ana Young. Why hadn’t I put that shit together? I could have saved both me and Dana a ton of heartache.

“Are you okay, baby?” I whispered to the air as I closed my eyes. “Are you hurting like I am? Broken by how fucked up this is?”

I’d have given anything to find her and drown her in apologies, making love to her with a passion that would burn her forever. I needed her tucked against me, yearned for her scent, her softness... her.

I groaned as I sat up and took another long drink from the bottle. The warmth rushing down my chest was merely a sign that I was alive physically. Emotionally, I was moving toward being nothing more than a shell of a man.

How many losses could one person sustain before they let life have its way with them? Before they just give up caring? Quit fucking trying?

Pulling out my phone, I fingered through the texts between us from the month before, each one causing small sobs to rise in my chest.

I wasn't worthy of love. That was the conclusion I was left with. I'd chosen my career, and now I could drown in the sorrow that came with a decision like that.

A few more drinks from my bottle, and I had enough liquid courage to dial her number. I leaned back on the couch and let out a long sigh as it rang four times and went to voice mail.

As always, I listened to the sound of her voice and dropped the call the minute the phone beeped. There was nothing to say that I hadn't already said. A day would come soon when I would dial her number and it would come back as a disconnection notice. She'd get sick of seeing my digits on her phone and realize that moving on was the only safe thing to do.

I sat there a few more minutes, drowning in my sorrows before getting up in search of my guitar. I hadn't played since Mandy died, which wasn't too far in the past. The act of strumming out a few chords was quickly becoming associated with depression and loss in my life. Neither of which were things I wanted to be reminded of.

After running through the four songs I knew by heart, I got up and walked toward the back door. With my guitar in one hand and my bottle of Jack in the other, I walked out on the back patio and sat the bottle down.

"I hate you," I whispered to the guitar and grabbed the handle. Anger burned through me where sadness was only a few minutes before.

Fury at my situation. At my loss.

"Always loss with me." I lifted the guitar above my head and beat it against the railing of my back patio until there was

wood splinters covering the ground. It should have made me feel better, but of course it didn't.

It was the last gift my mother gave me before she died.

It was all I had left of her. She should have left it to Mandy.

I closed the door behind me and let out a sardonic laugh. Everything had been taken from me because of my indiscretions early in life. Nothing I'd done in my younger years had gone unnoticed, and now it was time to pay the piper.

Nothing could shift the course of darkness my life was headed for.

Not even breaking the rules.

CHAPTER 41



DANA

The gold and crimson leaves all over the ground were usually one of my favorite parts of fall in Texas, but nothing seemed to matter as I walked toward the hospital. I'd been avoiding Kendal like the plague for a little over two weeks, though it almost killed me to do it.

But how in the hell could I do anything else but avoid him?

His Ana was my Ana.

Bile rose in my throat as I forced myself to jog up the stairs to the front door. How anyone who had been with my perfect, older sister could want me was a mystery. A sickening mystery.

Ana was tall and thin, her skin flawless, her boobs big and curves alluring. She was everything I wasn't.

Every nasty thing Cameron had said to me over the last few years rose up inside of me, his insults and degradation drowning me in sorrow.

No. Ignoring Kendal was the most responsible thing to do - for both of us. If he was the type of man that wanted a girl like my sister, then with me, he was settling. He deserved better than that.

We both did.

He might love me for a while, but when he realized that I wasn't Ana, he'd turn into Cameron, trying to change me to fit the mold.

Tears burned my eyes at the thought of Kendal ordering my food and warning me to put down a cookie or piece of candy that I wanted. Nothing would hurt worse than having him want me to be someone I would never be, someone I really didn't even like much.

My older sister was wild and flew by the seat of her pants. I had no question on *how* she hooked a man like Kendal, but why she ran from him was a different story. It was something I didn't want to dig into. I couldn't hear it. Didn't want to. I was too raw, too bare and broken from knowing whatever we almost had was over.

He'd broken the rules for her. She meant more than I ever would.

I pulled the heavy door open and walked in to the smell of cleanliness and the sound of soft elevator music and the occasional announcement over the loud speakers.

"But why didn't she stick with him? If he loved her... why would she-"

"You talking to yourself?" Jackie bounced up beside me, my only friend in all of Dallas is a whore and a half, but I loved her anyway. Her latest escapade with a young doctor from New York had her acting like a spaz, but I was grateful. It kept my mind off Kendal for a few moments during the day.

"Yep. I'm still mulling over all this stuff with Kendal." I shrugged. She knew exactly what I was talking about. I'd dumped all of it on her the weekend before when she finally forced me to spill. A couple of pitchers of margaritas and I was balling like a baby, vomiting information on our relationship and how he was the *only* man I'd ever loved.

Lies. I thought I was in love with everyone I'd ever dated. Love was something I coveted and wanted above anything else.

It just wasn't meant to be.

"Not him again. You can do so much better, Dana. He slept with your sister. He's a man-whore." She wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

“He thought he was in love with her and it was six years ago.” I let out a soft sigh. “Well, he was in love with her. Fuck, maybe he still is. You should have seen-”

“How fast he left after she got there. I know. You told me.” She squeezed me one more time and let me go. “I’m telling you, this is why you need a sexy resident or young doctor to ravish you from time to time and nothing else.”

I snorted and walked into the elevator, turning and holding the door open for her. “Wait. I thought you told me that you were in love with Parks?”

“Love. Lust. Whatever. I don’t know.” She walked in and wagged her eyebrows at me. “I’m just going to be chill about it, you know?”

“No. I don’t know. You were a total loon about it a week ago.”

“Things change.” She shrugged. “People change. Besides, I think he’s addicted to me. He’s called twice a week since we went on that trip to New York. I think I have him where I want him.”

“Twice in a week? Wow. That is progress.” I slipped my hands into my scrub’s pockets. “Kendal called ten times in the last two weeks, but never left a message.”

“Creep! How weird is that. You need to let me go over and tell him to back off, or maybe your brother, Brandon, could do it?” She reached over and tugged at my ponytail.

“No. I just wish he would have left a message. I want to hear his voice.” My throat closed up, and I swallowed hard, trying to relieve the pressure in my chest. I still wanted a life with him, to be the woman he gave everything up for because I was worth it, but that wasn’t me. It was Ana, and I wasn’t anything like her.

I’d lived in her shadow my whole life.

“Dude. I don’t like what this guy is doing to you. You’re almost obsessing over him. You’ve been walking around like a zombie. If he’s that important-”

“Wait. This coming from you, who ran to New York the first time this cocky playboy of a doctor didn’t return your call?” The elevator opened, and I moved out into the hallway. “And you just called him a whore because he slept with my sister, *who* by the way, he didn’t know was my sister. It was six years ago.”

“You’re taking up for him.” She was far calmer than I expected. Anytime I brought up Parks and her obsession with him, she would divert and then turn into a bitch, defending herself for being crazy over a one-night stand.

“Dr. Lewis wants to see you this afternoon before you leave.” Tinsely lifted her head, her expression almost kind. It was weird and threw me off. The number one bitch in the hospital was giving me a break from her usual abuse? Why?

Why today?

“Yeah, alright.” I glanced over at Jackie as she followed me to the nurse’s station on our floor. “I’m taking up for him because I’m still in love with him. Just because he was with Ana doesn’t mean my heart isn’t still completely his.”

“So why are we having this conversation?” She reached out and yanked a chart from the wall. “You have Mrs. Delmaz. She hates the rest of us.”

I let out a soft sigh and gave her a look. Crazy, old Mrs. Delmaz was always mine to deal with, but it was good. She kept life interesting, and her stories were always fascinating. I couldn’t tell if they were real or not, but like a good novel, I enjoyed them as often as I could.

“Because I’m not my sister, Jackie.” I reached up and took a few clipboards off the wall. “She’s beautiful, successful, an accountant like Kendal, feminine, gorgeous. She’s everything I’m not.” The words were harder to speak out loud than I thought they would be.

“And yet Kendal is still calling you. He could have gone after her six years ago. It’s not hard to find someone when you want to.”

“Stalker.” I forced a chuckle and walked to the medicine cabinet, slipping my key into the lock. “I really don’t want to talk about this anymore. He’s a good man and deserves a great woman. That’s just not me. I can’t live up to my older sister, and it would rot me from the inside out to try to.”

“What did Ana say about it?”

I turned and gave her a stern look as she raised her hands in defense. “Drop it.”

“I will. Just tell me what she said.” She took a step back, but the smirk at the side of her mouth lifted higher.

“She said that she and Kendal were a thing of the past. She’s not interested in him, and he’s not interested in her. She gives me her blessing, as if I fucking asked for it.”

“Well, then there you go.”

I turned back to my tray. “It’s not that easy and you know it. My father was still alive when all that shit between Kendal and Ana went down, and my mother is all up in arms about the *pervert* coming after her younger daughter now. She thinks it was all planned.”

“That’s absurd.” Jackie moved up beside me, pressing her shoulder against mine.

“Tell me about it.” I finished filling the patient prescriptions and backed my cart out of the room. “It’s going to hurt for a long time, but I’ll get over it. He’ll find someone that lights him on fire like my sister probably did.”

“Like you did?” She turned and glanced over her shoulder. “I know I’m not looking for love because I hate how bad it hurts when I lose it, but I haven’t had it in a long time. You have, and you were more alive because of it. Believe me. I’m your best friend-”

“My only friend here.” I chuckled.

“Don’t let it go so easily, Dana. It’s not as common as everyone thinks.” She shrugged and turned back around, her shoulders rolling in a little. She was in love with Parks. I knew she was, and she knew it too, but just like she was willing to

let the conversation die over Kendal, I wasn't going to start one up over Parks.

She was in pain just like I was.

Crazy how love seemed to take more than it ever gave, or maybe I just hadn't given it the chance it deserved.



“And then there he was. His eyes as big as saucers, his lips ruby red like those shiny-ass slippers from the Wizard of Oz movie back in 1939. You should have seen him.” Mrs. Delmaz laughed, her eyes closing as she relaxed against the white sheets and chuckled. “He was my favorite husband. Great guy. Really. Too bad he up and died. Old bastard.”

I pressed my hand to my mouth as she opened her eyes. It was hard not to giggle at her ridiculous stories. She had a million of them, and I was quickly becoming addicted to them.

“He sounds great.”

She reached out her hand. “Dana. Do you have a beau?”

I took her hand and moved to sit on the edge of the bed. I knew better than to let another one of my patients into my heart, but I couldn't help it. I would always lead with my heart instead of my head where people were concerned.

“I did, but we broke up recently.” I shrugged, hoping she would let it be.

“That's no good. A pretty girl like you deserves a beautiful man.” She smiled and studied me. “You broke up recently, did you, duckie?”

“Duckie?” I laughed and pulled my hand from her as my phone buzzed in my slacks. “Yeah, we did. My heart is still a little tender over it.”

“Well, then you need to do the one thing that'll get you over it and quick.” She pressed her hands into the bed and hoisted herself to a more upright position.

“What’s that?” I stood and glanced down to find a missed call from my brother, Brandon. We were close, but not too close. I kept my distance from everyone since Daddy’s death. We all had. Life was easier alone when you didn’t have to see a daily reminder that you lost someone so important to your happiness. It was sad, but we all lived with it as part of our reality.

“Get yourself another man! It’s simple. Find someone who sets your panties on fire and makes your heart swell.”

I was grateful she didn’t go the other way with her statement. I walked toward the door and paused before going out.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe going out with someone else would help.” I shrugged. “I don’t know, but thanks for the story. I’d love to have my own Fred.”

“Honey, hush. Everyone needs a Fred. The way that man could move his hips.” She growled and it was time for me to leave.

I laughed on the way down the hall, unable to help myself. I was grateful for her brand of crazy. It helped the dark feeling inside of me dissipate for a few seconds. Nothing would ever be right without Kendal by my side, but that promise was over. I had to find a way to look for hope and love in a new place.

I knew it was impossible, but I could at least lie to myself.

After putting my supplies back up, I walked to the break room and called my brother. He answered on the first ring.

“Sis?”

“Yeah. I only have a few minutes, so make it quick.” I sat down in a chair and pulled my legs up into the seat with me, wrapping my free arm around them.

“So you know my friend Talon has been asking about you for almost forever now.”

“The tall blond guy that owns the tattoo parlor near the house?”

“Yep. He’s a good looking guy and he’s really awesome. I told him that I’d mention him to you again.”

“Weird.” I closed my eyes as my thoughts went back to Mrs. Delmaz. We *just* talked about me trying to date someone else, but I was still head over heels in love with Kendal.

“Anyway, he wants to take you out this week.”

“So have him call me. This is weird as shit.” I got up and walked toward the window, trying to figure out if fate was fucking with me, or if my brother was just being a weirdo, which was probably much closer to the truth.

“Alright. I’ll have him call. Just say yes when he does. You need a new start and he’s a great guy. It’s dinner, not a ring.”

He was right. “Alright. I’ll say yes, but one date. Nothing more.”

“Awesome! I get free tattoos if you guys hook up.”

I rolled my eyes. “Glad to be of service to you, asshat.”

“Love you too.”

At least this guy would be *nothing* like Kendal.

No one ever would...

CHAPTER 42



KENDAL

I dragged myself out of bed the next morning after hitting the snooze button ten times. A groan left me as my head pounded. Drinking in my thirties was hella different than drinking in my twenties, or maybe I was used to burning the liquor out of my system through sex.

Something had to give. I'd have to find a different way to dull the pain. Liquor just gave a temporary reprieve only to show up the next day in a new way.

The alarm went off, and I growled and walked toward the phone. "Alright. Fuck. I'm up." I turned it off and pulled my t-shirt over my head and kicked off my pants on the way to the shower.

Leaving the light off, I started the hot water and got in, letting the warmth pour over my shoulders and chest. I bowed my head and ran my hands over my face as relief swam through me.

"God, I miss you so much," I mumbled softly and turned, putting my back to the water. Memories of Dana danced through my skull, leaving my stomach tight, my cock rock hard.

I wanted to offer myself some relief, but it almost seemed trite. I didn't deserve it.

A moan left me as the hot water ran over the top of my head. I needed to lather up my hands and fuck myself until my knees were weak, but I couldn't.

I hated myself so much in that moment. Why hadn't I run from her? Why hadn't I warned her that nothing good could come of us? Nothing ever worked out for me in love. I was a selfish prick for pulling her into a relationship when I *knew* that it wasn't going to last.

My career was too important at first, and after melting a little, something else sprung up. Nothing was smooth about our courtship, but I fell hard for her anyway.

"She was there when Mandy died." I swallowed the lump in my throat and ran my hands down my stomach before gripping my erection and tugging at it. Pleasure danced down my thighs, covering my exposed skin in chill bumps and leaving me a little off kilter.

The sound of my soft pants as I lifted my hips and worked myself to the edge of orgasm was almost too much. I was too emotionally raw. I needed my hand to be her hand, her mouth, her sweet body.

More than the sex, I wanted her heart. I needed to belong to her, to someone that would remind me that I was a good man. I couldn't do it for myself anymore. It was too painful to realize that it was a damn lie every day.

A good man would have a good woman.

A family.

A life.

I took my pain out on my body, tugging and pulling at my cock until the world disappeared, no matter how badly it hurt.

Pleasure soon overtook pain, and I slid to my knees as the orgasm finally hit, forcing me to submit to the power of it.

"Dana. I love you so much, baby," I groaned as electricity pulsed throughout my body, leaving me weak and useless.

There wasn't much I wouldn't offer her to bring her back to me.

Really? Then try. Try harder.

No. It wasn't right. It wasn't fair... to her.



“You look pale.” Eliza glanced up from her desk as a smile played at the edge of her mouth. “You okay?”

“I’ve been better.” I walked in and glanced around, amused at how pristine her office was. Mine was a holy-hell wreck on a good day. “You got a minute?”

“For you? Anything.” She leaned back and crossed her hands over her stomach. She was twenty-years my senior, and as brilliant in life as she was in accounting. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Everything.” I dropped down in the chair in front of her desk. “Nothing?”

She chuckled. “You know, you really shouldn’t wear those glasses.” She tilted her head to the side a little. “They’re not doing you any favors.”

I pulled off my black-rimmed glasses and studied them. “No? I thought they made me look smarter.”

“Naw... you can still see your face.” She chuckled and patted her chest. “I love that line from *Grease*. Classic movie for sure.”

I forced a laugh. “So, it’s a no-go on the glasses?”

“Yeah. You’re a handsome man, Kendal. You know that. The glasses only help with the appeal.”

“Oh.” I dropped my hand into my lap. “Oh.”

She laughed again. “Alright, Mister. What are you up to? You look like you’re at death’s door. I take it that you haven’t been to see Mark about Heather yet.”

“No, I haven’t. That’s why I was stopping by.” I put my glasses back on and shrugged as she gave me a stern look. “I can’t see without them.”

“Take your chances then.” She sat up and rested her forearms on the desk in front of her. “You need to go talk to

Lance. He's a good guy. Tell him the situation and ask what your next steps are. I can ask Daisy if she would be willing to talk to him about the affair she and Mark had." She held up her hand as I started to respond, which shut me up quickly. "He's just as liable in all of this sexual harassment mess as Heather is. Things rot from the head down. He's a filthy cheating bastard, and therefore, he puts up with people just like himself. He finds no wrong in it."

"And you think Lance would really want to talk with me? I don't have any evidence, Eliza. I'm the one that almost lost my job six years ago because of dating a student."

"Stupid move, but we've been over that a million times."

"Yes, thank you." I pursed my lips together to keep from being the cock I wanted to be. No sleep, the pain of losing love *again* and a raging hangover had me willing to act more like I did in college, which wasn't good at all.

There was a reason Damon was my *only* friend back then. No one else could stand my ass. Or his.

"Lance knows the situation. Go to him more for advice. See what he tells you to do and follow it, unless it doesn't make much sense."

"Mark's advice to take care of Heather didn't make much sense either, but he's more interested in getting a promotion than taking care of the fucking department."

"Yep, and that leaves all of us in quite a predicament." Her phone rang and she glanced at it. "That's my granddaughter. Let me get it and I'll come down to your office when I'm done."

"No, it's okay." I stood up and picked up my bag. "I'll catch you later."

"Alright. I'm here if you need me." She gave me a tight smile before I turned and walked out into the hallway.

Mark nodded as he caught sight of me and motioned for me to come closer. "Dr. Tarrington. Good to see you. Some of your students have been asking about the accuracy of your office hours."

“Yeah, losing my little sister has me a little off.” I extended my hand to shake his. “I’ll be back on track starting next week. I’ll have one of my TAs send out a note letting everyone know.”

“Sounds great.” He shook my hand with vigor. “You know the Fall Festival for Beta Alpha Psi is coming up. You’re taking care of that, right?”

Fuck. I’d forgotten all about the accounting honors fraternity’s big fall event. It was their main fundraiser as they charged a fee for getting in the door.

“Yeah. Of course. I’ll get together with some of the officers later today and get the details locked down.”

“You know with Heather being out of town for the event that you’re going to need to ask another professor, or maybe one of your grad-students to help you chaperon.”

I snorted. “Chaperon? We’re talking about twenty-two year old adults.”

“You know it’s the University rules that if we have a University-sponsored event that we have one male and one female chaperon there.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “Do you need me to find someone?”

“No. Where is Heather going to be?” I felt like an idiot for not knowing.

The sound of her voice behind me caused my hair to stand on edge. Our last encounter had ended with my fingers wrapped around her throat and her threatening to tell everyone from the Dean to the President of the University that I was *once again* dating a student.

“My parent’s are having their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary.” She sounded almost bored with the announcement.

I glanced over my shoulder and forced myself into a calm I didn’t feel. “Nice. I’ll take care of everything. No worries.”

“Do you have time to chat later today?” She gave me a cute, innocent smile that would make most men howl like

heathens.

“I might. I’ll stop by your office after my classes if I can manage it.” I turned back to Mark, not waiting on the bitch’s response. She was a snake in the grass and had her eyes completely on me.

Some part of me wanted to send her to McKenzie and Bryant to let Damon deal with her ass, but there was no way I would do that. He and Bethany were finally working things out, and I loved them both. Hurting them would bring me no joy, and it’s not like Heather was going anywhere. She wanted a hard fuck in the hall closet from one person. Me.

“You good on getting someone then?” Mark reached out and patted my shoulder.

“Yeah. Sure.” I moved past him and walked to the stairwell just outside of our office, my mind running through the possibility of asking Dana.

I’d called ten times over the last two weeks, but had yet to leave a message. She thought me to be a creeper for sure by now, but some part of me could care less.

After getting settled in my classroom, I dropped down in the front row and pulled out my phone. I had another twenty minutes until my class would show up.

“Please.” I closed my eyes and tilted my chin toward the ceiling. “Please, please, please let her come. Maybe we can just be friends if nothing else.”

We couldn’t. I already knew without a doubt, but it didn’t stop me from wanting anything I could get from her. I just needed a way back into her life. Surely she would forgive me over time. I wasn’t at *all* at fault for the situation and nothing had changed for me.

Yes, Ana was her sister. Yes, I’d once *thought* I was in love with Ana, but I was wrong. At the first sign of trouble, Ana picked up and ran, leaving me to stand in the spotlight of shame alone. If I did love the girl, I’d quickly gotten over it.

That was a lie.

I let out a soft sigh. I knew two things.

One, I didn't love Ana anymore. I didn't have *any* feelings for her when she walked through the door at Dana's mother's house. Nothing. Not even a drop of lust, love or longing.

And two, I was completely in love with Dana. She was everything I wanted in my life, everything I'd ever dreamed I might have.

I dialed the number and almost hoped that she wouldn't pick up. It would be easier to just leave a message and chunk the ball back into her court.

Four rings later, the answering machine picks up.

Her sweet voice filled my ear, leaving my pulse racing and my cock hardening in my slacks. She sounded like a naughty angel. My angel. I was so going to hell.

"This is Dana Young. I'm not here right now, but if you want to leave me your name and number, I'll try and get back to you soon. I hope you're having a healthy day!!"

The loud beep resounded in my ear, and I sucked in a shaky breath.

"Dana, it's Kendal. Look, I know we haven't talked in a couple of weeks, but I really could use your help. I have an accounting honors event that I have to chaperon this Friday. I know its short notice, but I need a female grad-student that's not in the club to attend with me." I took another breath and stood up, feeling a little light-headed. What the fuck was wrong with me? "Just wanted to see if you might be free. I'd love to see you, but I totally understand if you're busy or don't want to see me. I want to explain everything, but we don't have to do that on Friday. I just... fuck. I'm rambling, aren't I? Call me if you're interested, but if not, it's all good."

I hung up before I whispered, 'bye, baby' into the phone and locked in my creeper status forever.

The door to the auditorium opened and a few students walked in, saving me from either an emotional breakdown or me making the mistake of calling her back... over and over and over until she answered.

After avoiding women altogether for the last six years, I was going to turn into a Class-A stalker if I wasn't careful.

From not caring at all to caring too much.

Was there no way to strike a balance and live in the middle where moderation existed? I would have thought so before, but not now.

I yearned for Dana so much more than I thought possible.

I was even willing to leave my career and move to New York... today, tonight, tomorrow. Whatever she wanted.

But first, I needed to get her to talk to me, to see me.

"Dr. Tarrington? You alright, man? You look lost in thought."

I smirked and extended my hand to one of my students. "Yep. Just trying to solve a cost accounting question that none of you nugget-heads stand a chance against."

"Awww... cold! Throw it at us. We'll get it."

"We'll see about that." I forced a smile and turned my back on them walking to the front of the class. Dana would play on my mind all day long, the idea of her ignoring my call the only thing I could seem to think about.

Losing her hurt like a bitch, but not standing a chance of getting her back?

I couldn't even fathom it.

CHAPTER 43



DANA

Going on a date with Talon was the *last* thing I wanted to do, but of course the guy called shortly after I got off the phone with Brandon. He didn't even ask, but simply assumed I was willing to go seeing that my brother already made the confirmation with him.

I grumbled all the way to work the next morning. My evenings were my time to soak in a hot tub, drown myself in ice cream and wine and cry until I had no tears left inside of me.

It was becoming a tradition. A very fucked up, nightly tradition.

