



damaged
GOODS

MCINTYRE SECURITY PROTECTORS - BOOK 2

APRIL WILSON

Damaged Goods

McIntyre Security Protectors

Book 2

by

April Wilson

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Character List

Main Characters

Liam McIntyre – 25 yrs old, martial arts expert

Jasmine Grant – 21 yrs old, sex worker

Supporting Characters

Jason Miller – 28 yrs old, Layla's bodyguard and boyfriend, a former paramedic

Layla Alexander – 21 yrs old, Jason's girlfriend

Shane McIntyre – 35 yrs old, CEO and co-founder of McIntyre Security, Inc.

Beth McIntyre – 26 yrs old, Shane's wife

Cooper – 54 yrs old, co-founder of McIntyre Security, Shane's best friend, Sam's partner

Sam – 28 yrs old, Beth's best friend and bodyguard, Cooper's partner

Lia McIntyre – 25 yrs old, Jonah Locke's bodyguard and wife

Jonah Locke – 30 yrs old, rock star, married to Lia McIntyre

Troy Spencer – 40 yrs old, attorney, works for Shane McIntyre

Miguel – 28 yrs old, a McIntyre Security bodyguard

Matteo – 28 yrs old, a McIntyre Security bodyguard

Philip – 26 yrs old, a McIntyre Security bodyguard

Bridget – 54 yrs old, Liam's mother

Calum – 60 yrs old, Liam's father

Chapter 1

Liam

A little past midnight on a Friday night in November, I'm the last of my buddies to leave our weekly get-together at our favorite downtown Chicago bar, Tanks. When I step outside, I'm hit by a gust of chilly autumn air. I wave to my friends as they head for their vehicles. I'm parked two blocks away from the bar, so I start off on foot.

Just as I pass by the alley that runs behind the bar, a sound catches my attention—the shuffling of shoes on the pavement, a faint gasp followed by a sharp cry of pain. *Female*. Immediately, my internal alarm bell rings. I stop to listen.

When I hear an angry male voice followed by a strained female response and another cry of pain, I head straight into the alley.

My brothers always say that I'd run straight into a burning building if I thought someone needed help. I guess they're right. It's in my nature. I can't help it. I especially can't abide violence against women. I have three sisters, and the idea of any one of them getting hurt is repugnant.

I move deeper into the alley, passing huge metal trash containers, piles of discarded newspapers, and empty shipping crates sitting outside the businesses' rear doors. It's dark back here, but there's an occasional lamp to light my way, enough that I don't trip over the garbage at my feet.

I spot the man first, before I catch sight of the woman he's got pinned against a brick wall. He's got a hand wrapped around her throat, and I suspect he's cutting off her air because she's no longer making any sounds. She clutches his wrist tightly as she struggles in vain to dislodge his grip on her throat. It's not surprising that he's not budging because the assailant is a big guy, solid muscle, and he outweighs her by a hundred pounds easily.

Light from a low-watt bulb glints off the knife in his other hand as he raises it to the woman's face.

"I'm gonna cut you, bitch," he growls. "You damn whore, piece of garbage, filthy cock tease! Since when is a skank like you too good for someone like me? Let's see how much money you make when your pretty face is carved up."

I'm behind him a second later, grabbing his knife hand and twisting his wrist hard enough to snap the tendons. The guy

cries out, immediately releasing the girl. She sinks to the ground, gasping for air, her hands going to her throat.

The asshole tries to pivot to face me, but I undercut his footing and he goes down on his ass. When I pin his wrist back a solid ninety degrees he screams as one of the bones snaps.

“You motherfucker!” he shouts, saliva spraying from his mouth. “You broke my fucking wrist!”

“You should have thought about that before you assaulted this girl.” I twist his arm and wrench it behind him, almost to the point of dislocating his shoulder.

I glance down at the girl, who’s still on the ground. There are streaks of blood on her face and in her hair. She’s gazing up at me, her big dark eyes dazed.

When I release the guy’s arm, he scrambles to his feet. Cradling his broken wrist in his other hand, he turns and runs deeper into the alley, quickly out of sight.

“You okay?” I ask the girl as I pull my phone out of my jacket pocket. “I’ll call 911.”

“No, don’t!” She attempts to stand, but stumbles and falls back onto the pavement. “Don’t call anyone,” she gasps, her

voice thin and raspy. "Please."

I crouch down in front of her to get a better look. "Why not?"

"Just don't." With a shaky hand, she pushes her long, curly dark hair back from her face, revealing newly forming bruises. She has the beginnings of a black eye, and there are abrasions on her forehead, left cheek, and chin. There's a trickle of blood running down her left temple. It looks like he cracked her head on something hard, probably the wall.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

Still struggling to catch her breath, she nods. "Just... need... a minute."

"I think you need more than a minute. Let me take you to the emergency room."

"No!" She manages to get to her feet. "No hospital."

She's far younger than I realized, maybe nineteen or twenty at the most. Even with the injuries, it's clear she's stunning. She's mixed race, her skin a light brown, dark hair falling in corkscrew curls. Her eyes are so dark, they appear black in this lighting. Her lips are full and lush, painted pink and glossy.

I stand just as she finally straightens. She's tall for a girl. Probably five-ten, just a few inches shorter than my six-one. But then I notice she's wearing high heels, and that's probably giving her a few of those inches. Her black mini skirt barely covers her ass, her black fishnet stockings are shredded, and a shiny silver top has cleavage so low it doesn't leave much to the imagination. She's got on heavy make-up and lots of gold jewelry.

She's tottering on her feet, and at first I think she might be drunk until I glance down and notice that the heel of one of her stilettos is missing. She's not going to get far in those shoes. She stares at me with wide, wary eyes, as if she's wondering if I'm as much of a threat as the other guy.

"I'm Liam McIntyre," I say, hoping to put her at ease.

"What's your name?"

She studies me a moment and finally says, "Jasmine."

"Have you got a last name, Jasmine?"

She shakes her head. "Just Jasmine."

"All right, Just Jasmine. What now?"

She narrows her dark eyes on me. "What do you mean?"

I gesture to her. “You’re injured, your shoe is broken, and it looks like you hit your head pretty hard, I’m guessing on the brick wall. You need medical treatment.”

“No way.” She shakes her head adamantly, then cries out and puts her hand to her temple.

“See? You might have a concussion.”

The girl shakes her head more carefully this time. “No doctors or hospitals. I’ll be fine. I just need to catch my breath.” She winces when she stares down at her ruined clothing. “Shit.”

“The guy who assaulted you—do you know him?”

She meets my gaze but doesn’t answer.

“It sounded like he knew you.”

The girl shrugs as darkness clouds her eyes. “He’s a pervert. I’m glad you broke his wrist. He deserves a lot worse.”

“I won’t disagree with that. So, like I said, what now?”

She attempts to take a step forward but stumbles thanks to her busted shoe.

I catch her before she hits the pavement. “Careful.”

She jerks away as if burned. “Don’t touch me.”

I raise my hands. “Sorry. I was just trying to keep you from face-planting.”

Clearly exhausted and hurting, she leans back against the wall, and I take the opportunity to look her over. “Are you, uh, *working?*” That’s the best euphemism I can come up with. I figure it’s better than coming right out and asking her if she’s a prostitute.

Frowning, she nods.

“Look, your shoe is busted, and you’re injured. You can’t go back out on the street in your condition. Those abrasions need to be cleaned and disinfected at the very least. The cut on your head needs to be looked at. You might even need stitches.”

Her shoulders slump, and she looks like she’s a minute away from collapsing.

“I’ve got a buddy who’s a paramedic,” I say. “Why don’t you come with me? I’ll ask him to take a look at your injuries.”

She glances left and right, as if she’s expecting someone to pop up any second. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m working.”

A cynical laugh escapes me. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think you’re in any shape to work tonight.”

She glares at me, clearly irritated. “Do you think I have a choice? I’d rather get beat up again than go back empty-handed.”

“How much do you usually make in a night?”

She shrugs. “Around five hundred, give or take.”

“How much more do you need?”

“Four.”

“All right. I’ll take the rest of your night.”

She looks at me like I’m out of my mind. “A guy that looks like you doesn’t have to pay for sex.”

“I don’t want sex. I’ll take you to get medical treatment and fix your shoe. And I’ll feed you in the process. How about it?”

“And you’re gonna give me four hundred bucks?”

“Yes.”

She studies me. “How do I know you’re not some psycho serial killer?”

I laugh. “Like that guy?” I nod in the direction her assailant ran. “How often do you get in a car with a stranger?”

She studies me thoughtfully, then shrugs. “Okay, fine.”

I nod toward the street. “This way. I’m parked two blocks from here. Do you think you can walk?”

She leans down and slips off both her shoes, holding them by the skinny silver straps. “Yeah, I can walk.”

When she shivers visibly, I take off my black leather jacket and hold it out to her. “Here, take this. It’s cold tonight.”

She hesitates a moment, watching me closely. I think she’s going to decline my offer, but in the end she takes it from me and slips it on.

“Let’s go.” I walk slowly so she can keep up with me. I’m sure the rough pavement is going to tear up her stockings even more, but I think that’s the least of her worries right now. I pull out my phone and place a call.

Jason answers. “Hey, Liam. What’s up?” It sounds like he’s driving. He and Layla are probably still on their way home from the bar tonight.

I was with the two of them this evening, along with the rest of my usual group. “Jason, I’m sorry, but I need to ask a favor.”

“Sure,” he says without hesitation. “Whatever you need.”

“I know it’s late, but can you look someone over for me tonight? She’s got some bruises and abrasions on her face. She has a bloody cut on her temple that may or may not need stitches.”

“*She?* Who?”

“Just someone I ran into tonight.”

“Why don’t you take her to the—”

“The hospital’s not an option.”

“I see.”

I hear the hesitation in my friend’s voice, and I don’t blame him. He doesn’t want to bring a complete stranger around his girlfriend, Layla. Layla seemed a bit fragile tonight.

“How about if you meet us at my place?” I suggest. Jason and Layla live in the apartment directly across the hall from mine. “You can examine her there.”

“Sure, okay. Let me know when you’re home.”

“Thanks, buddy. I owe you.” I pocket my phone as we reach the sidewalk. “This way,” I tell Jasmine, nodding to the right.

She walks along the pavement beside me, obviously limping. I glance down and notice her right knee is bloody. She must have landed on her knee when she fell. Everyone we pass stares at her battered face with a mixture of curiosity and sympathy. A few disgusted looks come my way, too, as if they assume I’m the one responsible for her condition. I’ll be lucky if no one calls the cops on me.

In spite of how banged up she is, how disheveled, it’s obvious she’s an attractive young woman. Actually, the word *attractive* doesn’t begin to do her justice. She’s not quite what I’d expect of a prostitute.

When we reach my black Jeep Wrangler, I open the front passenger door for her and attempt to help her up into the seat.

She flinches and pulls away. “I said don’t touch me.”

“Sorry.”

Standing back to give her plenty of space, I watch as she hauls herself into the front passenger seat.

Once she's seated, I tell her, "Buckle up," and shut her door. I walk around to the driver's side and slide in behind the wheel and start the engine.

"Who's this friend of yours?" she asks as I pull into traffic. She stares straight ahead. "The paramedic?"

"His name's Jason. We work for the same company. He's a close friend, and he lives in my apartment building. I figure he's our best option since you won't go to a hospital."

Jasmine shrugs. "All right."

"If you don't mind me asking, how old are you?"

"I'm legal, if that's what you mean."

"No, it's not that. I'm just curious."

"Twenty-one. How old are *you*?"

I don't know whether to believe her or not. She sure looks younger. "I'm twenty-five."

I drive to my apartment building in the Gold Coast. As we pull into the parking lot, Jasmine peers out the windshield at the towering glass and steel building. "You live *here*?" She sounds skeptical.

"Yeah."

She whistles. “What do you do that you can afford to live in a place like this?”

“I work for a security company.”

I proceed down into the underground garage and park in my designated spot. After I get out, I jog around to the passenger side, intending to help her down, but she beats me to it. When she steps on the smooth cement, she gasps.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Yeah. The ground’s cold.”

I’d offer to carry her to the elevator, but she’s already made it clear she doesn’t want to be touched.

She follows me to the garage elevator, and I push the button for my floor. The elevator stops in the lobby and several residents get on. All of them do a double-take when they see Jasmine. She ignores them, staring straight ahead, not making eye contact with anyone.

The other residents get off the elevator before we do, so we ride the last few floors up alone.

“Sorry about that,” I say. They were openly staring at her, probably curious about what happened to her.

She shrugs. “I’m used to it.”

The elevator stops at my floor, and the doors open. As we step out, I point to the left. “My apartment is this way, at the end of the hall. Last door on the right.”

She follows me down the hallway, checking out the artwork hanging on the walls. “Nice.”

I nod. “It’s not bad.”

When we reach the end of the corridor, I knock quietly on Jason’s door. It’s late, and I don’t want to disturb any of the neighbors.

A moment later, the door opens, and Jason stands there with his medical bag in hand. He’s dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt. I don’t see Layla.

“This is my friend Jason,” I tell Jasmine. “Jason, this is Jasmine. As you can see, she got a bit banged up tonight. Would you mind checking her over?”

“I’d be happy to,” Jason says.

When we hear a quiet sound coming from within Jason’s apartment, we all look. Layla’s standing there in the shadows, her arms wrapped around her waist.

“Hey, sweetheart,” Jason says in a gentle voice. “Why don’t you go to bed? I won’t be long.”

The two girls eye each other curiously.

“All right,” Layla says. Then, to Jasmine, she says, “I hope you’re feeling better soon.”

Jasmine gives Layla a faint smile. “Thanks.”

Jason follows us out into the hall and locks his apartment door. Then he follows us across the hall to my apartment.

I unlock my door and flip on a few lights in the living room. I nod to the kitchen. “Let’s have you set up at the table. There’s better lighting in there.”

The three of us pass through the living room to the kitchen.

Jason sets his medical kit on the table and opens it up. “Have a seat, Jasmine.”

She does as he asked, looking far from comfortable. She wraps her arms around her torso.

“Would you like to take off the jacket?” Jason asks. “So I can examine your arms?”

She shakes her head. “No need. It’s just my face and my knee.”

“Okay.” Jason gives me a look and shrugs.

“Can I get you something?” I ask her. “Water or coffee? Anything?”

“Water, if you don’t mind,” she says.

While Jason is getting his equipment out, I grab the filtered pitcher from the fridge and pour her a glass of water. When I hand it to her, she practically downs half of it before taking a breath. As soon as we’re done here, I’ll make her something to eat. She’s probably starving.

I stand back, leaning against the kitchen wall, while Jason examines her injuries, working quickly and efficiently. He doesn’t ask her any questions about what happened or how she got hurt. I imagine he knows that conversation could get awkward real quick.

After he takes her vitals—pulse, blood pressure, checks her pupils—he cleans the wounds on her face and knee with a disinfectant and applies an antiseptic. The worst of the cuts get small bandages.

Very gently, he pulls her hair back to reveal the source of the blood trickling down her left temple. Jasmine winces when he dabs at the cut with a cotton ball soaked in a disinfectant cleaner.

“Does that need stitches?” I ask. I’m hoping he says no, since she refuses to go to a hospital. I imagine Jason could do it here if he had to.

“I don’t think so,” Jason says as he examines her temple and finishes wiping the blood from her face. “It’s not deep. A butterfly bandage will do fine.” He applies one to the inch-long gash at her temple, then moves back and eyes his work. He looks the rest of her over, at least what he can see. “Does anything else hurt?” he asks.

Jasmine shakes her head. Then she reaches for her glass and finishes the rest of the water. I can’t help but notice how her hand shakes as she sets down the empty glass.

“Would you like more?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No, I’m fine.”

After Jason’s finished, I thank him and walk him to the door. He refrains from asking any questions, although I’m sure he’s dying to know what’s going on.

After he’s gone, I return to the kitchen to find Jasmine right where I left her. She looks exhausted. “Are you hungry?”

It’s impossible to miss the widening of her dark eyes. For a minute, I think she’s going to turn down my offer, but finally

she says, “Yeah, sure. I could eat.”

“It’s kind of late for delivery. How about I make you something?”

Chapter 2

Jasmine

This is the first time I've ever gone to a guy's place. I never go home with tricks because it's not safe. But I don't get any creepy vibes from this guy. Quite the opposite. He seems like the Boy Scout type—honorable, a do-gooder. Tonight he rescued me like I was a stray puppy he found wandering the streets—a battered and bruised puppy.

His apartment is neat and orderly, kind of surprising for a guy. The living room furniture looks homey and comfortable. The kitchen is clean. I don't see stacks of dirty dishes hiding in the sink or dirty pots sitting on the stove.

“You live here alone?” I ask Liam as he returns from seeing his friend to the door. Maybe there's a girlfriend or wife who keeps the place looking so nice.

“Yeah. It's just me. Why don't you go sit on the sofa and relax while I get some food going? You'll be more comfortable.”

I do as he suggests. I'm tired and sore, and the thought of sitting on something clean and comfortable sounds like heaven. The living room furniture looks new. There's a low

wooden coffee table sitting in front of a dark gray sofa and beside the sofa is a matching oversized armchair. The TV hanging on the wall across from the sofa is huge—I didn't even know they made them that big now. It's the kind of place where you can kick back and relax.

I walk over to the sliding glass door that leads out onto a balcony. Liam's apartment has an amazing view of Lake Shore Drive and just beyond that, Lake Michigan. Moonlight glitters on the water's surface. And all around us, the city skyline is lit up.

“What would you like to eat?” he asks me.

I jump, not realizing he's standing behind me. “What are my options?” I'm not used to having a choice.

He thinks for a moment. “I can make you a salad, a burger, a ham and cheese sandwich. I've got cans of soup and chili in the cupboard. Boxed macaroni and cheese. I'm pretty sure I've got a frozen pizza. Several kinds of cereal. Eggs and bacon. Does any of that sound good?”

My stomach growls at the mention of food. The only thing I've had to eat today was some Ramen noodles around noon.

“I'd love a burger.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

As he turns to go, I say, “Wait. Can I use the little girls’ room?”

“Of course. Sorry. I should have thought of that. It’s just down the hall, the first door on the right.”

“Thanks.” I watch him disappear back into the kitchen, and then I head down the hallway. The bathroom is easy enough to find. It’s the *only* room on the right. Across from the bathroom is a rather spacious bedroom. The bedroom door is partway open, and I can make out what looks like a king-size bed with a dark comforter on it. There’s one other door at the end of the hall—probably a spare bedroom.

I step into the bathroom and flip on the light switch. The bathroom’s clean, too. And really nice. Like everything’s good quality—the cabinets, the mirror, the tub/shower area with glass doors and what looks like expensive tiles on the walls. The shower head hangs down from the ceiling—I’ve never seen that before. It looks expensive. It looks like he does all right for himself.

I really need a shower to wash this grime off my body, but right now hunger is gnawing a hole in my stomach. So, food first, then a shower.

After I pee, I wash my hands with hot soapy water. I avoid looking at my reflection in the mirror for as long as I can before curiosity gets the best of me.

Damn. I look like a wild animal. My hair is wrecked and matted with blood at my left temple. There are numerous bruises on my face, and my left eye is a bit swollen. Liam's paramedic friend put band-aids on the worst of my injuries. I'm officially a hot mess.

As I stare at myself, I feel sick. Who knows how long it's going to take for these injuries to heal? I'm not going to be able to work like this because make-up can hide only so much. Tony's going to lose his shit when he sees me. I bring in a lot of money for him, and benching me for a week, or even a few days, is going to cost him a lot. He doesn't like being out money. He won't care one bit that it's not my fault. He'll blame me, not the trick. He always does.

Feeling queasy, I sit on the side of the tub to catch my breath and think. I work hard to stay on Tony's good side, because he's not someone you want to piss off. I've seen what he does to the girls he's mad at. But there's no way I can hide my face from him.

My growling stomach reminds me that food is coming. Sighing, I leave the bathroom and head for the kitchen, where I find Liam standing at the stove. His attention is on the food in front of him, so I have a few moments to study him. Damn, this guy is hot. He's tall, at least six feet, maybe taller. The short sleeves of his T-shirt are molded to rock-hard biceps, and I'll bet he's leanly ripped all over. I remember how he handled the trick in the alley—he had the guy down on his knees in seconds, squealing like a stuck pig. He definitely knows how to handle himself.

He must have heard me, because he glances back at me and smiles. His brown hair is short, his beard and mustache trim and neat. His eyes are the color of dark chocolate.

He looks me over and frowns. “Why don't you sit down at the table before you fall? We'll eat first, and then we'll talk.”

“*Talk?* Who said anything about talking? I'm just here for the food. That's it.”

I sit down at the table because he's right, I am about to fall down. My muscles are jittery and weak. He hands me another glass of water before he returns to the stove to check on the burgers. There are plates already on the table, as well as silverware and napkins.

The food is sizzling in the pan, and the smell is incredible. My stomach starts cramping in anticipation.

Liam disappears into what must be a pantry, returning a moment later with a bag of sour cream and onion potato chips. He tears open the bag and sets it on the table in front of me. “Feel free to snack on these while the food is cooking.”

I don’t need an invitation. I pick up the bag and dump some of the chips onto my plate. “Thanks.”

“What do you want on your burger?” he asks. “Cheese? Anything else?”

“Yeah. Cheese. Ketchup and mustard, too, if you have it.”

He makes up two plates and carries them to the table. “What would you like to drink?”

“What are you having?”

“A beer.”

“I’ll have the same.” When he eyes me skeptically, I ask, “What?”

“Have you got some ID on you?”

I glance down at my body. “Do I look like I’m carrying ID? Anyway, I told you I’m legal.”

He doesn't look convinced. But he goes to the fridge anyway and grabs two bottles of beer, twists off the tops, and brings them to the table.

He sits, and we both start eating in silence. Thank god, because I don't want to *talk*. And if he's got anything else on his mind, he's tough out of luck. I'm hungry and tired and sore all over.

I scarf the burger down in minutes—god, that tastes good—along with more chips and the beer.

When we're both done eating, Liam says, "Let's go sit in the living room. It's more comfortable in there."

"Okay, but first there's something I've got to do."

"What's that?"

"Take a shower. Do you mind? I feel gross."

* * *

Liam hands me a Navy blue bath towel, a washcloth, and a clean change of clothes—*his clothes*—a pair of gray sweats and a black sweatshirt with some kind of martial arts logo on it. "They'll be a bit big on you, but it's all I've got."

"They'll do," I say.

"And you'll find a new toothbrush in the cupboard."

“Thanks.” And then I slip into the bathroom and lock the door.

I turn on the shower, and almost immediately the water is hot. Jeez, at the house where I live, it takes like five minutes for the water to get hot.

I strip off my tattered clothing and step under the spray. There’s soap in here and a bottle of shampoo. I lather up the washcloth with soap and scrub every inch of my skin until it’s practically raw. But no matter how hard I scrub, I can never feel clean enough.

I don’t have the right shampoo for my hair, so I just wet it and do the best I can to finger comb the tangles and wash out the blood near my left temple. Then I scrub my entire body once more and rinse off under scalding water.

When I’m done, I dry off and then wrap my hair in the towel. I can’t bring myself to put my underwear back on, so I pull on the sweatpants commando style. Then the sweatshirt. I grab the hundred bucks in my skirt pocket and slip it into the pocket of the sweatpants. I find a brand new toothbrush right where Liam said it would be and brush my teeth.

I feel almost human again.

When I return to the living room, I find Liam sitting on the sofa. I sit on the armchair.

He grabs a wad of cash off the coffee table and hands it to me. “As promised, here’s four hundred. You can count it.”

I take the money and do a quick count. All twenties. Four hundred bucks. I fold the bills in half and shove them into my pocket. “You’re serious?”

He nods. “I told you I’d pay for the rest of your night. You’re still on the clock, right?”

Shit. He was serious. “So, what do you want for your four hundred bucks?” Hell, for four hundred, a trick can have anything he wants. *Anything.*

Liam’s eyes widen. “What do I *want*? How about nothing, other than we talk?”

“Just talk?” I don’t believe him for a second. People don’t do favors for other people without wanting something in return. “About what?” Hell, maybe he gets off on sex talk. It wouldn’t be the first time a trick paid me good money to talk dirty to him. Nothing surprises me anymore. I’ve seen it all.

“Let’s talk about you, for starters,” he says. “Are you really twenty-one?”

“Yes.”

“When’s your birthday?”

“March 28.”

“How long have you been working as a—” He breaks off.

“A prostitute? It’s okay. You can say it. Since I was seventeen.”

He frowns. “How did you—”

“That’s easy. My mom’s a hooker, too. She does tricks for drug money. So is my older sister, Angel. My mom started pimping Angel out when she was sixteen. It’s how she pays the bills.” I glance out the balcony doors at the night sky. “I knew it was only a matter of time before my mom tried to pimp me out, too, and I’ll be damned if I’ll let my own mother do that to me. So I ran away at seventeen, and soon I started doing tricks on my own. But it’s rough out there for girls working alone. Then I met this guy—Tony. He found me on the street, offered me his protection, food, and a place to live. I’ve been with him ever since. He’s pretty fair as far as pimps go. He lets me keep some of the money. If you don’t piss him off, he treats you good.”

“How much does he let you keep?”

“About fifty a night. Enough for new clothes once in a while.”

“Is this really the life you want for yourself?”

I frown. “There’s nothing else I can do. Working fast food doesn’t pay enough to survive on.”

“You don’t have to sell yourself, Jasmine,” he says. His voice is gentle. Not judgmental or condescending.

I scoff. “I have no education, no training, no skills to speak of. There’s nothing else for me.”

“There could be. I take it you didn’t finish high school?”

“No. I dropped out near the end of my junior year.”

“You could get your GED. After that, you could get a job or even go to college if you wanted to.”

I laugh. “Sure I can. Who’d want to hire a prostitute?”

“You can get out of the life if you want to. I’ll help you.”

“You’re crazy,” I say dismissively.

He doesn’t crack a smile. “I’m serious. Just say the word, and I’ll get you out.”

“You don’t get it. If I don’t return before dawn, Tony’ll come looking for me, and when he finds me, it won’t be

pretty.”

“He won’t find you. Besides, I’d never let him—or anyone—hurt you.”

“It’s not me you should be worried about.” I gesture to my face and body. “He won’t mess up the goods because it’s bad for business. But as for *you*—” I point to him. “He’ll make you wish you’d never heard of me.”

“I’m not afraid of your pimp, Jasmine.” Liam doesn’t even bat an eye.

“You should be. He’s ruthless. And he’d never stand to lose a girl. Especially not one who makes as much as I do.”

“Do you want out?”

“Of course I do. But get real.”

“I am. I said I’d get you out, and I mean it. I’ll protect you from Tony, and I’ll help you get on your feet.”

I shake my head. “You have no idea what you’re saying.”

His expression hardens. “Oh, trust me, I’m not afraid of your pimp.”

Despite knowing better, I find myself desperately wanting to accept his offer. But it’s ridiculous. It’s way beyond

dangerous for him—he'd be putting his own life at risk. He wouldn't stand a chance against Tony and his muscle. "I can't let you do this. Tony'll kill you."

Liam reaches for the remote control and turns the TV on. He brings up YouTube and starts a video. He points at the screen—it's a fight ring in a huge indoor stadium. The title across the top of the screen says INTERNATIONAL KRAV MAGA CHAMPIONSHIP.

I watch a few minutes of the video as two men beat the hell out of each other in the ring. Their actions are mesmerizing—so fast, so brutal. Liam fast forwards to the end, when one of the men is declared the winner. The referee grabs the winner's wrist and holds the man's arm up in the air.

The camera zooms in on the winner's face as text scrolls across the bottom of the screen.

LIAM MCINTYRE

KRAV MAGA CHAMP

"Is that you?" I ask. I look from the guy on the screen to the guy seated on the sofa and back again. "Holy shit! That is you!"

He nods. “I’m a martial arts expert. I teach classes here in Chicago, at my brother’s security company. So, yeah, I’m not afraid of a pimp.”

“You might be able to kick ass, but no matter how big of a badass you are, that won’t stop a bullet.”

Liam doesn’t seem to be worried. “My offer stands. Just say the word, and I’ll get you out.”

I glance at the clock on the wall—it’s one o’clock in the morning. I either return to the house before six, or I don’t go back at all.

“Why don’t you think it over?” Liam says as he rises from the sofa. He disappears down the hall a minute, then returns with a pillow and a fleece blanket, which he hands me. “It’s late, and you should rest.”

He crosses the room to set the security alarm. “Don’t try to sneak out, or you’ll set off the alarm. If you want to leave, tell me, and I’ll drive you wherever you want to go.”

I nod. “Thanks. I have to be back at the house by six.”

He turns out the lights and leaves me alone in the living room. I’m exhausted, and the thought of stretching out on the sofa is irresistible. I drop the pillow at one end of the sofa and

lie down, covering myself with the soft fleece blanket. I let out a heart-felt sigh. This sofa is more comfortable than my own bed.

As I close my eyes, I can feel the throbbing in my face—the cuts on my cheeks, above my left eye. My right knee still stings.

My belly is full, and I'm having a hard time keeping my eyes open. I should tell Liam to take me back now, but the chance to rest here a while, where it's warm and comfortable, is more than I can pass up.

I can't quit the game. I can't let this do-gooder risk his own life on my account. He may think he's invincible, but he's not. Tony's ruthless. He'll exact revenge on both me and Liam if I try to leave the life.

I can't do that to the Boy Scout. It wouldn't be right.

Chapter 3

Liam

I'm not surprised I can't sleep. There's a stranger sleeping on my sofa—not just any stranger, but a prostitute. This poor girl doesn't belong in that life—no one does. She acts like it's a choice, but how can it be a choice when she has no other options?

I meant what I said. I'll get her out of that life. I'll help her get on her feet and become self-sufficient.

After tossing and turning in my bed, I finally get up and head to the kitchen for some water. As I pass through the living room, I see that she's asleep. It's five o'clock in the morning. If she's got to be back by six, we'd better leave soon.

I sure as hell don't want her to go back, but it has to be her choice. "Jasmine?"

She sits up, her dark eyes wide with panic.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to startle you, but if you're going back, we should leave soon."

She yawns. "What time is it?"

"Five."

She groans and lies back down, her dark curls spilling across the white pillowcase. “I don’t want to go back,” she admits in a quiet, sleepy voice. “But I’m afraid of what will happen if I don’t. And I sure don’t want to put you in danger.”

I clamp down on the impulse to reach down and touch her, to reassure her and comfort her. But she’s already made it clear she doesn’t want to be touched. I don’t blame her. No one should ever touch her again without her explicit permission.

“You don’t need to worry about me, Jasmine. Or yourself, for that matter. This is a secured building with security guards on duty twenty-four-seven. No one’s getting in who shouldn’t be here. Why don’t you go back to sleep? We’ll figure out our next steps in the morning.”

I can just make out the indecision on her face. “It’s okay,” I tell her. “You’ll be safe. You have my word on it.”

I continue on to the kitchen to get a glass of water. After I do that, I head back through the living room. She’s so still, I wonder if she fell back to sleep. Part of me wants to let her sleep, but part of me knows I shouldn’t. My opinion isn’t the one that counts here.

To my surprise, she glances up at me, her gaze filled with worry.

“Have you decided?” I ask her.

With a groan, she presses her face into the pillow. “I don’t want to go back,” she says, her voice muffled by the pillow. “I’m just afraid of what will happen when I don’t.”

My chest tightens painfully. No one should be afraid to choose their destiny. On impulse, I run my hand over the top of her head, brushing her hair back from her forehead. I love the feel of those bouncy curls against my palm. “You don’t have to be afraid,” I tell her. *Sweetheart*. I don’t add that last bit even though it’s on the tip of my tongue. There’s something about this girl that brings out my protective instincts. “I’ll take care of everything. Now go back to sleep.”

Once I’m back in my bed, I manage to sleep until my alarm goes off at eight. I moan as I stretch my arms and shoulders. I probably got a whopping three hours of sleep last night. At least it’s Saturday, and I don’t work on the weekends. It looks like we’ll be busy, though. She’s going to need everything because right now she has nothing. Not even the clothes on her back.

* * *

Jasmine is still sleeping when I head to the kitchen to make breakfast. While I’m cooking eggs, I formulate a mental

checklist of all the things she's going to need—clothes, shoes, toiletries, and whatever else girls need. As soon as she's feeling up to it, I'll take her shopping.

Just as I'm about to go wake her for breakfast, I spot Jasmine lurking in the open doorway. "Good morning," I say.

"Morning."

"Did you sleep okay?"

She shrugs. "I'm sore all over, but yeah, I slept okay. Your sofa is really comfortable. It's way better than my bed at home."

"Where is this house, and who lives there?"

"It's on the south side. It's a former boarding house, so there are lots of bedrooms and bathrooms."

"How many girls live there?"

"Right now, I think twelve. Plus the guards."

"Does Tony live there, too?"

"No. He has a nice place in Lincoln Park. I've seen it a few times." She shrugs. "Sometimes he takes a few girls home with him for the night. I guess it's a perk of being the boss."

"Do these girls get a say?"

She shakes her head. “Not if they want to walk the next day.”

I start plating the food. “Ready for breakfast? Have a seat.”

When she walks into the kitchen, I notice that she’d brushed her hair. It’s not quite the same wild mess it was last night. Even with all the bruises on her face, she’s stunning.

Jasmine sits at the table. “Is there anything I can do?”

“Nope. Food’s ready.” I set our two plates on the table. “What would you like to drink? Milk? Orange juice? Coffee?”

Her beautiful eyes light up. “Coffee for sure. I can’t function without it. Caffeine’s the only drug I need. Can I have some orange juice, too? I haven’t had orange juice in years.”

I pour coffee for both of us and set our cups on the table, along with a bottle of French vanilla creamer. Then I pour her a glass of OJ and set it in front of her. “You’re going to need some things—clothes and shoes, for starters. Do you feel up to going shopping this morning?”

She pales and shakes her head. “I can wear your clothes, if you don’t mind.” She grasps the front of the sweatshirt she borrowed last night. She reaches into her pocket, withdraws

the cash I gave her last night, and lays it on the table. “Here, this is yours.” She glances at the clock on the microwave. It’s eight-thirty now. Her six a.m. window has passed. “I guess I won’t be needing it after all.”

“You keep it,” I tell her. “You’ll need money for clothes and other stuff.”

“But I didn’t do anything to earn it.” She side-eyes me, looking a bit wary, like I’m going to demand a blow job right here and now in exchange for the money.

I smile. “Keep it.”

“I don’t take charity,” she says quickly.

“Then consider it a loan.”

She laughs. “Yeah, right. When would I ever be able to pay back a four-hundred dollar loan?”

“When you’re on your feet and have a job you love. You can repay me then.”

Her posture eases. “Okay.” She reaches for her fork and takes a bite of egg. After she swallows, she looks at me from beneath long dark lashes. “I won’t forget about the money.”

I want to reach out and pat her shoulder, encourage her, but I have to remind myself not to. She’s had a lifetime of

people touching her. I assumed she'd want to get some clothes, but that doesn't seem to be a pressing need for her right now. I think the fear of going out in public outweighs the need for clothes. She's right—she can wear my clothes as long as she needs. For a moment, I consider going out and doing the shopping for her, but I really don't want to leave her here alone for a significant length of time. She's anxious enough as it is.

After we finish breakfast, Jasmine offers to help me with the dishes. She clears the table, and I rinse off the plates and put them in the dishwasher. Then she crashes on the living room sofa while I go take a quick shower.

Just as I turn off the water and step out, my phone rings. It's Jason. He's probably calling to check on Jasmine. "Jason, hi," I say as I dry off.

"How's the patient? Did she get home okay last night?"

"She's doing better." I refuse to call wherever she was staying her *home*. "And for the record, she stayed here with me last night. She's not going back."

Jason is quiet for a moment. "What's the plan, Liam?" He pauses a moment. "Am I wrong in thinking she's a sex worker?"

“You’re not wrong. But I’m going to help her get out of that life. I’m going to help her get on her feet.”

“I see. Well, that’s admirable, but I don’t think it’ll be as easy as you might think. If any of those cuts get infected, let me know.”

“Will do. Thanks, Jason.”

“Hey, Liam.”

“Yeah?”

“Watch your back, man. Her pimp’s not going to just let her walk away without a fight.”

“I know. I’ll be careful.”

* * *

Once I’m dressed, I return to the living room and find Jasmine standing by the balcony door looking out at the street below. “You doing okay?” I ask.

With a gasp, she practically jumps out of her skin. “I’m fine.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you.” I notice her gaze is directed down at the street and not at the picturesque lake view off in the distance. “Are you looking for something?”

She shrugs. “Just watching.”

“He doesn’t know where you are, Jasmine. You’re safe.”

She glances at me, and I can tell she’s not convinced.

“You’re going to need clothes,” I tell her. “Are you sure you don’t want to go shopping?”

She shakes her head as she returns to watching the street.

“I don’t want to go out.”

“Are you afraid someone will recognize you?”

She nods. “If word gets back to Tony, I’m screwed.”

I know she’s scared, and I don’t want to push her.

I sit on the sofa, hoping to give Jasmine some space. She wanders around the small living room and ends up at my bookcase, where she skims the shelves of hardcover books. Most of my books are digital, but I do have a few dozen print books that are special to me.

I observe her as she checks out my collection of sci-fi books, a few self-help books, and my brother Jamie’s military thriller novels in hardcover. “Do you mind if I read one of these?” she asks as she runs her index finger along the spines.

“Go right ahead. My brother would love it.”

“Your brother?”

“Yeah. Jamie McIntyre. My brother wrote those thriller novels.”

She pulls one of the books out and skims the cover.

“You’re kidding. This is your brother?”

“Yep. He’s a former US Navy SEAL. Now he’s an author.”

Jasmine cracks open the book to the first page and starts reading as she walks over to the big armchair and takes a seat. She draws her bare feet up beneath her, then covers herself with the fleece blanket.

“You like to read?” I ask.

She looks up and nods. “When I was a kid, books were my escape. Every day after school, I’d go straight to the library where I’d stay until dark, doing my homework and reading. The librarians were really nice to me. They’d bring me sandwiches and fruit.” She smiles wistfully. “The library was my safe place, and books helped me forget about what was waiting for me at home.”

“No child should fear going home.”

Her eyes fill with tears, but she doesn’t say anything more. Instead, she turns her attention to the book in her hands.

While she's reading, I watch part of a football game on TV, keeping the volume down low. I keep one eye on the game, and the other on Jasmine. After a while, I notice she's dozing off. I'm not surprised. She must be exhausted from all the stress.

If she's going to be staying here with me for the time being, she needs someplace better to sleep than on the sofa. I'll give her my bed, where she'll be more comfortable. She'll also have some much-needed privacy. While she's napping on the armchair, I get up to change the sheets on my king-size bed.

When the bed's ready, I return to the living room and gently wake her up. "Why don't you go lie down on my bed? I just put clean sheets on it."

She shakes her head. "I can't take your bed."

"Sure you can. You'll be more comfortable in there, and you'll have more privacy."

She sits up and closes her book. "Liam, you've done so much for me already. I'm not kicking you out of your own bed."

"I don't mind. I have a spare bedroom, but it's currently set up as a workout room. I'll see about getting a twin bed in

there. I'm sure there's room." I nod toward the bedroom. "Go on. Go try it out."

She seems more than a little reluctant as she follows me to the room and stares at the bed.

"Go ahead," I tell her. "Lie down and rest."

She lays her book on the nightstand and sits on the edge of the bed, bouncing once. She smiles. "Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me, but you're welcome. Get some rest." I switch off the bedroom light and close the door behind me so she can nap in peace.

