



DARE

DARE TO TRY 2

ME

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

BROOKE BLAINE

AND

ELLA FRANK

DARE ME

DARE TO TRY 2

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Thank You

Also by Brooke Blaine

Also by Ella Frank

About Brooke Blaine

About Ella Frank

SYNOPSIS

The moment Bash “Miss Razzle Dazzle” Vogel sashayed into Lieutenant Kieran Bailey’s life, both their worlds were turned upside down.

What started as an easy friendship quickly morphed into sizzling chemistry that neither one could deny.

But what Kieran knows better than anyone is that when a fire burns this hot and heavy, someone’s bound to get burned.

Do they dare to risk being together? Or will the flame of this hot match consume them both?

Dare Me is book two of the Dare to Try trilogy, which must be read in order.

KIERAN

I CHECKED MY phone yet again and sighed before shoving it back in my pocket. Bash said he had meetings this morning, but that had been hours ago. I figured by the time I was finished with my reports I would've at least gotten a text back, but nope. Radio silence all day, and after his strange behavior this morning, I didn't have a good feeling about it.

Maybe he was just shaken up from seeing me injured and not being able to get a hold of me? My line of work wasn't easy to adjust to, and it might be par for the course for me, but I could see how I'd be freaked out if I were in his shoes.

Shit, or had he gotten the wrong idea about Summer being there? God, she'd been territorial as fuck, but I just brushed it off, knowing I wouldn't be getting in touch like she expected.

Or maybe he'd gotten caught up in work the same way I had and hadn't been able to message me back yet. That seemed the most plausible, but it didn't explain why I had a gnawing feeling in my gut.

The doors to the Regent slid open in front of me, and I walked inside and headed toward the front desk. With Bash in the penthouse, I needed special access to head up there, which meant giving him a heads-up that he had a visitor.

“Hi, Kieran Bailey to see Sebastian Vogel, please.”

The woman behind the desk smiled at me. “Of course. One moment.”

As she looked up his information, I drummed my fingers on the counter and waited, impatient to see Bash after such a crazy night. With the way my shoulder was beginning to ache something fierce, I probably should've stopped by the pharmacy to pick up my prescription first, but I could handle it. This was more important.

"I'm sorry, sir, you said Sebastian Vogel?"

"Yes. He's staying in the penthouse."

She typed something in and frowned at the screen. "Sebastian Vogel is no longer a guest at the Regent. He checked out this morning."

I blinked, not comprehending. "That's impossible. Can you check again? Maybe it's under Bash Vogel."

She shook her head and gave me a tight smile. "I'm sorry, sir. We don't have a guest here by that name. Are you sure you have the right hotel?"

What? Is she serious? "Yes, I have the right hotel. I just saw him this morning. He didn't say anything about leaving ___"

I couldn't even finish my sentence as I thought back to what he'd said at the firehouse before he left. Nothing about leaving Chicago, for fuck's sake. This couldn't be right.

As I pulled out my cell again, I mumbled, "Sorry, thank you," to the desk clerk and hit call on Bash's number. The damn thing went straight to voicemail, and I cleared my throat before speaking.

"Hey, it's Kieran. I'm at the Regent, and they're telling me you've checked out. I'm not really sure what's goin' on, so give me a call when you get this."

I ended the call and cursed. What the fuck? Was he really gone, or were they just saying he was? Did he just not want to see me? He wasn't the kind of person who would just ghost, was he? Shit.

So...he'd left. He wasn't answering my texts or my calls. Surely there had to be some other explanation, because none

of this made any sense.

Great. Just great. After the shit-tastic night I'd had, being exhausted, in pain, and now, what? Ghosted? It all added up to a seriously fucked-up twenty-four hours, and this was the last thing I needed.

I didn't bother waiting for the doors to slide open, punching through the side door instead. I was beyond tired at this stage and could barely think straight—huh, now there was a fucking joke—as I pulled up my Uber app and called for one, not feeling up to dealing with public transport today.

How could Bash have done this? Just up and left? With no call, no text? Hell, it'd be different if all we'd done was hang out once or twice, but I thought we were more than—more than what? Friends?

Well, yeah, last time I checked, friends didn't come all over each other, but hey, maybe they did in Bash's circles.

No, that wasn't fair. Bash wasn't like that. But then again, what did I know? Up until a few minutes ago, I never would've thought he was the kind to just up and fucking leave either, but here I was riding back to my loft alone after being left standing with my dick in my hand like some lovesick loser, questioning the woman at the front desk.

When the Uber dropped me at the loft, I made a quick trip to the drugstore across the street for some beer, but quickly nixed the idea in favor of the pain meds instead. I figured they'd knock me out for a good few hours, or at least long enough to forget how annoyed I was.

With my pills in hand, I headed upstairs, more than ready for this never-ending shitstorm of a day to be over with. I was careful not to make a sound as I entered the loft, knowing Olsen would be sleeping off last night too. I made a beeline straight for my room.

Once inside, I tossed the pills on my nightstand and kicked out of my boots. I then grabbed my phone from my back pocket and checked, like some loser, to see if I had any missed calls or messages.

Nothing.

There was absolutely nothing. Did he really think so little of me that I didn't even deserve a *Hey, I'm heading home early* text? Was that really so much to ask? I thought we'd had a good time together. In fact, I knew we had. So why the hell had he pulled this disappearing act? It didn't make any sense.

I carefully unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans and shoved them off, before gingerly removing my sling and then my shirt. I popped a couple of pills and crawled into bed, and as I stared at the ceiling, I thought about the last night I'd spent with him.

The way he felt in my arms, the way he sounded when he came undone for me, and the anger and annoyance from his little vanishing act turned to something much more personal—something deeper.

I was upset that he'd left. I'd been looking forward to seeing him after such a horrendous night, and to show up and find him gone was just one more blow to an already horrible day.

I closed my eyes and willed the pain meds to kick in, wanting something to turn my brain off so I wouldn't be tempted to keep calling and texting a man who had made it glaringly obvious he wanted nothing to do with me.

Wow. If someone had told me weeks ago that I'd be lying in my bed upset because a *man* I was dating had up and left me, I would've called them insane.

Fuck.

I glanced over at the clock on my nightstand and groaned. I needed to get some damn sleep if I had any hope of kicking this exhaustion, but sleep was being elusive. My eyes shifted to where my phone sat, and beside it the business card Bash gave me the very first time he'd visited the firehouse.

Reaching for it, I stared at the company name *AnaVoge*, and below was Bash's name and title along with a phone number, email, and South Haven address.

I frowned and fingered the edge of it before tossing it back on the nightstand. I hardly thought emailing him would get me far if he wasn't answering my calls or texts, and Jesus, why was I still thinking about this?

He left. He doesn't want to see you anymore. Deal with it, man.

But that wasn't good enough for me. Not when I felt like my entire world had been turned upside down. Bash knew how different this...this *thing* between us had been for me. How much trust it had taken for me to cross a line I'd never dreamed of before with him. And for him to just peace out on me like it didn't mean any more to him than just a fucking game? It was embarrassing. *I* was embarrassed.

Heat crept up my neck to my cheeks as I thought about him sitting around with his friends and laughing about the straight firefighter he'd managed to turn on his trip to Chicago. My stomach twisted, the idea of being a joke to him more horrifying than being a one-night stand, and again I couldn't help the niggling voice in the back of my head that said Bash wasn't like that.

But how would I know?

I let out a sigh and shut my eyes, and as a relaxed sensation spread throughout my body, I didn't fight it. I welcomed the lethargy, welcomed the peace that would come as my mind began to shut down. Then I banished all thoughts of men with soft lips, alabaster skin, and jet-black hair as I slipped into oblivion and happily stayed there for the next twelve hours.

BASH

I FIRED OFF another email and skimmed through the rest that had come in overnight to see which were most urgent and in need of my attention. Everyone would be arriving at the office soon, and I wanted to get a head start before the morning meeting.

I'd left Chicago before nailing down the manager position, and so many of the emails were resumés from headhunters I'd worked with in the past. Zoom interviews would do until I narrowed down the field, and then, what the hell, I could always fly them down here for the final decision. Chicago had left a bad taste in my mouth, which was unfortunate, since I'd just locked myself into a contract there, but nothing I could do about it now. I'd made my bed and now I had to lie in it.

Without Kieran.

Ugh, don't think about him. Don't think about any of it. I refocused on the resumés, or tried to, until out of the corner of my eye I saw Jackson walk in and do a double take when he saw me through the glass walls of my office. I hadn't let him or anyone know I was back. No doubt he'd bombard me in about two seconds with way too many questions, and I wasn't up for it.

I didn't want to talk. Didn't want to think. Just wanted to immerse myself in work so I'd have something to stay focused on other than the mix of stupidity, embarrassment, and heartache all vying for the top spot inside.

Jackson knocked on the door but didn't wait for me before entering my office. I didn't bother looking up, because I could feel his eyes boring into me as it was.

"You're back earlier than expected."

"Mhmm."

"You wanna talk about it?"

I scrolled down the current resumé on my screen and paused. "Hofstra University. That's in New Jersey?"

"New York. Long Island, I believe."

"Hmm."

"I take it your changing the subject means no, you don't wanna talk about it."

"Perceptive."

"This about the firefighter? Did something happen?" When I kept my mouth sealed shut, Jackson sighed. "Okay, well, when did you get in?"

"Yesterday." Before he could ask me one more thing, I added, "Morning meeting at nine."

"Bash." Jackson waited until I finally looked up at him, and there it was, that twinge of sympathy I didn't want to see.

"Everything is peachy keen, darling, so if we can please focus on work today instead of inconsequential matters, that would be marvelous." I took a sip of my coffee, still steaming hot in my traveler's mug, and sat back in my leather chair, waiting for his agreement.

Luckily, he didn't seem to be in a fighting mood today. "Is there anything you need before the meeting?"

I smiled. "I think I'm all caught up, but thank you, Jackson. You did a fabulous job while I was away—maybe too good."

"Nah, I'm glad you're back. It's not the same here without you."

“Aww. Flattery will get you everywhere.” When Jackson opened his mouth to say something—something I knew would be related to a certain firefighter—I held up my hand. “*Almost* everywhere.”

“Well, I guess I don’t need to tell you I’m here when you want to talk.”

“No, and I won’t need to.”

“Bash, you can’t always keep everything in—”

“I changed my mind. I’ll need the latest stats on the Fowler campaign before the meeting.”

Jackson’s head fell back and he stifled a groan of frustration. But when he looked back at me, he nodded. “On it.”

The entire office space of AnaVoge, apart from the lobby, was one big open area except for a few offices that lined one side of the room. But even the offices were four walls of glass with shutters pulled back unless absolutely necessary. I wanted things to be modern, minimalist, and transparent in every way.

Which meant I could see Jackson enter his office and immediately take out his phone to text what I knew was a group message to the others about me. Oh well, at least he’d dropped the subject for the time being, which was all I could ask for. It was enough to have the image of Summer kissing Kieran seared into my brain for all eternity, not to mention the fact that it kept popping up constantly no matter how much I tried to forget it.

And God had I tried. I’d kept my phone off, watched horrible trash TV on the plane, and taken a sleeping pill to keep my ass asleep once I got home. Avoidance wasn’t the most mature way to go about things, but self-preservation was more important.

Unfortunately, I knew I couldn’t keep my phone off forever.

I opened my desk drawer where I’d shoved my cell earlier and took it out, my finger hovering over the on button. There was no winning situation here, because if Kieran had called, it

would be painful, but if he hadn't called... Yeah, the latter would probably be worse.

It took a few seconds for the phone to power back up, and when it did, message after message came through, and yep—some of them were from Kieran.

Just check them and get it over with or you'll sit here wondering all day.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I brought up the voicemail he'd left, and as soon as I heard his voice, my heart constricted.

"Hey, it's Kieran. I'm at the Regent, and they're telling me you've checked out. I'm not really sure what's goin' on, so give me a call when you get this."

So he'd shown up after all. Was that before or after he'd gone to Summer's?

A wave of guilt crashed over me as I checked his texts. They'd been sent before the voicemail, and asked if I was still in meetings, if it was cool if he came by the hotel, and if everything was okay.

Part of me felt like such an asshole. I wasn't the person who dipped out on someone, and definitely not someone I cared about. But that was the problem: I cared about Kieran, and that was why what I saw at the firehouse had hurt so badly. Everything became clear in that moment, and I knew the way things would go down. He'd come over, we'd have it out, things would end badly, and on and on.

So really, I would've only been prolonging the inevitable by staying. At least me leaving gave things a clean break, and in a few days he'd forget I even existed.

I sniffed and ignored the sting behind my eyes. If there was anything I prided myself on, it was being *unforgettable*, so the thought I'd be so easily erased from Kieran's life didn't sit well with me. Not at all. But it was necessary.

Several messages came through all at once, from Lucas, from Shaw, from Trent, and I looked over to where Jackson sat behind his desk and shook my head. He just shrugged, a grin

on his face that told me he didn't care one bit that he'd set off the alarm to cause the others to hound me. I ran a finger across my neck, and he responded by blowing me a kiss.

Who needed enemies with friends like mine?

KIERAN

“YOU’RE AWFULLY QUIET over there, KB. What’d you do, pop another pain pill with your OJ this morning? Am I gonna have to carry you into the station?”

I glanced at Olsen out of the corner of my eye to see him looking over at me. We’d just come to a stop at a red light and were about three blocks out from the station. I’d been hoping we’d have a straight shot from the loft to the firehouse so I wouldn’t be subjected to any small talk, but no such luck. It seemed the gods were against me, because every set of lights we’d come to had been bright fucking red, and I felt the weight of Olsen’s stare getting heavier with each stop.

“Nah, just feelin’ the shoulder a little more today, that’s all.”

“Well, no shit. I swear I heard that thing pop even with the building falling down around us. I just figured the pain pills would’ve made you a little more agreeable. You’ve been stomping around the loft like a bear with a thorn in its side.”

I grimaced at the reminder of the searing pain that had accompanied my fall. I knew I’d been less than pleasant to be around since I woke up this morning. But that had nothing to do with the wicked bruise beginning to color my shoulder and back, and everything to do with a certain man ghosting me. Not even the pills managed to dull the sting of embarrassment and hurt that Bash’s little disappearing act had left behind. I wasn’t sure that anything could.

“Hey, on the plus side,” Olsen said, “at least you get to sit out the next few weeks in the air conditioning. Hottest couple days of the year coming up. If I didn’t know you as well as I do, I might start to think you did this on purpose.”

“Fuck that.” I shook my head. “There’s nothing worse than sitting around with your thumb up your ass when the rest of your crew’s out on the scene, and you know it.”

“Exactly. That’s why I know you’ve gotta be hurtin’. So if you need anything, make sure you ask, okay?”

Unless Olsen could get a certain someone to call me or, I don’t know, text me back and tell me why the hell he’d decided to up and fucking leave without a trace, there was little he could do.

When we pulled up at the firehouse, I told Olsen I needed to go see the chief and get my paperwork to fill out for leave. But really, I just didn’t want to deal with all the questions the guys would throw my way this morning.

I wasn’t in the mood for company. So it was probably for the best that I was on desk duty for the next however many days. That way I could lock myself in my office and stew in private.

I still couldn’t believe how things had gone down with Bash, and not just in the literal sense. I’d been happy with life, happy with *my* life, until Sebastian Vogel strutted his way into it. Now here I was left questioning every-fucking-thing.

Why did he leave?

Did I do something wrong?

Do I like guys now?

I was so up in my head that it was amazing I could actually put one foot in front of the other, and the more I thought about it, the more it festered. There was nothing worse than unanswered questions, and since the only person who could give me any kind of closure had up and left the damn city, it looked like I was shit out of luck.

“KB, it’s good to see you. How’s the arm doing?” Stevie, the paramedic who’d taken me to University, stopped me in the hall.

“It’s all good. I got a bit of a bruise coming up—”

“A bit?”

I chuckled. “Okay, a really nasty one coming up. But other than that, I think I got off pretty lucky.”

“I don’t know that I’d call it lucky. But I’m glad it wasn’t anything worse.”

“You and me both.”

She rubbed my good arm and gave a pitying smile. “So you’re stuck on desk duty for a while, huh?”

No one liked sitting on their ass around here. “Yeah, but I’ve got a lot of paperwork to catch up on—”

“So if we catch you sleeping on the job, it’s more than likely due to boredom than pills?”

I chuckled. “Maybe a combo of both. Is the chief in his office?”

“Sure is. I’ll let you go.”

I nodded, then gestured to my arm. “Thanks again, Stevie.”

“Anytime. I got to go stock the rig. See you around, lieutenant.”

Her words immediately brought to mind an image of Bash standing outside of Gravitass after he kissed me on the cheek. He’d said the exact same thing to me. In fact, I’d started to really enjoy the way he called me lieutenant like it was some kind of—

No. Stop it. I was doing it again. Fucking fixating on him. Jesus.

I rapped on the chief’s door a little harder than necessary, and when he gestured for me to come in, I shoved all thoughts of tall men with glossy lips and kohl-lined eyes out of my damn head. Wow, never thought *that* would be an issue.

“KB, come in.” Chief Parker gestured to a seat. “Sit down. Tell me what they said at the hospital.”

The chief had been busy dealing with the aftermath of the warehouse fire down at main headquarters when I returned from the hospital. So I quickly brought him up to speed and relayed what I’d been told about the dislocation and what they advised in way of recovery.

“Right, that’s about what I figured.” He gestured for his right-hand woman, Bridget, to come in and join us. “We’ll get your paperwork together for your couple days off, then it’s desk duty for you. We’ll have Olsen run the truck while you’re out, and once you get cleared, we’ll get you back out there.”

I nodded as Bridget opened the door and stepped inside. “Chief?”

“Bridget, would you mind getting Kieran the forms he needs to fill out for his admin leave?”

“Of course. I’ll email them over right away.”

I smiled up at her. “Thanks.”

“No problem. How’s the shoulder?”

Throbbing like a son of a bitch. “It’s fine.”

She eyed me closely, and for some reason I felt as though she could see right through me.

She turned back to the chief. “Anything else?”

“Nope. That’ll be all.”

She smiled at the both of us and then left, closing the door behind her. When I turned back, the chief was watching me closely.

“You all good other than the arm?”

I frowned. What the hell? Had Olsen said something to him about me? No way—we hadn’t been to the station since our shift, so when would he have had time to come and tell the chief anything? Plus, Olsen would’ve told me to pull my head in before he’d report anything—at least, I thought he would.

“Yeah, I’m good. Why do you ask?”

“We lost a lot of people at this last one. Being sidelined can sometimes mess with our heads. Make us wish we’d been able to stay in the fight, save more lives. It would be understandable if that had you a little shaken.”

Yeah, that night had been shitty all around. I’d hated being pulled out of the field, and I’d definitely had my share of what-ifs immediately after. I’d been doing this job long enough now, however, to know that if I went down that road, I’d end up in a really negative headspace. One that could swallow me whole.

So while I acknowledged the potential of what could’ve been, what I might’ve been able to do had that staircase not collapsed beneath me, I couldn’t allow myself to take on any guilt about it.

I’d done my job. I’d saved several lives that night, and while I wished it had been more, ultimately the blame for the lives lost in that fire fell on the city and management that had left it unchecked for so long.

“It was rough, that’s for sure. I hate losing anyone, but to know there were multiple fatalities was difficult. I’m okay, though. Promise.”

“Well, if you need to talk, just know the option is available.”

“Got it.”

“Very good. Dismissed.”

I gave a clipped nod and headed out of his office with every intention of making a beeline to my own, but Brumm bellowed out of the kitchen, “Yo, KB! Better get your ass in here quick. Olsen’s handing out orders like someone put him in charge or something.”

I sighed and decided the quicker I made an appearance with the guys, the quicker I could take my shitty mood with me home. So I plastered on a smile and made my way into the kitchen area, where everyone was filling up on caffeine and food for the day ahead.

I walked over to Olsen and smirked. “Do I need to remind you who’s in charge?”

Olsen barked out a laugh. “With that bum arm? I’d like to see you try.”

“Pretty sure I could take you with *two* bum arms. But want to test the theory?”

“Nah, I’m good. Plus, if you break my arm, who’s gonna help you out around the loft?”

Then Brumm said around a mouthful of toast, “Pretty sure he has a long list of badge bunnies dying to come play nurse for him. That Summer chick, for one.”

My stomach twisted at the mention of her name. This was the exact thing I’d wanted to avoid talking about this morning, which made it the perfect time to make my exit, before the dark cloud I’d managed to shove aside for five minutes came rumbling back in.

“Oh, that’s right.” Olsen nodded. “She did stop by that morning to offer up her services, didn’t she?”

Sanderson grunted. “Her and KB’s other biggest fan.”

My what? I turned in Sanderson’s direction to see an ugly curl turn up his top lip.

He looked me dead in the eye. “I mean, if Summer’s not up for the job, you could always invite our local firehouse faggot over to help. He seems more than willing to do your bidding.”

Like a switch had been flicked, a blinding-hot rage fueled by Sanderson’s sick diatribe bubbled up inside me until my vision was nothing but a red haze of fury, and before I knew what I was doing, I snapped.

I threw out my right hand, sending his full plate of food flying through the air and to the floor, and before the motherfucker could blink, I was on him.

“What did you just fuckin’ say?”

“KB!” someone called from behind, but I wasn’t paying attention to anyone but the piece of shit in front of me.

My heart was thundering, the blood ringing in my ears, and I knew I was way out of line putting my hands on another employee, but I was done putting up with this homophobic asshole’s mouth.

I had a good couple inches on Sanderson and a whole lot of pounds muscle wise. He tried to push back, but I moved in until I was only inches from his face, my gaze boring into his.

“Go on,” I said through teeth clenched so hard I thought I’d crack a molar. “Say that again. I fucking dare you.”

“KB, he’s not worth your job!”

Olsen. That was definitely Olsen, but I wasn’t listening. All of the emotions from the past couple of weeks—the guilt from that first night Sanderson ran his mouth, my own confusion over what I was feeling about Bash, plus thoughts of all of the people in my life that I loved and whom *they* loved—rushed to the surface, and I yanked Sanderson off the counter and then slammed him back into it again.

A whoosh of air left him, and a feeling of satisfaction managed to slip past the steel pipe that felt lodged in my chest. I might not be able to use my fist on his ugly fucking face, but I’d clearly made a point.

He winced and angled his chin up as though that were somehow going to make me back the hell off, but all it made me want to do is ditch the sling and punch him.

“You know, you’re pretty protective over someone who wants to suck your dick. Maybe you should just let him and get rid of this tension you’re carrying around.”

I was done.

I ripped my arm from the sling, and the burn that seared through my shoulder blade made my anger all the more potent. I balled my fist and was about to smash it in his face.

“Lieutenant! Sanderson!”

The shout that boomed around the kitchen was like the voice of God, and the only thing that was able to break through the madness that had taken hold of me. Brumm grabbed my right hand and Olsen hauled Sanderson away until we were on opposite sides of the kitchen.

My chest was heaving, and the only thing on my mind now was how to hurt the man who'd dared talk shit about everyone I cared about. Sanderson was now permanently on my motherfucking shitlist.

"Olsen," Chief barked out. "Get Sanderson out of here." He narrowed his eyes on the asshole. "I'll deal with you later."

Then the chief turned to me. "Lieutenant." He didn't say anything else, just turned on his heel and marched out, and his message was clear: follow.

I tugged my arm free of Brumm, who was uncharacteristically quiet, then shrugged my arm back into the sling, wincing at the bite of pain reminding me that I'd probably just set my healing progress back a couple days.

Oh well, it was fucking worth it.

I headed out of the kitchen to where Chief Parker was waiting for me. His hands were on his hips, his head down as he stared at the floor. I tried to feel sorry for what I'd just done.

"What the hell was that?" Chief's voice was low, a tone that was just as effective as the shout he'd issued only seconds ago.

"Sanderson was running his mouth, so—"

"You thought you'd put your fist in it?"

I clamped my mouth shut, thinking it might just be best, but then I remembered what that fucker had said.

"He's a homophobic prick, sir. Not once, but twice now, he's used disgusting, disparaging language around me, and I'm sorry, but I can't just sit back and let that shit go. What if someone started work here that was gay? That kind of harassment shouldn't be tolerated."

Chief Parker looked over my shoulder to the kitchen and then back to me. “Agreed. But if you have a problem, you come to me about it. You don’t start *Fight Club* in the kitchen in front of your crew and a new candidate.”

“I know.” I shook my head. “It’s just—”

“Listen, you’ve had a rough couple days.” Chief rubbed at his jaw. “You’ve got time accumulated. Why don’t you take a couple weeks?”

My mouth fell open. “Are you suspending me?”

“No. I’m advising you to take some time off.”

I gritted my teeth and glared over my shoulder. “And Sanderson?”

“Let me deal with Sanderson.” I turned back to see the chief eye me with a no-nonsense look. “This isn’t a request, lieutenant. Two weeks. Now get the hell out of here and ice that arm.”

Fine by me. I wasn’t exactly fit for company these days anyway. Two weeks at home alone sounded like the perfect solution.

BASH

WITH A HEAVY sigh, I slid deeper into my oversized tub until my chin hit the water, my eyes closed behind a couple of slices of cucumber. Puffy bags did nothing but make me look the miserable way I felt inside, and looking bad made me feel worse, a vicious cycle that was doing nothing to take my mind off a certain someone I was trying to stop thinking about. So by God, I was going to stay in this tub relaxing until I looked twenty-five again.

The sound of ocean waves played lightly in the background, something I'd had to settle on, since all the sappy love songs playing on the relaxation station had made me want to smash the damn speaker. And probably cry into a bottle of wine.

It was so unlike me to sulk this hard over someone, especially someone I'd just met, but here we were. I couldn't seem to rationalize why Kieran had affected me to the point of leaving town, and it was that thought that had kept me up all night. What was so different about him? With all of the millions of eligible men in the world, why had I gravitated toward one I couldn't have?

Because he was beautiful. A protector. Sexier than he had any right to be. And a genuinely good human being when he wasn't forcing me on top of tall buildings made of glass.

I snorted. It struck me as funny that my offices and my own house were made up of the very glass walls that had been so terrifying at such a ridiculous height.

Just thinking about that now made me remember the way he laughed when I refused to step out onto the ledge—because, hello, I wasn't a crazy person. I also didn't go running headfirst into warehouse fires—

Ugh.

I tilted my head back, resting it against the lip of the tub, and cursed. Things had changed on a dime, hadn't they? Going from being worried and stressed from knowing he was injured to heartbroken in about two seconds flat.

But I was still worried and stressed. Kieran hadn't escaped unharmed, and when would be the next time that happened? Would it be worse? The thought made me sick to my stomach, something else I was trying to avoid.

Yep, that was me, queen of avoidance right now, which included skipping out on going out with the guys last night.

Maybe I was playing this wrong. Maybe I should call Kieran back. Make it casual and light and not at all the way I felt, but it would cut down on the twinge of guilt I felt at leaving him high and dry.

No, he wasn't thinking about me the same way I was trying and failing not to think of him. He was probably relieved to get back to his life.

The doorbell rang, the loud chimes cutting through the quiet and making me jump.

Go away, I thought, settling back into the tub, but then it rang again...and again...and again.

“Oh, for the love of Lucille,” I muttered, lifting the cucumber slices from my eyes and tossing them away before getting to my feet. I wrapped myself in a fluffy, oversized amethyst-colored robe and made my way to the grand staircase, taking my sweet time as the doorbell continued to chime.

I should've known the person on the other side of the door would be a six-five, tattooed monster of a man with a peeved look on his face. Handsome, but peeved.

“Shaw, darling, you have a key.”

“I do, but that wouldn’t make you get out of bed.” He stepped inside and moved past me, looking around as if inspecting the place.

“Please do come in. And I was in the bath, not the bed.”

“Same thing,” he said, turning back around and crossing his massive arms over his chest. To anyone else, he might’ve looked intimidating, with biceps bigger than my head, a chest that strained the confines of his shirt, and tattoos covering almost every inch of skin you could see. But though he had his wild tendencies, Shaw was one of the best people I’d ever met, and more responsible than most, considering he owned a hugely popular tattoo shop downtown. “We missed you last night. I thought you’d want to celebrate being back.”

I waved a hand as I flitted by him toward the kitchen. “Oh, you know. Jet lag and all.”

Shaw scoffed. “Otherwise known as moping.”

“I don’t mope.”

“Like hell you don’t. And what the hell is this Fraggie Rock shit you’re wearing?”

“Something that came in my moping kit, I suppose.” I shot him a glare before opening my fridge and taking out a filtered water jug my housekeeper had thrown a variety of fruit into yesterday. “Thirsty? I’m sure you boys had a wild night of gossiping about me while I was gone.”

Shaw rolled his eyes, but took the glass I filled. “Actually, we were talking about how Trent’s gonna do a surprise set at Argos next weekend. Test out a couple of new songs for the home crowd.” He arched a brow. “Kev’s looking for an emcee...”

“Is that why you’re here? Your brother sent you to ask me?”

He shrugged. “You up for it? I know it’d mean a lot to Trent, too.”

Hmm. Maybe I'd be out of my funk by then. It *was* a good excuse to wear one of the new outfits I'd picked up in Chicago, and I knew that at least here it would be appreciated. Not to mention it wasn't exactly a small thing that Trent Knox, Shaw's boyfriend and one of the biggest rock stars in the world, wanted me to introduce him at our li'l island spot. Who was I to turn down such a proposition?

"I could never say no to Trent, darling, you know that. I'll be there."

"Good." Shaw sniffed the glass of water and took a small sip. "Jesus, Bash. This is some rich-people shit right here."

"It is not."

"It is. Filtered water isn't enough—you've got to infuse it with pineapple-mango-whatever this is."

"If you'd rather have a glass of salty ocean water from the tap instead, that can be arranged."

"Not opposed to salty, but that's pushin' it." Shaw chuckled and took another swallow of the fruity stuff. "So."