"Dana. You have a minute?" Dr. Lewis stood beside the ER reception desk. "I apologize about having to miss our meeting yesterday. Something came up with my wife."

"Sure. No problem." I readjusted my backpack on my shoulder and moved up beside him as we walked down the hallway. "I hope your wife is okay."

"She's undergoing cancer treatments." He glanced over at me, the worried expression on his face shooting an arrow through my heart.

"Oh. I'm sorry." I tried to think of something better to say, but nothing came to me. Funny how his pain had the power to make mine seem so small.

"No, we're okay. She's a trooper." He held the door to the elevator open for me. "She'd been fighting it for some time,

and things aren't looking nearly as good as I would like for them to, but we're not giving up."

"Good. Is there anything I can do?" I moved into the elevator and crossed my arms over my chest.

"Just give me an update on Kendal. You're seeing him, right?" He slipped his hands in his pockets and gave me a soft smile. He had no clue of the drama we'd been through lately.

"Sort of." I shrugged, not quite ready to lay out my dirty laundry in front of one of the leading physicians in our hospital.

"Well, make sure you tell him that Denise and I are still praying for him, and when he's ready, we'd love to have him over for dinner." He glanced down at his feet. "Sooner than later, hm?"

"Of course." His message was loud and clear. He wasn't saying what he wanted to say, but I'd been around the dying for far too long. His wife didn't have much time left.

"I'd love for you to come too. Bring him with you?"

The elevator opened and I nodded before walking out. The chances of Kendal and I ending up at a dinner with Dr. Lewis and his wife were slim. He would move on, and I would transfer to New York to see about getting a residency in St. Mark's Hospital. I could be closer to Olivia and get away from the possibility of watching Kendal get back with my sister.

That's not going to happen. It can't.

The sickening feeling had only grown as I walked into Dr. Lewis's office and sat down in front of his desk. "I hope this isn't about me missing three days last week. We had a family emergency, and I filled out all of the necessary paperwork to make sure I wasn't counted for those days."

He smiled and sat down at his desk. "Nothing of the sort."

"Good." I tried to relax, but found myself sitting stiffly in front of him.

"I told you the other day that I was impressed with you jumping into action. You have great ratings on your internship

as well.” He paused and I tried to think of something to say, but couldn’t. I sat there looking stupid, no doubt. “You’re looking at a nursing program from what I could see in your records, but I think you have the gifts and talents necessary to be a pretty powerful physician. It’s more schooling, but in ten, twenty years, you can use that and your business degree to run a hospital. I think that’s something you should consider. I haven’t seen someone with as much heart *and* head in my hospital since I started.”

Tears burned my eyes. I was too sensitive for a conversation about my greatness. Partially because I didn’t believe there was any.

“I’m sorry.” I reached for a Kleenex and pressed it to my eyes. “Thank you for your kindness.”

“No kindness here, Dana. I’m being honest. You should consider moving your masters from nursing and into medicine and taking up residence here, or I have some friends at St. Mark’s that would love to have you. My stepbrother works up there and he’s always looking for help. You could work in the nursing program until you get through your masters, and then we’ll place you, or they will for residency. I talked with Aiden this morning.”

“It’s a lot to think about.” I swallowed and moved back in my chair.

“It is. You’re right. You and Kendal discuss it. I know he loves his position at UT, but NYU is right down the road from St. Mark’s. They’re a great school too.” He brushed his fingers over his mouth as I continued to wipe at my eyes.

I didn’t have the heart to tell him Kendal and I weren’t together. Hell, I didn’t have the heart to accept it.

“Thank you, Dr. Lewis.”

“Nate when it’s just us.” He smiled warmly. “Would you be willing to chat with Dr. Aiden Crawford from St. Mark’s? He’s my stepbrother and is a brilliant brain surgeon.”

I nodded. Anything that might mean I could run from my current situation, and I was in. Kendal wasn’t going to be part

of my future, but that honestly meant that Dallas wasn't either. I needed a clean break. A new start.

The universe was shifting and providence was throwing me a ray of sunlight. I couldn't have Kendal, but maybe I would have this.

"There are plenty of great scholarships. We can have Dani, my secretary, look up for NYU or UT for you. Just let me know which way you're headed and know that I'm here to help." He leaned back and clasped his hands over his chest.

"Thank you," I whispered and blotted at my eyes. "Forgive me for-"

"No need. Thanks for meeting with me today." I stood up and walked to the door, pausing only as he called out. "And Dana?"

"Yes, Sir?" I glanced over my shoulder.

"Make sure you take care of Kendal. He's a good man. His mother meant the world to my family. He deserves happiness."

"Yeah. He does." I closed the door behind me and resigned myself to depression for the rest of the day. Kendal did deserve every good thing that life could offer, but who the hell was I to think I could provide it?

I needed to talk to my sister, though it would kill me to do it. I needed to tell her to get back with him, to give him a future that would blow his mind.

She could do that. She was Ana.



"That was fun." Talon glanced over at me from the driver's side of his beat-up pickup truck. "You want me to take you back to your Mom's or do you maybe wanna-"

"My Mom's." I gave him a shy smile, feeling like shit for pretending to have a good time. The date wasn't bad, but it wasn't good either. It felt like going out with a stranger that I never planned on seeing again. Weird. Awkward. A lie.

“Oh okay.” He chuckled nervously. “I was just going to see if you wanted to have a drink back at my place.”

“Maybe next time.” Fuck. Had I just agreed to a next time? It wasn’t happening. I’d have to tell Brandon to let his friend down softly. He’d set the poor guy up with his broken-hearted sister, he could let him down.

I was an idiot for agreeing to it.

“Oh yeah. For sure. Next time.” He snorted and pulled up in my mother’s driveway. “You want me to walk you to the door?”

“Nope.” I opened the door and got out, turning back toward him. His spiky blond hair had enough mousse to last a week, his tattoos hot, but covering every inch of skin up to his throat. He not only *wasn’t* Kendal, but he was the opposite of him. “But thank you.”

“Yeah. Sure, and Dana.” He leaned toward my seat and reached out.

I extended my hand to take his, feeling incredibly tense about what he was up to. “Yeah?”

“I really like you. I think we could be something special.” He cleared his throat and released my hand. “You’re a beautiful woman. Think about letting me be your man.”

“You barely know me.” I pulled my hand back slowly, trying not to offend him. He was nice enough, just not someone I would ever see myself with.

“I know, but I wanna know everything about you.” He smiled. “I’m being sappy.”

“Kinda, but its okay.” I moved back. “Call me soon.”

“Like now?” He laughed and I closed the door, faking a smile that left me feeling like shit.

I walked to the house, pulling out my phone just to look like I had something to do. A missed call. From Kendal.

“And a message.” I stopped on the front porch and dropped down onto the porch swing, putting the phone to my

ear. His voice was deep, delicious, perfect. I closed my eyes and leaned back, letting the high of knowing that he wanted to still talk to me wash down my center and bring me to life.

He'd called and hung up a few times, making me think he was second guessing his desire to talk to me. No. He was broken. Hurt. Needy.

Just like me.

The front door opened, and my mom poked her head out. "You back already?" She smiled. "It's not even dark yet."

"Don't ask." I tucked the phone in my pocket. Kendal wanted me to chaperon an event for the college, but there was no way. I didn't want to talk through things, because it would simply show my insecurities. My sister was better than me in a million ways, and I knew myself. I would blurt them all out and help solidify in his mind why Ana was much better for him than I was.

"That bad?" My mom moved back and held the door open.

"Talon was fine, but my heart is broken, Mom." I sat down at the kitchen table as emotion beat against the back of my throat. "I fell in love with Kendal. I know you think he's a piece of shit."

My mother brushed her hand down the back of my head before sitting down and taking my hand. "I'm not in love with the idea of you seeing him, but maybe I was wrong. We were pretty hard on your sister when she started dating him six years ago, but she was one of his students. Your father had a cow over it."

"You called him a pervert the other day."

She smiled as if she were proud. "I did, didn't I?"

"Mom." I gave her a look to remind her that *this* was the man I wanted to marry.

"Right." She released my hand and sat back. "My only concern is how this man ended up with Ana and then you. How could he not know? Explain that to me?"

“I don’t know.” I let my hands drop into my lap. “I know that he loved her. He told me before we realized that she was my sister. He hasn’t dated since her. There’s no way he could have linked us up.”

“Sure he could have, baby. He’s a professor at UT and you’re a student. All he has to do is look up Ana’s record and he could find you.”

“You think he used me to get to her?” Horror filled my chest as I glanced up and tried not to scream.

“What? No. I didn’t mean... well, it sounded like that, didn’t it?” She gave me a quizzical look.”

“Yeah. It did, Mom.” I let out a sigh. “I love him so much. I just want him to be happy.”

“Have you spoken to him since he left here?”

“No. He’s called a few times, but didn’t leave a message.” I pulled my phone from my pocket. “He finally called and asked me to come to a school event on Friday with him.”

“He’s not allowed to date students, Dana. He’s playing with fire again.”

“I know.” I pushed the phone around, wanting to break away from my mother so I could listen to his message ten more times in privacy. “We’re not getting back together, and he didn’t know I was a student when we met. I helped his sister at the hospital. She died a few weeks back.”

“Oh, no. That’s horrible.” My mother’s expression was comforting. She cared that he was suffering. Maybe there was hope.

“I just keep thinking that Ana is more suited for him. She’s beautiful and smart and they have so much in common.”

“Does he love you, Dana?”

“I don’t know. I thought he did. It sure felt like he did.” I reached up and pressed my fingers to my eyes. I didn’t want her pity or anyone else’s. Kendal deserved the best. He deserved Ana.

“Then you go after him. Your sister missed her chance. She’s gone against your father and I more times than I care to admit to, but she didn’t that time. You know why?”

“Why?” I whispered, having trouble breathing.

“Because she didn’t love him the way he loved her. He deserves better. He deserves you, baby. Just make sure that he’s in love with you, Dana. Don’t get hurt.”

I stood up and moved to hug her. “I don’t know what I’m going to do yet, but maybe I’ll go to the event this weekend and at least talk things out with him.”

“I think that’s a good idea.” She patted my butt and smiled up at me. “And you know what?”

“What, Mama?”

“Ana thinks you’re beautiful and smart, too. She wants to be like you.”

“Lies.” I smiled.

“No... I promise, baby. Stop living in her shadow, and remind me to tell her to stop living in yours.”

CHAPTER 44



KENDAL

“**W**hy is this fucking me up so much? My stomach is a wreck and I can’t get my heart to stop racing.” I paced the floor in my office late Friday afternoon. I had a few minutes before I needed to head over to help set up for the Beta Alpha Psi Fall Festival.

College kids just used Halloween as an excuse to dress like hookers, naughty nurses and vampires. And I remember *loving* it when I was younger. My cock twitched at the idea of seeing Dana in any of those costumes. Hell, a t-shirt and jeans would have me crippled if I wasn’t careful.

“Because you’re in love, man. Go with it.” Damon cleared his throat. “What are you dressing up as?”

“Nothing.” I snorted and pressed the phone tightly to my ear. “I’m there as the Chaperon. I’m not dressing up. I’d look like an idiot.”

“Go as something, dude. Bethany is going to kill you if you come in slacks and a button down.”

“Why aren’t you coming? Bethany is a post-grad student. She should be chaperoning with me and Dana.”

“She’s trying to help get everyone in the party spirit.” He chuckled. “I’m not going because like you, I’d get hit on ten million times and most likely not end up getting my girl naked. She’s a little protective of me.”

“You’re so full of yourself. You’d think that shit would die down a little with age.” I closed my door and walked back to

my desk. Dana had responded ‘yes’ to my invitation to help me chaperon the event. I was beyond thrilled at the thought of getting to see her, and terrified of what might happen all at the same time.

I’d never been the type of man that was unsure of himself. As much pain and loss as I’d suffered, I’d always persevered. Never had I been left standing on wobbly knees and an unsure path.

But I was now.

She meant too much to me. Losing her left me not wanting to try again.

“Dude. You there?” Damon’s voice was loud.

“Yeah. Damn.” I pulled the phone away from my ear. “I’m not dressing up.”

“Go as a professor. A naughty-”

“Alright. I gotta go. The building is on fire or some shit like that.” I rolled my eyes. “You’re no fucking help at all. I lied to Bethany to get her to the restaurant you wanted me to. I helped you out, remember?”

“Want me to go visit Dana? I already offered that, and I offered you a way out.”

“I don’t want a way out. I love her, Damon.” I sat down on the edge of my desk and tried to calm myself, but it just wasn’t going to happen.

“No, you idiot. A way out of the situation by coming to work for me. The offer still stands.”

I glanced around my office, half-expecting to feel the same feeling I always got when I walked into any part of the University. Pride. Belonging.

I felt nothing but sadness. Maybe I hadn’t ever belonged here.

“I’ll think about it. Wish me luck on tonight.”

“Nothing to wish luck for. Be honest with her and she’s going to melt, Kendal. I’ve seen her with you. She’s already

yours. I promise.”

“Right.” I ran my fingers through my hair and stood. “I gotta run. Thanks for nothing.”

“Yep. Fuck you too, buddy.”

I dropped the call, grabbed my bag and jacket and pulled the door open to find Eliza standing in the hallway as if she were just about to knock. “Hey.”

“Kendal.” She put her hand to her chest and let out a soft laugh. “You scared me.”

“Sorry about that.” I moved into the hallway and closed the door behind me. “I’m walking over to the rec center. You want to walk outside with me?”

“Yes. I was just getting ready to leave, but I wanted to let you know that I finally got a hold of Daisy. She’s scared to death, but willing to talk with Lance about her affair with Mark when you’re ready for her to.” She turned and walked beside me.

Something like ice water rushed through my veins. Nothing would be the same after I exposed Heather’s sexual harassment and then pointed the finger at Mark. Someone had to do it, but a small part of me hated that it was me. Mark saved my ass a few times after the situation with the girl who cried rape a few years back. If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t have a job.

Not that any of that mattered. Daisy had been taken advantage of, and when Mark was done fucking her, he threw her away and ruined her career. Someone had to do something.

“Good. I’ll let you know when that day is. I’m not sure just yet.”

“But you’re going to talk to him, right?” She tucked her arm into mine as we walked down the stairs slowly.

“Yeah. Absolutely.” I opened the door to exit the building as she released her hold on me. “I’m going to a hoppin’ party tonight and could use a date...”

“Not in a million years.” She laughed and swatted at me playfully. “Have fun and keep your glasses in your bag. You have enough trouble in your life.”

“This is true. Night, Eliza.” I waved and turned to walk toward the rec center as my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out to see that Damon was calling... again. “What?”

“Love you too.” He chuckled.

“Sorry. What’s up, man? I’m a ball of nerves. I told you that.”

“Yeah, that’s why I was calling. I meant to remind you that you’re one bad-ass mother fucker before we got off the phone. You and I ran that campus in our younger years and you could have *any* woman you wanted, Kendal. You could have Ana back.”

“I don’t want Ana or anyone else. I want Dana.” I jogged toward the large gym in front of me as the sky darkened a little.

“Exactly. Stop letting the past fuck with your future. You’re in charge here. Get the girl back using all your moves from when we were kids.”

“That shit works on girls, Damon. Not women.”

He laughed loudly. “Give. Me. A. Break.”

“You’re corrupt. I’m telling Bethany to run as fast and far away from you as she can.”

“Good luck, chump. She’s mine and she knows it.”

I walked into the gym and glanced around to find Bethany and Jake working on some of the decorations with a few other students. She turned and waved.

I motioned for her to come over. “I’m going to test this out. She’s headed my way.”

“Ask her who owns her heart.” He chuckled darkly.

“Bethany, who’s your daddy?” I asked and winked at her as I pointed to the phone.

“Um... you?” She gave me a questioning look as if she didn’t know that I was on the phone with Damon.

“What?” His voice exploded in my ear. “Put her on the phone.”

“No! Not me.” I handed her the phone. “I was on the phone with Damon. We were talking about... fuck it. Never mind. You talk to him.”

She rolled her eyes, took the phone and walked toward the door. The conversation behind me where she was trying to convince him that she thought it was Dana on the phone and we were *making her jealous* was almost comical. She was in trouble. About as badly as I was.

“Well. Thanks a lot.” She handed me the phone back and growled. “He’s in alpha ass mode now.”

“Nothing new.” I put the phone in my pocket. “Are you guys dressing up for this tonight?”

“Yes, and you are too.” Dani Bruce moved in front of me, her voice soft and teasing, her eyes filled with the promise of a long night of spreading her legs for the right man.

“I didn’t bring anything, but good try.” I smiled and turned back toward Bethany and Jake. “I was talking to you two.”

“Yeah. We’re dressing up. I’m a pirate and Beth is Little Red Riding Hood.” Jake grinned like a Tom-Cat.

“And I’m a naughty nurse, Dr. Tarrington.” Dani moved back in front of me.

“Just make sure it’s campus approved. We have a dress code. I’ll be right back.” I dialed Dana’s number and walked to the far end of the gym. There was no way I was dressing up unless she was. I half expected her *not* to answer, but when she did, it took me a few minutes to gather my thoughts and process a word.

“Hello? Hello? Kendal?”

“Yeah. Sorry. It’s busy in the gym.”

“I bet. Did you need something?”

My body hardened all over at the sound of her voice, at the way she almost whispered my name like it still meant something to her.

“This thing is a Halloween type party. Bethany and Jake are dressing up, but I wanted you to know that you don’t have to.”

“I’m coming as a nurse.” She chuckled.

“It’s so good to hear your voice.” I closed my eyes and took a shallow breath.

“Yeah. I’ll be there soon to help. Do you need me to pick anything up?”

“No. I guess I’ll just make myself look a little nerdy and come as an accounting professor.”

“Sounds good.”

The awkward silence didn’t belong between us. “Okay. See you soon.”

I put the phone back in my pocket and turned to find Bethany watching me. She lifted her eyebrow as if to ask what was up.

“Nothing. Just telling Dana she didn’t have to dress up for this.” I walked back toward the pile of decorations and students. “I guess I need to grab my calculator and pocket protector from the office to make sure I fit the part.”

“Of a nerdy accounting professor?” Jake glanced up from untying a long string of black bats. He was back in his wheelchair due to nerve damage from being attacked by one of his and Bethany’s friends. It was a shame for him to be confined to a wheelchair, but there was hope he would eventually get out of it.

“I’ll go back over to your office with you. Let’s get your stuff and then we can finish getting the decorations up.” Bethany nodded toward the door, turning to walk beside me as we made our getaway. “Who’s the girl with the bedroom eyes?”

“President of the club. She’s the main reason I’d rather not be an adviser, but the Dean wants a male and female on the team. It’s our top students...” I paused, a little confused. “How do you not know Dani?”

“She must be new.” She shrugged and pushed the door open. “Damon told me that Dana was coming tonight. Are you okay?”

“I’ve been better.” I ran my fingers through my hair and walked beside her back across campus. Dumb-ass waste of time.

“Well, just be yourself, Kendal. You know that she loves you.”

“Do I? She hasn’t picked up any of my calls over the last three weeks. I’d have broken a leg trying to get to the phone if she had called me.” A bit of resentment rushed through me, but I rejected it. It wasn’t fair to assume anything.

“You were in love with her older sister. You slept with her. You almost lost your career, your livelihood over her.” Bethany gave me a sideways look. “There’s no way I could date Damon if he’d slept with my sister. That’s... gross.”

“It was six years ago, and I didn’t know it was her sister.” I let out a long sigh. “I can’t let *that* be the thing that stands between us. That’s stupid. It was the past. It means nothing to me now. Ana means nothing to me now.”

“Does Dana know that?”

“I don’t know. I need to see where she’s at emotionally before I start trying to fix everything and explain myself.” I reached out and opened the door to the accounting building, letting Bethany walk through first. “I’m hoping that we can just have fun tonight and get back to being friends.”

“And what about your romantic relationship? There’s a lot of tension when you try and turn a sexual relationship into a friendship. Believe me. I know.”

I chuckled. “I’m not having this conversation with you. Damon already thinks I’m your daddy, which is going to get us both killed.”

“Or mauled at the very least.” She laughed. “Why can’t you guys just sneak around like Damon suggested?”

“I don’t know. We were...” I brushed my fingers by my lips as images of her danced around in my vision. What I wouldn’t give to throw her over my shoulder and take her home with me. I needed her to know how I felt about her, how I would give anything up for her. Well, almost anything.

“So do it again. Tease her. Entrance her. Do all the things you and Damon know how to do so well. Win her back.”

“And then sneak around until May? That’s so much harder than anyone seems to understand.”

“But it’s worth the effort, right?”

I didn’t hesitate at all. I didn’t have to. “Absolutely. She’s worth it and so much more.”

“Good. Then stop being timid and get her back. You’re Dr. Kendal Tarrington. Nerdy accounting professor extraordinaire.”

I smiled and almost felt sorry for her. I was a professor of accounting, but like my best friend, an alpha male lived deep inside of me, and he wasn’t at all happy about losing his woman.

Time to let him out to play.

CHAPTER 45



DANA

A sad sound left me as I dropped the call with Kendal. Were things going to be awkward between us now? Without a doubt... Yes.

I parked outside of my apartment and sat there for a few minutes, trying to decide if I should just cancel. Nothing good could come of us having our first meet up at a large University event. The school was half the reason we couldn't be together.

He moved past that... remember?

“Yeah, but now I get to move past him dating my sister?” I got out of the car and walked to the front door as my mind spun a long trail of lies. My hands were shaking by the time I got myself undressed and stood in front of the mirror in my bra and panties.

I wanted so badly to feel beautiful in front of him, and I was getting there... slowly. But knowing that he'd been with my model-like sister? Who was I kidding.

After turning around and making a few disgusted sounds at myself, I finally gave up, put on a clean pair of nursing scrubs. I wanted to see him, and that trumped everything else. I could get over myself for a few hours to help him out at the event.

After that, I would make my decision. Move past wondering if he could ever love me the way he loved Ana and be with him, or release him back into the world and hope he found someone that could love him like he deserved to be loved.

I hated myself for thinking that I wasn't capable of it anymore. Reaching for a candy bar on the kitchen counter, I stopped myself and grabbed a granola bar instead. Cameron's voice echoed in my head about me needing to lose a few pounds.

"Stop it," I mumbled and walked to the door, shoving the granola bar in my mouth and eating it in two big bites. I couldn't keep taking steps backward. I wasn't trash and I wasn't a pig. Kendal wouldn't have paid me a bit of attention if I'd been either.

Unless he knew that I was Ana's sister.

I turned the radio onto the 80s station and cranked it up loud, not letting my thoughts get the best of me as I drove toward campus. I sat there for a good twenty minutes in the parking lot, trying to talk myself out of putting the car in reverse and going back home. Fear tore through me in thick waves, and panic sat all around me.

"Come on. It's just a party. You won't even get to talk to him. Just get out of the car and tell him about Dr. Lewis and his invitation and then mingle with everyone else. You're there to chaperon, not be his date." I let out a quick puff of air and opened the door, closing it and walking quickly to the rec center before I changed my mind.

It was dark outside, but the bright orange lights wrapped around the windows of the gym made it more than obvious that something fun was going on inside.

"Welcome. We have punch by the basketball goals and the music will start shortly." Kendal was at the door, holding it open and welcoming everyone that walked in.

I paused as a large group of girls moved in front of me. Each one of them took their turn flirting with the handsome accounting professor who'd stolen my heart. My insides ached as I walked up the stairs and met his eyes.

Was I pretty enough?

Did he think about me?

“Dana.” His voice was nothing more than a whisper. His dark green eyes widened a little as a smile lifted his perfect lips.

“Think I was going to stand you up?” I smiled and moved to stand in front of him. I reached up and fixed his tie before running my hand over it to smooth it down. Might as well go with bold, though I didn’t feel it at all.

He clamped his hand over mine as his voice dropped a little. “Be careful. It’s not going to take much from you and I’ll turn into someone who doesn’t take ‘no’ for an answer.”

I swallowed hard and glanced down as another group approached. “I shouldn’t be here.”

“There’s punch inside and a name tag for you near the back. Go check in with Bethany and stop thinking so much. It’s a party and I needed your help. Go get started and I’ll find you later.” His eyes moved across my face and a million words passed between us.