I return to the living room and continue watching the game, but my attention is on the young woman sleeping in my bed. I hardly know her, and yet I can't help but be impressed. She's made a brave choice, and I'm committed to helping her see it through.

Chapter 4

Jasmine

I wake up feeling disoriented and glance around the room. Obviously, this bed isn't mine. For one thing, it's huge. Also, it's really comfortable. At the house, I sleep on a single cot that's as comfortable as a slab of concrete. My pillow is old and stained, and the sheets are threadbare.

All of a sudden, the weight of what I've done comes crashing down on me, and I sit up in a panic, my pulse racing.

Oh my god, oh my god. What was I thinking?

I can't do this! I can't run out on Tony. He'll kill me for even trying. No one ever succeeds at leaving. I remember one girl—Miranda—who ran off with a trick a few years ago. She and the guy left Chicago for Detroit, where they lived for a year before Tony managed to track her down and drag her back. I remember hearing screams coming from the cellar beneath the house. They went on for weeks, and then suddenly all was silent. We never saw Miranda again. I don't know if Tony killed her or sold her.

I must be out of my mind to think I can do this.

The curtains are partly open, and it's still light outside. It must be late afternoon or early evening. I've been gone for less than a day. Maybe if I beg for forgiveness, he'll take me back.

I glance around the unfamiliar bedroom.

Liam.

This is his bed, his bedroom. His apartment.

I lean against the black fabric headboard and check out the room. It's definitely a masculine space. The dresser is black, as is the chest of drawers. On each side of the bed is a black nightstand. Gray drapes hang in the two floor-to-ceiling bedroom windows. Beyond the windows, I see the tops of other high rise buildings, a darkening blue sky as a backdrop, and a setting sun.

My stomach sinks as reality catches up with me.

What have I done?

I was crazy to think this could work. Panic sweeps through me, and my pulse races. Tony's undoubtedly furious by now, and I'm sure he already has his men scouring the Chicago streets looking for me. When they find me, they'll drag me back by my hair, and then Tony will beat me to within an inch

of my life. Or worse. Over the years, I've seen him do it to many girls who thought they could leave. It never ends well.

Like an idiot, I let Liam convince me there was a way out, that I could escape. He made it sound so easy. "*I'm not afraid of your pimp.*" Obviously, he's never met Tony.

I know Liam means well. After years on the streets, my instincts have gotten good at detecting threats and bullshitters. Liam's neither. He's definitely one of the good guys—a knight in shining armor. In my world, that kind of attitude will get you killed.

When I hear the apartment door open, I freeze, not moving a muscle. I listen hard to a few quiet voices coming from the living room. Someone's here. Immediately, my anxiety kicks into high gear.

I jump out of bed and quietly slip out of the bedroom and into the bathroom across the hall to pee. There's nothing I can do about my face—bruises and all. But I do brush my teeth with the toothbrush Liam gave me last night.

Last, I stare at my hair. It desperately needs to be washed and conditioned, but I don't have any hair care products. I can't use Liam's. I need products specifically designed for my type of hair. I quickly wet my hair and then bend over, letting

the strands hang down. I carefully rake my fingers through the tangles. When I straighten back up, my curls are restored. It'll have to do for now.

I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, horrified by how I look—like I was on the losing end of a brawl last night. I'm lucky Liam showed up when he did. Ricky was high on meth and outta his mind last night. He could have killed me. Ricky's always been very possessive of me. He thinks we're an item—that we're in love. Whenever he sees me talking to another potential trick, he loses his shit. Last night he was the worst I've ever seen him. As I stared at the tip of that knife he held to my face, I was sure he was going to kill me.

Liam probably saved my life.

And now because of me, Liam's life is in danger.

I finally leave the bathroom, flipping off the light behind me, and walk slowly down the hall to the living room. Liam is seated on the oversized armchair. On the sofa is the paramedic who tended my cuts last night, and beside him is the girl I spotted last night in his apartment. She appears to be mixed race, like me. She's about my age, gorgeous with sleek, long black hair pulled back into a ponytail. Her dark eyes are framed by kohl eyeliner. She's wearing a burgundy University

of Chicago hoodie and sitting as close to the paramedic as she can.

The moment they spot me, the three of them stop talking.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” I say.

Liam shoots to his feet. “Jasmine, hi.” He nods to the couple on the sofa. “You remember Jason and Layla.”

“Hi,” I say to the pair. My heart is hammering.

The girl gives me a kind smile and a tiny wave. “It’s nice to see you again.”

I almost laugh. No one says that to prostitutes.

Layla gestures to my face. “I hope you’re feeling better.”

“I’m glad to see you’ve gotten some of your color back,” Jason says. “You were pretty pale last night when Liam brought you here. How are you feeling?”

I nod. “Better. Sleep and hot food helped a lot.”

“I’m sorry about your face,” Layla says. Her expression falls, and I could swear the look in her eyes is sympathy. “But don’t worry. The bruises will heal.” She seems to know what she’s talking about.

Does this girl even realize what I am?

In my experience, nice girls like her shun girls like me.

“A trick cut me up last night,” I say, touching my cheek.

“It could have been a lot worse, but Liam stepped in.”

Without missing a beat, Layla nods. “That sounds like Liam, always the hero. I’m glad he was there to help.”

So, she does know what I am. She didn’t even bat an eye when I mentioned my trick.

“Jason wanted to check on your injuries,” Liam says, “and we thought it might be nice for you to meet Layla. You two are the same age.”

I glance at Layla, and in her eyes I see a whole lot of understanding and empathy. I don’t know her story, but I get the feeling she’s been through some shit of her own.

Maybe if I were someone else, Layla and I could be friends. As it stands, I don’t have any friends. The girls in the house would turn on each other at the drop of a hat if they thought it would buy them any favors with Tony.

Jason stands. “We won’t keep you. We just wanted to stop by and check on you.” When Layla stands, Jason holds his hand out to her, and she takes it. “If there’s anything you

need,” he adds, “don’t hesitate to ask. We’re right across the hall.”

Layla gives me another small smile. “If you want to talk, I’m available.”

“Thanks,” I tell them both.

Liam sees them out. “Thanks, guys,” he says at the door. “I appreciate you coming over to check on Jasmine.” Then he closes the door and turns to face me. “How’d you sleep?”

“Good.” It’s the truth. I feel much more rested.

“I hope you found the bed comfortable.”

I laugh. “Are you kidding? It’s like heaven.” My smile falls as reality comes crashing back, and my anxiety shoots up into the stratosphere. “Liam, this was a huge mistake.”

“What was?”

“Thinking I could leave. Tony’s going to find me, and he’s going to punish me. I have to go back. Maybe he’ll go easy on me if I go back willingly.”

Liam frowns. “Is that really what you want? To go back to that life? If you do, I won’t stop you. It’s your life, Jasmine. It has to be your choice.”

“No, of course I don’t want to go back! I hate that life. But I’ve been missing for nearly twelve hours now. Tony’s got his men out searching for me, scouring the streets where I usually work. If they find me—” I shudder at the thought of what would happen.

“Jasmine, I won’t let anything happen to you. They won’t find you.” Liam gestures out the window. “Besides, I don’t think they’ll be looking for a runaway prostitute hiding out in the Gold Coast.”

“Don’t underestimate Tony’s reach. He’s got a lot of friends in high places. Some of my clients would surprise you—attorneys, cops, judges, CEOs. A lot of big names.”

“I’m not afraid of Tony.”

“I hope you know what you’re getting into,” I say.

He nods. “Now, are you ready for some dinner? It’s been hours since you ate.”

At the mention of food, my stomach growls. “Yeah, I could eat again.” I check the time, surprised to see it’s almost five o’clock. I slept most of the afternoon away.

“What’s your favorite kind of food?” Liam asks.

I shrug. “We eat whatever Tony gives us.”

“Well then, what sounds good to you right now?”

“Tacos? I love tacos.”

“Tacos it is.” He picks up his phone. “I’ll place an order for delivery.”

Instantly, I’m relieved that we don’t have to leave the apartment. “Thanks.”

“So, what would you like to order?”

* * *

“Tell me about your family,” Liam says as we sit at the kitchen table eating.

I dip a tortilla chip into my cup of salsa, pop it in my mouth, and chew. “Mmm. I don’t remember salsa ever tasting so good.”

“Jasmine?” he asks patiently. He’s always so patient.

“What can you tell me about them?”

“There’s not much to tell. It was always just Mom and us kids.”

“What about your father?”

I shrug. “Never knew who he was. I don’t think Mom knew either. She does tricks for drug money. There was

always a constant stream of men in and out of our apartment.”

“Okay. Tell me about your Mom.”

“What’s there to say? She’s a drug addict. She fucks men for drugs.”

“Does she have a name?”

“Faye.”

“Last name?”

“Grant.”

“And your name is Jasmine Grant?”

“Yeah.”

“Where does your mother live?”

“On the south side, in Englewood. Why?”

“I was thinking we should pay her a visit. You’ve been away from home for nearly five years. Maybe things have improved there. It’s certainly worth looking into. It would be nice if you could return to your family.”

I shake my head. “No fucking way.”

“Why not?”

“She’s the reason I left. She’s why I am what I am.”

“What do you mean?”

“When my mom started pimping out my older sister, I knew it was only a matter of time before she started with me. That’s why I ran. I was *not* going to let my own mother pimp me out. But alone on the street? I was cold and hungry. I knew I’d never survive. That’s when Tony found me. I was sleeping in alleys and eating out of trash dumpsters. He offered me food, shelter, and his protection in exchange for me working for him.”

Liam frowns. “Maybe your mother’s in a better place in her life now. Maybe she can help you get back on your feet. Don’t you think we should at least try her?”

I take a sip of my soft drink. “You don’t know my mom. She’ll never change.”

Chapter 5

Liam

After we eat, Jasmine curls up on the sofa with Jamie's book. She's still wearing my sweats, which are way too big for her. She needs clothes—she needs a lot of things—but I don't see us making a shopping trip anytime soon. Since she's terrified of leaving my apartment, we'll have to shop online.

“Hey, I need to make a quick phone call,” I tell her, “and then how about we do some shopping online? You can order clothes, shoes, toiletries, anything you need. Sound good?”

She nods warily. “We won't have to go out?”

“Nope. The packages will be delivered right to the apartment.”

“Okay,” she says, although she's still frowning. She glances down at my sweats. “I guess I can't wear these forever.”

While she's reading, I step into the spare room and call my eldest brother, Shane, who lives upstairs on the penthouse floor. Shane is the founder and CEO of McIntyre Security. He's my boss.

He answers on the second ring. “Liam, hi.” He’s laughing, and I hear my nephew, Luke, jabbering with excitement in the background. “Yes, buddy, just a minute,” Shane says, laughing. “Daddy’s talking to Uncle Liam.” Then to me, he says, “What’s up?”

“I take it you’re at home?”

“Yes. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine. It’s just—I need to see you. I need some advice.”

“Of course,” Shane says. “Do you want to come up?”

“I think that would be best. I’ll be up in a few minutes.”

I return to the living room and sit on the coffee table facing Jasmine. “Will you be all right on your own for a few minutes? I need to run upstairs to the penthouse to talk to my brother.”

Her eyes widen. “You’re leaving me alone?” There’s more than a hint of panic in her voice. She really is scared.

“Just for a short while. I won’t be gone long. Half an hour tops. I’ll lock the apartment door so no one will be able to get in. I’ll even set the alarm. If you want, I can ask Jason and Layla to come stay with you.”

“No, that’s okay,” she says, sounding far from sure. “I don’t want to bother them. Just please don’t be long.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

I do exactly what I said I’d do—set the security alarm and lock the door behind me. Then, using a special code, I summon the penthouse elevator, step inside, and take it up to the top floor. My brother, who owns this building, lives in the sprawling penthouse, which takes up the entire top floor. He and his wife share the spacious apartment with another couple, their close friends and co-workers, Sam and Cooper.

The elevator lets me out into a formal foyer. On the far side of the space is the door to their apartment. When I knock, my sister-in-law, Beth, answers. She’s holding their infant daughter, Ava, in her arms. “Liam, hi!” She smiles as she steps back. “Come on in.”

I step inside and kiss my sister-in-law on the cheek. Then I follow her into the great room where I find Shane seated on a sofa in front of the fireplace, holding their blue-eyed toddler, Luke, on his lap.

“What’s up?” he asks as he tickles the boy.

Luke squeals as he wriggles in Shane’s arms.

“Can we talk?” I ask him. “In private?” I can hear voices coming from the kitchen. It sounds like Cooper and Sam are home as well, probably in the middle of making dinner. Cooper is sort of the resident chef here, as my brother barely knows how to boil water. And I don’t think Beth cooks much either.

“Of course.” Shane sets Luke on his feet. “I’ll be back, buddy,” he says, patting the little boy’s shock of white-blond hair. Shane nods toward the hallway that leads to his home office. “Let’s talk in my office.”

I follow Shane into his office. He shuts the door behind us and takes a seat behind his desk. I’m too worked up to sit, so I end up pacing.

“All right, spill it,” he says. “What’s going on? You said you needed my advice. About what?”

I laugh. “I don’t even know where to start.”

He grins. “How about at the beginning?”

I sigh. “Last night, I was at Tanks with the guys, like we do every Friday night. As I was heading to my vehicle, I came across a guy physically assaulting a young woman in an alley. I broke it up, and the guy ran off.”

Shane raises a brow. “And?”

“I brought the girl home with me.”

“You did?” His tone is neutral. “I’m listening.”

“I had to, Shane. She was hurt and needed medical attention, but she refused to go to the hospital. The next best thing I could think of was to bring her home with me and ask Jason to look at her. He did. He treated her numerous cuts and abrasions and patched her up.”

Shane sighs. “You always had a penchant for bringing home injured strays.”

“I couldn’t leave her on the street, Shane. She’s so young. She says she’s twenty-one, but I’m not sure I believe that.”

“She *says*?”

“She doesn’t have any ID, so I can’t be one hundred percent sure.”

“I see. So what’s the advice you need?”

“Look, I’ll just put it out there, okay? She’s a prostitute.”

Shane’s electric blue eyes widen slightly. “I figured that much already.” He pauses for a moment as that sinks in.

“Maybe you should sit.” He points at one of two chairs placed in front of his desk.

I take a seat. “She ran away from home when she was seventeen, and she’s been *working* ever since. The john who assaulted her last night had a knife to her throat. He could have killed her, Shane.”

Shane shakes his head. “Okay. So, where do you come into all this?”

“I want to help this girl get out of that life. I want to help her get on her feet, get an education or a good job—whatever she wants.”

Shane nods. “That’s admirable, Liam. But she has no ID?”

“That’s right.”

“From a practical standpoint, she’ll need identification. She’ll need a birth certificate, her social security number, and a state-issued photo ID. She can’t do anything without those. Does her family—”

I shake my head. “She says her mom won’t be any help.”

“And the girl’s father?”

I shake my head again. “Unknown.”

Shane frowns. “All right. Troy can help you obtain any documentation the girl needs. What’s her name?”

“Jasmine Grant. Her mother’s name is Faye Grant.”

Shane nods as he reaches for his phone. “I’ll call Troy to get the ball rolling.”

“Thanks.” I wait while Shane has a quick conversation with his attorney and friend, Troy Spencer. Troy’s the lead attorney for Shane’s company, but he also handles family legal matters.

While he’s on the phone, Shane asks me, “Do you know her birthdate?”

“Yes. It’s March 28, 1996.”

Shane relays the info to his attorney. When he finishes with Troy, he ends the call. “Troy will be in touch with you as he needs more information.”

“Thanks, Shane.”

“Anytime.” He leans back in his office chair. “I don’t know what your personal interest is in this girl—”

“I’m just trying to help her get on her feet, that’s all. There’s nothing else.”

“Well, regardless, I think it would be prudent for her to get checked out by a doctor. I could call Dr. Shaw—she’s Beth’s OB-GYN—and make an appointment for Jasmine. I think a basic screening for STDs wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

I straighten in my chair. “We’re not—I’d *never*—”

“Hey, relax. I’m not suggesting otherwise. I just think it would be prudent for her to get tested, for her own health and welfare.”

I relax in my seat. “Yeah, definitely. Go ahead and make the appointment, and I’ll discuss it with Jasmine.”

Shane nods. “Good. Anything else?”

“Yeah.” I exhale a deep breath. “She’s afraid to leave my apartment. She’s afraid her pimp will find her and drag her back. And I really don’t want to leave her alone for long periods of time. She was anxious when I said I was coming up here for a quick visit. So, what I’m getting at is I’d like to take some time off this week, to stay home with her until she feels more comfortable. I don’t have much planned this week. My next self-defense classes don’t start until the following week.”

“All right, then. Take the week off. Help her get adjusted. If you need anything, just let me know.”

I stand. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“No problem. And make sure she sees Dr. Shaw.”

“Just for the record, I want you to know that I’d never do anything inappropriate where Jasmine’s concerned. I’m sure that’s the last thing she wants. And it would be highly inappropriate for me to have any personal involvement with her. I’d be taking advantage of her, and she’s had enough of that in her life.”

My brother nods. “I know you’ll do the right thing, Liam, whatever that is. I never had any doubt.”

On my way back down to my apartment, I try to figure out how in the hell I’m going to broach the subject of taking Jasmine to a doctor to get tested for STDs.

Chapter 6

Jasmine

My heart skips a beat when I hear someone turning the doorknob. The apartment door opens, and Liam steps inside. The security alarm is quietly beeping, and he quickly disarms it. “By the way, the code for the alarm is zero eight zero five. It’s my mom’s birthday—August 5th.”

It’s sweet that he’d use his mom’s birthdate for his security system code. I smile. “Thanks.”

He nods to the book in my hands. “You like it?”

“Yes. Your brother’s a really good writer.”

“Yeah, he is. When his books come out, they always hit the top of the *New York Times Bestseller* list.” Liam grabs a black case out of the coat closet. “How about we do some online shopping? You can’t wear my clothes forever.” He grins. “They’re way too big for you.”

He kicks off his boots before he sets the bag on the coffee table, unzips it, and pulls out a sleek silver laptop computer. Then he sits beside me on the sofa and sets the laptop on the coffee table and opens it.

Liam clicks a few times, and the Amazon website pops up on the screen. “We should be able to find everything you need here.” He leans back in his seat and motions to the laptop. “Go ahead. Order whatever you need.”

I sit there, frozen to the spot. “Can you do it for me?”

“Well, sure, but wouldn’t you rather do it yourself?”

“I haven’t touched a computer in five years, Liam. I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“I doubt anything has changed that much, but sure, I’ll help you. Let’s start with something easy. Name one thing you need.”

“Underwear?” It comes out like a question, when it shouldn’t. “I need underwear,” I say, more forcefully. “And socks.”

“Okay.” Liam types *women’s underwear* in the search box and hits the enter key. “That’s a lot of results. Can you be more specific? Like size and style? Do you want the little bikini underwear or the big ones?”

I chuckle. “Type in *women’s bikini underwear size 5.*”

He revises his search terms and hits enter again. “That’s much better,” he says. “Why don’t you look at these and pick a

package? It looks like you've got a lot of options to choose from."

I pick a package and put it in my shopping cart. Then I locate a package of socks and some flannel pajamas. I try my luck at searching for bras and end up picking two plain beige ones. Normally, I wear matching silk panty and bra sets, but those are designed to impress my clients. Now I don't have to worry about impressing anyone.

Next, I select a pair of sneakers and a pair of ankle boots, a pair of skinny jeans, some long-sleeve shirts, a couple hoodies, two dresses, and leggings. Then I grab a fleece jacket, gloves, and a hat.

I glance at the shopping cart and the total price displayed. "That's a lot of money, Liam."

He shrugs. "You've got four hundred dollars, remember? Use it. If you need more, I'll give you more."

"I won't take charity."

"Okay... let's call it a loan with zero interest. What else do you need?"

"Hair care products, soap, lotion, and make-up."

“I’ve got plenty of shampoo and soap,” he says. “You’re welcome to use it.”

I look at him out of the corner of my eye. “No offense, but your shampoo is for white people.” I wind a curly strand around my index finger. “I need products for *my* hair.”

He chuckles. “Okay.” He motions to the laptop. “Go for it.”

I search for my favorite brands and make my selections. “I think that’s it.”

“You like to read, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Then how about a Kindle?”

“A what?” I have no idea what he’s talking about.

Liam gets up and goes to the bookshelf to grab a flat little rectangular device that he brings back to the sofa. He turns it on and hands it to me. “Here you go. An e-book reader. You can download any book you want right to this device.”

“Really?” That sounds a little too good to be true.

“Sure,” he says. “Name a book you like. Something you’d like to read.”

“The Hunger Games.”

Liam types in the title, and the cover of the book pops up on the screen. He taps a few buttons, then hands me the device. “There you go. *The Hunger Games* at your fingertips.”

I read the first couple of paragraphs. “That’s insane. You can just dial up any book you want?”

“You’ve really never seen an e-book reader before?”

I roll my eyes at him. “We were dirt poor. We didn’t have money for food, let alone something like this. I got all my books from the library—you know, real books. The kind you can hold in your hand.”

“Well then, let’s add a Kindle to our order.”

Our order. Not *your* order, but *ours*. The way he said that floods my chest with warmth.

I nod. “I’d like that.”

I can’t remember the last time, if ever, that I had someone on my side. I didn’t have friends at school because I didn’t want anyone getting too close. I couldn’t risk anyone finding out how bad it was at home. The closest thing I had to friends were the librarians who fed me when I visited after school. I

stayed there every evening until they turned off the lights and locked up for the night.

After the shopping is done—Liam swears most of the items will arrive tomorrow, which I don't believe for a second—he shuts off the laptop and puts it back in its case and stows it in the closet. When he returns to the sofa, he sits beside me. “So, I was thinking.”

“Yeah?”

He starts to speak but stops.

“What?” I ask. Clearly there's something on his mind.

“Just come out and say it, Liam. You don't need to baby me.”

When he clears his throat nervously, I almost laugh.

He runs his hand along his thigh. “I think—I mean, given the nature of... what you've been doing—”

“You mean, since I'm a ho.”

He winces. “Technically, you're not a... sex worker now, right?”

I shrug. “Technically.”

“Okay. Since you were, though, in the past, it might be a good idea for you to, um—I think you should consider—”

“Oh, for god’s sake, Liam. Just say it.”

“You should see a doctor and get checked out.”

My expression is puzzled. “Checked out for what?” I know exactly what he’s talking about, but it’s fun watching him squirm.

“For any medical conditions.”

“But I feel fine.”

Again, he winces. “But you might have a medical condition and not realize it. If you get checked out, you can get it taken care of, which would be in your best interest in the long run.”

I laugh. “I’m sorry, I’m just teasing you. You’re right—I should get checked out. I usually do a couple of times a year. I’m due for another visit.”

He looks relieved. “My sister-in-law, Beth, has an OB-GYN that she likes. A Dr. Shaw. We can make an appointment for you to see her.”

“All right. Sounds good.”

Liam sighs. “I’m glad that’s taken care of. Now, how about we watch a movie? Would you like to watch *The Hunger Games*?”

“It’s a movie?” I ask, shocked.

“Yeah. You didn’t know that?”

“Like I said, we didn’t have TV at home. And I hardly got a chance to go to the theater.”

“Then how about we watch the movie? I’ll make some popcorn and grab us something to drink. I’ll be right back.”

While Liam’s in the kitchen—opening and closing cupboard doors, the microwave, the fridge—I pick up his Kindle device and resume reading *The Hunger Games*. It was one of my favorite books when I was younger. I identified with Katniss and her sister, with how trapped they were. And I loved it when she fought back.

“Do you want butter or salt?” Liam calls from the kitchen.

“Salt, please.”

“Coming right up.” The microwave dings. A few moments later, Liam returns to the sofa with a bowl of popcorn and two cold soft drinks. “Ready?” he asks as he drops down on the sofa beside me.

I set the Kindle aside. “Yep.”

Using the remote control, he calls up the movie on the TV.

“How did you do that?” I ask, stunned.

“Easy. Now you can stream just about any movie ever made on your TV or computer. Even on the Kindle.”

“Any movie? I feel like I’ve been living under a rock.”

Liam chuckles as he starts the movie. He leans close, nudging my shoulder with his. “Don’t worry. You’ll catch up quickly.”

When the movie starts on his huge TV, with the fancy Surround Sound, I feel like I’m in a movie theater. Liam props his feet up on the coffee table and props the bowl of popcorn on his lap. I mimic him, putting my feet up, too, and lean back to get comfortable. Our shoulders are close enough to brush whenever one of us shifts position. It’s nice. I imagine this is what it’s like to have a friend. Someone to hang out with. Someone you can trust. Someone who won’t stab you in the back the minute you let your guard down. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I’m able to relax.

By the time the movie ends, I can hardly keep my eyes open.

Liam turns off the TV. “So, what did you think of the movie?”

“It was good. The books are always better, of course, but still, I enjoyed it. She’s a survivor. Did they make movies of the other books in the series?”

“Yes. We can watch those, too, if you’re interested.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.”

When I yawn, Liam laughs. “You’re tired,” he says. “Why don’t you go to bed? Take the Kindle with you if you want to read a while.”

“You don’t mind?”

“No, of course not.”

I take his advice and head to the bathroom to wash up for bed. “Goodnight,” I tell him as I head into the bedroom.

He follows me to the bedroom door. “Would you like something to sleep in? Maybe a T-shirt?”

“Do you have one with long sleeves? And do you have some long pants I can sleep in?”

He nods. “Sure, I can find you something.”

He digs around in his closet and pulls out a dark blue, long-sleeve T-shirt bearing a logo for an international martial arts championship. He hands it to me. “Here you go.” And

then he pulls a pair of red flannel PJ bottoms out of the closet and tosses them over. “Goodnight, Jasmine,” he says as he heads for the door. “Sleep well.”

“Thanks. You, too.”

He closes the door, leaving me alone, and for a minute I just stand there. It’s all so unreal. Being here, in a safe and comfortable space, with Liam just on the other side of this door. It’s hard to wrap my mind around it. At the house, I shared a room with three other girls. They were always sniping at each other, arguing, trying to take advantage of each other. It was a constant battle. And before that, when I lived at home, I had to constantly be on guard to protect myself from Mom’s tricks.

As I get comfortable in the big bed, I feel bad that Liam’s sleeping on the sofa. This is his apartment—his *home*. He shouldn’t get kicked out of his own bed. Certainly not for someone like me.

When I hear the water come on in the bathroom, I struggle to focus on my book. I’m trying hard not to think about the fact that Liam’s naked just across the hall. I shouldn’t care. I shouldn’t even be thinking about it. Men are the last thing on

my mind. And yet the image of him in the shower lingers in the back of my mind way longer than it should.

Chapter 7

Liam

Monday morning, just as I promised, several large packages arrive from Amazon, filled with all the essentials we ordered. The expression on Jasmine's face when she sees the stack of boxes piled outside the apartment door is priceless. It's like Christmas and her birthday rolled into one.

I carry the boxes inside and set them on the coffee table. Then, after I open all the boxes, I sit and watch her unpack everything. At least now she has some clothes of her own.

I clear a spot in my closet for her to hang her new clothes. I empty out a drawer in the dresser for her to organize her new undergarments. I clear out a drawer in the bathroom for her lotion and make-up. She sets her soap and shampoo and conditioner in the shower. She lines up bottles of hair products on the bathroom counter.

"Finally, I can wash my hair!" she says.

So I leave her to it and disappear into the spare bedroom to lift weights.

The next couple of days pass pretty quietly. We stay holed up in the apartment and find ways to entertain ourselves. I

spend a lot of time in the spare bedroom working out. Jasmine spends most of her time catching up on her reading on the Kindle—her new best friend. We make meals together, and we watch movies in the evening. She really has a lot of catching up to do.

My sister-in-law, Beth, makes an appointment for Jasmine to see her OB-GYN, Dr. Shaw, on Thursday. It takes some convincing, but I manage to reassure Jasmine that it's safe for us to leave the apartment for her doctor's appointment.

Thursday after lunch, we leave the apartment and head down to the parking garage. I can tell Jasmine's nervous about going out for her doctor's appointment, but she doesn't say anything. She's wearing blue jeans and a hoodie, and she has the hood pulled up over her head. I hate seeing her so scared. Her pimp has absolutely no idea where she is. He's not going to miraculously pop up in my building's underground parking garage and nab her. But no matter how hard I try, I can't convince her of that.

After we arrive at the doctor's office, I sit in the waiting room while Jasmine is called back. She's gone about forty minutes. When she returns, she looks like she can't wait to get out of here.

I go up to the check-out counter to pay the bill, but the cashier waves me off. “Mrs. McIntyre already took care of it.” She must mean Beth.

“Thanks,” I say, and then we leave.

Jasmine’s quiet on the way out of the building. “How’d it go?” I ask when we’re in the Jeep heading back to the apartment.

She shrugs. “Fine, I guess.”

“When will you get the results?”

“The doctor said she’d call me. She said it shouldn’t take too long.”

I nod. “Good. I’m glad that’s done.” We drive a few more minutes in silence before I broach a subject that’s been weighing on my mind. “How do you feel about going to see your mother?”

Jasmine shoots me an incredulous look. “Are you crazy?”

“She’s your mother, Jasmine. She’s family. Maybe you—”

“She’s a drug addict and a whore.”

“Maybe she’s different now. You’ll never know unless you see her. What if she’s gotten her act together since you left

home? What if she's clean now? Isn't it worth finding out?"

Jasmines shakes her head. "You're nuts."

"Isn't it worth a try? I'm just suggesting we go see her and find out for ourselves."

She crosses her arms over her chest. "Fine."

Chapter 8

Jasmine

Liam drives us to the south side of Chicago. It takes me a while to find the place, but eventually we pull up in front of our old apartment building.

I unbuckle my seatbelt. “I’m not even sure she still lives here.”

“Let’s go find out.” He reaches over and squeezes my hand. “There’s nothing to worry about. I’ll be with you the entire time.”

We get out of the Jeep and walk up to the front of an old brick building that has seen better days. The walls are covered in graffiti. Some of the windows are boarded up with plywood. The lawn is overgrown, and there’s trash littering the yard.

I point at the second unit from the left. “That one.”

I follow Liam up to the door. The curtains are closed, but we see the flickering of the TV through the sheer curtains. It looks like someone is home.

Liam knocks, but there’s no answer. He knocks again, this time harder. But again there’s no answer. He steps over to the

front window and peers inside. “Shit!”

“What is it?” I ask, joining him. I look through the window and spot my mom lying on the sofa. Her arm is dangling off the cushions. There’s a syringe lying on the carpet right next to her hand.

Liam moves to the front door and tries the knob. It turns, and he opens the door. I follow him inside. The house is filthy, with dirty dishes, food wrappers, and empty beer cans everywhere.

Mama’s lying unconscious on the sofa.

Liam mutters a curse as he presses his fingers to Mom’s throat. “Is this your mother?”

I nod.

“She’s alive,” he says. He gently shakes her. “Mrs. Grant? Can you hear me?” But she doesn’t stir. “I’m calling 911.” He pulls out his phone, and a moment later, he speaks into his phone. “I’d like to report a drug overdose. Caucasian female, approximately forty years old. She’s alive but not responsive.” He pauses. “Yes, I’ll stay on the line.”

Liam turns to me. “They’re sending an ambulance.”

We hear sirens not long after. An ambulance pulls up to the curb in front of the apartment building, and two paramedics come to the front door. Liam's there to let them in.

While the medics go to work checking my mother's vitals, Liam pulls me aside. "Would you rather wait out in the Jeep?"

I watch, horrified, as one of the paramedics administers NARCAN to my mom.

I nod to Liam, feeling sick as I watch the paramedics trying to revive my mother. She's OD'd before, but I never saw her this bad. "Yeah, I'll go wait in the car."

I sit in the front passenger seat of the Wrangler and lock all the doors. Before long, the paramedics bring my mom out on a stretcher and load her into the ambulance. Liam locks the apartment door and pulls it shut on his way out.

He climbs into the driver's seat and sits quietly for a moment. We both watch as the ambulance pulls away, lights flashing as they head toward the local hospital.

"Is she—I can't even bring myself to ask the question.

"The paramedics were able to revive her," Liam says as he turns in his seat to face me. "I'm so sorry. I was hoping for a better outcome with your mom."

I shrug. “I’m not surprised. It was bad when I left. I wasn’t expecting anything different. It’s probably a good thing we came when we did. Otherwise, she might have died.”

Liam nods as he starts the engine. “Let’s go home.”

Home.

Tears prick my eyes, and I look away so he doesn’t notice. I stare out the passenger window at the passing scenery. We’re both quiet on the drive back to Liam’s apartment building. My throat is tight, and I’m fighting back tears. I never expected that going back home would turn out well, but I never dreamed it would be that bad. I don’t even know if my mom’s going to make it. And even if she does, what about the next time?

Liam’s phone buzzes, and he looks at the screen, then at me. “My brother and his wife are inviting us to the penthouse for dinner this evening. They’d like to meet you.”

I stiffen. “Why?”

“Because you’re staying with me at the moment.”

I laugh. “Maybe they’re afraid I’ll be a bad influence on you.”

“Or, maybe they’re nice people and they want to show you some hospitality.”

I frown. “They don’t mind having a hooker in their home?”

“I guess they don’t, or they wouldn’t have invited us. They want to help you, Jasmine.”

“How?”

“Shane invited his attorney over tonight, too. His name is Troy Spencer. He’s going to help you get your documentation in order—your birth certificate and social security number. You’ll need both of those to do anything, like register for school or get a job.”

I can’t help looking as skeptical as I feel. No one helps someone like me for free. “Does he know who I am?”

Liam nods. “Yes.”

“And he’s still willing to help me?”

“Of course.”

I still don’t buy it. “Okay, I’ll go,” I say with a shrug.

When we arrive back at Liam’s apartment, I freshen up and change into one of the dresses I bought so I look a little

more presentable. It's an emerald-green tunic with long sleeves. I wear a pair of black leggings and my ankle boots. At the last minute, I put on a bit of foundation—to hide the fading bruises on my face—and some lip gloss.

When I come out of the bathroom, Liam's eyes widen when he sees me. "Wow."

"Do I look okay?" I ask, trying not to smile at his reaction.

"You look amazing."

"You don't look so bad yourself."

While I was getting ready in the bathroom, he changed into a pair of black trousers and a gray Henley that accentuates his lean, muscular build.

We take a different elevator up to the top floor—one that requires a special code.

"You sure do have a lot of codes to remember," I say as I glance around the elevator. It's fancy, with gold trimmed light fixtures and mirrored walls. I stare up at the surveillance camera in the front corner. "Are they watching us?"

Liam laughs. "I doubt it. They have better things to do than spy on the elevator." He studies me a moment. "Are you okay?"

I nod but don't say anything.

The elevator opens, depositing us in what looks like a formal lobby. The floor is a black-and-white checkerboard pattern. In the center of the room is an elegant round wooden table holding a vase of red, pink, and white roses. The foyer even smells like roses.

"They must be rich," I say, studying the flowers. I've looked in enough florist shop windows to know those must have cost a fortune.

"They own this building," Liam says. "My brother is quite wealthy."

"You're sure they said it was okay for me to come up?" I'm finding this hard to believe.

"Yes. Don't worry." Liam motions toward the door opposite us. "This way."

He opens the door and steps back so I can enter a home that looks like something out of an interior design magazine. It's wide open and spacious. The back wall is all floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Chicago skyline. I scan the room, from the living room on the left with a fireplace that soars up to a high ceiling, to the bar in the back corner, and to

the right is a dining room table that could seat an army. To the right is an impressive kitchen. I spot an older guy sliding a baking tray into the oven.

Immediately, we hear a child's laughter. A tall, red-haired guy is throwing a blond toddler up into the air and catching him on his way down. The boy is giggling his head off and shrieking with joy.

Seated on the sofa in the living room is a young woman not much older than me. She's probably the boy's mother. She's stunningly beautiful, with pale blonde hair and light blue-green eyes. She's holding an infant in her arms.

As soon as we're noticed, the laughter stops. The red-haired guy props the little boy on his hip and walks toward us. "Hey, Liam. Good to see you, man."

Liam nods. "Hi, Sam."

Then the red-head turns to me. "And you must be Jasmine." He offers me his hand. "Welcome. I'm Sam."

While I'm shaking Sam's hand, the blonde woman rises from the sofa and comes to join us. She smiles at me. "Hi, Jasmine. Welcome to our home."

Chapter 9

Jasmine

Liam makes the introductions. “Jasmine, this is my sister-in-law, Beth, and these are her kids, Ava and Luke. And this is Sam—a family friend; he and Cooper live here, too.” Liam nods to the older guy in the kitchen. “Guys, this is Jasmine.”

“We’re so happy you could come,” Beth says to me. She’s holding an infant, Ava, in her arms. Luke, a toddler, stands next to the redhead, Sam, clutching Sam’s jeans.

Beth is wearing a pale blue linen dress that matches her pale blue-green eyes. Her long blonde hair is pulled back in a ponytail. “I hope you’ll stay for dinner.”

The silver-haired guy walks out of the kitchen drying his hands on a hand towel. He nods to me. “Hello, young lady. You must be Jasmine. Welcome.”

“Cooper is the resident chef, among other things,” Liam says.

My throat tightens, and I feel a bit overwhelmed. All these people—these strangers—are welcoming me into their home. They don’t even know me. “Thanks,” I say, doing my best to

smile and not look awkward as hell. I don't know how to act around people like these, *nice* people.

Behind us, back in the lobby, the elevator pings as the doors whoosh open. In walk two men, one dressed in jeans and a sweater, the other dressed in a black suit and tie, white dress shirt. He's carrying a briefcase and wearing a Rolex on his wrist. I'm guessing he's the attorney.

"Hello, Jasmine," says the man in the blue jeans. He's handsome, with his short brown hair and trim beard. His eyes are an amazing electric blue. "I'm Shane McIntyre. And this is my friend and attorney, Troy Spencer. He's going to help you." Shane glances toward the one named Sam. "Would you mind babysitting the steaks up on the roof while the four of us talk in my office? They're just about done."

The redhead nods. "Sure thing."

I follow Liam and the other two men down a hallway to an office. We walk inside, and Shane closes the door behind us.

"Have a seat, everyone," Shane says, pointing to a small round table with four chairs.

We all sit, and my pulse goes into overdrive.

“Ms. Grant,” the lawyer says as he opens a thin black laptop computer and starts typing. Troy Spencer looks like a lawyer in his designer suit and tie. His dark hair is short, and his dark eyes seem to miss nothing. “My understanding is we need to obtain a copy of your birth certificate and your social security number. That won’t be any problem. Shall we start with some basic information, such as name and birthdate?”

“Jasmine Olivia Grant,” I say.

“I’ve got your birthday down as March 28. Is that right?”
Then he rattles off the year I was born.

“Yes.”

“And where were you born?” he asks.

“Here in Chicago. In Englewood.”

“Do you remember which hospital?”

I pause to think. “I think it’s called St. Bernard Hospital.”

I watch as the attorney makes note of the information.

“First we’ll get your birth certificate,” the man says. “That can be expedited, and we should have it in two to three business days. Once we have that, Jasmine will need a state-issued ID with her photo on it. That, along with the birth

certificate, will be enough for her to get her social security card. That takes one to two weeks to receive.”

Shane McIntyre nods. “Fine. Would you take care of that, Troy?”

“Absolutely. I’ll get on it first thing in the morning.”

About the time we’re finished, there’s a knock on the office door. The door opens, and Beth pops her head in to tell us dinner is ready.

We leave the office and head back to the big room. The redhead is setting the table. “Dinner’s ready,” he says with a grin. “Everybody grab a chair.”