"So...what?"

"You tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Whatever it is you aren't telling Jackson or the rest of us."

I rolled my eyes and tightened the belt on my robe. "Aren't you the all-seeing one? You probably know more than I do in any given situation."

"I'm not psychic, for fuck's sake, but probably," he said, moving to the edge of the kitchen island and perching on the edge of a stool. "I'd rather hear it directly from you, though."

"It's really not a big deal. I'm practically over it."

"Over what?"

"You know what."

"Bash."

“Shaw.”

He narrowed his eyes and waited, and when I didn't say anything, he brought up the last thing I ever wanted to talk about. “This isn't the first time you've tried to hide something. And while this time it isn't your life at fucking risk, it's still dangerous to keep so much inside. So either you can start talking, or I can sit here all day and wait you out.”

“You have to work today.”

“Perks of being the owner. I can do what I want.”

Ugh. Why did the man have to be so damn intuitive? He always saw through the bullshit, which was usually a good thing—until it was something I didn't want to talk about.

Still and silent and staring at me as though he had all the time in the world, Shaw Jennings was a veritable pain in the ass, one who really would sit here all day if I didn't get to talking.

“Such threats,” I murmured as I took the seat beside him, fluffing my robe out around me. “How about this? I wallow in sadness for the rest of the day and don't have to say a word.”

“No—”

“I wasn't finished. I'll let you drag me to brunch tomorrow, and I'll tell you all the whole sordid story then. Fair enough?”

“We have to drag you to brunch now? Since when?”

“Since tomorrow, when I'll need a ride so I can get properly intoxicated enough to tell you how utterly dense your best friend is.”

A line formed between Shaw's brows as he thought over the offer, and then he nodded. “I guess I can give you another twenty-four hours to sulk. But that's it, Bash. I mean it.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, giving him a mock-salute before breaking into a grin. “I'll be back to my phenomenal self in no time.”

“Mhmm.” Shaw didn't sound quite so convinced, but I wasn't one to be kept down for long, so why would this be any

different?

Beat yourself up for a few more hours and then delete Kieran from your phone. Your life. Your memory. It's better this way. Really.

When my eyes grew unexpectedly wet, I quickly downed some of my water and inwardly cursed.

Oh God. I was going to need more cucumber slices.

KIERAN

BY THE TIME Saturday afternoon rolled around, the dark cloud that had been following me was a permanent fixture over my head. If I was smart, I would've called and begged out of today's little family get-together. But clearly I was no genius, considering my choices over the past few days—hell, weeks.

I thanked my driver and climbed out of the less-than-clean Uber that had picked me up, and was more determined than ever to get better so I could get back to driving myself around town. Then I stood at the bottom of Bailey's drive and stared up at the house.

This was the last place I wanted to be right now. Not because I didn't like hanging out with these guys, but because I knew they were going to make a big deal over the fire and my shoulder injury, and I didn't want to be the center of attention. I was burying too many secrets under this dark cloud of mine, and if they looked too close, they just might see what bolt of lightning had set off this chain of events.

But had I taken my own advice? Nope. So here I was standing in Bailey's drive like a total dumbass—like I said, not very smart—or maybe I'd just blame it on the pain meds. Yeah, that sounded plausible, right?

Knowing I couldn't stand out here all afternoon, I made my way up the drive to the front door and knocked.

Xander pulled it open and flashed that famous smile my way. "There he is, the hero of the week."

I snorted and shook my head as Xander stepped aside and let me in. “Hardly a hero when *I* was the one taken away in an ambulance.”

“Stop it. We’re just thankful a dislocated shoulder was the worst of it. That fire was a monster. The fact that you guys ran inside of it and managed to pull people out *makes* you heroes.”

“Nah. We’re just doing our job.”

“Well, it’s one we can never thank you enough for. But today your family is going to try, so let me be the first.” Xander gave me a hug, careful not to bump my arm. Then he pulled back and gestured to it. “How is your shoulder?”

“Throbbing like a motherfucker, but they gave me some really awesome pain meds.”

He chuckled and gestured toward the kitchen. “Come on, everyone’s in here.”

Yeah, I could hear them, which was why I’d been lingering. When Bailey called yesterday to check up on me, he’d told me they were going to put together a special afternoon in my honor—another reason I hadn’t skipped—and as we made our way toward the kitchen, the delicious aromas of garlic and onion greeted me.

Meatballs. Yum. Okay, so maybe showing up here today hadn’t been such a bad idea. If there was one meal I loved above all others, it was Bailey’s meatballs and marinara sauce—a jar of Prego and some extra garlic and onions, a.k.a. perfection in my eyes.

“Ah! See.” Sean glanced our way as we walked into the kitchen. “What’d I tell you? Kieran’s got a hard head. Here he is all safe and sound, and you’ve all been worrying yourselves about nothing. Shit, I bet that sling’s just for sympathy.”

I flipped Sean off as Xander shook his head. “Excuse me, but correct me if I’m wrong. Weren’t you the first one to call when you saw that fire? So don’t even try to play Mister Indifferent.”

“Eh, I was just making sure you didn’t miss out on a breaking news story.”

“Yes, because there was a real danger of that.”

My big brother. Sure, Sean might act like an ass, but deep down we all knew he had feelings. Like deep, *deep* down.

“We knew he was okay. We were just worried. That fire was huge,” Bailey said from the opposite counter. He was busy balling up the meatballs and placing them into a glass baking dish as Henri stirred the marinara sauce.

“I gotta admit, I’m glad I wasn’t the one running into that thing.” Henri shook his head. “I’ve been in some pretty... dicey positions. But nothing I know how to do would get me out of that.”

“Yeah, we all know what your specialties are, Boudreaux.” Sean smirked. “Give him a gun and a getaway car and he’s your man.”

Henri narrowed his eyes on his ex-handler and soon-to-be quasi-brother-in-law. “I didn’t hear you complain’ when we took down rAz, Detective *Dick*.”

“True. But that’s because it got me a pay raise. Thanks for that, by the way.” As Sean saluted Henri with his beer, I made my way over to Bailey and did a quick count of the meatballs.

“You better be making enough for more than four balls each.”

Bailey’s lips twitched, and when I realized what I’d just said, I started to correct myself, but Xander was waiting to pounce.

“You sure you can handle four balls at a time? Two seems like it would be a challenge with that hurt arm of yours.”

Heat crept up my neck as his lips tugged to one side. *Fucker.*

I’d been pretty adamant the last time the two of us spoke that Bash and I were just friends. But I’d known when I showed up here today that Xander would remind me that he knew better, or at least thought he did.

Not that Bash and I were even friends anymore.

I plastered a fake smile on my face. “I can handle them just fine. But if worse comes to worst, maybe you can help me out.”

“Like hell he can,” Sean piped up, and threw an arm around Xander, who’d just stolen his beer for a sip. “Go get someone else to play nursemaid. I know how Xander gets around a wounded hero.”

Xander just about choked. “I think it has to do with *who* the hero is.”

Sean kissed the side of his head. “Damn right.”

Bailey turned on the faucet and quickly washed his hands before moving over to the saucepan where Henri was gently stirring the marinara.

“Would you like to try it, chef?” Henri brought the wooden spoon up to Bailey’s lips.

He had a quick taste then nodded. “That’s delicious.”

Henri took Bailey’s chin in his hand and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Hmm. Agreed.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. Someone get me a bucket. All this lovey-dovey shit was making my stomach twist.

“You okay?” Sean asked.

I looked over to see him and Xander frowning at me. Shit, had I said that out loud?

“Yeah, why?”

“You groaned like you ate something bad, dude. You need to use the john?”

“No, asshole.” *Think Kieran, think.* “Arm was aching, that’s all.”

Sean, Bay, and Henri all nodded, seeming to buy that. But Xander’s expression cried *bullshit*. And I had a feeling he saw right through my lie.

Jesus, could someone please get me the hell out of here? Maybe I could think up some kind of excuse and leave. I could

text Olsen and have him call me and pretend to need me for—what? A paperwork emergency?

It looked like I was stuck here.

“I’m guessing you can’t have a drink, right?” Bailey asked as he headed to the fridge.

“Yeah, probably shouldn’t mix it with the meds, but I’ll take a Coke if you’ve got it.”

He nodded and grabbed one out, then replaced everyone else’s beer. “Okay, well, we just need to put the sauce over the meatballs and get them in the oven. So if you want to head out to the deck—”

“Actually,” Xander said, looking to Sean, who nodded, “before we head out there, Sean and I have something to tell you all.”

“You’re pregnant,” Henri deadpanned as he finished pouring the sauce over the meatballs and dumped the empty pan in the sink.

“Idiot.” Sean chuckled, but was clearly too excited by whatever they had to tell us to put much heart into the insult.

“No.” Xander wrapped an arm around Sean’s waist. “We’ve set a date for our wedding.”

“Oh my God,” Bailey shouted, a bright smile spreading across his lips. He raced around the end of the counter toward Xander—his best friend, who would soon officially be both his and my brother-in-law. “That’s wonderful news. When? Soon?”

Xander nodded. “We’re thinking fall.”

“As in *this* fall?”

“Yep, a couple of months from now.” Sean looked over at me with my hand clamped tight around the Coke bottle. I was thankful for the prop, because it gave me something to concentrate on other than the fact that everyone’s love life seemed to be turning up roses while mine fell apart.

Hang on a second. Love life? I don’t fucking think so.

“So what do you think, Kieran?” Sean said, and everyone looked in my direction.

I tried for my best smile and hoped like hell it looked more convincing than it felt.

“You think you can narrow down your list to a special plus-one, and find a lovely lady to bring to your big brother’s wedding?”

My mind immediately flashed to a sparkling red Valentino gown, but I quickly shoved it aside. “How about you just concentrate on the fact that your list will soon be nonexistent, and leave me to worry about mine.”

Henri moved up alongside me and replaced my Coke with a beer. I took it. “One won’t hurt, and if you’re feeling anything like I am, I need some alcohol to wrap my head around the fact *anyone* is brave enough to marry your brother.”

No shit. As I twisted the top off the beer and leaned back against the fridge, Xander looked my way, and I thought I caught a flash of sympathy and...understanding in his eyes.

I took a *long* swig of the beer, pain meds be damned.

OKAY, SO THOSE warnings on the side of the pill bottles that say don’t mix meds with alcohol? They really should be followed at all times. Something I would take into great consideration when my spinning head finally came to a standstill and I was able to tie my own damn shoe again.

As it was, Xander was walking me to the door of my loft while Sean waited down in the car by the curb, after they’d kindly offered to drive my inebriated ass back home.

So tonight hadn’t really gone as planned. But the good news was that I probably wouldn’t remember most of it tomorrow. After Sean and Xander’s big announcement, most of the night had been spent talking about wedding plans, bachelor parties, groomsmen, blah blah blah. You name it, they talked about it, while I sat there with a really big smile on my face and pretended I wasn’t dying to be anywhere else.

There was no way I was about to be a surly asshole for one of the happiest moments of their life, and just because I was nursing a wounded ego, a pissy mood, and a bum shoulder didn't mean I needed to bring that vibe around them.

So pills and alcohol. Don't do that at home, kids. Sure, it made me happy, but it had also made me completely useless. I figured the guys let me get away with it by giving me a pass for a stressful week and a screwed-up arm.

Ahh, if only they knew the rest of it. I was pretty sure Xander knew, or at least suspected, but the rest of them—nada. I wondered how they would react to knowing that their womanizer of a brother had been left high and dry by a...guy.

They'd all get a kick out of that. Shit, I'd never hear the end of it.

"Right," Xander said as we stopped just inside the loft. "You got it from here?"

I waved but swayed a little on my feet. When he went to grab me, I chuckled. "I'm just fucking with you."

"Not funny, Kieran."

"Kinda was."

"Look, maybe you should come home with me and Sean."

Oh God no, anything but that. "I'm good, really. Sean already texted Olsen, and he's gonna be home in a little bit. I'll be fine. I just want to sleep this off."

Xander slipped his hands into his pockets and let out a sigh. "Are you sure?"

"Yep. One hundred percent. Again, super excited for you and Sean."

"Thanks. We're excited too." Xander turned to head back to the front door, but stopped and looked back at me. "Kieran?"

"Hmm?"

"Other than the shoulder, everything else okay?"

Everything except Bash ditching my sorry ass. It seemed that my anger had now officially turned to self-pity. “Everything’s fine.”

Xander’s eyes narrowed. “You’d tell us if it wasn’t, right?”

“Course.”

“Okay, well, I’m going to text you in a few. Don’t go to sleep until Olsen gets here.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Xander waved and headed out the door, and I finally let out a sigh of relief. Finally, alone at last. I made my way into my room and tossed my phone onto the nightstand, and that was when I spotted Bash’s business card where I’d left it the night before.

I picked it up and ran my thumb over his name, my mind still buzzing as I thought about the last time I saw him after the fire. The worry in his eyes, the flash of hurt on his expression when he looked at Summer as she clung to me like I was her prize possession—

Wait, had I...had I been reading this entire thing wrong all this time? Maybe Bash hadn’t ditched me. Maybe he’d run. *Maybe* he’d been protecting himself from me and what I might do. Like, leave him, for Summer...

No, he knew better than that.

He knew I wouldn’t do anything like that.

But what if he didn’t?

I looked at the card and the address printed at the bottom of it, and before I knew what I was doing, I was online booking a plane ticket to South Haven, Georgia for tomorrow morning.

That’s right, kids: pills and alcohol don’t mix. But sometimes, they can make you do things you just might not do if you were thinking straight.

BASH

“EARTH TO BASH. You gonna open that, or do you plan on hugging it all day?”

I blinked at Lucas staring at me from across the table, his dark hair scattering in every direction from the combination of the wind blowing off the ocean and the overhead fans on the balcony. It was Sunday Funday, usually my favorite day of the week, when the besties and I commandeered a table at the Overlook on the beach for brunch and gossip. Today, however, I knew the topic of choice would be my unfortunate lack of love life, but I’d promised Shaw I’d get the sulking out of my system and get back to my fun-loving self.

Well, after getting gloriously inebriated today, that was.

“I told you he was out of sorts,” Jackson said, leaning into Lucas’s side. “Seems a certain someone in Chicago has messed with his brain a bit.”

“My brain is perfectly satisfactory.” I sniffed.

Lucas let out a snort. “Yeah, well, you think you could manage uncorking that bottle while you pout and *don’t* think about this guy? Or should I say phantom guy?”

I tucked the unopened champagne bottle farther into my chest. I’d already shared one bottle with the others; I wasn’t about to let them hinder my chances of severe intoxication. Although the buzz in my head felt pretty good at this point. “You want some of this and you’ll have to pry the bottle from my cold, dead, and superbly manicured hands.”

An awkward silence fell over the table, and then Lucas raised his brow. “Shaw? Some help here?”

Shaw put his arm on the back of my seat and said, “Bash, if you want the bottle to yourself, it helps to open it.”

I supposed he had a point.

I slowly drew the bottle away from my chest, watching for any grabby hands, and then, as I began to undo the cork wrapping, Shaw waved to get Wanda’s attention.

“Could we get another bottle, please, Wicked? Bash is a little thirsty today.”

“Selfish, more like,” Lucas muttered.

Wicked Wanda, as we called our regular waitress at the Overlook, winked over the glasses sitting low on her nose. “Anything for my boys.”

As I smiled up at her, Lucas made a grab for the bottle, and I swatted his hand away.

“You should really learn to share,” Lucas complained, sitting back in his seat.

“Hah!” I said as the cork popped. “I don’t like to share. And why is that?”

“Oh, pick me,” Trent said sarcastically, raising his hand.

“Yes, Knox?”

“Because sharing doesn’t get you to the top.”

“Ding ding ding. So no sharing. Not with you, even though I like you sometimes. And definitely no sharing with the opposite sex. They just take, take, take, stealing all the good ones. They can get their own damn bottle.” I filled my glass to the top, downed half of it, and then filled it some more.

“I told you this was about him,” Jackson whispered.

“Opposite sex, huh?” Lucas said. “Well, that’s why you don’t—”

“Go after the straight ones, yes, I’m aware. Feel free to slap me.” I held my hand out for someone to do just that, with

Lucas the only taker. But before he could give me a good smack, Jackson blocked his arm.

“Violence is never the answer, babe,” he said, and Lucas rolled his eyes but dropped his arm.

“It’s sometimes the answer. Bash looks like he could use a good knockout.”

“*Anyway*. Are you gonna tell us what happened that’s gotten you so riled up?” Jackson scooped a forkful of eggs. “And don’t say ‘nothing,’ because I saw you spend the better part of Friday afternoon mumbling in your office and peeling off your nail polish.”

I glanced down at my bare nails—which were never bare—and frowned. “Please excuse the cliché, but the answer is... I played with fire and I got burned. There. How’s that for a reason to get riled up?”

“Details might help,” Shaw said quietly beside me, but not quietly enough, apparently.

“Wait, *you* know? What the fuck?” Lucas took turns glaring at Shaw and me until Wanda came back outside carrying a tray with a bottle of champagne, a carafe of orange juice, and some extra glasses. She uncorked the bottle and then left, letting the guys have at it.

Once they’d all made their mimosas, I raised my glass. “Cheers, bitches,” I said, clinking my glass against each of theirs and then taking another long swig. It was necessary for the story I was about to tell.

I started at the beginning, even though they’d already heard about the fire rescue, but a refresher was necessary for context. Then I spilled every last detail, finding that the alcohol more than helped temper the embarrassment from being such a fool.

As they all quietly took in what I’d told them, Trent reached for a biscuit from the basket Wanda had left for us and sliced it neatly in half. “Don’t kill me for this, man, but... I’m kinda liking the fact that someone has you in such a state. You’re always so... What’s the word...”

“Pigheaded?” Lucas supplied.

I let out a gasp. “Rude.”

“I was going to say others would call him appealing yet unattainable, but that works too.” Trent winked, and I rolled my eyes.

“*Please*. I’m goddamn amazing. I mean, who doesn’t love me? It’s impossible.”

“Yes, your humble personality is so irresistible,” Lucas said dryly.

I scoffed. “I know, right? What does this girl have that I don’t?”

Shaw picked a banana up from the basket in the middle of the table. “Not one of these.”

Laughter broke out around me, and I had to admit that if it wasn’t so annoyingly true, I probably would’ve joined in.

“See, here’s the thing.” Shaw reached back into the fruit basket and held up a peach beside the banana. “Some people enjoy peaches. I don’t. You don’t. Lucas doesn’t. Apparently Jackson and Trent have dabbled and think they’re pretty all right. I mean, next to a banana, it’s nothing to write home about, but maybe someone who has only ever tasted a peach wouldn’t realize they would fucking love a banana.”

“Jesus Christ, I think we’re aware of the concept,” Lucas said.

Trent jumped in, waving Lucas off. “I think where Shaw was going with this was that you didn’t really give this Kieran guy much of a chance to tell you what he preferred once he had a taste. Hell, for all you know, and from what it sounds like, he was all about the damn banana. Which means maybe you got your nuts twisted for no reason.”

“Or maybe he didn’t,” Jackson said.

Shaw nodded, but I couldn’t tell who he was agreeing with until he said, “Because you pussied out and left, you lost your advantage. And not responding to him at all? You’re kinda forcing his hand to choose a peach, know what I’m sayin’?”

“Poor guy.” Jackson shook his head as he brought his glass to his lips. “Could’ve deepthroated a banana.”

When we all jerked our heads in Jackson’s direction, he lowered his glass, flushing a little.

“What? You guys were thinking it.”

Lucas let out a satisfied laugh and stretched his arm out along the back of Jackson’s chair. “That’s my guy, right there. Master deepthroater, and he loves it.”

“You’re a bad fucking influence,” Shaw said.

“Jealous?”

Shaw and Trent looked at each other and snorted at the same time. “Hardly,” Shaw said.

“Hel-lo.” I grabbed a fork from my barely touched plate and tapped it against my glass to get their attention. “I’m glad your love lives are in a state of bliss and all that blah, blah, blah, but can we please focus back on my predicament?”

As I sucked down more champagne, Lucas smirked. “Yes, let’s please talk about your *predicament*. Do you think your *predicament* will ever work again, or did the firefighter burn that too?”

“I thought you said he didn’t actually exist,” Trent shot back.

Lucas shrugged. “Okay, so did the firefighter you hallucinated break your *predicament*—”

“Oh, for the love of sweet Susie Q, will you please stop saying that word.” I gave myself another refill, even though I was more than aware I should probably slow down.

“Maybe you could actually eat something while you destroy your liver?” Shaw took my fork, stabbed a bit of the eggs Benedict I’d cut into, and held it up to my lips. “I really don’t wanna hold your hair later.”

“No?” I slid the food between my teeth, and as I chewed, I sang, “But that’s what friends are forrr.”

“Fill him up,” Jackson said with a chuckle. “Otherwise he’ll try to get on the table and karaoke soon.”

I gasped, perking up. “That’s a *fantastic* idea. Any requests?” I shoved away from the table, but as I went to stand, the room began to spin a little and Shaw caught my arm. He lowered me back into my seat and pushed the almost-empty bottle away before pointing to my plate.

“Eat and we’ll help you figure out a plan.”

“Ooh, a plan,” I said, scooping another bite into my mouth. “I like plans.”

“Where’s your phone?” When I shrugged, Shaw sighed and reached into my pocket, sending me into a giggling fit.

“Shaw, honey, Trent’s right there.”

He smirked as he dug in a little further and finally reached my phone. When he pulled it out, he held it up to my face to unlock it and then opened up my messages.

“Holy invasion of privacy, Batman,” I said, reaching for the phone and not getting anywhere...especially since it kinda looked like there were two of them.

“Shut up. We’re gonna help you. Right, guys?” There was a murmur of agreement as Shaw clicked on Kieran’s name. He tsked. “Sebastian Vogel, you bad, bad boy. We’ve even got a picture, fellas.”

“What?” I jerked up out of my seat, ready to snatch the cell for real this time, but Shaw’s arm was like a friggin’ tree trunk I couldn’t seem to move.

When Shaw held up the phone so the other guys could see the screen, every one of them whistled and threw out a few expletives of appreciation. Then he turned the screen to me and winked. “Damn, Bash. You sure you wanna let him go?”

The photo Kieran had taken of himself at the firehouse gym lit up the screen, a smirk on that handsome face, and God... How had I not pulled up that picture and stared at it every minute of every day since I’d left?

No, I knew why. It hurt too much to see him and know I could never have him. Not all of him. I could be the hidden little secret for a while, but eventually it would've ended badly, and I couldn't let that happen.

But did he have to be so unbearably beautiful?

I lifted my glass to my lips, swallowing the tiny bit left, and then I motioned for Shaw to hand me the bottle he'd moved away. When he didn't make a move, Lucas picked up their bottle and refilled my glass, earning a scowl from Shaw.

Lucas shrugged. "When a man's in pain, let him self-medicate. He's not hurting anyone. And let's be real, that"—he pointed to Kieran on the screen—"is a face worth self-medicating for."

Oh, Lucas, I thought, laying my free hand over his as I indulged in my champagne once again. This time, you're absolutely right.

KIERAN

I'D LOST MY damn mind.

As I drove my rental car over the bridge that linked Savannah to South Haven Island, I knew what I was doing was crazy. Maybe the most impulsive, insane thing I'd ever done, and that was saying a lot, considering what I did for a living. If I'd been sober last night, there was no way in hell I would've bought a ticket to Georgia, but here I was.

Palm trees lined both sides of the road, and the soothing smell of salt in the air made me lower my window a bit even as I kept the A/C blasting. It was hot in Chicago, but wow, humidity was a whole different thing down here. Even so, I could see the appeal of the island immediately, and why Bash had chosen this place over city living. Something inside you relaxed when you crossed over that bridge and caught a glimpse of the ocean. It was beautiful.

Still, even the tranquil environment couldn't stop the nerves from taking over as the GPS directed me toward the AnaVoge building. That was the only address I had for Bash, and I was holding out hope that *someone* worked there on Sundays, or else I was shit out of luck for the day.

Making the turn into AnaVoge's parking lot was a fun experience in driving one-handed, something I shouldn't be doing in the first place, but screw it. I didn't know if they even had Ubers on an island this tiny, and really, I wanted to feel like I had some control over this crazy decision. What would I even say to Bash when I saw him? The last thing he'd expect

was my showing up to disrupt his life here, but he'd disrupted the hell out of mine, so it was only fair, right?

Well, shit. That won't be happening today, will it? I thought as I pulled into AnaVoge's empty parking lot. Of course they'd be closed on a Sunday. Wasn't everything in the South closed for church or something?

Great. I'd have to wait until tomorrow to show up, but who knew if I'd still have the nerve to do that. Fuck me. Why was I here again?

Bash's face flitted through my mind, and I sighed, put the car in park, and dropped my head back against the headrest. Yeah...that was why. He was why. I needed answers and to get to the bottom of what had happened between us, since obviously something had gone very, very wrong.

I stared at the building in front of me, a chic, modern expanse of steel and glass. This was his, a company he'd built from the ground up, and that alone was impressive as hell. Almost as much as the man himself.

Okay, I'd stay, which meant I needed to find a hotel for the night. The beach seemed like a good place to start, because why not enjoy myself on a balcony? Or throw myself off it, either way. I reset the GPS to head in that direction and see what hotels popped up.

This was definitely the most impulsive I'd ever been. But what else was I gonna do? Sit at home, do nothing, and waste the time I had off from work? No fuckin' thank you.

The GPS took me to the public beach access point, where hotels and restaurants lined the strip on either side. Yes, this was perfect. Surely I was bound to find a room at one of these places.

I pulled into the small parking lot at the access point, and when I saw the sandy beach, I decided to take a moment and just...breathe. A lot had happened in the last couple of days—couple of weeks, really—and while I was here for a very specific reason, that didn't mean I couldn't take a moment to just take a moment.

I shoved open the car door and climbed out, and the salty air was like a balm to the soul. It instantly soothed and made me feel as though I was on vacation, which I was sure was another one of the reasons Bash enjoyed this island lifestyle compared to the bustling city.

I kicked off my shoes and slid them inside the sling on my left arm, then headed down the sandy path that led through the brush and out onto the open beach. The sand under my feet was soft and warm, and it had been so long since I'd been on a beach that I took a moment to just stand there and enjoy the sensation.

Why the hell didn't I do this more often? Take a vacation. Go somewhere peaceful. Unwind. Hell, I couldn't remember the last time I'd taken time off. I'd always attributed that to being too restless to just stop and relax. But maybe it had more to do with not knowing what it was I needed. This was apparently it.

The sound of the waves against the shoreline was like something from the sleep app I used on occasion, and I found myself moving toward them, wanting to feel the cool water against my hot skin.

There were a good number of people out and about today, being that it was the weekend, but it was by no means overcrowded. It was nice. There were families with kids running around and a couple of teenagers flying a kite, and it reminded me of when my parents used to take me and my brothers up to Savanna to fish.

Memories. That was what places like this made you want to create. It made you want to slow down and savor each day, instead of rushing right through them and then wondering where the hell the time had gone.

Wow, okay. So maybe I needed this more than I'd realized. Or maybe I was just feeling reflective because last night at Bailey's, Sean—*Sean*—had announced a wedding date. Something about that little reveal made me realize how much he'd changed recently, how he'd been willing to have an open

mind about things. The same things I now found myself thinking about.

Shit. I continued down the beach, my feet sinking into the wet sand as I went. Who would've ever thought that I'd have anything in common with Sean? We were about as different as two guys could be. A lot of that had to do with the age gap between us, but also that Sean had been carrying around our father's baggage most of his life and made sure to keep his distance. That had changed after my parents died, but not before we came to blows over it.

Another reason I didn't like to stand still, I supposed—too many ghosts floating around in my head. Ones that I preferred to remember in a good light, even though it was a dark addiction that had taken them away.

Jesus, ten minutes on the beach had been better than the two months of therapy I went to after their car accident. I definitely should've done this sooner.

As I made my way farther down the shoreline, I noticed several shops up on the bank, their balconies offering gorgeous views of the Atlantic. There were some with surfboards and swimsuits; another had little tables and chairs set up—a cafe, maybe—and as I continued on, I spotted a bigger establishment, one with a large wraparound porch under a wide awning, with huge fans that were trying their hardest to provide some sort of breeze.

It was clearly a favorite, judging by the amount of people there. I could see the waitresses moving through the crowds with trays full of food and large drink carafes, and thought what a perfect place it was to grab a bite to eat. The food on the plane had been average at best, and I couldn't think of a more perfect spot than a table overlooking the ocean to get me in the right headspace. Maybe I could look up a good hotel while I was there. Somewhere with a view like this.

I made my way up toward the restaurant and noticed the sign on the balcony read the Overlook. I liked that. Simple but catchy. As I got closer, a loud burst of laughter came from one of the tables closest to the rails. I saw a group of guys all

gathered around a table in the middle of busting a gut over something that had clearly amused them, and that was when I saw him.

There, standing on top of his chair—*is that a champagne bottle in his hand?*—was Bash, and he was holding the thing to his lips like a microphone as he bellowed out a really bad rendition of “That’s What Friends Are For.”

I blinked once, twice, and then rubbed my eyes for good measure, because I didn’t think my imagination was creative enough to hallucinate that. But this was no illusion; I’d know that face anywhere. The man standing on that chair was Bash. He looked about as blitzed as he had been the night we went to the burlesque show.

He wobbled a bit on his chair, and a massive guy beside him helped him back on solid ground. I couldn’t stop staring, still shocked that I’d stumbled across him here. Given he seemed to be a little intoxicated, not to mention surrounded by his friends, now probably wasn’t the best time to just show up.

But what could I do? I’d come all this way, and it had to be fate that we’d ended up on the same stretch of beach. I wasn’t about to tuck tail and hide now.

I pulled my shoes out of my sling and headed up to the Overlook before I could talk myself out of it.

Ready or not, here I come.