I needed him so bad it felt like I might explode. “Okay.”

“Good girl.” He leaned down and brushed his nose by mine. “Hurry before I get us both in trouble. You dressing like a naughty nurse.”

“What?” His humor pulled me from the moment. “These are my scrubs I wear every day.”

“I know. I love how they look on you.” He pointed toward the door. “Inside. Now.”

I walked in and glanced back to find him watching me closely. He was going to win me over and force me to retire any thoughts I had about not being good enough. The desire and demanding need written all over his face had my panties wet, my nipples budded. The pressure of my pulse beat against the side of my throat and the room spun for a moment.

“Hey. You okay?” Bethany moved up beside me and reached out, touching my shoulder.

“Yeah. Sorry. I just....,” I glanced back to find him welcoming another group of students, “I just love him so damn

much.”

“Good.” She laughed and moved to stand beside me before wrapping her arm around me. “He loves you too. You guys just need to figure out how to move past all of this craziness.”

“Maybe. I wish I felt like it were possible.” I walked beside her to the kitchen area, almost enjoying the comfort of her arm around me. I had to be careful what I said for sure. She was Damon’s fiancée, and he and Kendal shared everything, even women back in the day apparently.

Did they share Ana?

“Anything is possible.” She released me and walked over to pick up a small name tag. “Here you go. Wear this with pride as you’ll be asked to hold hair and cart sick students out of the building before the night is over.”

“Thanks?” I laughed and put it on as she excused herself and walked back into the gym. After I got myself situated, I moved to stand in the doorway and let my eyes move across the spooky decorations and bright lights strung everywhere.

“Like it?” Kendal walked up and stopped in front of me. The delicious scent of his cologne washed over me and I breathed in deeply, not caring if he noticed all of a sudden.

“Yes,” I breathed out.

He reached out and touched the side of my face. “Why haven’t you picked up my calls? You know I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

I pulled his hand down from my face carefully. Nothing too dramatic. We didn’t need it. “Dr. Lewis took me in his office yesterday and asked that you come to dinner soon. His wife’s cancer treatments aren’t going as well as they hoped. I think he’s hurting more than he’s letting on. I know you became good friends with him during your mother’s battle with MS.”

He slipped his hands into his pockets as he studied me. “Come with me. You’ll love Nate and Denise when you really get to know them.”

“And he and I talked about me entering into a master’s program so that I could move into medicine and start my residency.” I forced a warm smile, hating myself for pretending in front of him that everything was fine. He was the only man I wanted to be completely open with.

His eyes widened and he reached up, running his hand through his messy brown hair. The dark-rimmed glasses he wore seemed to make him more stunning, as if that were possible. “Here at UT?”

“No. In New York.” I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding. “I think being with Olivia for a few years would be good for me.” I glanced around, feeling so out of place. “You know? Something new and different. Away from my family.”

“Away from me.” He dropped his hand and took a step back. “I’ll call Nate tomorrow. Thanks for the invite from him. It breaks my heart to know that his wife is dying.” He rubbed his chest, never taking his eyes off of me. “Although some part of me knows exactly how it feels to lose everything.”

“You mean my sister?” I pursed my lips as my eyes burned with unshed tears.

“No.” He moved into the kitchen, forcing me back. The command in his voice left every part of me alert, ready for anything.

“Don’t do this.” I lifted my hands as he closed the kitchen door and crashed into me full force, lifting me off my feet and pinning me to the wall. The firm press of his thick body was almost too much.

“I mean you and you know I do.” He brushed his lips by mine and ran his strong hands down my sides, gripping the back of my thighs and forcing me to wrap my legs around him.

I was liquid heat with nothing more than a look from him. I wouldn’t survive him making me feel loved, important, special.

“Please let me down.” I wrapped my arms around his neck and ran my fingers up the back of his head as he ground

against me and groaned. “I can’t do this, Kendal. I don’t know how I feel.”

His hot mouth pressed to the side of my neck as he rolled his hips, massaging my center with the thickness of his erection. “I know how you feel, baby. Like heaven, Dana. I don’t miss your sister. She’s not in my life anymore and hasn’t been for a very long time.”

“But you loved her.” I whispered against his neck as I tightened my thighs around his waist. I needed him buried deep inside of me, to feel his hands all over me. I needed to get away or all thoughts would be useless. He’d win me over with nothing more than the need to be pinned to a bed beneath him.

“And I love you now. More. So much more. I was an idiot back then, and the sad thing is that she didn’t love me. She never would have left if she did.” He ran his nose up the side of my neck and licked at my ear as I groaned.

“But if she would have stayed beside you, then what?”

He stiffened against me. He would be with her. It was that easy. And he and I would be family.

“Please put me down.” I pushed at his chest as best I could.

He moved back and I slid down the front of his body, the sensation almost more than I could bear. “Dana, that’s not fair. I wasn’t looking for love when I found you. You know that.”

“Because you were still hurting over her.”

He glanced down and let out a long painful sound. “What do I need to do to make this up to you?”

“I don’t know.” I reached up and brushed away the few tears that had fallen onto my cheeks. I felt so weak, so stupid. I wanted to belong to him, but did he see Ana when he saw me? No. She was so much prettier than I was. He’d have to close his eyes to pretend to be with her, and even then, it would be impossible. She was thin and I was-

“Dana. Look at me.” He reached out and cupped my face. “I didn’t know she was your sister. I would have told you if I did. I opened myself up to you and told you how badly she hurt me. I’ve never shared the depths of that with anyone.”

I nodded. He was right. He had bared his soul to me, but at that moment, I’d almost wished he hadn’t. The pain on his face, in his voice that night when he talked about the *one who got away* was horrible. But now she wasn’t faceless.

She was my damn sister!

“But you don’t have to hurt.” I couldn’t believe the words pouring out of my mouth. “She’s here and single. You should go to her and pick up where you left off.”

His face dropped as he lowered his hands and stepped back. “What? Is that what you want? For me to be with your sister?”

“Is that what you want?” My breath caught in my chest. “Because I can’t be a part of that. I don’t even know why I just said it. I need to go. I’m not Ana. I can’t be. She’s... she’s so much more.” I moved past him as the room spun in front of me. “I’m sorry. I can’t be her.”

“Dana!” He called after me, but I found myself sprinting toward the door.

Why did I come here? What did I expect?

CHAPTER 46



KENDAL

The rest of the evening was a blur. I didn't even have the balls to text or call her after we finally shut everything down. Bethany cornered me as we were working through clean up and asked where Dana had been all night. I lied and said she was sick and had to go home. Something she ate.

My thoughts raced from showing up on her doorstep, to asking Ana to help me, to moving to another country and giving up on having love in my life.

I didn't want Ana or any other woman. I wanted my woman.

After sleeping like shit that night, I woke up just before sunrise and changed into jogging clothes. I needed to release some of the pent-up frustration tearing me apart. Dana wasn't going to be mine again. It wasn't as simple as *showing* her how much I wanted her. She didn't seem to buy that shit, though there was a moment the night before where I could feel how much she wanted me too.

But she wasn't going to move past me and Ana. And I really couldn't blame her.

Anger burned through my belly at the stupid mistakes of my past that were still wrecking my future. There was no rest in sight for me in the pursuit to belong to someone, to connect so deeply with someone that losing them fully destroyed me.

I was a pussy for wanting that kind of relationship with a woman. It didn't exist. Disgust for my thoughts pushed me

harder, and I forced myself to sprint the next three miles, stopping only when I felt like my lungs might explode.

The grassy field I dropped down into was cold and wet, the dew sticking to the back of my arms and coating my legs. I heaved loudly, trying to get air into my lungs as quickly as possible.

“You know... the glasses are a bad idea, but you wearing a tight t-shirt and jogging shorts is *way* worse.” I laughed and sat up as Eliza stopped on the sidewalk in front of me and put her hands on her hips. “You should find another campus to jog on. Too many students know and covet you.”

“I’m beginning to think you’re the one coveting me. If you want a date, just ask for it.” I got up and brushed my legs off as she chuckled.

“You’re not nearly that lucky.”

I glanced up. “You’re not telling me anything new.”

Her smile faded. “Last night didn’t go so well?”

“Nope. I invited Dana to help me chaperon the Beta Alpha Psi event, and we had a conversation in the kitchen before it really got going and she left a few minutes after that. Seems like she wants me back with her sister.”

“Wait. I don’t know this story. We’re not *that* good of friends.”

I snorted. “You’re pretty much my only friend on campus.”

“Well then. Let’s go have coffee and you tell me the rest of the story. Maybe I can help.” She tilted her head to the side and watched me. She was a great mentor and a good friend. I could spare an hour of spilling my guts to her. It’s not like Damon would want to hear me crying over the fact that none of my efforts had worked with Dana thus far.

“Alright, but I’m a little sweaty. I decided to run until my chest didn’t hurt anymore.” I wiped at my brow and moved up beside her as we walked toward one of the many coffee shops on the edge of campus.

“Just don’t touch me with that hand and we’re good.” She crossed her arms over her chest and breathed in deeply. A look of serenity moved across her face. “You’re dating sisters? Did I get that right?”

I laughed. “No. I know I don’t necessarily look like one of the good guys.”

“No, you don’t.” She gave me a sideways glance and smiled. “But I know better. You are a good man. You just have shitty judgment.”

“Thank you?” I reached out and opened the door for her as the smell of coffee rushed up to greet us. “I’ll grab us something and you get a table. What can I get you?”

“Non-fat latte. Small with two sugars and ten pumps of peppermint.” She wagged her eyebrows and turned, walking across the coffee shop.

I ignored the perky red-head who flirted the entire time I was in front of her, got our drinks and made a bee-line for Eliza. She was people-watching out the window from what I could tell.

“Here you go. They said to put a warning label on the cup. That much peppermint has the power to make anyone holly jolly.” I smiled as she chuckled.

“Tell me about this girl,” she cleared her throat and lifted one eyebrow, “and her sister.”

After taking a quick sip of my drink, I leaned back in my chair. “Remember six years ago when I was dating Ana?”

“Your student?”

“Yes. This is her sister.” I ran my hand down my face, hating the way she was looking at me like I was an idiot.

“Wow.” She pressed her fingers to her mouth and sat in silence for what seemed like forever. “So, are you still in love with this Ana girl, or with her sister?”

“Her sister, Dana. I didn’t know they were sisters.”

“You have the *worst* luck of any man I know.”

“Yes, thank you. I’m aware.” I pulled my phone out and sat it on the table next to us. “I met Dana at the hospital. She’s one of the nurses who was taking care of my sister Mandy before she died.”

“Ahhh...” Eliza picked up her drink. “Keep going. Please. This is better than daytime television.”

“You don’t watch that stuff.” I scoffed.

“You’d be surprised. Don’t let the old lady hair fool you.” She smirked before taking a drink of her coffee. “Mmmm... perfect.”

“Good.” I glanced down at my phone. “I didn’t know they were sisters, so when Dana invited me out to have dinner at her mother’s house-”

“Oh, no.” Her voice dropped. “Please don’t tell me that your ex-lover showed up and the three of you and her mother figured this out all at the same time.”

“Yeah. That’s about how it happened. I freaked out and faked a call from Damon, tucking tail and running as fast as I could. She took it that I was overwhelmed by seeing Ana after six years.”

“Were you?”

“No.” I reached out and brushed my fingers down the front of the phone absently. “I mean, I was in shock for sure, but overwhelmed? No. I’m in love with Dana. I want her to be the mother of my children, my partner in life. Hell, I was thinking about leaving UT for her.”

“Wait. Why would you have to leave UT?”

I glanced up, hating how dirty it made me feel to break the rules. “She’s a nursing student, and is a double major in business.”

“Oh, no. Kendal. Please tell me she’s not in one of your classes.”

“No, but she was going to take one next semester. When I found out, she dropped the class and I backed up. Remember, I

met her at the fucking hospital. I didn't know." I flinched. "Sorry for the language."

"No, it's fine. It's the weekend and we're not professors. Here, we're just friends."

"Thank you. I need a friend right now. I have no clue how to fix this. I've been running from women for six years, and now I'm supposed to run to one?" I growled softly under my breath.

"So, don't run to her? Just move on with your life."

I laughed. "As if that's possible. She's all I think about, Eliza. I honestly think I'm going to blow the cap on all this shit with Heather and Mark and then put in my resignation. My career defines me and it's holding me back from being with the one woman I want in my life."

"As I see it, you have three choices." She picked up her drink and blew on it as she watched me closely. "You wanna hear my thoughts?"

"Of course I do. I respect you greatly."

"And I you. You've persevered beyond what most people would. You've earned your stripes at the college, Kendal. It's taken a lot from you though. Maybe it's time to consider moving on."

"That one of the options?" I leaned back and picked up my coffee, enjoying the warmth of it in my hand.

"Yes. Step up and talk to Lance about Mark and Heather and then resign. That way you and the girl can be together."

"This is assuming she'll even talk to me again."

"She will. Stop worrying about that." She rolled her eyes. "Just put on your Clark Kent glasses and tell her what you just told me."

"That I love her?"

"Exactly. She'd be a fool for not listening if you're being open and honest with your heart. If she closes you down in

that moment, then she's not meant for you."

"Alright. The other two options?"

"Walk away from her and continue to work toward your tenure. Find another woman *outside* of the university and start building a life with her."

"Not happening." I shook my head. "If I'm not with Dana, I'm taking a really long break from trying again. It hurts too much."

"I understand that." She took a sip of her coffee and smiled. "And the third option, and the most mature of all is to keep your job and tell the girl you love her, but you'll have to wait until she graduates, which is when?"

"May." I nodded. "You're right. Either way I look at this, I owe her the truth. She needs to know how I feel."

"Yes, she gets to make the decision on whether she thinks that love is authentic and valid."

"And if she doesn't?" I already knew the answer.

"Then you have to let her go. Sometimes loving people means releasing them when they don't have the strength or the wherewithal to love you back."

"I don't like that option."

She chuckled. "No one does. So, choose one of the other ones."

I nodded and settled into my seat as she started to talk about her husband. Their love affair was as up and down as mine and Dana's had been, but they'd celebrated decades of marriage together. That's all I wanted with her. To give myself to her fully and have her love me as deeply as she could.

I needed to tell her the truth. There's nothing I wouldn't have done for her. If leaving UT would prove it, then fuck it. I was as good as gone.

"This was fun. We should do it again sometime." Eliza's voice brought me from planning my speech in my head.

“It was.” I stood up and gave her a quick hug. “I’ll see you on Monday?”

“You sure will. Make a decision and move on it quickly. Love never waits for the slackers, Kendal. Both of you will have a million thoughts until you settle this, and I can promise you one thing. None of them will be good ones.”

“You’re right. Thank you for your time. For listening to me.” I walked her to the door and smiled as she turned and wished me luck.

I was three miles from home, but jogging again sounded like the right action. I wanted to get back home, shower and call Dana. She and I were talking - tonight. Whether she liked it or not.

My heart was racing by the time I approached my house, but I slowed at the end of the driveway to have some semblance of a cool down. I pulled my phone out and shot off a text to Dana.

Me: I don't know what happened the other night, but it did not go like I planned. My house. Tonight at 7pm. Be here so we can clear this up. I need you to know everything and if you want to walk after that... fine, but not before.

Dana: I'll be there.

“Good,” I mumbled and glanced up to see a light grey accord sitting in my driveway. I didn’t know anyone with a-

“Kendal. I’m sorry to just show up, but I need to talk to you. Do you have a minute?”

Ana. Of course it was Ana.

“Yeah. Yeah, sure. Come on in.” I walked to the door, not sure what Dana’s sister was after, but I hoped like hell she would join forces with me on helping me get Dana back. If not... she was out on her ass. There was no way I was compromising anything with my girl.

Not for anyone. Least of all Ana.

CHAPTER 47



DANA

“Why do you force me to do uncomfortable things?” I glanced over at Jackie as we stood in a large yoga room, people everywhere, all of them half my size. I hated few things in life, but yoga pants were one of them. They seemed to show every flaw, which was fine unless I was forced to bend over in front of half of Dallas.

“It’s good for you. Stop bitching and breathe in the essence.”

“Essence?” I shook my head. “You know I wanted to stay home today and do nothing.”

“You wanted to cry all day. Every time I call or come by, you’re lost in another pity party. You and Kendal could be back together tonight if you went over there and demanded he tell you how he feels about you.” She pulled her hair into a high ponytail and lifted her perfect eyebrows at me, challenging me to dispute her claim.

No. She was right. Then what was I waiting on? I wanted him with everything inside of me.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged and lifted my arms toward the sky as the yoga instructor walked to the front of the room. “I’m scared.”

“I know you are.” She bent over and touched her hands to the floor, turning a little so she could look up at me. “Love is risky, Dana. You know this shit. You have to step up and hit the ball or get off the fucking field.”

“Ugh. Jeez.” A motherly looking woman beside Jackie picked up her mat and moved to the back of the room. “So vulgar.”

“I know. She’s horrible.” I gave the woman an apologetic look before smiling down at my friend. “This isn’t about taking a risk.”

Jackie stood up, the blood having rushed to her face. *Somehow*, she looked even more attractive. “No, then what’s it about?”

“Could you guys keep it down?” The guy to the left of me asked, his voice filled with annoyance.

Jackie moved around me. “No, we can’t. When the class starts, we’ll pipe down, but for now, mind your own business.”

I moved in between her and the guy who should *not* be wearing yoga pants. He needed a sock. An extension. Something. “Hey. Be nice.”

“I feel aggressive.” She rolled her shoulders. “I’m going to see Parks soon. I have to. I need to get some of this tension out of my body.”

“Are you guys dating now?”

“No. We’re just sleeping together.” She moved back and swung her arms back and forth.

“Then sleep with someone else.”

She gave me a look. “Why would I do that? He’s amazing, Dana. Like the best I’ve ever had.”

“Is the sex mutually exclusive?”

“No.” She turned back to the front. “You’re totally diverting now. Back to you and Kendal. If it’s not the risk of losing him or never getting him, then what is it.”

“It’s the risk of him settling for me when he really wanted Ana.”

“If he wanted Ana, couldn’t he just ask her back out?”

“I don’t know. I guess.” My phone buzzed on the floor beside me and I dropped down, checking it and praying that it would be him. It was. He wanted me to come over later that night, no demanded me to.

“Nice,” Jackie cooed as I stood up. “He texted you?”

“You’re so damn nosy.” I popped her in the stomach softly and turned to face the instructor as the class started. Maybe yoga wasn’t such a good idea. What if things went well with Kendal? I’d end up in his bed, sore as hell from a class I never wanted to go to in the first place.

“And breathe in deeply and lift up on your toes, stretching your fingers to the sky. Think of yourself as a tree, sway in the wind,” the instructor called from the front of the classroom.

“Really?” I whispered and glanced over to find Jackie smiling. She was so in for payback for forcing me to a yoga class. I was the most inflexible person we knew.

“Just do what the chick says. It will help the blood flow in your body.” She wagged her eyebrows. “To all of your parts.”

“Gross. Stop talking. Please.” I closed my eyes and extended my hands toward the ceiling, giving myself over to the ridiculousness of it for the next hour. I could let my mind wander around what the night might hold for me.

I had to make things right. Being depressed and hating life wasn’t me at all. I wanted my joy back, and I knew that would come with either cutting things off with Kendal, or fixing them.

The path to true happiness seemed to be available in the latter of the two objectives. He hadn’t been the one to turn away from me or shut me down.

I’d been the one running and slamming doors in his face.

All because of insecurity over my sister.

It would have helped if I could have talked to her, but she was off the grid. I growled at the thought and swept my hands along the floor like the instructor requested we do. I picked up my phone and ignored Jackie grumbling at me to put it down.

My mother had trackers on us when we were younger, and we hadn't changed our phones. I texted her to see if she could activate all of us and see where Ana was. I needed to work things out with my sister before I could work them out with Kendal.

I didn't get a response, which wasn't unusual. My mother enjoyed her quiet time more than anything since my father passed, as if sitting out on the porch was an invitation for him to leave heaven and join her.

"Hey. You okay?" Jackie squatted next to me as I swayed, still bent over.

"Yeah. I'm fine." I wiped at my eyes and stood up. The room was empty, everyone was gone. "What the hell?"

"Did you get lost in enlightenment?" The gangly yoga instructor stopped in front of us, her hair in a messy bun, her skin flawless.

I glanced around, still a little out of sorts. "I guess so? I don't know. One minute we were starting and I swear it wasn't but a second later and we're done?"

She laughed and Jackie picked up our mats and walked them to the back of the room.

"Then it was a good session. You must have a lot on your mind. Your eyes are cloudy with emotion." The girl reached out and touched my shoulder. "Do you want me to see if one of our masseuses can see you today?"

"No, but thank you." I smiled and walked toward Jackie. "That was a much better experience than I expected it to be. I closed my eyes for a minute and it was all over."

"The power of connecting with the source." She wrapped a sweaty arm around my shoulders as we walked out into the chilly October afternoon. "What's next? You want to grab lunch and hang out for the afternoon?"

"I would, but Kendal wants to talk at his place tonight." I walked to the passenger side of her small Prius and got in.

She glanced my way as she got into the car and buckled up. “That’s great news, right?”

“Yeah. I just need to decide if I have it within me to get over him sleeping with Ana.” I ran my fingers through my damp hair. “I need to see her, but she’s impossible to find.”

“Call her.”

“She won’t answer.” I reached up and adverted the hot air away from me.

“Text her.”

“She’ll ignore it. She hates being around the family or talking to any of us. She was my father’s favorite, and when he died, she sorta did too.” I tugged on my seatbelt.

“Track her ass.” Jackie snorted and pulled out of the parking lot, looking like a model for yoga wear. How I lived in a world where almost everyone around me looked better than me was a mystery. A sucky-ass mystery at best.

“I asked my mom to track her. She’s the only one with that functionality.” I glanced out the window. “I want to just let it all go. Obviously my sister isn’t interested in him or she never would have left him.”

“And he’s not interested in her, or he would run back to her and wouldn’t be trying so damn hard to get your attention, right?”

“I guess.” I turned and studied my friend. “I’m in love with him, Jackie. It’s not just a silly infatuation. I’m thinking about moving my degree plan to Baylor and extending it a semester just to make things work between us.”

“What? No the hell you’re not. That’s ridiculous!”

I laughed. “Olivia said the same thing.”

“Well, she’s right. I’m right.” She reached over and took my hand. “I know you love him, but you gotta see if the two of you are going to make this thing work. Let me ask you one really important question, and you have to be one-hundred-percent honest. Promise?”

“Yeah. Of course.” I settled back into my seat, letting myself relax.

“Is the sex good, great or mind blowing?”

I rolled my eyes. “Seriously? That’s your question? I thought you were going to ask if I was willing to take a bullet for him.”

“Oh, that’s a good one too. Are you?”

“Yes. I am. That’s sorta what being in love is about, right?”

“Maybe. Now, the sex question.”

“It’s mind-blowing. I didn’t know it could be that good, okay? Happy now?”

“No, I’m actually really sad for you. You’re missing out on mind-blowing sex because he was with your sister in the past? He didn’t even know you then. You need to move past this.”

I let out a loud huff. “Weren’t you the one that wanted to throw his ass out of a high window because he was a man-whore for sleeping with my sister?”

“Maybe. Doubtful. I’m usually not really violent.” She gave me a blank stare before turning back toward the road.

“I’m going over there tonight. We’ll figure it out. I just need to get to Ana first.” I pulled out my phone and let out a whoop! My mother was going to track her for me the minute she got back from the grocery store. I’d have time to take a quick shower and see my older sister before going over to see Kendal.

“Why are you so interested in seeing Ana first?”

“I need to know that she’s not in love with him anymore.”

“And if she is?” Jackie clicked her tongue against her teeth, as if I were an idiot for not assuming that my sister *might* still have feelings for Kendal.

“Then I guess I’ll walk away.”

“What? No!” She shook her head, looking far more agitated than she needed to. “Who gives a fuck if your sister is

in love with him. This isn't about her. It's about you and him. What do you want? What does he want?"

"I want him." I ran my hands down my face. "I think he wants me. I don't know. I just feel like I need to clear things up with her."