Shane puts the little boy in a high chair at one end of the table and straps him in. Beth lays the baby in a cradle near the table. Everyone else takes a seat.

Liam pulls a seat out for me. “Thanks,” I mutter. I can’t help feeling self-conscious. These people know what I do—*did*—for a living, and yet no one is giving me the stink eye or even staring at my battered face.

In addition to the steaks, we have huge baked potatoes loaded with butter and sour cream and shredded cheese. We have salad and warm dinner rolls and steamed broccoli. And to

drink, a bottle of red wine is passed around the table. There's plenty of coffee and soft drinks and water.

It's surreal. Everyone's so calm and easy going—one big happy family. Shane cuts up the little boy's food. When the baby wakes up and starts fussing, the silver-haired guy—Cooper—gets up from his seat and brings the baby to the table, cradling her in one arm while he eats with this free hand.

I don't belong here.

I don't know why they'd even want me here.

“Is everything okay?” Liam whispers as he leans close. “Are you all right?” He starts to reach out—to lay his hand on my knee, I think—but he changes his mind and pulls his hand back.

Of course, he did. He wouldn't want his family to see him touching a *ho* at the dinner table.

My throat tightens as I nod. “Yeah, fine.”

After the meal, Cooper serves a homemade cheesecake with strawberry topping. We have coffee with our cheesecake. Sam steals Luke from his high chair and sits him on his lap so he can help feed him his dessert. Shane holds the baby.

After everyone's done eating, we move to the living room. I sit on a sofa beside Liam. There are two sofas and several armchairs, so there's room for everyone.

The little boy brings me a toy camera and hands it to me. He says something I can't quite make out.

"He wants you to take some pictures," Sam says to me. "That's his favorite toy."

I gaze through the viewfinder on the camera and pretend to take pictures of Luke. He raids his toy basket and brings back a stuffed kitten and a red race car. He surprises me by climbing up into my lap.

Liam leans close and says, "I think you've made a new friend."

Shane hands the baby to the attorney, who's seated in one of the armchairs. "Here, you're on baby duty while I man the bar."

"I don't know the first thing about babies," Troy says, looking more than a little freaked out as he gazes down at the tiny baby girl in his arms.

Shane winks at him. "It's never too late to learn, pal. You never know when it will come in handy."

Everyone laughs good naturedly at Troy's discomfort. Even though he says he doesn't know anything about babies, Ava doesn't seem to mind. She seems perfectly content in his arms.

* * *

As Liam and I head back down to his apartment, he asks me if I had a good time. "I hope you weren't bored."

"No," I say. "Not at all. It was really nice. Your family is very welcoming."

He nods. "I might be a bit biased, but I think they're pretty awesome. Wait until you meet the rest of the family."

It's after nine when we finally crash in his living room. We both changed into more comfortable clothes—I'm in my plaid flannel PJ bottoms and top. He changed into a pair of gray sweats and a black Kung Fu T-shirt. He sits on the sofa, and I curl up with a blanket on the armchair.

"You thirsty?" Liam asks as he gets up and heads for the kitchen. "I'm grabbing a beer. Can I get you anything?"

"Sparkling water, please?"

"Sure thing." He disappears through the kitchen door.

"Troy said he'd have your ID early in the week."

“That’s great.” I say the words because I think they’re expected, but I don’t really care. I don’t know what good ID will do a prostitute.

“There’s a lot we need to do to get you on the right track,” he says from the other room. “Study for the GED exam is one thing. You can study online and take practice exams. When you feel ready, you can take the actual exam to get your certificate.”

“If I pass.”

“Yes, if you pass. Did you like school? Before?”

I shrug. “It was all right. It was kinda hard to study at home, though, with Mom’s clients coming and going at all hours.”

“How were your grades?”

“They were good. Like I said, it was hard to do anything at home, like homework or study or write papers.”

“It’s okay,” he says. “I can tutor you if you need help.”

“Then what?” I ask.

“You mean after you get your GED? Then you’ll have a choice to make. Do you want to get a job or continue your education? Go to a trade school or college?”

I look at him like he's nuts. "Me? Go to college?"

"If you want to, yes."

"I can't do that. I literally have no money."

"Don't worry about the money. We'll figure that out when the time comes."

Liam suggests we watch a movie until bedtime.

"Okay," I say. I tuck my feet up on the chair and wrap the blanket around me.

I've never in my life stayed in such a nice place, with such nice furniture. It's chilly outside, and the wind is howling tonight, and yet it's perfectly warm and cozy in Liam's apartment. I don't think he realizes how nice he has it. I can't count the number of times we lost electricity or water when I was a kid because Mom spent our money on drugs or alcohol.

Liam brings out a bowl of popcorn, along with cold soft drinks, and puts on a movie for us to watch. We decide to go with the second movie in *The Hunger Games* series. I still can't believe they made movies of some of my favorite books.

The day catches up with me quickly, and I find it hard to keep my eyes open. I lean my head back on the chair cushion and fight to stay awake.

“Jasmine?”

I must have dozed off, because the next thing I realize the movie is paused, and Liam’s crouching down beside my chair.

“You’re exhausted,” he says. “Why don’t you go to bed? We can finish the movie another time.”

Stifling a yawn, I sit upright. “That sounds like a good idea.” I turn to face him and catch him studying my face. Self-consciously, I bring my fingers up to touch my still-bruised face. And then the bandage on my temple. “Can I take this off now?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

I try to pull the bandage off, but it’s stuck tight to my skin. “Ouch.”

“Here, let me.” He stands and leans close so he can gently peel the bandage off.

When he’s successful, he steps back, putting space between us. “How’s that? It’s healing nicely, but you’ll probably have a little scar.”

I laugh. “It won’t be the first.” My body is covered with scars.

I toss off the blanket and swing my feet to the floor. “I guess I’ll turn in now.”

Liam steps back again when I stand, making sure to put plenty of space between us. It’s weird. Usually I have to fight guys off. They want nothing more than to put their hands, or their mouths, on me. Liam seems quite the opposite. I wonder if he’s gay. Or maybe he’s just not attracted to me. Or maybe he’s disgusted because of what I am.

I head to the bathroom to get ready for bed. When I come out into the hallway, I spot Liam in the living room making up his bed on the sofa. He changed into a pair of shorts and a tank top, giving me a clear view of his arms and shoulders. His muscles are so well defined, his shoulders broad. His legs are long, dusted with body hair. His feet are barefoot.

Damn, he’s good looking. Why doesn’t he have a significant other in his life? I can’t imagine anyone turning him down.

I watch him shake out a sheet and lay it on the sofa. Then he tosses a pillow to one end and drops a blanket at the other end. He runs his fingers through his hair and blows out a heavy breath. Probably he’s irked that he has to sleep on the sofa. I wouldn’t blame him.

“You should sleep in your own bed,” I tell him as I walk into the living room. “I can take the sofa. I don’t mind, really. It’s way better than what I slept on at the house.”

He turns to me. “No, don’t be silly. You take the bed. I’ll be fine on the sofa.”

This guy is too nice for his own good.

“Do you need anything else tonight?” he asks me.

I shake my head. “I’m fine, thanks.”

He smiles. “Goodnight, Jasmine.”

I disappear into his bedroom, close the door, and climb into bed with my new amazing, life-changing Kindle.

Chapter 10

Liam

I lie on the sofa and stare up at the ceiling. I'm so pissed I could strangle someone. I want to strangle Jasmine's mother, her pimp, and every god-damned asshole who ever laid a finger on her. Jasmine is an amazing young woman, with so much potential that I'm only just beginning to understand. She was saddled with a shitty family, a shitty life, and faced shitty options.

I want to help her. I want to give her everything she should have had and never got. I want to make sure she has a future where she can spend her life doing what she wants to do and not be forced to sell her body just to survive. I want her to have the type of life every young woman deserves.

I'm restless as hell, and I wish I could work out right now, but I don't want to disturb Jasmine if she's trying to sleep. I suppose I could lift some dumbbells quietly enough not to keep her up. Or do pull-ups. So I head to the spare bedroom and warm up with some push-ups and pull-ups. Then I start on the dumbbells. That won't make too much noise.

I push myself as hard as I can, doing reps over and over again until my muscles are shaking. I focus on my routine, on my form. I focus on the weights. But no matter what I do, I can't stop thinking about Jasmine. And I feel like an asshole because of it. The last thing she needs is another guy lusting after her. She's beautiful, yes. Gorgeous. And completely off-limits. I can be her protector, yes. I can save her from the life she's been living. I can help her build a new future for herself. But I can't be anything more to her.

It would be wrong.

I'd be taking advantage of her.

I work out until my muscles are about to crap out on me. I'm a hot, sweaty mess now, so I jump in the shower. And the whole time I'm standing beneath the hot spray of water, I'm mentally picturing Jasmine. And the harder I try not to, the more I fail.

After I dry off and brush my teeth, I pull on a pair of boxers and head for my make-shift bed—where I lie for a long time thinking about someone I shouldn't be thinking about.

* * *

We spend a quiet weekend in the apartment. We invite Jason and Layla over for dinner on Saturday. We order food

from an Indian restaurant and play some board games. I'm glad to see Jasmine and Layla are becoming good friends. They both have had hard lives and overcome huge challenges.

On Sunday, I manage to talk Jasmine into going out for a little exercise. She's been cooped up inside so much, I figure she could use some fresh air. We bundle up against the blustery chill and go for a walk in the neighborhood. I can't help noticing that Jasmine's antsy being outside. She feels unsafe out in public. She's also very quiet.

I stick close to her so that we're walking shoulder to shoulder. "Something wrong?"

She shrugs.

"You seem nervous."

Jasmine nods. "If someone recognizes me... Tony will hear about it."

"He's not going to find you." I realize we're not far from Clancy's Bookshop, which my sister-in-law owns. "I know a place I think you'll like."

We walk over to N. Michigan Avenue to the bookstore and pause outside. Jasmine cranes her head up as she takes in the impressive building. "It's a bookstore."

“Not just any bookstore,” I say. “This is Beth’s bookstore.”

“Your sister-in-law?” Jasmine sounds utterly dumbfounded.

I nod. “Let’s go in. We can grab a study guide for the GED.”

Jasmine makes a face. “I thought I was done with school.”

I laugh as I open the door for her. “Come on.”

Inside the store, Christmas decorations are everywhere—no surprise there. Erin O’Connor, Beth’s assistant manager and one of her best friends, loves decorating for the holidays.

Jasmine glances around. “Is Beth here?”

“I doubt it. She usually doesn’t work on the weekends. Erin might be working, though. You haven’t met her yet, but she lives in my apartment building, just down the hall from my place. You guys should definitely meet.”

I head over to one of the check-out counters, Jasmine right behind me. “Where would we find the GED study guides?”

“Upstairs,” the young man says. “Go up the stairs, turn right, and walk straight ahead. You’ll find the study materials there.”

“Thanks,” I say, and then I direct Jasmine to the stairs.

I follow behind her as she climbs the curved staircase that leads to the balcony that overlooks the front of the store.

“This place is huge,” she says.

“Shane bought this store for Beth, as a pre-engagement present. This is her happy place. The owner, Fred Clancy, was interested in selling so he could retire to Florida to fish. Now, it’s Beth’s.” I lean closer to Jasmine. “Funny story—Ava was conceived here in this bookstore, upstairs in Beth’s office during a snowstorm.”

Her eyes widen. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. The blizzard shut down the entire city. The roads were closed, and Beth, Sam, and a bunch of bookstore employees were stranded here in the store. Shane, Cooper, and a few other guys managed to make it here on foot to protect them from looters who were going up and down the street breaking into stores. Nine months later, Ava was born.”

We locate the study materials section and grab a GED practice guide that includes a number of practice exams. It’s a big book.

Jasmine flips through the book. “Math, language arts, social studies, and science.” She shrugs. “I can do that.”

I take the book from her. “Do you want to look around while we’re here?”

Her eyes light up. “Really?”

“Sure. You said you love to read. You might find something that looks good.”

Not surprisingly, Jasmine makes a beeline for the science fiction section. I stand by holding the study guide and follow her as she peruses the shelves. She picks up one book, reads the back cover, then returns it to the shelf. Then she picks up another one and does the same thing. Then another.

“You don’t like any of those?” I ask.

She gives me a strange look. “They’re fine.”

“Why’d you put them back?”

“I don’t have any money.”

“If you want to buy some—”

She shakes her head and moves on, turning to the next aisle as she continues her window shopping.

I realize she feels like she can't buy anything. The little bit of money she has is what's left over from what I loaned her.

I follow her to the next aisle. "Jasmine—" The rest of what I was going to say catches in my throat.

Jasmine's standing frozen to the spot, staring at a man who's staring right back at her. He's a professional man, dressed in a suit, tie, and a beige cashmere coat. Dark blond hair, parted on the side, blue eyes and glasses. He looks like an attorney or an accountant.

Standing right behind the guy is an obviously pregnant woman holding the handle of a stroller. Inside the stroller is a little boy around Luke's age. "How about this one, honey," the pretty young woman says as she taps the guy's arm. I presume she's his wife.

I move in beside Jasmine and peer down into her face. Her eyes are wide, radiating sheer panic. I have to fight the urge to put my arm around her. "What's wrong?" I ask quietly, even though I have a niggling feeling I know.

She turns abruptly and walks back the way we came. "We have to leave right now," she hisses at me as I keep pace with her.

“Who is that guy?” And then immediately I realize. “He’s a client?”

She nods jerkily as she makes it to the stairs and practically races down them.

“Jasmine, wait!” I follow her straight out the doors and onto the sidewalk.

She turns back to me and stares at the study guide I’m holding. “Oh, my god, the book! We stole a book.” She looks absolutely horrified.

I laugh. “It’s okay. We can pay later.”

The doors open and Erin O’Connor runs out, Mack right behind her. “Liam!”

We turn to face the petite assistant store manager.

“Erin, hi,” I say. “Sorry, but we can’t stay to chat. By the way, we’re taking this book. I’ll pay for it later.”

Erin waves dismissively. “No problem.” Her curious gaze drifts to Jasmine, and I know she’s wondering who she is. But maybe she already knows. Maybe she talked to Layla and Jason. Or to Beth.

“This is Jasmine,” I say to Erin. “And this is Erin. She’s the assistant store manager and a close friend of Beth’s.

Layla's too. And this is Mack." I nod to the towering dark-haired man standing behind Erin.

"Nice to meet you," Erin says to Jasmine. "Would you guys like to come back in for some coffee in the café?"

Jasmine's still antsy, and her gaze keeps going into the store. Every time the door opens and someone walks out, she checks to see who it is.

"Unfortunately, now's not a good time, Erin," I say. "We need to get going. Maybe we can catch up soon, okay?"

"Sure," Erin says. "Let's plan something soon."

"Which way?" Jasmine asks me when Erin walks back into the bookstore.

"This way." I motion up the street. "Do you want to grab a taxi?"

"Can we? Do you mind?"

"Of course we can." I flag the nearest available cab, and we slip into the backseat. I give the driver my address, and we're off.

I can't talk openly to Jasmine in the taxi, but I watch her body language. She's shaking.

“It’s okay,” I say quietly.

She looks at me but doesn’t say anything. I can tell she’s spooked. Her hands are clasped in her lap so tightly her knuckles are white. I notice she’s digging the thumbnail of one hand into the palm of the other. She’s hurting herself.

On impulse, I reach out and cover her hands with mine, stilling them. I don’t say anything, but we make eye contact. I squeeze her hands gently.

She unclasps her hands and turns one of them to fit against mine, pressing her palm to mine. I link my fingers with hers and hold her hand tightly. That seems to help with the shaking.

As soon as we’re back in my apartment, Jasmine heads straight for the bedroom and locks herself in. I knock on the door. “Jasmine?”

But she doesn’t answer.

“Jasmine, you’re okay. You’re safe. I’m not going to let anyone hurt you.”

The door opens, and she storms out, heading for the kitchen. “He saw me!”

I follow her, watching as she opens the fridge door and peers inside. “And you think he recognized you?”

“Yes. He’s—”

“He’s what?”

“He’s a regular. I see him several times a month.”

Damn. And he has a pregnant wife and a toddler. “Was that his wife with him?”

She nods.

“I don’t understand. Why would a married man—”

Jasmine rolls her eyes at me. “Most of my tricks are married, Liam.” She pulls a bottle of beer out of the fridge.

“Do you have anything stronger than this?”

I take the beer from her and put it back in the fridge. “But why go to someone else? He has a wife—”

“Different reasons. Sometimes they want things from me that their wives won’t give them.”

Oh, god. I can just imagine what that could be. This just keeps getting worse.

Jasmine storms out of the kitchen and crashes on the sofa. She kicks off her sneakers and tucks her feet up beneath her and reaches for the blanket. “If word gets back to Tony, I’m dead.”

Jasmine's wired so tightly she's literally shaking. Her eyes are wide, her lips pressed hard together.

I sit beside her. "Hey, it's okay." I know I shouldn't, but I can't help putting my arm around her shoulders. "You're safe, I promise. I won't let anyone hurt you."

She melts into me, then, leaning her head against my shoulder. She turns to me, and her arms snake around my waist. She holds onto me tightly. And then she starts crying—horrible, heart-breaking sobs. "I—never—had—anyone—before. No one—who—cared—if I lived or died. No one to protect me. Never."

Impulsively, I wrap both arms around her and kiss the top of her head. Right now I'm swamped with emotions, all directed at this girl, complicated and confusing, some of them so very wrong. But I shove all those thoughts aside. Right now, she needs someone—anyone—to stand up for her. "It's okay. I promise, it's okay."

She sniffs loudly. "I always wanted a big brother who'd protect me. From Mom, from the tricks who came to our house and stared at me, from what I knew was coming one day."

Her words hit me like physical blows. The picture she paints is a nightmare scenario that no child should ever face.

“I’ll protect you,” I vow. “I’ll be that big brother you always dreamed of.” But I feel like a heel because if I’m being honest with myself, my emotions where this girl is concerned are complicated at best. I don’t want to be her *brother*. But there’s no other option on the table, so brother it is. “I have three sisters. There’s always room for one more.”

She laughs, the sound watery and breathless. “Thanks, Liam,” she says as she tightens her hold around my waist. “I’d like that.”

“Even if that guy told Tony he saw you at Clancy’s, Tony still doesn’t know where to find you. We’ll keep it that way, okay?”

She nods.

Jasmine eyes the GED study guide on the coffee table. She releases me and picks it up. “I need something to do—something to take my mind off *him*. Have you got a pen?”

“Sure.” I disappear into the kitchen and locate a pen in a drawer. “Here you go,” I say, handing it to her.

“I should do the pre-assessments.” She’s already making marks in the book. “I’ll start with math. I always liked math.”

“Good idea.” I’m really curious to see how she scores. My gut tells me she’s a smart young woman.

While she takes the math pre-assessment, I grab a bottle of Coke from the fridge and bring her a bottle of sparkling water.

“Thanks,” she says absently as she opens the bottle, takes a long drink, then returns to the test.

I sit on the sofa and watch her work. She scribbles out problems in the margins of the study guide.

“Do you want a calculator?”

She shakes her head. “Don’t need one. These are easy problems.”

As I observe her, she appears to be doing the problems in her head. I don’t want to make her feel self-conscious, so I get up and put a load of clothes in the washer. I take a load of towels out of the dryer and fold them. I find things to keep me busy while she’s working.

“I’m done,” she calls from the living room.

“Already?” When I step back into the room, she’s tucking the pen into the book and hands it to me.

“You want me to grade it?”

She nods.

So I do. I sit back down beside her and compare her answers against the key. According to the guide, she got every single question right. She aced the math practice exam.

“How’d I do?” she asks. “Did I pass?”

“You did. In fact, you got a perfect score.”

When she smiles at me, I feel a punch to the gut. This is the first time I’ve seen her really smile, and it transforms her face from beautiful to breathtaking. “What were your grades like in school?”

She shrugs. “Good enough that they put me in advanced classes.”

She had so much potential, and it was stolen from her because of her home situation.

“I think you should take the rest of the practice tests. As soon as we get your ID, we’ll sign you up to take the official exams. Then, your future is up to you, Jasmine. Whatever it is you want to do, I’ll help you.”

Her smile falls. “I have no idea what I want to do. I never saw myself doing anything other than playing the game.”

The game? Is that what it's called? A young girl selling her body to survive is just *the game*?

“You don't have to decide now,” I tell her. “There's plenty of time for that.”

Chapter 11

Jasmine

That evening, Liam asks me what I want to eat for dinner.

“Pizza?” I ask. I’m still not used to getting to make decisions like what to eat. I’m afraid I’ll choose wrong or ask for something he doesn’t like.

“Sure. What do you like on your pizza?”

“How about a veggie pizza?”

“All right.” He grabs his phone and places the order.

While we’re waiting for the pizza, we watch TV—*Supernatural*, which I’ve never seen before. About halfway through the first episode, the pizza arrives.

When we’re done eating, and we’ve watched two episodes of the show, I yawn.

Liam laughs. “I think someone’s ready for bed.”

“I think you’re right.” I get up from my chair to head to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

“Hey, Jasmine.”

I pause and turn back to Liam. “Yeah?”

“Tomorrow’s Monday. I was wondering... would you like to come to work with me? You could stay here if you want to, or you can come with me and spend the day at McIntyre Security.”

“You teach martial arts?”

“Yes. And self-defense for employees. I’d love for you to come with me. There’s going to be someone there who I’d love for you to meet.”

“Who?”

“My twin sister is coming tomorrow to help me give a women’s self-defense demonstration to some new hires. I thought you might like to see that.”

“You have a twin sister?”

“Yes, Lia. She works for McIntyre Security as a professional bodyguard.”

Her eyes light up. “I’d love that, but are you sure it’s okay for me to go to your work?”

“Yes, I’m sure. My brother owns the company, remember? We’ll leave at eight-thirty. My first class is at nine.”

* * *

That night, as I'm lying in Liam's bed, my mind is racing. So much happened today, but the part I can't get out of my head is the way Liam held me on the sofa after we got back from the bookstore. I was having a legit panic attack. I'd never felt that kind of security before. That kind of compassion. I think he kissed the top of my head, but maybe I dreamed that part. I can't be sure.

It was a platonic kiss, of course—like from a brother or a friend. Nothing about it was sexual. He's never made any sexual moves on me, which is a first for me. Every guy I've ever been around has tried to get with me. Even Mom's tricks would sneak into my bedroom at night if Mom passed out. I kept a kitchen knife under my pillow for a reason.

I shared a room with my older sister, Angel, and sometimes she'd get with Mom's tricks for a little extra cash. But not me. Never me. I'd put earbuds in my ears and crank up the music so I didn't have to hear them going at it.

I haven't known Liam long, but I know he'd never force himself on me—or on any girl.

I have a hard time falling asleep. My pulse is racing, and my body feels weird, sort of queasy. My belly is quivering, and I feel warm all over, like I'm having hot flashes. Maybe

I'm coming down with something. I sure hope not because I want to go to Liam's work tomorrow. I can't wait to meet his twin sister. If she's anything like her brother, I know I'll like her.

* * *

I awake to the sound of a knock on my bedroom door.

"Rise and shine, sleepyhead," says a muffled male voice. "I'm about to start on breakfast."

I jump out of bed and head for the bathroom so I can shower quickly. Once I'm out, I dry off, then apply lotion to my arms and legs. I'm careful not to look at my reflection in the mirror. I hate the reminders of my life that are etched all over my body. It's ugly. Hideous. So many scars. Knife wounds from when tricks or other girls stabbed me. Marks from beatings Tony gave me with a belt in the early days, before I learned the ropes. I even have a bullet wound from a drive-by shooting.

I pull on a pair of skinny blue jeans and a long-sleeved coral T-shirt. I always wear long sleeves to hide my scars. I never show my skin to anybody if I don't have to. Tricks don't seem to care about my scars. I think some of them actually like them.

“Breakfast is ready,” Liam says as he raps on the bathroom door.

“I’m coming.”

Breakfast is waffles and sausage, already made and waiting on the table. Coffee with caramel creamer and orange juice. Toast with butter and strawberry jam. As I take my seat at the table, my stomach growls loudly.

Liam smiles. “I’ll take that as a compliment.”

It’s such a treat to have fresh, hot food like this. At Tony’s, we ate stale bagels for breakfast. No cream cheese or anything to put on them. Just dry, hard bagels.

“Slow down,” Liam says with a laugh. “You’re going to make yourself sick if you eat that fast.”

I shrug as I sip my coffee. “I can’t help it. It’s just so good.”

His smile fades, and he looks a bit sad as he watches me eat. He starts to speak, but then he stops himself. “I’ll take care of the dishes. You take your time.” He carries his empty plate and silverware to the sink.

I watch him rinse off his plate and fork and put them in the dishwasher. I’ve never seen a man do housework before. At

the house, the girls do all the chores, and the men assigned to guard us just sit and watch. They know better than to touch us, though. Tony would kill them for touching. Still, it's creepy how they'd watch us. They'd sometimes touch themselves openly, grabbing their dicks and squeezing or rubbing.

“Jasmine? You okay?”

I shake myself mentally. “Yes, fine. I'll go brush my teeth. Then I'm ready to go.”

“Why don't you bring the GED study guide with you? You can sit in my office and take more of the practice tests.”

I nod. “Sure. I'll grab it.”

“And bring the Kindle, too,” he calls after me when I'm in the living room. “So you can read when there's nothing exciting going on.”

Once I'm ready, he says, “One more thing. It's just a precaution, and if you don't want to do it, I totally understand.”

“Do what?”

He pulls a small device out of his front pocket—a silver disc smaller than a dime. “This is a GPS tracker,” he says. “I can track you anywhere with this.”

“Track me?” And then it dawns on me. He means if I go missing. If Tony or his men manage to capture me. “How does it work?”

He holds up his phone. “I have an app that will track this device. I can put it in your shoe.” He shrugs. “If something happens, I’ll be able to find you.”

“You’ll be able to find my shoe, you mean.”

He nods. “True. Try not to lose your shoe.”

I smile in spite of myself. “Okay. I’ll try not to.” I take off my sneaker and hand it to Liam. He works for a moment on the inside of my shoe, then hands it back to me. “It’s under the sole. Put it on.”

I slip my foot into the shoe. He checks the app and nods. “It’s working.”

“Thank you,” I tell him. The idea that he can find me no matter where I am is reassuring. If something does go wrong, there’s a hope that Liam can save me.

We head down to the parking garage. Liam opens the front passenger door for me, and I climb up onto the seat. I’m buckled up by the time he slides behind the wheel.

It's a short drive to his work. We pull into the lot of a tall office building on the main road. Liam drives into an underground garage and parks the Jeep.

Other people are pulling in, too, and as we get out and walk to the bank of elevators, people wave at Liam and say hello. He smiles at them, waves back. I'm careful to keep my gaze forward and try not to make eye contact with anyone. It's not likely I'd recognize anyone here, but I don't want to take the chance.

We take an elevator up to Liam's floor and get out. He walks me down the hall until we reach a pair of double glass doors marked MARTIAL ARTS STUDIO. He opens the door for me, and I step inside a brightly-lit, spacious room. The entire outside wall is floor-to-ceiling windows.

Liam flips on the overhead lights. "This is the martial arts studio. Over there is my office. You can set your stuff down there. That's the equipment room there, and those are the locker rooms, men's and women's."

I glance around the wide-open space. There are huge black mats on the floor, arranged around the room. On one wall is a set of bleachers, like you'd see in a school gymnasium. It even reminds me of a school.

He points to the big clock on the wall. “My sister and I are doing a demonstration at nine. People will start arriving soon. Come, I’ll show you my office.”

His office is neat and clean, like his apartment. There’s a big desk with a computer monitor on it. A gray sofa is positioned against the wall with a coffee table in front of it. A freestanding rack beside the sofa holds an assortment of fitness and martial arts magazines.

“Make yourself comfortable,” he says. “There’s coffee, water, and snacks. Help yourself to anything you want. Bathrooms are located in the locker rooms. If you need anything, just let me know.”

Liam sits at his desk and turns on his computer. It looks like he’s checking his e-mail. I sit on the sofa and glance around the room, taking in all the framed certificates and brightly-colored ribbons hanging on the wall. I assume these are from all the martial arts events he has won. There’s a bookcase on the back wall that holds several rows of shiny trophies.

“Is there anything I can do?” I ask, feeling useless just sitting there.

“No. Just relax. The demonstration will start soon.”

I crack open the study guide and start to do another practice test—science this time—when I hear voices outside Liam’s office.

A few minutes before nine, a petite, pretty blonde appears in the open doorway, dressed in black workout gear. She’s got a trim, muscular build. The girl plants her hands on her hips and says, “Hey, bro.”

Liam looks up from his computer and smiles at the blonde. “Come in, Lia.” He pushes his desk chair back and stands. “I’d like you to meet someone.”

The blonde studies me curiously. “Ooh, Liam has a lady friend. It’s about time.” Then she frowns when she gets a good look at the fading bruises on my face. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Uh, Lia—” Liam says.

“I hope the other guy looks worse,” the girl says.

Chapter 12

Jasmine

“Lia, this is Jasmine,” Liam says to the petite blonde girl. Then he turns to me. “Jasmine, this is my twin sister, Lia McIntyre.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jasmine,” the sister says. She steps forward, looking me directly in the eye, and holds out her hand.

It takes me a hot second to realize she just wants to shake my hand. So I offer mine, and we shake. I’m just not used to people wanting to shake my hand. First Liam’s family the other night, and now his sister. Obviously, his sister has no idea who I am, or I doubt she’d be so quick to touch me.

“Is Jonah with you?” Liam asks her. As soon as he says that, we hear squeals and shrieks coming from the other room. He rolls his eyes. “I guess that’s a yes.”

“Yes, I brought him, the big baby.” Smiling, she rolls her eyes. “He didn’t feel like staying home—he said he was feeling left out.” Then Lia looks my way. “Jonah’s my husband,” she explains. “He tends to attract a lot of attention wherever we go.”

The murmur of voices out in the main room has grown louder. Lia heads for the door. “I’d better make sure no one is mauling him.”

When she’s gone, Liam smiles apologetically at me. “Sorry about that. Jonah Locke—”

“Your sister is married to *Jonah Locke*? *The* Jonah Locke? Are you kidding me? How—”

“She’s his bodyguard. That’s how they met. They were married just recently.” Liam motions to the door. “Why don’t you come sit on the bleachers? We’re just about to get started.”

Out of habit, I touch my face, covering a few of the bruises and healing cuts. “Are you sure? Won’t people wonder about my face?”

“Lia assumed your bruises came from sparring—fighting in the ring. The others will, too. It’s okay. You have nothing to be self-conscious about. They’ll assume you’re another bodyguard.”

“Me, a bodyguard?” I laugh. “Right.” But I follow Liam out of his office anyway and into the classroom. There are probably twenty women of all ages streaming into the

classroom, from girls my age all the way up to silver-haired seniors. They mill around the bleachers, chatting and laughing.

“All right, ladies,” Liam says as he addresses the class.

“Have a seat. Let’s get started.”

The women take their seats.

There’s another guy already seated on the first row of benches—a gorgeous guy with long dark hair twisted up into a bun on top of his head. He’s wearing ripped blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and a black leather jacket. This has to be Jonah. I’ve never seen his face before, but I’ve heard his songs on the radio a million times. He’s—oh, my god—he’s *famous*. And now that I get a good look at him, I can see why. He’s not just a great singer. He’s hot as hell.

Liam’s sister waves me over to an empty seat beside the rock star. “Come sit with Jonah,” she says. “You can keep him company and fend off any overexuberant fans.”

My heart drops like a stone. If Lia knew I was a prostitute, she’d never let me sit by her husband. In fact, security would probably escort me from the building.

Jonah scoots over to make more room for me. “Jasmine, right?” he asks, giving me a welcoming smile. He pats the

empty bench beside him. “Have a seat. Lia says you’re a friend of her brother. It’s nice to meet you.” Then he offers me his hand, just like Lia did.

I’m in shock as I shake the man’s hand. Then I take the seat beside him. I face forward, not daring to look at him or at anyone else for that matter.

“All right,” Liam says as he playfully taps his sister on the head. “Let’s get started.”

It’s hard to believe they’re related, let alone fraternal twins. Liam is at least six feet tall, maybe taller, and his sister is barely over five feet. His hair and eyes are brown, while she’s a pale blonde with blue eyes. I wouldn’t have guessed they were even related.

Liam addresses the group of new hires seated on the bleachers. “Welcome to McIntyre Security, ladies. I’m Liam McIntyre. No matter your role here at the company, it’s a good idea for you to have some basic self-defense training.” He puts his arm around Lia’s shoulders. “This is my sister, Lia. She’s going to help me out today with a demonstration of some of the basic techniques you’ll learn in class this week.”

“Since you’re new to McIntyre Security, you probably don’t know that Lia is one of our female bodyguards. She’s a

real powerhouse and incredibly good at what she does—just ask her husband, Jonah Locke.” Liam nods to Jonah, and the women sitting on the bleachers chuckle.

“Being Jonah’s bodyguard is a tough job, but somebody’s got to do it,” Lia says as she winks at her husband.

More laughter follows.

Jonah laughs, too. “I think she’s the only one willing to put up with me.”

Even more laughter. And I find myself smiling, too. I see the way Lia’s looking at her famous husband—like she wants to eat him up. And he’s looking at her in just the same way.

The two of them step back from the bleachers and square off on one of the black padded floor mats.

“Self-defense is all about being aware of your surroundings,” Liam says. “Always knowing where you are and who’s around you. We’re going to start by demonstrating some basic moves that anyone can perform, no matter your size, age, or fitness level.”

Lia turns her back to her brother.

“Often, an attacker will come at you from behind, like this,” Liam says as he walks up behind his sister and wraps his

arm around her neck. “Now, notice I’m much bigger and have far more muscle mass than Lia has, but don’t let a size difference fool you. There are plenty of things Lia can do to throw me off balance, gain the upper hand, and get away. Your goal isn’t to overpower your assailant. Your goal is to get away from your attacker if at all possible. If you can’t do that, then do whatever you can to attract attention to your predicament.” Then Liam tightens his hold on his sister’s neck and pulls her back against his body, throwing her off balance.

“Now, you already know where some of the soft spots are on a man. For example, his package.” The audience chuckles. “Because I’m behind Lia, she can’t kick me there, but there’s another soft spot she can reach, and that’s my instep.”

And with that, Lia pretends to slam the heel of her shoe right onto the top of Liam’s foot.

Liam releases her immediately and steps back. “That’s called a toe stomp. It’s not hard to do, and it’s very effective if you do it right. Make sure you strike with your heel—not with your toes or the ball of your foot. It also works if you’re facing your attacker. And if you’re wearing high heels at the time, all the better, because that’s going to really smart.”

And then the two demonstrate that as well.

“See?” Liam asks. “Easy.”

They step apart, and then Liam says, “Next we’ll show you how to take advantage of your attacker’s pressure points. After we show you a few more techniques, we’ll have you all come down onto the mats and practice with each other.”

The whole time Liam’s speaking, I’m hanging on his every word. He’s so good at this, sounding so confident and yet down-to-earth. He makes it all seem so easy. It’s surreal watching him, realizing that this guy took a chance on me, took me under his wing, and is giving me a chance at a new life. I can’t even begin to measure what I owe him. It’s a debt money could never repay.

After he and Lia demonstrate a few more techniques, Liam invites the women seated on the bleachers to come down to the floor and pair up to practice their moves. I remain seated next to Jonah, sitting quietly, keeping my mouth shut and hoping no one pays me any attention.

Lia jogs over to us. She cups her husband’s face in her hands and leans in to kiss him on his lips.

Jonah laughs as he pulls Lia close. “Hey, tiger. Good job out there.”

Lia makes a face. “Ew, I’m a sweaty mess.”

Jonah smiles. “You know I don’t care.”

Lia grins at him and then winks at me. “TMI, babe. Jasmine doesn’t need to know that, do you?” Lia steps away from her husband. “Come on, Jasmine. Join the fun.” She nods toward the students who are pairing up and waiting for instructions.

“I—oh, no. That’s okay,” I say. “I’ll watch.”

I sit quietly, watching the participants pairing up on the mats. Liam and Lia move about the room watching the students practicing their moves, suggesting changes, making corrections, offering encouragement.

After a while, Liam walks over to me and says, “Would you like to give it a try?” He nods toward the mats. “It’s actually a good idea for you to learn some self-defense moves. Just in case.”

I realize he’s right. I think back to the many times a trick manhandled me, pushed me around, made me do something I didn’t want to do.

“Come on, Jasmine.” He holds his hand out.

I glance around at all the other women, but none of them are paying me any mind.

Liam's hand hangs patiently in the air as he waits for me to make up my mind. Finally, I figure why not try it? It might come in handy one day.

I stand. "Okay."

Liam walks over to an open spot on one of the mats and motions for me to join him there. "Turn around," he directs me, motioning with a twirling finger.

I turn my back to him. That turns out to be a bad idea because now I'm facing a pair of women who are going through the steps Liam and his sister showed us earlier. I look away, avoiding eye contact.

Liam walks up behind me. "I'm going to put my arm around your shoulders," he says quietly. "Now, pretend to stomp on my instep. Remember to use your heel and not your toes. Got it?"

I nod. "Got it."

And then his arm slides around me at shoulder level. When he pulls me back against his firm chest, my brain short circuits. I can sense his closeness. I can smell him, a

combination of soap, deodorant, and the heat of his body. My muscles tense and my stomach knots. My heart starts pounding. And I don't know why. I've never felt this way before.

“Jasmine?” he asks quietly. His breath ruffles my hair as he leans close to whisper. “Go ahead. Try it.”

I mentally shake myself. “Right. Stomp on your foot.” Or rather I pretend to. I lift my foot and lower it on top of his, heel down first, and then I press gently. “Like this?”

When he doesn't answer me, I wonder if maybe he didn't hear me. “Liam? Like this?”

He clears his throat. “Yes, that's perfect. Let's try it again, only this time facing each other.”

Liam turns me so that we're face to face. As he gently takes hold of my wrists, his gaze locks onto mine, and for a moment we stare at each other. I search his eyes, studying the flecks of dark brown and gold in his irises.

He swallows hard, his throat muscles moving. “Now try it again,” he says as he holds my wrists secure in his grasp.

I lower my heel onto the top of his foot and press lightly. I can't stop myself from grinning. “Tag. You're it.”

The tension in Liam's shoulders eases instantly, and he grins at me. He turns me abruptly and wraps his arms around my shoulders and pulls me against him. "Now what do you do?" he asks, his voice amused and playful.

I stomp backward on his foot, a little harder this time. He laughs. "I think you've got that move down. Now try the next one—the pressure points." We work through the next several moves that Liam and his sister demonstrated for the group. I remember each one and execute them flawlessly.

"I think you're ready for battle," Liam says when we finish our practicing.

Most of the pairs of participants have broken up and are returning to their seats on the bleachers. I do the same, taking my seat beside Jonah.

Liam faces the class and clears his throat, catching the attention of his sister, who's back to goofing around with her husband. "Now Lia and I are going to give a demonstration of Krav Maga, just for fun. This is something we teach the bodyguards here."

Once the class is settled in their seats, the twins face off on one of the mats. "Krav Maga is a form of martial arts that combines moves and techniques from a number of disciplines,

including aikido, judo, karate, boxing, and wrestling. It's popular for its swift and effective outcomes."

The two of them face off on the mat, circling each other slowly. Everyone in the audience grows silent as we watch in anticipation of the first move.

"I'll be the aggressor," Liam says. "Watch how Lia counters my moves."