BASH

“ALL RIGHT, MADONNA, how about you get down before you break your neck.” Shaw put his arm around my waist and grabbed my hand. As he pulled me down off the chair, the rest of the guys laughed and began to clap.

“You’re no fuuun. I wasn’t gonna faaall.” I pouted, not ready to cut off my performance so quickly. I shimmied, the song playing in my mind changing to something more upbeat. “All right, who’s up for ‘Like a Virgin’?” I went to climb back up on the chair, but Shaw dragged me down again.

“If you need a stage, make it on the ground, yeah?”

I rolled my eyes and gripped the empty bottle of champagne I’d been using as a microphone even tighter. “Then it wouldn’t be a *stage*. Trent, my sweet honeybee, can you please back me up on this? Would you perform without some”—I waved my hand with a flourish—“elevation?”

Trent looked between me and Shaw and held his hands up. “I’m not choosing sides here, but you were very entertaining, Bash.”

“Oh come ooon.” I rounded the table and perched on top of his lap, throwing my arms around his neck. “I’ve known you longer than he has, so your allegiance should be to *me*.”

“Uh oh,” Lucas said, winking at Shaw. “Looks like you’ve got competition.”

“Hush, Sully boy, I don’t want to sleep with him. I just want him to admit he’s danced around on stage after drinking

lotsss of champagne.”

Trent chuckled and shook his head. “I don’t dance on stage.”

“Dance, grind, whatever you call it.”

“And I don’t drink champagne before a show.”

“Ugh, champagne, whiskey, cheap beer, you know what I mean. You can’t tell me you’ve been sober at all of your shows. That’s not very rock-star-like.”

“Course not. I can’t remember half the shows I did before I left the band.”

“Thank yooou.” I kissed his cheek and hopped off his lap, but I moved a little too fast and stumbled into the table. All of a sudden the giggles were back, and I couldn’t make them stop as I righted myself. “I’m fine. Perfect. Faaantabuloso. Please no one get up.”

“Except for Kristopher,” Jackson said with a smirk.

“*Kieran*. But I see what you did there, naughty boy. Tsk tsk.” I wagged my finger at him as I headed back to my seat, where, whether Shaw liked it or not, a rousing performance was coming up, but perhaps on the table this time.

Just as I grabbed the back of my chair, fully intending to use it as a stepstool, I stopped suddenly, my eyes latching on to a figure standing inside the doorway leading out to the balcony, watching me.

My lips parted as I stood there unmoving, my mind trying to catch up with what I saw before me—or should I say whom.

No... There was no way I was seeing this right. The man looking at me wasn’t Kieran, he was just some stranger I was projecting Kieran’s head onto. Right down to the sling holding his left arm, because of course I’d visualize that too, since the last time I saw him, Kieran was wearing one.

Wow, okay, maybe I’d had enough champagne now.

“Bash? You okay?”

With my eyes still locked on the vision I'd dreamed up, I nodded at Jackson's question. That was when the stranger with Kieran's face frowned and I felt my jaw hit the floor.

Hold on, this wasn't real...was it?

"Does anyone else see a really gorgeous man that looks like Kieran standing by the door, or am I going crazy?" I said.

As the guys all turned in his direction, I heard one of them curse, and then Shaw said, "Uh, Bash? I think that *is* Kieran. But he doesn't look too happy to see you."

Oh shit. This couldn't be happening.

"He's heading this way," Jackson said under his breath.

Not looking at all pleased, Kieran crossed over to our table, stopping right in front of me as I lost my tongue.

"Looks like you're having a great time. Stupid me for thinking you left Chicago upset when here you are, having a party."

I blinked as I stared up at his ridiculously handsome face, still trying to comprehend that Kieran—my super-hot, brave firefighter lieutenant—was standing in front of me. Not only that, but he sounded pissed. Not exactly the indifference I'd expected at my departure.

Okay, this had to be a drunk illusion brought on by one too many glasses of the bubbly.

I was about to deflect and say something brilliantly witty, of that I was sure, but before I could locate my tongue, I heard the chair beside me shift as Shaw got to his feet. Kieran's eyes drifted over my shoulder. I whipped my head around, and when the room began to spin a little faster, I steadied myself with a hand to the table.

Shaw glanced down at me, no doubt making sure I wasn't going to fall on my ass, and held out his hand to Kieran.

"Hey, I'm Shaw. I'm gonna go out on a limb here and guess that you're the elusive Kieran?"

Or the beautiful, muscular, clearly annoyed Kieran.

Kieran gave a short nod and took Shaw's hand, and seeing him this close to me again caused a sudden rush of heat to lick over my body.

Or maybe that was the alcohol.

"Yeah, that'd be me. At least someone at the table knows who I am. And remembers my name."

"Excuse *me*, lieutenant," I said. "I know exactly what your name is."

Seemingly, that was the response Kieran had been after. He dropped Shaw's hand and looked me dead in the eye. "I wasn't so sure, since you seemed to be dodging it on your phone like it was a spam caller."

"Oh shit, that was a burn."

I turned my best death glare in Lucas's direction. "Oh hush. You don't get an opinion. You didn't even think he was *real*."

Lucas sat back in his chair, gave Kieran a once-over, and shrugged. "Still seems a little convenient, if you ask me. How do we know this guy isn't someone you paid to *pretend* he's your fireman fantasy?"

I could feel the color drain from my cheeks. I was going to have my private chef flambé Lucas for dinner.

"If he was an actor, I'd be paying him to look at me like he adored me, not like I was a bug under his shoe," I said.

Kieran ran his eyes over me. "And if you hadn't run away, maybe I'd be looking at you like I adored you."

"I didn't run anywhere. I flew first class."

"Same thing."

As the table fell silent, tension simmered in the air, and Shaw decided to ease it by holding out the basket of fruit.

"Have you eaten already?" he asked. Oh help me, Betsy, I already knew what was coming. "Would you like a peach? Maybe a banana?"

Kieran frowned and looked at the bowl of fruit, but then he nodded and shrugged and reached for, yep, the banana.

Trent snickered. Kieran looked in his direction, stopped, and did a double take. His jaw fell open.

Now, I'm not the jealous type, but was it so wrong that I wished that had been his reaction upon seeing me? But then again, Trent Knox was...Trent Knox.

"Hey, man." Trent gave a modest wave, as world-famous rock stars do, and I rolled my eyes.

"Uh..." For the first time since walking up to the table, Kieran lost some of his composure.

"Yes, yes, it's Trent Knox," I said. "Don't pay him too much attention or it'll go to his head."

"Don't you mean or you'll get jealous?" Lucas piped up.

"You're friends with Trent Knox?" Kieran looked around my shoulder again and shook his head. "What am I saying, of course you are."

"That's right, of course I am. But that's not really all that important, now, is it?"

"Gee, thanks," Trent said, and I waved him off.

"What's important is, what are you doing here?" I asked.

Kieran nodded and slipped his good hand into his pocket. Then he looked to the guys all sitting at the table, watching the two of us as though we were the entertainment for the afternoon.

Bet they wished we were on a stage now.

"I think you know why I'm here."

I knew why I wished he were here, but that seemed a little too good to be true. Especially given his current mood. "Honestly, I have no idea. I thought we'd said our—"

"If you say goodbyes, I'm gonna lose my shit. You said, and I quote, 'I'll see you around, lieutenant.' And then, oh

look at that, you were nowhere around. So this seems like a pretty good place to *see* each other again.”

My foolish heart thumped a little harder. Did he even hear himself and how that sounded? He’d wanted to see me again? What did that even mean?

This? A date? More than a date?

My emotions were all over the place, confusion, excitement, and guilt vying for the top spot, but the cool, calm, rational side of myself had been drowned by the champagne. I looked to my friends for some kind of assistance, but they were all staring at us with mouths agape.

“Uh, Kieran, is it? I’m Jackson.” When Jackson clearly got the message, he rose to his feet and moved to grab an empty seat. I almost hugged him. I knew I was acting out of sorts and would likely hear about it for years to come, but right now I appreciated the assist. “Why don’t you take a seat here? Order some food. The Overlook makes a mean French toast, and by the time it gets here, maybe Bash will have regained his ability to form full sentences.”

I took that back—I appreciated nothing.

Kieran sat down at the table, then he gestured to my seat, looked up at me, and mouthed, *Dare you*.

KIERAN

I'D NEVER SEEN Bash look quite so tongue-tied, and I was enjoying the hell out of it. The surprise and confusion on his face—along with a heavy dose of guilt—when he first saw me had made this spur-of-the-moment decision worth it, and now, as I arched a brow at him, I waited to see if he'd respond to my *dare you* challenge.

Bash stared at me for a little longer, until the guy beside him kicked his chair forward, hitting him in the back of the knees and forcing him onto the seat.

“Oh, Wicked,” the man who'd introduced himself as Jackson said, motioning for a woman with short grey hair, glasses perched on her nose, and a nametag that said Wanda. “We've got a new addition that would like to place an order.” He nodded toward me.

“The French toast you mentioned sounds great. I'll have that.”

“Comin' right up,” the waitress said, smiling at me and then placing a hand on Bash's shoulder. “Can I get you boys anything else? What about another round of karaoke?”

“Don't encourage him. He's trying to fall on his face.”

“And this is Lucas,” Jackson said, putting his arm on the back of the chair of the guy who'd just spoken.

“Ah, the skeptic,” I said.

Lucas crossed his arms and eyed me. “A straight firefighter who happens to rescue Bashalicious here and then

falls magically under his spell and wants to rip his clothes off?” Bash gasped, but Lucas didn’t take his eyes off me. “You gotta admit, that seems a little too good to be true.”

Don’t ask me what had come over me to feel so confident as I sat amongst a table full of strangers who were all looking at me with judgment in their eyes. But from the moment I stepped inside this restaurant and saw Bash again, it’d become obvious that I’d been a topic of discussion, one where they’d made a lot of assumptions, and it was up to me to set them straight.

Maybe that was a poor choice of words. But something about them thinking I was this straight firefighter asshole who’d dicked their friend around and left him brokenhearted sat wrong with me. That wasn’t how it had gone down, and I wanted to make that crystal clear to his friends.

“I’d agree with that.” I nodded at Lucas, who was still eyeing me with a healthy dose of skepticism. “But then again, if anyone could weave a little magic, I would think it’s Bash. After all, he does know how to up and disappear.”

Jackson arched an eyebrow at Lucas and shrugged as if to say, *He’s not wrong*. Then I turned back to Bash and reached for the champagne bottle he still had clutched in his hand.

“If ever there was a time I needed you to pour me a drink,” I said, “that time would be now.”

With his cheeks flushed, Bash’s dark hair and otherwise pale complexion all added up to a stunning picture, and I wanted to reach out and stroke a finger over his heated cheek.

Then he licked his glossed-up lips and whispered, “How are you even here right now?”

“Delta was running a sale.”

“Well, thank you, Delta.” Bash reached out like he was going to touch my face but second-guessed himself and dropped his hand. “You’re even more handsome than I remember.” Then he turned to his friends, aiming the champagne bottle at them all like an accusatory finger. “I told

you he was real. As if I'd ever stoop so low as to make up a man."

"Lucas was the only one who doubted you," Shaw said.

"Yeah," Lucas scoffed. "Like you weren't all thinkin' it."

"Oh ye of little faith. Don't you know you shouldn't underestimate me by now? I'm not a liar," Bash said.

"In all fairness, you did show us a picture, but it didn't do him justice." Trent fucking Knox winked—*winked*—at me, and I almost lost my brain cells until I realized what he'd just said.

"You showed them a private picture of me?" I asked.

Bash's mouth fell open. "I did no such thing. Shaw muscle-manned me and stole my phone."

"Oh, so you didn't delete my picture? Just my number?"

"That's not what... I didn't... You're twisting my words." Bash rubbed his temples. "I can't think straight. Maybe I need another drink."

"Babe, you're never thinking straight," Shaw said. "Don't blame the champagne."

I thought back to when Bash was completely wasted and still able to put on a show for me in heels. There was no way alcohol threw him off his game. If anything, it made him even bolder, which was why it was interesting to see him so flustered.

Bash looked me in the eye. "Of course I didn't delete it. Your picture or your number."

"Could've fooled me."

"There's no foolin' anyone," Lucas said. "He hasn't shut up about you since you met."

"Well, I think it's a nice surprise." Jackson smiled at me and cocked his head. "But, and no offense by this, why *are* you here?"

I wasn't about to lay it all out for Bash's friends right here and now. I hadn't expected an inquisition, only hoped to get to South Haven and see Bash. Finding him here and surrounded by his best friends wasn't the ideal situation for what I wanted to say to him.

"I'm sure you'll find out eventually," I replied. "But I'd rather talk to Bash first. Privately."

Shaw nodded. "Fair enough."

"Fair enough, my ass." Lucas sat forward in his chair and narrowed his eyes. "If you came all the way down here to break his heart or get him all twisted up again, I swear to God I'll—"

Jackson saved the day by covering Lucas's mouth and whispering something in his ear, and after a long moment, Lucas rolled his eyes and nodded.

"Fine," he murmured, and Jackson lowered his hand. "I'll try—keyword here *try*—not to kick your ass."

I couldn't help but snort as I looked down at my sling. "I'm not exactly a hundred percent right now to defend myself, although I almost punched Sanderson out, so you never know."

"Sanderson?" Bash frowned. "You guys got in a fight? When?"

"Friday. I got suspended, he got fired, and now here I am."

Bash's jaw hit the floor, but he quickly shook himself out of his stupor. "Okay, on that note, I think we should get that French toast to go. We obviously have a lot to discuss."

"Wait, you can't leave now. It was just getting interesting," Lucas said.

"Shut it, you." Shaw cut his eyes in Lucas's direction, and apparently that was enough to make the mouthy guy clamp his mouth tight. "Bash?"

"Hmm?" Bash replied, but didn't take his eyes away from me.

“How about Trent and I give you two a ride home, since you’re right next door?”

Couldn’t say I wasn’t excited him and Trent were Bash’s neighbors, but... “I actually have a rental parked down at the beach access point. So if you could just give us a ride there?” Shaw nodded, and I turned to Bash. “Is that okay with you?”

Bash blinked at me. “Is what okay?”

“If I come to your house?”

There was a snicker from across the table. “Pretty sure it’d be okay for you to come anywhere, as long as he can watch.”

Man, that Lucas sure had a mouth on him, but I wasn’t paying any attention to him now. Bash got to his feet, and when he swayed a little, I got up and took his elbow.

He looked down at where I held him and then back to me, a hopeful expression swirling in his eyes. “Saving me again, lieutenant?”

“Seems to be the norm with you.”

We stood there for several seconds, not willing to break the connection just yet. When the server appeared with my French toast, Bash finally looked away, frowning at the scrumptious-looking meal.

“Oh no, we forgot to get this to go.”

“It’s fine—”

“Apologies, Wicked. We’ll need a box, please.” As she headed off to go wrap the plate, Bash smoothed his hand up my arm. The touch was familiar, but strange given the circumstances. “You are really here, right? This isn’t some drunk hallucination that I’m going to wake up from tomorrow morning and want to drown myself in the river, only to be eaten by alligators?”

“I’m really here.”

“And you want me to take you home? To *my* home?”

“I think that’s probably a good idea.”

Bash nodded and dropped his hand, his mood ever-changing under the influence. “Okay, let’s do that.”

“How about you guys go on? I’ve got this,” Jackson said as Wanda came back and handed him the check.

She gave me the to-go box and smiled. “Now you take care of our Bash here.”

Jesus, did everyone in this town have a vested interest in Bash’s personal life? Actually, who was I kidding—that seemed totally normal, considering the way people gravitated to the guy.

“Okay, okay, let’s go,” Shaw said as he and Trent walked by hand in hand, and I had the crazy urge to grab Bash’s hand. I stopped myself at the last second, not knowing if that was something *he* would want, because after all, he’d been the one to leave me.

“After you.” I stepped out of the way to let him pass by, and that amazing cologne of his made me think of that night by his hotel door. The first night we’d kissed.

Before I could follow, Bash looked over his shoulder. “Welcome to South Haven, lieutenant.”

KIERAN

WE WERE FINALLY alone.

For at least the next few minutes, or however long it took to drive to his house, Bash was buckled up in the passenger seat and unable to escape the many questions I had for him. It was the perfect time to finally understand why he'd dipped out the way he had.

Except it wasn't.

We were both quiet as I pulled out of the parking lot and followed Shaw and Trent out onto the main road. I didn't even know where to start or what to ask, and was Bash even coherent after all those drinks?

The more I thought about it, the more time passed without either of us saying a word, until the tension in the car was a tangible thing.

"I..." Bash cleared his throat, staring straight ahead. "I wanted to call you."

I hadn't expected him to speak first. "You didn't have to call. You just had to answer."

"I wanted to do that too."

"Then why didn't you?"

Bash was silent for a long time, his chin on his hand, staring out the passenger window. "I didn't think you wanted me to."

“What?” I went to rub my head in frustration only to realize my arm was still stuck in this damn sling. “Why? Why would you think that? Did I say something you took the wrong way?”

“No. You didn’t say anything.”

“Then you’re gonna have to help me here, Bash, because I don’t understand. Hell, I don’t even know if it was the right thing to show up here or not—”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

I paused. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Color me shocked, because I hadn’t been able to tell one way or another. Then again, I *was* currently driving us to his house, so that had to be a good sign.

As I followed Shaw and Trent off the main roads and deeper into the island, I decided not to push things with Bash until we got to his house and could really have it out. Bash seemed content with that too, or at least that was what his silence told me. In such a small, enclosed space, his presence still loomed large, and the heady scent of his cologne once again had me thinking back to the time we’d spent together in Chicago. How could we have had those moments and not have a word to say to each other now? I felt like I’d flipped so many damn switches lately that I didn’t know which was way up anymore.

We turned into an unmarked neighborhood with enormous houses that seemed to be on a river. The houses were painted in a way that made them blend into the scenery...except for one up ahead.

Bash didn’t even have to say that house was his. It stood out as a modern marvel, with floor-to-ceiling glass windows on each level, trimmed in a dark wood. Absolutely gorgeous, just like the man himself.

Shaw and Trent beeped the horn twice and waved as they continued on to the next house, and I made the turn into Bash’s long driveway. Damn, he even had a pier and a boat.

Somehow I couldn't picture Bash on a boat, but it was something I'd love to see.

If I was here longer than an hour.

I put the car in park and waited for Bash to make the first move to get out, but he seemed half-asleep and hadn't noticed we'd arrived.

"Bash." I shook his shoulder gently, and he stirred. "I think we're here."

He opened his eyes and blinked a few times before nodding. "This is me."

I hadn't known what to expect of his house, but seeing it now, I realized it fit him perfectly. Especially once we entered and I got a good look at the inside.

Jesus.

The foyer was ornate, with one of those massive chandeliers you see in the movies, and beyond that, a seemingly never-ending staircase rose before us.

The penthouses he stayed at had nothing on this place.

"Welcome, welcome." Bash waved his hand toward the stairs and around the foyer as he sashayed his way inside. His long legs were encased in tailored black pants that molded to his ass, and the sleeveless leopard-print shirt he wore was neatly tucked in at his trim waist. I wasn't sure what I was more impressed by, him, his place, or the fact he was still upright after the copious amount of alcohol he'd clearly consumed at brunch.

Then, in true Bash form, he took hold of the handrail and turned to face me in a most dramatic fashion. "So, lieutenant, what do you think? Do you like my little slice of paradise?"

"Little?" I slipped my hand into the pocket of my shorts so I wouldn't, I don't know, break something. "I'm not sure you know what that word means, if this is your definition."

"Hmm." Bash smoothed his hand over the banister as he looked around, his eyes shifting to the chandelier overhead.

“You might be right. I’ve always gone with the motto ‘bigger is better.’ So you, darling, were a lovely surprise.”

“So lovely you left without a goodbye?”

“Or too lovely to stomach *saying* goodbye.” Bash shrugged. “It all depends on how you look at it, really.” He looked up the stairs. “The bedrooms are all upstairs. I’d offer to give you a tour—however, I don’t think that’s why you’re here. Or is it?”

“No.” I shook my head and stepped inside, shutting the door behind me.

“Good. Disappointing. But good.”

“We need to talk, Bash.”

“Ah yes, talk. Okay then, follow me.” As he headed off past the stairs, I followed close behind, because I had a feeling it would be easy to get lost in a place like this. There were halls with doors leading off them every which way.

We stepped into the main living space, and my feet came to a grinding halt. Holy shit. The jaw-dropping foyer was nothing compared to this. A beautiful, modern kitchen was directly off to the right, fitted out with all of the latest and greatest appliances known to man. Which were sparkling stainless steel, and polished so well you could see your reflection in them. There was a massive kitchen island of cool white marble with veins of grey that faced the living area, and running along the entire length were black barstools.

It was chic and modern, sleek and sexy, and beyond the main appliances, it was devoid of any other clutter, leaving a very minimalistic feel. Actually, all of the white marble made me think of Bash’s smooth skin, not to mention the sleek black hair that was always perfectly styled.

Bash made his way over to a white leather couch on a rug that looked softer than a cloud. As he fell down into it, he tossed his keys and phone onto a glass coffee table that had golden legs.

With as rich and flashy as Bash was, I wouldn’t put it past him to own furniture with real gold legs.

“Well, don’t just stand there, lieutenant.” Bash turned his head along the back of the couch until he was facing me. “Or maybe do. I like looking at you there.”

How did he do that? One minute I was hurt and humiliated, wanting to know how he’d so easily up and left me, and the next I wanted to kiss the ever-loving hell out of him. Bash had this way about him that made me completely forget all of the reasons I’d been questioning our time together. But I couldn’t let that overtake me. I couldn’t just brush aside what he’d done, and how that made me feel. Not if I didn’t want to find myself in the same situation.

I needed to know: was it real? Or was it just the circumstances that made me feel the way I’d felt? But as I stood there now staring down at him, I knew deep down—it was *him*.

Bash was the reason I was feeling all of these mixed-up emotions, which was why I’d been so upset when he up and left, leaving me even more confused.

I walked further into the room and took the recliner that faced the floor-to-ceiling windows that enclosed the entire house. But from here the view was an entirely different one. The house most definitely backed onto a river with sweeping willows shading parts of it, and Bash had a beautiful balcony that overlooked the private dock and boat I’d seen on my way in.

If there’d ever been any doubt that Bash’s company deserved to be the headliner at the tech expo, that was soon wiped away. The guy was clearly successful as hell.

“This is some house.”

Bash nodded. “I like it. But it occurs to me that I’ve never seen where you sleep. Somehow you always end up at *my* door.”

I’d never thought about that, but he was right. “Should I apologize?”

“No. I already told you, I’m glad you’re here.”

“See”—I frowned and leaned forward, resting my forearms on my knees—“I don’t know that I believe that.”

“Why ever not? Do I not seem glad you’re here?”

“You seem plastered, barely able to walk straight, and judging by what your friends had to say about that, I’m one of the reasons why. So I think ‘glad’ might be stretching the truth.”

Bash sighed and stretched out on his side so his legs were up on the couch and his head was propped in his hand. “Oh, don’t be so dramatic.”

How he said that with a serious face when he was laid out on his couch like a screen siren was beyond me.

“I had a few glasses of champagne with brunch. I always have a few glasses. That’s all.”

“Uh huh.”

“What? You sound like you don’t believe me.”

“Because I don’t.” I got to my feet, frustrated all over again with him, because if what he was saying was true, what did that mean? That I was the only one who’d been acting like a fucking headcase the last couple days? “So you’re trying to tell me you haven’t been upset about all of this? About leaving me...at all.”

Bash blinked, and I thought I caught something flash in his eyes before it quickly vanished and he smiled. “That’s right.”

I didn’t believe that for a second. For some reason he was trying to put on a brave face, but I didn’t want that. I wanted the truth. I walked over to the windows that overlooked the balcony and stared out at the water below. Maybe it would be easier to say this if I wasn’t looking at him.

“Look, these last couple of days have been hell for me. When I showed up at that hotel and found out you were gone, I thought I’d go crazy. I didn’t know if something had happened to you. If I’d upset you, or done something wrong. All I knew was I needed to talk to you and find out.” I let out a deep breath and rubbed the back of my neck. “But then when I

called and you didn't answer...I... I mean, what the hell, Bash?"

I turned around, ready to get into this with him, but when I saw his hand had slipped down to hang off the couch, I rushed over to make sure he was okay. The sight that greeted me took the frustration and irritation right out of my sails.

Bash's cheek was squished up against the side of the couch and his eyes were closed. Those dark lashes kissed his cheek and his hair was all messed up. He looked about as unkempt as I'd ever seen him, and one hundred percent passed out. It looked like our little talk was going to have to wait.

I closed my eyes and ran a hand through my hair, praying for patience, then moved around the coffee table to grab one of the pillows off the recliner.

I gently lifted his head and placed the soft pillow under it. When he wrapped his hands around it and pulled it in nice and tight, something inside my chest tightened.

Even one hundred percent wasted, Sebastian Vogel made a stunning picture. I took a seat in the recliner so I could watch over him, and while the view outside was something spectacular, the view inside was even more so.

BASH

WAKING UP WITH my head throbbing was certainly not the best feeling in the world, and did not motivate me to open my eyes. How much had I had to drink yesterday? Had I never heard of alternating with water before?

I groaned and massaged my temples, wishing I'd thought to throw back some pain reliever before I passed out.

Wait, when had I passed out? I couldn't remember anything after brunch with the guys at the Overlook, so how did I get home?

Oh my God.

No. No, no, no, no—

My eyes flew open, and I shot up on the settee—*the settee?* What in the name of Dolly was I doing on my settee, and why had I thought it was a good idea to sleep somewhere other than my bed?

Bewildered, I looked around to confirm I had just dreamed that Kieran had shown up in South Haven. There was no way he actually did, no matter how much I wished that would happen.

Look at me trying to manifest my dreams into reality, when—

I froze as a pair of blue eyes met mine from across the room.

Oh my God.

Every thought went flying out of my head as I stared at what could only be a hallucination. With my head aching so bad it was ready to pop off my shoulders, there was no way I was seeing things correctly.

But then Kieran sat up in the recliner. “About time you woke up.”

I worked my jaw, trying to figure out if this was for real or if I was hearing things now too. Oh, what the hell. If this wasn't real, at least no one would bear witness to my embarrassment. “Are you really here, or did someone slip drugs in my champagne?”

He frowned. “You don't remember?”

“Remember what?”

Kieran let out a humorless laugh and pushed the footrest of the recliner down. “Damn, okay. Showing up at your brunch thing had quite an effect on you. Gotcha.”

“Hold on. That really happened?”

“Yep.”

“I...thought I dreamed it.”

“Well, I'm here. In the flesh.”

I couldn't read the look on his face to know if he was happy or pissed, but I knew exactly how *I* felt about it.

Shocked all the way down to my core. No one had ever surprised me or made a move this big before. Whether he was here because he wanted to see me again or slap me, the fact remained that he'd come all this way, made an effort after I left him behind.

My heart squeezed, and I swallowed hard. For once, I had no words.

Kieran pushed up to his feet and walked toward me, and I noticed how his arm was still in a sling. Sleeping in a recliner couldn't have been comfortable.

“You're hurt. You should've lain down in one of the beds,” I said as Kieran picked up a small bottle from the coffee table.

I noticed there was also a glass of water sitting on a coaster, and I reached for that to quench my dry throat.

“The recliner was fine.” Kieran tapped a couple of pills out and handed them to me. “I imagine you’re not feeling too great.”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to you chopping my head off right about now, but other than that, I’m fanfreakintastic.” I swallowed down the pills and hoped for quick relief as Kieran backed away and crossed his arms.

“So I’m guessing you don’t remember a lot from yesterday.”

“Yesterday? Today isn’t still Sunday?” Now that I was more awake, I flung the blanket off me and saw that I was still wearing the same outfit I’d worn to brunch, except for my shoes.

“You’ve been out since I brought you home. I got up every once in a while to make sure you were still breathing. Have you not been sleeping?”

Not well at all, actually, but I didn’t want him to know that. My under-eye bags were probably out of control again, not to mention my hair had to be all over the place. This was so not ideal.

I rose to my feet, grabbing the blanket and folding it as I tried to get my bearings so I wouldn’t go running into his arms. “I apologize for sleeping so long.”

“That’s not what I want an apology for.”

Of course not. He was probably here to talk about what he perceived as my bad behavior, but hadn’t he understood I was trying to do him a favor? Maybe if I kept things light between us, I could put off that conversation.

“Bash.”

Or maybe not.

I dropped the folded blanket over the edge of the settee and turned to face him, all too aware of what a mess I must be compared to how handsome he looked. I remembered now, the

guys passing around Kieran's picture and then saying it had nothing on him in person, and how true that was. Even though the crease between his eyebrows told me he was upset, it couldn't take away from his bright blue eyes and attractive features. The stubble along his jaw seemed a little longer, maybe, or it could've been that my mind had already started to forget the details I'd obsessed over.

"Talk to me."

A simple request, one I'd denied him for days now. Denied myself, too, because it wasn't easy to ignore the man I wanted to be with every minute of every day.

But he was here now. Ignoring him wasn't an option anymore.

"I...don't know what to say." There. The truth.

"That's a first."

"I know."

"Okay." Kieran uncrossed his arms and sat down on one side of the settee, motioning for me to do the same. "Maybe we should start with the little you told me yesterday."

I wasn't really in the mood or position to refuse the man anything right now. I followed his lead, sitting down and shifting to face him, tucking my leg beneath me.

"You said you didn't think I wanted you to call. That it wasn't anything I said to make you feel that way, but fuck, that's confusing. Can we start there? What the hell made you think I wanted you to go away?"

Starting with the hard questions, the same way I would. I shouldn't have expected anything less. "Look, I know that we moved really fast up in Chicago. Lightning speed, one thing just led to another, and I thought that it'd be better if I gave you an out. I mean, come on, Kieran, we both know where this is going to go."