"I vote that you don't."

"Well, you don't get a vote," I grumbled and pulled my phone close to my face. "She's a pain in the ass, but I still love her."

"Enough to give her your man? I love a lot of people, but none that much. That's insane."

"If she loves me, then she'll know how I feel already, Jackie."

"This is getting more fucked up by the minute, Dana. Just go see Kendal. You don't need to bring your sister into the middle of this. If she wanted him, the bitch knew where he was all this time. She could have gone back to him. Period."

"Maybe you're right." I undid my seatbelt as we pulled up to my apartment. "I'll text you later and let you know what's going on."

"Please do, and stop ignoring that Talon guy too. I see him blowing up your phone."

I glanced down at the ten unread messages I had from him. "I hate hurting people."

She reached for my phone, snatched it and typed away as I reached across to her seat and tried to wrestle it back from her. "Let. Me. Take. Care. Of. It."

"Give it back!" I finally got it from her and growled. "I swear I'm going to send Parks a note that you have clinical herpes."

"No such thing." She glanced down at her nails and back at me. "You're welcome. You need to tell that boy to find someone else to bother. What is Kendal going to think when he sees your phone tomorrow morning after your all-night-

fuck-fest and it's got some dude's name on it with messages galore?"

"I hate you." I got out of the car and bent down. "Not really. Thank you. I'll text you later."

"I love you too. I want details. Dirty, juicy-"

After slamming the car door, I ran upstairs and let out a long exhale as I closed the door behind me. Talon texted back a sweet note, which made me stop and read Jackie's. She'd done a good job of letting the poor guy down.

"Much better than I would have done." I walked to the couch and dropped down as my mother texted me the address where Ana was. Jackie was right. I didn't need it.

I stared at it for a few seconds feeling like I should know where it was. Not wanting to spend the rest of the afternoon worried about my sister, I plugged the address into google and pulled up the map.

"What?" I pressed my hand to my chest and stood up. Sickness rolled through me. I didn't need to wonder if my sister still had feelings for Kendal. Obviously she did.

She was at his house.

CHAPTER 48



KENDAL

I half-expected to feel overwhelmed or awkward in front of her, but neither emotion showed up. I was in control of myself, fully assured of what I wanted, and it wasn't her.

"Beautiful house." She glanced around, her dark hair brushing over her back. "I'm sorry about the big showdown at my mother's. I didn't know you were dating my sister."

"Of all the people in the world, right?" I chuckled and moved past her into the kitchen. "You want something to drink? I have coke or water."

"No. I'm not staying long. I just wanted to apologize and see what I could do to help you and my sister get back together." She pressed her hip against the counter nearest her and crossed her arms over her chest. "And I need to apologize for not standing beside you all those years ago. It was stupid, and my loss."

"It's the past." I turned and got a coke from the fridge, popping the top and turning back to face her. It was almost odd how calm I felt around her. Six years before my heart would have been pounding, my cock rock hard and every emotion known to man pumping through me.

Now? Nothing.

"What can we do to fix it?" She tilted her head, her eyes searching me for something she wasn't going to get.

"I'm going to fix things with Dana tonight, I hope." I reached up and ran my fingers through my hair. "I'm in love

with her. I want her to be my wife, to move in with me, to rule my world.”

She smiled. “I like the sound of that.”

“Good. Then tell her that whatever was in the past between you and I is stuck in the past.” I took another drink of my soda and set it down. “She’s comparing herself to you. She’s trying to figure out if I still love you.”

“Do you?” Her voice softened a little. It wasn’t seductive, but questioning.

“No. I feel nothing.” I shrugged and checked my watch. “You want the best for her?”

“Yeah. She deserves it after her last boyfriend beat her into the ground emotionally.”

“Then tell her there’s nothing between us and there hasn’t been in a really long time. This is just a fucked up coincidence. Nothing more.”

She nodded. “I can do that. I want happiness for her. I want it for you too.”

“And we had that together.” I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding. “Let me walk you to the door.”

“Okay.” She turned and walked through the foyer, stopping suddenly and turning to face me. I took a step back to give us some distance. “You were willing to break the rules for me.”

“And I am for Dana too, Ana. I’m older and ready to start a family. Your sister is the only woman I want that with.” I moved around her and opened the door. “Help me make that happen?”

“It’s the least I can do for not running hard and fast after you back then.” She walked out and didn’t look back as she made her way to her car.

Did she still love me? I couldn’t tell.

I didn’t care either way. She was a memory... a painful one.

Turning, I walked back into the house and closed the door behind me. Excitement raced through my chest. Dana.

I'd get a chance to redeem myself to her, to help her see how much I wanted her in my life. I wasn't going to fuck it up. Not a chance.

I jogged to the bedroom and pulled off my clothes before jumping in the shower. I wanted everything to be perfect, including me. She needed to know what she meant to me, that I was her man and wouldn't stop until she was mine.

My body ached for her touch.

"Soon," I mumbled and stroked myself a few times. Soon she would be pressed to the bed beneath me, letting me worship every inch of her.

I wasn't going to take no for an answer.



"Dana." I smiled like a kid in a candy store as I pulled the door open. The angry look on her beautiful face caused my high to dim a little.

"How dare you!" She walked in and pushed me in the chest with both hands, causing me to take a step back.

I planted my feet and lifted an eyebrow. "Be careful, woman. I'm not the type of man who's good with being pushed around."

"Where is she?" Tears filled her eyes as she pushed me again.

I grabbed her wrists and tugged her toward me. "Who are we talking about and why are you so upset?" She smelled like heaven, the tropical scent of her shampoo rushing down to fill my lungs. I growled and took two big steps toward her until she was pressed against the door. "You smell so fucking good." I leaned down and pressed my lips to the side of her hair. "Stop for a minute and talk to me."

“My sister!” She pushed a little, but not nearly as hard as she had before.

“Ana left two minutes after she got here.” I moved back just a little, but kept my lower half pressed to her, holding her in place. I pinched her chin gently and forced her to look up at me. Her dark hair was wild, her eyes filled with passion. I was completely lost to her. “She came to try and fix things between me and you. Nothing else.”

“I don’t believe you.” Her breathing was off as emotions raced across her face. She was terrified. She still loved me.

“Then don’t believe me, but I wouldn’t lie to you. I didn’t walk away last week, baby. You did, and I’ve been in hell since then.” I leaned down and brushed my lips by hers, loving the soft whimper that came from her.

She didn’t want to fight me. She wanted me to fight for her.

“Look at me.” I kissed her again, short, hard.

“What? Let me go. I came over to talk, not be manhandled.”

“You think this is me manhandling you?” I laughed low in my chest before moving back and bending over a little. I pressed my shoulder against her stomach and picked her up as she yelped.

“Put me down! Kendal! What are you doing!!”

I ran my hand over the curve of her ass, cupping the back of her thigh and pressing my fingers against her center. Her jeans were too thick to really get a good feel of her body, but they’d be off of her soon enough.

“I’m manhandling you.” I walked toward the bedroom as she kicked and tried to throw a fit. “That’s the best you got?”

“Really!” She upped her game a little, almost kicking me in the dick.

“Better. Much better.” I dropped her on the bed, letting her fall hard. Reaching out, I gripped her hips and pulled her to the edge of the bed as she growled loudly at me.

“What are you doing?”

“I already told you.” I moved to my knees and slid my arms around her waist, pressing my cheek to her stomach and closing my eyes. I tightened my hold on her as my heart pounded in my chest.

She panted loudly, but seemed to be calming down a little. My heart broke when I heard the sound of her first sob. Her fingers ran through my hair, scraping down the back of my neck as she let herself cry.

I stayed there, holding her as tightly as I could until she pulled at my shoulder. Only then did I move up and cover her body with mine.

“I can’t lose you. I hate this life without you,” she mumbled, her beautiful lips swollen, her eyes filled with unmet need.

“Then don’t lose me.” I brushed her hair back. “Ana came to fix things between me and you.” I brushed my nose by hers and breathed in deeply. “I’ve missed you every night for the last week. You know I didn’t find you because you were her sister, Dana. You know I don’t still love her or I would be with her. We met at my sister’s deathbed. Remember, baby?”

She nodded. “Yes. I know. I just wish I were more. Ana is so-”

“Stop.” I rolled my hips, forcing her to open her legs for me so I could settle down between them. My erection was thick and twitching as if trying to get the poor girl’s attention all on its own.

“I know. I just-”

“No. You don’t know.” I leaned down and brushed her tears away before pressing my lips to hers. “Open up for me. I won’t hurt you.”

She moaned softly and wrapped her arms around my neck, her legs around my waist.

The desire to own her washed over me, and I pressed against her tighter as I slid my tongue against hers, coaxing

her to submit to me. Her soft moans mixed with sexual pants left me on fire.

“I need you,” she whispered, “but I’m scared.”

“Of?” I lifted up a little and rocked against her, wanting inside of her soft body so fucking bad.

“Of losing you again.”

“Were you scared of losing me when we first started seeing each other?” I rolled onto my back and pulled her with me.

She sat up and pressed her hands against my chest. “No. I don’t know. Why would my sister come over here to help me? She and I barely get along. Why would you *ever* choose me over her?”

I ran my hands up her thighs, along her sides until I cupped her throat on either side. I pulled her down and kissed her passionately, invading her once again until she pushed away from me and breathed in deeply.

“I’m not in love with Ana. That was six years ago.” I sat up and wrapped my arms around her, pressing my face against her breasts before turning and kissing the little bit of skin above her t-shirt opening. “I want you more than I have ever wanted her or anyone else, Dana. I’ve made that clear. You stood beside me through Mandy’s death no matter how shitty I was to you.”

She cupped my head against her chest and pressed her cheek to my forehead. “It’s going to take a little while for me to move past this.”

“Then let me help you do it.” I ran my hands over her hips and down to cup her ass. “Stay with me tonight. We’ll make dinner and talk about anything you want. Then I’ll run you a hot bath and wash you up for a long night of hearing you moan my name.”

She shivered and bucked her hips, rubbing her sweet center along my raging hard-on.

I growled and slid my fingers down farther, petting her from behind as she dug her fingers into my shoulders and

arched her back. “Maybe we don’t do dinner at all.”

“No. I want dinner. I need time with you before we-” She gasped as I tapped her pussy with my fingers.

“Oh, yeah?” I smiled and slid one of my hands into the back of her jeans, pushing until I had my middle finger buried in her wet heat. “You’re so wet, baby. All this fighting turn you on?”

“I don’t know.” She ran her hands down my face and leaned in for a long kiss as I drove my finger into her, brushing by her ass with my thumb as she rolled her hips and let me have her.

“I like it. Come for me once before we go.” I gripped the back of her head with my free hand and ground against her clit by lifting my own hips. The clothes were getting on my nerves, but she needed to know who she was dealing with. I wanted her lust and her love. Both in equal parts. When I wanted it.

“Oh God,” she whispered against my lips. “Stop. I’m not sure-”

I slipped another finger inside of her and licked up the long column of her neck. “Stop thinking and keep fucking my fingers, baby. I’m going to take advantage of every part of you tonight. You ready for that, Dana?”

She hugged me tightly as she screamed my name, her body tightening around me, wetting me in her release. The way she let herself enjoy the quick fuck was beautiful, delicious. It had me completely on edge. We had a lot of shit to work through, but there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do for her.

“I want more,” she whispered against my ear.

Time to tease her.

“And you’ll get it. After dinner.” I ran my fingers up her ass and pulled her down for one more kiss. It was filled with promise, forgiveness, raw lust.

We could get past all this shit... and then, I’d have to figure out what to do about my job. One thing was for sure.

She was more important than any rules I'd set for myself or had the University force upon me.

She was my future. My everything.

CHAPTER 49



DANA

“Did we really just do that?” I sat in the Lexus, my skin on fire, my heart racing a million miles per hour. The plan was to come over and bitch him out, kill my sister and move to a different part of the country. A few minutes in Kendal’s presence and I was screaming his name and trying to figure out what color I wanted my bridesmaids’ dresses.

He ran his hand over his cock and adjusted himself. “Yes, and my body is screaming for me to finish it.”

“You’re going to win me back with sex, aren’t you?” I laughed and noted that he was watching me.

“I’ll use anything I have to.” He reached over and took my hand, lifting it to his lips and kissing each knuckle, one at a time.

The deep pulse inside of me came to life again, leaving me sensitive, wet, needy. Damn him.

Had Ana really gone over to try and save things between me and Kendal? If so, my mother must have sent her. I’d have to find her sometime the next day and see what she was up to. It was rare for my sister to do anything that didn’t benefit her directly and massively.

“What are you thinking for dinner?” I had to change the topic before I crawled over into his seat and got us arrested for indecent exposure.

“Whatever you want. Steak? Lobster?”

“Both?” I snorted and pulled my hand from his to tug at the seatbelt. “Hey.”

“What, baby?” He glanced over and took my hand again, rested it on his thigh. He looked like something out of GQ in his jeans and t-shirt. The man never looked dressed-down no matter what he did. His dark hair was messy from me running my fingers through it, and his soft pink lips wet from my kisses.

I wanted him on his knees, between my thighs, making his apology with the flicking of his tongue and deep thrusting of his fingers.

He laughed. “I lost you. Are you fucking me in your head?”

“What?” Horror rolled over me. “No. I was just thinking about dinner.”

“Liar.” He squeezed my hand and chuckled. “You said, ‘hey’. Hey what?”

“I was just going to tell you that I was sorry about the other night at the Beta Alpha Psi thing. I should have been more mature. I just have always had this inferiority complex where my sister is concerned. She’s always been more than me.”

“She’s not nearly as much as you.” He pulled my hand farther into his lap, forcing me to lean over a little as he stroked himself with my fingers. “Just the thought of you turns me on, Dana. I have to be careful when I’m in class not to let myself go there. And not just sex. Anything related to you. The way you interact at the hospital, how smart you are, how strong you are.”

I took a shaky breath. I’d been wrong about him. How quickly I was willing to run due to fear and in doing so, I would have lost the best thing that had ever happened to me.

“I went on a date.” I pulled my hand back, realizing that I needed to make sure there was nothing standing between us being together.

“A date?” He lifted his eyebrow before his expression darkened a little. He parked in the grocery store parking lot. “And how was it? Find someone you like better than me in a short week?”

“What? No.” I got out of the car and walked around to face him. “My brother set me up with this poor guy that he’s been friends with forever. It was awkward, horrible. All I could think about was you.”

“If I told you that I’d been on a date, you’d lose your shit.” He reached out and cupped the side of my face.

“I know.” I glanced down and exhaled loudly. “Forgive me. It was more like a weird friend thing with your little brother’s bestie. Nothing happened. Nothing.”

“You’ll have to pay me back for this one.” He leaned down and nipped at my lips, his aggressive side so damn addictive.

“Anything you want,” I mumbled and snuggled against his side as we walked into the store. He wrapped a strong arm around my shoulders and kissed the top of my head.

“Be careful what you offer. I might take you up on it.”

A shiver ran through me. I knew his stories from the past were filled with sexual depravity and lust that would burn most people, but surely, he wasn’t that guy anymore, right?

Did I want him to be?

Yes. Badly.



“You get enough?” Kendal stood up from the table and reached for my plate. We’d spent the time cooking dinner and eating, talking through everything.

He had a lot on his proverbial plate at UT, and I had some big decisions to make, but one thing was for sure. We were going to work toward being together again. I couldn’t blame him for dating my sister. It was the past and not having him in the future left me without another option.

“I did. It was delicious.” I got up and followed him into the kitchen, bringing our wine glasses. “So, are you going to talk to the University President about Daisy, Mark and Heather? Seems like a lot to get involved in.”

He set the dishes in the sink and turned to face me. “I think so. If I lose my job, then so be it.” He reached out and brushed his hands down the side of my face, pulling me closer and leaning down to make love to my mouth.

By the time he moved back, my knees were weak, my stomach tight. “I love your kisses.”

“Then you should have more of them.” He kissed me quickly and moved around me to walk down the hall. “Bring the wine and meet me in the master bathroom.”

“Okay,” I whispered softly as nervousness ran through me.

A bath? Or shower together? Sex sounded good, but getting naked and having him stare at me for half an hour or more... terrifying. Would he compare me to Ana? She was so much thinner than I was.

“Stop stalling,” he called from down the hall. “I’ll happily turn back into a caveman. I’ve been dreaming about licking every inch of you since we met.”

“Shit,” I mumbled and grabbed the bottle of wine. If he didn’t like what he saw, he would tell me. *No, he won’t.*

He was sitting on the edge of a huge garden tub when I walked in, the smell of strawberries filling the air as bubbles rose in the bathtub. He glanced back. “Hi beautiful.”

“Where do you want this?” I lifted the wine feeling like an out-of-place heel.

“On the sink is fine.” He turned and pressed his hands to his knees. “Undress for me.”

“What? No.” I put the wine down and then rethought my response. I grabbed the wine, filled up a glass, downed it and did it again.

He laughed in the background, the sound delicious. “Undress for me, Dana. It wasn’t a request.”

I turned to face him and took a shaky breath. “I don’t know.”

“I do. Take off your clothes and let me see you. I plan on spending the rest of my life memorizing every beautiful curve and crevice. Let me start tonight.”

I nodded. Him and his poetic language. He could probably talk a nun into sinning. No wonder he and Damon Bryant were friends.

“Just know that I don’t want to do this.” I reached down and tugged my shirt off, throwing it at him.

He caught it and stood up. “Stop treating this like a moment where I’m going to judge you.” He pulled his shirt over his shoulders sensually, leaving miles of smooth, tanned skin on display. The dark trail of hair that lead into his pants had my pulse spiked. “It’s about showing off. Teasing your mate. Offering them a moment of pleasure without touching them.” He undid his jeans as I took a step back.

I wanted to see every inch of him, bared to me. There was something so intoxicating about it. His willingness to submit and go first. It left my head spinning.

He took his time, sliding his boxer briefs over his muscular thighs and leaving his body on full display. He ran his hand over this erection, gripping it tightly as he watched me. “See what you do to me? This isn’t because there’s a promise of sex. That exists everywhere. Anywhere. It’s because I want to lose myself inside of you. Because I want to hear you moan my name, to know that you belong to me. You turn me on. No one else.”

I swallowed the thick ball of regret in my throat. I’d almost lost him over nothing. Over the past.

Reaching back, I undid my bra and pushed it off my shoulders slowly, reaching around to knead at my breasts as his eyes shifted and he nodded.

“Beautiful,” he whispered and licked at his lips. “Your jeans.”

I unbuttoned them and slid them over my hips before standing up and kicking them off as casually as I could. He was much better at being sexy than I ever would be.

“Panties.” His voice was low, commanding. It caused chill bumps to break out across my skin.

He stepped back and got into the bubble bath, still standing and waiting on me as I slid my panties down my thighs slowly. “Like this?” I glanced up and he smiled.

“Exactly. You’re the greatest treasure I’ll ever know. Let me revel in the sight of you teasing me.” He extended his hand. “Come let me wash you.”

I walked toward the tub on wobbly knees. It was the biggest bathtub I’d ever seen. We’d have no trouble having a bit of fun. The real problem was that I’d never let anyone wash me before, much less took a bath with someone. “How about I wash myself and you just watch.”

He chuckled and took my hand as I stepped into the warm soapy water. “As enticing as that is, I want my hands on you. Maybe next time.” A chill ran through me as I moved to my knees and settled myself between his legs. He reached up and brushed his thumb by my lips. “Tell me you’re not going anywhere.”

The desire in his eyes scorched me. I loved him. I wanted to tell him, but it seemed like it was too soon, as if it would ruin the moment.

“You’d have to run me off.” I smiled and turned my back to him, sinking down in the warmth and resting against him.

“That’s not going to happen.” He ran his hands over my breasts, softly teasing my nipples as he dropped kisses up the side of my neck to my ear. “You’re beautiful beyond belief. Why in the world would you even begin to think that I would want anyone but you?”

I stiffened momentarily before leaning up and reaching for the soap. “Old habits die hard?”

“I guess.” He took the soap from my hand and offered me his free one. “Move back to your knees and lean up so I can

wash your back and butt.”

“So bossy.” I took his hand and moved to my knees, reaching out and pressing my forearms to the side of the tub as I lifted my ass like the hooker I felt like.

“Hell, yeah,” he mumbled and moved up behind me, running his hands all over me, pressing his fingers into my muscles, massaging, teasing. “I want you like this.”

“You need a condom.” I glanced back and stifled a groan. He had to be the sexiest man I’d ever laid eyes on. I wanted to offer him the world, but I wasn’t sure I knew how to come through on it. Our next steps were on shaky ground. One night of sex wasn’t going to open the door to anything. We had eight months until I graduated, or one of us had to make a major move.

“Not yet. I’ll hold back until we’re in the bed.” He leaned over, pressing his chest to my back and pulled me more to my knees again. “I want to feel your body explode around mine.”

I whimpered and cupped my hand over his as he slid his fingers down my stomach and cupped my sex, rubbing softly as he pressed his cock against my entrance.

White hot need raged through my center, and I pressed backward, forcing a little bit of him inside of me. He moaned in my ear and the world dissipated. He was all I wanted.

“Be easy,” he whispered and moved his free hand to my hip, using his grip on me to press in deeper.

“More,” I moaned and reached for the edge of the tub, wanting to give him better access to fuck me the way he had our first time. “Don’t go easy on me. Please.”

He laughed and ran his hand up my back, sliding his fingers into my hair and gripping it tightly. “You have no idea what you’re asking for.”

“Of course I do.” I lifted my hips and bobbed on his cock as he grunted and tightened his hold on me. “I wouldn’t have asked otherwise.”

“Oh, now you’re a tease.” His voice dropped low as he thrust, filling me with every inch of him and forcing me to open my legs farther.

“Kendal,” I cried out and closed my eyes, enjoying the sensation of belonging to him.

“Mine,” he mumbled before he lifted up and drove into me over and over again.

Nothing mattered but forcing myself to be present in the moment while he worshiped my body, forcing me to orgasm until I begged him to stop.

CHAPTER 50



KENDAL

Every naughty moment of my night with Dana rolled through my mind as I walked up the campus Monday morning. She'd fallen asleep in my arms Saturday night, my bed covered in sex and bubble bath. Her last question caused my heart to ache, though I was ready to make a decision.

"What about your rules, Kendal? I can't stay away for eight months, and I hate sneaking around. Maybe I should transfer." Her eyes were filled with worry that she was working hard to keep off her face.

"No. Then you'd be in Waco. I don't want you living somewhere else. I'd never see you." I brushed her dark hair back as I worked to memorize the way her lips turned down when she was worried.

"Then what? There's really no solution here."

"I'll quit UT. Damon offered me a job. We'll just go from there."

"You love teaching." She snuggled in closer, the softness of her breasts on my side making it hard to think. I'd made love to her until my body hurt and I still wanted more. It wasn't the sex. It was the act of making her cry out, the desperate way she pressed back against me, wanting more of my dick inside of her. It was so much more than I'd experienced with any other woman. It was loving and soft, forceful and passionate. It was love. I was convinced of it.

“I do, but I’ll teach again in the future.”

“You’re not leaving. We can sneak around.”

“You sure?” I kissed the tip of her nose and turned on my side to press my body tightly against hers. We intertwined our legs as I pulled her flush against me.

“Of course.” She glanced down for a second, and I had my answer. She wasn’t okay with it.

“Then, I’ll quit,” I mumbled to myself and walked into the Accounting building. Students were rushing around everywhere, and I almost regretted not getting in earlier.

Were we going to spend every night together or was that too risky?

Quit. Shit.

As much as I wanted to walk into Mark’s office and put in my resignation, something stopped me. I loved teaching with every fiber of my being. The thought of working in a big high rise in downtown and having to put on a front for a bunch of stiff pricks left my blood running cold.

Surely Damon’s company was different, right?

No way. Business was business.

I took the elevator up, squeezing in with a bunch of students and trying to be polite when I really wanted to remind them that the elevator was for professors and handicapped students. No need to look like the dick that was running around in my skull.

Something about having to be the *good guy* and tell Lance, the University President about not only Heather’s bullshit, but Daisy and Mark’s had me on edge. That and a million other things.