And then the two of them explode into action. Liam rushes Lia and tries to get her in a headlock. She strikes out in rapid succession, her hits quick and efficient, forcing Liam to go on the defense. Liam started as the aggressor, but it's Lia who takes the lead. Her technique is fast and furious, and I can't take my eyes off her. She's a tiny tornado of power and strength, matching Liam hit for hit, kick for kick. I've never seen anything like it. And she's not much over five feet tall. I'm in awe of her.

If I could do what Lia can do, no one could ever again force me to do anything I didn't want to do. Not tricks, not other hoes, not bullies, not even Tony or his goons. If I could fight like that, I wouldn't be afraid of *anyone*.

My throat tightens, and my vision blurs. I blink several times before I realize my eyes are tearing up.

Jonah leans into me. “Jasmine?” His gentle voice is deep and resonant. “Are you okay?” He’s watching me closely.

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Then my attention is directed back to Liam and his sister. They’re still going at it, moving in this perfect choreography of move and counter-move. Every time he comes at her, she meets him head-on, dodging his attempts to overpower her and driving him back.

Lia swipes her foot behind Liam’s, and he goes down hard on his ass. “Ha!” she yells, and the women seated in the bleachers laugh with her.

Liam sits up, laughing himself. “Lucky hit.” When his sister offers him her hand, he takes it, and she helps him to his feet. “And that’s how it’s done, folks,” he says.

The audience erupts in applause. I notice that Jonah’s smiling at Lia as he, too, claps. I join in as well, still reeling from what I just witnessed.

Just before the class begins to disperse, Liam thanks them for coming and reminds them of the next class session.

Lia comes over to the bleachers and sits beside her husband.

Jonah puts his arm around her and pulls her close.

“Remind me never to piss you off, babe.”

She laughs.

Liam steps in front of me. “Well? What did you think?”

“I know what I want to do,” I say. “I want to learn how to fight. If I can fight like Lia, no one will ever be able to hurt me again.”

Chapter 13

Liam

After the morning self-defense class ends, Jasmine sits at my desk in my office to take more GED practice tests while I set up for my next class—kickboxing—in the main room.

“So, where did you meet Jasmine?” Lia asks as she slips up behind me.

I turn to face her, wondering how in the hell I’m going to explain this.

“She’s freaking gorgeous, by the way,” my sister says, offering me a fist bump. “Way out of your league, though, bro.”

Oh, god, this is awkward. “Lia—”

She grins at me. “Hey, I’m happy for you. It’s about time you had someone special in your life. All the rest of us are either married or nearly married. You’re the late bloomer in the family. So, tell me... where did you crazy kids meet?”

There’s no easy way to say this, so I just blurt it out.
“Jasmine’s a prostitute. I mean, *was*.”

Lia's eyes widen just a fraction, but otherwise she gives no reaction. "*Okaaay*. I'm sure there's a good story behind this. I'm all ears."

"Last Friday night, as I was leaving Tanks, I was heading to my vehicle when I heard a scuffle coming from down the alley behind the bar. Then I heard a female cry out in pain. I went to investigate and found Jasmine's, um, client forcibly pinning her against a brick wall, in the process of physically assaulting her."

"I hope you kicked his ass!"

"Of course, I did." I refrain from rolling my eyes. "Anyway, Jasmine had a number of facial injuries—cuts, bruises, abrasions—and it was obvious she'd hit her head on the wall. I wanted to take her to the emergency room to get her checked out, but she refused to go to a hospital or even a clinic. So, I did the only thing I could think of—I brought her home with me and asked Jason to check her over. Since then, she decided she wants to leave that life. I promised I'd help her do that, and she's been staying with me ever since."

"Holy shit." Lia glances around to make sure we're not being overhead. Jonah is still seated on the bleachers, ignoring us as he types on his phone. "That poor girl! What now?"

“The first step is to get her some ID—Troy’s working on getting copies of her birth certificate and social security card. Then, she’s going to take the GED exam. Once she’s done that, she can do whatever she wants—go to college, get a job. Whatever. It’s up to her.”

Lia shudders. “The thought of that poor kid selling her body on the streets, being treated badly by a bunch of assholes—god, it pisses me off!”

“Yeah, tell me about it. It’s difficult to wrap my mind around it. After seeing the Krav Maga demo today, she says this is what she wants to do—learn self-defense. She said if she could do what you do, no one could ever force her to do anything again.”

Lia lights up. “Oh, my god, I’m totally going to train her! Unless you’re going to do it. But if you’re not, I want to.”

Part of me wants to say no, because I want to teach her myself. But having Lia do it is probably in Jasmine’s best interest. “It might be better if you do it. I think she’d be more comfortable working with another female. I make a point of not touching her, you know—I’m trying to respect her personal space. She’s never had that before.”

Lia frowns. “How long has she been doing this?”

“Working the streets? Five years, since she was seventeen. She ran away from a really shitty home situation, Lia. My god, you should see her mother. She’s a meth addict who sells her body for drug money. Jasmine’s older sister is a prostitute, too. Jasmine ran away from home because it was only a matter of time before her mother pimped her out as well. Of course, out on the streets, with no money and no support, she ended up selling herself anyway. Her pimp is a guy named Tony, and she’s terrified that he’ll find her and drag her back.”

Lia’s eyes narrow. “Over my fucking dead body.”

I smile. “Don’t worry. I’d never let that happen to her. She’s under my protection.” I chuckle bitterly. “It looks like I’m the big brother she always wanted.”

Now it’s Lia’s turn to roll her eyes. “I saw the two of you out on the floor when you were paired up as class partners. I saw the way you looked at her, Liam. It didn’t look very brotherly to me.”

Shit! “Lia, stop. There’s absolutely nothing going on between us. That’s impossible. After what she’s been through, I could never go there with her even if I wanted to. I’m her *rescuer*. Naturally, she feels indebted to me. I’d be taking advantage of her.” I shake my head. “No, absolutely not.”

Jonah walks up behind Lia and puts his arms around her shoulders to draw her back against him. He leans down and kisses the top of her head. “Absolutely not, what? What are you guys up to?”

Lia glances up at Jonah. “Liam asked if I would mind teaching Jasmine self-defense, and I said absolutely I would not mind.”

“Oh, cool,” Jonah says. “That’ll be nice.”

“Thanks, sis,” I say, feeling instantly relieved. The thought of training Jasmine myself—putting my hands on her, holding her in my arms—scares the shit out of me. I’m finding it hard enough as it is to keep my thoughts platonic where she’s concerned. I keep having to remind myself that I’m her *protector*, and that’s all I am. It’s all I can ever be.

“I’m happy to do it,” Lia says. She nods toward my office. “I’ll go give her the good news myself. We’ll work out a schedule. I can train her at our house—she’ll be safe there.”

As Lia heads to my office, Jonah studies me. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah.” I blow out a heavy breath. “Look, Jonah, you should know... Jasmine—”

“She’s in hiding, isn’t she? I noticed back on the bleachers that she seemed hypervigilant. Every time someone walked into the room, she’d tense and look to see who it was. Who is it? A stalker? A violent ex?”

“Try an ex-pimp.”

Jonah’s eyes widen. “Seriously?”

I nod. “I rescued her a little over a week ago from a physical assault on the streets. Now I’m trying to help her get out of the life and become self-sufficient. She’s interested in learning self-defense for obvious reasons. I hope you’re okay with Lia training her.”

“Of course I am.” Jonah pats my shoulder. “Besides, no one tells Lia what she can and can’t do.”

That makes me chuckle. “Good point.”

“But seriously,” Jonah says, “she seems like a sweet girl. We’ll do anything we can to help her.”

The door to my office opens, and Jasmine comes running out, brimming with excitement. “Liam! Your sister said she’d train me in self-defense and Krav Maga!”

“That’s great,” I say, forcing an encouraging smile.

“We’re going to train at her house. She has a martial arts studio *in her home*. She said we can start right away.”

“Perfect!” Inside I have to tamp down my disappointment. If Jasmine’s spending time at Lia and Jonah’s, then she won’t be with me. I suppose that’s for the best. I need to try to keep some distance between us before I get even more attached to her. And it’s not like she won’t be perfectly safe at Lia’s. They live in our family’s private gated community.

Lia puts her arm around Jasmine’s waist. “Why don’t we take her back to our house now? We can start this afternoon.”

Jasmine looks my way, as if it’s up to me.

“Sure,” I say. “If she wants to.” I look to Jasmine. “Are you okay with this?”

Grinning, she nods. “I want to get started as soon as possible.”

“Okay, go with Lia. I’ll pick you up after I get off work.”

“Just let me change and grab my stuff,” Lia says before she heads to the locker room.

Jasmine walks right up to me and throws her arms around me. “Thank you, Liam,” she whispers. She’s shaking, but this time it’s from excitement, not fear.

“I didn’t do anything,” I say as I pat her back in a brotherly way. *Boundaries, man, boundaries.*

She pulls back and looks up at me. “Yes, you did. You saved me from hell, and now you’re giving me a chance at a real life. I’ll never be able to repay you for that.”

I force another smile—they’re becoming easier. “You don’t need to repay me, Jasmine. That’s what friends are for.”

Lia returns, dressed in jeans and a hoodie, her gym bag slung over her shoulder. “All right, gang, let’s go.” Then she looks at me. “Don’t worry. She’ll be fine.”

I nod. Of course she will. Jasmine couldn’t be safer than she is in Lia’s hands.

“Have fun,” I tell Jasmine as she heads for the door. I know this is going to be good for her. Already she seems far more relaxed and happier than she’s been since I met her.

At the last moment, Jasmine pauses and glances back at me with a tinge of sadness in her expression. There’s a sudden flash of apprehension in her expressive dark eyes, and she looks like she’s on the verge of changing her mind.

My chest tightens, and my breath catches in my throat. So, this is what tough love feels like. It sucks. “Go,” I force myself

to say. “You’re going to have a great time. I’ll see you after work.”

And then I turn away from her and head to my office before I change my mind and ask her to stay. I close my office door behind me and don’t look to see if she left with Lia. If she tries to back out, I’m sure Lia will coax her into going.

I spot one of the GED practice books laying open on my desk and pick it up to scan Jasmine’s most recent efforts. She wrote her scores at the top of two tests. She aced both of them. Clearly, she has a high IQ. Hell, if she took the official exams tomorrow, she’d undoubtedly pass.

She’s beautiful, brave, resilient, and smart as hell. She’s a fighter. If I’d met her under any other circumstances, I’d move mountains to be with her. But that’s impossible.

She’s completely off limits, at least to me.

Chapter 14

Jasmine

Lia's driving a big black Cadillac Escalade. Jonah's in the front passenger seat, and I'm in the back. I'm nervous as hell, but also excited. I've never been this excited for anything in my life. To be honest, I've never had much to get excited about.

We drive for about twenty minutes until we reach a closed gate. Lia waves at the security guard on duty. He waves back, and the gate opens.

“This is the McIntyre family compound,” Lia says, laughing as she pulls inside. “We really need a better name for it. The important thing is it's completely secure. No one can get in without approval from the guards. It's a godsend for me and Jonah. He can walk around freely inside the gates, and no one can bother him. We still have to worry about drones with video cameras, but that's the worst of it.”

As we drive along a pretty tree-lined street, I look around at a lot of open green space. I count five houses, with three more under construction. The street wraps around in a big

circle. In the center of the circle is a wide-open grassy space with a playground and park benches.

“My parents live there,” Lia says, pointing at one of the houses to our left. “Next door to them is my brother Jake’s house. And the new construction beside Jake’s house belongs to my brother Shane, who is currently building a house for his family, including Sam and Cooper. Have you met them?”

“Yes. Liam took me up to the penthouse to talk to Shane and his attorney. I met Beth and the kids, and Cooper and Sam.”

Lia points at the two completed houses on the other side of the circle drive. “That one there is our house. And the one next door to us belongs to Beth’s mom, Ingrid.”

“No one else lives in here? Just your family?”

“Yep,” Lia says. “It’s all Shane’s doing. He bought out the entire development when the developer first broke ground.”

I point to another house that’s under construction. “Whose house is that?”

“That’s my sister Sophie’s house. She and her husband will be living there. They’re expecting a baby in April.”

“I didn’t realize Liam has so many brothers and sisters.”

“Yeah, there’s a bunch of us, plus Mom and Dad. How about you? Have you got any siblings?”

“I have an older sister named Angel.” Just mentioning my sister is painful. We were so close when we were younger, but once she started doing tricks, we drifted apart. “I haven’t seen her in years, not since I left home when I was seventeen.” All of a sudden, I feel like a fraud. “Guys, there’s something I should tell you. You might not want to—”

“It’s okay, Jasmine,” Lia says as she pulls the big SUV into a driveway. “Liam filled us in.”

“He did?”

Lia nods. “Yeah, he gave me the basic rundown. Don’t worry. We’re cool.”

Shame and insecurity sweep over me, and a big knot forms in my belly. How can these people be so accepting of me? How can they welcome *me* into their home? Surely they realize the things I’ve done with complete strangers.

Lia meets my gaze in the rearview mirror. “Jasmine?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s fine. You have nothing to worry about.”

I nod, not really believing her. “Thanks.”

“I’m going to teach you to kick ass, girl, okay? No one will ever be able to hurt you or force you to do anything.”

That makes me smile. “That would be a dream come true.”

“Consider it done.” Lia pulls the vehicle into a huge garage. She shuts off the engine and closes the garage door behind us. “Let’s get started, shall we?” She turns to Jonah. “Honey, can you go entertain yourself for a while? Jasmine and I have kick-ass girl stuff to do.”

Jonah leans over and kisses his wife. “You two have fun. Don’t worry about me.”

* * *

“Your home is really nice,” I say to Lia when we walk inside. I’m finding it hard not to gawk. “It looks like something from a magazine.”

She grins. “I can’t take any credit. My sister Sophie picked out everything. She’s an interior designer. If it had been left up to me, this place would look like a bus station.”

I’ve never even been in a bus station before, but I get the general idea. I like Lia. She doesn’t take herself too seriously, and I never know what’s going to come out of her mouth.

Jonah follows us into the house and heads for the kitchen.
“You girls go beat each other up. I’ll make us some lunch.”

“Sounds like a plan, babe,” Lia says.

I follow her down the stairs to a lower level that has numerous windows and a walk-out patio. Despite being below ground, there’s a lot of natural light.

“This way,” she says.

I follow her into a big, wide open room with mirrored walls, wood floors, and black mats everywhere. It looks very much like Liam’s martial arts studio.

“Here’s where the magic happens,” Lia says.

When she motions for me to follow her, we end up in a small locker room. “Have you got workout clothes?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t realize I’d need some.”

“Then it looks like we need to go shopping soon. In the meanwhile, you can wear something of mine. You’re a lot taller than I am, but I think I can find something that will work.”

Lia tosses me a pair of black workout shorts and a white tank top. “Suit up, Jazz,” she says as she grabs something for herself to wear. “Let’s get to it.”

Hearing her call me Jazz brings a smile to my face. Jazz was my sister's nickname for me.

"Is it okay if I call you that?" Lia asks, studying me.

"Yeah, sure. It's what my sister called me."

"What about your parents?"

I shrug. "It's just my mom. She's in the business, too. It's how she gets her drug money."

"If you don't mind me asking, where's your father?"

I shrug. "I have no idea who my father is. He was one of Mom's tricks. Same for Angel. Sometimes Mom's not careful. Or the tricks offer her extra cash if she'll let them go bareback."

Lia cringes. "That's—ew. What jerks."

"Yeah. It's not uncommon. A lot of guys don't want to wear rubbers, and they'll pay extra to go without them."

"Did you ever—"

"No! I didn't want to risk bringing any kids into that life. I always insisted on using protection."

"Good." Lia walks to the center of a large black mat and waves me over. "Come on, Jazz. Let me teach you how to kick

some ass.”

* * *

We work hard for about an hour. She teaches me how to stand right so I’m less likely to lose my balance, how to hit, how to duck and pivot, how to knee a guy in his junk. I especially like that one. We go over the basics. She tells me I’m in an accelerated course. She also says I’m a fast learner and that I should pick this up pretty quickly. She says once I’ve mastered the basic moves, I can move on to Krav Maga. That’s really what I want to learn. I want to be able to knock an attacker senseless in seconds.

Jonah comes down to tell us lunch is ready. We wash up and go upstairs to eat in the kitchen. He made some fancy dish with corkscrew pasta and this weird green sauce. With it, we have a salad and garlic bread.

I take a hesitant bite of the pasta and chew. “What is this?” I ask Jonah.

“It’s homemade pesto. Do you like it?”

“I love it.”

Jonah sure isn’t what I expected. He seems like such a regular guy. He’s got a calm vibe, and he’s kind. I’d expect a

big star like him to have an equally big ego. And obviously he's crazy about Lia.

After lunch, Lia and I go back downstairs and get back to work. She teaches me how to hit a punching bag. Then she has me practice punching her hands, which are covered in thick, padded gloves.

She has me repeat everything over and over and over again.

“You're building muscle memory,” she explains. “Before long, you'll be able to act without thinking about it. It'll come naturally to you.”

We finish around four-thirty. I go to the bathroom to change back into my own clothes.

When I leave the bathroom, I find Lia watching a video on a huge TV mounted on the wall. It takes me only a second to realize we're watching Liam in the ring.

“This was an MMA championship a couple years ago,” she says.

“MMA? What's that?”

“Mixed Martial Arts. It's a combination of boxing, Jiu-Jitsu, and Judo, among other styles.”

We watch Liam in action. He's insanely good, moving powerfully and fast. So fast I can barely track his actions.

"He won, of course," Lia says with more than a little admiration in her voice. "He always wins. He's been studying martial arts of all types since he was five years old. It's second nature to him, like breathing."

I'm in awe of Liam as I watch him in the video. His strength and speed are phenomenal. He's amazing. It's hard for me to reconcile the fact that the nice guy I met is this powerhouse.

"He's something, isn't he?" Lia says.

I can only nod.

At the sound of footsteps behind us, we turn just as Liam's coming down the stairs, followed by Jonah.

"How'd it go?" Liam asks.

"She did great," Lia says. "Jazz is a fast learner."

Liam grins. "Jazz?" He smiles at me. "Well, Jazz, are you ready to go?"

After thanking Lia for the lesson, and thanking Jonah for lunch, I leave with Liam. We head back to his apartment building.

“Your sister is amazing,” I tell him on the drive. “She’s so nice to me, even though she knows what I am.”

“What you *were*,” he says. “Just because that was your past doesn’t mean it has to be your future.”

“*Once a ho, always a ho*,” I say. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard that.”

“From people who wanted to control you, right?”

“Well, yes.”

“They lied.” He glances from the street to me. “You can be anyone you want to be, Jasmine. You can reinvent yourself and start over with a clean slate.”

I wish that was true. I’d give anything to be the kind of girl Liam would be interested in. Of course, he’d never be interested in someone like me—not in a prostitute. Not even a former one. I’d be kidding myself if I ever thought I had a chance.

Dr. Shaw calls Liam’s phone shortly after we get home to give me the results of my STD tests. He hands me the phone, and I put the call on speaker.

“Everything looks good, Jasmine,” she tells me. “If you experience any problems, call my office and we’ll get you in

for an appointment. Have you given any thought to birth control?”

I remember at my appointment she asked me if I was sexually active and if I was taking birth control. I told her I wasn't sexually active now. I glance up at Liam, not sure how to answer. “Not really.”

“Well,” the doctor says. “It's something for you to consider. Before you become sexually active again, you might want to consider using birth control.”

Chapter 15

Liam

Birth control? Yeah, I suppose that's definitely something Jasmine should consider if she becomes sexually active again. It's entirely possible. She could meet someone. After all, she's an incredibly attractive young woman. It wouldn't be surprising if she starts dating someone. I shake off the idea, because the thought of Jasmine getting intimate with someone makes me a little crazy.

"I got a call from Troy Spencer this afternoon," I tell her. "He wanted to let us know he requested a copy of your birth certificate from the county. We should have it in two to three days."

"So quickly?"

"Yeah. But don't get too excited. That's just the beginning. Once we have that, we can request a copy of your social security card, but that'll take a week or two to get. We can't get you a state-issued ID card without those documents. And you can't take the GED until you have a photo ID card."

"Well, that'll give me more time to prepare for the exams."

I nod. “Based on the scores you’ve gotten so far, I think you’ll ace it.”

“I admit I’m nervous. I haven’t taken a school exam in years.”

“But you’re smart, Jasmine. You’ll do well. And if you don’t, it’s not the end of the world. You can retake the exams as needed.”

“Once I pass the exams, I can get a job?”

“You don’t have to have a GED to get a job, but it would help. In the meanwhile, would you like to work with me, say part-time? In addition to training with Lia?”

Her eyes widen. “Work with you? Really? I’d love that.”

“Sure. I could use an assistant to help me manage the martial arts studio. You could help me schedule classes and enroll students, organize the equipment, things like that. And one day, after you’ve had adequate training, you could even help me teach the self-defense classes.”

“You’d really hire me? You don’t think your brother would mind?”

“Of course he wouldn’t mind. I’ll talk to Lia tonight, and we’ll devise a work and training schedule for you. You can

spend your mornings working with me and your afternoons training with Lia. How does that sound?”

When she doesn't answer me, I glance over at her, shocked to see tears in her eyes. I have to stop myself from reaching for her hand. “Are you okay?”

Nodding, she goes to sit on the sofa. I can tell she's trying not to cry. At the risk of crossing the line, I sit beside her and pat her leg, just above her knee. Surely that's acceptable. “It's okay.”

She lays her hand on mine and grips it tightly. “I never dreamed there was a way out for me. I guess I'm afraid it could all unravel at any second.”

“It's not going to unravel. For some reason, our paths crossed. And now that we've met, I'm not going to let anything derail you from having the life you want. And you don't just have *my* protection; you have my family's protection, and believe me when I say that's no small thing. You've met my sister—she's a she-tiger in disguise. And my brother Shane—there's nothing he can't do. So, there's nothing for you to worry about.”

She squeezes my hand. “I've never even had a friend, Liam, let alone people who want to help me succeed.”

“Well, you have us now.”

To my surprise, Jasmine links her fingers with mine. “It still sounds too good to be true.” She frowns. “I don’t know why your family would be so nice to someone like me.”

Sighing, she stands. “Do you mind if I take a shower? I’m a sweaty mess.”

“Of course not. And for the record, Jasmine, you don’t need to ask me. Just do what you need to do.”

She has a worried expression on her face. I wonder if she’s had to ask for every little thing.

While she’s in the bathroom, I start on dinner. I wrap some potatoes in foil and toss them in the oven. When they’re close to being done, I’ll throw some steaks on the grill out on the balcony.

I figure I might as well get in a quick workout while the food is cooking. As I head down the hall to the spare bedroom, the bathroom door opens, and Jasmine steps out in a cloud of warm, humid air with nothing on but the towel wrapped around her naked torso. I nearly run right into her, just catching myself at the last minute before we collide.

We freeze, both of us caught off guard.

“Oh, my god, I’m so sorry,” she says, her shaking hand coming up to cover her chest. “I forgot to bring clean clothes with me into the bathroom.”

“No problem,” I say, like it’s nothing for me to run into a half-naked woman in my apartment. My first impression is of a lot of golden brown skin. But then my gaze drops to her shoulders and clavicles and arms, and I suck in a shocked breath. I see several scars on her chest that resemble old knife wounds. “My god, Jasmine.”

She glances down at herself and shrugs. “Shit happens, you know? Those are old,” she says nonchalantly as she looks down at her chest.

I step back, not wanting to crowd her. As I stare down at this beautiful, damaged girl, rage wells up inside me. How dare someone hurt her? How dare someone treat her like that? “Who hurt you?”

She shrugs. “Tricks, mostly.”

“Jesus, sweetheart.” I wince when I realize what I called her. But even if I could take it back, I won’t. No matter what I say, she still looks mortified. “Jasmine, you’re a beautiful young woman. Nothing could ever change that. Not scars or... anything else.”

Her eyes fill with tears. “You honestly don’t think people find me disgusting?” The self-loathing in her voice breaks my heart. “I’m a *prostitute*, Liam.”

“You *were* a prostitute.”

“Do you really think anyone cares whether I’ve quit the business or not? Use your imagination, Liam. Anything you can possibly think of, I’ve done it—with strangers. For money. And everyone knows it.”

“I care. And my family cares.”

She sighs. “Your family has been wonderful to me, but the rest of the world won’t be so forgiving. This is going to follow me for the rest of my life.”

I reach out and touch her cheek, wishing I could do more. I want to pull her into my arms and hold her tight. I want to protect her from what can be a cruel world. “I promised you my protection. You have it. You’ll always have it. If anyone even looks at you funny, tell me, and I’ll take care of it.”

She laughs. “If only it was that easy.”

My gaze keeps drifting down to her half-naked body. The towel can hide only so much. “You’d better get dressed before

you freeze.” I point to the spare bedroom. “I’m going to lift weights while dinner’s cooking.”

Frowning, she tugs the towel up higher. “Okay.”

I disappear into my workout room and take off my T-shirt and start with warm-ups. It’s shoulder day, so after completing my warm-up routine, I start with barbells. I’m on my second set of ten reps when I hear a quiet knock on the door. I pause and lower the barbells to the floor. “Come in.”

The door opens, and Jasmine’s standing there, the study guide in her hands. “Sorry to bother you. I wanted to let you know I completed another math test.”

“How’d you do?”

“I got a ninety-seven percent.” Her gaze locks onto my torso and she stares. “Um...” She points back toward the living room. “I’ll just go, um, read until you’re done.” And then she closes the door.

I find myself smiling at the way she stammered. She almost seemed flustered at the sight of my bare chest.

Nope. Don’t go there.

It’s almost time for me to put the steaks on the grill, so I finish up and grab a quick shower. Then I head to the balcony

to fire up the gas grill. As I pass through the living room, Jasmine keeps her eyes on her Kindle, not looking at me once.

I'd give anything to know what she's thinking.

I throw the steaks on the grill and take the potatoes out of the oven when they're done.

"Can I do something to help?" Jasmine asks.

I turn to find her standing in the doorway. "Sure. Why don't you set the table? The food should be ready soon."

When everything's done, we sit at the kitchen table.

"Where'd you learn to cook?" Jasmine asks as she butters her potato.

"My mom made sure all of her kids knew how to cook. She didn't want any of us starving after we left home."

Jasmine frowns. "I don't ever remember seeing my mom cook anything. We ate a lot of cold cereal and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. On special occasions, we'd order a pizza."

"I'll teach you, if you like."

"Really?" When her dark eyes widen, my chest tightens. "I'd like that," she says, smiling as she takes a bite of her

potato. “I’d like to do a lot of things different than my mom did.”

I sit back in my chair and enjoy watching Jasmine eat. In spite of having a miserable upbringing and a horrible life on the streets, she can still find it within herself to be optimistic about her future. I’m thrilled that she’s found something to be passionate about—self-defense. She has more reason than anyone to want to learn how to protect herself. If she ever finds herself in a dangerous situation, I hope she kicks ass and takes no prisoners.

* * *

The next morning, as we’re making breakfast, we devise a schedule.

“You can come with me to work in the mornings,” I suggest as I pour us each a cup of coffee. “As my assistant. We’ll keep track of your hours, and once you have ID and I can hire you formally, then you’ll be compensated for your work. Lia will pick you up after lunch and take you back to her house for training. I’ll pick you up at Lia’s after I get off work. How does that sound?”

“It’s perfect!” And then she throws her arms around me with so much exuberance she knocks me off balance. “Thank

you, Liam.”

My arms go around her waist, simply to steady her and keep us both from toppling over.

Blushing, she releases me and steps back. “Sorry. I guess I got a little overexcited.”

“It’s okay. I’m glad you’re happy. I want you to be happy.”

She gazes into my eyes for the longest moment, and I can’t look away. I’m mesmerized.

And then a smile transforms her expression. “I *am* happy.” She sounds genuinely surprised. “I can’t ever remember feeling like this. I’ve never had anything to look forward to. I’ve never felt like I was working toward anything meaningful. And it’s all because of you.”

I take a deep breath and wish I could take all the credit, but I can’t. “Don’t underestimate yourself, Jasmine. This is all your doing. I’m just the facilitator.”

When we sit down to eat breakfast, she’s got a smile on her face and a calmness I haven’t seen before.

On Wednesday afternoon, while Jasmine is with Lia, Troy Spencer stops by the martial arts studio to drop off the expedited copy of Jasmine’s birth certificate. The next step is

to get a copy of her social security card—he's still working on that. We're one step closer to getting her on the path to independence.

Near the end of the work day, I go up to the 20th floor to talk to Shane.

I knock on his door. "Hey, Shane, have you got a minute?"

Shane looks up from his laptop. "Liam, come on in. Of course I have time for you. Always."

I walk into Shane's office and take a seat in front of his desk. My pulse is pounding, and I can't believe I'm doing this. "I was wondering..."

Shane leans back in his chair. There's a hint of a smile on his face. "Yes?"

"I was wondering if I could ask your advice."

My brother's grin widens. "Of course. About what?"

"Women."

"Women in general, or just one woman in particular?"

I swallow. "I guess just one woman in particular."

Shane crosses his arms over his chest. "Ask away. I've been waiting for this."

“I’m not exactly sure where to begin.”

“So, how are things going with the young lady?”

“Good. She’s doing well. Thanks to Troy, we got a copy of her birth certificate today. That’s a big first step. She’s doing well. She’s studying for the GED, and Lia’s training her in self-defense. She’s really taken an interest in it. I can’t blame her. She’s been a victim for nearly all of her life, and now she sees a way to protect herself. I think she’s starting to see a future for herself.”

“I’m glad to hear it. So, what’s the problem?”

“I guess the problem is me. She sort of sees me as the big brother she always wished she had growing up. You know, someone to protect her.”

“Is that how you see yourself?” Shane asks.

My pulse picks up, and I shrug. “It should be. She needs protection.”

“And is that all you see in her?”

Immediately, I go on the defensive. “What do you mean?”

“Nothing. It’s just that she’s an extremely attractive young woman, and you two seem to spend a lot of time together. I mean, she’s *living* with you, Liam.”

“It’s purely platonic. There’s nothing going on between us.” When Shane doesn’t look quite convinced, I say, “There *can’t* be anything between us. It would be wrong. I’d be taking advantage of her trust.”

My brother raises a placating hand. “All right. Calm down. I was just asking. I wasn’t trying to imply anything.”

I sigh. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I—sometimes I struggle with—” Words fail me.

“With your feelings for her?”

“I’ll admit I’m attracted to her, sure. I mean, she’s amazing—beautiful, smart as hell, and so damn resilient. She’s lived through hell and come back even stronger for it. Who wouldn’t be attracted to her? But don’t worry, I won’t ever cross that line.”

“Hey, I’m not judging you, Liam. I’m only asking. Just remember... some lines are okay to cross. Don’t make that decision for Jasmine. She should have a say, too.”

Chapter 16

Jasmine

On Thursday, Jason and Layla send Liam a text inviting us over to their apartment for dinner. They're making tacos. I'm always up for tacos.

"Do you want to go?" Liam asks me.

"You're sure they invited me, too?"

Liam laughs. "Of course they did. The invite says *you guys*." He makes a point of glancing around the apartment. "I don't see anyone else here besides you."

We've just gotten home from work, showered, and changed into clean clothes. I'm wearing a pair of blue jeans and a pale blue hoodie. I sit sideways on the sofa, my feet tucked up on the seat cushion.

Liam sits at the other end of the sofa and turns to face me. "Jason told me this was Layla's idea. I think she'd like to make friends with you."

"With me? Seriously?"

"Yes, seriously."

"Does she know?" I ask.

Liam shakes his head. “I honestly don’t know. Jason knows, and he might have told her.”

“I have to tell her. It wouldn’t be fair to her otherwise.”

“You can if you want to. But Jasmine... Layla has struggles of her own. I’ll let her decide what she wants to share with you. But believe me when I say you’re not the only one who’s been through challenges. Who knows? Maybe you two could be great friends.”

I smile at the idea of having a friend. Other than my sister Angel, when we were little, I’ve never had a friend before now. I wouldn’t consider any of the girls who work for Tony to be friends. They’d gladly stab you in the back if there was any advantage in it. Now I have Lia, who I would consider a friend. Jonah, too. And now maybe Layla and Jason. “Sure, let’s go.”

After I refresh my curls and brush my teeth, I put on a bit of mascara and a little blush and lip gloss. I study my face in the bathroom mirror and am glad to see that most of the bruises are fading. I’m starting to look more like myself again.

I wonder what Liam thinks when he looks at me. I’ve been told my whole life that I’m pretty, but to me, I’m just *me*.

I jump at the sound of a knock on the bathroom door.

“Ready to go?” Liam asks.

I turn to open the door. “Yep, I’m ready.” I smile, hoping I don’t look self-conscious. Thank goodness he can’t read minds.

Liam’s dressed in black trousers and a navy blue button-down shirt. This is the most dressed-up I’ve seen him.

“Am I underdressed?” I ask, suddenly afraid I misunderstood tonight. “I thought we’re just going for tacos.”

“No, you’re fine.” He catches my gaze. “Actually, you’re perfect, Jasmine. It’s just a casual dinner with friends.” He reaches out and gently tugs on a corkscrew of curls, sending a shiver across my scalp and down the back of my neck. He drops my hair as if burned and steps back. “Ready?”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. My throat has suddenly closed up on me. Countless men have touched my hair before, played with it even, and it never once felt that good.

We across the hall to Jason and Layla’s apartment. Liam knocks on their door.

Jason opens the door a moment later and welcomes us in. “Perfect timing,” he says. “Dinner’s just about ready. Can I get

you guys something to drink?”

“I’ll take a beer if you don’t mind,” Liam says.

“How about a bottle of *Dos Equis* in honor of taco night.”

“I’ll have one, too,” I say. At least now I have proof that I’m twenty-one.

Jason raises an inquisitive brow at Liam, and Liam laughs. “Yes, it’s official. She’s twenty-one. We have a copy of her birth certificate to prove it.”

“Just checking,” Jason says as he closes the door. “Come on into the kitchen.”

We find Layla at the kitchen counter dicing tomatoes. When she sees us, she washes up and dries her hands on a towel. “Hey, guys,” she says. “I’m so glad you could come.” She steps forward and hugs Liam. Then she turns to me, almost hesitant as she opens her arms. “Can I have a hug?”

For a moment, I’m paralyzed, standing frozen on the spot. Layla waits patiently with a smile on her face. “Sure,” I finally say, returning her smile. I step closer, and she wraps her arms around me, giving me a tight squeeze. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Can you grab the sour cream and the salsa out of the fridge?” she asks.

“Sure.” I feel all tongue-tied, nervous, and so out of place. I catch Liam’s gaze, and he smiles at me.

Jason grabs bottles of beer out of the fridge and hands one to Liam, one to me, and keeps one for himself. I’m surprised when Jason hands Layla a bottle of sparkling water.

“I don’t drink alcohol,” Layla says to me, grinning bashfully. “It conflicts with my medication.”

“Oh,” I say. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t—I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” she says, cutting off my awkward attempt to apologize. “I’m a type 1 diabetic. Plus, I take other medication.”

Jason steps up behind Layla and puts his hands on her shoulders, giving them a little squeeze. He leans in to kiss her cheek. “Dinner looks amazing, sweetheart, and it smells fantastic. Thank you.”

Layla gives him a beaming smile. To me, she says, “I’m learning how to cook.”

The four of us sit at the table in their kitchen and build our own tacos. Layla put out both crunchy taco shells and soft

tortillas, tortilla chips, homemade salsa, guacamole, and all the fixings. For dessert, she made a Key lime pie.

“This is really good,” I say, meaning every word.

She smiles, looking pleased at the compliment. “Thanks.”

“Are you taking cooking classes?” I ask her.

“Not exactly. My parents’ chef, Andre, is teaching me.”

Her parents have a chef? Oh, my god. Her parents have a chef, and my mother is a drug addict.

“Jasmine’s taking self-defense classes,” Liam says. He winks at me. “Lia’s teaching her.”

“Really?” Layla asks, her dark eyes wide. “I’d love to take self-defense classes.”

“Maybe I could teach you one day,” I say. “I mean, after I learn myself.”

“That would be wonderful,” Layla says. “I’ll be your first student.”

I’m on my second soft taco when Layla says, “Are you guys going tomorrow night?” She looks at Liam. “We missed you last week.”

I look to Liam, not sure what Layla’s referring to.

“Um, no,” Liam says, shaking his head. “I don’t think we’ll be able to make it.”

Layla frowns. “Oh, that’s too bad.” She looks at me. “I’d love for you to come.”

“Come where?” I ask, having no idea what they’re talking about.

“Every Friday night after work, a bunch of us meet at Tank’s for dinner,” Layla says. “It’s sort of our regular thing. Jason and I, Liam, Erin and Mack, Miguel, Philip. The guys play pool and throw darts, and we all eat too much.” She nods to me. “You guys should come. It won’t be the same without you. Erin and I would really appreciate having another girl around.”

Tanks.

It was in the alley behind Tanks that Liam rescued me. That’s a neighborhood I know well—very well. I’d often hang out on street corners in that part of town.

“Jasmine?” Layla asks. She reaches over and lays her hand on mine. “Are you okay?”

Mentally, I shake myself. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Well, think it over,” Layla says. “I hope you guys can join us.”

After we eat dessert, the guys kick us out of the kitchen while they clean up.

Layla and I end up on the sofa in the living room.

“I’m really glad you came tonight,” Layla says. “To be honest, I don’t have many friends, so it’s nice to meet someone new.”

I chuckle. “I can relate.”

Suddenly Layla looks away from me, seemingly staring across the room at the wall. Frowning, she shakes her head.

“Layla?”

She doesn’t respond. She just continues staring at the wall and shaking her head, as if she’s listening to something I can’t hear.

I try again. “Layla? Is everything okay?”

She flinches as her attention snaps back to me. “Oh, sorry. I was... distracted.”

“It’s fine. You don’t have to apologize.”

“I meant it when I said I hope we can be friends,” she says.

“I’d like that, too.” She has no idea how much I’d like that.

Layla looks away again, staring at nothing. She shakes her head, and I just watch her for a moment, waiting, not sure what’s going on. Finally, she snaps out of it and refocuses her attention on me. “If we’re going to be friends, there’s something you should know.”

“What’s that?” My heart starts pounding. If we’re going to start sharing secrets, I’m sure mine beats hers, hands down.

“I suffer from auditory hallucinations,” she says. “I hear voices. That was the other medication I was referring to earlier in the kitchen, when I said I can’t drink alcohol. I take antipsychotics.”

“Oh. Well, that’s fine. I know quite a few people who take them.” A lot of Tony’s girls take them.

“I just wanted to be up front with you,” she says. “You know, in case you decided you don’t want to hang out with me. It’s okay. I’d totally understand.”

“No, it’s cool,” I say. “I’m fine with it.”

She gives me a relieved smile. “Thanks. I never know how someone’s going to respond.”

I guess if we’re sharing, it’s only fair I tell her my secret—that I’m a former *prostitute*. But I can’t do it. She’s one of the first people I’ve ever met who actually wants to be friends with me. I’m afraid if I tell her the truth, she won’t want anything to do with me. I don’t want to screw this up, so, like a coward, I keep my mouth shut.

Later in the evening, after we return to Liam’s apartment and crash on the sofa, I tell him, “You should go out with your friends tomorrow, like you normally do. Don’t skip it because of me.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not leaving you here alone.”

“It’s fine, really. I don’t mind. I’ll just watch TV or read.”

He gives me a look. “Jasmine, I’m not leaving you. Would you like to come with me?”

My stomach drops. “Are you serious?”