"We do, do we? I don't know, seems I don't know how to think for myself, so why don't you fill me in?"

Oh my. Kieran was pissed.

“You live in Chicago. I live here. You’re straight and have a girlfriend. I’m—”

“I have a girlfriend now?”

“Well, if it’s not official, Summer’s certainly up for the job.”

Kieran’s narrowed eyes could cut glass. “Please tell me that little scene at the firehouse isn’t why you left. Please tell me the girl I’ve blown off since I met you isn’t the reason why you cut and run.”

“I have eyes. I saw what was going on, and yes, she’s definitely part of it—”

“Part of it?” Kieran shot to his feet. “I spent one fucking night with her. *One*. Before I met you. The only other time I’ve seen her was when she showed up pretending to give a shit if I was okay.” He gripped the back of his neck with his good hand and paced away from me before turning back around. “So what was the other part, huh? There some other girlfriend I have that I don’t know about?”

“Kieran, this never would’ve worked. Girlfriend or not. You’re straight. How many times did you tell me that when we met? I can count at least three.”

“I didn’t realize you were keeping score.”

“I wasn’t.” I moved to my feet and angled my head up until only inches separated us. “But I was also trying to keep some sort of grasp on reality. Here you were, my own personal knight in shining armor who just so happens to want to throw away his straight card for me. Jesus, if it hadn’t actually happened to me, I would’ve thought it was a rollicking good story.”

Kieran took my chin in hand. “But it did happen to you, and it happened to me. And when you up and left me, I thought I’d go fucking insane. So tell me, Bash, is that the way a straight man would react?”

No, it wasn’t. None of this was how I’d thought Kieran would react. The guy was standing in my living room, for crying out loud. He’d gotten on a plane, flown his fine ass

down here, and then hunted around South Haven until he found me.

“I...” I swallowed, my words and brain getting stuck. “I was—”

“Scared?”

Damn it. I hated admitting weakness of any kind, but with his eyes locked on mine, I had nowhere to run. I *was* scared. Scared of him, me, and everything I wanted in that moment.

Kieran stroked his thumb across my cheek, and I reached up and took hold of his wrist. The man was making my knees weak.

“Would it help if I said it first?”

God yes.

“What I feel whenever I’m around you scares the hell out of me. I have no clue what I’m doing, if what I’m doing is right or if I’m making the biggest ass out of myself. I’m so out of my depth in every way. I literally have a backpack stuffed with clothes in my rental that I threw together hungover.”

“Hungover?”

“Yeah.” He chuckled. “You aren’t the only one who went on a bit of a bender.”

“Is it bad that that makes me feel better?”

“No. But don’t you see? I was so fucking mad at you. I’m *still* so mad at you. You made assumptions and didn’t even give me a heads up or a chance to explain what was really going on. How could you do that? How could you just leave?”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. I wasn’t used to screwing things up so royally, but I’d gotten this all so terribly wrong. “I’m sorry. I—”

“There. That’s what I’ve been waiting for. An apology. I’ve been a fucking mess since you left.”

“I didn’t know—”

“No, you didn’t, because you shut down and left. But you hurt me.”

His words twisted the knife in my heart, and deservedly so. I was never one to jump to conclusions, but it had been easier to write Kieran off this way. I’d told myself it had been for his benefit, when really, it had been for mine.

God. I had never felt more ashamed of myself than I did in that moment.

I reached for Kieran’s hand and laced our fingers, and then I looked up to meet his gaze.

“I truly didn’t believe it would matter if I left. But I see I was completely wrong. I thought by sacrificing what I wanted, it would be easier for you to move on.”

“Move on? To what? Did I ever give you the impression I wanted to move on?”

“No, but I assumed you would eventually.” When Kieran started to protest, I squeezed his hand. “I know, I shouldn’t have assumed anything, but all I could think when I saw you with Summer was that I was standing in the way of a perfect life. You, a wife, a few kids, one of those picket fences straight people seem to enjoy.”

“And yet all I really wanted to enjoy was a beautiful man in heels and a Valentino dress.” Kieran stepped even closer, his thumb stroking over my knuckles, and I almost lost my breath. “Please don’t tell me to go away. Not when you’re the only thing that makes any sense right now.”

I couldn’t have told him to go away even if I wanted to. “I don’t want you to go anywhere. I never wanted either of us to go, you have to know that. I only ran because you were right—I was scared. God, I’m so sorry I hurt you. I never wanted to hurt you. I know there’s no excuse for my bad behavior, but if you could find a way to forgive me, I promise I’ll do my best to make it up to you.”

Kieran stared at me for a long moment, and I don’t think I breathed as I waited for a response. But then his lips twitched.

“Just how do you plan to make it up to me?”

“For starters, go and get your backpack. You’re not going anywhere.”

That smile that could just about melt me to the floor slowly spread across Kieran’s lips. “Yeah?”

“Yes. I told you, I don’t want you to go. But fair warning: you’re in my world now, lieutenant. You think you can handle it?”

“I’m here aren’t I?”

So he was. Now the only question was how to make him stay.

KIERAN

NOT SURPRISINGLY, BASH was still in the shower after I'd washed up and gotten dressed. I wasn't complaining, because it gave me time to process everything that had been said.

Talk about miscommunication. Or lack of communication, in Bash's case. The fact that Summer had been at the center of our breakdown had been enough for me to reach out to her and make sure she understood exactly where I stood.

Yeah, I wouldn't be hearing from her again.

I'd come here for an answer and an apology, and now that I'd gotten both, it was time to see where we went from here. There was no denying a weight had been lifted from my shoulders, and with the knot in my stomach now gone, it was beginning to growl. The French toast from yesterday was all I'd bothered to eat, and if I was hungry, Bash had to be starving.

I headed to his kitchen, where I'd already rummaged through the immaculately organized cabinets yesterday trying to find some pain reliever for when he woke up.

His refrigerator was well stocked, which was surprising, given that he was the only one living here, but it made it easier for me to grab a few things to whip up a quick breakfast. Somehow I had a feeling Bash never turned on his stove, but I doubted he'd have an issue with me using it. I had more than enough experience on kitchen duty at the firehouse to know my way around.

When I couldn't decide between pancakes or omelets, I decided to make both. I didn't know yet which Bash would prefer, and the saying in my house growing up was it was better to have too much than not enough. I desperately needed some coffee, and I assumed he would too, but for the life of me I couldn't figure out how the hell to use his coffee maker. It looked like something out of a professional coffee house, and I wasn't about to touch that and fuck it up. It probably cost more than a year's salary for me.

Trying to whisk the pancake batter one-handed wasn't as easy as I thought it would be, but I was making it work, if just a little slower than usual. I'd managed to get a few frying in the pan before Bash finally made an appearance, looking back to his usual put-together self. Both sides of him were undeniably attractive, something I was still coming to terms with admitting so easily.

"Aren't you full of surprises, lieutenant," he said, coming around the kitchen island. "Do you need any assistance?"

"Actually, if you wanna hold the bowl still for me while I whip these eggs, that'd be great."

"Whip the eggs? What did they do to you?" He gave me a cheeky smile and held on to either side of the bowl.

I grinned and added a dash of milk to the eggs before giving them a good whisk. "Pancakes and omelets okay with you?"

"Perfect," he said as I poured the eggs into the hot pan. "What else can I do?"

"Figure out how to work that blasted coffee machine. If it's not popping a pod into a Keurig, I'm useless."

Bash laughed and went to work getting the much-needed caffeine. I wasn't sure how long I'd last without it.

"So how did you find me?" he asked once the grinder finished its job.

"Well, *someone* left me their business card, so my first stop was to see if you were at work."

“No one works on Sundays here unless you’re in the food business.”

“So I quickly figured out. I was gonna get a hotel and drop by AnaVoge today instead, but I took a walk on the beach first. Guess it was fate you decided to get on a chair and karaoke.”

“Oh God. Please don’t remind me.”

“You asked.”

“So I did. But let’s pretend that never happened. Okay? Good. Now, you said you were going to book into a hotel. Does that mean you haven’t yet?”

“Right,” I said. “I didn’t want to leave you until I knew you were okay. I’ll find one today.”

“You’ll do no such thing.” Bash took two cups and placed them under the spouts. “I have more than enough room here.”

“I couldn’t do—”

“Did you or did you not come down here to see me?”

My lips twitched at Bash’s haughty tone. “I did.”

“You can hardly do that if you’re staying somewhere else. I told you, you’re in my world now, lieutenant, and that means you play by my rules.”

I switched off the stove and placed the food on the island before moving over to Bash, who had just finished pouring milk into the frothing jug.

“And what rules might those be?”

He angled his face toward mine, and he was so close I couldn’t help but reach out and brush the back of my hand over his smooth cheek. God, it felt good to touch him after thinking I never would again.

“For one...”

“Hmm?”

“You should always feel free to touch me whenever you like.”

I chuckled. “That’s a *rule*?”

“Well, in Chicago I know you might’ve felt more... restricted by what you could and couldn’t do. But here the rule is that there are no rules. I want you to touch me. I like you touching me, and if you’re going to be anywhere near me, I get to touch you back.”

“Okay, that sounds more like a demand.”

“Take it however you like.”

I lowered my hand and reached for his waist, then pulled him in close. “I like that rule. Are there any others?”

Bash placed a hand on my chest and the other gently on my shoulder above my sling. “That you have to kiss me good morning as long as you stay here.”

“Oh yeah?”

Bash’s eyes dropped to my mouth. “Yep. That’s your payment.”

“Then let me get right to that.”

“That’s what I like, a man of action.”

I was still smiling as I took those flirty lips with mine, and the second I tasted him again, any and all thoughts of hunger redirected from food to him. Bash groaned and teased his tongue along my lower lip, and a shiver of pleasure raced up my spine.

Jesus. The man was delicious, better than any food on the plates behind us. He ran his fingers up the back of my neck, and I smoothed a hand down to cup his ass. It felt as though it had been years since I’d had him in my arms. The desperate need to get even closer to him clawed at me, and I muscled him back against the counter and went to move my arm to—

“Ow, motherfucker.” I tore my mouth away and clenched my teeth at the pain that shot through my shoulder.

“Oh shit, your shoulder.”

“Yeah.” I winced and put some distance between us. “Damn thing is making it impossible to do anything. So if you

could be a little less, I don't know, sexy or something, that'd be great."

Bash bit into his lip, trying to hold back his grin. "Okay, new rule." He pushed off the counter. "I'll continue to be *extremely* sexy, and when you want to do something about it, tell me, and I'll...accommodate you in a way that won't hurt. I'll happily do the *hard* work."

"How generous of you."

"That's me. I'm a giver. Well, also a receiver sometimes—it just depends on the situation."

Somehow I didn't think we were talking about helping out our fellow man anymore.

"I thought your injury would be a little less painful now that it's been a few days. But it's still really bothering you, isn't it?"

"That has more to do with what went down with Sanderson than a slow recovery. I set myself back a few days."

"Ah, yes. Give me a second; I'm just enjoying the idea of you punching that horrid man with the micro dick square in the face."

I snorted. "Hate to ruin your little fantasy, but the others pulled me off him before it got that far. Though I'm thinking he has a bit of a sore back this week from where it met with the counter."

Bash shook his head. "I don't usually condone violence, but I'm finding myself slightly giddy over this scenario."

"I don't blame you. He's a dick."

"A micro one. That's why he's so loud. Trying to make up for his shortcomings."

"You just might be right. But I don't want to waste our time talking about him."

"You're right. Let's eat. You must be starving."

Right on cue, my stomach growled, and Bash laughed.

“Let me finish making the coffee, and then I’ll call in to work.”

“Are you sure?” I asked as I took a seat at the island. “I don’t want to disrupt your life or anything.”

Bash glanced over his shoulder and arched a brow. “Why not? I’m pretty sure I disrupted yours.”

Wasn’t that the damn truth. From the second I’d pulled him out of that hotel fire until now, Bash had shaken my world to its very core. And while that probably should’ve been alarming, I was running headfirst into the chaos.

“Let me make a quick call,” Bash said as he placed the coffees in front of me. “Then we’ll eat and I’ll take you on a tour of my little island. How does that sound?”

That sounded like the best Monday ever. With the tension from the past few days now firmly behind us, we’d slipped back into that easy friendship we first shared. Only this time there was a humming sexual attraction simmering between us that was getting more intense with every passing second—and I wanted more of those moments with him.

“That sounds perfect.”

BASH

“HOLY SHIT. YOU’VE got to be kidding me.” Kieran’s jaw dropped as he walked into the garage ahead of me. His eyes shifted between the flashy red sports car and the sleek black one, and he moved slowly toward them like he was approaching an untamed animal.

“You like?”

Kieran’s eyes were wild as he looked back at me. “You’ve got a Bugatti Veyron? *And* a Mercedes McLaren? Are you fucking serious?”

“Oh, these old things? I’m surprised they’re even on your radar.”

“I’m supposedly a straight guy. Of course I know cars.”

When Kieran winked at me, I laughed. “Well then, in your expert ex-straight opinion, which should we take out today?”

“I don’t know if I should be allowed to touch either of these babies.”

“That’s a shame,” I said, running my finger along the hood of the Mercedes as I walked toward him. “They do enjoy being handled. And ridden...hard.”

“Jesus.” Kieran licked his lips, and I stepped in front of him, resting my ass on the hood of the Bugatti and straddling his legs. Then I reached for his hand and made like I was going to have him touch me, but at the last second I moved his palm to the hood of the car.

He groaned, dropping his head on my shoulder, and the sound he made was ecstasy to my ears.

“Mmm, I think this one’s the clear winner.” I grinned as he stood back up, shaking his head as he stared at the car.

“It’s a head turner for sure. Doesn’t exactly go along with the low-key day you mentioned.”

“Honey, we were born to stand out. The question is whether we should go topless.”

“I’d rather keep my shirt on— Oh. You meant the car. Definitely topless.”

“Perfect.” I unlocked the car and nodded at the passenger side. “Hit the silver button on your side and we’ll get him naked.”

Kieran lifted a brow. “Him, huh?”

“You may have a different opinion, but only a guy can look this fucking sexy. Now lift.”

Even one-handed, Kieran could’ve probably lifted the whole thing by himself, and after we set the top down, I shot him a grin. “Get in, handsome.”

I didn’t think the smile on his face could get any bigger as he hopped in, practically sliding onto the leather seat and sighing happily.

“And here I thought you were used to driving in something red and flashy,” I said.

“Don’t even pretend like a fire truck is in the same stratosphere, Bash. This car is unreal.”

As I started the engine and the car began to purr, Kieran cursed.

“Damn, it sounds like heaven. You’re a lucky man.”

I backed out of the garage slowly, careful not to hit his rental, but that was the only time I planned on going slow. “I would say I’m a smart, goal-oriented, motivated risk-taker with a fabulous wardrobe before I’d call myself lucky. But thank you.”

“Trust me, there aren’t enough words to describe you.”

I gave him a sidelong glance. “That better be a good thing.”

“Oh, it is.”

“Good.” I stopped at the end of the driveway and pointed at the house a little ways down from us. “That’s where Trent and Shaw live. Well, technically I don’t think Shaw has officially moved in, but as you can see, his Camaro is there, so he can say he still owns his condo all he wants, but we all know where he sleeps.”

“Okay, I have to ask. How the hell do you know Trent Knox?”

“Ahh, our sexy little rocker.”

“I wouldn’t say little.”

“He was when I met him. Just a kid on the beach who knew we should be lifelong friends. Smart from the start. We lost touch for a bit, but when he left TBD, he came back here for a breather and never left. So now you can say lucky me.”

I pulled out onto the road and hit the gas hard, sending us flying and causing Kieran to grab the edge of the door. But hey, he needed to see what this powerhouse could do.

“Oh fuck yes,” Kieran shouted over the roar of the engine, and I kicked it up another notch. Back roads on the island like this one were almost never patrolled, at least not by cops. Alligators, on the other hand...

With the sun beating down already, I flipped on the A/C—yes, I was a diva, and I didn’t like to melt—and then turned on my playlist.

As “Faster Kill Pussycat” began to play, I pushed the volume up to blasting and then looked over to Kieran, who had slid on a pair of black Oakleys.

Damn the man was hot, especially sitting in my car looking like dessert. If someone had told me yesterday this would be happening, maybe I wouldn’t have decided to inject champagne into my veins.

The car vibrated with every pulsing beat of the song, Kieran nodding along and that smile never leaving his face. I made sure to take the long way into town, driving through the road most visitors loved to hit on their trips, the one with the Spanish-moss-draped oak trees that curved over the road to join each other, blocking out the sun.

I turned the volume down enough to yell over it. “Lucas and Jackson live up this road.”

“That where we’re going?”

“No, lieutenant. I’m not sharing today.”

A few minutes later, we made the turn that led into downtown by the beach. I reluctantly turned the song off, since I wasn’t *that* asshole, and pointed out the tattoo shop. “Shaw owns Body Electric, so if you ever want to tattoo my face on your body, that’s where you should go.”

Kieran chuckled. “So it’s faces now, not names, huh?”

“I wouldn’t be opposed to either.”

As we headed down the busy street, I pointed out a few other places of interest before turning onto what we called Club Row.

“Club Row?” Kieran said. “Is there only one street allowed for drinks or something?”

“Unlike Chicago, darling, we prefer to drunkenly stumble a few feet to get to the next spot instead of taking a car or train. Although really, we tend to stick to Argos over the others.”

“Because...?”

I shrugged. “It’s the best.” That gave me an idea... “How long are you planning to stay?”

“Um.” Kieran bit his lip. “I guess that depends on you.”

“On me? How so?”

“Well, you could tell me to leave today, and I would. If that’s what you want. I don’t want to overstay my welcome.”

“Lieutenant, I haven’t even started welcoming you yet.”

I couldn’t see his eyes through his shades, but the sexy smirk was all the confirmation I needed.

I turned my eyes back to the road. “See, now you’ve gone and distracted me.”

“I distracted you? You’re the one talking about *welcoming* me like it’s going to be an event. I’m just hoping in your mind that’s a one-man kind of party.”

“Oh, it’ll be an event, all right, one that ends with a bang, if we’re in luck.”

Kieran chuckled. “Damn, Bash.”

“I know, I know, I’m moving as fast as my car right now, but if you could see how good you look sitting in it, you wouldn’t blame me.”

“Bash?”

“Yes, darling?”

“I really wish my arm wasn’t in a sling right now.”

I let out a delighted laugh as I pulled to a stop and let several people cross in front of us, and when they caught sight of the car, they stopped and did a double take. I leaned across the console to Kieran.

“What’d I tell you? You’re born to stand out.”

Kieran turned his head to look my way, and I took in a breath. He was just so damn beautiful that he really did take one’s breath away.

“Pretty sure that’d be the car, not me.”

I shook my head. “Not from where I’m sitting.”

A horn blasted from behind us, shocking us out of our trance, and I glanced back to see who had so rudely interrupted us. When I spotted Astrid—my receptionist—I smiled and waved.

“Small towns,” I said, and pulled out onto the main road.

“Gotcha. Everyone knows everyone, right?”

“And then some. Another reason why I like my—”

“Privacy?”

“Exactly. That way, you can get up to all kinds of shenanigans and still look people in the eye the next day. It’s much more pleasant than her knowing that her very proper brother isn’t so proper after all. Don’t ask me how I know that. I’m not allowed to tell.”

“Why do I get the feeling you know more about the people of this town than the local priest?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. But if you ever feel the need to confess any deep, longing secrets—or perhaps sinful urges—I’m here for you in any capacity you should need.”

“I bet.”

We passed by several of the local shops, and I was sure to point out my favorite new ice creamery, Licked. “At some point I’m going to take you in there. I swear the owner and I must be related on some level, and one of these days we shall meet. But until then I’m happy to devour her Ground-Shaking Orgasm.”

Kieran’s head whipped around. “What did you just say?”

“That I like to devour her Ground-Shaking Orgasm. Relax, lieutenant. It’s the name of the ice cream flavor.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Were you worried?”

“No.”

“Were you confused?”

“A little.”

“Were you...jealous?” I pulled my glasses down to peer over them.

“So what if I was?”

“That’s not an answer.”

“What was the question again?”

“Were you jealous that I *love* to devour her Ground-Shaking Orgasm?”

“Well, I wasn’t happy about it.”

I grinned and lifted an impish shoulder. “Yep, that’ll do.”

“So glad to hear it.”

“You were totally jealous. That’s okay. But just so you know, I’d much rather devour yours.”

Before Kieran could say anything back, I turned out of the main street and punched the gas.

KIERAN

“YOU WERE RIGHT. That was the best fish and chips I’ve ever had.” Hell, I’d practically licked my empty plate after finishing it off, and now I was stuffed. “How do you not come here every day?”

Bash chuckled and tapped his lips with a napkin. “Why do you think they know me by name?”

“Because everyone knows who you are.”

“Hardly.”

“It’s true. You should’ve heard people talking about you at that tech expo. They thought you were a god.”

He lifted a shoulder and reached for his water. “Well, who am I to deny the will of the people?”

His confidence knew no bounds, although I’d seen firsthand how he shunned being vulnerable, so maybe it was more of a facade than he let on. Either way, there was no denying Bash had a presence no matter where he was, whether here or in Chicago, or probably even Tokyo.

As the waiter came around to grab our empty plates, I rubbed my stomach in satisfaction. “I have to say, I’m surprised you brought me here.”

“Oh? Not my style?”

I couldn’t help but snort as I looked around. This was so not the elegant, over-the-top kind of place we’d gone to in Chicago, that was for sure. The restaurant here was basically a

shack with a large outside patio of mismatched tables and chairs that overlooked the water, but the food was out of this world.

“I admit, I’d give this place a makeover if it were mine, but the look of it helps keep the tourists away. Good food, spectacular views...”

He cast his eyes up and down my body. I felt the heat in that gaze everywhere. So much so that I shifted in my seat, something Bash picked up on right away.

“Nice to know I haven’t lost my touch,” he said.

“Not at all. Jesus. It’s just...”

“Yes?”

I guessed I was here to figure this thing out. “Can I be honest with you?”

“Of course. I pride myself on honesty—even when it’s not wanted.”

Okay, here goes nothing. “It’s just... This thing between us? I’m still trying to wrap my head around it.”

Bash cocked his head to the side and narrowed his eyes.

“Not in a bad way—it’s just I never expected to, umm...” I let my eyes rove down over him.

“Never expected what? You have to say it, Kieran. This is too important for guessing games.”

I licked my lower lip, my nerves at an all-time high. “I never expected to be so turned on by a man.”

Bash sat back in his seat and crossed one of his long legs over the other. “And is that what you are? Turned on?”

“Fuck yes.” A nervous laugh left me. “I’m so fucking turned on right now I’m thankful there’s a table over my lap.”

“Well, I’m not.” Bash sat up, trying to peer around the table.

“Would you be serious?”

“I’m being very serious. You can’t tell me you’re turned on and then expect me not to look. That’s just rude.”

“Bash…”

“Fine. Fine.” He sat back in his seat and sighed. “But don’t think I won’t want proof of that later.”

My cock throbbed at the request, and I reached down to press the heel of my hand to my erection. “See? That’s what I’m talking about. You open your mouth and my dick goes crazy.”

“As it should. My mouth is very talented.”

“Sweet Jesus.” I rubbed a hand over my face as I tried to get my brain to catch up with my very eager body. Back in Chicago I’d definitely tested the waters with Bash, and he’d never pushed too hard or fast and let me move at my own pace. But as I sat there now, I realized the pace I wanted was much faster than where my brain was.

“Okay.” Bash leaned forward. “I’ll be serious. Will that help?”

“Probably not, but we can try.”

“Very good.” He sat up and clasped his hands on the table. “I understand that this is all new to you. It’s one of the main reasons I—”

“Ran away?”

Bash arched a cool eyebrow. “I thought we came to the understanding that I *flew* away. I don’t run anywhere. I knew this was all new to you back in Chicago. That’s why I was giving you an out.”

“But I don’t want an out.”

“Yes, I understand that now. The fact that you flew all the way down here and looked me up? No one’s ever done something like that for me before. That means something to me, Kieran. Something beyond friendship. So the question is, what does it mean to you?”

No one could accuse Bash of not being direct, and I had started this conversation, hadn't I?

“What does it mean?”

“Yes. Why did you get on that plane? Why not just chalk our time together up to a crazy couple of weeks and forget about me?”

The very idea of that made my insides twist. “Because I couldn't. I didn't want to.” I lowered my eyes, trying to make sense of all of the thoughts swirling around in my brain.

“Why not, Kieran?”

My heart thundered and the blood rushed around my head as I thought back to Saturday, when Sean and Xander had announced their wedding date. That was the moment for me. Seeing everyone so happy and in love while I was sitting off to the side alone and miserable because Bash had up and left me.

That was when I'd known it was more. When I'd known I couldn't just forget what happened between the two of us.

“Because I missed you.” I raised my head to see that Bash's eyes had widened. I hadn't expected to say that either, but I'd asked for honesty, so I was gonna give it in return.

“You...*missed* me?”

“Yeah. I know it's crazy and you might be thinking about taking back that offer for me to stay at your house now that you know that. But from the second I knew you'd left me until I saw you standing on that chair at the Overlook, I missed you.”

Bash opened his mouth, about to respond—but, not wanting to lose my nerve, I quickly grabbed hold of my chair and scooted it around the table until I was close enough to take his hand.

“My oldest brother announced his wedding date this weekend.”

Bash grinned. “To Alexander?”

I nodded, my smile automatic as I thought about the goofy grin on Sean's face when he told everyone. I squeezed Bash's hand. "Being there and seeing them all so incredibly happy, so free with themselves and who they loved, reminded me how easy things had felt between you and me. How free I felt with you."

"I'm not sure I've ever heard anything so lovely. Thank you." Bash looked to our hands and back to my face and frowned. "Kieran, honey. I know we're good together, but you're not going to ask me to marry you, are you?"

"What?" I looked down to see I was stroking the back of his left hand and laughed. "No. God no. I'm just trying to explain that I...I missed you."

Bash reached up to cradle my face. "I missed you too—dreadfully."

"You did?"

Bash nodded. "Embarrassingly so. You can ask Shaw the next time you see him, or even Jackson. I was about as useless as a pot of decaf. And I'm never useless."

I believed him. Bash was one of the most successful people I'd ever met. I found it difficult to believe he was ever anything other than efficient with his time. So the idea that I'd made such an impact on his life gave me hope that I wasn't the only one who wanted to explore this—whatever this was.

"So this has never happened to you before either?"

"You might want to be a little more specific with that question, handsome."

Huh? Oh, well, of course he'd been with men before, but... "I meant, no one has ever made you..."

"Skip out on a night out with my friends so I could wallow in my bathtub and cry into my cut cucumbers?"

My lips twitched. "Uh, sure. That's exactly what I meant."

Bash chuckled, gently ran his fingers along my stubble, and let his hand drop back into his lap. "I had a few relationships in my twenties—and no, I'm not telling you how

long ago that was, so don't even ask. But I was busy building my career, and none of them could compete with that. I was more than happy to date around and just wet the whistle when need be, but no one ever stopped me in my tracks."

"Until me?" Something about that revelation made me really fucking happy.

"Until you."

There was no stopping my smile. "Uh huh."

"Well, that's a very smug *uh huh*."

I stretched my legs out on either side of his and shrugged. "Yeah, it is."

"I suppose you think that means I'm all smitten with you now."

"A smitten kitten."

"Don't you make fun of me." Bash brushed at a piece of imaginary lint on his pants and, shock of all shocks, blushed. This was new.

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are. But it's your own fault. Tossing me over your shoulder and pulling me from a fire, then taking me to dinner and a sexy little burlesque show. If I didn't know better, I might just think you set out to seduce me."

That made me laugh. "By setting fire to your hotel? Yes, that's where my evil plan all began."

Bash pursed his lips. "There has to be some explanation as to why I fell for a straight guy. I never do that."

"Hold up."

"What?"

"You *fell* for me?"

Bash waved his hand in the air as though trying to brush it off, but it was already out there.

"Oh, you know what I mean."

If I hadn't before, I sure as hell did now, as the sun set over the sound and disappeared behind the dunes.

KIERAN

I COULDN'T GET Bash's words out of my head as he drove us back to his place. He'd fallen for me? After the confusion of the last few days, it came as an unexpected—and massive—relief that I wasn't the only one feeling something here. Add to that the fact that he'd revealed I was the first person to make him stop his busy career, and my head was exploding.

As I watched him, I held my hand out over the passenger door, loving the feel of the wind through my fingertips. Now that the sun had set, the night air was much more bearable, cool even with the top off the Bugatti. This car was all passion and sex, something I was starting to relate to Bash, and...fuck. I wasn't used to being so out of my element, not when it came to sex. But the truth was that I didn't have a clue how to handle getting past third base with Bash, and that lack of confidence in the bedroom wasn't something I wanted him to see.

Dammit. Maybe I should've thought this through before I showed up here, but I hadn't expected that Bash would even want to see me, much less fuck me. Or fuck him. Shit, I didn't even know the basics, but I knew how my dick had been responding every time I was around him. Even now, watching him, his black hair ruffled and his skin practically glowing in the moonlight, made me want to reach out and touch him somewhere, everywhere. The sling was the only thing keeping my hands off him, because the more I thought about it, nothing sounded sexier than getting each other off in this hot ride.

“Why do I feel like you’re thinking something especially naughty?” Bash cast a sideways glance my way, a wicked smirk on his face. “Care to clue me in?”

“You, in this car. It’s a sexy picture.”

“Oh?” Bash straightened and flipped his hair, giving me an even hotter pose. I reached for my cell and pulled up the camera, snapping a photo. It was gorgeous, like he could ever take a bad one, and without thinking, I held the phone up in selfie mode and took another picture, but this time with the two of us in the frame.

Now that’s a good shot.

But what stuck out the most was how happy I looked, like the outside finally matched what I was feeling inside.