“Dr. Tarrington.” Mark was outside my office door when I walked up.

“Hey, Mark.” I extended my hand. “What can I do for you?”

“If you could come up to my office for a few minutes. Just need to talk through something with you.” He gave me a stern look, and I knew something was off. Had he found out about Eliza talking to Daisy? Had Daisy told him? It wouldn’t have surprised me. Someone sick in love usually was willing to use *any* means necessary to get back with their lover.

“Yeah. No problem. Let me put my stuff down and I’ll be right up.”

“Good. Make it fast, please. I have a meeting with the University President in twenty minutes.” He turned and walked toward the end of the hall, his demeanor stiff.

“What now?” I walked into my office and set everything down. After I pulled off my coat, I made a sharp right out of my door in search of Eliza. Maybe she knew what the hell was going on.

No luck. Her door was closed and she had a little sign that said she was changing the future. I smiled in spite of myself. Eliza was a good woman and a damn good professor. She took her job seriously in molding the minds of the people who would one day take over as the next line of teachers, preachers and professionals.

I used to think that way too.

I couldn’t help but try and pinpoint when my warm and fuzzy feelings toward my career stopped. Ana. They stopped when the University went from being a place where I could share myself to make a difference, to a dominating master in my life. They set the rules, and I followed them.

Like the good boy I never was.

Jogging up to Mark’s office on the third floor was good for me. My heart was racing a little by the time I walked in, but I had some clarity. Whatever he threw at me, I would nod, walk out and go visit Lance myself. I didn’t have to be pushed around or made to feel like a charity case anymore. They could all rot in hell.

“Mark?” I stuck my head in his office, not finding his secretary sitting at her desk. “Now good?”

“Yeah, buddy. Come in and shut that door behind you.” He nodded toward the door.

I closed it and walked over to drop down into the empty chair in front of his over-sized desk. The image of him taking Daisy ran through my head, and I grimaced. Gross. Damn.

“What’s going on? You need my help with something?”

“No.” He leaned back in his chair, crossed his big ass hands over his chest and watched me. “You know I stood by you when all that shit with Ana happened, and again with the situation we had two years ago.”

I nodded as my stomach soured. What the hell was happening? Surely there wasn’t some other woman coming forward to give false testimony that I’d raped or seduced them. I hadn’t been with anyone since Ana. No one on campus at least.

“I know that. I appreciate you.”

“Well, you’re on your own for this next one.”

“Next one?” I sat up and pressed my hands against my knees. I was going to throw up.

“Heather Turner is claiming that you took advantage of her three times over the last month. There are camera’s showing the two of you together in the various places, but of course there’s nothing but your word against hers on what actually happened.”

I exploded out of my chair. “Are you fucking kidding me? I wouldn’t touch Heather with a ten-foot pole. We were college friends and,” I leaned over, pressing my knuckles to his desktop and I leveled up and stared him in the face, “and she’s been trying to get in my pants since she got here, Mark. She’s a whore.”

“Is she?” He didn’t seem moved at all. “She’s got a pretty clean record.”

“No. She doesn’t.” I stood and walked to the window, running my fingers through my hair. “Why does this shit keep happening.”

“Cause you can’t keep your dick in your pants?”

“You’re one to talk.” I turned to face him. “And for the fucking record, I didn’t touch Heather. Not since college when she was a cum-sucking whore.”

He lifted his hands and gave me a warning look. “Hey. Watch what you say. Whether you fuck her or not, she’s making the claim. If you want this thing to go away, you gotta work with me to make that happen, *and* don’t you fuck this up. No dating anyone or seeing anyone that even has association with UT. You got me?”

“You know what,” I walked back over to stand in front of his desk and crossed my arms over my chest, “Fuck UT. I quit. I’m done with all of this madness.”

“Kendal.” He stood and slipped his hands into his pockets. “She’s pressing charges. You working here only helps you right now. You quit and it’s going to look like a confession of sorts. Don’t be an idiot. I’ll help you where I can, but you gotta keep your nose clean.”

I glanced down, feeling completely defeated. Keeping my nose clean meant that I needed to steer clear of Dana. I didn’t think I could do that. But as per usual... what choice did I really have?

“Is the school getting involved?”

“Yes. I’m going to try and get an investigation started and will support your character, but you’re on leave until it’s cleared up. Understood? I’ll get your classes covered and take care of everything here. Go find some charity to give back to, or a company to consult. This will remain under wraps as it’s in Heather’s contract to let us investigate anything that happens while she’s on campus. Just like it’s in yours.”

“Fine.” I turned and walked toward the door. “When this is cleared, I’m done. I’m not staying here and working my ass off, giving my entire life to a place that allows this kind of shit to happen all the time.”

“Kendal. We didn’t create this problem. You did by dating students.” He sat down as I glanced back at him.

“Six fucking years ago!”

“A record is a record, brother. Take a vacation and I’ll be in touch.” He glanced up from his paperwork and narrowed his eyes a little. “You fuck this up by doing something stupid and it’s not going to be your job you have to worry about. It’s your freedom.”

I didn’t look up as I walked down the stairs to the bottom floor, across campus and got into my car. Fury mixed with regret tore at the inside of my chest. I couldn’t catch a break. No matter what.

Of course Heather claimed that I raped her or *took advantage* of her three times. She wanted to be owned so badly that she was going to force her way into my life in a positive or negative light. No matter what the bitch had to do, she was going to get the spotlight in my world for a while.

She was jealous of Dana, and she should be. They all should be.

I drove to McKenzie and Bryant, breaking every law possible in my rage. I pulled up to the front and got out, ignoring the valet as he welcomed me to the building. There had to be justice somewhere. Damon was the only one I could think to go to in order to help me find it.

He loved me like a brother, and he was richer than God himself. It was time to cash in on our friendship. I was obviously doing a *horrible* job of making my life work alone.

“Dr. Tarrington,” Linda glanced up from her desk. “He’s in a-”

I ignored her and walked into Damon’s office. He was seated at his desk on the phone, his voice loud, his brow pinched. He gave me a ‘what the fuck’ look as I closed the door behind me and dropped down in the chair in front of him.

“Yes,” he barked into the phone and studied me, “and get it right this time. You make me look anything less than brilliant and your whole family will be on food stamps before the end of the day. I will ruin you.”

He slammed the phone down and leaned back in his chair.

“Matt?” I asked.

“How did you know?” He cracked a smile. “What the hell, man? You can’t wait five minutes for me to get done chewing someone out?”

“No. Heather filed a sexual assault suit against me. I swear I’m never going to get from my past, am I? I’ve never forced myself on a woman - ever.”

“It’s about the fact that they all wish you would force yourself on them.” He got up and walked to his floor-to-ceiling windows. “I don’t know what the fuss is all about. You’re a total nice guy now.”

I laughed and stood up. “Help me. I don’t ever ask for help, but I need you here. I just got back with Dana, and of course Mark is telling me that I’m on voluntary suspension and I can’t see anyone or do *anything* if I want to keep my freedom.”

“Your job?” He turned to face me, his expression softening.

“My freedom, Damon. I could go to jail if this bitch figures out a way to make it look like I raped her.” I ran my hand down my face as he walked over and gripped my shoulders.

“We’ll figure it out. I’ll get someone on it today. I have resources.”

“You should be in the mafia.” I let my chin touch my chest. “I just keep thinking I’m finally going to catch a break.”

“Naw... rule followers are always bumping up against walls and shit.” He squeezed my shoulders. “We’ll figure this out, and when it’s all said and done, you’re quitting UT and coming to work with me. I’ll pay you twice as much as you’re making. You can be our lead trainer or coach or anything you fucking wanna be. I’ll just put you as an executive vice president and you can stare out the window all damn day. You’re my only friend.” He patted my chest. “You’re like a brother to me. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

“Thanks man.” I let out a long exhale. “I don’t know what to tell Dana.”

He patted the side of my neck, forcing me to look up. “Tell her the truth.”

“Right.” I slipped my hands in my pockets, feeling a little better.

His phone buzzed and he walked back over to his desk. “Seriously. Women get pissed more about lies than anything else. And... don’t forget we’re having a family dinner tomorrow night at Dad’s house. He’ll be fifty-eight. Bring the candles and Dana. It’ll be good for all of us.”

Bring Dana? I wasn’t supposed to even go within a hundred feet of her until all this shit with Heather got cleared up. She was never in a million years going to understand me stepping back, even for a couple of weeks. I knew I wouldn’t.

CHAPTER 51



DANA

Everything seemed right again. Was I really willing to get over Kendal being with Ana in the past? It would seem so. Having him wrapped around me Saturday night left my heart full, my eyes focused on the future. He didn't know me back then. It was just a messed up coincidence that all of us would have to ignore, reject, forget.

As long as he didn't still have feelings for my sister, I was good. He knew that I was struggling with self-image issues because of having to grow up as her ugly-duckling sister. Where I wasn't sure I could get past that drama on my own, something told me that he would be right next to me, helping me push through it.

"Morning, Dana." Dr. Lewis walked by me as I made my way to the elevators.

"Morning, Dr. Lewis. I spoke with Kendal. I'm sure he'll be calling you soon. He seemed very interested in having dinner with you and your wife." I slipped my hands into my pockets and smiled warmly.

"Good. And will you be joining him?" The older man paused and put his hands on his hips. The knowing look on his face left me feeling like I belonged there. It was a first for me, but something I could quickly get used to.

"I think so." I waved and moved into the open elevator, wishing I would have found it empty.

Tinsley glanced up from reading a chart. "Oh. You."

I laughed. “Morning to you too, Tinsley.”

“I’m actually glad you’re here. Mrs. Delmaz has been acting like a wild-ass all morning. She found out a friend of hers died and wants to go to the funeral, but her dementia is getting worse. Once we stabilize her blood pressure and make sure her new medicine is working better than this last one, her ass is outta here.”

“Does she not have any family we can call?” I hadn’t seen anyone come to visit her and there was no mention of anyone in the charts as a next of kin.

“Just her crazy bird, Larry. Weirdo.” She moved up as the door opened.

I grabbed the back of her arm, forcing her to look over her shoulder. “You know. One day it’s going to be you laying in a bed. You better damn well hope you get someone like me to care for you and not someone like you.”

She jerked her arm away from me. “You know nothing about me. Don’t touch me again.”

I moved back and let the door close, riding the elevator all the way to the top. I wasn’t going to let Tinsley or all people get me down. I had Kendal back and I was hoping to meet up with Ana for coffee later that day. After I cleared everything up with her, there was nothing else that could mess things up for my future.

I was in love with a handsome bad boy professor who was willing to break the rules for me. It was hot and made me feel like I was flying.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out as I reached up and pressed the button to be taken back down to my floor. Talon.

I growled and waited until the door opened to call my brother, Brandon. He answered just before I hung up, the phone ringing five times.

“Hello?” He sounded sleepy.

“Hey. Can you do me a big favor? It’s Dana.”

“I have caller I.D., silly girl.” He snorted and I smiled.

“Is that a yes?”

“You drunk and stuck at a bar without a license again?” He huffed. “You’re always getting in trouble. Jeez!”

“That was you, and no, I’m at work.” I let a smirk lift my lips as I walked toward the nurse’s station. “Can you tell Talon that I’m back with my ex-boyfriend?” I rounded the corner to find Jackie standing there.

She turned, her eyebrows lifted and mouthed, ‘back with your ex-boyfriend?’ The grimace on her pretty face let me know quickly that she thought I was talking about Cameron.

“What? Awww, man. I was hoping things would work out with you and my main man.”

“If he’s your main man, then you need to put a ring on it.” I snorted. “He’s a great guy, Brandon, but Kendal and I are working through things. I’m in love with him.”

“The guy that dated Ana?” His laugh hurt my feelings a little. “You sure that’s a good thing? Keeping it in the family and shit.”

“Ouch,” I barked into the phone and leaned against the counter beside Jackie.

“I’m sorry. That was shitty of me.” He huffed. “I’ll let Talon know. Be careful though, Sis. He hurt Ana really bad back then. I remember listening to her cry in her damn room for a year. Now granted, Mom’s walls are fucking paper thin, but still.”

“I understand. I’m good. Thanks for the help with Talon. I’ll check you later.” I dropped the call and slipped my phone into my scrub’s pocket. “Brothers.”

“Are you and Kendal back together? That’s great news.” Jackie reached out and squeezed my shoulder. The woman was hot and then cold and then hot again where Kendal was concerned. It was a little unnerving not knowing what she was thinking, and yet if I were being honest with myself, I really didn’t care.

He meant the world to me and things were looking bright. I refused to be the type of person who was waiting for the other shoe to fall.

“Yeah. We stayed together some over the weekend.” I turned and reached up to grab a few towels from the cabinet above my head. “It felt like coming home. He loves me. I know he does.”

“And the shit with Ana?”

“They talked through it.” I shrugged and turned back to face her. “I’m going to text her and see if she can meet with me for a few minutes later today.”

“You think she will? I never can really get a read on you and your sister’s relationship. Seems like it’s on and then off again.” She pressed her hand against the counter and leaned toward it, looking innocent in her question. I almost laughed. She was the wildest woman I knew.

“What’s your point? Everyone’s relationship is on and off again. That’s the nature of family in general.” I pulled down my list and thumbed through it. “Mrs. Delmaz is acting up again?”

“Yes, but you’re diverting.” She reached up and pushed the clipboard down. “Your sister says she’s not in love with Kendal, but what if she is? A lot of times when people care about each other, they’ll say one thing, and mean the total opposite. You know this.”

I nodded. “I know, but Kendal doesn’t have feelings for her.”

“So you say.” She put her hands on her hips and cocked an eyebrow.

“Jackie.” I turned to face her. “Are you for Kendal or against him? I’m confused.”

“I’m *for* you. No one else.” She reached out and tugged at a strand of my hair. “I’m just worried. This is a really weird situation, and I thought you told me that he couldn’t date students.”

“We’ve been over this.” I turned and walked toward the door. “We’re going to wait until I graduate, sneak around or one of us is going to make a change that allows us to see each other.”

“Right. You going to Baylor.” I didn’t like the tone of her voice.

I glanced over my shoulder before turning to face her. “I love him. I don’t want to lose him. Doing something as simple as changing schools is easy.”

“I get it.” She shrugged, not seeming at all like herself. “But if you’re the one willing to make a massive change and he’s not, then what do you have to change next? You’re thinking about being a doctor instead of a nurse and your best shot for that is in New York, right?”

I could see where she was headed with her questioning. “Yes.” I held back a loud sigh of aggravation.

“I’m just saying that you better be careful. This relationship isn’t just about the here and now. It’s about what he expects you to be *willing* to do in the future for him. What’s he willing to do for you now?”

“He said he would leave the University, but I don’t want to ask that of him.”

“And that’s smart. Men don’t change for women, Dana. Believe me. I’ve tried to get a few to change for me, and nope... not even a little bit.” Her expression tightened and I finally caught up. She was upset. About Parks most likely. The conversation had little to do with me and Kendal and everything to do with her and the sexy bastard of a doctor that stole her heart and set her panties on fire.

I’d kick him in the nuts if I ever saw him again.

“Why would he say that he would leave UT if he wasn’t really planning on doing it?”

Jackie put her back to me. “Men are liars. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“I’ll be upstairs if you need me.” I turned and pushed the cart into the hallway. Jackie was being a bitch because of her own life falling apart. And where I should have ignored it, something nagged at me. Kendal *had* brought up leaving UT, but did I really believe he would?

A huge part of me wanted to. It was the most sensible option for us to be together now. Me moving to Baylor would only put an hour and a half drive between us, but studies at Baylor were incredibly hard, and it was a private school. It was expensive.

“He didn’t let you consider that option either. Stop it,” I grumbled at myself as I stopped by the first door for my rounds. I couldn’t let everyone else’s problems or opinions become my own. My relationship with Kendal was unique.

Focus on the good stuff.

I had a bounce in my step an hour later as I approached Mrs. Delmaz’s door. It didn’t take much to get me feeling good again when I let myself dwell on how right it was to belong to such an incredible man. Nothing was going to get in the way of that. He was worth fighting for. Hell, I was worth it.

“Mrs. Delmaz?” I stuck my head into the door to find her sleeping. Her blanket was wrapped around her legs as if she’d been kicking a few minutes before. After unwinding her legs, I pulled the blanket back up to just under her chin and squeezed her hand. “I hope you’re okay.”

She was sleeping peacefully from what I could tell. I half expected her to wake up, but she never moved an inch. I stood there for a few more seconds before realizing what a creeper I looked like. All of my patients were important to me, but it seemed like the ones that threw fits and acted like crap were the ones that drew me in deep.

They were looking for attention. For love. I wanted to offer that every time if I could. It was a far better answer than treating them like they were crazy, besides, karma had to play a part in the bigger scheme of things.

I pulled my phone out and texted my sister, hoping she would be free later. Her text back said she had about ten minutes at the top of the hour. That was it.

“Snippy.” I checked the time. If we met at the park, I’d have to go... now. Shit.

After rushing through the rest of my rounds, I put my stuff up, explained myself to Jackie and jogged out of the hospital and down the street to the pretty little park half a mile away. I was panting by the time I showed up.

Should have driven.

“Dana. Over here.” Ana waved me over, her long hair down around her shoulders, slightly curled. Her makeup was perfect and the outfit looked like someone had designed it just for her.

Great. Nothing like feeling second best every time I had to see her.

I checked my phone as I walked toward her, realizing that I had a text from Kendal, inviting me to go to Damon Bryant’s father’s house the next night. He had something he needed to take care of *that* night, but would see me soon.

Something about the message set me on edge. Why wouldn’t he want to spend the evening together? We hadn’t seen each other in two days because of my night shift on Sunday and an early morning one that day.

“Hey.” I stopped in front of my sister. “Thanks for meeting me. I figured we need to get this worked out between us.” I reached up and brushed my hair over my shoulder. “I don’t want things to be weird between us.”

“You’re dating the guy I thought I would spend my life with, Dana. Why *wouldn’t* it be weird.” Her smile faded. She was upset. Fuck.

“So you are still in love with him.” I crossed my arms over my chest as if I had a chance in hell of protecting my heart from her. She knew just where to shoot her arrows.

“It doesn’t matter. He’s in love with you.” She shrugged and looked around as if wishing she could be anywhere but with me.

“I didn’t know you guys had-”

“Save it.” She lifted her hand. “I realize that. I’m not an idiot.”

“So what do we do.”

“Nothing. He chose you. It’s for the better. I fucked up all those years ago running when I should have stayed. He’s yours now, but I’ll tell you straight up... if you guys date while you’re a student and he’s a professor and someone finds out-”

“We’re going to put things on hold until I graduate.” Why was I explaining myself to her? Obviously her intentions by going over to his place weren’t nearly as noble as Kendal made them seem. That or he was completely oblivious to her feelings.

“Right.” She gave me a sappy look. “We were too, but he’s not the kind of man that wants to wait on anything. He’ll force you to change to make things work. He’s not going to give an inch.”

“You don’t know that.” I hated her all of a sudden. My whole life she’s been in the background, making me second guess myself. Never once had she supported me.

“Sure I do.” She laughed and pulled out her phone. “It was our story once, but another time. I gotta get back to work. Best of luck with things. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I didn’t say a word. There was nothing else to say. She was most likely right, but I hoped for the sake of my heart that she wasn’t. It couldn’t take another hit.

I wouldn’t let it.

CHAPTER 52



KENDAL

I should have stayed home, but I wanted to see Eliza to have someone to talk things through with. After spending the day pacing the floor at my house, I'd finally resigned myself to needing to see Dana. I had to tell her what the hell was happening. At least if we met up at Damon's and things went to shit, I could get drunk and drown myself in the pool.

"One step forward and three steps back." I pulled open the door of the accounting building, praying like hell that I wouldn't run into anyone, especially not Mark. Heather was on leave for three weeks because of the trauma of everything. Fucking lying bitch. I should have put her in her place the first time she showed up in Mark's office. Now I was the villain.

It seemed like that was always the way my stories ended. Me holding the bag, broken hearted or the false villain who ruined lives and ripped panties. Crazy.

"Dr. Tarrington. You weren't in class today. Everything okay?" One of my senior students stopped me as I jogged up the stairs to the second floor.

"Yeah. Just had to deal with a few things in my personal life."

"Okay. Hope everything is alright." He smiled and jogged down the stairs as I continued to make my way up. There were many reasons why I loved my job, and I could fool myself all day long, but a *huge* part of me still loved my job. It was who I was at this stage in my life. I was an accounting professor.

And in my early thirties to not be a husband, a dad, a t-ball coach... being a professor was all I had.

Luckily enough, I made my way down to Eliza's office without another interruption. She was typing away on her computer, so I gently knocked on the door. The look on her face told me that the staff was already privy to what was going on.

"Oh, Kendal. Come in. Jeez." She hopped up and walked toward me, closing the door behind me and letting out an exasperated sound.

"Now is a good time? I know you're--"

"Stop that. It's fine. Come in and sit down."

"No, I'm not staying long. I was just driving myself batshit crazy walking around the house." I put my hands on my hips as a million thoughts raced through my mind. "You guys know about Heather's claims?"

She nodded. "Unfortunately, their investigations always include taking witnesses from both sides of the story."

I snorted. "Heather has someone on her side of the story?"

Eliza pressed her hand to her face and glanced down. "Yes. Unbelievably so."

"Who? Eliza. What are you not telling me?" Sickness rolled around in my stomach as I moved toward her desk, but stopped short of reaching her. The last thing I needed was to have someone walk in and find me standing too close to another female professor, regardless of her age. I was a pervert. We did weird things.

"Daisy." She ran her fingers down her face. "I have no clue why. I guess she's planning something and thinks that Heather is an ally."

"What? That makes no sense at all. Heather is just like Mark. She's the viper in the bird's nest, not the goddamn bird." My voice rose and Eliza lifted her hand to warn me. "Sorry."

“It’s okay. I understand your frustrations. I’ll keep my ears open and let you know if I hear anything. I’m planning on talking to Daisy tomorrow to see what she thinks she’s doing. I swear someone just needs to blow the lid off on all of this madness.”

“I should have done it while I had the chance. At this point, it will simply look like retaliation for getting caught with my pants down.”

“You didn’t-”

“No. Of course not, but you get the point. Now is the worst possible time I could bring all of this up. They’ll crucify me. You know they will.” I ran my hand over my chest, rubbing my heart.

“You okay?” She glanced toward my movement.

“Yes. Just trying to stay calm. There’s only so much someone can take before they fucking snap, you know? I went through this same nightmare two years ago. I would never touch a woman without her consent. Hell, even then I probably wouldn’t come close. I’ve been burned too many times.”

“Don’t say that.” She walked around her desk and laid her small hand over mine. “Hold tight. It’s going to get better. Just keep your nose clean and try hard to steer clear of all of them until we work it out. I’ll figure out what’s going on with Daisy and let you know. Maybe Heather went to her.”

“I don’t know. I hate drama so damn much. Just keep me in the loop.” I took a few steps back and paused. “The other professors don’t think that I... that I would...”

“No. Not most of them. The ones that do are just jealous.”

“Right. Okay. Thanks, Eliza.” I turned and opened the door, walking out and trying hard not to let my skin crawl. I’d worked so hard to redeem myself, but it didn’t matter. It was taboo to date a student, even though I was twenty-five and Ana was twenty-two. That part was irrelevant. The college looked at it as if I were a pedophile. Everyone did. It would be no different with Dana now.

I kept my head up as I walked down the stairs and started for the door. I couldn't let anyone know how bad I was hurting. It wasn't their business anyway. Hell, it'd probably start more rumors or help in convicting me further.

"Dr. Tarrington."

I turned at a familiar voice. Bethany. I relaxed a little as she walked toward me, her smile warm and welcoming. She reached out and touched my arm. "Where were you today? Damon said you were coming to dinner tonight."

I pulled her hand off of me carefully. "Some shit happened yesterday and I've been asked to go on voluntary leave."

She gasped and reached up, pressing her fingers to her mouth. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. I need to go, but I'm headed over to Kent's now. I'll tell you all about it over there."

"I'm done for the day. Let me just catch a ride with you. I'll get my car tomorrow."