“Sure. Why not? You might enjoy getting out. Layla will be there, and Erin, too. You met Erin at the bookstore, remember?”

My pulse is galloping. The idea of *going out*, with Liam, is thrilling. But reality rears its ugly head. “I can’t, Liam. Not to Tanks. Someone might recognize me. I worked that part of town a lot lately. And if word got back to Tony—I can’t risk it.”

“Okay, we won’t go then. It’s no problem.”

“You should go. Don’t let me hold you back.”

He shakes his head. “Like I said, I’m not leaving you.”

That night, as I lie in bed wide awake, I’m obsessed with the idea of going out with Liam. It would almost be like a date, and that’s something I’ve never done. And I like Liam’s friends—the ones I’ve met so far. I’m sure I’ll like the others, too. This would be the first normal adult thing I’ve ever done—go out with friends. Go out, have fun, laugh. Work on making friends. Be with Liam.

“I want to do it,” I whisper to myself, just testing out the words. “I want to go out. It’ll be fine.”

By the time I fall asleep, I’ve just about convinced myself to do it.

* * *

The next day, Lia picks me up at McIntyre Security after lunch and drives me to her house.

“Do you and Jonah ever go out with Liam and his friends when they go to Tanks?” I ask her on the way.

Lia laughs. “No way. It would get out of hand the instant someone recognized him. His location would get posted all over social media, and before you know it, there would be a mob.”

“Oh, right.”

“Once it gets out on social media that he’s out in public, people come pouring in from everywhere. It gets out of hand quickly. Why?”

I shrug. “Layla—do you know Layla?”

“Of course.”

“She asked if we were going to Tanks tonight, and Liam said no. But I sort of want to go. I want to do something normal, like go out with friends. And it would be fun to go out with Liam.”

Lia grins as she side-eyes me. “Are you crushing on my brother?”

“No! Absolutely not.”

“Why not? He’s hot.”

“Lia.” I give her a look. “You know why.”

Lia shakes her head. “Nope, I can’t think of a reason.”

I roll my eyes. “Maybe because I used to be a ho, or have you forgotten that? *Once a ho, always a ho.*”

She laughs. “I don’t see any reason why you shouldn’t go for Liam if you like him.”

I face forward and stare out the windshield. “He deserves better.”

“That’s bullshit. Look, Jazz, you’re a fierce and ferocious badass babe. He’d be lucky to have a girl like you in his life. I think you two are perfect for each other.”

I turn to stare at her like she’s crazy. “You do know what I’ve done with probably hundreds of men, right?”

Lia shrugs. “Hey, everyone deserves a second chance. Even badass girls like you. Reclaim yourself, Jazz. Reclaim your identity, your power. It’s no one’s business what you used to do. What you do now is what matters. Here’s your chance to write your own future and say fuck off to your past.”

Lia pulls through the gate at her family’s community and drives to her house. She parks in the garage. We get out and

walk inside the house, into the kitchen, where Jonah is making a sandwich.

“You make it sound so easy,” I tell Lia. “What if someone recognizes me? I used to work in that part of town.”

“If anyone gives you any grief,” she says, “kick him in his junk, just like I taught you. Right?”

I nod. “Right.”

Jonah turns to us, his eyes wide. “What’d I miss?” He winces. “Jeez, remind me never to piss off either of you.”

Lia smacks his ass as she walks past him. “Don’t worry, babe. Your junk is safe with me.”

Lia and I head down to the lower level and start our workout. We start with basic drills, then move on to more complicated techniques. We practice for hours, only taking short breaks once in a while.

Liam arrives at five-thirty to pick me up. “All ready?” he asks when he finds us in the kitchen, raiding the fridge for cold drinks.

“All done,” Lia says. “Jazz gets a gold star for her work today. She’s a fast learner, bro. You’d better hustle if you want to keep up with her.”

I laugh. “Yeah, right.”

“Duly noted, sis,” Liam says. Then he winks at me.

On our drive back to the apartment, I tell Liam, “I changed my mind. I want to go out tonight with you and your friends.”

“Are you sure?” he asks.

“Yes. If anyone messes with me, I know what to do.”

He grins. “And what’s that?”

“Kick him in his junk.”

Liam fights a smile. “How about you leave the ass kicking to me, okay?”

“Sure,” I say. “But Lia’s taught me enough to do some damage if I need to.”

“Let’s hope it never comes to that,” he says.

Chapter 17

Liam

After work, we come back to my apartment to get ready to go out to Tanks. Both of us take showers because we're sweaty from our workouts.

Jasmine walks out of the bedroom wearing a silky teal top with long sleeves and a high-neck, button-up collar, distressed skinny jeans, and ankle boots. Her hair is hanging loose in beautiful dark corkscrew ringlets. She's stunning, and I'm already worrying about what's going to happen tonight at Tank's. She's going to attract a lot of male attention, and honestly, I'm not sure how well I'll deal with that. Or how well *she'll* deal with it.

"How do I look?" she asks me as she gazes down at her outfit. "Is this appropriate?"

"You look great," I tell her. "It's perfect."

"Thanks. You don't think it's too much?"

"No, not at all. You look lovely."

Her smile widens, and I think she might be blushing.

“Shall we?” I ask. I grab my leather jacket off the coat hook and slip it on. Then I grab her jacket and hold it for her as she slips her arms into the sleeves. “Are you nervous?”

She nods. “I’m afraid someone will recognize me.”

Her jacket settles on her body, and I reach around her to free her hair from the garment. “You don’t need to be afraid. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

We take the elevator down to the parking garage and hop into my Jeep. It’s a short drive to the bar, and I luck out and quickly find an off-street parking spot just two blocks from our destination. As soon as we get out of the vehicle, Jasmine pulls her hood up to cover her hair and shield her face. We start walking toward the bar. It’s dark out already this time of year, but the street lights give us enough light to see our way.

Jasmine walks so close to me that our arms brush. She’s hypervigilant, her gaze scanning both sides of the streets. I’m tempted to put my arm around her or hold her hand, but I don’t want to confuse our situation or give her the wrong idea. *Big brother. Protector.* That’s all.

I have to keep reminding myself of that because part of me doesn’t care about what’s right or wrong.

As we approach the intersection close to Tanks, I notice a young woman standing on the corner. She's wearing a super short mini-skirt, fishnet stockings, stiletto heels, and a silky white top with a plunging neckline that does absolutely nothing to hide her cleavage. And despite the frigid temperature tonight, she's not wearing a jacket. She smiles at every passing car.

I'm guessing she's a prostitute.

Jasmine stiffens and presses closer to me, studiously avoiding eye contact with the young woman on the corner.

"Do you know her?" I ask after we've passed out of ear shot.

Jasmine nods but doesn't say anything.

Finally, when we reach our destination, I open the door for Jasmine, and she steps inside and comes to an abrupt halt just inside the bar. She lowers her hood and stares at the crowded room.

The place is packed tonight, but that's no surprise. This time of year, there are sporting events playing on all the big screen TVs scattered throughout the room.

I look to our usual table, a large circular booth in the back corner, and spot some of my friends. “This way,” I say to Jasmine as I guide her through the crowd.

She spots Jason and Layla already seated at our table and waves. Layla waves back, an eager smile on her face. Mack and Erin are here as well. Our corner booth is large and circular, accommodating a number of people. I let Jasmine slide in ahead of me so she can sit beside Layla.

“Hi,” Layla says to Jasmine, and then again to me.

“Hi,” Jasmine says.

I take off my jacket and hang it on a hook on the wall beside our booth. “Can I hang up your jacket?” I ask Jasmine.

She looks at me, obviously hesitant, but then she nods and takes off her jacket. I hang it up beside mine.

The door opens, and Miguel and Philip walk in. They’re the last two of our group. I haven’t seen either of them in the past two weeks, which means they haven’t met Jasmine. Philip works with my brother Jake, primarily doing surveillance. Miguel is a bodyguard, currently working as a floater, filling in as needed.

Just as Miguel and Philip slide into the booth, our server brings a tray filled with glasses. Another server delivers two pitchers of beer to our table.

Our server says she'll come back to take our orders in a few minutes. The moment she's gone, Miguel leans into me and says, "Who's your friend?"

"Guys, this is my friend Jasmine. Jasmine, this is Miguel Rodriguez and that's Philip Underwood. They also work for McIntyre Security."

Miguel is sitting closest to me. He reaches in front of me to offer Jasmine his hand. "Nice to meet you."

Jasmine glances at me first, looking uncertain, but then she surprises me by shaking Miguel's hand. "Thanks. You, too." She waves at Philip, as he's too far away to shake her hand.

But then Phil surprises me by standing so he can reach across the table to shake her hand. "Nice to meet you," he says as they shake.

I swear if either of these guys hits on Jasmine tonight, I'll lose my shit. Well, to be honest, I'm not worried about Philip. He's already crushing on someone right now. But Miguel is as

single as they come. He's also good looking and a super nice guy. He'd be perfect for Jasmine.

"Do you work at McIntyre Security?" Miguel asks Jasmine. "I don't think I've seen you before."

"Not exactly," she replies. "But I hope to one day. Right now I'm assisting Liam in the classroom part-time."

"She's also studying self-defense with Lia," I say.

"Cool," Miguel says, nodding as he pours beer in his glass. "You won't find a better company to work for. Shane's the best."

Jasmine nods. "He's been very kind to me."

"Would you like something to drink?" I ask Jasmine. "We have beer, or if you prefer something else, we can order it."

"Beer's fine," she says.

I go ahead and pour for her when she doesn't make a move to do it herself. She takes a sip and gives me a small smile. Then she goes back to scanning the bar, checking everyone out. I imagine she's looking for familiar faces.

I pat her thigh. "Relax. Everything's fine."

When I see that faint smile again, I'm pretty sure she doesn't believe me.

Our server returns to take our orders, and she goes down the line asking everyone what they want. I order a burger and fries. Jasmine orders a chicken sandwich with potato chips.

As we're eating, I steal a chip from Jasmine's plate. She grins at me as she's chewing a bite of food. She swallows, then sneaks a French fry from my plate and pops it in her mouth.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Philip elbowing Miguel as he nods to us. "Are they too cute, or what?" he mutters.

Grinning, Miguel shakes his head as he takes a sip of his beer.

While everyone chats, Jasmine sits quietly and listens in as she scans the room. She watches the door every time it opens. I figure it's going to take her some time to get used to being out in public.

After we've all eaten, and our plates are cleared from the table, Mack and Erin slide out of our booth and head to the dance floor. Jason and Layla follow soon after them.

Miguel and Philip try to draw Jasmine out in conversation, but she's not very talkative. She's still too tense and hypervigilant.

After a couple of dances, Layla and Jason return to the table. Layla makes eye contact with me behind Jasmine's back and mouths "*ask her to dance.*"

I sneak a peek at Jasmine, and sure enough her gaze is glued to the dance floor. I can't imagine she actually wants to get out there.

Layla continues to give me encouraging looks when Jasmine can't see her.

I sigh. Fine. I'll do it. But before I can even ask her, she turns to me and says, "Where's the ladies room?"

"I'll take you," Layla says.

Jason slips out of the booth, making way for Layla and Jasmine to exit. The two girls head for the restrooms, which are located behind the bar.

Just as I'm about to follow after them, Jason says, "I'll go. You sit and relax."

As soon as they're gone, Miguel and Philip practically pounce on me.

“So, who is she?” Miguel asks.

“Where did you meet her?” Philip asks.

Both of them are grinning at me. They assume she’s my date tonight.

“Come on, man,” Miguel says, grinning as he elbows me. “Spill it.”

“We met a couple of weeks ago, right here outside Tanks.” I decide to keep it simple and factual.

Miguel seems skeptical. “You met her *here*?”

“Well, actually it was outside the bar. She was having a little difficulty and needed a ride, so I helped out.” It’s only a matter of time before the guys find out she’s currently staying with me, so I decide I’d better come clean. “She’s kind of going through a rough time right now and didn’t have anywhere to go, so I offered to let her stay with me until she gets on her feet.”

Their eyes widen.

“She’s *living* with you?” Miguel asks. “Why are we just now hearing about this?”

I shrug. “What can I say? It’s been a busy couple of weeks.” Speaking of Jasmine, I glance toward the hallway

where the restrooms are located just as Jason and the girls are heading back this way. Jason's holding Layla's hand—keeping her close, as always. Jasmine's right behind them.

A big tattooed guy in a white T-shirt and black leather vest, a beer bottle in his hand, steps in front of Jasmine, blocking her way.

“Shit!” I'm out of the booth in half a second, making my way across the bar.

Chapter 18

Jasmine

“Hey, baby! Wanna dance?” asks the guy blocking my path. Blue eyes, shaggy blond hair, and a beet-red face. He wavers on his feet, clearly drunk. But most importantly, I’ve never seen this guy before.

I don’t know him, and he doesn’t know me. Relief sweeps through me. It’s okay. He’s just a jerk. “No thanks.”

When I try to step around him, he moves with me. He reaches out and touches my hair. “So pretty. Come on, baby, just one dance.”

Jason appears behind the guy, but before he can say a word, Liam’s wedging himself between me and the stranger. He faces the stranger and holds him back. At the same time, he’s reaching back, his hand outstretched toward me. I grab hold of his hand.

“Back off, pal,” Liam warns him.

The blond stumbles, clearly wasted. “You back off, man.”

Philip and Miguel appear behind the blond, both poised to step in if needed.

“It’s okay,” I tell Liam. “He’s drunk.”

“No, it’s not okay,” Liam says. When my inebriated admirer refuses to budge, Liam grabs his left wrist and pins the guy’s arm behind his back.

The blond grunts loudly as he tries to free himself. When Liam twists harder, the guy drops to his knees. “All right! All right! Jeez, pal, lighten the fuck up. I didn’t know she had a boyfriend.”

Liam releases his hold on the guy’s arm and steps back toward me, keeping himself between us. The big blond clambers to his feet, cradling his wrist, and heads to the bar muttering to himself.

Liam turns to me, a scowl on his face. “Are you all right?”

I nod. I glance from Liam to all his friends standing close by. I know they heard what the blond said. “I’m sorry he called you my boyfriend. I know you’re not.” I hate that he put Liam in an awkward position.

Liam’s expression softens. “It’s okay.” He reaches for my hand as a slow song starts playing over the sound system.

More couples flock to the dance floor, including Jason and Layla.

“Would you like to dance?” Liam asks as he nods to the dance floor.

Of course I would, but I don’t want to make him even more uncomfortable in front of his friends. “We don’t have to,” I say, my gaze going from Liam to Miguel and Philip. “Not if you don’t want to.”

He tugs on my hand, drawing me closer. “Come on, let’s dance. I’d be honored.”

Chapter 19

Liam

As Jasmine takes my hand and I lead her to the dance floor, I acknowledge this isn't one of my better ideas. I shouldn't risk tempting myself. I'm having a hard enough time trying to keep my thoughts platonic where Jasmine is concerned. I don't want to give her mixed signals. But I can see she really wants to dance. I saw the way she kept looking at the couples on the dance floor. Layla and Jason are swaying slowly to a romantic song, as are Mack and Erin.

I kept recalling Layla prompting me to “ask her to dance!”

When we reach the dance floor, I pull her into my arms, and we move gently to a slow melody. The feel of her body against mine affects me far more than I expected it to. I shouldn't be holding her like this, and yet I can't bring myself to put more space between us. I could do this all night if it meant I got to hold her like this.

Our gazes meet for a moment, and I see so many conflicting emotions in her big, beautiful dark eyes—a mixture of wonder and confusion. When I smile at her, she smiles back in relief.

“You’re a good dancer,” I tell her, as she moves perfectly in sync with me.

She laughs softly. “I don’t see why. I’ve never danced with anyone before. I never went to any school dances or parties.”

When I think of all the things she’s missed out on, my heart aches for her. I can’t do anything about her miserable childhood, but I can do something about her future. “I guess you’re just a natural. My oldest sister taught me to dance, even though I crushed her toes in the beginning.”

“I suspect you’re good at everything you do,” she says. Then she slides her arms around my neck and lays her head on my chest.

I tighten my hold on her, enjoying the feel of her in my arms, the warm weight of her as she leans into me. It hits me like a ton of bricks that she *trusts* me. After all the men she’s been with, after all the abuse she’s suffered, the lack of choice and free will, she still has the capacity to trust someone.

I lay my cheek against the side of her head and breathe in the scent of her hair. I close my eyes and let the music guide us. When she lowers her arms and slides them around my waist, tightening her hold on me, my chest tightens. My body heats as it comes alive. I’ve never felt like this before. I’ve

dated lots of girls, sure, and I liked a lot of them. But none of them made me feel like I do now.

The song ends, and another slow song begins. Neither one of us seems in any hurry to leave the dance floor. When Jasmine runs her hand up and down my back, my nerve endings come alive.

Hell, I could do this forever.

* * *

Jasmine and I dance to several more slow songs before we finally return to our table. Mack and Erin are still out on the dance floor, but Jason and Layla are at the table. Miguel and Philip are off shooting pool.

Jasmine and I order soft drinks to cool off, which is a good idea. I don't think consuming any more alcohol this evening would be wise.

It's getting late, and I notice Jasmine is yawning. I figure she's got to be exhausted after all the hard training she's had this week. I was crazy for even bringing her here tonight. "Are you ready to go home?" I ask her.

She smiles at me. "Yeah. I'm wiped."

“I figured as much.” I stretch my arm behind Jasmine and Layla and tap Jason on the shoulder. “We’re heading home. It’s been a long week.”

Jason nods. “We’ll be leaving soon, too. It was good to see you tonight. I’m glad you both came.”

Jason stays with the girls as I head over to the pool table to say goodnight to Miguel and Phil.

“Dude,” Philip says when he sees me. “What the hell?” He smiles. “Why didn’t you tell us you were seeing someone? She’s amazing.”

“It’s complicated,” I say, watching Miguel line up a shot with his pool cue.

“Eight ball, corner pocket,” he says with satisfaction. “She and Layla seem to be hitting it off.” Miguel shoots and sinks the eight ball.

“Damn!” Philip yells. “That’s twenty bucks I owe you!”

“Forty,” Miguel reminds him. “Don’t forget the previous match.”

Philip pulls out his wallet and hands Miguel two twenties. “I’m done for the night,” he tells me. “Miguel’s on a roll.”

“I came to say goodnight,” I tell them. “Jasmine’s tired, so I’m taking her home. She’s been training hard all week.”

Philip pats me on the back. “Respect, man. Not only is she gorgeous, but she’s kicking ass.”

“Yeah, she is pretty amazing. You don’t know the half of it.”

I return to our table and lay down some cash to cover the bill. I put my jacket on and hand Jasmine hers. She slips it on, and then we say our goodbyes and head for the exit.

It’s blustery cold outside, and I put my arm around Jasmine. “We need to get you a warmer coat. Winter’s just around the corner.”

We’re halfway to the Jeep when a girl steps out of the shadows of a storefront. “Jasmine? Is that you?” She sounds incredulous.

Jasmine freezes as she stares the girl in the face. “Kat?”

This Kat is around Jasmine’s age. Her blonde hair is pulled up into a topknot. She’s got numerous facial piercings and a couple of tattoos visible on her throat and chest. She’s shaking, most likely from the frigid night air. She’s dressed in skimpy clothes—a mini skirt and a top with a low cleavage—no

jacket. There are dark shadows beneath her lower lids, and her eyes are glazed over, her pupils dilated. She's clearly high on something.

Kat looks at me, then at Jasmine. "Where the hell have you been, girl?" she hisses. She reaches out and grabs Jasmine's wrist. "Tony's had his guys scouring the streets looking for you! He thinks you're either dead or in jail."

Jasmine doesn't move a muscle. "Please don't tell him you saw me," she begs the other girl.

I step in quietly and pry Kat's fingers off Jasmine's wrist and draw Jasmine out of the girl's reach, sliding between them to act as a physical buffer. "That's enough."

Kat glares at me. "Who the hell are you?"

"He's a friend," Jasmine says from behind me.

"I'm her protector," I say. "You tell Tony that Jasmine's out of the business. End of story."

Kat peers around me at Jasmine. "Come back with me now, and maybe he'll let you off light. It'll be worse for you if he catches you on the street." And then she jabs her finger in my direction. "As for you, Tony's going to kill you for interfering with one of his girls."

Jasmine clutches the back of my jacket. “I’m not going back, Kat. Not ever. I’d rather die first.”

“Well, you might just get your wish,” the other girl says. “Remember what Tony did to Miranda when she ran?”

Out of nowhere, Philip appears at my side. “Is there a problem here?” he asks in his deep voice.

I’m six-one, and Philip towers over me. The guy’s huge—six-four—and all muscle. He’s intimidating as hell dressed in black jeans and a black McIntyre Security T-shirt. Kat’s eyes widen and she takes a hasty step back.

“No problem,” I say. “We were just leaving.” I reach for Jasmine’s hand. “Let’s go,” I say, tugging her along with me.

Philip remains behind, planting himself between us and Kat to prevent the young woman from following us.

Shit! Coming out here tonight was a colossal mistake.

As we walk the rest of the way to the Jeep, I scan the street and sidewalks to make sure we’re not being followed. I help Jasmine into the front passenger seat and buckle her in. She’s in a state of shock, shaking uncontrollably.

“You’re fine,” I tell her, making her look at me. There’s sheer panic in her eyes. “Don’t worry.”

I shut her door and jog around to the driver's side and climb inside. Immediately, I start the engine and pull into traffic. Just to be safe, I take a long route back to the apartment building, making sure we're not being followed.

I glance over at Jasmine, who's staring numbly at the road in front of us. Her arms are wrapped securely around her torso, and she's still shaking. I reach over and pat her thigh. "No one knows where you are. And I made sure no one followed."

But it's as though my words fall on deaf ears. I get no response from her at all. She just sits there shaking.

Fuck!

* * *

Once we're back at my apartment building, I park in the underground garage and take Jasmine upstairs to our apartment.

"No one followed us here," I assure her as I press the button for our floor. "I was watching. No one."

Jasmine nods but doesn't say anything. She's truly frightened. I put my arm across her shoulders and pull her close. Fortunately, we're alone in the elevator, and we don't

stop for any other passengers. We get off on our floor and head to the apartment.

Once we're inside, Jasmine makes a dash for the bedroom and shuts the door behind her. Hard.

Shit.

I hang up my jacket and knock on the bedroom door.
“Jasmine? Can we talk?”

But there's no response.

I try the doorknob and find it locked. “Jasmine? Honey, we need to talk about this, okay? You don't need to be afraid. I won't let anything happen to you. I won't let Tony get his hands on you.”

I stand at the door, listening quietly, and can just make out the sound of muffled sobs. “Jasmine, open the door. Please let me in.” She's scared, and I don't want her to suffer alone.

But the lock doesn't turn. Instead, I hear her slide slowly down the door to the floor.

I knock quietly. “Jasmine, please.” But there's no response. So I do the only thing I can do. I sit outside the bedroom. “I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart. I'm going to

sit here as long as it takes until you open this door and talk to me.”

Chapter 20

Jasmine

I stay locked in Liam's room for nearly an hour, until my full bladder forces me out. I guess I had a lot to drink tonight between one beer and a couple of soft drinks. When I open the door, I find Liam sitting there, leaning against the wall beside the door reading on his phone.

"I have to pee," I say.

He chuckles as he points to the bathroom door. "Go ahead."

When I emerge from the bathroom, he's still sitting there. "What are you reading?"

He lays his phone down. "Jamie's new book."

"You have so many siblings I can't keep track of them all."

Liam laughs. "Maybe you'll get to meet the rest of them one of these days." He rises to his feet and holds out his hand to me. "Let's go sit on the sofa and talk."

I stare at his outstretched hand, surprised by the gesture. He's always been *so* careful to avoid touching me, and I never

blamed him for that. *I'm dirty. Tainted.* I get that. He probably can't help thinking about the things my hands have touched, all the things I've done.

He waits patiently until I lay my hand in his. When I do, he links our fingers and leads me to the living room. I sit, and to my surprise, he sits down right beside me, so close our thighs are touching. Then, to my utter shock, he puts his arm around my shoulders and pulls me close.

"I'm sorry about what happened tonight," he says. "I guess it was a bad idea for us to go out in public in an area where you could run into someone who knows you."

"Liam, I froze."

"What?"

"When Kat grabbed me, I froze. I didn't fight back. I didn't do any of the techniques Lia taught me."

"It's okay. You were startled. That's to be expected in the beginning of training."

"Learning self-defense moves isn't going to help me much if I don't use them when I need to."

He squeezes my hand. "It takes time to build muscle memory. Just keep working on it. It'll eventually become

second nature to you. I'll help you practice. We can spar in the martial arts studio in the mornings before Lia comes to get you.”

Liam starts stroking the back of my hand with his thumb. I don't even think he's aware he's doing it. It's soothing. No one's ever touched me like this before—just to provide comfort and nothing else. No ulterior motives. No intentions other than to be kind. I don't even remember my mom ever holding me or trying to comfort me.

It feels good.

Suddenly, he stops as if he just realized what he was doing. I give him a smile to let him know it was okay.

He releases my hand and pats my thigh. “Yeah, we'll practice sparring every day. It'll help you jump into self-defense mode when you need to. It'll become second nature to you in no time.”

“What if Kat tells Tony she saw me?”

“He doesn't know where you're living. He doesn't know who I am, so he'll have no way of tracking you. We'll stay away from Tanks from now on. I can meet my friends someplace else, in a different part of town.”

I sigh, suddenly feeling exhausted. When I lay my head on Liam's shoulder, he doesn't object. I close my eyes, just for a second, and allow myself to enjoy the moment. The closeness. The sense of security I feel when I'm around him.

I remember how he stepped between me and danger this evening, not just once but twice. Once at the bar, when the inebriated blond asked me to dance, and again, out on the street when Kat grabbed my wrist. I froze in both instances, but Liam didn't. He stepped right up and handled things.

Lia's teaching me all these wonderful self-defense techniques, but in order to implement them, I have to stop freezing and take charge of the situation.

With a sigh, I sink more fully against Liam. His arm around me is a comfort. He's so strong and solid. And his masculine scent makes my belly flutter.

“Jasmine?”

I wake with a start and sit upright, leaving the heat and security of Liam's body. I push back my hair. “Sorry. I guess I dozed off.”

“It's okay. I didn't mind. Since you're tired, maybe you should head to bed.”

I stretch, raising my arms in the air and arching my back.
“That sounds like a good idea. I’m wiped.”

Liam lays his hand on my back. “Goodnight. I hope you sleep well.”

I force myself to ignore how good the slight pressure of his hand on my back feels. There’s nothing sexual about it, which is good because I’ve never taken pleasure from sex. Sex is—*was*—just a job to me. A way to make money, a way to survive. But I never enjoyed it. I just sort of shut off my brain and tried not to think about it when it was happening.

But this—simple touches from a friend, from someone I trust—feels amazing. It’s something I’ve never experienced.

“Thanks, Liam.” I don’t dare look him in the eye, afraid he’ll see more than I want him to see. “I appreciate everything you’ve done for me. I don’t know where I’d be right now if not for you.”

“You don’t need to thank me,” he says. “This is what friends are for.”

I head for the bathroom to get ready for bed. Then I disappear into the bedroom, put on my pajamas, and slide beneath the covers. Sleep eludes me for a long time. Every

time I close my eyes, I see Kat standing there on the sidewalk, glaring at me, judging me, reminding me of what Tony will do to me when he finds me.

That night, Kat revisits me in my dream. Only this time she's not alone.

We're back on the street just a couple of blocks from Tanks. Tony is waiting in the shadows, along with some of his goons. They jump out of the darkness and overpower Liam, two of them grabbing his arms while a third one gets him in a choke hold from behind.

Another man grabs me and holds me immobile while Tony looks me over. "You been givin' it out for free to this guy?" he asks, nodding toward Liam.

"No," I gasp as I struggle to free myself. But my movements are sluggish, and nothing I do loosens the grip of the man holding me.

"Where'd you go, Jasmine? You just dropped off the face of the earth."

I continue fighting, trying to free myself, but my efforts are pointless. "I'm done with the business," I tell him. "I want out."

“And who’s this guy?” he asks, nodding to Liam.

“No one. Just a nice guy who’s been helping me out.”

When I realize Liam has stopped struggling, I glance back and see that one of the guys has a knife pressed to his throat.

“Leave him alone!”

Tony chuckles. “You should have thought about that before you ran away. You belong to me, Jasmine. Running off isn’t an option.” Then Tony glances to the men holding Liam. “Take him someplace no one will find him and kill him.”

“No!” I scream at the top of my lungs.

As the men drag Liam away, I scream over and over, hoping to attract attention. Hoping to avert this horrible tragedy unfolding around me.

“Jasmine, wake up!”

Gasping for air, I shoot upright in bed. The room is dark, but the door is open, letting a faint light inside, enough that I can see someone’s sitting beside me. Strong hands grip my upper arms. “Liam?”

“I’m here,” he says. “Are you okay? You were having a nightmare.”

I struggle to catch my breath, and then to my absolute horror, I burst into tears. “I’m so sorry!”

“About what?” he asks, sounding perplexed.

“For putting you in danger. Tony—”

“Honey, Tony can’t hurt me. I’m not in danger, and neither are you. It was just a dream.”

“But—”

“It was just a bad dream.” He gets up to turn off the hallway light. Then he returns to the bed and lies down beside me. “Come here.” He pulls me close. “I’ll stay with you until you fall back to sleep.”

Reluctantly, I try to relax in his arms. I’m still reeling from my dream—from the thought of Liam being hurt. I would never forgive myself if something happened to him.

He rubs my back slowly, and it helps me relax. Gradually, my heart rate slows and my breathing evens out. My eyelids grow heavy once more as sleep pulls me under.

* * *

I wake up Saturday morning warm and snuggly in bed. It takes me a hot minute to realize why I’m so comfortable. I’m

lying on my side, and there's an arm draped across my waist and a solid warm weight pressed up against my back.

That warm solid weight is Liam.

Of course it is. How does he always know what I need without me asking?

I smile as he begins to stir.

"Good morning," I say.

His arm tightens around me just for a second before he removes it altogether. "I guess I fell asleep. Sorry. I didn't mean to."

"You don't need to apologize."

He checks the time and groans. "Eight o'clock? I never sleep this late." He sits up and swings his legs over the edge of the bed. "Ready for some breakfast?"

I sit up. "Yes. I'm starving."

"How would you like to go out for breakfast? I know a place where we can get the best homemade waffles you've ever tasted."

"That sounds wonderful, but where?" I really don't feel like going anywhere after what happened last night.

“Just let me make a call to confirm we can get reservations this morning.” He runs out of the room and returns a moment later with his phone. “Hi. I was just wondering if it’d be okay if I stopped by with a friend for breakfast this morning. Yeah? You’re sure it’s no problem? Great, thanks.” He checks the time, then looks at me. “Can you leave in about thirty minutes?”

“Sure,” I say, curious about where we’re going.

“How about nine?” he says into his phone. “Is that okay? Great. We’ll be there. Thanks.” And then he ends the call. “Let’s get ready. Breakfast awaits.” And he starts for the closet.

“Where are we going?”

He grins. “To my parents’ house. My mom makes *the* very best homemade waffles.” And then he grabs clean clothes and heads for the bathroom to get ready.

His parents’ house? Is he insane? He just invited a prostitute home to meet his parents.

Chapter 21

Liam

Jasmine's flustered at the idea of meeting my parents. She spent longer than usual getting ready—hair, make-up, everything. She's wearing distressed skinny jeans and a long-sleeve cream sweater with a turtleneck collar.

We hop in the Jeep and head to my family's community. I'm excited about seeing my folks. If we're lucky, more family members will stop in and say hi when they see my Jeep parked in my parents' driveway. I send Lia a quick text to let her know we'll be there because I imagine she'd like to pop in and say hello to her protégé.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Jasmine asks. "Your parents don't even know me—or what I am."

"Were."

"I don't think you should just spring me on them without warning. Maybe you could at least give them a heads-up."

"Don't worry, Jasmine. My mom's going to love you, I promise."

“Not if she knows my background. She’ll probably be upset when she finds out I’m staying with you. And when she finds out Lia is teaching me—”

“Stop.” I reach across the console to pat her thigh. “I promise

you don’t need to worry.” But no matter what I say, she looks nervous as hell. “What’s wrong, Jasmine?”

“These are your parents, Liam. Naturally, they’re going to be protective of you. They’re going to worry. They’ll think I’m up to no good or trying to take advantage of you.”

Smiling, I shake my head. “Just wait and see, okay?”

When we arrive at the gate, the security guard waves us through. I pull into my parents’ driveway and cut the engine. I look over at Jasmine, who’s staring up at my parents’ house.

“This is a really nice house,” she says.

I shrug. “Yeah, I guess so. It’s comfortable, and there’s room enough for our growing family to get together for special occasions. Besides the nine of us, there are spouses and significant others and a bunch of grandkids.”

“Tell me about your parents. What are their names?”

“My mom’s name is Bridget. She’s a retired kindergarten teacher. My dad’s name is Calum. He’s a retired firefighter.” I exit the vehicle, walk around to open Jasmine’s door, and hold out my hand. “Come on. Don’t be such a baby.”

When she sticks her tongue out at me, I laugh.

“Let’s go,” I say, tugging Jasmine out of the car. When she grips my hand tightly, I hang on to hers, and we walk up the front walk together.

As soon as we reach the threshold, the door opens, and my mom is standing there. She’s dressed in blue jeans and a pale floral top. Her strawberry blond hair is pulled back in a ponytail. “Welcome,” she says to Jasmine.

I motion for Jasmine to enter, and I follow her inside and make introductions.

“Hello, Jasmine,” Mom says, reaching out to clasp her hand. “I’m so glad to meet you.” Mom’s blue eyes dart from Jasmine to me and back again as she tries to figure out our relationship.

“Thank you, Mrs. McIntyre,” Jasmine says.

My mom chuckles. “Oh, sweetheart, please call me Bridget.”

Dad joins us in the foyer. “I thought I heard voices.” He shakes my hand, then turns to Jasmine. “And who is this beautiful young lady?”

“This is my friend Jasmine,” I say, smiling when I notice Jasmine’s blushing.

“It’s very nice to meet you both,” Jasmine says quietly.

“How about some breakfast?” Mom asks as she heads down the center hallway toward the kitchen. “You two must be hungry.”

In the back of the house is a large kitchen and family room combined—the perfect space for a large family to hang out and visit. Between the two rooms is a large table that seats a dozen people, but we always manage to squeeze in everyone. To my surprise, Aiden, my seven-year-old nephew, is seated at one end of the table munching on waffles. His dark hair sticks up in tufts, and he’s still got his favorite dinosaur pajamas on.

“Looks like someone just got up,” I say.

“Hi, Uncle Liam!” Aiden says, waving his fork in the air.

“Hey, buddy,” I say, walking up to ruffle his hair. “I didn’t expect to see you here.” I fill Jasmine in. “My brother Jake

and his wife, Annie, live next door with their three kids. Aiden is the oldest. He's got baby twin sisters."

"I had a sleepover last night with Grandma and Grandpa."

"I see that," I say, chuckling as he crams a huge bite of food into his mouth.

"You two have a seat," Mom says as she carries our plates to the table. "Your food is ready. There's butter on the table, along with maple syrup, whipped cream, and some fresh sliced strawberries. There's bacon, too. Help yourselves. If you want anything else, just holler. Jasmine, dear, what would you like to drink? Coffee? Tea? Milk? Water?"

"Water would be fine, please," she says.

"Can I have some more milk, Grandma?" Aiden asks just before he shovels another forkful of food into his mouth.

"Careful, pal," I tell him. "Don't choke."

My mom laughs. "That child is a bottomless pit. Just wait until he's a teenager. He'll eat Jake and Annie out of house and home."

Aiden gives me a thumbs-up. "Gotcha, Uncle Liam," he mumbles around a mouthful of food.

Jasmine sits at the table, and I take the chair beside her. She seems rather subdued as she starts on her breakfast. A moment later, the front door opens, and Lia and Jonah walk down the hall and into the kitchen.

“Hey, guys,” Lia says. She stops to give our mother a hug. “Hi, Jasmine!”

Of all the kids, Lia’s the one who takes after our mom the most. They’re both petite, blonde, blue-eyed, and strong-willed.

“You’ve already met Jasmine?” Mom asks Lia.

“Sure.” Lia grabs a waffle off a platter on the kitchen counter and pulls off a bite-sized piece and sticks it in her mouth. “I’m teaching her self-defense.”

“Lia, honey, use a plate, please,” Mom says. “Jonah, would you like a plate, too?”

While my mother gets Lia and Jonah settled at the table, the back door opens and in walks my brother Jake holding his infant twin daughters—Emerly and Everly—one propped on each hip. “Good morning, all,” he says in his deep, booming voice.

Jasmine's eyes widen when she gets a look at him. At six-four, he's a big guy, all solid muscle. He's a former heavyweight boxing champion, now working for McIntyre Security. He's in charge of their surveillance team. Let's just say Jake's not someone you'd want to run into in a dark alley. Dressed in his usual black jeans and T-shirt, with his dark hair and eyes, he's intimidating as hell. But he's also the nicest guy you could ever meet. And a *great* dad.

"Hi, Daddy," Aiden says, waving. "Grandma made waffles for breakfast."

Jake walks over to the kitchen counter, hands Mom one of the twins—no idea which one because I still can't tell them apart—then snags a waffle off the platter and bites off a big piece. He winks at Mom. "I figured there'd be waffles this morning. Can I bring a couple home to Annie?"

"Of course," my mom says. "I'll make up a plate for her. Do the girls want some?"

The twin that Jake is holding reaches for his waffle, her little hand outstretched. She makes a plaintive noise as she tries to make a grab for it.

"I'd say that's a yes," Jake says, as he breaks off a tiny piece and hands it to his daughter.

“I think that one is Emerly,” I whisper to Jasmine. “The other one is Everly.”

“No, Uncle Liam,” Aiden says, laughing as he waves his fork in the air. “You got them backwards. Daddy has Everly, and Grandma’s holding Emerly.”

Jasmine suppresses a smile.

Finally, Jake turns his attention to those of us sitting at the table. “Hey, Lia, Jonah. Liam.” His gaze settles expectantly on Jasmine.

“This is Jasmine,” I say. “Jasmine, this is my brother Jake.”

“Pleased to meet you, Jasmine,” Jake says, and then he winks at me.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” Jasmine says, her voice barely audible.

I guess I didn’t think this through. I should have warned Jasmine that the odds of more of my family showing up were pretty high. Instead of just Mom and Dad, there are an extra six people here. Now all we need is for Jake’s wife, Annie, and my sister Sophie and her husband, Dominic, who live in the house on the *other* side of my parents, to stop in.

I reach under the table and squeeze Jasmine's hand. "You okay?"

Smiling, she nods, but her eyes are a bit wide at the moment, and she seems tense.

"It's okay," I whisper.

Jake doesn't stay long. He says he stopped by to collect his son. He and his wife are taking the kids to the Lincoln Park Zoo. Mom packs up Aiden's overnight bag, and Jake collects his brood of three and herds them out the back door.

That just leaves Lia and Jonah—whom Jasmine already knows—and my parents.

After we're done eating, Jasmine and I clear the table, carrying the dirty dishes to the sink, where Mom rinses them off and sticks them in the dishwasher.

"Thank you, dear," Mom says to Jasmine.

"How are you feeling, Jazz?" Lia asks her. "Any soreness?"

"No, I feel pretty good," Jasmine says.

"Good. Get ready to resume your training Monday afternoon."

“So, you’re learning self-defense?” Mom asks Jasmine.
“How exciting. Lia’s a great teacher. Both of my youngest kids are masters of martial arts and self-defense.”