“Send that to me, please,” Bash said. “I promise I’ll do a better job of hiding your pictures from my friends.”

“Eh, let them see. I don’t care.”

“I’m sure I’ve told you I’m selfish. Maybe I don’t want them looking at what’s m—” He stopped himself, like he’d almost said too much, and swallowed. “No need to make them any more jealous than they already are.”

“That’s not what you were about to say.” I unfastened my seatbelt so I could get closer to him. “You don’t want anyone looking at what’s yours? Is that where you were going?”

Facing him now so that my good arm could reach him, I stroked my hand along his thigh. Bash let out a soft moan as I slid my hand higher, his hips arching. “You better be glad we’re almost home,” he said, covering my hand with his and moving it between his thighs.

I’d barely put my hands on him and his erection was already steadily pulsing under my hand, growing even harder as I gave him a light squeeze. Unable to resist getting even closer, I dropped my chin on his shoulder and brushed my lips across his neck. I could feel the way he shivered beneath my mouth, and I repeated the move before kissing just beneath his ear.

When he cursed, I breathed him in. The heat from his skin combined with the delicious way he always smelled had me ravenous. But before I could do more damage, I heard his garage doors open and sat back in my seat.

He tightened his grip on my hand. “Don’t even think about going anywhere,” he growled, steering the car into its spot with a sharp squeal of rubber against the tile. I barely had time to blink before he’d cut the engine, unfastened his seatbelt, and climbed over the center console to straddle my lap.

“Oh shit.”

His smile was savage and full of sensual promise. “You started it. Want me to stop?”

“Hell no.” I grabbed a fistful of his shirt and pulled him down to me, his lips slamming down on mine in a kiss that felt like he’d been waiting years, not minutes for. In such a small, enclosed space, he was pressed up against me so tight I was completely surrounded by him, and in that moment, I wanted nothing more.

I reached around with my good hand to grab his ass, holding him against me as his tongue dove between my lips. He rocked his hips over mine as we tasted each other, and it felt like forever since I’d had him like this. Would it be possible to ever get enough? When it felt this good, I didn’t think so.

I had the thought that things might be moving from zero to sixty right here, right now, and despite my insecurity over everything I didn’t know, my body was ready. More than ready.

He rocked into me again, but in the cramped space when he dropped his hand to adjust his position, it knocked into my bad arm, causing me to let out a grunt of pain.

Tearing his lips away, he looked down in horror. “Oh no, did I hurt you?”

“No, I’m fine.” This fuckin’ sling was starting to really piss me off.

Something in my expression must've told him otherwise, because he pulled back. "Would you tell me if I did?"

"Probably not."

Bash shook his head and pressed a light kiss on my injured shoulder before popping the passenger door open and climbing out. "That was hot, lieutenant, I'll give you that. Maybe I can make you more comfortable inside?"

Yep, this was the moment. As my eyes roved over Bash's body, his erection still hard and ready for me, I knew without a doubt it was happening tonight. And I wanted it to, God yes, but...how the hell did I make this good for him? I already knew it would be good for me, but I wanted to reciprocate, that was for damn sure.

A thought crossed my mind, and as much as I cringed to think of it, I knew I didn't have much of a choice.

"Um." I reached down to press the heel of my palm over my dick. "I'm gonna calm things down for a minute and then I'll be in."

"Of course, gorgeous. Take your time." Bash winked as though he thought I was going to masturbate in his car, and while that sounded like a good idea for another day, I had something far more embarrassing to do. Or ask.

I waited until Bash was inside to pull my phone back out, and as I hit Bailey's number, I had to swallow down a rising sense of panic.

The nerves were premature, though, because his cell went straight to voicemail, which usually meant he was on an important job and couldn't be bothered.

Shit. I hadn't thought about what I'd do if he didn't answer, but that meant I had three options left, and none of them were good.

Sean, Xander, or Henri. None of them would let me live this down, but my pride was less of an issue when the alternative was humiliating myself in front of Bash.

I hit the number of whom I hoped was the least of all evils, and when Sean picked up, I didn't know whether to sigh in relief or throw up.

“If you're callin' to bribe me to be my best man, you'd better put up stiff money, 'cause I'm gonna make you and Bailey fight for it.”

Typical Sean, always mouthing off, but at least it gave me a second to gather my courage. “As if either of us are gonna fight to stand next to your sorry ass. If anything, you're gonna have to pay someone to do the job.”

“Yeah, yeah, talk all the shit you like, but we all know the best man always gets the ladies.”

My stomach flipped, and in usual Sean fashion, he just kept on yapping, taking my silence as indifference to his bullshitting. Little did he know I was trying to work out how to tell him I wasn't interested in getting a...lady.

“Not that you've ever really needed help,” he said. “But hey, you aren't getting any younger.”

“Do you ever shut the fuck up?”

“Hmm?” I heard the squeak of a chair and figured Sean was down at the precinct. “Sometimes, but that's a whole other kind of conversation.”

Actually, that was the exact conversation I wanted to have. But fuck, where to even start?

“Okay, so if you aren't calling with a bribe—whaddya need? More pills? Alcohol? A massage with a happy ending?”

Oh for fuck's sake... “I need some damn advice, okay, so can you shut the hell up so I can talk?”

“Well, hello, someone's in a bad fuckin' mood.”

Horny. I was in a horny mood, and I knew the only way I was ever going to get off this phone and inside that house was to get this conversation over and done with.

“I'm not in a bad mood, I just need to ask you something, but...” Jesus, why couldn't Bailey have answered his phone?

“Buuut what?”

“It’s... Uh, fuck.”

“Okay, you sound a little stressed. You want me to swing by and we can have some dinner? I’m sure Nichols can do fine without me for an hour or so.”

“Well, that’d be great and all, but I’m not in Chicago.”

The silence then was deafening. It took a lot to shock Sean, but I had a feeling by the end of this conversation he was gonna need a drink. I knew I would.

“Did you just say—”

“That I’m not in Chicago? Yeah.”

“Uh, then where the hell are you?”

It’s now or never, Kieran. Just do it. Rip the Band-Aid off and tell him. At least you won’t be there when they’re all talking shit about you.

“I’m in South Haven.”

“The fuck is that?”

I let out a sigh and closed my eyes. *Really, God? Was Bailey so much to ask for?* “It’s in Georgia.”

“As in the *state* of Georgia?”

“Wow, you don’t miss anything, do you? No wonder you’re a detective.”

“One second.” I heard the scrape of his chair against the floor and assumed he was heading outside. “Okay, so, you’re in Georgia? Why? Did work send you there?”

“Uh, no. I’m here because I—” *Oh, fuck it.* “I met someone, and this is where they live.”

Crickets. And I hadn’t even got to the most shocking part.

“You’re telling me that you *flew* all the way to fuckin’ Georgia for some chick? Holy shit, Kieran.” My sentiments exactly. “Is she pregnant?”

“What the hell, Sean?”

“Sorry, but why the hell else would you be chasing some girl down that lives out of state?”

“Maybe because I, oh, I don’t know, *like* her. But that’s the thing.” *Here goes nothing.* “It’s not a her.”

One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi...
“*What* did you just say?”

“I said it’s not a her.”

“Then what the fuck is it? A cat you saw online for adoption?”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Sean.” I groaned and dropped my head. “How are you this stupid?”

“Stupid?”

“Yes.” I lowered my voice until it was a whisper. “It’s a *guy*.”

I sent up a quick prayer, hoping for some patience. Well, at least now I wasn’t worried about coming all over Bash’s car. Sean’s stupidity had cured that.

“I’m sorry, but did you just say a *guy*?”

“Yes. Damn it, Sean, catch the hell up, would you? I flew down here yesterday because a *guy* I have been...hanging out with had to come home, and I—”

“Don’t you dare fucking stop there.”

It looked like I finally had his attention. “I wanted to see him, okay?”

There was a pause, and then Sean said, “Define hanging out.”

“Define fuck you.”

“Hey, you called me, remember?”

“Something I’m deeply regretting at this very second. Is Xander home? Maybe I could call him. At least he knows Bash.”

“Bash? Is that the, uh—”

“Guy, Sean. The *guy*’s name? Yes. Jesus, you do know you sleep with a man every night, right? That you’re about to marry one?”

“Of course I know that, I’m just... I’m fucking shocked, okay? Give a man a moment.” He took several deep breaths, and I did the same before he finally said, “Xander knows about this? That you’ve been seeing a guy? Since when?”

“I mean, we didn’t exactly discuss it, but I’m pretty sure he suspects something. He met him when Bash was in town for this big tech expo.”

“Hang on a second. Are you talking about that bazillionaire techy geek guy? Uh, Sebastian something?”

“Yeah. That’d be him.”

“Wow.”

That about covered it. Not wanting to spend any more time away from said techy geek guy, I swallowed down all my nerves. “So about why I’m calling?”

“Uh, yeah, you said you— Oh hell no, Kieran, you need advice? Advice about what?”

“What do you think? And trust me, this is more painful for me than it is you right now.”

“Aww, well, you’re just not doing it right, then, baby brother.”

I groaned and shook my head. “I’m not doing it at all yet, moron. That’s why I’m calling you. You’ve...been in my situation before.”

“Are you seriously asking me for advice on sex right now? With a man?”

I was never, *ever* going to live this down. “Yes, and if you give it to me in the next five minutes without any commentary, I’ll give you permission to give me as much shit as you like the next time I see you.”

“Promise?”

“Sean...”

“Okay, okay. Well, fuck, chalk this up to conversations I never thought I’d have with you, but let’s start at the beginning. Can’t have you givin’ the Bailey brothers a bad name.”

BASH

WHEN KIERAN MENTIONED needing a minute, it was the perfect opportunity to get myself ready. A robe wasn't cutting it tonight, no sir, so I rummaged through my closet until I found something that would have Kieran wanting to rip it off.

I stripped out of my clothes, keeping an ear out for the door, and smiled as I fingered the sheer pink scarf I'd chosen. It was long enough that I was able to tie it around my waist, leaving a bow covering what I wanted Kieran to unwrap for himself.

Too much? Nah. I was a gift, and if I had confetti, I'd probably sprinkle it all over the bed just to further my point.

As I was admiring myself in the mirror, I heard the garage door close, and a few seconds later Kieran called out, "Bash?"

Not wanting to spoil my grand appearance, I walked out to the hall and said, "I'm up here. Come find me. Or find me and come."

I smirked as I skipped off back to the bedroom, hitting the mood lights and then climbing up on the bed. Hmm, what position would be most flattering? Probably all fours, but that would hide the bow. I decided to puff up the pillows and lie across them like Cleopatra waiting for Mark Antony. Just as I got into position, I could hear Kieran making his way up the stairs.

"Oh, lieutenant, please hurry. My goose feather pillow just caught fire."

As his tall, muscular body finally came into view, I bit down on my lip, finishing off my seductive pose.

The look on his face was worth the extra effort. I vowed right then to keep him on his toes and pull out the surprises for as long as I had him.

He glanced down at his hips and then back up to me. “So much for calming down. Damn, Bash.”

“Well, I didn’t know you were going to surprise me by showing up in South Haven or I would’ve gotten you a welcome gift. It’s a little late, but”—I swept my hand over my body and smiled—“here you go.”

He walked toward me slowly, his eyes trailing over every inch of my body, leaving goosebumps in their wake. As he stopped beside the bed, he took one end of the bow and rubbed the material between his fingers. “I hope you don’t welcome all your guests this way.”

I shook my head, grinning. “Don’t you want to unwrap me?”

I didn’t have to ask twice before he began to slowly pull the bow free, and I took delight in the hunger I saw. The way he sucked in a breath, his eyes heated and his jaw clenching as he took me in. And while I wanted him to like what he saw, I wanted him to touch me even more.

“You’re definitely the hottest gift I’ve ever received.” Kieran licked his lips but didn’t come any closer. Instead, he unfastened the sling and tossed it aside, and then he lifted his shirt up using his good hand but winced before getting it over his head.

“Let me,” I said, moving up on my knees in front of him. I carefully pulled the shirt off him, over his head and slowly down his arm. I had to remember not to get too crazy with his shoulder still healing, and that gave me an idea.

“Hey, gorgeous,” I said, and leaned in to kiss him lightly. “I’ll be right back.”

I dashed off into the en suite, quickly finding what I needed, and when I came back and Kieran saw what was in

my hand, his eyebrows shot up.

“What exactly do you plan to do with that red lipstick?”

I popped off the lid and moved in front of him, running a hand down his muscled chest. “Well, I want to have my way with you, but I’m afraid I’ll get a little too carried away in the moment. Do you trust me?”

“I do. But I’d prefer that color on you and not me.”

“I don’t know. I think this 1950 Le Monster Matte is the perfect shade for your complexion.” I rolled the lipstick up and made a diagonal line across his bruised shoulder, careful not to push too hard. When I finished off the X, I popped the top back on and smiled. “X usually marks the spot, but it’s a reminder for me not to get too...rough.”

“That’s too bad. That was exactly what I was hoping for.”

Before I knew it, Kieran pushed me back onto the bed and stole the lipstick out of my hand. He straddled me, still, unfortunately, in his jeans, and rolled the lipstick up.

I chuckled. “And just what do you plan to do with that? I’m not the one who’s hurt.”

“You need a reminder of where *not* to touch. I want a reminder of where *to* touch.” He drew an X right above my cock and looked up at me under his lashes, a wicked gleam in his eyes. He wasn’t going to shy away tonight. Delicious anticipation curled in my stomach.

“Now this sounds like my kind of game, lieutenant.”

“Oh yeah?” Kieran re-capped the lipstick and tossed it down on the covers, then reached for the button of his jeans.

“Definitely.” I leaned back on my elbows as he drew his zipper down.

“As you know, I’m still kind of new to this ‘being with a man’ situation. So I hope you don’t mind if I just”—his eyes still on mine, Kieran wrapped a firm, warm hand around my excited dick—“feel my way through it.”

“Mind?” My hips arched up into his touch. “The only thing I’m going to mind is if you stop.”

“No chance of that,” he said, more to himself than me, as his fingers flexed and he gave me a slow pull.

“Damn,” I moaned, and flopped down to my back, draping my arm across my eyes. It was hard enough—yes, pun *included*—looking at him straddled over me. But add in him finally touching me where I most wanted him, and I was embarrassingly close to spraying all over him like my favorite bottle of Dom Pérignon.

Kieran continued to learn my shape and length one solid stroke at a time, and the more comfortable he became, the bolder his movements were. Up and down, a tight squeeze at the base. He was working me in the same way I imagined he did himself, and when he swiped his thumb over the sensitive head of my cock, my hips jerked up.

Desire swirled in his dark blue depths, and a red stain tinged his cheeks. When he let me go and moved to climb off me, all I could do was lie there and watch.

Kieran was gorgeous. With his shirt off and his jeans hanging open, the picture he made was downright delectable. Which made me thankful I was already flat on my back, because seriously, the man was enough to make me swoon.

I reached down to continue the good work he had started. Kieran kicked out of his shoes, hooked his thumbs into the sides of his jeans, and shoved them down his hips. Once he was as gloriously naked as I was, he straightened back up to his full height, and the impact made me halt.

“Don’t stop,” he said in a voice straight out of every one of my fantasies. I spread my legs further apart where they dangled off the end of the bed, to place one of my *biggest* assets on better display for him. “Fucking hell.”

Kieran licked his lips as he took a step toward me, his eyes fixated on the way I was sliding my fist up and down my shaft. His concentration was as much a turn-on as all of his naked muscles. It was as though he were taking notes in his head and

saving them for next time. Then he came to a stop between my thighs, and my heart began to thump in time with each throb of my dick.

“You know one thing that I’ve always loved when it comes to sex?”

I was absolutely positive I’d love anything and everything when it came to sex with him. “What’s that, handsome?”

Kieran leaned down and braced his hands on either side of my hips. “When someone sucks my dick until my toes curl.”

Um, yes please.

“Let’s see if you feel the same.”

“Yes.” I nodded eagerly, angling myself up toward his mouth. “Let’s.”

Kieran smirked, and holy hellfire, I thought my head just might explode as he flicked his tongue over the tip of my cock. This was the last thing I’d expected tonight. I’d been prepared to walk him through everything one step at a time until he was comfortable. But then he parted his lips and blew that—literally—right out of the water.

A soft groan bubbled up out of me as I looked down at the scrumptious man between my thighs, and I reached down and smoothed my hand over Kieran’s short-cropped hair. When he glanced up, his mouth full of my cock, I trembled. What I’d done to deserve such a moment, I didn’t know, but I wasn’t about to question it.

Hell no, you should never question your good fortune. Especially when it had its mouth wrapped around your dick.

Kieran tightened his lips and sucked me in a little deeper, and the wet heat around my sensitive skin made my hips buck up off the mattress. He angled his head up, seeking me out to make sure he was on the right track, and if I had a score card, I would’ve held up a ten.

Heaven help me, the man was driving me crazy, and I was pretty sure I was mumbling incoherent curses as he drew his mouth back up my cock and tongued the slit.

I couldn't stop watching him, his movements eager and not at all unsure, exactly the opposite of what I'd expected for his first time. Hell, it was like he'd taken a class for this. If one existed, there was no doubt in my mind he would ace it.

My whole body shuddered as he took me in deep again, and the sight of him was too much for me to take. I dropped my head back and closed my eyes, even as I kept a hand on the back of his head, encouraging him along. For how long, I didn't know, because I didn't think my cock could get any harder, and the last thing I wanted to do on his first time was give him an unexpected surprise.

But then he had to go and cup my balls at the same time his nose brushed against the trimmed hair above my erection, and holy hell, we were about to have a situation.

"Um, lieutenant." I moved my hand to his jaw and forced him back a little. His eyes shot up to mine, and I didn't miss the flash of panic in them, like maybe he'd done something wrong.

Oh, darling, no—just the opposite.

I struggled to suck in a breath. "We're about to have a code-five fire over here."

His forehead eased and a tease of a smile crossed his swollen lips. "A five-alarm fire?"

"Whatever it is that requires you to use your big hose."

He chuckled and looked down to my feet where my toes were indeed curled.

"You're a little too good at that," I said.

"I was just getting started." He winked at me, and that confidence somehow made him even more damn sexy.

I needed my hands on him, and I needed him now.

"If you're ready for round two, lieutenant, you need to get on the bed." I shifted up to my elbows and licked my lips. "I don't know about you, but I'm ready to slide down a fireman's pole."

KIERAN

SLIDE DOWN A fireman's pole, huh? That told me exactly what I needed to know about who would be giving and who would be taking. Or, as Sean had put it, who would be "topping" and "bottoming."

This was all so new and different, but just thinking about being inside Bash made me climb onto the bed, ready for more. There was something intoxicating about driving him out of his mind, and that had definitely spurred me on to take him even deeper, finding little ways to make him crazy. I hadn't expected him to stop me so soon, but with the way my dick was standing at attention, it was probably a good thing. The last thing I wanted was to blow before I even got inside him.

"So what I'm thinking is this..." Bash plumped up a few pillows against the headboard and then reached for me, pushing me back onto them. "I know how much you love a good show, lieutenant, and this is the best position to enjoy the view."

He straddled my thighs, and his naked body over me was already the hottest thing I'd ever seen. In the back of my mind, I could still feel the surprise at finding a man so attractive, but Bash wasn't just any man.

"How do you feel about audience participation?" I said, teasing the head of his cock with my fingers until he moaned.

"The same way I feel now about blow jobs and your mouth—absolutely necessary." Bash gave me a naughty smile and

leaned over me, and just when I thought he'd kiss me, I heard a click above my head.

A hidden compartment in the headboard opened, revealing his stash of lube, condoms, and even a couple of toys.

"Holy shit," I said as he took out a couple of items and set them on the bed beside us. "I don't know whether to be grateful or alarmed you have a secret spot for all that."

"Grateful, of course." Bash settled back on my thighs and trailed a finger up the underside of my cock. "I keep all the things I need within touching distance. So *you* better get comfortable."

I looked at the mammoth bed he'd shoved me back on. "Don't think I could get more comfortable than this."

"No? I think you could. For instance..." Bash wrapped his hand around my erection and gave me a long, slow pull. "I think you would be much more comfortable if *this* was somewhere hot and tight. Somewhere you could really let go and release all of your pent-up frustrations...wants... desires..."

Bash leaned down to flick his tongue over my nipple.

"Let it all out," he said as he aimed a sultry look at me. "Inside me."

"*Fuck.*" I took a shaky breath and reached for him, then slid my fingers through the longer strands of his hair so I could pull him up my body. "I want to feel that. I want to see it."

"Mmm." Bash placed a hand by my head then kissed his way over to my ear. "Then get ready, gorgeous. That's exactly what you're going to get."

Bash slid away from me, kissing and teasing his way down my neck, across my pecs, where he scraped his teeth against the firm muscle.

"I can't tell you how many times I've fantasized about this chest of yours, lieutenant. So brawny and masculine, it makes my poor little...*heart* pound."

His sinful smirk made it clear it was a lot more than his heart that was affected by my muscles. And when he slinked further down my body, I could feel the proof of that against my thigh.

His cock was as hard as mine, still excited from the lip service I'd given to it, and even more so from the up-close-and-personal inspection he was giving me now. His hands were all over me, trailing across every naked inch of skin he could see. Then he drew a path down the middle of my sternum with the tip of his tongue, and my hips punched up.

Bash raised his head, his face hovering over my abs as my cock pressed flush against the smooth skin of his chest. The fact that my pre-cum was marking him made my balls tighten.

"Now remember," he said in a teasing voice. "No straining that shoulder of yours."

"Uh huh, I remember."

"You promise?" Bash kissed my abs and then slid a little further south, and I was so caught up with watching him I said nothing in response.

That was a mistake, because he stopped and raised his head.

"Lieutenant?"

"Huh?"

"Do you promise?" Bash moved to his knees.

"Yeah, I promise."

Bash eyed my hard dick and then looked back to me. "Good. Can you remind *me* when I'm looking for something to hang on to in a few minutes?"

Jesus Christ. The idea that he was gonna ride me so hard he'd need to hold on to something made me wish my arm was fully functional, because there was nothing I wanted more than to give him the kind of rough-and-tumble sex he clearly wanted. It also had me reaching for the condom he'd tossed on the bed earlier.

I might not be able to drive him into the mattress right this second, but I sure as hell could give him the stiff pole he wanted to slide down.

“You have my fucking word.”

Bash grinned and plucked the packet from my fingers and moved up so he was straddling me mid-thigh. With his eyes on mine, he tore the packet open with his teeth then looked down to where I was holding my cock upright.

“Why, thank you for the assistance, kind sir.” He really amped up the Southern drawl as he rolled the condom on. Then he batted his lashes and reached for the bottle of lube. “I always do appreciate it when a big, strappin’ man like yourself offers me a...helping hand.”

Biting back a laugh, I tried to remember a time I’d ever been so amused while getting my dick stroked. But that was what made Bash so...Bash. He was one of a kind and *never* did what was expected, and something about that really turned me on.

So did the other idea his words had just brought to mind. It was something Sean had mentioned, something I’d never even thought about, but...

“Speaking of helping hands.” I reached for the bottle of lube and poured some into my palm.

“And what do you plan to do with that, lieutenant?”

Hopefully something he enjoyed. I tossed the bottle aside and crooked a finger at him. Bash leaned down over me. I slid my slick palm over his ass until my slippery fingers could tease up and down his crack.

“Ooh. Aren’t you full of surprises?” Bash squirmed and pushed back a little, widening his straddle, which made his cheeks naturally part. Something I appreciated, considering I couldn’t use one of my hands.

I slid two of my fingers up and down his hot, narrow entrance, and Bash dropped his forehead to my chest and rocked back into them. He liked that. Nothing was hotter than knowing you were pleasing your partner.

I knew he hadn't expected this of me. Hell, if I hadn't been able to get a hold of anyone back home, he wouldn't have gotten it either. But as I pressed the tip of my finger against the tight little hole, Bash purred in my ear.

"Kieran..." His dick was leaking all over mine as I teased and tormented him. Then my finger slipped past the first ring of muscle, and Bash shoved back on to it.

He was right. His body was tight and hot, and if it felt that way around my index finger, I couldn't begin to imagine how it would feel around my cock. I slowly pulled out and then pushed it back in, and when the sharp sting of teeth hit my chest, followed by a moan, I chuckled.

This was the first time Bash had stopped talking. There were no witty remarks, no flirty comments, just the sounds of someone who was highly aroused and totally in the moment. His breathing had kicked up a little at the second finger, and when I began to widen them, his moans turned to curses.

Bash raised his head, his eyes a little wild as he placed his hands on my chest and pushed up to a seated position. He clamped a firm hand around the base of his dick in an effort to calm himself. When my fingers slipped free of him, he gasped.

His cheeks were flushed as his eyes roved all over me. When he rose to his knees, all I could think was how goddamn gorgeous he was.

My heart thumped as Bash licked his lips—and when he reached back and guided my cock into position, I thought it just might stop. This was the hottest thing I'd ever been a part of. When Bash's body engulfed mine until he was fully seated, I knew I'd never seen a more beautiful sight in my life.

"Damn..." The word slipped past my lips before I could stop it. "You are so fucking sexy."

Bash hummed as he smoothed his hands up my chest and wriggled around on me, no doubt trying to accommodate my length. "As are you and this lovely, thick pole of yours, lieutenant."

I chuckled and ran a hand up his thigh. Bash rocked his hips a little, making a curse fly from my lips.

“Oh yes, I think I’m going to like sliding up and down this a lot.”

I dug my fingers into his leg, his wicked grin telling me he knew exactly what he was doing to me.

“Would you like that?” Bash planted his hands on my chest and slowly slid himself part of the way off me before reseating himself. “If I slide up and down you—”

The damn tease began to roll his hips even faster.

“—over and over again.”

As I caught on to his rhythm, I punched my hips up. When Bash clamped tight around me and he threw his head back, I knew I’d hit the fucking jackpot.

“Oh God,” he panted as he sat upright and ground down on me. He reached for his dick and began to stroke it. “Kieran…”

Oh fuck yes, he was close. I could tell by the strain in his voice, the tension in his body. Knowing I’d gotten this firecracker of a man close to exploding made everything inside me roar with satisfaction.

Bash’s dark eyes locked on mine as he braced his free hand on my chest, and as I continued to thrust up into him, they became even darker. All of the lust, all of the desire that had been building between us since we first met was finally being acknowledged, and it felt un-fucking-real. *He* felt un-fucking-real.

Then he lowered his head and whispered across my lips, “Ready for that show?”

Fuck yes I was, but before I could even answer, Bash sat up until I was as deep as I could possibly get.

I balled my left hand into the covers so I wouldn’t be tempted to reach out and grab him. Bash tipped his head back and ran a hand down his neck. His lithe body all but gleamed in the shadows of the room as he circled his hips over mine and began to masturbate for me.

He was a thing of beauty, one right out of all of my recent fantasies, and my cock began to throb even harder. Bash raised his head and looked down at me. When he bit into that sexy bottom lip, I was done for.

I dug my fingers into his thigh as I bucked under him, shoving myself as deep as I could get, and as my climax slammed into me, Bash flew over the edge too. He cried out and came in a hot spray all over me—and while that might've alarmed me a couple of weeks ago, experiencing it right now was about the most erotic thing I'd ever seen in my life.

Sex had always been good for me, something I enjoyed on the regular. But nothing had prepared me for what I'd felt tonight. This hadn't just been good—it'd been out of this fucking world.

Bash collapsed on top of me and pressed a gentle kiss to the X on my shoulder, and I knew there was a real danger of me becoming addicted to this...addicted to him.

KIERAN

I COULDN'T TELL if I was awake or still sleeping. All I knew was it felt like I was wrapped up in a cloud, with every muscle in my body so relaxed that I doubted I could move even if I wanted to.

My mind flashed back to the pure ecstasy on Bash's face as he came, and it was an image I didn't think I'd ever forget—and didn't want to. All the worry and doubt had been for nothing, because being with Bash was as easy as breathing.

And speaking of...

The soft whisper of Bash talking to someone told me I wasn't still dreaming after all. I opened my eyes and saw him lounging back against the pillows, his cell to his ear.

"Let's move the meeting to next week and have the team start looking into Aventural's sales growth from last quarter... Mhmm... Right, I agree." Like he could feel my eyes on him, Bash looked at me and smiled. "That's all for now, Jackson, and thank you."

He ended the call and tossed his phone aside then burrowed back into the covers to face me. How he still looked so good first thing in the morning was beyond me.

"Good morning, gorgeous. I hope I didn't wake you."

I yawned and shook my head. "Not at all. You can work if you need to."

"That's the good thing about being the boss. I don't need to. Not today, anyway." Bash slid his hand up the side of my

thigh and massaged my hip, and after last night's workout, it felt fucking heavenly.

“So you're free today? All day?”

“Mhmm.” He squeezed my hip and then trailed his fingers up along my side. “Whatever shall we get into? Any requests?”

Good question, considering I hadn't really thought past getting an audience with Bash, and now here I was, waking up in his bed. “If you're offering a full body massage with those magic hands of yours, I'm not gonna turn it down.”

Bash let out a tinkling laugh and pushed the covers down to my hips. “I'd love to start there.” He ran his hand lightly over my shoulder, the X still in place and, surprisingly, barely smudged. Then he moved up to my neck, massaging the back and earning an appreciative groan from me.

“So I have you for today, but what about tomorrow? And the next day?”

I arched a brow. “That depends.”

“On what?”

“You.”

“Oh.” Bash ran his fingers down to my chest and then massaged the muscle there. “I see. It depends on my magic fingers, huh?”

“Among other things.”

“My magic cock?”

I choked out a laugh and shook my head. “If that were the case, I may not leave.”

I expected him to laugh, since obviously I was joking, but a flicker of something I couldn't quite put a name to flashed behind Bash's eyes, and I wondered if I'd said the wrong thing.

“I'm kidding,” I said. “I swear I won't overstay my welcome.”