I glanced around, not too sure that was a good idea. "I don't know. Might be best if we--"

"Kendal. It's me." She gave me a stern look. "Let me grab my bag and I'll meet you outside."

"Alright, but if they call you in as my next rape victim, you better tell Damon that nothing happened." I forced a smile and turned, trying to get away from the concern on her pretty face.

The idea riding with her to Kent's lifted my spirits, though it shouldn't have. Where she was quickly becoming a friend, it was a friendship that would have to remain secret much like mine and Dana's relationship. She was a student. I was taking a chance in having *anyone* see us as we left campus. It felt like a chance I couldn't afford.

I texted Damon so he could let Bethany know as I walked to the parking lot, got in the car and drove off. She'd understand. I'd explain myself at dinner. She'd have to. I didn't need someone else angry or disappointed in my life.



“Hey. What’s the big deal with standing me up?” Bethany walked into the kitchen where Matt and I stood. Damon was on the back patio with Karen and Kent, working on getting the grill started.

“I’m sorry.” I lifted my hands and walked toward her, pulling her into a quick, friendly hug. “Heather Turner claimed rape on me and I’m back where I started two years ago. I’ve been warned not even to be seen with anyone at UT. Adult, child, bookshelf.”

Matthew laughed. “I’d pay to see you with a bookshelf.”

“Heathen.” I glanced over my shoulder and gave him a look as someone knocked on the front door. “I got it.”

“Expecting someone?” Bethany called after me.

“Yeah. Dana.” I walked to the door, forcing myself not to jog. I was terrified of losing her again, but I had to explain myself. She needed to know what the hell was going on.

I opened the door and lost my breath. She stood there, looking like a sex kitten in a pretty blue dress, her legs going on for what seemed like forever. The dainty sandals she wore were all wrong for winter, but looked so good on her. My body roared to life.

“Um, hi?” She moved toward me, wrapping her arms around my waist and lifting to her toes. “You’re my boyfriend right? A one, Dr. Kendal Tarrington? Best looking thing this side of the Mississippi?”

I didn’t say anything, but instead ran my fingers through her hair and leaned over to consume her sweet mouth. A soft moan left her and I was lost. It was a damn good thing for her that everyone else was in the house behind us. Otherwise I would have carried her down the hall and eaten her for dinner.

“Wow.” She pulled back and reached up to touch the side of my face. “You okay?”

“Oh yeah. Much better now.” I leaned down and kissed her a few more times. “Fuck, you turn me on.”

“Well, keep it in your pants.” She smiled. “Let’s go hang out with your friends and I’ll fake a stomach ache in a little while so we can leave.”

“I like the sound of that.” I cupped my hand over hers and pulled it from my face, kissing her fingers a few times. “You doing okay?”

“Just cold.” She gave me a look, and I realized that I was blocking the way into the house.

“Sorry, baby.” I moved back and watched her walk past me. It took me a few minutes to adjust my erection, but she stole the attention from everyone in the kitchen anyway. How could she not? She was magnificent, caring, gorgeous, smart. I was in trouble. I’d be on my damn knees before her with a ring before too long if I wasn’t careful.

Slow your roll. You gotta get through this shit with Heather. It isn’t just your job. It’s your life.

One more fuck up, and I was sure to dive into a pit I couldn’t get out of on my own. To the University, Dana would be a *massive* fuck up. Dating another student?

Sadness swam through my center as I watched her own the room. Matt laughed and glanced over at me, shaking his head.

“How the hell did you score this beautiful girl?”

“No clue. I’d say that I was lucky-”

Damon walked in. “But we *all* know that’s a damn lie.”

We laughed and Damon motioned for me to join him outside. I shook Kent’s hand and gave Karen a quick hug before walking into the chilly night with him.

“She’s gotta know what’s going on.” He opened the top to the grill. “Just tell her.”

“I can’t.” I ran my hand over my chest and turned toward the house. “I want her so fucking bad right now. Something

about having her wrapped around me gives me a moment to believe everything is going to be okay.”

“Then go take her. We’ve got thirty minutes. Stop being a puss and get in there.”

“You just dragged me out here, fucker.” I glanced back and smiled.

“I’m going to get you out of this. I promise. Go spend time with your girl seeing that you can’t really do it anywhere else.”

“Thirty minutes?” I walked toward the house as my cock stood at attention. “That’s not nearly long enough.”

“I’m calling bullshit,” Damon called after me, but I ignored him. The insane life he and I had lived in college left us brothers by choice for the rest of our lives. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for him, and I knew the feeling was mutual.

If he said he could get me out of my hell. He could.

The sound of Dana laughing stole my heart. I paused by the entrance to the kitchen and let my eyes move down the back of her. She was telling a story about some crazy old woman at the hospital and Bethany, Kent, Karen and Matt were gathered around her, laughing. They moved away as Karen started giving out orders, and I had my chance.

I moved up behind Dana, wrapped my arms around her and leaned down, brushing my lips up the side of her neck.

“Meet me in the bathroom, third door on the right. Now.” I licked her ear. “I need you so fucking bad.”

She shivered in my arms, but when I turned to leave, I had no doubt that she would follow. I could see the love entangled lust in her eyes when I first opened the front door.

I couldn’t mess this up. I just couldn’t.

CHAPTER 53



DANA

Chill bumps covered my exposed skin, and I stifled a moan. My mind had been playing horrible tricks on me the last day or so. After not getting to see him on Sunday or Monday, and then having my older sister basically confess that of course she was still in love with him. I was a hot ass mess.

“I’ll be right back,” I stuttered and turned, hoping to catch up with him. Did he say second or third? Right or left.

I yelped as he reached out and grabbed me from an open door. “Kendal.” I swatted at his chest as he laughed and closed the door.

The bathroom around us was elegant. Beautiful.

“Sorry, baby. I didn’t want you to pass me by.” He slid his hands down my sides and squeezed my hips before pulling me in close. “I missed you.”

“Why didn’t I get to see you yesterday?” I lifted to my toes and brushed my lips by his, loving the taste of lust on his tongue.

He didn’t respond, but deepened the kiss, leaving me weak to whatever he wanted from me. “We only have twenty-eight minutes and I hate rushing these things.”

I laughed. “We have all night. We’re not having sex in this bathroom. I’m not a wild-”

“Yeah, you are. I know you like to play proper like a good girl usually does.” He stood up and walked around me, dragging his fingers over my lower back as he moved. “You

pull it off well, but the woman covered in soapy water with her beautiful ass in the air moaning for me to go deeper is the one I want to spend twenty-seven minutes with.”

Nerves danced in my belly, but I forced them down and turned to face him. “And what if she doesn’t really exist?”

“I know she does.” He licked his lips and ran his eyes down my body before reaching out and gripping my waist. “Up on the counter.”

I reached back and pressed my hands to the cold counter as he lifted me and sat me on the edge. “What are you doing, Kendal?”

“Loving you when I want to.” He slid his hands up my thighs, forcing my dress to go with him. “Where I want to.”

I reached out and gripped his shoulders, not too sure of myself. “What if someone hears us? Did you bring a condom?”

He tugged my dress up enough to leave a tiny pink triangle showing between my thighs. “Hush. Just lean back and give me some room, angel.”

I whimpered as he ran his thumb over my center. His eyes moved back up to mine and he slipped his fingers underneath my panties, spreading me open and pressing in a little.

“Kendal. We can do this later t-”

“Shhh...” He moved down to his knees and pulled me closer to the edge before tugging my panties to the side. Leaning in, he breathed in deeply. “Fuck, I love the way you smell.”

“Oh shit.” I gripped the counter as he rolled his tongue through my folds, teasing me with strong flicks and the hope that he would force a finger deep inside of me.

“Wrap your pretty legs around my shoulders.” He glanced up and smiled. “Relax. It’s just me. I’m going to be down here a lot. I love the way you look. The way you smell and taste.” He leaned in and pressed his mouth to me, sucking softly and then harder.

I wasn't going to last long. Cameron refused to go down on me, and Kendal had been my first time a few weeks back. I wasn't used to it, didn't know what to expect. The naughty part of me wanted to reach down and hold myself open for him, but I wasn't sure how he would take it.

“So soft and wet, Dana.” He pressed two fingers into me, driving me over the edge with nothing more than a few deep pumps. “That’s it. I feel you tightening. Let go.”

I let my head drop back as electricity raced across my stomach. The moan I let out would have been embarrassing if I could make sense of anything. All I could hear, feel, see was him in front of me, lapping at my body.

“Again,” he commanded and flicked his tongue over my clit.

“Harder,” I whispered and arched my back.

He complied, and I had a hard time holding myself up. The room spun around me as the sound of him licking and sucking at my flesh filled the air.

“I’m going to fuck you so good when I get you home, Dana. You’re in for a long night, baby.” He pressed his mouth to my center and I almost came off the counter as a cry ripped from my lips, my body shaking, my mind dizzy.

He stood and gave me a naughty grin. “Fuck, that was hot.”

“I love it.” I reached up and gripped the back of his neck, pulling him down into a long kiss. “I love you.” I needed him to know.

He pulled back and ran his hand over his erection. “You turn me on so much. Did you know that? Everything about you.”

I worked to get my panties back into place and reached for him as someone knocked on the bathroom door. The sound of it almost scared the hell out of me.

“Hey guys. Dinner is ready!” Matt yelled.

“We’re coming,” Kendal called out and glanced back at me, whispering the rest. “At least one of us is.”

I smiled and moved toward him. Why hadn’t he repeated my affection? Was it too early? Had he not heard me? “You wanna a turn.”

“You know I do, but not here. We’ll take our time together soon.” He brushed his fingers down the side of my face. “You were incredible.”

“I don’t wanna go yet.” I pressed my hands to his chest and lifted to my toes. “Tell them I’m not feeling well.”

He laughed. “That was our plan for later tonight, I thought.”

“It was.” I stepped back and fixed my skirt. “I know this isn’t the right time, but I met with Ana today. She told me that you were in love with me.”

He turned and leaned over the water faucet, splashing his face, leaving me in silence. Awkward silence.

I continued to fill the gap. “It was good to move past things with her. I think we did, at least.”

“That’s great news, baby.” He patted his face with a white hand towel and turned to face me. “And you told your brother’s friend to jump off a cliff? I’d hate to go to jail for killing some poor guy.”

I smiled. “I did. And what about you?”

His expression tightened. “What about me?”

I was expecting a different response, but I got somewhere between tense and put off. For some strange reason, it agitated me. Maybe I just needed to be direct with him. He was my lover, my boyfriend and soon to be my best friend. I wanted everything clear between us.

“I’m moving past the shit with my sister for you. I’m thinking about transferring for you. So we can be together before May. That’s too long. You know it is.” I reached up and brushed my hair back, trying not to lose my nerve. “Are you getting past the rules of the university for me?”

He moved past me and opened the bathroom door. “It’s not that easy. I’ll explain.”

I took his hand when he reached for me, because I wasn’t sure what else to do. I’d just opened my legs like a whore in the bathroom for him. Sure, it was all for my own pleasure, but to have him not respond to my admission of love and then say that he *wasn’t* going to reject the University rules for me?

Shit. Maybe Jackie was right. Maybe my sister was right.

“We’ll talk about it tonight, okay?” He glanced over his shoulder, his expression meant to reassure me no doubt.

“Of course. It’s all good.” I pulled my hand from his and walked into the kitchen to find Bethany and Karen laughing about something. I missed my own mom in the moment. “Hi ladies.”

“Hey. Where did you run off to?” Bethany reached out and brushed my hair from my face.

“Kendal wanted to chat for a minute. We’ve both been going through some crazy crap in our own lives.” I shrugged and pointed to the carrots that someone stopped chopping midway through the bag. “You need me to finish those?”

“I’d love for you to.” Karen smiled over at me. “How long have you and Kendal been dating?”

“A couple of weeks, I guess.” I moved over and started to chop the carrots, grateful for something to do. My panties were ruined, my hormones on full alert and my knees weak. It was a shitty way to feel in front of almost strangers.

“That’s great. He’s a wonderful man. His life has been a little bit ridiculous, don’t you think, Beth?” Karen moved over toward me and took the chopped veggies I’d completed. “He just needs to find a good woman, but it seems like he already has.”

“Yeah. Every time he gets ahead a little, something stupid happens. This latest thing with Heather is just fucking disturbing.” Bethany moved up beside me as her mom barked from behind us.

“Language please!”

“Sorry, Mom.” Bethany laughed and picked up a bottle of wine. “You want a drink?”

“Um, sure.” I needed to get my head out of the conversation Kendal and I had half-ass had in the bathroom. It was stupid. He would tell me that he loved me when he could. He would walk away from the University when it was the responsible time to do it. It didn’t have to be him that sacrificed. It could be me. Just me. Right?

“Did he tell you about the latest crap with Heather Turner?”

“The professor at UT that he knew back in college?”

“Yeah.” She rolled her eyes and poured a glass of wine before extending it toward me. “I guess him and Damon used to sleep with her together. That’s weird.”

“I agree.” I forced a chuckle and lifted my glass. “I knew she was bothering him a little, but he was supposed to go to the dean about it.”

“Well, it’s gotten worse. She’s claimed that he forced himself on her three times.” She finished her glass and filled it up again. “Have you ever heard of anything so stupid?”

“No,” I whispered as dread filled me. There was no way Kendal would sleep with this chick. He hated her. An angry fuck? It’s not like we were together at all the last two weeks. I couldn’t believe it about him. He wasn’t that guy.

Or was he?

I’d never met anyone so aggressive and forward in the bedroom, and where I loved it, I could image Heather did too. How hard would she have to push to get him to buckle? A hot guy like him? He wasn’t the only one with the looks.

She was beautiful too. The day she’d been spying on us gave me a quick chance to see who she was. Why hadn’t I been worried then? Because everything seemed fine.

But it wasn’t fine.

He didn't love me or he would have said something in the bathroom. It was the perfect chance to validate it for me.

And he wasn't going to push against the University rules to make sure we were together. Jackie and Ana were right. Men didn't change for the woman they liked. They did it for the ones they loved.

And that wasn't me.

I twisted the knife and cut the tip of my finger, yelping loudly as Karen rushed over.

"You okay, dear?"

"Damn. I'm so sorry." I pulled my hand up and reached for the towel she offered me. "I'm really sorry. I cut my finger pretty bad. And I ruined the carrots." Tears burned my eyes. Where the cut was on purpose, the tears were real. I needed an out. Now.

"I'll get Kendal." Beth walked out.

"Just tell him that I'm okay and just need to run up to the hospital to get a stitch. No big deal." I walked toward the door, grabbing my purse and did not stop.

The sound of Kendal's voice behind me was far enough that I knew I could make it to my car and get out of there before he could reach me. It was childish and stupid, but I was at a loss for how to save myself.

He wasn't going to love me the way I loved him. How could he? I wasn't Ana.

I cried all the way home and called Olivia once I was settled on the couch with a bandage on my hand. She calmed me down and offered for me to come up and visit for the weekend, all expenses paid.

"Can I come tomorrow morning? I wanna get out of here." I glanced around my living room. "I think I've made a mistake. I just want to run from all of it."

"Then come on. My computer is showing a five o'clock flight in the morning. I'll send the ticket through e-mail. Come stay with me. I'll take care of you."

“Okay. Love you,” I mumbled in the phone and walked to my bedroom, closing the door and dropping on the cold bed. The sound of knocking at my front door ten minutes later had my heart racing, but I ignored it. Kendal would get the message sooner or later.

I wasn't willing to be the only one to bend, nor was I capable of being the only one in love.

CHAPTER 54



KENDAL

“Dammit, Dana.” I walked around my living room, my kitchen, the back yard. Nothing. Nothing calmed my nerves. She wasn’t answering her phone. She wouldn’t open the door the night before. What the hell?

Anger burned through me, and I began to question everything.

Maybe she was too young for me. I was thirty-one and Dana was in her mid-twenties. Maybe the difference was too much? A grown-ass woman would have picked up the phone by now. Or returned a call.

Karen had told me that Dana had cut her finger and ran out like she was missing half of it. Why the fuck wouldn’t she call and let me know that she was okay?

Surely she knew that I cared. That I wanted to make sure she was good. I would have taken care of her. Waited on her hand and foot.

I growled loudly and walked back into the house, letting the back door slam. “Think!”

What happened? What could have messed up the evening to the point of her running from me?

I ate her out in the bathroom, doted on her as much as humanly possible, and reminded her that she was mine and I was hers. Aggravation overwhelmed me.

Dropping down on the couch, I pressed my face to my hands and let out a long yell. Every cell in my body screamed

for me to find her and force her to see me. To hear me.

Why did women have to be so damn difficult?

My phone rang from the kitchen, and I jumped up like my ass was on fire.

“Please let it be her.” I picked it up to find someone from UT calling. “Great.” I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and pressed the answer button. “Dr. Kendal Tarrington.”

“Kendal. It’s Mark. We met with Lance and he wants to have a mediation just before lunch today. Can you make it up here? He wants to close this down as quickly as possible.”

“A mediation?” I almost swallowed my tongue. Of course the University would want to have a mediation that would become an arbitration. Anything to keep the scandal out of the news and off the books. I was a liability to them. I had to be.

“Yes. It’s the cleanest way to figure this out. We’ve done a few interviews and without video evidence, all we have is your word against Heather’s. I’m going to warn you that she’s looking like the victor here.”

“Of course she is.” I walked toward the backyard, suddenly needing fresh air. My stomach ached from the pain of whatever was going on with Dana, and now this.

“Let’s get together with Lance and talk. We’ll figure it out.”

“I didn’t touch her, Mark. I was going to come talk to you about her sexually harassing *me* a week ago because Eliza told me I should, but I didn’t want to bother you. That, and you’d just kicked me in the dick over helping Heather get along better on campus because of her father giving loads of cash.” I sighed and pushed the back door open. It was chilly outside and the leaves were starting to fall.

What I wouldn’t have given to be wrapped up in a blanket with Dana laying against my chest, both of us able to simply enjoy the promise of a life-long relationship together.

Bullshit. It was all bullshit.

“What? Why is this the first I’m hearing of this? Are you serious or just looking for a counter-conversation?”

“I’m dead serious. The bitch has been hitting on me, throwing herself at me, asking for things that would make a whore blush.” I ran my hand down my face. “I told you we were partners for a while in college. She obviously wants to go down memory lane. I told her no. She got really pissed. She’s been after me since then.”

“Let’s bring this up today. Maybe between her claims and yours, Lance will shut you both down and slap you on the hand with a warning.” He sounded hopeful.

“I doubt that. This would be my third slap. I’m pretty sure you strike out at this point in most ballgames.”

“I know, but stop thinking like that buddy. It’ll work out. Get up here a little early and we’ll talk before the meeting.”

“Is Heather coming?”

“Yes, and Daisy is too for some weird reason. You know anything about that?”

“Nope.” I pursed my lips. This shit was so messed up. Did things like this really happen to normal people?

“Alright. See you then.”

I dropped the call and dialed Eliza’s number immediately. She picked up on the first ring.

“There you are. I tried to call you yesterday, but I must have had a digit off?”

“How did you know this was me, then?” I smiled, unable to help myself.

“I’m a numbers savant, remember? I knew six of the seven numbers I had were right. They’re stuck in my brain.” She took a quick breath. “I finally got a hold of Daisy.”

“And?” I started to pace, unable to stand still any longer.

“And she and Heather have become friends somehow. Probably Heather’s doing. The little witch is quite conniving.”

“You’re not telling me anything new here.”

“I honestly think that Heather talked Daisy into quitting the department so she could have her job.”

“What? Heather is brand new at the school. How would she have even known Daisy? Heather came *after* Daisy left. That seems impossible.”

“They’ve been friends for two years, Kendal. This black widow decided she wanted to work in the UT accounting department years ago and looked for the right person to attach to. So she introduced herself to Daisy at a conference two years ago. They become fast friends. You know, single professors nearing their thirties with no family or spouses. They clicked. I’m sure Heather made sure of that.”

I dropped down in a lawn chair as Eliza kept going. Somehow the surreal was very real. Heather was so much smarter than I’d given her credit for. Her coming to UT wasn’t by chance. It had been planned. For years? Fuck me.

“So they get to talking and sharing over the two years and of course Daisy tells her about the affair with Mark. Heather consoles her when it’s over and talks her into quitting. Says they can switch jobs. Daisy can have her old job wherever she came from, but that conveniently fell through. So now Heather has Daisy’s job and Daisy is stuck out.”

“How in the hell-”

“Wait. It gets better.”

“Really? Better isn’t the word I would use for this insanity.”

“Hush. Okay, so Heather isn’t satisfied with having Daisy’s job. It’s too low on the totem pole, and between you and me, she doesn’t have the power in her current position to force you to your knees. She can only push a little, but she can’t hold you to the fire or force you to become her pet.”

“Did you just call me a pet?” I lifted my eyebrow and dropped back on the chair, laying down fully.

She laughed. “You know what I mean. She needs more power, Kendal. So who’s job does she go after next?”

“Mark’s?” I sat up. “No way. How would she go after Mark’s?”

“By putting him in a very odd predicament. She set this whole thing up to get you, her, Daisy, Mark and Lance in a room together. How many of you know about Mark’s affair and Daisy leaving campus, completely destroyed because of it?”

“Holy shit. All of us but Lance.”

“Exactly. She’s not going to attack you in there. She’s going to attack Mark.”

I jumped up. I was an intelligent guy, but I just didn’t have the wherewithal or desire to be a mastermind schemer. “This is crazy, Eliza. How do you know this for sure?”

“Daisy told me.”

“What do we do?”

“Tell the truth. On Heather and Mark. Daisy will back you up. Heather’s expecting to have an ally in the room, but she doesn’t have one. Daisy will be there for you. Go with the flow. It’s going to work out.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. “Alright. I trust you.”

“You should, kiddo. I’m in your corner.”

“You might be the only one.” I walked to the house as we said our goodbyes. My situation with Dana would have to wait. Everything was on the line. My career and my freedom.

I’d find Dana later hopefully... unless she was still running.

I was getting tired of chasing.



Mark stood by the window in his office as I tried to slow my racing heart. We had to shut Heather down before she shut Mark down. I hated to kick the guy in the crotch when he was helping me out as much as he could, but he was a bastard. Sleeping with one of our fellow professors for kicks and rejecting her the minute he was done? Sickening. And he had a pregnant wife at home?

My heart goes out to his wife and Daisy. What the fuck was wrong with people?

“Alright. So I explained the situation to Lance after I got off the phone with you. He had one of his staff dig deeper into Heather’s record. Looks like she’s done this before. At her former college. He’s going to ask her a few questions and let her go. Eliza called and told me about her picking Daisy apart, promising her a job at the other university for more exposure too. We need her out of here. She’s a disease.”

I nodded, a little surprised to hear that Eliza called Mark. “Heather talked Daisy into quitting.”

“Yeah.” He turned from the window, avoiding eye contact with me. “She promised her a better position and more exposure to publishing and such.”

“That’s the only reason Daisy left? She was promised something bigger and better? Doesn’t seem like Daisy at all.” I was digging, but I had to. I wanted to know if there was anything worth redeeming in my old friend.

“Yep.” He walked around his desk and grabbed his phone. “Let’s go get this shit over with. I hate losing Heather because she’s a smart girl, but she’s a black-hearted bitch for sure.”

“I agree.” I walked to the door and opened it. “Maybe we can talk Daisy into coming back.”

“No way. Her days here are over.” He walked past me, his voice tight. He was stressed out over having to sit in a room with her again.

I couldn’t begin to fathom the awkwardness that we were about to walk into. I needed to play my part and called Damon

to get a lawyer. Something told me that this was just the beginning of all of it.

We walked into a large conference room to find Lance at the end of the table deep in conversation... with Damon.

Mother fucker.

Damon glanced down toward me and winked.

He came through. I knew he would.

“What’s Damon doing here?” Mark turned to me and lifted his eyebrow.

I shrugged. “He’s like a brother to me. Maybe he’s here as a character witness? You know he and Kent give a lot of money to the business school as well. Let’s hope whatever he’s up to is going to help us.”

“I don’t need help,” Mark barked, his face red. “I’m not on trial here.”