After the kitchen’s cleaned up, we move to the family room to sit and get acquainted. Jasmine and I are on one sofa, Jonah and Lia on another. My parents sit in their favorite chairs near the fireplace hearth.

“So, Jasmine,” my mom says. “Tell me about yourself. What do you do? And how did you meet Liam?”

I can almost feel the waves of anxiety pouring off Jasmine. I reach for her hand and give it a gentle squeeze. She gives me a smile in return. Still clutching my hand, she says, “We met downtown one evening. Someone was... bothering me... and Liam chased him off.”

“That’s my son,” Mom says, smiling like a proud parent. “Always the hero.” She smiles at me. Then, to Jasmine, she says, “Are you still in school?”

“No, ma’am,” Jasmine answers. “At least not at the moment. I’m still deciding what I want to do.”

“Taking a gap year, then? That’s a good idea. We didn’t have gap years when I was your age, or I would have taken

one.”

“She’s doing great with her self-defense training,” Lia says. “I think she’s a natural at it.”

I lean back in my seat and enjoy the conversation, all the while holding Jasmine’s hand. She shows no signs of wanting me to let go. And I’ll take the opportunity to hold onto her for as long as I can.

After a nice chat, Jasmine and I say our goodbyes and head out.

“Your parents are amazing,” Jasmine says to me as we drive away. “Now I know where you get it.”

I grin. “So, you think I’m amazing?”

She laughs. “Oh, stop.”

“How about we stop and do some shopping on the way home?” I ask Jasmine. “I think you need some more clothes. And you definitely need some workout clothes.”

She frowns. “And a workout bag. But I really can’t afford anything more. I’m down to my last dollars.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m happy to lend you the money until you get on your feet.” I’d say I’ll just pay for her clothes, but I know that won’t go down well.

She frowns. “I appreciate the offer, but I don’t know when I’ll be able to pay you back. Who knows how long it will be before I have a paying job?”

I shrug. “All in good time.”

Chapter 22

Jasmine

I don't even recognize myself or my life anymore. The breakfast with Liam's parents was surreal. They treated me like I was a real *guest*. Like someone important. No one looked at me funny. No one looked down on me. It was great seeing Lia and Jonah again—it's starting to feel like I have real friends, besides Liam. His parents were fantastic, and I like his brother Jake and those three little kids.

After we leave his parents' house, Liam takes me shopping downtown. We stop at his favorite fitness store—Under Armour—and I buy several sets of workout clothes and a duffle bag to carry my stuff in. We go to Watertown Place, which is an amazing upscale shopping mall. I've heard of it, of course, but have never been here before. I make a stop in a jewelry store and splurge on a pair of gold hoop earrings. In another store, Liam talks me into letting him buy me a warm winter coat and a scarf.

After a couple hours of shopping, we walk around downtown, stroll along the river, and work up an appetite. We stop to eat lunch at a cute little sushi restaurant on Rush Street.

As we're eating, I realize how much I enjoy spending time with Liam. Yes, he's nice to look at, but it's more than that. He's kind and caring and thoughtful. He's everything I could want in a man. The problem is, I just don't know how long I'll have him in my life. Once I get a job, I imagine he'll expect me to move on and support myself. I'll probably have to leave Chicago altogether because I won't be able to afford to live here on my own, unless I get roommates.

When Monday rolls around, we have breakfast together and then head to Liam's workplace. Just like he promised, he sets aside some time to work on drills with me.

"As I said, you need to build muscle memory," he says. "Your body should react to a threat automatically, before you even consciously think about it. So, if you find yourself in another situation like what happened with Kat, you'll respond instantly and with confidence. Now, let's get started."

Dressed in my new workout clothes—black boy shorts and a black tank top—we face off on one of the big floor mats.

"Let's replicate what happened Friday night with Kat. I'll be Kat." He steps forward and grabs my wrist. "What do you do?"

“Grasp your wrist with my other hand, then pivot my hips and twist your wrist at the same time.”

“Right. Now, show me.”

I follow through with the designated steps, twisting his wrist and forcing him to let go of me. Then I jump back.

“Good,” Liam says. “Now we do it twenty more times. And then another twenty and another until you can do it in your sleep.”

He wasn’t kidding. We repeat the same move over and over again.

“That was excellent,” Liam says when we take a break. “How about some lunch before Lia comes to get you?”

“Good. I’m starving.”

Liam reaches out without warning and grabs my wrist tight. I twist his wrist, forcing him to release me.

“See?” he says. “Over time, it becomes second nature. You’re already getting there.”

“Liam?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

He smiles. “You don’t need to thank me, Jasmine. Not ever.”

The way he’s looking at me makes my belly flutter. There’s so much intensity and emotion in his dark eyes. My skin tightens, and I feel a flush of heat sweeping through me, settling low in my belly. God, how I wish things could be different between us. How I wish I was just another girl, a *normal* girl, he just happened to meet.

We run downstairs to the cafeteria on the first floor to grab a quick lunch. There are several self-serve stations where you can grab sandwiches, burgers, or pizza. There’s both a taco bar and a pasta bar where you can make your own meals. Or you can go through the line and pick from the entrees and sides of the day.

“How about pizza?” he asks me as we walk into the cafeteria.

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

“I’ll grab our food. Why don’t you get us a table?”

I find an available table and wait for Liam. He joins me soon after, setting a tray on our table. On the tray are two slices of pepperoni pizza for him, and two slices of veggie for

me. He then sets down a shaker of red pepper flakes by my plate and a bottle of sparkling water.

He didn't even have to ask me what I wanted—he just knew. The veggie pizza, the red pepper flakes, and the sparkling water.

“Thanks,” I tell him, kind of reeling from the realization that he knows what I like. My preferences. *He knows me.*

Near the end of our meal, a tall, handsome black guy with short, twisted dreadlocks walks up to our table and pats Liam on the back. “Hey, mon, how’s it going?” He has an accent, something Caribbean, I think.

Liam looks up at the guy and smiles. “Mateo! Good. How are you, man?”

The guy nods. “I can’t complain. May I join you?” he says as he sits in one of the available chairs at our table. He reaches across the table to offer me his hand, and after a brief hesitation, I shake it. “I’m Mateo,” he says. “You must be new here. I definitely would have remembered seeing you before.”

“Jasmine,” I say. I glance to Liam for a second before turning my attention back to Mateo. “Yes, I’m new.”

Mateo nods. “Where do you work? Personal protection? Surveillance? Or are you in administration?”

“She works with me,” Liam says. “She’s my assistant.”

“Really?” Mateo says, grinning. He smacks Liam on the shoulder. “You have an assistant now?”

Mateo has a pretty smile. His skin is warm brown, and his dark eyes practically sparkle when he smiles.

“I like your accent,” I say, wondering where he’s from.

“It’s Jamaican,” he replies. “Born and raised in Kingston. So, Jasmine, what time do you get off work? Maybe I—”

“No,” Liam says abruptly, his voice uncharacteristically sharp. “She’s just leaving. She spends her afternoons off-site in training with Lia.”

Mateo’s eyes widen. “In training? That’s cool. If you ever need a sparring partner—”

“Nope,” Liam says, cutting him off again. “We’ve got it covered. But thanks anyway.”

Mateo stares at Liam for a moment, and Liam stares right back. I get the feeling there’s a lot of silent male communication going on.

Finally, Mateo nods. “Right. Gotcha, buddy. No problem.” He stands and pats Liam on the shoulder. “Well, I gotta run. I’m sure I’ll see you two later.” And then he winks at me before he walks away.

“Sorry about that,” Liam says when we’re alone again. “Guys shouldn’t be hitting on you like that.”

But I don’t mind. It’s one of the most flattering things that’s happened to me in a very long time.

* * *

Lia arrives at one o’clock to pick me up and take me back to her house. “So, how’d it go today?”

“Good. Liam practiced breaking a wrist hold with me. After that we had lunch in the cafeteria. Hey, do you know a guy named Mateo?”

She chuckles. “I sure do. Why?”

I shrug. “No reason. I met him in the cafeteria today. He sat with us for a little while. When he found out I was in training, he offered to be my sparring partner, but Liam said no.”

Lia grins. “He said no, did he? Isn’t that interesting?”

Lia doesn't say any more about it, and I don't bring up the subject again. We arrive at her house and go straight to the workout room in the lower level, next to Jonah's sound studio. I wave at Jonah through a big picture window, and he waves back. He's seated on a stool, holding his guitar, and writing notes on a pad of paper propped up in front of him on a music stand.

"He's in the middle of writing a new song," Lia says.
"He'll be in there for *hours*."

"What's it like to be married to a famous rock star?"

She shrugs. "He's just Jonah to me. I mean, I know he's a big deal—I'm the one who fights off his legion of female admirers every time we step foot outside this community. But here at home, he's honestly just a regular guy. He makes me pancakes for breakfast, takes out the trash, and gives me back rubs before bed. He's kind of perfect."

I smile. "That must be nice," I say wistfully.

"You'll find that one day. I know you will."

"I doubt it."

"Why?"

“Why would a nice guy want to be with someone like me? I mean, if he knew about my past.”

Lia scoffs. “Someone like you? You mean someone strong and resilient and beautiful?” She laughs. “Yeah, who wouldn’t want that?”

“You know what I mean. As soon as they learn I was a ho, they’ll run away screaming.”

“Then don’t tell them.”

“It’s not something I can hide.” When she looks at me funny, I say, “I have... scars. Lots of them. From knife wounds, a bullet wound, and other various marks that won’t ever come off. They’re going to ask how I got them.”

“Hey,” Lia says. “If they don’t accept you for the amazing person you are, they don’t deserve you. Fuck ‘em. Not literally. You know what I mean.”

Chapter 23

Liam

I've been in a shitty mood all afternoon. I know I shouldn't be, but I am. Mateo was clearly interested in Jasmine today, but I shut him down quick. And he knew it. But it was a dick move on my part. Mateo is one of my closest friends, and he's a great guy. He'd be a fantastic boyfriend for any woman. But when he started showing interest in Jasmine, I kind of lost it.

I just can't picture her with another guy. She needs someone amazing in her life. Someone who knows her past, but doesn't judge her for it. Someone who's willing to do whatever it takes to give her the life she deserves. Give her opportunities and chances to succeed. And when I picture another guy with her—physically with her, holding her, touching her—I feel sick. She needs someone who will take things slowly and give her a chance to ease into a healthy sexual relationship. She's been *used* for so long, I don't know if she even wants that with anyone.

“Hey! Earth to Liam.” Mateo's standing in the doorway.
“Mind if I come in?”

My heart shoots up into my throat. It's like I summoned him here with my thoughts. "Hey, Mateo. Of course I don't mind. You don't need to ask."

He shrugs, grinning. "I wasn't so sure based on the way you snapped at me earlier."

"I'm sorry about that. I guess I overreacted. I get protective when it comes to Jasmine."

"You think?" Mateo grins as he waves off my apology. "Hey, mon, there's no need to apologize." His Jamaican accent becomes more prominent. "I'm here right now—as a friend—to find out what's going on with you two. Are you guys dating? And why haven't I heard of her before now?"

"No, we're not dating. We're just friends. I'm helping her get on her feet, that's all."

He looks skeptical. "Okay. So, where did you meet her? At work?"

"No. We met outside Tanks."

"Oh. So just an accidental meeting?"

"Yeah. Sort of."

"Sort of?" His dark eyes narrow. "What does that mean?"

“She was in a *situation*. I stepped in to assist.”

“Where does she live? Is she local?”

Shit. Here we go. “Currently, she’s living with me.”

“With you? All right, Liam. What the hell’s going on? You meet a random woman on the street, and now she’s living with you?”

“Nothing. I told you, we’re just friends. That’s all it can ever be.”

Mateo scoffs. “I don’t believe that for a second. Dude, you’re kidding yourself.”

“There are things you don’t know. Things I can’t tell you. Suffice it to say, Jasmine is under my protection. And she’s off limits. Is that clear?”

Mateo nods. “Yeah, I hear you, mon. Loud and clear. If there’s something I can do to help, just let me know.”

“I will. Thanks.”

* * *

At five, I head to Lia’s house to pick Jasmine up. I let myself into the house and head downstairs to the lower level. I find Jonah in his music studio, and the girls are in the workout room, both of them going at it hard.

So far they haven't noticed me, so I have a moment to observe Jasmine's capabilities. Lia's teaching her the basics of Krav Maga—strike hard and fast, without mercy. It's the most effective way to quickly neutralize an opponent.

They run through a set of well-practiced movements over and over, and I can't help smiling. Jasmine's coordination is spot on. She's tenacious. A few times, she gives Lia a run for her money, driving my sister back a few steps before Lia gains the upper hand once more.

Then they notice me, and the drills stop.

Jasmine jogs over to me. "Hi," she says, trying to catch her breath. "Lia said I'm ready to start learning Krav Maga."

"I see that. You looked great just now."

She grins. "Thanks."

Lia joins us. "Grasshopper is coming along nicely."

Jasmine frowns. "Who's grasshopper?"

"Never mind," I tell her. "It's an old television show reference from the early seventies, long before you were born."

Her frown deepens. "We didn't have a TV."

Lia reaches out and ruffles Jasmine's hair. "It just means you're a good student, sweetie."

"Are you ready?" I ask Jasmine

She nods. "Just let me grab my workout bag."

Jonah comes out of his studio at that moment and wraps Lia in his arms.

"I'm a hot mess, babe."

Laughing, Jonah grins as he kisses the side of Lia's neck. "That's okay. You're *my* hot mess."

Jasmine and I leave my sister and her husband to their foreplay and head out to the Jeep. "Looks like you got a serious workout today," I say as we hop into the vehicle.

"It was great." Jasmine mimes striking out with the edge of her hand. "I kept envisioning plowing my hand into Tony's face."

I laugh. "I heartily approve."

"Can I use your barbells at home? I want to build up muscle. Lia says I'd be more effective if I had more muscle."

At home. My heart skips a beat. "Of course you can. You don't need to ask."

When she smiles at me, my chest tightens. This girl has me wrapped around her little finger.

* * *

That night, we make pasta with marinara sauce for dinner, along with garlic bread and a salad. After dinner, I show Jasmine around the workout room and show her how to use all of the equipment. She spends half-an-hour lifting barbells, while I do bench presses.

“Be careful not to overdo it, Jasmine,” I warn her. “You’re not used to weight training.”

“How much weight can you lift?” she asks me.

“Without a spotter, about one-eighty-five. With a spotter, two-fifty.”

She gasps. “Do you mean hundreds?”

I chuckle at her reaction. “Yes.”

She winces. “I can barely lift the ten-pound barbells.”

“It’s okay. Keep at it. You’ll build up muscle in no time.”

After our workout, we take turns showering and then crash on the sofa to watch TV. Halfway through an episode of *Stranger Things*, Jasmine conks out.

She's asleep sitting up but listing toward me and about to topple over. I could wake her up and send her to bed, but instead I gently lower her so that she's lying with her head in my lap.

I stare down at her profile. The bruises are fading nicely, leaving her beautiful soft brown skin unmarred. I study the delicate shape of her ear. With a sigh, she shifts and settles more deeply into sleep. When her palm comes up to rest on my thigh next to her face, my dick starts to stir.

I'm going to hell for this.

I remain in place and do some channel surfing, trying to ignore the temptation of Jasmine with her head on my thigh, finally landing on the tail end of the Monday Night football game.

Finally, just as the game is ending, Jasmine stirs. "Oh, god, I'm sorry. I fell asleep." She sits up and straightens her hair.

"It's okay. You had a busy day. You should probably hit the hay." I notice a strand of her hair out of place, and on impulse, I reach out to tuck it behind her ear.

She looks at me, surprise on her face. Our gazes meet for a long moment, and I could swear she's blushing.

Abruptly, she stands and stretches. “Yeah, I should go to bed. Goodnight, Liam.”

“Goodnight.”

After she pops into the bathroom to get ready for bed, she walks across the hall. She pauses at the bedroom door and turns to me. “Night, Liam.” She stands there for the longest moment, just looking at me. And then she disappears into the bedroom and closes the door behind her.

I sit here on the sofa wondering what the hell I’m doing. Having her living here with me is sheer torment. Spending almost all of my time with her is torture. The problem is, I don’t know how to get from where I am to where I want to be.

* * *

The next afternoon, after Jasmine leaves with Lia for her training session, I take the elevator up to the 20th floor to the executive offices.

“Hi, Diane,” I say, stopping at Shane’s assistant’s desk. “Is he in?”

“Yes, honey. Go on in. He’s alone.”

“Thanks.” I walk over to Shane’s door and knock.

“Come in!” When I open the door and he sees it’s me, Shane waves me in. “Come in and have a seat. What’s up, pal?”

I sit in the chair facing his desk and blow out a heavy breath.

“All right, spill it,” he says as he settles back in his black leather chair.

“I have a problem.”

“And what’s that?”

“Jasmine.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Care to be more specific?”

“I—shit. So, I’m trying to be a big brother to her, you know? Her protector. But the problem is... my thoughts aren’t very brotherly, if you get my drift.”

Shane grins. “You like her.”

I nod. “That’s an understatement. It’s more like I can’t stop thinking about her.”

“I don’t see the problem here. You’re single, she’s single. Does she feel the same way about you?”

“I have no idea how she feels, but I can hardly come out and ask her, right?”

“Why not?” he asks.

“Because it would be wrong. She recently escaped a life of severe mistreatment and abuse, and she’s grateful to me for rescuing her—her words, not mine. It’s wrong of me to have feelings for her. I’d be taking advantage of her.”

“Have you asked her how *she* feels?”

“Of course not.”

“Why not? Maybe she feels the same way you do. Have you thought about that?”

“I bet she’d be happy never to have to deal with another man for as long as she lives.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Or maybe she’s just waiting for the *right* man. One who will treat her as she deserves to be treated. Someone like *you*. How will you know until you ask her? Liam, if you really want to be with her, tell her before it’s too late. Before someone else sweeps her off her feet.”

“She feels indebted to me for helping her. Even if she did express interest in me, how could I trust that her feelings for me are legitimate, and not just some kind of gratitude?”

“Liam, I think you’re selling yourself short. You have a lot to offer a woman. Why don’t you give her the courtesy of letting her decide for herself?”

Chapter 24

Jasmine

Tony catches me and forces me back to the house kicking and screaming. He drags me down into the cellar—where he punishes the girls who defy him—and tears off my clothes. I cower in the corner, shaking, cold, terrified of what I know is coming next.

“You damn fucking whore!” he spits in my face. “You think you can run out on me? Think again, bitch. You’re mine. My property. You’re my money-maker, you fucking whore.”

When he tries to grab me, I fight back, just like Lia showed me. But Tony swats me away like I’m a fly and laughs in my face.

He drags me to the metal cot, throws me down, and climbs on top of me, pinning me down with his weight. He grabs my wrists with one hand as he opens his trousers with the other.

I struggle. I fight with everything I have. This can’t be happening. It just can’t! I’d rather die than let him do this to me.

“No!” I buck my hips in an attempt to throw him off me, but I fail.

Once he has his cock free, he slaps me so hard my ears ring.

“No!” I wail.

I wake with a start and jump out of bed, turning in dazed circles as I scan the room. But there’s no one here. No Tony. I’m in Liam’s bedroom, dressed in my red plaid flannel PJs.

It was just a dream. A nightmare.

But it felt so damn real.

The dam breaks and loud, ugly, racking sobs pour out of me. I hear a frantic knock at the door, but I’m too far gone to respond. I don’t want Liam to see me like this, a pathetic mess.

The door flies open, and Liam stands there in a pair of boxers, no shirt. His chest is heaving as he tries to catch his breath. “What’s wrong?” He steps into the bedroom and skims me from head to toe. “What’s wrong?”

He’s so beautiful it shocks my system.

My cheeks burn with shame as I stand there facing him. “I had a nightmare.”

Liam swallows, his throat muscles working hard. He steps closer, his hands outstretched, but he stops short of touching me. “Do you need anything, sweetheart? Something to drink?”

Sweetheart.

He's the only person who's ever called me that. I don't even remember my mom calling me such nice names when I was little.

I nod. "Cold water sounds good."

He disappears for a minute and returns with a glass of ice water.

I drink it all, letting the cold water soothe my burning throat.

He takes the glass from me and sets it on the nightstand. "Do you think you can go back to sleep?"

"Will you stay with me?"

"Jasmine," he says, my name a long, drawn-out sigh.

I recognize *no* when I hear it. "Please? Just until I fall asleep? I don't want to be alone right now."

His shoulders drop. "All right."

He motions to the bed, and I crawl back on it and slip beneath the covers. He lies down beside me. When I can't stop shaking, he pulls me to him, into his arms, and I sink into his

warmth. I latch onto his arm and am comforted by the firmness of his muscles.

His hand comes up to rub my back. "It's okay, Jasmine," he says quietly. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

I'm lulled back to sleep by the soothing pitch of his deep voice.

* * *

I wake up sometime later. It's still pitch black outside. Liam's lying on his back. I'm lying on my belly, my head on his shoulder, my arm stretched out across his chest. I freeze, not sure if he's awake or not.

He must sense I'm awake because he strokes my back. "It's still early. Go back to sleep."

I lift my head to look at him. "Do you think I'm a whore?" I ask him quietly.

"No, Jasmine," he says with such sincerity. "I don't."

"But I used to be."

He's quiet for a moment, and then he says, "No, you weren't. You were a victim. Now you're a survivor."

"In my dream, Tony grabbed me. I tried to fight back, but he laughed at me. He swatted me like I was a bug."

“Your psyche hasn’t caught up with your new reality yet. That’s normal. I promise you, you’re not a bug to be swatted. If you faced Tony right now, I think you could take him, and he wouldn’t even see it coming. The next time you have a bad dream, remember that.”

I lay my head back on his shoulder. “Okay.”

With a sigh, I melt into him. *Liam, I think I’m falling in love with you.*

I’m not sure because I don’t know what love is. But of course I don’t say that out loud. I would never want to put him on the spot because if he couldn’t say it back, I think I’d shatter.

* * *

On Friday, I train as hard as I can, both with Liam in the morning during his downtime between classes, and with his sister in the afternoon.

“Damn, girl,” Lia says as she sits on the mat beside me, panting. “You’re on fire today.”

“Do you think I could defend myself against someone?”

She meets my gaze. “I guess that depends on who it is.”

“Say it was just a regular guy, and not someone trained in martial arts.”

She laughs. “Then hell yes, you could.”

“Good. I hope you’re right.”

“What’s on your mind, grasshopper?”

“It’s nothing. I had a bad dream last night about my former pimp. I tried to fight him off, and he just laughed at me.”

“No way.” Lia shakes her head. “If you went up against a civilian opponent, you could kick his ass. Just remember your training.”

“Would you teach me how I could stop someone from raping me?”

She frowns. “Is this about your dream?”

I shrug. “I just—can you work with me on that? Please?”

“Of course.” She takes a deep breath. “Lie down on the mat, on your back.”

I do as she says.

“Let’s assume he’s already on top of you,” she says, as she moves closer. “Spread your legs and bend your knees.” She

says it very matter-of-factly, but I can't help my reaction. My heart starts pounding, my pulse racing.

Lia moves between my legs, on her knees. Her hips are pressed against mine. If she were a man, her dick would be knocking on my door.

“Now,” she says. “I’ll show you a few options. Ready?”

I suck in a breath and nod. “Go ahead.”

“Assuming the guy’s on top, you need to throw him off. If you can, roll him so that you’re on top. But you have to move fast. Once he realizes what you’re doing, he’s going to counter your moves. And if he’s bigger and stronger than you are, you’re likely to lose the upper hand.” She grasps my elbows and brings them together, right over my chest. “Tuck your elbows in close. Try not to let him spread them or pin them to the ground. If he spreads your arms apart, you lose momentum and strength.”

“Okay.”

“Option two. If you can, ball your hands into fists and slam them into his junk. If you hurt him badly enough, he’ll roll off you, hopefully writhing in excruciating pain, giving you a few precious seconds to escape.” She wraps her fingers

around my fists and mimes me slamming them into my attacker's hypothetical junk.

“Option three. Raise your legs, like this, and wrap them around your assailant's neck. Squeeze as hard as you can to cut off his blood flow. He'll be out in seconds. Then, bam! You run. Your best bet is a choke hold, and you knock him out. Just remember one thing—you have to remain in control at all times, or you can't help yourself or anyone else. Got it?”

I nod.

“Good. Now, let's try it.”

She teaches me a series of movements, from planting my feet solidly on the floor, trapping my assailant's right foot with my left, then bucking my hips to tip him off balance and roll us to my right. She teaches me how to get my legs around my opponent's neck and squeeze hard.

We try a variety of techniques designed to get a woman out from underneath an attacker intent on raping her. After more than an hour of practice, we both lie on our backs to catch our breaths.

“I think you're ready for a real test,” Lia says.

“How?”

“I can set up a sparring session for you with one of the guys at work. Someone objective to spar with you. Someone who won’t take it easy on you. You’ll know for sure where you stand.”

“Do you take it easy on me?” I ask her.

She shrugs. “A little. Liam would kick my ass if I so much as bruised you.”

“Does Liam take it easy on me?”

She chuckles. “You bet he does. Heaven forbid anyone put a bruise on his precious Jasmine.”

That makes me laugh. “Don’t be silly. I’m not his precious anything.”

She turns to me and rolls her eyes. “Girl, you are so clueless. If anyone laid a finger on you, he’d massacre them.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

Lia hauls herself up onto her feet and offers me her hand.

“Can I ask you a question?” I say as she hauls me to my feet.

“Sure,” Lia says. “Shoot.”

“Has Liam ever had a serious girlfriend?”

“Not really. He’s dated a few girls, but he never got serious with anyone. Why?”

“Do you think he would’ve liked me if we’d met under different circumstances? You know, if I’d been a nice girl. The kind he might want to go out with?”

Lia shakes her head. “You’re asking the wrong question.”

“What does that mean?”

“Hey, guys,” Liam says as he jogs down the stairs to join us. “How did the workout go?”

“She kicked ass,” Lia says. “I think she’s ready for a real test.”

Liam frowns. “I don’t know about that.”

“Sure, she is. I’m going to arrange for her to spar with someone on Monday,” Lia says. “I want to see how she does when she’s going up against someone who isn’t afraid to bruise her.”

“I think it’s a little premature for that,” Liam argues.

“Oh, just a tiny match, that’s all,” Lia says as she winks at me. “I won’t let it go too far. Maybe Mateo or Philip. Or how about Miguel?”

“No way—Phil’s too big. And not Mateo, either.”

“Why not?”

“Because I said no.”

“Then how about Miguel? He’d be the most gentle of them all.”

“I said no, Lia. She’s not ready.”

“You can’t coddle her forever, you know,” Lia says to her brother. Then she looks at me. “I told you, you’re asking the wrong question.”

On the drive back to Liam’s apartment, I keep replaying Lia’s words in my head. If I’m asking the wrong question, then *what’s the right question?* I turn in my seat to face Liam. “Do you think I can’t cut it sparring with another person?”

“No, it’s not that.”

“But you said I wasn’t ready.”

“Your skills are coming along really well. What I meant was that I don’t think you’re ready to be sparring. Accidents do happen, you know. You could get hurt.”

“Lia said Miguel wouldn’t hurt me.”

Liam frowns, his brow furrowing. “I said no, Jasmine.”

I turn back to face forward and stare at the road ahead of us. It's Friday night. "Are we going out tonight with your friends? Like we did last week?"

"No. I thought we'd stay in tonight and order out. We could watch a movie. Your pick."

"I want to go out again," I say.

He winces. "Have you forgotten what happened last week? The incident with Kat?"

"No, I haven't. And that's why I want to go. If she grabs me again, I'll know what to do. This will be a good test."

When he doesn't say anything, I add, "Please? Besides, I haven't seen Layla and Erin all week. I want to see them again."

"I'll think about it," he says grudgingly.

Lia's words come back to me. *You're asking the wrong question.*

Then what's the right question?

Chapter 25

Liam

Jasmine clearly wants to go out, and I feel like an ass for trying to keep her in. She does need to get out and socialize, make friends, and who would be better friends than Layla and Erin?

When we arrive at my apartment, I park and shut off the engine. “Are you sure you want to go out tonight?”

She lights up. “Yes.”

But I’m not so sure this is a good idea. “All right,” I say, resigned.

To my utter shock, she leans over and kisses my cheek. “Thanks. You’re the best.” And then she hops out of the Jeep.

The best what, I wonder. The best big brother? The best protector? Is there room for me to be anything else?

We head up to the apartment to shower and change. I’m ready first and sit on the sofa waiting for Jasmine. She’s taking longer than usual in the bathroom, and I wonder if she’s having second thoughts.

When she walks into the living room, my heart thuds in my chest. She's put her hair up, letting a couple of delicate corkscrew curls dangle down. She's wearing eyeshadow and mascara and a little bit of lip gloss, and the effect is mind blowing. She's wearing skinny jeans and her ankle boots. Her burgundy top is soft and silky, open at the neck and exposing the graceful column of her throat. My breath catches.

"Wow," I say, as I shoot to my feet. Suddenly, I feel underdressed.

"Do I look okay?" Jasmine asks as she looks down at her outfit.

"You look amazing. I mean yes, you look great."

As she smiles, she glows. "Thanks."

We leave around seven-thirty. I park a couple of blocks from Tanks, but on a different side street this time. I'd like to avoid another run-in with someone Jasmine used to know.

We arrive at the bar just as Jason and Layla do. The two girls hug, both of them smiling. I realize their budding friendship is as good for Layla as it is for Jasmine. Based on Jason's pleased expression, I'd say he agrees.

Mack and Erin arrive right after we do, and Erin joins in on the girl power fest. I have to say I'm glad to see Jasmine making friends. I don't think she's ever had that.

The song *Happy* by Pharrell Williams starts playing on the jukebox. Women stream onto the dance floor, clapping and cheering. I watch as Layla and Erin coax Jasmine onto the dance floor. She seems apprehensive, but when she glances my way, I nod and motion for her to go.

She hesitates a second, but then goes along with the other girls. It's mostly women out on the dance floor, with the guys looking on. The next song is *Hey Ya* by Outkast—another feel-good song—and the girls keep dancing. I watch, mesmerized, as Jasmine grows more and more comfortable out there, letting go and moving her body to the music.

The rest of the guys have arrived—Philip, Miguel, and Mateo. They stand with me, Jason, and Mack on the perimeter, watching.

When the high-energy songs are followed by a classic romantic slow song—*I Can't Help Falling in Love* by UB40—men flood the dance floor to claim their partners.

Jason sweeps a laughing Layla into his arms. Mack claims Erin. Jasmine stands frozen on the floor, suddenly unsure of

herself.

Mateo nudges me hard with his elbow. “You either get out there right now and dance with that girl, or I will.”

And then I’m moving, bypassing the couples on the dance floor to get to Jasmine. The look of panic on her face immediately transforms to relief when she spots me.

I hold out my arms. “Would you like to dance?”

Her smile steals my breath. “Yes.” She steps into my embrace.

“Having fun?” I ask.

She nods. “I just hope I don’t step on your foot.”

“You’re doing fine,” I say.

She smiles. “Thanks to you.”

A couple dancing behind Jasmine bumps into her, knocking her into me. I catch her and slip my arms around her waist to steady her. I glance down at her just as she glances up at me, and our gazes lock. My heart slams into my ribs, and I can’t for the life of me look away. She doesn’t seem inclined to look away either.

My traitorous gaze drops to her mouth, her lips glistening with strawberry-scented lip gloss. I can't bring myself to look away, and when her full lips part on a shaky breath, my body lights up. Heat rushes through me like a raging fire, and I find myself struggling to breathe. My pulse starts pounding, and my growing erection strains against my jeans.

Still, she doesn't look away, and her chest rises and falls with quick breaths. The slow song morphs into another one, and neither one of us seems inclined to end the dance. I tighten my arms around her waist and draw her closer so that her breasts are pressed against my chest.

Suddenly a grinning Miguel is beside me. He winks at me as he taps my shoulder. "How about you let me cut in?"

"No way. Forget it."

Miguel groans. "Aw, man. You just cost me a twenty-dollar bet." And then he walks away.

"What was that about?" Jasmine asks.

"No idea." On impulse, I slide my hand up beneath Jasmine's hair to cup the back of her neck.

She closes her eyes and sighs.

I'm not sure what just happened here, but I'm pretty sure we just crossed a line.

After the second slow dance, the music kicks up several notches. Jasmine and I leave the dance floor and head to our table. Our server comes to take our orders. Once that's done, Layla and Erin drag Jasmine off to the women's bathroom.

I start to rise, intending to escort them, but Mack beats me to it. He clamps a hand on my shoulder and says, "I'll go."

"Relax, she's fine," Jason says when he catches me watching the women's room door from across the bar.

"The last time we were here, Jasmine ran into someone she knew outside. It got ugly."

"Mack's with them. He won't let anything happen."

"So, what's this about Miguel losing twenty bucks?" I ask the group.

Mateo laughs. "We took bets on whether or not you'd let anyone dance with your girl. Miguel said you would. He lost."

"She's not—"

Mateo wags a finger at me. "If you say she's not your girl one more time, I'm going to punch you."

The girls return to the table, and our food arrives. The rest of the evening we eat and talk. We play some pool. I win the first match against Mack. I lose the next match to Jason. While Mateo and Miguel are playing pool, Mack challenges me to a game of darts.

“That doesn’t look too hard,” Jasmine says as she observes us.

“Then you come over here and try,” I say. I hold out my hand to her, and she steps close. “Let’s see how well you do.”

She laughs when I move in behind her. I show her how to stand and how to hold the dart. “Aim for the center,” I tell her. “The bullseye.”

She hauls her arm back and throws. The dart misses the board entirely, bounces off the wall, and lands on the floor. She laughs. “Well, crap.”

“Try again,” I say, laughing along with her. “Here, let me show you.”

I hold her hand in mind and guide her throw. This time, she hits the board, but barely. “I suck!” she says.

“That was much better,” I say. “Keep practicing.”

It's nearly midnight when we all decide it's time to head home. Jasmine and I walk back to the Jeep without incident.

She's quiet on the drive home.

"Everything okay?" I ask her when we pull into the parking garage.

She nods as she hops out of the vehicle and heads for the elevator. "Fine."

She's uncharacteristically quiet on the elevator ride up to our floor.

"Is something wrong?" I ask her. "I thought you were having a good time tonight."

The elevator stops at our floor and she exits the car without answering. I follow her to the apartment. As she steps aside and waits for me to unlock the door, I make a mental note to get her a set of keys.

I glance at her out of the corner of my eyes and notice she's tearing up. *Shit*. Something's obviously wrong, but I have no idea what.

Once we're inside, she heads straight for the bathroom. "I'm tired. I'm going to get ready for bed."

I'm at a complete loss for what happened this evening. When we danced, I thought we shared something—a moment—something. We had fun throwing darts. And now she seems miserable.

I wait outside the bathroom door for her to come out. She jumps when she opens the door to find me standing there.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” I say.

At first, she looks sad, but quickly her eyes take on an angry glint. “Nothing’s wrong,” she bites out.

“You’re a terrible liar. I thought you were having fun tonight.”

“I was!”

“Then what’s wrong? You’ve hardly said a word to me since we left the bar.”

“Nothing!” she insists, and then she pushes past me to the bedroom.

I reach out and grab her hand, pulling her back to face me. “Bullshit. Something’s obviously wrong, Jasmine. Tell me.”

Her expression crumples as she tears up. “I just wish I was someone else,” she says, her voice breaking.

She tries to pull away, but I hold fast. “What are you talking about?”

Her tears overflow, streaming down her cheeks. “I wish I was the kind of girl you could be interested in.”

I’m stunned by that. “What makes you think you’re not?”

She looks pained. “Come on, Liam. I’m a *whore*.”

She spits out the word with so much self-loathing, my heart breaks for her. “Is that how you see yourself?”

“Don’t you?”

“No. I see a survivor. I see a young woman who has faced incredibly difficult circumstances and did the best she could. No, I don’t see you as a whore. I see you as an amazing young woman who has overcome impossible odds and is now well on her way to making a new life for herself.”

She stands there frozen, her eyes wide in disbelief. I reach out and cup her face in my hands. “Jasmine, you’re selling yourself short. You’re a fighter, a survivor. You’re amazing.”

“I wish that was enough.” Her voice breaks.

“What do you mean? It’s more than enough.” But my words aren’t getting through her pain. She looks devastated.

Impulse takes over, and unable to help myself, I lean in to kiss her.

Her lips are soft and full, and they feel so incredibly good against mine, like heaven, like silk and satin. They tremble as they move hesitantly against mine, her breath shaky.

Our kiss deepens, and I run my hands up and down her back.

Suddenly, Jasmine sucks in a breath and shoves me away with a heart-wrenching cry. Holding her hand to her mouth, she staggers back as tears spill over. She blindly feels behind her for the bedroom door, slips inside the room, and slams the door.

Oh, fuck.

My heart sinks like a stone. *What in the hell did I just do?*

Chapter 26

Jasmine

Liam kissed me! Without warning, he kissed me! I'm stunned and horrified and reeling from the shock. When he pressed his mouth to mine, the only thing that registered was the warm pressure of his lips against mine. I was too busy freaking out to notice anything else, like how it felt.

Hiding out in the bedroom, I strip off my clothes, dropping them to the floor, and reach for my pajamas. For a moment, I stand naked in front of his dresser mirror and stare at my scarred body. The ugliness I see—all the scars, the old wounds—sickens me. So much damage. There are scars on my chest, on my breasts and belly and thighs. There's no part of my body that doesn't bear a permanent physical reminder of my life as a prostitute. These scars will stay with me forever, stealing any chance I might have at a real relationship.

I'm like Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*—branded a whore for the whole world to see. These marks are a permanent reminder of what's been done to me. What I let happen.

I jump at the sound of a quiet knock on the bedroom door.

“Jasmine?” Liam's voice is low and subdued.

Quickly, I pull on my long-sleeve red flannel shirt and matching long flannel PJ bottoms. “Yes?” My reply is little better than a croak.

“Jasmine, I’m sorry! I was completely out of line. It’ll never happen again, I swear.”

He sounds distraught, filled with regret. Those aren’t the words I want to hear. I want him to kiss me again. Maybe the next time I won’t freak out on him. It’s just that he caught me by surprise.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say, at a complete loss for words. I don’t know how to tell him what I’m really feeling.

I’ve never been kissed before—not ever. I never let tricks kiss me. And honestly, it wasn’t kisses they wanted from me. They had other uses for my mouth.

When Liam pressed his lips to mine, it was such a foreign sensation. All I can remember is a soft and gentle pressure, the warmth of his lips moving gently against mine. It was shocking and amazing all at once.

And I freaked out. He probably thinks I’m an idiot.

I drop down onto the bed and cover my burning face with my hands. I wish I could disappear into nothingness, where I

don't have to worry or be ashamed or embarrassed.

“I want you to know I'd never do anything to hurt you. I guess I got my wires crossed and misread the situation.”

No, you didn't.

“Jasmine, can I come in? We need to discuss this, face to face. I won't touch you, I promise. I just want to talk—I want to apologize in person.”

“You don't need to apologize. I'm tired, Liam. I'm going to bed. I don't want to talk anymore.”

He sighs. Finally, he says, “All right. Sleep well.”

And then I hear the floor creak lightly as he walks away.

After turning off the light, I climb into bed and lie staring up at the ceiling for a long time.

* * *

We stay in the rest of the weekend. Liam spends a lot of time in the spare bedroom lifting weights. I complete more GED practice tests. Liam cooks our meals, and I offer to help. I really need to learn how to cook so he doesn't have to do it all himself.