“Overstay? That’s not—” He stopped himself and forced a smile. “You can stay as long as you’d like.”

“That’s good to know. I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to get out of this cloud bed.”

“Then my evil plan worked.” The soft touch of his fingertips along my stomach made me shiver. “You mentioned you’re off for two weeks, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then maybe you could just stay here for those two weeks.” When I responded with stunned silence, he looked up at me, and the vulnerability I saw was even more surprising than his question. “If you’d like to, of course. No pressure. I’ll still use my magic cock and fingers on you for as long as I have you.”

I narrowed my eyes, trying to ferret out the truth. “You want me to stay? Really?”

“Of course I do.”

“Why?”

“Why not?”

I scoffed. “That’s not an answer.”

“What if I attempt to actually cook and set the kitchen on fire? It happened to Trent, it could happen to me.”

“Trent Knox set a kitchen on fire?”

Bash nodded. “They had to send out trucks and everything. Firefighters everywhere. So, you see? It’s too dangerous to leave me here alone. If you don’t stay, you’re putting my life at risk.”

I laughed. “That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard. But if it’ll keep you safe...I’ll stay.”

“You will? Because you want to, not because you’ll feel responsible for my third-degree burns if you leave?”

“Oh, I’d feel responsible.” I grinned and draped my arm over his waist, still feeling the ache in my shoulder, but it was

down to a bearable pain instead of agony. Bash pushed his leg between my thighs, intertwining us so that our bodies pressed up against one another. He tucked his head under my chin, and as he held me close, I couldn't decide which sensation overwhelmed the other—arousal or comfort.

He let out a contented sigh, and I wondered if he ever let anyone hold him like this. It felt like he was giving me a peek behind the curtain, at a side he never showed anyone. Bash came off as all-powerful in his life, in his work, in his friendships...hell, just breathing. What would it be like if he let his guard down and let someone in? He said he didn't form romantic relationships because no one ever made him look up and take notice, but it sure felt like he was taking notice of me. What had I done to deserve it?

“Bash,” I murmured in his hair, and he snuggled in closer. “Why me? Everyone loves you, and you could choose any of them to be here with you right now. So why me?”

“I could ask you the same question, lieutenant.”

“But I asked you first.”

“You want a reason besides the fact that you're the sexiest man on the planet and I almost lost my tongue when I first saw you without all that gear?”

I chuckled, the sound muffled by his thick hair. “Besides that, yes.”

“Okay, okay.” He sighed and pressed a kiss to my collarbone. “Because you're someone I respect, and that's the highest compliment I can give. Because you're a protector. I can't think of many people who would put their life at risk for someone else, much less someone whose name they don't even know. I'm still here because of you, and I'll never forget that. But you didn't only save me—you stood up for me when you didn't have to, and that tells me so much about who you are. There aren't many people I admire in this world, Kieran, but I admire you. That means something to me.”

That means something to me. He'd said that last night too, about how I'd come all this way to see him. It was almost like

he was so used to being the one going out of his way that he was surprised to see anyone else making an effort to do that for him. Which pissed me off, to be honest, because anyone around him should realize how lucky they were to be in his life.

Shit, KB, protective much?

He made circles along the bare skin of my back and gave me another soft kiss, this time on my chest. “I didn’t expect you.”

Four simple words, but they said so much. How the hell had this happened? A few weeks ago I hadn’t even known Bash existed, or that I’d ever so much as look at a guy, and now here I was planning on staying with him until he got tired of me or I went back to work—whichever came first.

This was crazy. But Bash was right.

“I didn’t expect you, either,” I said softly.

I could feel Bash’s lips curve against my chest, and I pressed a kiss in his hair.

“So you’re all mine for the next three hundred and thirty-six hours, give or take a few. What happens after that?”

Geez, had he done that calculation in his head? Math was definitely not my subject. I’d stick to firefighting.

“Once I go back to Chicago?”

He nodded.

I had no fucking clue. With everything between us happening at such a rapid pace, I hadn’t even let myself think of the possibility of more. But last night had changed everything. I was used to one-night-stands, but waking up with Bash this morning didn’t feel anything like that. I wasn’t rushing to leave or sneaking out in the middle of the night. Hell, I just committed to spending all my time off here, which meant I was either insane, or heading down a path I didn’t have any experience with.

“Honestly?” I said. “I don’t want to think about that right now. Let’s just see where it goes.”

“Where it goes? What makes you think I’m a go-with-the-flow kind of guy?” Bash lifted his head and pushed up to his elbow, still keeping our legs entwined. He ran the back of his smooth hand against my stubbled jaw, and when I nipped at his fingers, he grinned. “Lieutenant, I like plans and lists and knowing what to expect at all times. You’re throwing me off my game.”

“Should I apologize?”

“Not unless you want me to break out the whip.”

“Is that what else you’re hiding in your headboard?”

Bash wagged his brows. “Guess you’ll have to wait and find out.”

My cock jerked, and Bash caught on immediately. He slipped his hand back under the sheets to wrap it around my erection.

When I moaned, he let go and pushed me onto my back.

“I think I know just what to do with you today,” he said, moving between my spread thighs. He lowered himself so that his mouth hovered over my dick, and then he took hold of the base and squeezed. “But first...”

BASH

“SO WHAT DO you say about getting Licked this morning, lieutenant?”

The sun was heating things up as it approached noon, and after we finally dragged ourselves out of bed and showered, I'd decided we best leave the house if we wanted to do anything other than laze around my house naked all day.

Not that I was opposed to that. But we had a good two weeks with one another, and I figured if I got all of the sightseeing over and done within, say, the next couple of days, then Kieran's shoulder would be feeling better and naked activities could most certainly be a larger portion of the schedule.

“I'm pretty sure I already *got* licked this morning, didn't I?” He glanced over at me as I pulled the Bugatti into an open spot out the front of the little boutique stores that lined Ocean Avenue.

“You did...” I lowered my glasses to eye him looking all handsome and relaxed, and recalled in explicit detail the reason *why* he looked so relaxed. “But I was thinking more of my favorite little ice-creamery. Remember? I told you about it yesterday on our drive-through tour.”

“Ah, that's right. The one that gives you all of your Ground-Shaking Orgasms.”

I reached across and stroked a finger up his jean-clad thigh. “Not anymore, they don't.”

Kieran chuckled and glanced up the street to where the store sign swung back and forth in the warm breeze. All of the shop fronts on Ocean Avenue had those classic wooden signs that made South Haven feel like a throwback, a quaint little town where everybody knew everybody, which was exactly why I liked to keep my business my own.

“Not gonna lie, I’m not upset by that.”

“Why would you be? I look spectacular when I come.”

Kieran’s jaw fell into his lap, and I laughed as I shoved open the car door and climbed out. When I turned back, Kieran was exactly where I’d left him, staring at me slack-jawed.

“Just so you know, your face will stay like that if the wind changes.” When Kieran quickly shut his mouth, I frowned. “On second thought, I rather liked you with your mouth open. Can you do that again?”

He shook his head as he finally climbed out. “You know, I have never met anyone like you.”

I rounded the hood of the car and stepped up onto the sidewalk. “Which I’m going to take as a good thing.”

Kieran took a step toward me, his eyes roving down over my flared white linen pants and bubblegum-pink shirt, before coming back to land on my face. “It’s an incredible thing.”

My heart thumped as he stood there, close enough for me to touch, but I wasn’t sure if that was something he’d want in public. Even if he was hundreds of miles away from all who knew him.

That look in his eyes, though, was enough to make me forget he was anything other than comfortable with the two of us. So for now I thought it’d be best if I kept my hands to myself. Let him reach for me if he wanted to—no, *when* he wanted to, because he would. I was on a mission to make myself irresistible.

“Well, what do you say? Let’s go and see what deliciously naughty flavors are up for consumption today.”

“They change?”

“Not the standards, but there’s usually some kind of theme each day where they add a specialty flavor,” I explained as we made our way to the front door. “The last time I came was Whack-Off Wednesday—”

“Of course it was,” Kieran said.

“Not like that, cheeky man. But I do like where your head’s at.” The bells chimed as we stepped inside. “I’m not sure what Tuesday’s theme is.”

Kieran took a moment to look around. It was quieter today, being that it was a weekday, but that by no means lessened the impact of the place, which was decked out like a soda fountain shop from the fifties. The floors were a shiny black and white checkered pattern that beautifully complemented the alternating walls, which were snowy white and rich magenta.

The display freezer was directly in front of you at one end of a long counter, and at the other end were stools. There were booths lining the windows that overlooked the sidewalk, and a big, beautiful jukebox in the corner.

“Hey there. Oh hi, Bash.” Marilyn, a twenty-something blonde with her hair dolled up in a retro ’do smiled at us as she came out from the back room. “Are you ready to get Licked?”

With an invitation like that, it was no wonder this place had been doing well since it opened.

“Darling, we’ve been there, done that this morning, but we’d love a lick of something else delicious.” When Kieran choked out a cough of laughter beside me, I winked at Marilyn and said in a loud whisper, “He’s a virgin. It’s his first time.”

“Ah, I see. If he’d like to ease in, we do offer Like a Virgin, which is a plain vanilla bean, made fresh here in the store.”

I looked to Kieran and gave him a once-over for her benefit. “I don’t know. He’s pretty adventurous. I think he could take something more on the wild side. What do you think, lieutenant?”

Kieran was busy studying the contents behind the glass. “As long as you’re not giving me something that tastes like grass, I’m game.”

“Oh, the Your Ass Is Grass isn’t actually grass. It’s mint chocolate chip with brownies.”

When he chuckled, looking visibly relieved, Marilyn added, “Today’s special is Taste Me Tuesday, which means you get a free castrated ball of any flavor with your purchase.”

Kieran’s eyes widened. “We’re talking castrated balls now? Where the hell are we?”

“Oh come on, don’t tell me you’re opposed to an extra ball. You handle them so well.” I slinked up beside him and again wanted so badly to touch him that I ended up crossing my arms behind me.

“That mouth,” he said, chuckling softly. But if I thought that my comment would make him blush, I was in for a surprise, because he looked up at Marilyn and gave a nonchalant shrug. “Yeah, that’s me. Master handler of the balls.”

“Don’t worry. We appreciate that kind of thing around here,” she said.

“Okay, I think I know what I want,” I said. “Let me get a pair of love balls with one of those castrated ones on top, starting out with a Stroke ’N Poke, followed by Lick My Cream, and finishing off with my favorite Ground-Shaking Orgasm.”

Kieran licked his lips then said, “I’ll have the same.”

“*Coming* right up.” She winked and told us to grab a seat anywhere.

“You mind if we sit at one of the window booths?” Kieran said as he grabbed a few napkins. “You know, to people-watch.”

“I don’t plan on watching anyone but you, but I see the appeal.” I slid into the seat across from the one Kieran chose and thought it was a perfect choice. The sunlight hit him in

such a way that it highlighted his features without shining directly in his eyes.

“I have to say, when you first told me you lived on an island down here, I didn’t really understand why.”

“Really?”

“You just seem like such a city guy. Like a small town would suffocate you or something, but I don’t know. Now that I’m here, I get it.”

“This place has a way of winning you over.”

“Is that what happened? It won you over on a visit?”

“Well, I’ve been coming here since I was a child, so it feels more like home than anywhere I’ve ever been. And when my parents passed away, I guess I wanted something familiar.”

“That makes sense. Bailey moved into my parents’ house after they passed. I think he didn’t want the home we grew up in just given away.”

“Is that where you go for your weekly family barbecues?”

One side of Kieran’s mouth quirked. “Good memory. Yes, it is.”

“And what about you? Is that why you stay in Chicago?”

“Huh. I don’t think I’ve ever really thought about it. It’s where my brothers are, where my job is, where I grew up. I guess it never occurred to me to leave.”

“Not even when you have to go out in several feet of snow? I’ve seen what your weather is like, and I have to say, I won’t be visiting during winter.”

“God, I try to block that out. I’d say I’m used to it, but I don’t think you ever get used to it. But you’re changing the subject; I wanna know about you. I want to know more of who you are.”

“Excuse me, guys, your balls are ready to be devoured.” Marilyn slid the large bowls in front of each of us, and she’d gone heavy on the cream and extra cherries on top, just how I liked it.

“You’re a goddess,” I said, blowing her a kiss. “Thank you.”

Kieran was already spooning a bite into his mouth. When he swallowed, he pointed at the oversized ball he’d just tasted. “This is fucking delicious. Is that cheesecake with Oreos?”

“A Stroke ’N Poke. Dig around and there’s graham cracker and fudge in there too.”

“Jesus. Between this and the fish and chips, I’d have to work out all day to live here and still fit into these pants.”

“Don’t you work out for a living anyway?”

Kieran shrugged. “Good point.”

“So why not indulge a little and make it all worthwhile?”

“A little? I’ve been here a couple of days and feel like I’ve gained ten pounds.”

“Okay, how about this? If you promise to relax and indulge in some of the finer gourmet delights around the island, I will promise to work out with you at least once a day.”

Kieran looked across the table, a sexy grin on his handsome face. “Weren’t you the one who told me you don’t run anywhere? You tellin’ me you’re going to hit the gym with me?”

“I didn’t say anything about a gym. There are many ways to burn calories, lieutenant. And I can think of plenty of ways that I can work up a sweat.”

Kieran chuckled and brought another scoop of ice cream to his lips. As he pulled the spoon free, some of it caught on the corner of his lip. I’d behaved myself up until now, but how was I supposed to resist such an obvious sign from the gods that I should just touch the damn man?

I wasn’t. Before I overthought myself to death, I pushed up off the seat and swiped my thumb across the corner of his mouth. Then I sat back and sucked the creamy concoction from my thumb.

Kieran's hand was frozen mid-scoop as he stared at my mouth and licked his lips. The man was too scrumptious for words.

“I've decided to change today's theme from Taste Me Tuesday to Taste *You* Tuesday. We started the morning off that way, might as well finish it the same. Don't you think?”

KIERAN

WHAT DID I think? If he didn't stop looking at me like he was imagining the way *I'd* tasted on his tongue this morning, I just might haul him across the table and remind him.

Between the ice cream names reminding me of what a fantastic night we'd shared together, to every flirty word out of Bash's mouth, the fact I was able to sit here and form coherent sentences was a miracle.

He was damn near irresistible. And after we thanked the lady behind the counter and headed out to the sidewalk, I was done resisting. I wanted to touch him again, needed to. So I reached out and took his hand. When he whipped his head around, I thought that I might've overstepped. Until a beautiful smile crossed his lips and he interlaced his fingers with mine.

"So where to next, Mr. Tour Guide?"

"Hmm." Bash cocked his head and looked up and down the sidewalk. "I don't know about you, but I think I might need to walk some of that ice cream off."

He looked down at our hands, squeezed my fingers, and began to head off up the street. I couldn't help but wonder if his desire to walk had more to do with the sweet treats we'd just eaten or holding my hand.

I knew where my head was, and I could only hope his was too. There was something so simple yet intimate about holding hands. That connection and statement that said yes, this person is with me and I'm with him. I found that I was okay with that. *More* than okay with that.

Not that that was shocking. Bash was an amazing person. I'd known that even before I flew down here. Hell, it was one of the reasons *why* I'd flown down here. But with every passing minute, hour, and day that I spent with him, the list of reasons why I found him so compelling, and why I couldn't stop thinking of him, all seemed to vanish until one single fact remained—Bash himself.

He was one of a kind, and I knew if I didn't take the time to work out what this was between us, he'd be someone else's one of a kind before I could even blink.

The thought made my stomach churn.

“Kieran?”

The sound of my name pulled me out of my thoughts, and I turned to see Bash had stopped in front of what looked like a clothing store.

“I asked if you wanted to check this place out. I know you only have that one backpack with you, and Lord knows even for a weekend trip I need at least two full suitcases. So if you'd like to pick up a few things...?”

“Oh, uh...” I looked in the shop window to see a couple of mannequins in shorts and surf shirts and figured I could find a few things in there. “That sounds good. Are you sure you don't mind shopping on your day off?”

“I'm sorry, did you just ask me if I minded shopping? Have you met me? It's like you don't even know me right now.”

I chuckled. “You're right. I don't know what I was thinking.”

“The only time you'll hear me complain about shopping is if you force me to try on another pair of jeans.” Bash tugged me toward the door and pulled it open, and a blast of cool air hit us. I'd happily shop all day if it meant enjoying the A/C.

“Good afternoon, Vera,” Bash called out as we headed into the store. I indicated the rack with the shirts I'd seen from outside, and he nodded and let go of my hand. “You head on over and pick out whatever you want. I'll be right back.”

I stood there for a moment and watched him weave his way through the display stands and racks. A woman came out from a back room and made a beeline for him.

“Bash,” she said, and held her arms out as she came around to greet him. “I was wondering if you were back in town. I just said to Harry the other night I hadn’t seen young Bash around lately, and here you are.”

I couldn’t help but smile as she ran her hands down his arms and squeezed his fingers. It seemed the Bash effect was a nationwide phenomenon. Shit, probably worldwide with all of his business dealings.

Leaving him to catch up with his friend, I turned my attention to the shirts and shorts hanging up on the wall and grabbed a few I figured would fit. I also picked up a pair of flip-flops and a couple of hats. When I had enough to rotate every few days, I headed up to where Bash was still chatting with the woman, who’d moved back behind the counter.

“Please tell me you aren’t going to leave South Haven for the city life?” she said.

I already knew the answer, but I’d been doing my level best to avoid thinking about it anytime the subject came up. If I didn’t think about it, it might just resolve itself. But that wasn’t likely. And when I heard Bash’s response, I realized I’d eventually have to face that fact.

“Oh, heavens no, Vera. It’s purely a business move. In fact, I was just telling Kieran here that I couldn’t imagine living through their winters.”

My stomach dropped. Assuming his response was one thing; hearing him say no to Chicago definitively was another.

When the woman, Vera, turned her attention to me, I forced a smile.

“He’s right,” I said, laying the clothes on the counter. “He’d never make it without wearing long johns, and I think he’d rather freeze to death than put on a pair.”

“You know me so well already.” Bash rifled through the clothes I’d picked out and frowned. “Is that all?”

“How much do you think I need?”

“I just told you I need two suitcases for the weekend—what do you think?”

“Do you not own a washer and dryer?”

He looked insulted and put a hand over his heart. “Darling, a home wash is for undergarments, not designer wear, but yes, I do own those appliances.”

“Good.” I pushed the clothes forward. “Then this is all I need.”

Bash’s lower lip popped out ever so slightly as Vera began to ring up the items. “I had this whole *Pretty Woman* scenario in my head, where you’d try on everything in the store and I could sit back and admire you.”

“I’m the prostitute in this scenario?”

He rolled his eyes. “You didn’t even try *one* thing on. So now I’ll have to resort to begging you for a private fashion show at home, and it’s just not the same.”

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Vera’s eyebrows shoot up, and I bit back a smile. No doubt the people down here had a good laugh over the crazy shit that came out of Bash’s mouth. It *was* pretty endearing.

Once she’d bagged everything up, I pulled my wallet out, but she inserted a black card instead.

“That’s not mine,” I said, and then narrowed my eyes at Bash. “That better not be yours.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Vera handed the card to him, and he scribbled a quick signature as I stared at him, slack-jawed.

“Bash, seriously? You’re not supposed to buy my clothes. That’s too much.”

“Too much? Says the man who hopped on a flight just to see me?” He scoffed and grabbed one of the bags, and I took the other before he could get his hands on that one too. Then he blew an air kiss to Vera. “Ta-ta for now, darling.”

“You two come on back anytime.”

I nodded and said a quick thank you before following Bash back outside, where it seemed to have gotten even hotter during the time we were in the store. Luckily, the breeze off the ocean was pretty constant, something I could definitely get used to.

Huh. Something I could get used to?

“Is there anything else you need to pick up while we’re out and about?” Bash asked.

“I think I’m set.” I reached for his hand again and gave his fingers a squeeze. “Thank you. You didn’t have to do that.”

“One thing you should know: if I want to spoil you in any way, you’re going to have to let me. Otherwise I get cranky, and it’s unattractive. I just can’t have you seeing me that way.”

“What if I want to spoil you?”

“Then, gorgeous, I’ll let you. I’m high maintenance. I need lots of attention.” His smile was infectious as he swung our hands between us, careful not to go too high and risk aggravating my shoulder. It felt good to have the sling off, especially in the heat. The fewer layers I had to wear, the better.

As we passed a couple walking in the opposite direction, they greeted him by name, and he waved, bag in hand, but for once didn’t stop to chat.

“What are you?” I said. “The mayor of South Haven? Everyone knows you.”

“Ooh, mayor. Now that’s a position I haven’t done.”

“I bet that’s a rarity.”

Bash shot me a sideways glance. “Cheeky.”

“In all seriousness, though, towns like this need people who really care about them. That’s what keeps the community feeling about them, and this place feels like one big, happy family.”

“So what you’re really trying to say is that when I become mayor of South Haven you’ll come and be my fire chief?”

It was crazy, but that scenario sounded much more appealing than I ever would’ve imagined. Small towns like this one had never really held much draw for me in the past. Their firehouses were smaller and the calls much less intense. I liked the rush and adrenaline I got from working a busy firehouse. But as I walked down Ocean Avenue with Bash’s hand in mine, I found myself falling under the spell of the island.

“Definitely.” I smiled at Bash, who’d leaned in so his shoulder was up against mine. “If you’re going to try out new positions, I want to be there to make sure you get it right.”

Bash grinned. “In that case, maybe we should go home and practice for this new job title of mine? What do you say, chief?”

BASH

AS I SLIPPED on my silver glitter boots and zipped them up tight, I could hear Kieran in the en suite, touching up his sexy stubble with an electric razor. I couldn't wait to see him all decked out in the designer clothes we'd bought yesterday, since we needed something a little less beachy, a little more sex on a stick for tonight.

Trent was doing a surprise set at Argos, which meant not only would Kieran be around my friends tonight, but he'd also be experiencing a gay nightclub for the first time in his life. I wondered if he was as apprehensive as I'd been about walking into a pub, but at least he'd have me there beside him, and I knew the guys would watch out for him too.

I pushed off the bed and opened the closet door to get a look at my outfit in the full-length mirror. *Yesss, honey.* This might be one of my favorites so far, and I couldn't wait to see the look on Kieran's face when he saw me. Not one to go for anything ordinary, I'd chosen a white satin jumpsuit with an open collar that dropped to mid-stomach, where the high waist of the pants rose to. The rest of the shirt, if you could call it that, and sleeves were an open pattern of white and silver glitter strips crisscrossing with my bare skin, with oversized cuffs around my wrists. But as stunning as this outfit looked, I couldn't wait until later tonight when Kieran took it off me...

It was all I could do to wait for his grand reveal—and mine—and when the sound of his razor cut off, I expected to see him walk out a few seconds later. Instead, his cell began to ring, though it didn't last long before he turned it off or sent

the call to voicemail. I'd noticed him doing that all week, and he'd blown it off by saying his brothers were harassing him and he'd get back to them later.

Hmm... How much did his brothers know about where he was and who he was with?

“Oh my God. That fucker.”

“Kieran? Is everything all right?”

The en suite door swung open, and as Kieran stood there, phone in hand, I gasped. What had I been thinking dressing him up to take him out to a club where he'd be surrounded by other guys pawing him? Especially looking like *that*.

In a pair of black slacks that curved to his gorgeous ass and the ribbed black tank that was practically molded to his abs, Kieran pulled off simple and designer to a T. With bronzed skin from our time out on my boat yesterday, he looked utterly magnetic.

“Holy shit, Bash.” His eyes were wide and appreciative as they roved over me, and I struck a pose for his benefit. He took a step toward me, reached out to curl his finger in one of the straps of my sleeve—see? Useful already—and grinned. “I like the hair.”

“Just the hair?” I'd slicked back the sides and poofed up the top so it almost looked like a mohawk, which worked best with an outfit like this. And also to show off my red glitter lips, a choice I was starting to regret, since it meant I couldn't grab Kieran and kiss him whenever I wanted—yet.

“No, not just the hair. I really like your face. And that outfit.”

“What about the shoes? I know you have a thing for heels, and these boots do have a good couple of inches.”

“Hot as hell. Do I really have to share you tonight?”

“Do I really have to share *you*? Have you looked in a mirror? I had to go all out just to make sure your eyes stay on me all night, because I just know the attention you're gonna get.”

Kieran's smile grew and he trailed his hand down to my waist. "I can't imagine Sebastian Vogel gets jealous, so that can't be what I just heard."

"Me? Jealous? What a ridiculous thing to suggest." There was no way I'd admit to having a twinge of anxiety about bringing Kieran out around a hungry pack of wolves.

"Would it help if I promised to have not just my eyes on you all night?"

"Help with what? I told you, I'm not jealous."

"Oh, okay." Kieran dropped his fingers from the waistband of my pants. "Then I'll just keep my hands to myself."

I arched a brow. "Not if you want somewhere to sleep tonight, you won't."

"I know exactly where I'm sleeping tonight, and so do you."

"Arrogant."

"Am I wrong?"

No, he wasn't, but it was never smart to give away all your secrets. "Guess you'll have to wait and find out. Now, what got you all worked up on your phone? Is everything okay?"

Kieran looked at the cell in his hand as though he'd forgotten it was there. "Yeah, just my brother Sean being a tool."

"A *tool*?"

"Yeah, you know, a douchebag?" Kieran began to fiddle with the phone, and I couldn't be sure, but he suddenly seemed nervous about something, which was totally unlike him.

"I know what it means. I'm just curious what he was being douchey about. Your reaction in the en suite was quite... passionate."

"Oh, it was nothing. Just Sean being Sean."

I didn't buy that at all. He'd gone from flirty to jumpy within seconds, and I wanted to know why. "Your nose will

grow if you keep telling fibs, lieutenant.”

“Huh?” Kieran finally looked at me, and I grinned.

“Your nose? It’ll grow, and I kind of like your face as is.”

Kieran let out a sigh. “I’m not lying. It’s just, well, it’s fucking embarrassing, and he’s an idiot.”

I held my hand out and gestured for the phone. “Hand it over.”

“Really? Let’s just forget—”

“Kieran? Give me your phone.”

Resigned to his fate, he handed over his cell, and I pulled up his voicemail and saw a message from SEAN GRUMPY BASTARD.

“You two are close, I see.”

Kieran smirked. “Trust me, if you knew Sean, it’d make sense.”

Interesting. From what I remembered, he was the brother engaged to Alexander Thorne, which made me even more curious as to what kind of man Kieran’s oldest brother was.

“Mind if I...?”

Kieran shook his head. “Sure, why not. But just remember, you asked to hear this.”

I made sure the volume was up and then hit play.

“Yo, Kieran. Did you forget how to answer your damn phone since you left town? I know you’re busy trying to learn a new skill set up there, but I told you as long as you stretch him good and hit the right spot, you’ll drive him crazy. It’s not that hard—well, hopefully it’s hard if you’re doing it right—but you’ve got one too. If you’re having performance anxiety or issues, Google it. You don’t gotta hide. Oh, and Bay and Xander said if you have any other questions, they’d be more than happy to help. Henri said, ‘Don’t fucking text me.’ That’s a quote. Call us back, asshole. You have some explaining to do.”

Now it all made sense why Kieran had looked so mortified, but he had no reason to. If anything, it made him all the more endearing. Not to mention a whole lot sexier. He'd not only gone out of his way to ask about how to make things good for me, but he'd told his brother about me.

That obviously meant there was more going on here than a fling, because just the inkling that Alexander knew about me in Chicago had sent Kieran into a tailspin. Now here he was asking for sex advice.

Call me crazy, but that made me deliriously happy.

I took a step closer and held out his phone. When Kieran went to take it from me, I kept a hold of it until he looked me in the eye.

“For the record, you hit the right spot that first time and every time since. So you're either a really fast learner, gorgeous, or I'm incredibly lucky.”

He smirked, angled his head up a fraction, and whispered across my lips, “I'm the lucky one.”

“That you are. Now stop kissing me; you'll mess up my lipstick. Plus, we have somewhere to be.”

“That we do. Let's go.”

I made sure to wipe any red from his lips, then we left the confines of my bedroom before either of us could change our minds.

THERE WAS NO doubt in my mind that both of us would be unable to drive by the end of the night, so I'd called us a car. As it stopped in front of Argos, I squeezed Kieran's hand.

“Ready?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Nervous?”

He gave me a small smile. “Maybe a little.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got you.” The driver opened the back door of the SUV, and I slid out first. Argos was pretty nondescript from the outside; it just looked like a black warehouse. The entrance was down a side street, and I could already see a long line of people waiting to get inside.

Kieran’s hand found mine, a move that surprised me, considering what we were about to walk into. When was the last time I’d walked into Argos holding someone’s hand?

The answer was never. But the fact that he wanted everyone to know we were together had the biggest, cheesiest grin spreading across my face.

I led us down to where Ricky, one of the bouncers, stood guarding the entrance and checking IDs. He looked up as we approached and then did a double take. “Bash, where the hell have you been?”

I greeted him with an air kiss and gestured toward Kieran. “I was being held hostage in Chicago by this gorgeous man. Can you blame me for not putting up a fight?”

“Not at all, baby,” Ricky said, pulling the door open wide. “Good to see you. I think the rest of your group is already inside.”

“Ah, fashionably late as always, then. Thank you, Ricky.”

We stepped inside to the loud thumping beat of a new Miley remix and bypassed the smaller line of those waiting to pay. As we entered the vast main room of the club, I kept an eye out for Kieran’s reaction.

“Uh oh. You gonna try to get me out on the dance floor?” Kieran said, raising an eyebrow.

“Damn right I am. I’ll buy you a few drinks first, though.”

We headed toward the VIP section, which we always bought out on the nights Trent came out with us. For the most part, everyone was cool with seeing him out and about, but he was still one of the biggest names in music, and that led to some people getting a little handsy.