“You should be.” Lance turned and walked toward us, extending his hand toward me. “Eliza called me this morning. She explained everything. I’ve been in meetings with Daisy and Damon on the situation. I’m sorry you keep suffering at the hands of this University. Your position is locked in and we’ll be looking to move you into tenure in the next month. If there is any way we can make this up to you other than that-”

“I don’t want it.” I shook his hand. “I’m turning in my resignation this afternoon. If this stuff with Heather is cleared up, I’m done. I’m tired and I want a life outside of here.”

“Coming to work with me?” Damon’s eyebrow lifted.

“I wish you would reconsider.” Lance squeezed my hand and released it.

“Wait. I don’t understand-” Mark started but was cut off by Lance.

“Pack up your office. You’re fired and your affair with Daisy will be under investigation. I’m sickened by you right now. Get out of here and figure out how you’re going to tell your wife you cheated on her. One of us will be telling her

today. You can decide that. I'll be in your office in fifteen minutes."

Mark turned and walked off, his face pale, his breathing off.

"What about Heather?" I glanced around, half-expecting the whore to walk in.

"She's been fired. Her father's money was returned and we put a note in her file that she's not hireable for *any* professorship. Anyone calls for a reference, and they will if she stays in academia, we'll set them straight. She'll never be a professor again. She doesn't deserve the honor." He glanced toward Damon and back at me. "But you do, and you should. Please take some time and reconsider."

"I appreciate it, but no thanks. I'm done. I have too much riding on me walking away from this."

And it hit me.

Dana was upset because she'd been working like crazy on her side of the relationship to clean up things with Ana. To break off old relationships. To change her entire life to make us work - now. And I hadn't offered her even a breadcrumb of hope. I'd done the opposite.

"Buddy?" Damon squeezed my shoulder. "You okay?"

"Dana loves me. She told me last night."

"That's awesome." Damon chuckled and glanced over at Lance. "I'll take him home. We'll be in touch. He's just been through way too much with Amanda's death, losing his girlfriend over this place, and all this shit with Heather."

"I get it. Try to get him to stay." Lance shook Damon's hand, patted my shoulder and walked out.

"I have to find her." I stared Damon in the face. "The hospital."

"Want me to take you?"

"No. Thank you." I pulled him in for a long hug. "I love you, bro. You saved my ass."

“And you saved mine more times than I care to recount. Go get the girl, and then come talk to me. We need to pick colors for your office.” He squeezed me and moved back.

“Shit. I’m not working for you.” I chuckled and turned, jogging the whole way to the car. I had to find my girl and make her mine.

Forever.

CHAPTER 55



DANA

“Are you okay, dear?” The sweet older woman beside me on the plane reached over and handed me a tissue.

“Yes, ma’am.” I took it. “Thank you.”

I couldn’t stop tearing up. My whole world was behind me and I was running. Again. Maybe I was overreacting, but it just didn’t feel like it. It felt like the beginning of *another* relationship where I was pulling the weight, where I was the only one bending and breaking and changing. I couldn’t go through it again.

I needed to matter to someone enough for them to change a little too. It seemed like too much to ask.

“Anything I can do to cheer you up?” She gave me a smile.

I forced myself to smile back and blotted my eyes. “No, ma’am. I’m headed to see my best friend in New York, and I wish it were for a good reason.”

“Care to share?”

“I fell in love with a really great guy, but it turns out that maybe he’s not so great.” I let out a painful sigh, not truly convinced that I believed my own words. Kendal was a good man. I was just looking for something more. Something bigger. Better.

As if that were possible.

It wasn’t like Kendal had the power to heal every shitty relationship I’d been in and the scars each of them had left on

my heart. It was completely unreasonable to expect that of anyone. Especially of him.

He was fighting for his job and had just lost his sister.

I was a horrible person. A needy bitch that couldn't settle down thanks to my demons. I'd never be enough in my own mind. He deserved someone that was at least emotionally put together.

"And why is he not such a great guy? Did he cheat on you?"

"No." I blew my nose.

"Leave you standing at the altar?"

"No. He's just not willing to bend in order for our relationship to work out, and I'm tired of being the only one willing to change. I feel like that's an unhealthy place to be."

"It is. Sometimes." She reached over and squeezed my hand. "But you love him?"

"Yeah." I nodded, feeling the truth in my admission. I loved him so much. I would have changed everything for him, given anything.

Then why not this?

"And he loves you?"

"I honestly don't know. I think so, but he's not willing to say it."

"He refuses to tell you that he loves you?" Her voice gained a little bit of an edge.

"No. Yes. I don't know." I smiled and wiped my eyes once more. "He's a professor at a prestigious college and I'm a student there. Not his student, but they have very strict rules."

"How old is this man?" Her eyebrow lifted.

"Six years older than me. He's young." I patted her hand this time.

"Oh. Good. Jeez. You scared me there for a minute."

“We can’t see each other until next May when I graduate, and I feel like I’m the only one coming up with solutions to make it happen sooner. Eight months feels like absolute hell.” I brushed my hair over my shoulder and huffed. “I just wish he would offer up a solution.”

The airline attendant brought the drink cart down the aisle and offered us a drink, interrupting us for a moment. I sipped my coke and turned back to my seatmate, suddenly grateful to have someone to talk things through that didn’t know either of us. Maybe she’d have some wisdom she could share with me.

“So this beau of yours... he didn’t offer to leave the University so that you could be together.”

“He...” I paused. He had offered. I shut him down. There was no way I would take away his career. It meant everything to him. It was all he had. His mother and sister had passed from MS and his father disappeared a long time ago.

He had Damon and his career. And me. Or used to.

My heart broke open and I hated myself for not seeing deeper into the situation.

“He did,” I whispered and took another tissue. “I wouldn’t let him.”

“And you forgot that he offered?” She pressed her shoulder against mine.

“Yeah. I’d somehow convinced myself that he didn’t care.” I sniffled. “When he did. He does. I shouldn’t be on this plane.”

“Well, it’s too late for that now, silly.” She laughed. “Just make sure you get back on the next one out tomorrow and go tell him before it’s too late. Love doesn’t come around all the time, sweetheart. It’s a precious gift and so many of us throw it away over the stories we tell ourselves.”

I nodded. “You’re so right. I’d convinced myself that he didn’t care. That I was alone in wanting to make us work. What crap.”

“Such crap.” We shared a quick laugh and she pulled out a book. “I hope everything works out beautifully for you both and someday, you’ll share your wisdom with a young woman in need that crosses your path.”

I smiled. “I will. Thank you.”



“Hey!” Olivia walked up as I made my way down the baggage claim. She pulled me into a tight hug and squeezed. “I missed you so much. Why can’t you just call for once and ask me to bring a U-haul?”

“Would you?” I moved back and pulled my phone out, holding it up. “Do you have a charger?”

“Um, that’s like three upgrades ago, Dana. We need to get you a new phone.”

“Right. Charger?” I smiled and moved to grab my bag off the turnstile.

“No, but we can get you one. Let’s go up to St. Mark’s and do a small tour. I talked to one of the doctors that Luke is friends with up there. He’s going to get us in to see Dr. Crawford.”

“What? No. We don’t have to do that. Dr. Lewis hasn’t even set anything up yet. I told you all about this just to get it off my chest.” I grabbed my bag and gave her an exasperated look.

“Give me that and hush. You’re my best friend and like a sister to me. I’m going to do everything I can to get your ass up here when you graduate.” She looped her arm into mine. “Luke tells me that Dr. Crawford is big shit up here at St. Marks.”

“Dr. Lewis seemed to think highly of him, but the guy is his step brother.”

“Ohhh... that’s a great hookup. Let’s go up there for a quick tour and meeting and then we’ll grab lunch and coffee at

one of my favorite places in all of New York.”

“De Luca?” I smiled, knowing her better than she knew herself.

“Yes! So delicious.” She slipped her hand into mine. “So... have you talked to Kendal since you half-cut your finger off to get away from him?”

The humor in her voice was less than appreciated. “No. I was ignoring his calls and texts and then when I decided I was being an asshole about everything, my damn phone died.”

“I’m thinking that’s fate telling you that this *isn’t* the guy for you.” She pulled out her key fob and hit it a few times. “I hate looking for this car. I should have gotten something besides white!”

“You think fate’s telling me that I shouldn’t be with Kendal?” I snorted. “I think the fates have been slapping you in the face for the last three years. You don’t belong with Luke. He’s a jerk and you’re not happy.”

“We’re focusing on your problems for the duration of this trip. You’re the one that needed to get away, remember? I’m not running from Luke.”

“Right. You’re dying on the vine right next to him.” I put my hand on my hip as she loaded the suitcase in the back of her car. “Look at me and tell me you love him.”

“How’s love working out for you, Dana? Something you’d like me to experience too?” She closed the trunk and pursed her lips.

I let out a long sigh and moved toward her, leaning into the warmth she offered. “I’m sorry. I just want the best for you.”

“I know. I just don’t know what the best is right now. I can’t keep living in a childhood fantasy. Cade isn’t coming back to be a part of anything in my life now, you know?”

“I know. You’re right. I’ll leave it be.” I moved back and reached up to smooth down her hair. “Thank you for letting me come crash your life.”

“Thank you for giving me something other than my life to think about.” She snorted. “Come on. People are going to think we’re lesbians if we keep hugging and petting each other.”

“And?” I laughed and walked to my side of the car, getting in.

“And my face is printed on the side of a billboard downtown. All I need is a client to call up Luke and tell him I’m cheating on him... with a woman! He’d beg me for a month to just sit back and watch the show.”

“Too far.” I rolled my eyes and buckled up. “Speaking of Luke-”

“He’s at a convention for the next few days. It’s just us.”

“Nice. I need to get a charger after this tour so I can bring my phone back to life. I misjudged everything Kendal’s been up to lately. I need to apologize and tell him that we can talk when I get back home.” I glanced out the window as we drove away from the airport. “That is if he still wants to talk to me.”

“He’s in love with you. I know he is. I just want to make sure he’s the right guy.”

“He is. I love his kindness, his sexiness, the way he watches me when we’re together. He’s mind-blowing in bed and has this aggressive alpha male persona that comes out and makes me want to be so naughty for him.” I glanced back over at her as warmth coated my cheeks and chest.

She laughed. “Please, don’t stop. I love seeing you get all hot and bothered over a guy. That’s usually my part in the school play.”

I snorted. “I love you. I’m glad you’re free for a few days. Did you have to clear your calendar?”

“Yep, but it’s no big deal. I just told them it was a family emergency.” She pointed out her window. “There are some great apartments right here by the hospital that we can rent for you when you get here.”

“They’re beautiful.” I studied them and couldn’t help but wonder what Kendal would think. I wasn’t sure if he was still willing to be a part of my future, but if he was, and if New York was part of the deal, then I didn’t give a shit where we lived. As long as we were together.

“Okay. Let’s get this over with.” She smiled and pulled into the parking lot. “You want me to leave you alone with Dr. Crawford or come into the meeting?”

“You can come. No worries.” I got out and walked toward the large glass door entrance. The hospital was beautiful and insanely busy. We stopped by the receptionist desk and checked in, got Dr. Crawford’s office number and made our way to the elevator.

I couldn’t help but look for Parks. Jackie would die to know that I was in the same hospital as him. Or maybe not. I wasn’t sure if the two of them were on the up or not.

“This way,” Olivia whispered as we got out of the elevator and walked down the hallway toward a hallway of offices. “You want me to wait here?”

She didn’t want to go in for some reason. She asked twice already. That was code for ‘don’t make me do it’ from our childhood. I decided to honor it.

“No. I’m good. Be right back.” I walked down the hall and stopped outside the door with *Dr. Aiden Crawford* on it. Knocking softly, I leaned in.

“Dr. Crawford?”

“Come on in,” a deep voice called from the other side.

I pushed the door open and walked in, a little taken aback by how handsome the guy was. Dark brown hair played along his forehead and blue eyes the color of the ocean searched my face.

“You must be Dana Young. Please, come in.” He stood behind his desk, his hand out as if offering me a seat. “I only have about ten minutes but all ten of them are yours.” He smiled and I almost felt sorry for him. There was no way he wasn’t getting hit on a million times a day. Being sexy was

almost a curse in a place like a hospital. Depravity and lust were abundant because of the long shifts and the need for *someone* to understand you. Was he married? I didn't see a ring. Maybe Jackie should try for him instead of Parks.

I sat down and cupped my hands in my lap. "I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice. I'm working now as an intern under Dr. Nate Lewis in Dallas."

"Nate!" His smile grew wide. "He's my brother."

"He told me that you guys were related. He's supposed to reach out in the spring to talk with you about me maybe coming on then as a resident or a nursing assistant or-"

"What a small world. I got a call from Luke Taylor about you. He's a patron here at the hospital. Him and his brother." He leaned back and cupped his hands over his stomach. "And you're working for my brother. Well, stepbrother. I was adopted by his family when I lost mine."

"I'm sorry." My heart contracted. Lost his family? Like all of them?

"It was a long time ago. The Lewis family was really good to me." He tapped the desk, his eyes filled with what appeared to be excitement. "Let's get you to fill out some paperwork for me and we'll work on scholarships if you need them and seeing what the interview process might look like for you next spring. My right-hand guy can get all of that for you. I'll buzz him and ask him to meet you by the exit in the ER with a packet."

"Sounds great." I stood up. "I shouldn't keep you."

He stood and extended his hand. "Thank you for coming by. I wish I had time. I'd take you to lunch. Do tell my brother I said hello."

I nodded and released his hand before walking to the door. I opened it and paused, glancing back. "Who am I looking for downstairs?"

"Parks."

“Okay. Thanks.” I walked out to find Olivia waiting. Of course I’d get to run into Parks.

“It go okay?”

“Perfectly. I have to grab a packet from one of his doctors before we go. Just some pre-interview paperwork.”

“That sounds promising!” She slipped her arm into mine as we walked toward the elevator.

“I think so. As long as Kendal is willing to come up here... I’ll be set.”

“And if he isn’t?” She moved into the elevator and held the door for me.

“I don’t know. I’m in love with him, and I think if we could come to some type of mutual understanding of what we were each going to let go of-”

“Or give.”

“Right, or give to the relationship, then I would be willing to move forward.” I rubbed my chest. “I can’t imagine life without him. That’s for sure.”

“Then you shouldn’t have to. We’ll grab a phone charger on the way to De Luca.” She walked out of the elevator and I spotted Parks from across the room.

Three nurses were gathered around him, none of them seeming to care much that the other two were flirting outright with the playboy.

“Parks?” I walked up and thought he might recognize me, but no luck.

“Hey there. You must be Dana.” He extended his hand. “I’m Parks. I was actually down in Dallas a while back. Great hospital. Good staff and kick ass BBQ down the street.”

I laughed, quickly realizing his charm was just being who he was and nothing more. “My friend Jackie talks about you a lot.”

“Oh yea?” He handed me the packet. “Not sure I remember a Jackie, but you’d be surprised how many girls

don't give their real names." He shrugged and his smile faded a little.

"That's her real name. We came up and she visited you a couple weeks ago."

He lifted his eyebrows. "Oh yeah. I think I remember her. Brown hair? Green eyes? *Really* tall?"

That wasn't Jackie at all.

"Um, yeah. Alright. Thanks for this." I lifted the packet and turned around to join Olivia. Did he really not remember Jackie?

What an asshole. And I was worried about Kendal not being great. He was a million times better than the jack-wagon behind me.

Why anyone would give him the time of day was beyond me. I had to tell Jackie - stat.

CHAPTER 56



KENDAL

I made a quick stop by the flower market on the way downtown to see her. My heart was racing, my palms sweaty. It felt like I was going on my first date again. A joyous laugh bubbled up in me.

I was free. No more letting my job rule my life. Never again. I'd be Dana's whatever for as long as she'd have me. We could build the house of her dreams and start working on making babies.

A growl lodged in my throat as my body woke up. My first act after apologizing and smothering her in kisses was to find a way to get her home and in my bed. I needed to spend the next few days worshiping her. I'd fucked up.

Why couldn't I see that before?

Too much on my plate. A laugh bubbled up and poured from my lips as I tore into the parking lot at the hospital and parked. Clarity was mine, and with it, I could make things right.

I jogged toward the hospital entrance, ignoring the odd looks I received. Most people ran toward the hospital, but not with a big ass smile on their faces. Unless they were having a little one.

A baby.

My heart swelled in my chest. Never before had I had such a clear cut path to where I was going and how to make it happen. All I needed was for Dana to forgive me. To comply.

My jog slowed to a fast walk. Was there a better way to do this?

Was rushing into the hospital with flowers enough? I stopped just outside the door and let my thoughts overwhelm me.

She wasn't just any girl. She was the woman I wanted to wear my ring and own my last name.

“Kendal?”

“Nate. Hey man.” I extended my hand and smiled. “How are you?”

He pulled me into a quick hug and stepped back. “I'm okay. I asked Dana about you and she said you would be calling.”

“Sorry. It's been crazy at the school.” I ran my fingers through my hair and looked past him. “I'm coming to dinner as soon as you invite me. It's alright that I bring her with me?”

He glanced over his shoulder and back at me, chuckling. “You okay? Looking for her?”

“Yes. I messed up bad with her.” I let out a long sigh and lifted the flowers. “I suck at this relationship stuff.”

“I always did too, son.” He smiled and slipped his hands into his white coat. “You just need to be yourself. You're a good man. She'll recognize that.”

“Thank you.” I glanced down at the ground and back up at him. “Is she here? Do you know?”

“She's actually not, but I don't know where she is. Her best friend is Jackie. Blond nurse on the second floor.”

“Oh yeah. I know Jackie. We went to New York with her a while back.”

“I'm not going to ask why.” He tilted his head to the side and smiled, seemingly knowing far too much for his own good. “How about dinner Saturday night? Denise and I will tell the poor girl how incredible you are.”

I laughed. "I might need the help. Sounds good. We'll be there. Six good?"

"Perfect." He reached out and squeezed my shoulder. "Good luck with the girl. I'm sure you've got everything inside of you to convince her that you're the one. Just lean on that."

"Thanks, Nate." I moved past him as someone called out to him from down the hallway.

"Dr. Lewis. We need you in room four."

I glanced back to see him jogging that way. He took the time to lift his hand in the air and wave. I responded in kind. Where I was depressed that Dana *wasn't* at the hospital, it felt good to see Nate. He was a good man, and from what Dana said, he was losing his wife.

I moved into the elevator and pressed my back against the far wall. My heart hurt for him. Loving Dana for the rest of my life would be bliss, but to lose her after the kids were gone and it was finally our time to enjoy life alone together?

Impossibly painful.

The elevator opened, and I moved out, looking for a blond with a name tag I could recognize.

"Mr. Tarrington?" One of the other nurses stood up from behind a desk. I'd seen her a few times during Mandy's stay up there, but couldn't remember her name. If her name badge had been anywhere but her tit, I'd have glanced down at it.

"Yeah. I was, um, looking for my girlfriend, but she seems to have taken the day off." I glanced around, feeling a little out of sorts.

"Who is your girlfriend?" The scorn in the girl's voice was a little surprising.

"Dana Young." I turned and pinned her with a hard stare. "She's a nurse here. She helped with my sister's passing."

"Kendal." Jackie walked toward me.

“Hey.” I let out a sigh of relief and walked toward her. “Is Dana here? Nate said she wasn’t, but he wasn’t sure where she was. I need to find her. I have to apologize for being an idiot.”

She smiled and glanced down at the flowers. “Who’s Nate?”

“Dr. Lewis, idiot,” the other nurse called from behind me.

Jackie flipped her off, smiling so big all of her teeth showed.

I chuckled and glanced over my shoulder. “Make sure I get her name. *Nate* should know how unpleasant she is.”

“Done,” Jackie mumbled. “Dana is in New York.”

I jerked around to face her again. “New York? What the hell?”

“She’s upset. She thinks this thing between the two of you is a mistake, so she ran. She’s tired and the poor girl has never been in a good relationship. Never.”

“Dammit.” I growled and pulled out my phone, texting her. “I wish she would pick up the phone. She misunderstood everything I said last night.”

“Or maybe you simply didn’t say it right. Or maybe you didn’t say the *right* things.” She reached out and brushed something off of my shoulder, forcing me to return my attention to her. “She’s completely in love with you. I’d never be willing to transfer my internship and degree plan to another school for someone else, but that’s what she’s been talking about for a few weeks now. We all think she’s crazy.”

“She is crazy.” I smiled, unable to help myself. “She’s not going to have to make any changes. I turned in my resignation today. I’m done with the university. I came to tell her. To apologize.”

“Then go to New York.” She shrugged and reached for the flowers. “You want me to put these into water? They’re not going to last on a plane.”

I smirked. “Just keep them for yourself for helping me.”

“Really?” Her smile lifted. She was a pretty girl with rough edges. I couldn’t help but wonder if she was in a good relationship. By the dark circles under her eyes, I’d think she was as bad off as Dana had been lately. Thanks to me. Fuck. I had so much to make up to my beautiful girl.

“Absolutely. Thank you, Jackie.” I turned and jogged back to the elevator.

“Are you going after her?”

“I don’t know. I think so.”

“You should! It’s so romantic.”

I slipped into the elevator and closed my eyes. It was romantic, but would she accept me if I showed up unannounced? She was with Olivia. She had to be.

Walking to the car, I realized that I was out of options. She was the *only* thing I wanted in my life. She gets all of me, one-hundred percent. Now to find out if that’s what she still wants.

I got in the car and hit Damon’s number.

“What’s up buddy? How did it go with the girl?”

“It didn’t,” I mumbled and pulled out of the parking lot. “She ran to New York to get away from me.”

“Damn... that’s pretty powerful stuff.” He laughed.

“Fuck you too. Can you get Linda to find me a flight? I need something now and fast.”

“Sure can. I’ll even spot you for first class. You’ve had a bitch of a day. Let me help make it better.”

“Why am I worried that you’re going to come a’callin’ soon for your paybacks?”

“Me?” He sounded so innocent. Sickeningly so. “Never. I just like giving away my time, money and cunningness.”

“Alright, man. What do you want from me?” I put on my blinker and glanced over my shoulder as I pulled onto the freeway. I didn’t have clothes or bathroom stuff or anything.

“For you to be happy, Kendal. You know that.”

“And what does that mean to you?”

“Get the girl back, love on her some and then call me. You’re going to need a job and money. You’re a high-dollar guy. You’ll cut through your savings in no time.”

“Thank you, Dad.” I smirked.

“You have a job waiting for you here.”

“And if I decide to move to New York next spring with Dana?”

“Then you can work from an office there or from your house. Your choice. It’s me you’re talking to. I don’t care what the fucking arrangement is. I want you happy and taken care of.”

“I feel like a trust-fund baby.” I pressed my foot down on the gas. “Get me the ticket and text me the info please. Let’s start with that and we’ll see what happens when I get back from New York.”

“Done. Be safe, brother.” He dropped the call and relief flooded my system.

I wasn’t usually a fly by the seat of my pants type of guy, but it felt good to do something crazy. Flying across the US to tell a woman that I was in love with her felt very adventurous. I prayed she would see the depths of my heart when I stood before her.

She had to. I wasn’t leaving until she did.



“Where are you, baby?” I pulled my phone from my ear and walked toward a cab in the airport in New York. The flight had been excellent, the first class ticket probably the reason behind that.

Dana still wasn’t answering her phone, which was typical of her. It was something we would have to talk about. Her being upset in the future and needing space was going to be a

regular occurrence from what I could tell, but I needed to be able to reach her.

I *had* to know that she was safe. That she was okay. That she still loved me.

Getting in the cab, I did the only thing I knew to do. Probably not the smartest thing in the world, but I called Ana.

“Where to?” The cabbie barked at me.

“Central Park.” I pressed the phone to my ear.

“Hello?”

“Ana. It’s Kendal. I need to see if you can help me find Dana. I pissed her off yesterday because I’m an idiot and she ran to New York. Please tell me you have some way of finding her.” I sucked in a quick breath.

“Yeah. I can track her phone. My mom set this shit up when we were younger and wild.”

“Not much has changed.” I laughed, feeling a sense of providence. I was going to find her and she’d have nowhere to run to when I trapped her against me. She had to hear me out.