We hardly talk at all, other than the basics. *Yes, no, please, thanks.*

He handles me like I'm made of glass. Like if he says one wrong word, I'll shatter. When I catch him watching me, he turns away abruptly.

This awkwardness between us is all my fault for freaking out over a stupid kiss—something most girls experience for the first time when they're still in school. I've fucked tons but had never been kissed before Friday night.

I don't know what to say to him. I don't know how to make things right between us again.

Monday morning rolls around, and as we're getting ready to leave, Troy sends Liam a text to let him know he's got my social security number and that a card is on its way. Now I can get an official state-issued photo ID and register to take the GED exams.

When we get to McIntyre Security, Liam has a full slate this week because he's starting a bunch of new classes. I sit in his office and read and take practice tests. I've already worked through the first study guide he bought me at his sister-in-law's bookstore. Since then, we ordered another study guide from Amazon.

We eat lunch together in the office cafeteria, then return to the martial arts studio a few minutes before Lia arrives to pick

me up.

She and Liam have a rather long conversation in his office while I sit alone on the bleachers, wondering what they're talking about.

Lia walks out of his office just as students start filing into the classroom. As she passes me, she nods to the door. "Let's go, Xena."

"Who?" I ask as I grab my duffle bag and hurry after her. For someone with short legs, she sure can move fast. "Who's Xena?"

"We really need to work on your knowledge of the TV classics."

"Yeah, but who's Xena?"

When Lia stops, I nearly run her over. "Xena, Warrior Princess. She's a kick-ass heroine, just like the name says."

"I'm no warrior princess," I say as I resume following Lia to the parking garage. "Hey, what were you and Liam talking about in his office?"

Lia pauses at the door to the garage and glances back over her shoulder at me. "You."

We're halfway to Lia's house when I finally get up the nerve to ask, "What about me?"

"He told me he kissed you Friday night."

"He said that?"

She nods. "And he told me you pushed him away and gave him the silent treatment all weekend."

"No, I didn't. I just didn't have anything to say."

"Were you angry that he kissed you?"

"No! Of course not. I was just surprised. It took me off guard."

"He feels bad about what happened, and he blames himself." Lia glances at me.

"It wasn't his fault. It was mine. I freaked out on him."

When we pull into Lia's garage, she turns off the engine and pivots in her seat to face me. "So, what exactly happened Friday night?"

"I told you, I freaked out."

"Why?"

I turn to face forward. "I'm embarrassed to tell you."

She chuckles. “Don’t be. We all have baggage, including me.”

“You?”

Lia nods. “You first, and then I’ll share mine.”

“I’d never been kissed before.”

Her eyes widen. “Are you serious?”

I nod. “I never let my clients kiss me.”

“So, no one had ever kissed you? Before Liam, I mean.”

“Yeah. He caught me by surprise—I just wasn’t ready for it.”

She laughs. “No one’s prepared for their first kiss. It just happens, you get over the shock, and then you move forward.”

“Even if I did get over the shock, as you put it, I can’t move forward.”

“Why not?” she asks.

I glance down at my clasped hands in my lap, my fingers white-knuckled.

“Jasmine? Why not?”

“Because of my body.”

“You mean your amazing, kickass body?” She looks perplexed. “I don’t get it.”

“There’s a reason I wear only long sleeves and long pants.”

“I’m listening.”

“My body looks like a war zone. There are scars all over me. It’s hideous.”

“And you think those scars will turn Liam off?”

I nod. “I know they will. Some of my clients made nasty comments about them.”

Lia sighs. “I’ll let you in on a little secret, Jasmine. My brother is crazy about you. A few scars aren’t going to put him off.”

I turn to look at her. “He is?”

“Yes. Pathetically so.”

I’m stunned. I’m also not sure I believe her. “It’s more than just a few scars, Lia.”

“Doesn’t matter. You just crook your finger at him, and he’ll come running.” Lia leans back in the driver’s seat and closes her eyes. “All right,” she says, exhaling a heavy breath.

“My turn. My first boyfriend videotaped the first time we had sex together. I was a virgin—and it hurt like hell. I cried and begged him to stop. He didn’t. When I broke up with him because of it, he revenge-porned me. He uploaded that sex video to every porn site he could find. That video has been downloaded and shared literally millions of times.”

“Oh, my god.”

“Yeah. It about destroyed me. I was only sixteen at the time. I found it impossible to trust guys after that—at least I did until I met Jonah.”

“I’m so sorry. That’s awful.”

“Shane’s tech team is still locating copies of that video and having them taken down. The point is shit happens, you know? Does Jonah care? Does he blame me for that video? No, of course not. And Liam won’t be turned off by your scars. Some of the ugly things that happened to us in our pasts make us who we are today—kick-ass women. Be proud of that.”

I want to believe her. I really do. “So, what do I do now?”

“Do you want Liam to kiss you again? And again and again, until you get over the shock?”

I laugh. “Yes.”

“Then tell him. Or take matters into your own hands and kiss him yourself.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Why not? Trust me, he’d love it. You need to meet my brother Jamie and his fiancée, Molly. Talk about scars. They’re both scarred but in different ways. It doesn’t stop them from loving the hell out of each other. Even Liam has scars. Ever notice his knuckles? Scarred from fist fights when he was younger. He’s got a few scars on his body, too, from official fights. There’s no one in my family who doesn’t have scars. Even my mom does. Did you notice the old burn scars on her arms? That was from an apartment building fire, when she almost died trying to rescue a young mother and her newborn baby.”

“Oh, my god!” I say, horrified.

Lia shrugs it off. “Ask her about it sometime. She loves to tell the story. It’s how she met my dad, who was a firefighter then. It was love at first sight for the both of them.”

“You and Jonah seem really happy.”

Lia nods, then grins sheepishly. “Yeah. Ridiculously happy. He’s the best—just don’t tell him I said that. I don’t want it to go to his head.”

I laugh. “What’s it like?”

“What’s what like?” she asks.

“Sex with someone you care about. I hate it.”

“You hate sex?”

“Yeah. It was a job, you know. I never took any pleasure in it. I just wanted to get it over as quickly as possible. I just wonder, if you’re with someone you care about, does it get better?”

Lia’s smile falls. “Oh, sweetie. Goes, yes, it’s better when you care about your partner.” She frowns. “I’m sorry. You deserve to have a wonderful sex life.”

“I don’t know that I can. Maybe I’m ruined for good sex. Maybe I’ll never enjoy it.”

“No, don’t say that. I promise you, when you’re with the right person, it’s magical.” Then she rolls her eyes. “God, don’t tell Jonah I said that. I’ll never hear the end of it.”

I laugh, because I know she’s just kidding. I’ve seen how Lia and Jonah dote on each other.

* * *

That evening, Lia's words reverberate in my head.

Just kiss him.

But I'm afraid to. Kissing him is one thing, but what if kissing leads to something else? Like the two of us taking off our clothes? Then what? And what if she's wrong? What if he's horrified by what he sees? What if he can't get past what I was? I think that would kill me. Maybe I should just leave it alone—leave everything the way it is and just be content with being friends.

I leave the bathroom after my shower, dressed in my bathrobe, and practically run right into Liam in the hallway. His arms are full of folded bath towels and washcloths.

“Sorry,” he says, sidestepping me to prevent a collision.

“It's okay.” I stand frozen to the spot and look up into his face. I could stare into those beautiful brown eyes forever.

His gaze meets mine, and neither one of us looks away.

God, I hope his sister is right. I'm taking the proverbial bull by the horns.

“Can we talk?” I ask him.

Chapter 27

Jasmine

Liam watches me warily. “Sure. Just let me put these away.” He opens the linen closet door and neatly shelves the towels and washcloths. After he closes the door, he turns to face me. “So, what would you like to talk about?”

“The other night. When you kissed me.”

His eyes widen. “Okay. I’d like to talk about that too. Would you like to get dressed first?” He glances down at my bathrobe. “Would you feel more comfortable—”

“No. That’s not necessary. Um—”

He waits patiently while I search for the words.

“I’m sorry I freaked out on you the other night when you kissed me. No one’s ever kissed me before, and it caught me off guard. I guess I panicked.”

“You’ve never been kissed?”

I shake my head. “No.” At the surprised look on his face, I add, “I never let clients kiss me. You were my first, and I didn’t handle it very well. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s my fault. I shouldn’t have sprung that on you. I should have asked you first.”

I’m so nervous my pulse is racing. “So, I was wondering if we could move past that.”

He breaks into a smile. “Of course we can.” Then he hesitates. “I’m not sure what you mean by that, though. Can you be more specific?”

“Your sister said I should just kiss you, and since she seems to know what she’s talking about—” I step forward, grab his T-shirt, and pull him to me. Our mouths collide, his lips suddenly moving against mine, hot and hungry. I take my cue from him and kiss him back just as hungrily, hoping the whole time that I’m doing it right.

I pull back just as abruptly as I started this and stare at him.

He smiles at me. “That went a lot better than the first time, didn’t it?”

I nod. When he takes my hands in his, I happen to glance down and see the tiny knicks and scars on his knuckles. I smile. Lia was right.

“Something funny?” he asks me.

“Your knuckles are scarred. Lia said they were, from fights when you were younger.”

He nods. “Yeah, I got into a lot of scrapes when I was a kid. Plus, it’s par for the course in my line of work. I usually come away from championship fights with a few extra scars.”

I swallow hard. “I have scars, too.”

His gaze is filled with compassion when he asks me, “Would you like to tell me about them?”

I release his hands. “It’ll be quicker if I just show you.” I untie the belt of my robe and let the garment fall to the floor. I’m standing there in front of him wearing only a pair of panties. I shiver as goosebumps break out all over me.

Liam’s eyes widen as he stares at my nearly naked body. “Jasmine.” His voice is little more than breath.

I reach for my robe. “I’m sorry. This was a bad idea. I know how I look. It’s awful.”

“No,” he says. “Don’t.”

When I straighten and look him in the eye, he surprises me by saying, “You have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of, Jasmine. You’re beautiful.”

I glance down at my body and frown. “Look at all these scars.”

He reaches out to take my hands in his. “Do you want to tell me how you got them?”

I swallow hard, my throat painfully tight. I point to the scar at the top of my right breast. “This is a bullet wound. I was a bystander in a drive-by shooting. The shooter was aiming for my trick and hit me instead.”

Liam winces. “Jesus, honey. If you’d been hit a little bit lower, you could have died.” He points to a scar just below my liver. “And that one?”

“One of the girls stabbed me because she thought I stole one of her tricks.”

“And this one?”

I swallow. “A trick stabbed me because I wouldn’t do what he wanted.” When Liam doesn’t ask what that was, I say, “He wanted me to let him go bareback, but I said no. I always made them use condoms.”

Liam’s gaze darkens. “And he stabbed you for saying no?”

“Yeah. I hit him over the head with an ashtray and ran.” I tell him how I got the various other scars I have, and he just

sits there calmly listening.

“Are you going to tell me about this one?” he asks, pointing at the letter *T* branded on my left breast.

I glance down at myself. This is the one I hate the most. “Tony did that. He brands all his girls.” I look away. “I know, it’s disgusting. It’s like a cattle brand. I was thinking maybe I could get a tattoo to cover it up.”

“Hey.” Liam tips my chin up so that I’m looking at him. “You have nothing to be ashamed of. Tony’s a vile predator. Nothing he does, or has done, is your fault.” Right now, I’m thinking I’d like to carve something into *his* skin.”

Liam’s jaw tightens, a muscle clenching in his cheek. Then he shocks the shit out of me when he takes my hands in his. “I’m in awe of you.”

Tears prickle my eyes, blurring my vision, and I blink them away. “I’m nothing special. I just did what I had to do to survive.”

“You underestimate yourself, sweetheart.” He raises his hand slowly, toward me. “Is it okay if I touch them?”

He means my scars. I nod, not trusting myself to speak.

Gently, he traces a circle around each one, barely skimming the surface of my skin. “People face different tribulations in their lives and survive to tell their stories. You’re no different, Jasmine. You fought a different battle and lived to tell the tale.” And then he slowly leans forward and kisses each scar, each puckered mark, and the brand on my breast. Then he places a kiss in the center of my abdomen.

His touch sends wild shivers coursing through me. My breasts feel heavy, and my nipples pucker up into tight little buds. There’s a soft fluttering of excitement in my belly, and my head is spinning. I feel hot all over, my nerves tingling. There’s an unfamiliar throbbing between my legs, a heat pooling down there.

I wonder if this is what desire feels like.

I wouldn’t know because I’ve never felt it before.

Liam links our fingers together. Smiling, he leans in and kisses me, this time very gently. His lips are soft on mine as he nudges them apart. Our breaths mingle, soft puffs of air. Goosebumps prickle my skin from head to toe. This is what intimacy feels like. I’ve been with lots of men, but it never felt anything like this.

“Tell me what you want, Jasmine,” he murmurs against my mouth.

“I want *you*. I want you to show me what it’s like to be with someone you want.”

He looks me in the eye, so intently, as if he’s searching for something. “I need you to be very specific with me, sweetheart. Spell it out because I can’t risk making a mistake.”

I swallow hard, determined to see this through. “I’m talking about sex. I want to know what it’s like when you’re with someone you... care about.”

I want to smile, because she’s talking about *me*. She’s admitting she cares about me. But this is way too serious to make light of. “You never enjoyed sex?”

I shake my head. “No. It was a job—something I just wanted to get over with.”

Chapter 28

Jasmine

Liam sweeps me up into his arms and carries me to the bedroom, shouldering open the door, and walking us over to the bed. He sets me down on my bare feet, then whips his T-shirt off and tosses it aside.

As I gaze at his bare chest—all those lean, chiseled muscles—my breath catches. His body is a work of art, and I feel sadly inadequate in comparison.

He tips my chin up and looks me directly in the eyes. “I want you more than I’ve ever wanted any woman in my life.” Then he pauses to let his words sink in. There are no buts, no qualifiers.

But it’s still so hard for me to believe him. “Liam—”

“If you change your mind, at any time, for any reason, just say so. This is all about you having a choice in what happens to you and to your body. Is that clear?”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. I’m overwhelmed. My emotions are shattered.

“What’s wrong?” he asks gently. “You look like you’re about to panic.”

As I gaze down at my scarred body, my past flashes before my eyes—all those nameless faces and bodies. The things I’ve done. The things that were done to me. My vision blurs. “I don’t know why you’d want me. You don’t have to settle for someone who’s as damaged as I am.”

“What are you talking about? Who’s settling?”

“You are.”

He lays his hand over my heart. “This is who you are, Jasmine. What’s in here. Your courage, your—”

I laugh shakily. “I don’t feel courageous. I’m terrified.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Of letting you down. Of disappointing you. Of not being good enough. How could I ever be good enough?”

He cups my face, his fingers sliding into my hair. He leans down and gently touches his forehead to mine. “Your fears are unfounded, Jasmine. The truth is, I’m nervous, too. I want this to be perfect for you, and I’m afraid of messing up.” His thumbs gently stroke my cheeks. “I want you, Jasmine. I want to be with you. I want to make you happy. I want to love you,

if you'll let me. I want to protect you. I want it all. I want everything you'll give me.”

My heart is pounding. Fears and doubts are screaming in my head. *Why me?* He can't possibly love me when he could do so much better.

He releases me, takes hold of my hand, and presses it to his chest, right over his heart. “Can you feel that? If you can, then you know my heart is thundering right now.” He takes my other hand as well and holds both of them to his chest. “If you don't want this—if you're not ready or not sure—”

“No!” When I blurt the word out, he smiles. “I do want this,” I say. “I want *you*. I just don't know how. I've never done this simply because I *wanted* to. Only because I had to.”

His smile falls. “I swear to you, you'll never again have to do anything you don't want to do, not for the rest of your life.”

His beautiful eyes, with their deep brown irises and flecks of green and gold, are locked onto mine. I've never been so thrilled, so excited, and yet so utterly terrified in my life.

He smiles. “I'm honored that you chose me.”

I raise my hands and cup his handsome face, smiling as I feel his soft beard brush my palms. I feel heady with desire. I

go up on my tippy toes and gently press my lips to his. I'm surprised once more by how soft they are. I expected them to be hard, like the rest of him, but they're not.

Liam sucks in a breath, but otherwise he's as still as a statue, as if he's afraid to make a wrong move.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I say, laughing shakily.

He smiles against my lips. "There is no wrong way. You touching me in any way is always going to be a good thing."

I try again, this time moving my lips against his. He copies my actions, and I realize he's intentionally matching my pace. Feeling emboldened, I touch the tip of my tongue to his upper lip, and he groans harshly. The sound jolts me. I've heard many male groans and moans, but I've never heard *him* make that sound before.

I feel panic start to overtake me. Is he just one more male in a long line of them? Is this going to be any different than the others? *Can* it be different? Please, god, say it can. If it's no different than the other times, I can't bear it.

"Jasmine?"

I glance up at him. "Hmm?"

"Tell me what you want."

“I don’t know what I want.” I honestly don’t know what to do. My first instinct is to give him head—that’s how it usually starts. Men always want head. So I drop to my knees on the rug beside the bed.

“Whoa,” he says. He grasps me by my elbows and stands me up. “This isn’t just about *me*, Jasmine. It’s about *us*.”

I’m at a loss, so I shake my head. “I don’t know how to do this.”

He closes his eyes and sighs. Then he says, “Okay, let’s try something else. Why don’t you lie down?”

I get on the bed, and he follows me.

“On your belly,” he suggests as he rolls me over. He lies beside me, on his side, and starts tracing gentle lines on my back. “How about we start with a back rub?”

“Okay.” I’m not sure how that’s going to help, but I’m game to try anything.

Liam begins by tracing patterns on my back. His touch feels so good, shivers skate up and down my spine. He talks quietly, just murmuring to me, his voice so low I can barely make out what he’s saying. “Just relax, Jasmine. Let me make you feel good.”

No one's ever done that for me before.

Eventually, he sits up and begins massaging my back in earnest. First my scalp, then my neck, my shoulders, arms, and hands. It feels so good I can't help moaning. He laughs softly and keeps it up, moving to my upper back, then down my spine to my waist. He stops there.

My bones have turned to liquid, and a sweet heat flows through me, settling between my legs. I ache down there. I roll over onto my back and cup Liam's face. "I want you inside me, Liam. Show me what it's like. Show me the way it's supposed to be."

Liam lowers his mouth to mine and kisses me so perfectly. His lips move against mine, nudging them open, and the tip of his tongue slides against mine. Gradually, his mouth moves to my throat, and he trails kisses down to my shoulder. He moves slowly, taking his time, as he explores my body.

When he reaches my left breast, he kisses my branded flesh with such reverence my heart nearly breaks. He cups my breast, molding it to his palm before he draws my nipple into his mouth and suckles gently. I feel a tug deep inside me, followed by an answering pull down below in the deepest core of my body.

He moves to the other breast, giving it the same treatment. Then he trails kisses down my body. He teases my belly button, making me squirm and laugh. Finally, his lips come to rest at the waistband of my panties. I'm practically frozen in suspense, wondering what he's going to do next. I've never experienced anything like this—not this slow, unhurried touching and tasting. I realize I'm breathing hard now in anticipation.

Liam surprises me when he presses his nose to my panties, right between my legs, where all that throbbing heat has gathered. As he inhales deeply, breathing in my scent, his hands tighten on my hips. He groans, the sound loud and harsh in the quiet room. My pulse is racing as I wait to see what comes next.

His fingers grip the waistband of my panties, and he raises his head to look at me. "I want to make you come. I want to make you feel good. Is that all right?"

My breath is trapped in my lungs, and my heart thunders. Since I've lost the ability to speak, all I can do is nod.

He slowly slides my panties down, past my thighs, and pulls them off. Then he opens my legs and settles between

them. He's watching me intently, which is a bit unnerving. My nerves are ragged and my lungs are struggling to keep up.

When he opens me, I flinch. It's an automatic reaction. Not many tricks have been down there, and the few times it happened, I was nervous. I'd heard horror stories from the other girls about getting bit.

I feel his breath first, warm and soft. Then his tongue gently strokes me. I let out a long exhale.

I can do this. I can. He's not going to hurt me. This is Liam.

His tongue flicks my clit, and the sensation is so amazing I gasp, and my back bows off the mattress. He's gentle and teasing, and it feels amazing. Suddenly, his finger is there, circling my opening, slipping farther and farther inside with each pass. My thighs are shaking, my muscles quivering. I find myself fisting the sheet beneath me, desperately trying to maintain my composure.

This is all new to me. It's not the typical eager groping that I'm used to. This is different... it's soft and gentle and caring. He's making sure I feel good. And I realize *that's* the difference. When you're with someone you care about, you

want them to feel good. It's about giving, not taking. It's a two-way street.

His tongue is fluttering quickly now, teasing and tormenting my clit. His finger is deeper inside me, sliding easily through my wetness. He seems to be focused on one particular area, rubbing and

stroking, and soon I feel something gathering there, a swelling sensation coming from deep within me. My entire body is a live wire. Pleasure courses through me in waves, all centering in that one spot between my legs.

“Oh, god.” The words come out of me as a breathy moan. “That feels—oh, god. Liam.”

He keeps up the stroking and the pressure. Faster and faster, and suddenly I'm panting for air. My nipples tighten almost painfully, and my entire body feels connected to what he's doing with his finger. “Liam.”

My leg muscles tighten as an explosion detonates deep inside me, stealing my breath. When I close my eyes, I see stars. My body arches, and a high-pitched cry escapes me. The pleasure between my legs spirals higher and higher, until my thighs start shaking. I'm stunned at my body's reaction, at the

intense throbbing between my legs. “Liam, I—” *I think I just came.*

Liam moves up to lie beside me, his arm tucked around me. I pull him close and kiss him. We’re both breathing hard as our lips cling together. His hand moves up to cup the back of my head. There’s a fluttering in my belly, and my pussy’s throbbing.

This is desire.

This is what it’s like to *want* someone.

“That was amazing,” I say against his lips.

His smile widens. “We’re not done yet.” He jumps off the bed and strips off the rest of his clothes. I watch as he opens the top drawer of his nightstand and pulls out a condom packet. He rips it open with his teeth.

As he covers himself, I get a look at him—at his long, thick shaft with its large ruddy crown. My belly tightens as I wonder how that’s going to feel going into me. I reach down to touch myself and am shocked by how wet I am, how slippery, how good everything feels.

He kneels between my legs and fists his impressive erection. “Still with me?” he asks.

I nod.

He hikes my thigh onto his and leans down to kiss me again. His lips are warm and coaxing, and my body lights up again.

Liam guides his erection to my opening and brushes the head of his cock against me, once, twice, and again. He doesn't seem to be in any rush. He teases me, slipping the head in just a bit, then withdrawing, then a tiny bit deeper, then out again. His rhythm is slow and tantalizing, making my nerves sing.

This feels *good*.

And oh, my. There's a lot of him.

He sets up a slow rhythm, sinking a little bit deeper each time, until I'm dying for more. There's no rough shoving, no slapping or pinching my ass or breasts, just a gradual rocking, until suddenly, he's fully seated. *All of him*. Wow. It doesn't hurt at all. I'm used to it hurting. Men can be so rough.

"That feels good," I say in wonder.

He smiles. "That's the point. It's supposed to feel good." And then he wraps an arm around me and starts moving inside me, slow and steady. I find myself anticipating each thrust and

wanting to meet it. He glides smoothly inside me, and there's only a delicious sense of fullness, but no burning. No pain. Just a feeling of *rightness*.

So, this is what it's supposed to be like.

Liam's lips brush my cheek. "Don't cry, Jasmine. Please. You're killing me."

I didn't even realize my cheeks were damp with tears. I reach up and cup the back of his head and bring him to me for a kiss that suddenly turns hot. Our mouths devour each other's as his pace picks up. His thrusts are long and deep, filling me so perfectly. This is perfect. All of it.

Oh, my god.

I smile into our kiss. "I never knew it could be like this."

He smiles back. "Sweetheart, this is just the beginning." And then he grunts harshly, his voice deep and rough. His next thrust is hard, and then his back bows as he cries out. He bucks a few more times, each time more gently than before.

Liam rolls to the side, his chest heaving as he catches his breath. He turns to me and kisses me. "I'll be right back," he says. "I need to toss the condom and wash up."

I follow him to the bathroom so I can pee. That's one thing I do know. Pee after sex if you want to avoid UTIs. It was drilled into my head by the other girls.

We're both being unnecessarily quiet in the bathroom, whispering to each other. It's silly—like who's going to hear us? I start to giggle as Liam sweeps me up into his arms and carries me back to bed.

“How are you feeling?” he asks as he lies down beside me.

I let out a sigh. “A bit dazed.”

Liam pulls me into his arms and kisses my temple. “I hope in a good way.”

Smiling, I press my face into the crook of his neck. “Yes. I was so afraid I wouldn't enjoy it. I didn't before—when I was in the game. I hated it. I hated myself for doing it. And I was terrified that it wouldn't be any different even when it was something I *wanted* to do.” I press a kiss to his shoulder. “I guess who you're with makes all the difference.”

His arms tighten around me. “I wish I could undo everything you've suffered through in your life.”

“I think you already have.”

He rolls me onto my back and lies on his side, facing me. He gently brushes my hair back and runs his finger along the arch of my brows, down the bridge of my nose. He traces the edge of my cheek, then he leans down and kisses me. It's a gentle kiss, a tender kiss, one filled with reverence and—I don't even dare think it—love. "I'll get spoiled if you're not careful," I say.

He kisses my forehead. "If anyone deserves to be spoiled, Jasmine, it's you."

Chapter 29

Liam

When I wake up the next morning, I'm spooning Jasmine. Her butt is tucked against my groin, and wow, that feels good. She's still asleep, so I lie perfectly still so I don't wake her. The alarm isn't set to go off for another twenty minutes.

She didn't get much sleep last night. Neither did I.

I'm not sure what last night meant to Jasmine. Was it a one-time thing? Or did it mean something to her? Do *I* mean something to her? And then there's the problem of Stockholm Syndrome. Well, not literally. I sure didn't kidnap her. But it is conceivable that she might mistake gratitude for something different—like love.

Whoa, slow down, McIntyre. Don't put the cart before the horse.

I lie quietly, enjoying her closeness until the alarm on my phone goes off. I reach over and touch the snooze button. That gives us a nine-minute reprieve.

Jasmine begins to stir, her ass pushing against me. I pull back enough that she doesn't feel my growing erection.

She shifts onto her back and looks over at me. “Good morning.” There’s a sweet smile on her face, one that I’ve never seen before.

I reach out and brush back her hair. “Good morning to you, too.”

We both lie there simply gazing at each other.

“Thank you for last night,” she finally says.

“Last night was amazing.” I lean forward and press a quick kiss to her lips.

“Now what?” she asks.

That’s certainly a loaded question, one I’m not sure either of us is ready for, so I play it down. “Well, we get up, get dressed, eat breakfast, and then head to work.”

She laughs. “I know that part. I meant, what about last night. Now what? Does that change what’s between us?”

My smile falters. It looks like we’re going there. “I guess that’s up to you.”

She reaches out and strokes my cheek. “I’ve never had a relationship. I’ve never dated. I’m pretty clueless.”

I'm trying so hard not to put words in her mouth. "What do you want last night to mean?"

She leans in and brushes her lips against mine, and it's all I can do not to take over and kiss her the way I want to. It's a good thing we have somewhere to be soon because if it was up to me, I'd want a repeat of last night.

"I want—" she starts to say, but then my stupid alarm goes off again. "I'd better get ready." And then she's out of bed and across the hall, into the bathroom.

She never did answer my question, and now we're both still in the dark.

What did last night mean?

I know what it meant for me, but I can't make that assumption for her. Like she said, she's never even dated. She can't sleep with a guy one time and then decide we're going steady. It wouldn't be fair to her.

I get out of bed, pull on clean clothes, and head to the kitchen to start on breakfast. I put on a pot of coffee and place a skillet on the stove. I throw some bacon into the skillet to get it cooking.

When Jasmine joins me, she's wearing her workout clothes, black pants and a long-sleeve black top. Her hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and she looks gorgeous.

My heart thuds. "Do you mind watching the bacon while I get ready?"

While she tends to the food, I take my turn in the bathroom. When I return to the kitchen, she's standing at the stove whisking a bowl of eggs. The bacon is out of the pan.

"How about scrambled eggs?" she asks.

"Perfect," I say as I walk up behind her and slip my arms around her waist. I lean in and kiss her cheek. "While you're doing that, I'll make the toast."

I realize how much has changed in the short time I've known her. Her confidence is growing. I can see us like this every morning—starting our day together, heading in to work, coming home and making dinner. I can see our lives intertwining. There's so much I want to show her, do with her. She's lived such a confined and limited life, and she's missed out on so many things all young women should experience—movies, restaurants, museums, theaters... the list is endless. I want her to have all of that and more.

While Jasmine finishes the eggs, I set the table and pour coffee for each of us.

“Great job,” I say as I take my first bite of scrambled eggs. “They’re perfect.”

She smiles. “I like cooking. Can you teach me how to make more things?”

I smile. “I’d be happy to.”

She smiles back. “Thanks.”

When we get to work, I ask Jasmine if she’d like to help me with my new self-defense 101 class. She already knows more than these students know.

She beams. “Really?”

“Yes, really. You’re more than ready for that.”

“I’d love to,” she says.

Jasmine assists me with my morning class that runs from ten-thirty to eleven-thirty. It’s only the second class session for this new group. When I introduce Jasmine as my assistant, she beams. I have her help me demonstrate moves, and she executes the steps perfectly. I’m not the least bit surprised. I know Lia and Jasmine have been working hard.

Jasmine strikes up a conversation with a few of the young women in the class—girls her age. This is good. She needs to make friends to round out her development. She seems to be hitting it off with two girls in particular, Claire and Sarah, both new to the marketing department.

When the class ends, Jasmine comes up to me, a bit breathless as she's been working hard. "I've been invited to lunch," she tells me.

"Oh?"

She nods. "Yeah. Claire and Sarah are going across the street to a sub shop for lunch, and they invited me to go with them."

I can tell by her eagerness that she wants to go, and yet she also seems a bit hesitant. "Do you want to go?" I ask.

She nods, then shrugs. "I do, but I don't. They said it's right across the street. It's not far. That's safe, right? We won't be gone long. I'll be back before Lia comes to pick me up."

I realize the problem—she's afraid to go without me. But it's important for her to make friends and establish relationships with other people. This is an important milestone for her. "You should go. It'll be fine." I'm so tempted to offer

to go with her, but that would defeat the purpose of her making friends. “It’s up to you, sweetheart. There’s no right or wrong answer. Do what feels right.”

“You’re right. I should go.”

“Do you want me to walk you to the restaurant?”

“No, I can do this.” She squares her shoulders. “I’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” I have to admit, I hate the idea of her going without me. But I can’t keep her locked in a cage. “Do you need any money?”

“No, I have enough.” She pats her pocket. “This should be plenty.”

“I’ll see you when you get back,” I say.

She nods, her eyes a bit wide and wary. “Okay. Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need luck. You’ll do great.”

And then, to my utter surprise, she steps closer and kisses me in front of a dozen students who are packing up their workout bags. “Try not to miss me too much,” she says with a grin.

My pulse is pounding now for a different reason. Last night did mean something to her. I'm on the verge of inviting myself to go to lunch with them after all when Claire and Sarah both call Jasmine over. They're at the door, ready to go.

"I'll be back in an hour," Jasmine says. She reaches out and snags my hand, giving it a squeeze. "See ya."

And then she goes with them, confident, a smile on her face, and I know it's the right thing to do. Let her go. Let her blossom and make friends. Let her grow her confidence.

It's the right thing to do.

But that doesn't mean I can't follow them to the McIntyre building's exit and watch them cross the street to the restaurant—for my own peace of mind, of course. She doesn't need to know.

I stand in the building's foyer and watch as the three of them walk to the end of the block to the crosswalk, wait at the light, and then cross over to the opposite side of the street.

As they disappear into the sub shop, I feel a bit bereft. Jasmine and I have been spending so much time together, it feels weird to see her branching out with other people. Weird, but I know it's good for her.

Reluctantly, I head to the cafeteria to grab a quick bite to eat, then I head back to the martial arts studio to get ready for my next class.

Forty-five minutes later, Jasmine walks back into the studio, a pleased grin on her face.

“How was lunch?” I ask.

Smiling, she nods. “It was great. Sarah and Claire are really nice. They treated me just like I was one of the girls.”

“You are one of the girls.”

“You know what I mean. If they knew what I am, I don’t think they’d be quite so accepting.”

I take hold of her arms and make her look me in the eye. “Jasmine, the past doesn’t matter. Who you are now, and who you want to be tomorrow—that’s what matters. Nothing else.”

She smiles as she cups my face. “I don’t deserve you, Liam.”

I cover her hands with mine. “You deserve whatever you want, Jasmine. Don’t ever think otherwise.” And then, because we have the place to ourselves, I step closer. “I’d really like to kiss you right now.”

Her eyes light up. “I’d like that, too.” She goes up onto her toes and presses her mouth to mine.

I slip my arms around her waist and pull her close, so that our bodies are flush. I deepen the kiss slowly, bit by bit, giving her a chance to pull away if she wants to. But she doesn’t. She leans into our kiss, her lips moving against mine.

My body reacts, naturally, and she smiles against my lips when she feels my erection.

“Hey, bitches!” Lia says as she waltzes into the studio. “Oops, sorry. Bad timing.”

Jasmine and I break apart, and I’m relieved to see she’s smiling.

“You go, girl!” Lia says, and Jasmine blushes.

I turn to greet my sister and find that she has Jonah with her. “Hey, sis. Hey, Jonah. How’s it going?”

“Good,” he says. “We had some errands to run, so I decided to tag along.”

There’s a growing ruckus out in the hallway, and we all turn to the glass doors to see a small crowd of young women congregating outside the studio door. A few of them are holding up their phones, undoubtedly filming Jonah.

“He’s been spotted,” Lia says with annoyance. “Come on, Jazz. We’d better go before the whole building comes down here to gawk at him.”

* * *

The next morning, during the self-defense class, we’re working on choke holds. I go through the most common scenarios with Jasmine as my partner. I demonstrate pinning her to a wall in a choke hold, pinning her to the floor, coming up behind her and wrapping my arm around her neck. She demonstrates perfectly how to respond in each scenario.

“You’re really doing well,” I tell her when the class takes a ten-minute break. “I can tell you’ve been working hard.”

She grins, looking very pleased with herself. “It’s all thanks to Lia.”

“And to you. You’re a quick learner.”

When the students return from their break, Jasmine partners up with some of the students as they practice their moves. She pairs up with Claire for a while, then with Sarah—the two girls she had lunch with the day before.

When the class is over, Jasmine makes plans with her friends to go out for lunch again, this time to a sushi shop just

down the street. There's no shortage of restaurants in this part of downtown.

I walk the three girls to the front entrance.

"I'll be back soon," Jasmine says, and then she kisses me goodbye.

I grab her hand as she's pulling away. "Be careful, okay?"

She nods. "I will."

I stand inside the glass doors and watch as the three girls cross the street. I know I shouldn't micromanage her like this, but I'm feeling nervous about her being out in public. What if she runs into someone who recognizes her? The risk is always going to be there.

When an unmarked white van stops in the middle of traffic just ahead of them, pissing off the line of cars behind them, horns start blaring.

The instant the van's rear doors open, *I know*.

Fuck!

I crash through the front doors of McIntyre Security and run straight into oncoming traffic, dodging cars as I race across the street. Cars slam their brakes, and angry drivers blast their horns at me. But I ignore them and keep running.

A big guy wearing a pair of dark blue work overalls walks up behind an unsuspecting Jasmine, wraps one arm around her torso, pinning her arms, and the other arm around her neck in a choke hold. He squeezes, and soon she goes limp in his arms. Her two friends scream as a second man grabs Jasmine's legs, and the two of them slip into the back of the van with her. The van doors close, and the vehicle shoots forward into traffic before I can reach them.

Claire and Sarah are both crying hysterically.

Jasmine's gone.

I failed her.

I lean over to catch my breath, sucking in deep lungfuls of air. As my heart slams into my ribs, I pull out my phone and open the GPS app that tracks the chip in Jasmine's shoe. The signal is strong and clear. They're heading south from N. Michigan Avenue. I know where they're going—at least the general vicinity. Englewood—Tony's home base territory.

He's got her. That fucking loser of a pimp has got her.

As I race back across the street and into the McIntyre building, I shoot out a group text to Miguel, Mateo, Lia, Philip, and two of my brothers, Shane and Jake.

I tell them all the same thing.

Jasmine's been taken. Her pimp grabbed her off the street. I'm tracking her now.

And they all answer me immediately in the same way: *I'm coming.*

Chapter 30

Jasmine

It happens so fast. One moment I'm standing outside a sushi restaurant with Sarah and Claire, waiting in line as we discuss our lunch options, and the next, an arm wraps around me like an iron band, pinning my own arms to my torso. Then a second arm wraps around my neck and starts squeezing.

He's got me in a choke hold.

As the arm around my throat tightens, my vision darkens, and pinpricks of light burst like fireworks in the corners of my eyes. My lungs are screaming at me to breathe, but I can't. My throbbing head feels like it's going to explode.

No!

Liam!

And then I feel nothing.

* * *

When I come to, I'm dazed and disoriented. I'm lying on the floor of a van, being tossed around as the vehicle bounces over the road. My wrists are tied behind my back. My ankles

are tied, too, and there's a ball gag in my mouth. I try to speak, but it's impossible.

Inside the windowless van, it's dark.

"Stop fighting," a man says, his voice gruff. He kicks me. "You're wasting your time."

I don't recognize the voice, but I know he must be one of Tony's men. Somehow they found me.

Oh, my god, Liam! He must be frantic. I hope Sarah and Claire told him what happened.

Eventually, the van comes to a stop and the engine is shut off. The back doors open, and two men haul me out of the van. One of them throws me over his shoulder and carries me up the steps and inside through a side door.

We enter the kitchen, where a few of the girls are sipping coffee at the table. Tony's standing there waiting for us, his arms crossed over his chest, a dark scowl on his face. "Take her downstairs," he orders, nodding toward the cellar door. "You know what to do."

I thrash and struggle, but it's useless. With the gag in my mouth, I can't even scream for help. Not that there's any

coming. I'm in *his* territory now. He's in charge here, and no one would dare go against him.

I'm carried down a set of rickety wooden steps to the cellar below, where it's cold and musty. This is where Tony sends the girls to be punished.

We enter one of the small rooms toward the back. Two men hold me down while a third secures both of my wrists and my ankles to a metal bedframe using zip ties. Then he pulls out a switchblade, opens it, and cuts the clothes off my body.

One man pulls off my shoes and socks. Then he stuffs all of my clothing into a black trash bag and tosses the bag to another man. "Get rid of this."

The chip! It's in my shoe.

"We're gonna have fun with you," one of the men says as he removes the gag. He pinches my left nipple hard, bringing tears to my eyes.

My stomach churns, and gagging, I manage to turn my head to the side just before I wretch. Fortunately, nothing much comes out except for hot, bitter acid. It's been hours since breakfast and my stomach is empty.

They leave me then, alone, switching off the light as they go. They close the door behind them, leaving me in near complete darkness. There's one small window in this room, but the glass is so filthy it lets in hardly any light.

I'm shivering, and my heart is racing out of control. I try to do the breathing exercises Lia taught me—breathing slow and deep, in through my nose, out through my mouth.

Her words of advice come back to me. "*You have to remain in control at all times, or you can't help yourself or anyone else.*"

I'm trying.

I'm not having much luck, though. My emotions are overwhelming, off the charts. I'm furious at myself for letting them take me. They overwhelmed me before I could even respond.