The white curtains were tied back as we headed up the small set of stairs, giving a peek of who was inside, and sure enough, we were the last to arrive. I couldn't help but notice the way every pair of eyes dropped to where I held Kieran's hand, something they'd never seen me do, at least not in a romantic way.

"Well, look who finally decided to show up looking like he raided Prince's closet." Lucas held up his glass in greeting and then downed whatever was inside.

"Honey, if you wanted some help in the fashion department, all you had to do was ask. I know how hard it was to grab a random pair of jeans and a Hanes t-shirt." When he rolled his eyes, I tugged Kieran forward. "You all remember my sexy firefighter, Kieran Bailey."

"Good to see you're still here," Trent said, the first to shake Kieran's hand.

"And miss your show? Never," Kieran replied.

"Is that the only reason you stayed?" The words coming out of Shaw, of all people, shocked me, and I swatted his arm.

"Obviously not," I said. "You've seen me, right?"

"Yeah, and I dig the outfit, but I wasn't asking you."

Kieran dropped Trent's hand and reached out for Shaw's. Kieran looked him square in the eye and said, "There's only one person I'd uproot my life for, and as much as I'm a fan of Trent, it's not him." It looked like he tightened his grip as he gave Shaw a close-lipped smile. "That all right with you?"

The lines in Shaw's forehead eased, and he nodded, clapping Kieran on the back. "Good to know. Now let's have a drink."

I reluctantly let go of Kieran's hand as he joined the others around the low table already adorned with different spirits and mixers, as well as tumblers and shot glasses.

Damn, I hadn't expected Shaw to go into protective mode like that, but hearing Kieran's answer made my stomach flip in

a good way. I didn't realize I was still staring after him until Jackson came up beside me and forced a drink in my hand.

"Someone's got it bad," he said.

"I think you mean I've got it *good*. Oh so very good." I winked and took a sip of the champagne he'd spiked with a splash of elderflower liqueur, my favorite.

"Is he still staying through next week?"

"That's the plan."

"And after that?"

I brought a finger up to my lips. "Shh. We don't talk about that."

"You'll have to eventually."

"La la la la... Oh, I'm sorry, were you saying something?"

Jackson chuckled and shook his head. "Not a thing, Bash, not a thing."

KIERAN

I WAS SO used to spending my nights at chill bars in downtown Chicago that being hit in the face with techno-pop and colored disco lights reminded me just how different my and Bash's worlds really were.

When we first walked in, I'd wondered what the hell I was thinking coming here, somewhere I so obviously didn't fit in. But then I remembered Bash not giving two fucks about showing up at the pub and decided to loosen up and try to enjoy it. It helped that Bash never let me go as we walked through the crowds, where we both had eyes and occasionally a hand on us. It was a little strange being so openly checked out by guys, because when the hell had that ever happened before I met Bash?

"Another?" Lucas seemed determined to keep my glass, as well as everyone else's, full tonight, and I was starting to get a nice buzz going.

"Why do I feel like you're the instigator of the group?" I said.

"Someone has to be. I take on that title with pride." He gave a mock-bow, but it was a little wobbly, which told me he was more far gone than the rest of us. Bash said the more he drank, the less "cantankerous" he was, and so far that seemed to be true.

"We should head over to the stage, since the guys'll be up in a few." Shaw topped off his glass with tequila and then poured some into the shot glass Jackson held. "Let's go."

With Bash and Trent somewhere backstage, I followed the others down into the crowd. Right now there were dancers on the stage, wearing nothing but pairs of tiny briefs and a whole lot of sweat, but as soon as we got up close, the lights dimmed quickly, which seemed to be their cue to head off.

Bash mentioned this was a surprise, and that certainly seemed to be the case from the confusion on everyone's faces, as the music faded in the background until it stopped completely.

A spotlight hit the back curtains, drawing everyone's attention. As a sultry jazz song began to play, one of Bash's legs kicked out from the curtain and slid down the opening.

A tease, always a tease. I watched, mesmerized, as he ripped the curtains open, and when he came into view, cheers and loud wolf whistles sounded throughout the club.

He rolled his hips to more applause, and the smile on his face told me he knew just what he was doing, and he loved every second of it. He was searching, though, and when his eyes landed on me, he moved his body the same way he'd done standing over me on the couch that night in his hotel. He slinked down slowly, keeping his eyes locked on mine, and I couldn't have looked away even if the world had been on fire.

What the hell was it about this man that had my cock going crazy whenever he was around? Even when I *thought* about him it all just felt...different. I couldn't explain it. I didn't understand how I could live my entire life attracted to women and then, after spending time with Bash, feel more connected to someone than I ever had before. I'd been with him every minute of every hour for almost a week now, and I still wasn't ready to leave, a far cry from my previous hookups.

But Bash wasn't just a hookup. And the thought that I wouldn't be here with him this time next week made me dive back into my drink.

Bash strutted forward toward center stage, the spotlight moving with him, and then he brought the mic up and said,

“Well, well, well. Aren’t you glorious bitches a sight for sore eyes?”

As the crowd whooped, Bash caught my eye again and winked.

“Bash, you sexy fuck!” someone yelled.

My eyebrows shot up, but Bash didn’t falter a bit. He ran a finger down his open shirt and said, “Oh, honey, you have *no* idea.” There were more whistles, and I bit my lip, because unlike that unlucky guy, I *did* have some idea.

“I have a very, very special surprise for all of you tonight. And no, it’s not a signed pair of my thongs. Something even better, if you can imagine. But don’t worry, I won’t make you wait too long, though anticipation really is everything. Hmm. Decisions...”

I chuckled as the crowd began to chant, “Tell us, tell us,” and found myself getting super excited even knowing what the surprise was. I hadn’t seen Trent perform live since one of the last tours he did with TBD, which had been phenomenal.

“You’re going to have to get louder than that for what’s behind curtain number one. Can you do it? Pretend you’ve just had the best orgasm of your life and give it to me.”

The roar made me flinch, but it was nothing compared to when Bash stepped off to the side of the stage and said, “Please welcome the one, the only, Trent Knox!”

Everything went dark, and when the lights turned on again, Trent was standing center stage, a guitar strapped to him, and wearing nothing but leather pants.

The room fucking lost it.

I could barely hear a word he said over the screams, but it was something about a new song and wanting us to be the first to hear it. The cheers died down a little as he began to play a silky love song that had everyone swooning and holding up their phones. I looked around for Bash, but figured he must’ve stayed backstage or been needed somewhere. Seeing Lucas’s arms wrapped around Jackson and Trent singing down to

Shaw every so often reminded me of being around my brothers, and once again, I was the odd man out.

Or was I?

Warm arms slipped around my waist, and then Bash rested his chin on my shoulder and squeezed me tight. It was amazing the way he could make me relax and yet rile me up at the same time. He began to slowly sway us to the music. Suddenly, watching Trent became secondary to focusing on the way Bash and I moved together, the feel of his body against mine, and the fact that anyone and everyone could see us and I didn't care at all.

No, that wasn't true. I did care. I wanted them to know he'd chosen me and was off-limits, because after the performance he'd put on, it needed to be clear he wasn't available.

When the next song started up, a faster one, I expected Bash to let go, but he kept his hold on me, and I let him. Hell, I'd let him all night if that was what he wanted.

Before I knew it, Trent's set was over, and as the guys were all heading back to refill their empty glasses, Bash pressed a kiss against my neck.

"Sorry, handsome," he said as I turned around. "You look so good I had to mark you."

"Now I wish I was wearing some to mark *you*. You were fucking amazing up there. Yet another career choice if you wanted one."

"Oh, that." Bash gave a flippant wave. "That's just for fun. But I'm glad *you* enjoyed it. As a matter of fact—"

"Bash, sorry to interrupt, but can I steal you away for a few?" A guy that looked remarkably like Shaw but with darker hair and fewer tattoos had come up beside us, and he nodded at the bar. "A couple of reporters are out tonight and wanted a quote from you and Trent."

"Of course. And Kev, this is Kieran. Kieran, this is Shaw's twin and the owner of Argos, Kevin."

“Good to meet you,” I said, shaking his hand, and then I turned to Bash and inclined my head toward the VIP. “Go do your thing and I’ll be up there with your friends.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, sure. Come find me after.”

“Or find you after and come?” Bash’s wicked smile made me wish that time was sooner than later. He followed Kevin off to the bar.

It didn’t escape my notice how many people stopped him on his way there, or that they were touching and hugging him so freely. Wasn’t there a back way he could take or something?

“Wanna dance?”

I turned around at the invitation from no one I recognized and tried for a friendly “thanks but no thanks” before making my way back to the VIP. It was definitely time for a refill.

Lucas was handing out shots again when I got up there, and I downed it before realizing the others hadn’t taken theirs yet.

With a laugh, Jackson handed me his, and this time I waited for the cheers before taking it.

“Let’s go dance,” Lucas shouted, grabbing Jackson’s hand and pulling him behind him back out to the dance floor.

“You wanna join ’em or stay up here?” Shaw asked, and that was when I realized it was just the two of us left in the private area.

“Uh... I’ll stay here. You can go ahead if you want.”

“Nah, maybe we can have a chat, you and me.”

That didn’t sound too promising, not with the way he’d greeted me earlier, but if the alternative was dancing, I’d sit through whatever he needed to say.

I poured myself a refill, and when I joined him on the couch, he pointed to my shoulder. “Whoever did your tattoo did a great job.”

That wasn't where I thought he was going with this sit-down, but I had to agree. I'd gotten a fire helmet surrounded by flames at the top of my back, and the flames licked up and over my shoulder. "Thanks, I like it. He did the lion on my thigh, too."

"Color?"

"Black and grey realism."

"Nice."

"I heard you own a shop here."

"I do. Body Electric. If you ever wanna come by, you're welcome anytime."

"Thanks, I just might do that."

Shaw's eyes drifted toward the bar, where Trent and Bash stood surrounded on all sides by guys who did *not* look like reporters to me. Like he knew where my thoughts were going, Shaw looked back at me and raised a brow.

"You sure you can handle all of this?"

"All of this? Like the club?"

"The club, the people, the attention. Bash."

"Do I look like I'm not handling it well or something?"

"I didn't say that." Shaw took a long swallow of his drink and rested his arm along the edge of the couch. "I know it's your first time here and it can be a little crazy, but I'm sure you've figured out by now that anywhere with Bash is bound to bring attention."

"Well, he certainly got mine. I can't blame anyone else for wanting to be around him."

"That's good to hear. He's a great guy, maybe the best guy, and I wouldn't want him changing for anyone."

"Neither would I. Bash is perfect the way he is."

Shaw's narrowed eyes relaxed a fraction, and then he nodded. "I'm glad you agree."

We looked back to where our guys still stood, Bash being ever the flirt and Trent signing someone's shirt.

"So how did you two meet?" I said. "You and Trent."

"You mean Bash didn't tell you?"

"I never asked," I said. "Why? Did he set you up?"

"You could say that. His way of introducing us was to throw us in a dark room with blindfolds and a couple of condoms to say hello."

I almost choked on my drink. "What?"

"Hey, it worked. Of course, I didn't know it was Trent at the time, but things have a way of working themselves out if they're meant to be."

"You're joking, right?"

"About Bash's legendary sex parties? As he would say, 'No, honey, I wouldn't lie about that.'"

Holy shit. This was the first I'd heard about anything like that. I looked back at Bash, only this time a guy was dancing all up on him—until Bash turned around and wagged a finger.

"Still think you can handle him?" Shaw said.

I finished off the rest of my drink in one gulp, slammed it down on the table, and got to my feet. "Watch me."

BASH

“KEV, HONEY, WOULD you be a doll and get me another glass of the bubbly?”

“Sure thing, Bash. You need anything else?”

My big, strapping firefighter to come and sweep me off my feet?

I’d been away from Kieran much longer than I’d anticipated or wanted tonight, and considering I didn’t enjoy someone clinging to me at all times, that was shocking. But after that last young thing tried to dance a little too close for my liking, I decided enough was enough. No one was going to crease this outfit unless he was a six-two fire lieutenant from Chicago.

“No, that’ll be all,” I said, and turned back to Trent, who was politely, but somewhat forcibly, removing someone’s hand from his behind. I supposed that was what came with celebrity, and as gracious as he was toward his *adoring* fans, I knew how possessive Shaw could get when one got a little too handsy. “Are you ready to head back to our men-folk?”

Trent nodded and took a sip of his drink. “The sooner the better, I’d say.”

“I agree. But after that number you debuted tonight, you can hardly blame these boys for being so smitten. I just don’t want to ruin my outfit by having to get in the middle of something.”

“I wouldn’t want that either, and speaking of smitten, you and this firefighter of yours—it’s getting serious, huh?”

“I’m definitely”—I stroked my fingers down the open neck of my jumpsuit—“*purring*, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Yeah, we can all see that. Just be careful, okay? I’d hate it to turn to hissing.”

“Ugh, you’ve been spending way too much time around Shaw. He’s swallowed up your impulsive side and left you utterly predictable.”

Trent chuckled. “He’s definitely swallowed something, but this is all me, not Shaw. Bash, I’ve known guys like Kieran, and they’re—”

“Not Kieran. We don’t make prejudgments around here, remember?”

“Says the man who was looking down his nose at a last-season Gucci shirt seconds ago.”

“Don’t get lippy with me, Knox. I’ve known you too long and have enough secrets on you to make me millions—”

“You already have millions.”

“It never hurts to have a few— *Ooh*.” A large arm slid around my waist, and I reached for it to tell my unwanted interrupter they were crossing a line. “Lieutenant?”

“I have a bone to pick with you.” Kieran’s voice was low by my ear, and while the delicious warmth of his breath sent a shiver of anticipation through me, his words made me pause.

“A bone?”

“Uh, I’m gonna go find Shaw,” Trent said. “You good here?”

I nodded, and as he left the two of us, I turned in Kieran’s arms until we were standing face to face. He didn’t look upset or mad, but had something happened while I was gone? Then I remembered the young dancing queen from minutes ago. Maybe he’d seen and misread that?

I wasn't one to usually clarify my actions, but Kieran and I were in the beginning of something new, something I didn't want to end. If he needed a little reassurance tonight, I couldn't deny him.

Just as I was about to explain, a sinful smirk curved his lips, and he leaned in and said by my ear, "When did you plan to tell me you held legendary sex parties here on the island?"

Well, well, well, it seemed I'd been worried about nothing. Kieran wasn't upset about some silly little man trying to get my attention. Of course he wasn't. He was one of the most confident men I knew, which was one of his biggest draws. He and Shaw had been gossiping, those bad boys. How dare they talk about sex and parties when I wasn't present to enjoy it.

The hand on my waist lowered to my ass. Kieran pulled me in tight, and I could feel exactly what that talk had done to him. The throbbing bass of the club music was acting like the theme song to my overly excited libido as I stared into Kieran's gorgeous blue eyes and tried to remember what it was we'd been discussing.

Oh, that's right, sex parties.

"You and Shaw had quite the talk, I see."

"If you mean we discussed your penchant for blindfolds, dark rooms, and throwing people into them? Then yes, we talked."

Damn. With those beautiful broad shoulders and muscles on display, I was finding it difficult to look at him and not imagine that tank top removed, those jeans gone, and those big, strong hands holding me in place while he—

"Here's that drink, Bash." Kev placed it on the bar top but was smart enough to leave when he saw I was otherwise engaged.

"You don't want your drink?" Kieran asked.

I smoothed my hand up to his shoulder to the back of his neck. "That is now the *very* last thing I want."

Kieran's fingers flexed against my ass cheek. "And what's the first?"

I slid my tongue along my lower lip. "You, a dark room, and a sex party for two."

I wasn't sure if that would be too bold an ask for the lieutenant, but his devilish smile quickly alleviated me of any worry.

"Well, *you're* the legend. Did you have somewhere in mind?"

Even if I didn't, I would've found a place posthaste. "I have just the place in mind."

My drink forgotten, I took Kieran's hand and led him past the bar to where a door exited into a hallway. There were a few rooms back here: one for breaks, and one for the stage equipment, which was jam-packed and buzzing with people going in and out tonight. But I thought it best we went to the least frequented of the rooms. The alcohol storage room.

Kev would've stocked the bar full with Trent's little show happening tonight, so the likelihood anyone was back here was minimal.

When we reached the door, I poked my head inside to see if it was clear for our little tryst, then pushed it wide. I plastered my back to the open door and gestured for Kieran to come inside. "Will this room work for you?"

He was about to walk by me, but at the last second stopped and turned. "This is perfect. But I have one request."

"And what might that be?"

"Leave the light on."

My breath caught. The idea that he'd rather see me and what we were doing and risk being caught made flames of desire lick across my skin.

"Whatever you want, handsome."

Kieran chuckled, and the sound was rich and warm and so deliciously decadent that I reached down to palm my cock.

“I think I might take you up on that.” He strolled further into the room. “Shut the door, Bash.”

My jaw dropped, and Lord help me, I knew I was in trouble.

I quickly shut the door and locked it for good measure, because if anyone dared interrupt this, I might lob one of these bottles at their head.

My heart thundered as Kieran looked around. There were rows and rows of every liquor you could imagine on the shelves, along with copious wine bottles. Several kegs were stacked along another one of the walls, and at the far end was a walk-in refrigerator. I seriously contemplated standing in it with how hot and bothered I was becoming.

Kieran hadn't said a word since he issued his little order, and his silence was making the anticipation grow. His eyes were dark, full of arousal. He ran them over my outfit, and I angled my head high and let him look his fill.

“Bash?”

His hands fell to his pants and he flicked open the button, and I damn near fainted. “Yes, darling?”

“Get over here.”

I summoned every ounce of pizzazz I possessed and strutted over. He reached out and repeated the move he'd made earlier at home in my bedroom, trailing his fingers down the open neckline of my jumpsuit to my waist. Then he slipped his fingers behind the high waistband and asked, “How do I get you out of this?”

“Aww, and here I thought you liked my outfit.”

“It's *because* of how much I like your outfit that I want to know. Fucking hell, Bash. Watching you dance and walk around in this all night has been torture.”

I slipped my fingers inside my pants over his and directed his fingers to the hook and eye clasp that fastened them. “Feel this?”

Kieran look down. “Yeah.”

“There’s seven of them.”

“*Seven?* Are you serious?”

“Mhmm.”

“Torture is right,” he muttered, and I couldn’t help but smile.

“But such sweet torture, am I right?”

Kieran didn’t respond, just bent his head and went to work on my pants. When they were finally undone, he said, “Sweet is not exactly the word I’d used for you,” and took a step forward, backing me up to the shelves behind me. “Not when you wear outfits like this.” He slipped a finger under one of the shoulders of my sheer sleeves and helped it down my arm.

“Would you prefer I wore something else?”

“The only thing I’d prefer,” Kieran said as the top half of my jumpsuit fell free of my hands and hung precariously on my hips, “is nothing at all.”

“In that case, I’m still very overdressed.”

Kieran reached for my chin and angled his face so he could brush his mouth over the top of mine. In my boots, I was only a couple of inches taller than he was, but one of the things I enjoyed most about Kieran was that even when I towered over him, he didn’t seem bothered in the slightest.

“You’re exactly how I want you. Well, almost.” He winked at me, and my knees almost gave out. “Turn around.”

KIERAN

I WASN'T SURE what had come over me while talking to Shaw. But when I learned about Bash and his infamous sex parties, the only thing on my mind was to hunt him down and make him mine.

It was a crazy, possessive urge that sprang up out of nowhere. As ridiculous as it was, something inside me wanted Bash to know that I wasn't some strait-laced guy about to freak out because he was too much for me to keep up with. Hell fucking no. I wanted him to know I could more than handle someone as fabulous as he was, and revel in the process.

I didn't want to change him. I didn't want to hold him back. I wanted him exactly the way he was, because *that* was the man I couldn't get out of my goddamn mind.

Bash's naked back was on full display to his waist, his smooth, pale skin beckoning me to touch as I took a step toward him. I was practically vibrating with lust as I ran my eyes over his long, tall frame. When I reached out and trailed my fingers down his spine, Bash put his hands on the shelf above him and arched back into me like a greedy kitten.

Never in a million years would I have guessed another man's height would flick my switch this way. But with Bash's arms above his head and that jumpsuit hanging low on his hips, I couldn't wait to pull it all the way off him and drink in those long legs.

Slipping my fingers into the side of his pants, I tugged the satiny material free of his body. As they fell in a pool at his ankles, I zeroed in on the nude strip of material bisecting his firm cheeks.

He looked naked. I stood there trying to remember how to make my arms and legs move, but my dick showed us all up, hardening to where I had to unzip my pants or risk serious injury.

“Goddamn, Bash.” I shoved my pants down a fraction then finally remembered how to move my feet. I stepped up behind him and traced my finger along the thin strip of elastic at the base of his spine. “Thank fuck you were wearing pants when I came out of the en suite tonight, or we never would’ve made it here.”

“If that’s true, I can’t help but be a little disappointed.”

“No need for that. I’m about to make it up to you real good.”

Bash glanced over his shoulder, and the come-hither look in his eyes made me drag the elastic down until it sat under his ass cheeks.

“Aren’t you in a mood tonight?”

I leaned in and placed my lips on his shoulder. “It’s your own fault.”

“I’m not complaining, gorgeous, just trying to work out what to do next time for the same result.”

I chuckled, nipping into his skin. “Just being yourself seems to work pretty well.”

As I shifted in behind him, my cock brushed up against his ass.

“I gotta say”—I smoothed a hand over one of his cheeks, spreading him slightly—“these boots and that slight heel sure are gonna work in my favor tonight.”

“How so?”

I kissed my way up the back of his neck until I was at his ear and my dick slid right over his crack. “All the better to get nice and deep inside you.”

Bash let out a moan of pleasure and dropped his head forward to the shelf in front of him. I reached into my pocket for the loot I’d pocketed for tonight from his handy headboard stash.

Condom and lube at the ready? You betcha. Gotta love a well-prepared man.

Seemed Bash did too. He peered over his shoulder to see what the holdup was, spotted me sheathing up, sent up a quick curse, and spread his legs a little wider.

“Tease,” I said, and swatted his ass as I moved on to the packet of lube.

“Who’s teasing? I think I’m being *very*”—he shoved his hips back—“clear.”

“So you are. Let’s see if I got the message.” I dragged my index finger between his tight cheeks, slid it back down and pressed against his entrance, then moved forward and wrapped my other arm around his waist.

Bash’s erection brushed against my hand, and as the sticky evidence of his arousal coated my palm, I wrapped my fingers around him. He cursed and thrust his hips again, using the shelf to propel himself forward and slide his cock through my fist. I was really fucking thankful that these shelves seemed to be welded into the wall.

I groaned and rocked my hips into his, something about him being completely naked while I’d only stopped to shove my pants down making this encounter even hotter.

“God,” he said, his head falling back against my shoulder as I pushed a finger inside him and began to work it in and out. “You feel so good.”

“So do you,” I whispered, adding a second finger. His ass clenched around them tight, and a feral sound I didn’t recognize rumbled out of my throat. I’d never been so worked up in my life. It was like something inside me was screaming

—*just fucking do it, he wants you to*—but at the same time I was worried I’d, I don’t know, hurt him or something.

I felt like a fire about to rage out of control.

“Kieran,” Bash panted, and turned his head, and though he’d done everything in his power to keep that ruby-red mouth off me tonight, bar my neck, I was about to kiss the hell out of him now.

I swooped in and took his lips in a savage kiss, and Bash caught fire too. He grabbed the back of my neck and shoved his tongue deep inside my mouth. Jesus, the man was obliterating every damn thought in my head. I continued to work him from behind as he fucked into my fist. As the scent of our sex began to fill my senses, I tore my lips free of his and found myself staring into eyes so dark they seemed to be beckoning me to come play—and play hard.

Then he flicked his tongue across the corner of my lips. “My Sinful Siren lipstick suits you.”

I wouldn’t have cared if it did or didn’t at this point. It’d been on his mouth, and I wanted to taste him. “Face the fucking shelf, Mr. Mayor.”

“Yes, chief.” He moved into position, and I smoothed my hands over his hips and dragged my cock up and down the crack of his phenomenal ass.

The picture he made was one I knew I’d never forget as long as I lived, and as I slowly began to enter him, I kept my eyes on the image of my dick disappearing inside of him. I placed a hand on his lower back and rolled my hips forward until I bottomed out. Then I glanced up to see his fingers digging into the steel shelves and his shoulders moving up and down with each breath he took.

I was about to ask if he was all good, when I saw his arms flex, and then he moved. His hips dragged forward off me before he propelled himself back and took me all the way inside again, and this time he let out a loud shout.

Oh, fuck yes. That was a green light if ever I’d seen—or felt—one. My fingers dug into his hips, and I pulled out until

barely the head of my dick was inside him before I thrust back in, making him nearly climb the damn shelf. But Bash wasn't trying to get away from me. No, he was using it like a springboard, putting all his power behind each push back onto me.

It was like I'd lost my fucking mind. Like I wanted to crawl inside him and never leave. I reached around him, needing my hands on every part of him. When I took hold of his erection, Bash let out a sound somewhere between a groan and a growl. It was so damn sexy that I shoved into him hard enough that he lost his footing and ran into the shelf.

A bottle of Hendrick's fell to the floor and smashed by our feet, but not even that was enough to slow us down. We were in it now—or I was in him and he was in heaven, judging by the sounds coming out of his mouth.

I licked a path up the side of his neck as I jammed my hips forward. He craned his head to give me better access. He'd kissed me earlier on the neck, wanting to mark me. Well, two could play that possessive little game, and the idea of him walking out of this room with my brand on him had my balls tingling.

I sucked the taut skin on the side of his neck between my lips and thrust hard inside him.

“Harder, Kieran...” he cried out. “Harder. I want you to have to carry me to the fucking car.”

Holy hell. That mouth of his, this body... I was done.

I let go. I went at him exactly as he'd asked—hard—and it didn't take long after that.

I interlaced my fingers with his and pressed my body flush up against his, then I thrust my hips back and forth, giving him everything I had. When his body tensed and his fingers tightened around mine, a shiver of red-hot desire licked across my skin.

Bash threw his head back and shouted out my name, and his ass all but strangled my cock. Then he came with such intensity that the sight made me fly right over that cliff with

him. He was uninhibited and so damn sexy that my entire universe felt as though it had just shifted, and nothing would ever be the same, because how could anyone ever compare to the man in my arms?

My body shook as my brain tried to refocus, but it was no use. All I could see, feel, was Bash, and before I ruined one of the best moments of my life by overthinking it, I pulled out of him and pried his hand from the shelf.

As I pulled him into me, I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him on the temple. Bash let out a satisfied sigh and glanced back at me.

“So what do you think? Should I run for mayor?”

In typical Bash fashion, he said the very last thing I would ever expect. But as I looked at the mess we’d made in the storage room—one broken bottle and a whole lot of...yeah—I chuckled.

“We might want to make things right with your constituents first by, um, cleaning up this place?”

Bash patted my hand. “I’ll pay Kev for any cleanup. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had a crew on retainer. I’m more concerned with the state of my jumpsuit.”

When he cocked his head to the side, I reached down and snapped the elastic string of his thong back in place. “This is still intact, if you’re game. I’ve carried you over my shoulder in a dress—how different could this be?”

Bash grinned. “Naughty, naughty, lieutenant, but you know what? I like it. We’ll do that, as long as you leave your mouth...as is.”

My mou— Ah, the lipstick. He thought I’d refuse, did he? Well, he had another thing coming. I cradled his face between my hands and took a nice, long taste of him, making sure to get a good, glossy coat of his favorite shade over my lips. “Dare me?”

BASH

“SO PROFESSIONAL. I can’t decide which version of you I like best.” Kieran’s admiring gaze met mine in the mirror as I adjusted the oversized collar of my orchid button-down so that it sat perfectly over my blazer lapels.

“Decisions, decisions. Will it be business Bash for the win? Perhaps after-dark diva Bash? Or maybe naughty, naked Bash is more to your liking?”

“All of the above.”

“Excellent choice. A look for every occasion. And speaking of, I do so enjoy you in this beachy leisurewear.”

I turned to face Kieran and ran my hands over the short-sleeved linen shirt he’d paired with navy shorts. Relaxed and casual in South Haven, rugged in Chicago. Like him, I also couldn’t decide which version I preferred. I’d take both.

“Not something I ever thought I’d see myself in, but I kinda like it.” Kieran covered my hands with his and then brought one up to his lips, pressing a kiss to my fingertips. “So, I was wondering...and feel free to say no—”

“Yes.”

“You don’t know what I’m going to ask.”

“Do you really think I’ll say no to you?”

Kieran smiled and shook his head. “You should say no if it’s something you don’t want.”

“And when it comes to you, what could I possibly not want?”

“Well, I was thinking that I’ve never seen the inside of your office...”

“And you’d like to?”

“I don’t know what it is you do all day. And I’ll be honest, business Bash is a big turn-on.” He tugged on the opening of my jacket and pulled me forward, kissing me.

With a request like that, who would say no?

I grinned as I pulled back and ran my nose alongside his. “You can just say you’d miss me too much to be away from me for a few hours. I won’t hold it against you.”

“Damn. And I was so hoping you would.” Kieran’s hips knocked into mine, the teasing little flirt, and it took everything in me not to push him back on the bed and say to hell with my meetings today.

But I had a few important calls to make and I’d been away for a while, so putting in an appearance was necessary. But if Kieran wanted to come, I didn’t have a problem with that. Our time together was dwindling to a handful of days, and the last thing I wanted was to miss him while he was still here.

“I’d love for you to see where I spend my days. I can’t imagine it’ll be as exciting to you as running into burning buildings, but you’re welcome to join me.”

“Good. I’m ready when you are.”

“AND THIS IS where I flog everyone who doesn’t comply with my rules,” I said, gesturing to the lounge filled with cushy chairs and couches where everyone could take their breaks.

“Why do I get the feeling they’d enjoy that?” Kieran smirked as he followed me back out and into the vast open area where the day was just getting started for my many fabulous employees.