“True.” There was a smile in her voice. Maybe it wasn’t just me and Dana that could reconcile. Maybe Dana and Ana could... for good.

“She’s at De Luca. It’s 1225 Main Avenue downtown.”

“Excellent.” I smiled. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it. No really. Don’t mention it to her.” She chuckled.

“Alright. Later.” I dropped the call and leaned forward, giving the cabbie the address for the coffee shop.

He took a sharp right and hit the gas, scaring the hell out of me. I’d most likely die before I got there, but if not... things were about to look up.

I leaned my head back and let the memories we’d made over the last few weeks run through my mind. I was so deep in love with her that it hurt. It was far beyond what I had with

Ana, and we hadn't been together more than a month or so. She's caring and sensitive, feminine and so delicious in every way possible.

"Here you are, buddy."

I glanced up to see thirty minutes had passed.

"Oh wow." I paid the man and got out, walking up to the small coffee shop. The scent of coffee and sugar greeted me as I walked in and a pretty girl with a name tag that identified her as Jenna glanced up.

"Hi. Welcome to De Luca. What can I get started for you?"

"Just a large coffee please." I turned and glanced around the small shop. No Dana. No Olivia.

Just a meat head with huge muscles, tats and dark-blue eyes watching me like he wasn't too thrilled I was in *his* coffee shop. I turned back to the girl.

"Three-twenty-six."

I handed her my card and glanced back at the guy and back to her. "Do you guys really need a bouncer at a coffee shop?"

She laughed and handed me the card back. "That's my boyfriend, Nate, but yeah... it's New York, man. You always need a bouncer and security around here."

I smiled. "Nice."

The sound of two women laughing caused me to turn. Dana and Olivia walked out of the bathroom at the end of the hall, Dana stealing my breath.

"There you are," I whispered and walked toward her, picking up a bouquet of flowers sitting on the counter beside the register. "Dana."

She glanced toward me and stopped short. "Kendal? What are you doing here?"

"Coming to collect what's mine. You."

CHAPTER 57



DANA

His words drove lust through me, but shock covered my nerve endings. Had this beautiful man left his life in the middle of the day and flown to New York for me?

Had he left everything behind to run hard and fast until he found me?

“How did you...” I reached for him, wrapping my arms around him and lifting up as he leaned down and consumed me.

The soft press of his lips was nothing compared to the hot wetness of his tongue, sliding past mine, taking control of my mouth and forcing me to comply. I was lost. Completely.

“Um, guys. I’m going to head to the office. Something just came up. Call me later.” Olivia’s voice broke through the cloud around me.

I pulled back and turned. “You sure? I don’t want to-”

“Yes. Positive.” She smiled, wagged her eyebrows, whispered ‘hot’ and walked out.

“Why did you run from me?” He brushed my hair back as I turned and looked up at him.

“I thought I was the only one that cared about us.” I pressed my fingers into the thick muscle along his lower back and snuggled in tightly. “I told you that I loved you last night, that I was willing to give up everything for you-”

“And I failed to validate your words.” He leaned down and brushed his nose by mine, his scent staining my lungs and leaving my knees weak.

“Yeah. Something like that.” I cupped the back of his neck, pulling him down for another long kiss. I’d almost forgotten we were in the middle of a coffee shop in New York. The sound of some giggling kids pulled me out of it.

“Let’s go walk in the park and talk about everything.” He kissed me once more before releasing me and taking my hand. He picked up his coffee and walked toward the door.

The handsome thug sitting by the entrance stood and opened the door for us. “Enjoy your day, guys.”

“Thank you,” I turned my head to study him as we walked out into the freezing cold. He looked like someone that belonged in the middle of a drug deal somewhere, but something about his voice and the way he smiled led me to believe differently. I couldn’t help but notice the way him and the barista girl kept making eyes at each other. Judging people had to stop. Especially judging myself.

Kendal stopped suddenly, almost throwing me off balance. He gripped my waist and turned his chin down, pressing me with a stern look. “Let me be perfectly clear about one thing.”

I swallowed hard as emotions raged deep inside of me. I didn’t want him angry at me or upset. I wanted him to feel comfort. Warmth. Overwhelming love when I was around.

“Yeah?” I choked out.

He brushed his thumb by my face. “Don’t ever run from me again, Dana. Don’t turn your phone off and don’t ignore me. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

I nodded. I could understand that. “Don’t keep things from me. Karen and Bethany told me about the shit you were dealing with at the University last night. They told me that Heather was claiming that you guys fucked three times up there.”

He paled. “Shit. I wanted to tell you about that.”

My heart broke. “You wanted to tell me that you were sleeping with her too?”

“What? No.” He rolled his eyes and moved back, grabbing my hand and moving toward the road. “Get ready to run. New Yorkers drive like shit and they seem to earn cosmic points for hitting humans. Go!”

I ran beside him and tucked myself under his arms as we reached the other side and walked to the park. “So you didn’t sleep with her?”

“Not in a million years, baby. I’m yours. Or I am if you still want me.” He glanced down at me as we turned to walk down the snowy bank into the park. “She went to the President of the University and claimed something like rape. I’m not sure how that works since it was three times, but anyway... that’s what I had going on yesterday.”

I jerked him to a halt. “And if we’re going to be together, then I’m the first person you call and tell that sort of shit to. I’m supposed to be the one standing beside you. Not Damon or anyone else. Me.”

He cupped my face and leaned in for another long kiss. “Forgive me. I’ll not make that mistake again.”

“What does this mean? Do you love me? Do you want us to be together?” I was putting my heart on the line, but I had to. I was weary from running not just from him, but from love in general. I needed a soft place to land, a warm body to hold me at night, someone to be mine.

He smiled and kissed the tip of my nose. “I fell for you the moment I met you. I remember it like it was yesterday. Do you?”

Tears burned my eyes. “Yes. I was dealing with Mr. Jackson. He wouldn’t take his pills for anyone but me. You were with Mandy.” I paused as my voice broke. “Her arms weren’t working that day and I could see the pain all over her.”

“I remember.” His eyes filled with tears too.

The memory swept me away.

Kendal was bent over Mandy's bed, rubbing her long brown hair back and trying to soothe her with his promise that everything would be okay, but it wouldn't... it couldn't...

"Move," I mumbled to Jackie and took her spot on the other side of the thrashing girl. She was a year younger than me, but she looked ten years older. "Amanda. Look at me."

I reached out and gripped her chin, turning her and forcing her to look at me.

"Hey. Be careful with her." Her brother's voice was sharp, condescending.

I ignored him and smiled down at her. "Remember what we talked about yesterday? Old Mr. Jackson?"

She panted as her eyes moved about wildly, but she stopped thrashing for a minute.

Releasing the tight hold I had on her, I leaned down and pressed my elbows to the bed beside her, leaning my chin on my balled up fists. "You should have seen him this morning. He chewed up those damn pills again."

Her brother took a few steps back and let out a shaky breath. I wanted to glance up and get a good look at him, but she needed me to remain locked on her for a little while longer.

"No w-w-water?" She closed her eyes and took a deep breath as tears spilled down into her hair. "I'm scared."

"I know, sweetheart." I leaned forward and pressed my forehead to the side of her head like I would do to my older sister when life had dealt her a shitty blow. "I'm right here, though. Your brother is here, the nurses are here, hell, old man Jackson is still here. We're not going anywhere."

A soft sob left her, and I glanced up and locked eyes with her brother, motioning for him to come closer.

He moved in and bent over, wrapping her in a tight hug and tucking her face into the side of his neck as she cried softly. The moment wasn't mine to have, so I moved back and

wiped my eyes before moving out of the room. I wasn't sure I'd seen a more stunning man in my life.

Messy brown hair, strong shoulders, sensual lips and deep green eyes. My heart fluttered in my chest as I pressed my back to the closed door.

“I’m so sorry,” I whispered against his chest as he held me tight.

“Me too, baby.” He moved back and forced me to look up at him. “I love you with every part of my heart. I’d do anything to have you as mine forever.”

“Even quit your stupid job?” I laughed through my tears.

“It’s already done.” He leaned down and kissed me a few times as I tried to process his words. It was already done?

“Wait. What?” I moved back and put my hand in the middle of his chest. “You left UT?”

“I did.” He smiled. “I’m not sure where I go from here, but I know a beautiful woman who’s a *little bit* bossy who might help me figure it out.”

I let out a small yelp of joy. “So we can be together?”

“Oh hell yeah.” He glanced around. “Let’s find a place to celebrate the future.”

“You horny bastard. Is sex all you think about?” I snuggled up to him and purred softly.

He glanced down, his eyes darkening. “When you’re around? Yes.”

CHAPTER 58



KENDAL

Three Days Later

“I can’t believe you pulled it off.” Damon positioned himself on the putting green as I stood quietly by the golf cart. I waited until he made his shot to respond.

“Why? I’m far smoother than you. I helped you get your girl back, remember?” I squatted and studied exactly where to hit the ball to get the best shot.

“I do remember. I owe you for that.”

“You’ve already paid me back, Damon.” I stood up and turned my head to the right. “Just keep your lips closed while I win this game, and we’ll be good.”

I was almost surprised by his silence. I lifted my club and swung as his voice ripped around the early morning.

“FOUR!”

The jolt of it caused me to twist and shoot my ball off into the trees.

“You dick.” I turned and rolled my eyes. “Karma is going to show up at the time when you least expect it.”

“Karma is my bitch. Don’t be dumb here.” He got in the cart and patted the seat beside him. “So you’re really thinking about going to New York next year with Dana?”

“Yeah. I have to support her dream, Damon.” I got in the cart and let out a contented sigh. “You still up for me working for you from a distance?”

“Absolutely. You come up with your job description, I’ll slap a title on it and we’ll call you employed once again.”

I nodded. “I appreciate it. Lance called yesterday, asking me to reconsider, but I can’t. Me quitting means freedom to me, and it means a lot to Dana.”

“Of course it does. It’s a statement that she matters more than some stupid job. Love has to come first.”

“I’m going to pull out my phone and hit record. Can you say that again? No one is going to believe that you said it at the next high school reunion.”

“You didn’t even go to my high school, dip shit.”

“I still plan on crashing the party.”

“Word.” He chuckled. “You know Beth and I are planning the wedding.”

“I know. I’ll be there in any way you want me to.”

“I’m not sure what I’m going to do about the best man spot. I want you to have it, and I want Matty to have it too.”

“I’m honestly good with whatever you decide, dude. Dana and I will play any and every role you need us to.”

“And what about you guys?” He parked next to the last hole and turned the cart off. “You going to snatch her up and put a ring on her finger before anyone else does?”

I growled and got out of the cart. “No one else is coming near my woman.”

“So no ring?”

“Not yet. I want to court her a little more, but I will propose.” I moved to the side and nodded toward the green. “Good luck with this one.”

He rolled his eyes. “If you think you screaming out ‘four’ is going to affect me, you’re wrong. I’ve had many a woman scream ‘God,’ ‘more,’ ‘harder,’ while I was at my peak. You ain’t got nothing on me.”

“Apparently not. Shit.” I snorted and waited until he was in the perfect position.

He glanced back. “Give it your all.”

“Yeah. Sure, buddy. I’ve got class, remember?”

“Naw, you quit that gig.” He laughed at his stupid play on words and turned, bending his knees and swinging.

“Bethany and I slept together.” I let my words be nothing more than a soft whisper.

He jerked around and the ball went into the water. “What the fuck did you say?”

“I said, God! More! Harder!” I laughed and turned to run as he tackled me and threw a few punches just for fun. I got mine in as well, and we went home, looking like we both got mugged. That’s the story we told too... No one believed it.



“Why would Damon give you a shiner?” Dana took the flowers I handed her and reached up to touch the side of my face. “I’m going to *kill* him.”

“You should. It hurt really bad.” I tried to look sad, but I was pathetic at it.

She laughed. “Let me discharge my last patient and we’ll head over to Dr. Lewis’ for dinner.”

“Good. I’ll help.” I leaned in for a quick kiss, but jerked back at the sound of an old woman screaming and hollering.

“This seat is too small! Who’s ass do you think these things were made for? I’m a size twelve and I barely got a cheek hanging on! How pathetic is this?”

Dana lifted her eyebrows and turned. “Hi, Mrs. Delmaz. This is my boyfriend, Kendal.”

The older woman’s demeanor changed immediately when she saw Dana. “Finally. I’ve been waiting to meet you since Dana started talking about you a month ago.”

“Nice to meet you, ma’am.” I extended my hand and shook hers carefully.

“The pleasure is all mine, handsome.” She wagged her eyebrows and turned back to Dana. “I’d hold on tightly to this one. He’s all sorts of pretty.”

“Pretty?” I pressed my hand to my chest and laughed. The woman was a hoot. No wonder Dana loved her job.

“Very.” Dana wagged her eyebrows and turned back to Mrs. Delmaz. “Your chariot awaits. Come on. I’ll wheel you down.”

The older woman patted Dana’s hand as they walked toward the elevator. I joined them and held it open.

“Thank you, child.” She glanced up at Dana as her eyes filled with tears. “I’ve been in a lot of hospitals, but never one where I fell in love with someone special.”

“Oh yeah?” Dana moved around to the side of the chair and squatted beside the woman. I felt like I was interfering with a private moment, but it was one I would remember for the rest of my life. Dana hadn’t just cared for my sister... she’d loved her.

“Yeah.” The older woman wiped her nose with the back of her hand. “I want you to come visit me, okay?”

“I will, but you gotta tell me the lucky guy you fell in love with.” Dana smiled and my heart melted. She was so much more than I deserved. How could I ever live up to being a man worthy of her?

“It wasn’t a boy, silly thing.” She touched Dana’s cheek. “It was you, sweet girl. Thank you for giving me hope in humanity again. I’ll never forget it.”

Dana moved up and wrapped her arms around the older woman as they cried together.

The door opened and I pressed the button to hold it open, allowing them the time they needed to say their goodbyes.

I watched from the stairs as she put Mrs. Delmaz in the car that showed up for her. My beautiful girl had a heart the size

of Texas and it was all mine. Or some part of it.

“Wow. I didn’t realize I’d done so much for her.” She walked toward me and wrapped her arms around me. “I should get extra for that.”

I laughed and leaned down, kissing her softly. “You get anything you want, baby, and extra of all of it too.”

“Good. Let’s do dinner and then dirty up that bathtub of yours again.”

“I like the sound of that.” I kissed her again, deepening it as the wind blew around us. Nothing could be more perfect.



“I honestly wasn’t sure I was ever going to make it out of med school.” Nate laughed, his eyes alive with life. Humor. Every good thing available to us.

His wife reached over and touched his arm, her hand frail, but her voice full of love. “I didn’t think you were going to either. You were such a rascal back then, and Aiden didn’t help any.”

“Speaking of Aiden,” Nate turned toward Dana as we all sat at the dinner table, the meal far too much food, all of it delicious,” he said he got a chance to talk to you for a second?”

“He did. He seemed like a great guy. Now his assistant, Parks? Not so much.” She wrinkled up his nose.

Nate’s eyebrows lifted. “Really? I’ve heard so many good things about him. He’s supposed to be the next up and coming surgeon at St. Marks.”

“I’m sure he’s great at his job. He’s just a…”

“Man-whore,” I added in as Dana blushed beside me. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and leaned in to kiss her cheek. “They’re not prudes, baby.”

“Not at all.” Denise stood up, reaching for Nate as she did.

He jolted up to help her. “You okay, baby?”

“Oh yeah.” She glanced over at Dana. “I made a pie this morning. Come help me slice it and tell me more about this rascal Parks.”

We all laughed and the girls walked out. I let my eyes move from following Dana out of the room to Nate. His expression was somber.

“Hey.” I reached across the table and squeezed the top of his hand. “What’s going on, man?”

“She’s got two weeks.” He reached up and pressed his fingers to his eyes. “I don’t know what the fuck I’m going to do without her.”

My heart shriveled in my chest. “You know those prognoses don’t come true all the time.”

“Don’t I know that they do.” He wiped his tears away and sat back in his chair. “We told her two years to see if she could push through longer, but I’m such a bastard for doing that to her. She’s in pain and she’s tired.”

“And she loves you.” I leaned forward and pinned him with a truthful stare. “She’ll hang on as long as you do. Don’t give up, man. This fight isn’t over yet.”

He pursed his lips and wiped at his eyes one more time, trying to collect himself. “I’ve seen the charts, Kendal. She’s got two weeks.”

“Tell me what I can do to help you. You’ve been beside me through the death of my mother and my sister. You’ve been a staple in my life when I needed someone most.”

He sniffled and forced a smile. “Just come when I call you, okay? I don’t have kids. You’re the closest thing I have.”

I nodded and glanced up as the girls walked back in, both of them giggling over something.

We had fun and laughed over the course of eating dessert, but Nate’s situation wouldn’t let me fully enjoy anything.

After we wrapped everything up, Nate put Denise to bed and walked us to the door. He stepped outside and breathed in deep, and I could feel his pain radiating all over me.

“Thank you for tonight.” Dana extended her hand toward him, but he used it to pull her into a warm hug.

“Thank you. I’m proud of you, kiddo. Keep pushing, okay? The future is so wicked bright for you.” He glanced over at me and extended his hand. “And for you... make a good choice on where to spend the next twenty years.”

“My career?”

“No. Your life.” He glanced back toward Dana and smiled. “Can you explain to him what I’m saying?”

She laughed and moved into my arms. “He’s telling you to pick me.”

“Already done. Now and forever.” I leaned down and kissed her only to find Nate gone when I looked back up. His life was ending in so many ways, and mine...

It was just beginning.

CHAPTER 59



DANA

Seven Months Later

“Wow. That was amazing.” I turned and looked up at Kendal as Damon and Bethany’s limo kicked up dust in the darkness. Their wedding had been the highlight of my week. It reminded me that Kendal and I would find ourselves walking down the aisle before too long.

He had to propose of course, but I knew it was coming. He’s casually mentioned it too much lately.

“I agree. Let’s help everyone clean up and we’ll head back to our place.” He took my hand and walked us back into the reception hall.

Matt and Erica were busy cleaning off tables, teasing each other about something or other as they laughed and poked fun.

“Where do you want us?” Kendal called out as Kent, Damon’s father leaned out of the kitchen.

“Nowhere! You’re a guest. Go home and enjoy the rest of your evening.” The handsome older man disappeared behind the door leaving us standing in the middle of the dance floor.

“Alright. My kind of night.” Kendal turned to me and smiled. “You wanna give me a quick dance before we get out of here?”

“I’d love to.” I smiled and clasped my hands in front of my waist as he jogged over to the DJ booth. He’d been working for Damon at McKenzie and Bryant for almost six months, all of it done out of the comfort of the house. We’d moved in

together shortly after Christmas and my graduation was coming up in three weeks. Life couldn't be better.

Soft music played from the speakers above me, and I glanced up, admiring the lights and decorations. The place was beautiful. Majestic.

"Can I have this dance?" Kendal's voice caused chill bumps to break out all over my exposed arms.

"Every dance." I slid my arms around his neck as he stepped closer, pressing his body to mine.

"How many times have I told you that you look heavenly tonight?" He leaned down, whispering his words along my neck.

"Several, but I'd never refuse you." I turned my face and kissed his cheek. "We should be dancing at home in the living room. Naked."

"We should, and we will, but first..." He moved back and I glanced around, noticing that most of Damon and Kendal's friends were gathered around the edge of the floor. The only people missing were Damon and Bethany, but knowing them, I could guess what they were up to.

"What's going on?" I turned to find Kendal on his knee. His dark suit looked so damn good on him, and his expression was filled with a perfect blend of love and lust.

"I'm done waiting."

"On what?" I was breathless, my heart racing, my knees shaking slightly. Was he really proposing? Surely not.

"On the right to call you my bride." He pulled out a small box and lifted it toward me. "I love you with the depths of my heart, baby. I'll spend forever proving how much you mean to me if you'll just give me the chance. There's no mountain I won't climb, no obstacle I won't beat, no *rule* I won't break to have you beside me as my wife. Tell me you'll say yes and be my girl forever."

Tears burned my eyes, and I knelt down with him, wrapping my arms around his neck and knocking him over.

“Yes,” I cried out and kissed him as we lay tangled up on the floor with confetti all over us.

Laughter filled the place, and ours soon joined it.

“I love you, Dana.”

“I love you more.” I leaned in for another long kiss and let the moment sink in deep. He *was* willing to change for me, to give up everything, and I was willing to do the same.

Rules be damned.



“Take it off.” He reached out and pulled the clip out of my hair, causing my thick curls to fall all over my shoulders and back.

“Say please.” I teased him as I backed up, forcing him to let me go.

He sat on our couch at home, completely naked, his cock thick and hard, twitching as if stuck in the middle of a mating call.

I reached down and grabbed him, stroking him once as he lifted his hips and groaned loudly.

“This ring looks good on my finger.”

“And your fingers look good on my dick.” He gripped my wrist and pulled me closer as I fiddled with the back of my dress.

“I can’t get it.” I turned and sat down in his lap, enjoying the pressure of him against my ass.

“I kinda like it on.” He sat up and unzipped the dress before pulling it off my shoulders and forcing me to stand. It slipped off and he reached up and tugged my panties down. “Turn and face me. I wanna hold you.”

“Me too.” I turned and crawled into his lap before pressing myself to his chest. “God, I need you.”

“Then have me.” He pressed down on my hips, impaling me as we moaned in tandem. Nothing felt better than having him buried deep inside of me.

“Don’t stop, okay.” I pressed my hands into his shoulders and lifted up, working him nice and slow like he liked it.

“Never.” He moved forward, sucking one of my nipples into his mouth as he gripped the top of my ass and set the rhythm of our love making. “Delicious, baby. So fucking wet.”

“I’ve been turned on all night.” I pressed my breasts to his chest and tucked my face in the crook of his neck as he ran his hands all over me.

“Come for me,” he whispered against my hair. “I need to feel you lose control tonight.”

“Take it from me then,” I shifted enough for him to press his lips against mine. I whimpered as he ran his hand up my back, gripping the base of my hair tight. His other hand was wrapped around my ass, using his grasp to use me for his own pleasure.

He nipped at my lips before sliding his tongue deep into my mouth. The last pressure point was all I needed. He pressed a finger into my ass and the world exploded.

I cried out and tried to move, but he held me in place, fucking me so deep in every available opening. I was in lust. I was in love.

I was his.

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I don't fit into the world around me.

My brother and father are far more the billionaire type.

Art is what wakes me up. Expressing my soul through a paintbrush.

That and the beautiful woman that stole my heart years ago.

But she belongs to their world. An executive for the accounting firm my family runs.

And we live clear across the country from one another, but that doesn't stop the way I feel.

Every time I see her, I want to change everything about myself until she takes notice.

Funnily enough, she doesn't want me to change a damn thing.

She says that now, but when she finds out all that I desire of her, with her, she might not be so compliant.

Or maybe that's what she's been waiting on this whole time.

Book 4 - His Many Pleasures

Falling in love with the enemy wasn't my goal.

Life has been nothing shy of entertaining since I was a boy.

Adopted by the wealthiest family in Qatar.

I'm a businessman with no desire for the crown my father wore.

But I wasn't asked my opinion on the matter. My brother's too young to rule the country.

With tons of concerns, I concede and take the throne, only to have the most beautiful woman I've ever seen show up.

Her timing is almost too perfect.

It's her persistence or fierceness that holds me completely captivated.

Either way, I want every part of her for my own.

Too bad she's come to Qatar for one reason.

To destroy me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ali Parker is a full-time contemporary and new adult romance writer with more than a hundred and twenty books behind her. She loves coffee, watching a great movie and hanging out with her hubs. By hanging out, she means making out. The man is hot. Hello.

She's a creative at heart and loves coming up with more ideas than any one person should be allowed to access. She lives in Texas with her hubs, teenage son, one grown daughter and two love-of-her-life grand babies while the other grown daughter lives in Tennessee! Telling a good story that revives hope, reminds us of love and gives a vacation from life is all she's up to.

Questions, comments or concerns? You can always email her at Ali@aliparkerbooks.com.

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His Many Demands - 2018

His Many Rules - 2016

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Editor: Nicole Bailey, [Proof Before You Publish](#)

Cover Designer: [Ryn Katryn Digital Art](#)