I struggle against the zip ties, but it's pointless. I'm only rubbing my skin raw. "You fucking douchebag!" I yell. Tony thinks he can get away with anything he wants.

And I'm scared as hell, because I know what happens to the girls Tony punishes. After what Liam and I have shared

together—the friendship, the bond, the trust, intimacy, our bodies—I couldn't bear to be violated again.

Liam.

Oh, my god, he must be so worried. He must be frantic. But then I remember he put a tracking chip in the sole of my sneaker.

He can track me!

But that hope quickly disappears. My shoes are gone, along with the rest of my clothes. If they destroy my things, Liam might not be able to find me.

I hear heavy footsteps coming down the cellar steps. It could be Tony, himself, or some of his men. I slow my breathing.

Try to be calm.

Think.

Wait for your chance.

I just have to stall them long enough for Liam to come. Because he *will* come. I know he will. I have to believe that, or I have no hope of rescue.

The footsteps come closer, and I hear men speaking in low voices. The wooden door to this room slowly swings open, letting in light from a bulb hanging from the ceiling in the corridor.

There's one figure standing in the open doorway. He's backlit, so I can't see his face, but I'd recognize that big, hulking body anywhere. It's Tony. Behind him is one of his men, but I can't make out who. It's probably Donnie or Lyle. Everyone knows those two are sadists who get off on punishing girls.

“Well, if it ain't my wayward Jasmine,” Tony says as he comes into the room. “You disappointed me, little bird. I thought I could trust you to always fly back to the roost, but apparently not.”

He walks to the foot of the cot. “Katrina told me she saw you outside Tanks, with several men no less. Have you gone into business for yourself?” He shakes his head in disbelief. “I almost didn't believe her. But do you know how we found you?”

I clench my jaws tightly, refusing to answer him.

He continues anyway. “One of those men was wearing a T-shirt with a business logo on it—McIntyre Security. That's

how we found you. I've had my men watching that building just waiting for an opportunity to spot you. They did a helluva lot more than that today—they picked you up right off the street. Stupid little bird. Since I can no longer trust you, I'm going to clip your wings and lock you in a cage where you belong.”

Tony motions for the man in the corridor to come forward. “Since you're no good to me anymore, you can at least make yourself useful by keeping my men entertained.”

Tony pulls the chain on the bulb hanging from the ceiling in this dark desolate room, and the light blinds me. I wince as I blink against the pain. Once I finally adjust enough to see, I realize it's Lyle standing with Tony.

My stomach sinks. Lyle is the worst. He *likes* hurting girls.

“You have no one to blame but yourself, Jasmine,” Tony says, shaking his head in fake regret. “You broke the rules, and now you must be punished. I imagine when Lyle is done with you, you'll wish you'd followed the rules.”

Tony looks at me one last time, then at Lyle, before he leaves the room, shutting the door behind him.

Lyle stares at me with a sick grin on his face. He looks haggard, as he always does. The girls call him Scarecrow. He's tall and thin, his face wrinkled. He's practically emaciated. His clothes hang loose on his wiry frame. And he smells like rancid onions and stale tobacco.

When he grabs his junk and starts rubbing, my stomach roils. "This is the best part of my job," he says in his gravelly voice. "When Tony lets me do whatever I want to his girls."

"Don't you dare touch me," I warn as I struggle against the ties holding me. I know I can't break these zip ties, but I'm not going to stop trying.

"You're not in any position to be telling *me* what to do, girl. I'm callin' the shots now. Your job is to obey, and if you don't, then I'll cut you so bad you'll wish you'd been a good girl when you had the chance."

He pulls a thin, black-handled switchblade out of his pocket and dangles it in front of me. When the blade snaps out with a loud snick, I flinch, and he laughs.

I can hear Lia's voice in my head again. "*You have to remain in control at all times, or you can't help yourself or anyone else.*"

My heart thunders as he comes closer. He reaches down with his free hand and grips my bare ankle, squeezing hard. Then he runs his hand up my leg, past my knee, and up my thigh.

When my muscles tighten, he laughs. He runs the back side of the blade up my thigh, then over to my crotch, pressing it against my clit. “What do you want first?” he asks. “My knife or my dick? Because trust me, you’re getting both.”

The dank air is cold against my exposed skin, and I start to shiver uncontrollably.

“But first we’ll have a little fun,” he says. He eyes Tony’s ‘T’ brand on my left breast. “Maybe we’ll add an ‘L’ too. What’dya say?”

The idea of Lyle branding me is more than I can bear. I know what I have to do. “Not the knife, please,” I beg.

“Then you want my dick?”

I nod. “Anything but the knife.”

He smiles. “Good choice, honey.” Lyle closes the knife and sticks it in his back pocket.

If I can get hold of that knife, maybe I can use it on him instead.

Lyle pulls off his shirt, revealing his thin, wiry torso, and tosses it on the seat of a wooden chair in the corner. Then he starts unfastening his filthy tan trousers.

“Cut me loose,” I say as I tug on my restraints. “I’m no good to you if I can’t move.”

He seems to consider my suggestion. Then he grins. “All right. But if you make one wrong move, I’ll make damn sure you regret it. Is that clear?”

I nod, not trusting myself to speak. Right now I’d agree to anything because I need him to release me. I can’t do anything to protect myself if my limbs are restrained.

Lyle fishes his knife out of his pocket and quickly slices through the four zip ties, freeing my arms and legs. I notice the red marks around my wrists, and fresh blood seeps from the stinging wounds. Lyle shoves his pants off and drops them on the floor. His underwear follows.

He grins at me as he grabs his erection and squeezes hard. “This is gonna feel so good.”

I force myself to remain where I am, flat on my back on the cot. My heart is pounding, and my flight response is screaming at me to run.

Remain calm.

Remain in control.

Lyle grasps my ankles and pulls my legs apart. Then he crawls between them, kneeling between my thighs as he fists his cock. When he's within range, I do what Lia taught me. I bring my elbows in, trap one of his feet with mine, and then buck my hips up hard. Not only do I knock him off balance, but the cot is so narrow he falls onto the hard stone floor. I follow him to the floor and shove my knee hard between his legs.

As he writhes in pain, I jump to my feet, grab his discarded shirt, and pull it on as I run out the door and up the wooden stairs to the first floor.

Lyle's furious shouts reverberate in the cellar. Soon I hear his heavy footsteps as he races up the stairs. My best bet is to get out of the house and make a run for it. I glance down at my bare legs and feet—I've got nothing on but Lyle's nasty, stained shirt, but at least it covers my ass.

I glance out the side door that leads to the driveway, but I don't see anyone out there. The angry shouting behind me grows louder. I have only seconds to make my escape before Lyle catches up to me. If he gets his hands on me now, there's

no telling what he'll do. He might even kill me. Tony made it clear he's had it with me so I doubt he'd even care.

Sacrificing stealth for speed, I unlock the kitchen door and step out onto the stoop. I take the three steps down to the pavement, and then I race barefoot down the long drive. The asphalt is ice cold, and bits of gravel cut into the soles of my bare feet, but I keep running. The shouts behind me grow louder and angrier, and I don't have the luxury of caring. And it's not just Lyle's voice I hear now. I hear Tony's as well, plus a few others. I'm running out of time. I have to make it to the street before they catch me. I just hope I can flag down a car, find someone who can help me.

I hear a shot fired behind me, then another. In this part of town, the sound of gunfire doesn't attract a lot of attention. No one's going to call the police. I hear their thudding steps as they race after me, but I don't dare look back. Every second counts now. I can hear them gaining on me.

Shit! I should have grabbed Lyle's knife! I have no weapon, no way to protect myself.

I'm almost at the end of the driveway when two black SUVs pull to a screeching halt in front of me. The vehicle

doors fly open, and people wearing black tactical gear jump out, weapons drawn.

Someone out front yells, “Jasmine, get down!” and motions for me to drop to the ground. It takes me a second to recognize Liam’s voice.

He’s here! Oh, my god, Liam’s here!

I do as he says, dropping like a stone to the pavement. Several of the new arrivals race past me, heading up the drive to intercept Tony and his men.

A smaller figure dressed in protective gear crouches down beside me. “Are you hurt?” Lia asks as she runs her hands over my body. When I don’t immediately answer her, she shakes me. “Jasmine, are you hurt?”

“No!” I gasp as I try to catch my breath.

Lia hauls me to my feet and drags me back to the SUV, pushing me into the back seat and climbing in beside me.

“Holy shit you scared us,” Lia says, breathing hard as she surveys the area around us. “Don’t you ever do that again.”

“Do what?”

“Get kidnapped.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” I say, laughing shakily. I can’t believe Lia can make me laugh after what I’ve been through.

I stare down at the bloody, torn skin around my wrists. “Lia, I did it! I fought back, and I escaped.” I sound as astonished as I feel.

She smiles as she throws her arms around me. “Of course you did. You’re a warrior princess.”

A single gunshot reverberates, and I flinch. “Oh, my god, where’s Liam?” If anything happens to him, if he gets hurt, or worse, I’ll never forgive myself.

“Don’t worry,” Lia says. “He’ll be fine.”

The sound of sirens alerts us to the arrival of several police cars and a SWAT van as they converge on the house.

“It’s about time,” Lia says as she watches the cops in protective gear swarm the lane.

I look out the windshield to see Tony, Lyle, and several other men lying face down on the pavement. Liam and a number of others are holding them at gunpoint.

“Is that Mateo?” I ask. “And Miguel?”

Lia nods. “And Shane and Jake and Philip.”

“They came for me?”

Lia nudges me with her shoulder. “Of course they did. You’re one of us now. We protect our own.”

I’m still shaking when Liam returns to the SUV.

He climbs into the back seat, drags me into his arms, and holds me tightly. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I say, but my voice is barely audible as my face is pressed into his vest.

He releases me and quickly scans my body. “Did they hurt you?” He runs his hands up and down my arms, then glances down at my bare legs. “Jasmine? Did they hurt you?”

“No, I’m okay. I got away before Lyle could really do anything.”

With a groan, Liam pulls me into his arms once more and kisses me hard. “This was all my fault. I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

“Hey,” Lia says as she punches her brother’s shoulder. “Give the girl some credit. She managed to escape.”

Liam squeezes me so tightly I can barely breathe.

“You’re shaking,” I say, shocked. I didn’t think anything could rattle Liam.

“Hell yes, I’m shaking.” He kisses my temple. “Jesus, Jasmine. I’ve never been so scared in my life. If they’d hurt you—” he stops and exhales a heavy breath. “Thank god you’re all right.”

Chapter 31

Liam

I know I'm smothering her, but I can't help myself. My brain is reeling from the shock. She could have been hurt. Hell, she could have been killed. I'm also so damn proud of her. She got herself free. "I'm so proud of you," I murmur against her hair.

I squeeze my eyes shut against the burn of tears and press my face into her hair. My throat is tight, and my emotions are raw, absolutely shredded.

I grab a blanket from the back of the vehicle and cover Jasmine. She's severely underdressed and shivering from the cold.

Philip and Miguel return to the SUV. Philip slides behind the steering wheel and starts the engine.

Miguel comes around to my rear passenger window and motions for me to roll it down. "The cops want to speak to Jasmine. They need her to make a statement. Afterwards, we're to take you guys back to the office so Jasmine can get checked out in the clinic."

“Do you feel up to answering some questions?” I ask Jasmine.

When she nods, I tell Miguel to let the cops know they can talk to her now.

An officer approaches the SUV. She stands at my open window and addresses Jasmine. “Are you all right?”

Jasmine nods.

The officer asks Jasmine to tell her everything that happened. She recites the events, step by step, explaining how she managed to escape.

The situation on the lane is pure chaos. Tony and his men have been apprehended and are sitting in handcuffs on the drive. At least half-a-dozen women, presumably Tony’s prostitutes, are outside on the front porch, observing the arrests. More cops arrive soon after, and the officers search the house, flushing everyone outside.

Miguel turns to face us. “They’re searching the premises, interviewing, and making arrests. Shane’s on the phone with Troy. The pimp is undoubtedly going to be charged with kidnapping and unlawful confinement, among other things. I

imagine they'll be able to come up with a number of additional charges."

When the officer is done questioning Jasmine, we're given the go-ahead to leave. Philip backs the SUV out of the driveway and heads downtown where the McIntyre Security building is located.

Jasmine leans into me. She's shaking, but I think it's more to do with nerves than the cold. She's wrapped up tightly in a warm blanket. I pull her into my arms. "We're heading back to the office. We have a clinic there, with a full-time nurse on duty. Once we get you looked over and your injuries treated, I'll take you home so you can rest."

Jasmine sits upright. "I have nothing to wear except for this nasty shirt."

I tighten my arms around her and kiss the side of her head. "We'll find something in my office for you to wear home." I lean close and whisper to her, "I'm so damn proud of you, Jasmine. I told you, you're a survivor." Then I kiss her, right there in front of everyone.

"I guess that answers that," Miguel says with a laugh. "Mateo owes me twenty bucks."

Jasmine smiles as she leans her head on my shoulder.

When we arrive at the office building, I take Jasmine straight to the clinic on the second floor. The on-duty nurse checks Jasmine out and says that, other than the abrasions on her wrists and ankles from the zip ties, she's okay. Her vitals all check out fine, and there's no sign of a concussion or any other injuries.

Lia runs down to my office and grabs a pair of gray sweats, a T-shirt, and socks and sneakers for Jasmine to wear home. They're my clothes, so they're too big for her, but they'll do in a pinch. I plan to take her back to the apartment so she can rest. Lia offers to stay for the rest of the afternoon and take over my classes for me.

Jasmine is pretty quiet on the drive back to the apartment building. I don't blame her, of course. She's been through a horrible ordeal. I reach over to hold her hand, linking our fingers together. She gives me a smile.

"You must be hungry," I tell her as we ride the elevator up to our floor.

She shakes her head. "Not really. I don't feel like eating."

Once we're inside our apartment, Jasmine crashes on the sofa. I get her a pillow and blanket so she can curl up and feel safe. I sit at the opposite end of the sofa with her feet in my lap.

Not long after, my phone chimes with an incoming text from Jason.

Jason – Miguel told us what happened. Is Jasmine OK? Layla wants to see her. Is that okay?

I show Jasmine the message. "Do you feel up to having some company?"

"Sure. Tell them to come over."

I send back an invite, and a few moments later, there's a quiet knock on our door. I get up to let Jason and Layla in.

Jasmine sits up, and Layla sits next to her.

"Are you okay?" Layla asks as she hugs Jasmine.

Jasmine nods. "Physically, yes. Emotionally, I'm still processing."

Layla holds Jasmine's hands and examines her bandaged wrists. "Do they hurt?"

"A little, yes."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Jasmine shrugs. “My ex-pimp’s men grabbed me on the street outside a restaurant. They took me back to his house, and—” She chokes up at that point.

“Jasmine freed herself,” I say. “She escaped on her own. We arrived at the house just as she was running down the drive.”

There’s another knock at our door, and I go to open it. Beth is outside our door, along with Sam.

“How’s she doing?” Beth asks. “Shane called to tell me what happened.”

“She’s okay,” I say. “Come on in.”

Beth joins the two girls on the sofa, while we three guys stand around, mostly still in a state of shock. I think everyone is.

“Cooper sends his best wishes,” Sam says. “He stayed upstairs with the babies.”

Jasmine seems comfortable enough being the center of attention all of a sudden. When I catch her gaze, she smiles at me, almost bashfully, as if she’s surprised these people are showing up to support her.

“Shane’s increasing security around the building,” Sam says. “Inside and out. Just in case. He and Troy are meeting right now with Chicago detectives to put together a case against Tony and his organization. I don’t think Tony and his guys will be free any time soon. They’ve all been arrested and are sitting in the county jail awaiting arraignment.”

Word travels fast. Erin and Mack show up as well, having heard through the grapevine what happened. I’ve never had so many people in my apartment at one time. Jason and Mack bring chairs over from their apartments to help seat everyone.

Lia arrives after finishing up with the last class at McIntyre Security. “There’s my warrior princess,” she says as she walks into the apartment. She goes right to Jasmine and hugs her. “You kicked ass, girlfriend. I’m so proud of you.”

Jasmine laughs. “Thanks, Lia. I could hear your voice in my head telling me what to do. It’s because of you that I was able to help myself and get away.”

“Hey, you get all the credit, Jazz. I’m so proud of you.”

Miguel, Philip, and Mateo arrive next, bringing cartons of beer, pizzas, and lots of paper plates. “We figured you guys would be hungry,” Miguel says.

Jasmine eats on the sofa with her feet tucked up beneath her and a blanket over her lap. Layla, Erin, and Beth keep her company on the sofa, while Lia sits on the coffee table facing her. She's surrounded by friends, and that makes me happy.

She's still shaking, though.

Jason takes her vitals again, just to be sure she's still doing okay. Her pulse is slightly elevated, as is her blood pressure, but he assures me it's to be expected under the circumstances.

As the sun starts to set, our friends and family all head home after hugging Jasmine and offering her any help she needs.

Finally, we're alone. I've been wanting to get her alone ever since we got home, but I'm glad our friends came out to support her.

"How are you feeling?" I ask as I get a chance to sink down on the sofa beside her now that it's just the two of us. "Come here, sweetheart." I draw her close. When she melts against me, my chest tightens painfully. She's had next to nothing her whole life and asks for so little. I want to give her the world. Anything she wants.

She grasps my T-shirt and presses her face into the crook of my neck.

I cup the back of her head. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She shakes her head.

“It might help,” I say. “Sometimes saying the scary parts out loud is good therapy.”

She sighs. “When they grabbed me, I didn’t even have a chance to fight back. It happened so fast. There were two of them, and they overpowered me.”

“It’s understandable, Jasmine. Don’t be hard on yourself. But you got your chance when it mattered most. You got yourself free before they could do serious harm.”

“What gave me hope was remembering that you’d put the GPS chip in my shoe. I knew you’d find me. I knew you’d come.”

I press my lips to her temple. “Of course I did. I’ll always be there for you.”

She laughs shakily. “Let’s hope this doesn’t become a habit.”

I try not to laugh, but it’s hard. “Yes, let’s hope so. I’m so proud of you.”

“Tony was furious at me for leaving. He sicced Lyle on me. Lyle’s a sadistic twat. He wanted to fuck me and cut me, probably in that order.”

Oh, god. “Thank god you got away.”

“I told Lyle I’d need my limbs free first, so he cut me loose. That’s when I made my move. When he climbed on top of me, I reversed the mount and managed to knock him off the cot and onto the floor. And then I smashed his package with my knee. While he writhed in pain, I ran.”

Hearing this makes me realize how close Jasmine came to being hurt, or worse. “I have a confession to make,” I tell her. “I saw them grab you. I was watching from the McIntyre building as you walked across the street to the restaurant. I saw everything. That’s why we were able to respond so quickly. I put out an SOS call, and everyone dropped what they were doing to help. Thank god for the chip in your shoe. That’s how we found you so quickly.”

My phone rings then, and I check the screen. “It’s my mom,” I say as I accept the call.

It’s a short conversation. She and Dad heard about the kidnapping and are calling to check on Jasmine.

“She’s doing all right,” I say. “She’s a survivor.”

“Please tell her Calum and I are thinking about her and that we hope she recovers quickly. Maybe you could bring her by for dinner one night this week. We’d like to see her again soon.”

“I think we can manage that. Thanks, Mom.”

After the call ends, Jasmine sits up straight on the sofa. “I think I’d like to take a shower, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course I don’t mind.”

Without another word, she gets up and disappears into the bedroom for a moment, then, carrying her pajamas, she heads into the bathroom. A moment later, I hear the water running in the shower. She’s in there a long time, and I start to worry.

When she finally comes out, I’m sitting on the floor outside the bathroom door.

“Liam, what are you doing?”

I climb to my feet. “I wanted to be close in case you needed something.”

“I do need something.”

“What’s that?”

“You,” she says, reaching out and touching my chest with her index finger.

“Will you sleep with me tonight? I don’t want to be alone.”

“Of course I will.”

After I make a quick trip to the bathroom to get ready for bed, I join her. She’s sitting up in bed with the light on, leaning against the headboard. She’s got the bedding pulled up to her chest, and her hands are clasped in her lap. She’s shaken.

I turn down the light and climb into bed with her. “Do you need anything? Something to drink?”

“No, I—just hold me. Please.”

I hold her close, and before long she’s asleep. I lie there awake, my mind racing as I keep picturing Jasmine running down that drive, barefoot and dressed in nothing but a filthy shirt. All kinds of horror ran through my head when I saw her. I was so afraid she’d been sexually assaulted.

Chapter 32

Three Weeks Later

Jasmine

“I don’t have anything to wear,” I tell Layla. “Renaldo’s is a five-star restaurant. I can’t just show up there in sweats and a T-shirt.”

Layla laughs. “I think it’s sweet that he’s taking you out to dinner to celebrate passing your GED exam. And Renaldo’s is an amazing restaurant. You’re going to love it. I’m surprised he got reservations so quickly. It usually takes weeks to get in.”

“Apparently, he knows one of the sous-chefs there. Someone named Gabrielle. Do you know her? Apparently she’s Beth’s friend.”

“Oh, right. Of course. Yeah, she could pull strings for you and get you in on short notice.” Layla motions for me to follow her down the hallway to her bedroom. “Come look at my dresses. We’re the same size, so I’m sure you can find something to wear.”

Layla invites me to look through the dresses hanging in her closet. I try not to gawk, but she has an amazing wardrobe.

I'm used to seeing her in jeans and hoodies, so these dresses come as a surprise. She's got everything here—from casual dresses to cocktail dresses to sparkly formal gowns. "Wow."

Layla laughs. "Sometimes I go to fancy events with my parents. I hate dressing up, but the upside is I get to see Jason in a tux, and let me tell you, my man looks good in a tux."

I don't know a lot about Layla's parents, but I know they're both big shots in Chicago. Her father is a federal judge, and her mother is a district attorney. And her parents have a private chef—that says it all. Apparently, Layla comes from a very wealthy family, but you'd never know it. She's as down-to-earth as a person can be.

"How about this one?" Layla asks as she pulls a cobalt blue cocktail dress off the clothing rod. She holds it up to me. "This shade of blue goes great with your coloring."

"It's beautiful," I say. "Really, it is. But I need something with long sleeves and a high neckline."

Layla's gaze meets mine, and I can tell she understands. "Oh, right. I'm sorry. I forgot." Of course she's referring to my scars. "By the way, how's your tattoo healing?"

"It's doing great. Do you want to see it?"

“If you don’t mind, sure.”

I pull down the neckline of my T-shirt to show her the tattoo of a coneflower on the top part of my left breast.

“It’s perfect, Jasmine,” Layla says. “You can’t even see the brand now.”

I smile. “Yeah, it’s perfect. Liam found the tattoo artist for me—Chloe Montoya. She’s a family friend. Chloe’s best friend, Molly, is engaged to one of Liam’s brothers.”

Layla returns the cocktail dress to the closet. “Hold on. I think I have just the dress for you.”

She rummages through her closet until she pulls out a pale mauve satin dress with long sleeves and a high neckline. “How about this one?”

My throat tightens as I stare at the most elegant dress I’ve ever seen. I hold the dress up in front of me and turn to face the full-length mirror hanging on the bedroom wall. “It’s perfect, Layla. Thank you.”

Layla’s dark eyes tear up. “I can’t wait to see how it looks on you. You have to send me some pics of the two of you together. Now, sit down and let me do your hair.”

Layla sits me on a chair in front of her vanity and goes to work arranging my hair. She gathers the curly strands at my temples, pulls them back and braids them together. Then she gathers the rest of my hair and pins it up in a bun. She leaves a few tendrils hanging down at my temples and places a few delicate sprigs of white baby's breath flowers in my hair.

"There," she says, stepping back. "What do you think?"

I've never had anyone do my hair before. "Thank you, Layla. It's perfect."

She smiles when our gazes meet in the mirror. "Now try on the dress so we can see the full picture."

After I put on the dress, Layla takes a selfie of the two of us.

"Thank you," I tell her as I give her a hug.

* * *

When I leave Layla's apartment and return to ours, I find Liam in the bedroom getting dressed for our dinner date. He's got his freshly pressed black trousers on and a white dress shirt. His suit jacket is hanging on a hook on the back of the bedroom door.

His eyes widen when he sees me. “Jasmine!” He steps forward and puts his hands on my shoulder. “You look stunning.” He turns me in a circle. “Your hair! I love it.”

“It’s all Layla’s doing—the dress, the hair. Everything.”

He shakes his head. “Absolutely stunning.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” I say as I finally get a good look at him in his suit. “Very handsome.”

Liam grins as he reaches for his black tie. “You think so?”

“I know so.” I walk up to him and smooth my hands over his shirt front, noting the firm shape of his pecs beneath my palms. I skim my hands over his broad shoulders, then down his arms to his hands.

He links our fingers and brings my hands to his mouth to kiss. “Congratulations, sweetheart. I’m not one bit surprised you passed. I knew you would.”

I shrug off his praise. “It was just some school tests. It’s not that big of a deal.”

“It’s a very big deal. You aced those tests, Jasmine. After everything you’ve been through, you passed with flying colors.” He leans forward and kisses me. “Now, let’s go celebrate.”

When Liam slips on his suit jacket, I try not to gawk at him. He's a handsome man under any conditions but seeing him in a black suit and tie takes my breath away.

We grab our coats and head down to the parking garage, hop in Liam's vehicle, and head downtown. Winter is in full swing now. The drive along N. Michigan Avenue is magical. The stores have their Christmas displays up, the sidewalks are decorated with holiday lights, and there are snow flurries in the night sky. Tonight couldn't be more perfect.

When we arrive at our destination, a parking attendant meets him at the driver's door to take the keys. Liam walks around to the front passenger seat and opens my door. He offers me his hand and helps me out of the vehicle. We fall into step with several other couples who are on their way to Renaldo's.

"This is so unreal," I whisper, squeezing his hand.

Liam walks me into the restaurant, where an attendant takes our coats and hands him a claim ticket. We approach a fancy wooden podium, where a hostess stands smiling at us. "Mr. McIntyre?" she says with a smile.

Liam nods. "Yes. I believe we have a reservation."

“You do,” she says, as she hands two menus to a young male server standing with her.

The server motions for us to follow him into the dining room, where we’re seated at a table for two.

He hands us each a menu. “I’ll be right back to take your orders.”

I glance around the room at the elegant light fixtures and the tables covered with fine white tablecloths. “Fancy,” I say.

Liam smiles. “Wait until you taste the food. The owner, Peter Capelli, is a close friend of Shane’s. And Beth’s friend, Gabrielle, is a sous-chef here.”

Our server comes back to our table to fill our water glasses and take our orders. I decide on fettucine Alfredo with grilled asparagus and a salad. Liam goes for the lasagna. For an appetizer, our server brings us a basket of warm, crusty Italian bread and bowls of olive oil for dipping. Liam orders us a bottle of Pinot Noir.

We’re halfway through the meal when a gorgeous redhead wearing a white chef’s uniform approaches our table. Based on the huge grin on her face, I think she must know Liam. I imagine this is Beth’s friend, the sous-chef.

“Liam, hello!” the redhead says. She lays her hand on Liam’s shoulder. “It’s so good to see you.” Then she turns her radiant smile on me.

“Jasmine, this is Gabrielle Hunter,” Liam says. “She’s a sous-chef here at Renaldo’s.”

Gabrielle’s tall for a woman. Her beautiful red hair hangs in a single braid down her back. Her round face is freckled, and her eyes are a startling shade of green.

Then to Gabrielle, Liam says, “This is Jasmine Grant, my girlfriend.”

I’m nervous because I have no idea what she knows about me, or what she thinks of me.

Gabrielle’s smile widens. “It’s about time a smart young woman managed to snag this guy.” She winks at me. “I’ve heard you’re learning self-defense and Krav Maga, Jasmine. How exciting. I hope you’re enjoying your food this evening.”

“Yes, we are.” I relax a bit and return her smile.

“Everything is delicious. Thank you.”

Gabrielle nods to Liam. “Well, I’ll leave you two alone to finish your entrees. I just wanted to pop out here to say hello.

Your meals are on the house, by the way, so make sure you order dessert.” And then she returns to the kitchen.

When I meet Liam’s gaze, he extends his arm across the table. I lay my hand in his, and he squeezes it. “Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Yes. Gabrielle’s really nice.”

He nods. “She is. And she’s a very talented chef. She’ll probably be running this place one day.”

Liam raises his glass of wine. “How about a toast? To the future,” he says. “To us.”

After we finish our meals, we follow Gabrielle’s advice and order dessert. I opt for the Tiramisu. I’ve heard about this dessert but had never tried it. Liam gets the cannolis.

When our desserts arrive, he holds up one of the little cannolis. “Here, have a bite.”

He holds it for me as I bite into it. “Oh, that’s good,” I say, laughing as the cream oozes out. Then I offer him a taste of my Tiramisu.

“We’re so cute,” I say as he tries my dessert. I’m smiling so much my cheeks hurt.

When it's time to leave, we collect our coats, and the parking attendant brings the Jeep around for us. It's snowing a little harder now, filling the night sky with sparkling flakes of white. The snow covers the sidewalks and buildings, and everything looks pristine and beautiful.

Once we're home, we walk into the bedroom, and Liam unbuttons my dress. As it slides off me, his eyes widen when he sees the cream-colored silk panty and bra set I'm wearing.

"I splurged a little," I admit, blushing at the way he's staring.

"You go right ahead and splurge all you want," he says.

He pulls me close and kisses me, his mouth hot and hungry on mine. Then he lifts me up and sits me on his dresser. He nudges my knees apart and steps between them, pulling me close to the edge. He's so close I can feel his erection through his trousers.

One of the biggest surprises that has come from my relationship with Liam is that I can enjoy sex. In the beginning, I was so afraid I wouldn't be able to—that my life on the streets had ruined me for intimacy. I was also afraid that my scarred body would turn off a partner. But Liam sees my

scars as a badge of courage. He says they symbolize what I endured.

Now I'm comfortable around him in my bare skin. I love how he looks at me—with hunger and need. Like he can't get enough. He looks at me like I'm the most beautiful woman he's ever seen.

Liam's hands come up to cup my face. "Did you enjoy our dinner date this evening?"

Nodding, I run my hands up and down his upper arms, enjoying the feel of his hard biceps beneath my fingers. "It was lovely. Thank you."

His gaze darkens as it drops to my cleavage. He unfastens the front clasp of my bra and watches as the cups fall aside. With his index finger, he traces a careful circle around my flower tattoo. "This is healing nicely."

I lean forward and kiss him. His fingers slip up into my hair, and he holds me close. Our kiss deepens. He drops his hands and cups my ass, pulling me against him, letting me feel his hardness. "I want to eat you up," he says with a smile. "I can't ever get enough."

I loosen his tie and pull it off. Then I start unbuttoning his shirt. No matter how handsome he looks in his suit, I'd much rather be looking at his bare chest and those lean, chiseled muscles.

My bra ends up on the floor at our feet, along with his shirt and tie. He slips a finger inside my panties and encounters my slick desire.

He groans. "These are in my way," he says, and then he carefully tears my delicate panties in half.

"Hey, those are new!" I complain, laughing as I fight a grin. "I bought them just for this evening."

"And they served their purpose beautifully. But right now I need them gone, and I'm too impatient to let you undress properly. I'll buy you more. I'll buy you all the panties you want if you promise to let me rip them off you."

And then he unfastens his trousers, shoves them down along with his boxers, and steps closer. His erection defies gravity, thick and heavy as it lifts in the air. Liam grabs a condom packet from the top dresser drawer, rips it open, and rolls the condom on.

Holding my gaze steady, he fists his erection and brings it to my opening. “I love you,” he says.

I smile. “I love you, too.”

“I loved you first,” he counters.

Grinning, I lean in and kiss him. “I sincerely doubt that. I fell in love with you in that dark alley when you first rescued me. You were a real-life knight in shining armor. What girl doesn’t dream of having one of those?”

He brushes my cheek with his thumb. “You started out as a damsel in distress but you became the kickass heroine of your own story. When the time came, you rescued yourself.”

As Liam slowly guides himself into me, our gazes lock, and we lose ourselves in each other’s eyes. He rocks forward slowly, gently sliding into me an inch at a time until he’s fully seated. I wrap my legs around his waist.

Holding me securely, Liam moves us to the bed, lying me down, and then coming down over me. He rocks into me, slowly at first, then more forcefully. I dig my heels into his ass, urging him on. The feeling of him inside me is exquisite. His mouth locks onto mine as we move together, breathe together.

His thumb slips between my legs, and he strokes my clit in steady, relentless circles. He knows my body so well, and he's such a generous lover. He always makes sure I come before he does.

Before long, pleasure builds deep in my core until it sweeps through me, lighting up my nerve endings. I cry out, a high-pitched breathy sound that Liam drinks in. He follows me immediately, his own orgasm making his back bow as he surges into me with a rough, deep cry of his own.

He pulls me close, wrapping me in his strong arms, and we rest for a moment, just enjoying the closeness. When he eventually pulls out, we finish undressing, then head to the bathroom to dispose of the condom and clean up.

Once we're back in bed, naked beneath the covers, we lie quietly in each other's arms, enjoying the closeness and warmth of our bodies.

Liam presses a kiss to my temple. "Sweet dreams, Jasmine," he whispers.

He's well aware of the bad dreams that sometimes haunt my sleep. It's been better lately now that Tony and his men are in jail awaiting trial. The judge decided they were all flight risks given the number and the severity of the charges and

denied them bail. Based on the extensive evidence that's been collected since my escape and subsequent rescue, Troy is convinced that they'll get life in prison. Tony destroyed so many lives—all those poor girls who never got their chance at freedom.

As I roll to my side, Liam spoons me from behind. His strong arm wraps around my waist, a symbol of his strength and protection.

Just as I'm dozing off, the last thing I hear is his whisper, "I love you best."

Epilogue

Three months later

Jasmine

“It was really nice of your parents to invite us for dinner tonight,” I say as we’re driving to Liam’s parents’ house. It’s late March, almost my birthday. I’m going to be twenty-two tomorrow. I sit back in my seat with a contented smile on my face. I never dreamed this time last year that my life could turn out like this. I have everything I’ve ever wanted—the man of my dreams, a family who loves me, amazing friends, and a job working with Liam while I continue my martial arts training. I couldn’t ask for anything more.

Liam reaches over the console and squeezes my hand.

“My parents adore you.”

It still blows my mind how accepting the McIntyres are of me. They treat me with respect and kindness—and love.

The security guard waves us through the gate, and we continue down the lane to Bridget and Calum’s house. We park in the driveway behind Calum’s big pick-up truck.

It’s already dark at this time of the evening. There’s a light on in the front room of the house, but other than that, the

house looks pretty quiet.

Liam opens the front door for me, and we step inside. “Mom, we’re here,” Liam calls as we hang our coats in the foyer closet.

“In the kitchen, honey!” his mother says. “Perfect timing. Dinner’s almost ready.”

We walk hand-in-hand down the center hallway to the kitchen and great room at the back of the house. All of the lights are off, and I wonder why Bridget’s cooking in the dark.

Suddenly, the lights come on. “Surprise!”

I stand frozen, shocked by the sight of so many people. Everyone’s here—Liam’s entire family and all our friends. On the kitchen island is a three-tiered birthday cake decorated with pink roses made out of icing. The dining table is filled with all sorts of goodies, hot foods, finger foods, and tiny bite-sized sweets.

Everyone’s staring at me in anticipation.

When I burst into tears, Liam pulls me into his arms and rubs my back. “It’s okay, sweetheart.”

“I’ve never had a birthday party before,” I say, my face pressed against his shoulder. When I finally have myself under

control, I turn to face everyone. “Thank you all for this. It really means a lot to me.”

When Bridget comes up to hug me, I wrap my arms around her small frame. “Thank you,” I whisper.

She pulls back to look me in the eye and brush the tears from my cheek. “You are very welcome, darling girl.”

Liam’s nephew Aiden steps forward. “Can we eat now, Grandma? I’m starving.”

Laughter breaks the tension, and everyone relaxes then and starts mingling. Liam’s entire family comes up to wish me a happy birthday, starting with his parents. Then every one of his six siblings and their significant others come give me a hug.

First Shane and Beth come to wish me a happy birthday. Shane’s holding their son, Luke, who leans forward to hug me. Beth’s holding Ava, who’s surprisingly sound asleep through all the ruckus.

Liam’s sister Sophie comes up to hug me, her husband Dominic towering behind her, his hands on her hips. She gives me a big, awkward hug as her baby bump is huge! Her baby is due soon.

Jamie and his fiancé, Molly, are next in line. “I’m reading another one of your books,” I tell Jamie. “I can’t believe I know a famous author.”

Jamie laughs. “Famous? I wouldn’t go that far.”

Molly grins as she steps forward to hug me. “Don’t listen to him, Jasmine. He’s very humble.” Then she pulls back and slips her arm around his waist. “Aren’t you, babe?”

Jake, Annie, and their three kids come to wish me a happy birthday.

“Which one are you holding?” I ask Jake, as he props a baby girl on his hip.

“This is Everly,” he says. And then he looks to Aiden. “Right?”

Aiden gives his dad a thumbs-up. “You got it, Daddy.” Aiden gives me the biggest hug of all, squeezing me tightly in this little arms. “Happy birthday, Jasmine!”

Liam introduces me to his sister Hannah, and her boyfriend Killian, whom I’ve never met before. They came here all the way from Colorado just for my birthday.

“I’ve been dying to meet you,” Hannah says as she squeezes my hands. “I couldn’t wait to meet the woman who

stole my baby brother's heart.”

Lia is the last sibling to wish me a happy birthday. She doesn't even have to say a word. She just wraps her arms around me and squeezes tight. “I'm so proud of you,” she whispers, her voice catching. “My warrior princess.”

And then I get to hug Jonah, who in spite of being a huge celebrity, remains the nicest, most easy-going guy you could ever want to meet.

And then the friends come wish me a happy birthday... Jason and Layla, Erin and Mack, Sam and Cooper, Miguel, Mateo, and lastly, Philip.

“Is that *her*?” I ask Philip when he hugs me. I nod toward the pretty young brunette standing across the room with Mack and Erin. Liam's told me all about Philip crushing on Mack's teenaged daughter, who's still in high school.

“Yes, that's Haley,” Philip says with a chuckle.

“She's gorgeous.”

“She's amazing,” he says. “And, she's only seventeen.”

I wince in sympathy. “What are you going to do?”

“The only thing I can do—I'm going to wait. I'll wait until she graduates high school, and I'll wait until Mack gives me

permission to date her. Until then, I'm hands-off. I do get to spend time with her, but only when there's a chaperone present. We've double-dated a few times with Mack and Erin, but trust me, that's *awkward*."

I wonder how Haley feels about Philip, but if the expression on her face as she sneaks peeks at him is any indication, I'd say his feelings for her are definitely reciprocated. "You're a good guy, Philip."

After all the hugging is over, we eat. The dining room table is filled with goodies of all kinds—hot food, finger foods, snacks, and sweets. But the best part of all is the beautiful birthday cake sitting on the kitchen island. I've never seen such an elegant cake.

"Thank you, everyone," I say. "For all the food and the cake and the kind wishes." My eyes tear up again. "I can honestly say, this is the best birthday party I've ever had."

Liam leans in and kisses my cheek. "Happy birthday, sweetheart."

* * *

Thank you for reading *Damaged Goods*. I hope you enjoyed Liam and Jasmine's story. Stay tuned for more books in the *McIntyre Security Protectors* series. If you like these

characters, you might want to check out my *McIntyre Security Bodyguard Series*, featuring Shane, Beth, and the rest of these characters.

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