“Not nearly as much as you would think,” Jackson said from behind us, and I looked over to see him stirring his coffee. “Good morning.”

“Hey, Jackson. You guys have a great place.” Kieran’s hands went in his pockets, which I couldn’t help but notice seemed to be a way to not reach for mine. Not that I would mind a bit, but I figured he wanted to give a professional distance here, which was kind of adorable.

“Oh, Kieran,” Jackson said. “Sorry, I didn’t recognize you without Bash’s lipstick all over your face. How’d you manage to get that off, anyway?”

I rolled my eyes. “I licked it off, darling. Let me know if you’d like to borrow a tube to use on Lucas.”

“Pretty sure my guy would disown me for that, but thanks.” Jackson blew on his coffee before taking a sip. “Need anything before the meeting?”

“Nope, your notes were spot-on. Thank you, Davenport.”

“That’s what I do.” Jackson winked and then headed off to his office, and I inclined my head toward mine for Kieran to follow.

When we stepped inside and the door closed behind us, I headed over to my desk as Kieran swept his gaze around the immaculate space.

“So *this* is where the magic happens?”

“If you mean, is this where I make genius decisions and plot to take over the world, then yes, this is where the magic happens.”

Kieran chuckled as I took a seat. “Only the world, huh?”

“One can never be too ambitious,” I said as I leaned back in my chair and fired up my computer. “Would you like to take a seat?”

Kieran flashed that half-crooked smile that made my insides flip then moved to take the seat opposite me. “You’re so formal here. I feel like I’m about to get in trouble or something.”

“That can be arranged, if you so desire.”

“I’m sure it could, but considering this feels a little fishbowl-like, where everyone can see us, I’d hate to ruin your reputation.”

“Ruin away. I won’t even complain while you’re doing it.”

“Stop it. You obviously run a well-oiled machine here, one that’s highly respected. I would never compromise that.”

I sat forward and clasped my hands on top of my desk, then ran my eyes over him. “You really should stop tossing out words like *ruin* and *compromise* around me, because with a face and body like yours, I’m apt to throw myself across this desk, fishbowl be damned.”

Kieran glanced over his shoulder, checking to see just how many pairs of eyes were on us. Unfortunately, there were a few too many. Of course I was professional when it came to my workplace. But could anyone blame me for fantasizing for a moment about hauling Kieran across my desk and licking him like a lollipop?

“Okay, I’ll try not to say anything too suggestive.”

“That would be appreciated.”

“But that means you have to stop looking at me like you want to jump over that desk.”

I let out a sigh. “If I must.”

“You must. Plus, I want to know about this place. About you. When I was at that tech expo, people acted like you were their god, and I guess I’m surprised you never decided to expand to a big city until now. You’d mentioned it’s because this place is home, and I get that, one hundred percent. But there’s got to be more to it than that, right? It’s not like you can’t leave and come back.”

I clicked open my emails, and as they began to flood in, I faced Kieran. “You’re right. I can leave and come back. But I wanted the roots of the company to be based here in my hometown. Anyone can move into a big city, open a business,

and work with people they've never met. But I didn't want that."

I looked over Kieran's shoulder to where my employees were moving around the office answering calls or working at their computers, and smiled.

"There were so many wonderful young people here on the island, and businesses that I knew I could help and employ. I wanted to give them that opportunity. So when I started AnaVoge, I offered any business owner and resident of South Haven shares in the company. These people all but raised me. I grew up in these stores. And I now had something that I could give back to them."

"You paid it forward."

I chuckled. "Well, it wasn't a *wholly* altruistic move. I was also in it to make enough money that I'd be dripping in diamonds whenever the need presented itself. Priorities, darling. It's all about priorities."

Kieran pushed to his feet, and I craned my head to watch him as he walked around my desk and spun my chair so I was facing him.

"You might hide behind the glitter and glam when it comes to everyone else. But I see underneath all of that. Your priority was this town you love and the people in it." Kieran took my chin between his fingers and lowered his head to gently brush his lips over mine. "You're pretty damn incredible, you know that?"

I could count on one hand the number of times a man had left me speechless, and that was only because Kieran was the only one. My heart was thumping so hard I could barely hear anything beyond it. As he continued to hold me in place, the expression in his eyes softened to something that both alarmed and excited me.

"Bash, I—"

"Are going to go insane if you have to stay here much longer?" I reached for his wrist and gently pulled it away, taking his hand in mine as I got to my feet.

Kieran frowned. I knew that hadn't been where he was going, but I wasn't quite sure my poor little heart could handle the kind of declaration he'd been about to make if it was just a reflex to a story that had touched him.

"I have an idea." I picked up my car keys, knowing a surefire way to ease any kind of hurt I might've just inflicted. "What if you take my car for a spin around the island while you're waiting for me?"

Kieran's eyes widened, and the frown from a second ago was replaced with complete and utter shock. "I...I can't take your car."

"Why not?" I placed the keys in his hand and closed his fingers around them.

"Why not? Because it's worth more than everything I own—*combined*."

I smiled and took a step toward him, his hand still in mine. "Kieran?"

"Yeah?"

"Have you ever had to drive those big old fire engines through the tiny, narrow city streets?"

He grinned. "Yeah."

"Then I trust you to drive my car around a sleepy island town." He nodded and took the keys, then I gave him a quick kiss. "Plus, if you *do* wreck it, I'll just have to show you how good I am with that flogger I mentioned."

I let him go and retook my seat. As Kieran walked to my office door, he tossed the keys in the air. Then he pulled the door open and winked at me.

"That's the worst threat I've ever heard. Text me when you're done, Mr. Vogel."

KIERAN

I COULDN'T BELIEVE Bash had handed over the keys to his Bugatti like he was handing me a spare shirt. That was some trust, even if it did make him out of his mind.

And while part of me was thrilled at getting a chance to drive a car like this, I also panicked at the thought of even a scratch happening under my watch. The Bugatti was worth more than I'd make in a decade—hell, probably more.

Damn, it drove smooth. I was just glad I was able to get it out on the open roads of South Haven instead of wasting it sitting in traffic in Chicago. I didn't know how long Bash would be today, so I took my time popping into a few of the more touristy beach shops along the water that I was positive Bash would rather die than go inside. I picked up a few souvenirs and shot glasses for my family to add to their collection, grabbed lunch at the hole-in-the-wall seafood place Bash had taken me to, and then set my maps app for Ocean Avenue. There were a few places I remembered wanting to check out when Bash had given me the tour, and after I sent a quick message to Bash and he didn't respond right away, I figured now was as good a time as any.

Turned out Ocean Avenue was practically walking distance, which was another advantage of small-town living. After turning the corner, I stopped at a red light and could feel the stares of those around me before I saw them.

Yeah, I wasn't made for a car like this, but it *was* aaaall Bash. Just as flashy and attention-grabbing as the man

himself.

I thought back to the moment in his office, when I'd been so close to saying something it was probably too soon for and he stopped me. He came off as though he had on an armor of steel, and he sure didn't want someone penetrating that. I understood. He was simply protecting himself. We hadn't exactly talked about what would happen when I left this weekend, and I knew that if it was up to Bash, that conversation wouldn't come up at all. Which would leave us...where?

Would there even be an us? Did he want there to be? Did I? And even if we did, how would we make that work?

A horn beeped behind me as the traffic light flashed green, and I made sure to slowly take off instead of punching the gas. No, I'd treat Bash's baby more carefully than I would my own.

I drove slowly as I looked out at the storefronts, trying to find one that sounded familiar. *Freymond Galleria... Body Electric...*

Wait, Body Electric? Wasn't that Shaw's tattoo shop?

When I saw his Camaro parked nearby, I made a sudden decision to pull in. Sure, he'd been a little protective the last time I saw him, but we'd ended the night on a good note. Plus I could always use another tattoo, and his were damn impressive.

The car chirped behind me as it locked itself up, and I looked both ways before jogging across the street. The "open" light was on, so I walked inside, and the sound of tattoo machines buzzing and rock music met my ears.

The walls were an elegant dark blue with artistic silver sculptures, and on one side were black partitions separating each artist's station just high enough that it seemed they could all have conversations while still maintaining privacy. There were two artists already at work on clients, but neither of them were Shaw.

“Hey, what can we do for ya?” The female artist stopped tattooing and looked up expectantly.

“Is Shaw here today?”

“You have an appointment?”

“No, I’m just stopping by. I’m—”

“Kieran,” Shaw said, coming from the back hallway looking every bit like the shop’s personal security, only better dressed. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Bash is working, so I thought I’d explore the island a little.”

“I’m glad you stopped by. Good timing, too, since I’m in between clients.” He gestured toward a coffee bar on the opposite side, and I took a seat on one of the black leather chairs.

“Coffee?”

“Sure.”

Shaw popped a new pod into the machine and set a mug with the Body Electric logo underneath it. “We missed you guys at brunch Sunday.”

“Oh, right. I forgot that was a weekly thing. Sorry.”

“Nah, we figured you two were busy, so you get a pass. But just one, so if you’re in town this weekend, you better be there.”

“I’ll be back in Chicago by then.” I swallowed, not wanting to even admit that out loud yet. “But hey, you’ll finally get your friend back. I know I’ve been taking up a lot of his time.”

“Yeah, you have.” The words might have sounded accusatory, but Shaw gave me a small smile to ease the sting. The coffee dripped to a stop, and he handed me the brew, nodding to the assortment of condiments on the bar before popping in another pod for his own.

I poured in a little sugar and gave it a quick stir as I thought of how I wanted to broach this, since Shaw was a

massive fucking guy. I mean, I could hold my own against most, but if he got one of those biceps around my neck, my head would pop off.

After taking a small sip, I sat back and propped my ankle on my knee. “Look, I get that you probably don’t like me—”

“Yes, I do.”

“What?”

“Where did you get the idea I didn’t like you?”

“Uh, you’ve been warning me off Bash since I met you.”

“Have I? Well, you’re still here, so I guess you didn’t listen.”

“I have a thing about others telling me what to do. Especially when it comes to something or someone I want.”

Shaw’s mouth quirked. “And I respect that. Despite what you may think, I can tell you’re not here to intentionally fuck over my friend. You like him. He likes you.”

“But?”

Shaw stretched his long legs out, crossing them at the ankles, then sighed. “I’m worried that this is just an experiment for you. That it’s something new and exciting for now, but when you leave, you’ll leave Bash behind too.”

I opened my mouth to protest that, but when nothing came out, he nodded.

“Like I said, I know you don’t plan to hurt him, but how does this work, exactly? Have you even talked about that?”

“No, but—”

“But that’s important at this point, don’t you think?” He nodded toward the street. “Hell, he’s got you driving his car, and usually no one’s allowed to even touch it. Not me, not Lucas or Trent, not Jackson. You’ve been staying with him for, what, almost two weeks now? Trust me, I know him, and he’s in this. The question is, are you? Or is this some summer fling you’ll forget once you get back to your world?”

I looked down to the keys in my hand and wrapped my fingers around them, now realizing them for what they were, a symbol—and while I'd suspected as much, hearing Shaw spell it out made it all the more meaningful. Where I'd thought Bash was trying to distract me from pouring my heart out too soon, he'd really been offering a glimpse of his without saying the words out loud.

“I agree with everything you just said and asked just now, I do.” I squeezed my fingers around the key fob and saw Shaw waiting for me to lay all my feelings and intentions out at his feet. But there was no way the first time I discussed this would be with anyone other than Bash. No matter how big this guy was. “You're right, this is new and exciting. But isn't the beginning of every relationship? Yours sure as hell doesn't sound like it was boring.”

“Literally the last word I'd use.”

“Exactly, and I'm not stupid. I know how this looks to you guys. The straight fireman from outta town showing up for some hot summer se—”

“Careful...”

“That's not how *I* see it. But I understand that's how it looks. You don't know me from some stranger walking through that door over there, so you should question things. But what you don't know about me is that I've come into this—and yeah, I'm *in* this too—with my eyes wide open. Did it catch me off guard? Hell yes it did. Can you really imagine Bash being subtle?”

Shaw scoffed.

“Exactly. But I'm not coming at this like some beer-swiggling, game-playing straight guy who's never met a gay man in his life. Both of my brothers are gay and in very happy relationships.”

The amount of satisfaction I got from the shock that crossed Shaw's face made this interrogation somewhat less painful. And since I wasn't sure when I'd ever get an opportunity like this again, I decided to keep right on going.

“As for the problem revolving around our locations, we do need to discuss it. As in me and Bash. I’m sure Trent travels for work, right?”

Shaw inclined his head but remained silent as he looked at me over his coffee mug.

“Then I think the best thing you could do for Bash right now is give us a chance to work this out before you decide it’s a hopeless case.”

Shaw’s eyes narrowed, and it was hard to get a read on the guy. Did he believe me? Had I gotten through? But then he cleared his throat and got to his feet.

“Fair enough,” he said as he towered over me. “Then let me just end it with this: you break his heart, and I’ll break something much worse.”

I was just about to respond when a distinctly familiar voice said from over by the door, “Really with the threats, Shaw?”

BASH

THE SCENE I walked into at Body Electric wasn't what I'd expected. When my meetings were finished, I'd pulled up the Bugatti's tracker and noticed it stopped here, so after getting Jackson to drop me off, I figured I'd stumble into Kieran getting a tattoo.

But no. He was getting a warning instead, and from the one person I could usually count on to have my back.

Break his heart and I'll break something much worse, huh? While I'd usually appreciate the sentiment, the last thing I needed right now was Shaw running Kieran off.

I walked over to where Shaw was standing over Kieran, which would usually be intimidating in and of itself, but when Kieran turned to look at me, his expression was one of determination.

"Care to tell me what you two are discussing so heatedly?" I asked.

They looked at each other and seemed to come to some sort of unspoken understanding, because they both shook their heads.

"Considering I walked in on the tail end of a threat, Shaw, I'd say you have some explaining to do."

"We're fine—" Kieran started, but I put my hand up, not wanting to hear anything other than why my best friend was threatening my boyfr...uh, lieutenant.

Shaw sighed and looked past me, as if he were checking to make sure the other tattoo artists weren't listening in. "I'm just looking out for you."

"By casually talking about breaking body parts? That's your way of looking out?"

"If he hurts you, yes."

"What makes you think that's something you need to worry about?"

"You want the list?"

"Jesus, Shaw, what I do in my personal life is none of your business."

Kieran jumped up, holding his hands out. "Everything's fine, Bash, really. Shaw's just worried. That's what friends do."

"See, I always thought friends helped each other out," I said. "Isn't that what I did for you? For Trent?"

"That's different—" Shaw started.

"You're right, it is. Because I wasn't telling you or Trent I'd break bones if things didn't work out. That's fucked up, and you know it."

"He doesn't even live here. He's leaving. Forgive me if I don't want to see you fall apart. There's not enough champagne in the world to drown in if that happens, and who will be there to pick up the pieces?"

I stared at Shaw, not believing the words coming out of his mouth, but before I could respond, he put his hands on my shoulders.

"Bash, we all love you. And we really like Kieran. But I won't apologize for looking out for you."

I could barely breathe as my anger continued to rise, and I shrugged out of his hold. "There are better ways to go about it." To Kieran, I said, "Let's go."

I didn't bother waiting for a response as I turned on my heel and headed for the door.

“You don’t have to leave,” Shaw said.

After punching open the door, I turned around and glared his way. “Well, I sure as hell don’t have to stay.”

I crossed the street, bypassing the Bugatti in favor of walking, since the last thing I wanted to do was punch a hole in my car.

Well, not that I could if I wanted to, but a car wasn’t conducive to stomping out some aggression.

The nerve...

“Bash, Jesus.” Kieran caught up to me and grabbed my arm as I reached the other side of the street. “Damn you’re fast. Would you hang on a second?”

I rounded on him, and when I saw a smirk on his lips, my anger found a new target. “Is something amusing, lieutenant?”

He had the good grace to lose the grin, and when he tugged me in a step closer, I reluctantly went.

“No, not amusing, more...satisfying.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Meaning?”

Kieran let go of my wrist and wrapped an arm around my waist. “Okay, don’t get mad, but watching you stand up for me just now—”

“Yes?”

He leaned in and whispered across my lips, “That was really fucking hot.”

“Hardly the reaction I was aiming for.”

“Yeah, well, what can I say? You seem to have that effect on me.”

I did my level best to act perturbed as I placed my hands on his chest and pushed him back a step. But there was no denying the flutter in my stomach. “Don’t think you’re off the hook any more than Shaw back there. I don’t appreciate being talked about when I’m not around.”

Kieran let out a sigh and nodded. “I get that, and you were the last thing on my mind when I went in there.”

My eyes widened. “Well, that’s flattering.”

“Shit.” Kieran shook his head and then rubbed his stubbled chin. “I didn’t mean that. What I’m trying to say, and failing at, apparently, is I didn’t go in there to dig up dirt and gossip about you. I just wanted to check out Shaw’s shop.”

That did seem the most likely scenario. Kieran didn’t exactly strike me as the gossipy kind. My friends, however, were a bunch of chatty bitches.

“It’s fine. I’m fine. It’s over.” I turned and started up the sidewalk again, this time with a little less gumption under my boots.

“I think *fine* is the last thing you are right now.” Kieran fell into step beside me and reached out to take my hand. “I think you’re pissed off.”

“No... What gave me away?”

“Couldn’t have been your subtle exit.”

“I wouldn’t think so.”

Kieran brought our joined hands up to kiss my knuckles. “Don’t be mad at Shaw.”

“Why not? He was being a ridiculous oaf, and when someone is being ridiculous, you should tell them so.”

“Yep, well, you definitely did that.”

“Excuse me if I was standing up for you.”

“Oh, I don’t mind that at all. Like I said, fucking hot. What I do mind is you fighting with your friends *because* of me. I don’t want that.”

Again I came to a stop, not trusting myself to walk and talk at the same time as I tried to think of a way to articulate just how *humiliating* it had been to walk into Shaw’s shop and not only hear him threatening Kieran, but also implying I was too weak to handle myself.

“I appreciate that. However, Shaw needs to mind his own business. And *you* are not his business.”

“No. But you are.” Kieran’s expression sobered. “He’s your family. He loves you, and trust me, I know all about annoying and emotional family members.”

I took a deep breath and then turned back to the street in front of us, checking both ways before crossing. I knew what he was saying, and eventually I would see his point, but right now it was too fresh, my anger still too hot.

Kieran kept quiet the rest of the way up the sidewalk. We reached the path that led to the beach and made our way down there. Maybe the fresh air and sound of waves could help calm my nerves.

I walked a little ways up the shore, away from the access point, and when I found an empty stretch of sand, I planted myself down in it—designer pants be damned. Kieran kicked off his flip-flops and took a seat beside me, then wrapped his arms around his knees before peering at me.

I could feel his gaze boring a hole in the side of my head. When I finally turned his way, I saw his cheek resting on his knees and a boyish grin on his handsome face.

“Stop it,” I said, and then looked back out to the waves crashing against the shoreline.

“Stop what? I’m not doing anything.”

“You’re staring at me.”

“Yep, I am doing that.”

“Then stop it.” The last thing I wanted was for him to see me like this. To see me feeling so vulnerable. It was bad enough Shaw had implied I would fall apart without the man, but for Kieran to see the start of that? To see that the reason I was so angry was because there might be some inkling of truth to it? I couldn’t stomach the thought.

“What if I don’t want to?” I asked.

“Why wouldn’t you when there’s a beautiful beach to look at?”

“There’s also a beautiful man.”

I turned to see Kieran’s eyes still locked on me. “You’re crazy.”

“Yeah, I am, about you. That’s what Shaw and I were talking about. And I told him flat-out, Bash, I’m not here to hurt you. I’m here because I can’t stay away.” Kieran reached for my hand and curled his fingers around mine. “From the moment you burst into my life, everything changed for me. But the one thing that stayed constant was my desire to be with you. I wanted to talk to you, hang out with you.” He leaned in and bumped shoulders with me. “Kiss you.”

My lips twitched. “Don’t think this charming act of yours is going to work every time we have an argument.”

“So there’ll be more?”

I leaned my head down on his shoulder. “If you’re lucky.”

Kieran brushed his thumb over the back of my hand and whispered, “I’m feeling really lucky right now.”

So was I, and as we sat there staring out at the water, hand in hand, I realized that was the reason I was so scared. I hadn’t let anyone this close, ever, and with every passing day, Kieran was chipping away at the armor I’d carefully cloaked myself in.

I wasn’t going to let fear rule me, however, just as I wasn’t going to let my friends. I closed my eyes and allowed the anger to slip away. I wouldn’t spend another second of our remaining time together feeling anything other than grateful for what we had.

“Bash?”

“Hmm?”

“Will you do me a favor?”

I cradled his cheek. “What’s that?”

“Call Shaw and work things out.”

I rolled my eyes. “Do I have to? It might do him some good to reflect on his high-handed ways.”

Kieran chuckled. “You might have a point.”

“Of course I do.”

“Okay, how about you call him tomorrow?”

I cocked my head and thought that over. “Oh, okay. That seems like a good amount of time for him to stew.”

Kieran leaned forward and pressed a kiss to my temple. “I mean, if you want to make it tomorrow *night*, I wouldn’t be that upset.”

A burst of laughter fell from my lips and I tipped my head back. God I adored this man. He pulled me into his arms and tackled me back into the sand, and I let myself get lost inside him and the moment for just a little longer.

KIERAN

“ALL RIGHT, LIEUTENANT, do I get to know where we’re going now?” Bash buckled himself into the driver’s seat of his black Mercedes McLaren and looked over at me expectantly. Every day was a fashion show with Bash, and I found myself looking forward to what he’d put on. Today he was in what he called “casual wear,” or at least what *he* considered casual. In a loose orange and teal shirt left open at the top, a pair of dark, skinny pants that sat so low on his hips it was almost indecent, and tan suede boots, he looked like a model. Especially with his hair all tousled like it’d been windblown.

So damn hot.

“Well, since you’re driving, I guess I can tell you,” I said. “I need a t-shirt.”

Bash’s exquisite features twisted into a frown. “A...t-shirt?”

“Yeah. Is that okay?”

Bash hit the button for the garage doors and then started up the car. “I suppose. Did you want to stop by Siriano’s again?”

“I was thinking a little less designer, a little more my kind of casual.”

“Oh.” He tapped his fingers on the wheel as we headed up the drive. “Did you have somewhere specific in mind?”

“I do.” I held up my cell with the maps app to our destination already pulled up, and Bash laughed.

“We’re going over the bridge for a shirt? Now I think you’re playing me, handsome.”

“Never.” I smiled as he reached for my hand and brought it over to rest on his thigh. I was trying not to think about the fact that it was already Friday, or that I had a flight itinerary for tomorrow sitting in my email. We’d both tried to stay busy, soaking in as much time as we could together and avoiding the elephant in the room.

Maybe if we kept ignoring it, it wouldn’t happen.

As if Bash could tell the direction of my thoughts, he flipped on the music and grinned, shaking his hips as a Shakira number began. He always had that way about him, never letting anyone wallow too long and always trying to keep the energy up.

It made me wonder if what Shaw said about him falling apart would actually happen. God, that was the last thing I wanted. Had I made a huge mess of things by coming down here? Made it all worse?

“I don’t see those hips shaking.” Bash smirked at me as he continued to dance in his seat.

“My hips don’t move like that.”

“Oh, honey, yes they do. People would pay to see the way you move your body, trust me.”

Heat crept up my neck, which was strange, since I didn’t blush easily. For Bash to say that when I was still learning how to make things good for us between the sheets made me feel fantastic.

Before long, we’d crossed into Savannah and were pulling into the parking lot of our destination. Bash cut the engine and looked at me with surprise.

“A firehouse?”

“Hell yeah,” I said, unbuckling my seatbelt.

“You said you wanted a shirt, though.”

“I do. It’s a thing we do, go to different firehouses around the country and collect shirts.”

“Huh.” He cocked his head, seeming to think it over. “Why?”

I laughed. “I don’t know, I don’t make the rules. Gives us a chance to say hi and shows off where we’ve been, I guess. Come on.”

As the doors of the Mercedes lifted—a seriously badass feature, by the way—Bash said, “But we didn’t bring a welcome gift.”

“What do we need a welcome gift for?”

He rounded the car and kept time with me as we headed toward the open app bay. “Darling, you don’t go anywhere in the South empty-handed. We should’ve picked up some food or something.”

“It’ll be fine, I promise.”

“I feel so rude.”

“Well, you look sexy as fuck, so maybe think of yourself as the gift.”

Bash perked up and playfully bumped his arm against mine. “See? You get me now, lieutenant. You really get me.”

I chuckled as we walked inside, and the first thing I noticed was that this house had four vehicles—two engines, a truck, and an ambo, and there was a second floor, making it almost double the size of my home station. Hell, there wasn’t room to grow anywhere in downtown Chicago, but this place even had a backyard-type area with a couple of picnic benches.

“Hey, you lookin’ for someone?”

A guy wearing a squad shirt stood up from the table where he and another guy were playing a round of cards.

I held my hand out, and he shook it. “Lieutenant Kieran Bailey from Station 73 in Chicago. I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d stop by, look around, grab a shirt.”

“Damn, all the way from Chicago. Nice to meet you, man. I’m Pete Prince. What brings you out this way?”

I nodded toward Bash. “This is Sebastian Vogel, CEO of AnaVoge. He lives nearby on South Haven.”

“Oh yeah? My wife and I were looking at a place over that way, just to get a breather from the city.”

Bash smiled, his body language switching to professional in an instant, and then he shocked the hell out of me by pulling out his card from his back pocket. “I’ve lived there all my life. Feel free to get in touch if you need any advice.”

“Great, thanks.” Pete glanced over his shoulder and then back to us with a smile. “Why don’t you come on in, and you can meet everyone and we can see about that shirt.”

“Thanks—you lead, we’ll follow,” I said.

We made our way down the aisle, and when we got to the far end where the doors led inside, Bash stopped in his tracks and looked up at the gangway above.

“They have a fireman’s pole here.”

Pete stopped and looked up at it, nodding. “Yeah, it’s a real hit with the kiddos when they come through on tour. All they want to do is slide down it.”

The *kiddos*? It was clearly a hit with the grown man now salivating over the idea of muscled-up firefighters in nothing more than bunker pants and a fine sheen of sweat sliding down it.

As Pete headed toward the main doors, I leaned in to say by Bash’s ear, “Roll your tongue back in, Mr. Vogel. You already have a fireman’s pole to slide down.”

He winked. “I know, but it never hurts to look.”

“As long as that’s *all* you do,” I growled, and he chuckled as we followed Pete inside.

The setup of the main house was fairly similar to our own. There was a kitchen and common area on the main floor, along with the admin and offices down the hall from that. A gym

rounded out that end of the station, and on the other side was a Zen room/garden.

I tried to imagine my guys back in Chicago ever using a space like that and couldn't help but laugh, because the idea of Olsen or Brumm doing any kind of meditation or inner thinking beyond their next meal was just hilarious.

That, along with the sleeping quarters and locker rooms upstairs, were the only major differences I could see. As well as the fact the station itself seemed relatively new.

"Let's head in here," Pete said. "Most of the crew should be in the common room. I can introduce you and then grab that t-shirt."

"Thanks, man, that'd be great," I said.

The three of us walked into the open kitchen and lounge area to see several men and a couple of women seated at the tables and over on the couches. When they spotted the new faces, everyone sat up and paid attention.

"Hey, guys," Pete said. "This here is Lieutenant Kieran Bailey, all the way from Station 73 up in Chicago."

"No shit," a big, burly guy with a buzzed head said. He got up from the table and offered his hand. "Welcome, man. Welcome." He turned his attention to Bash. "Are you from the same station?"

Bash let out that lyrical laugh of his. "Oh, aren't you hilarious? No, honey, I live over on South Haven, where I prefer to work in an air-conditioned office where there's an assistant at the ready." Bash reached out and booped the man on the nose. "But aren't you cute?"

I tensed a little, waiting for some asshole like Sanderson to open his mouth and say something that would make me want to tear a piece out of him. But when the big guy started to laugh and so did everyone else, I let out a sigh of relief.

"Can't fault you on that. I've been trying to get Hannah over there to make my coffee every morning, but—"

“She isn’t his slave, so she doesn’t.” The woman aimed a *fuck you* grin in his direction.

“So, Chicago, huh?” the big guy said. “What brought you down here?”

I reached for Bash’s hand, and his head almost flew off his shoulders with how fast it whipped around. “I’m visiting this diva here. Someone has to bring him his coffee.”

Bash’s jaw almost fell to the ground as the guys chuckled, and I wondered if that was due to my comment or the fact I’d openly reached for his hand in the middle of a packed firehouse.

“Well, we’re happy to have any of our brothers stopping by,” Pete said. “You said you were a lieutenant?”

“That’s right.”

“Interesting. It looks like there might be an opening for a lieutenant down here soon if you’re looking for something a little different than the big city.”

“No kidding?” My stomach flip-flopped at the idea. The thought had never even occurred to me.

“Yeah, and I could always use someone who knows how to make me a good coffee.”

That made me laugh, but when I turned to Bash, I noticed a frown creasing his forehead.

“Anyway,” Pete said, and clapped me on the back, “give me one second and I’ll get you that shirt.”

“Sounds good. Thanks.” As he walked out and everyone went back to what they were doing, I turned to Bash. “You okay?”

“What?”

“You got very quiet. I was just asking if you’re okay.”

“Oh.” He plastered a smile on his face that was just a little too bright and nodded. “Yes, I’m great. I was just taking everything in.”

I didn't believe that for a second. If I had to guess, his sudden mood change had everything to do with the unexpected door that had just been opened to me. A job opening here had been the last thing I expected when I suggested coming out here today. But now that it was on my radar, it was all I could think about. Bash too, apparently.

I was about to push him a little harder, to see if my suspicions were right, when Pete walked back in and held out the shirt.

“You looked like a large, am I right?”

I nodded and took it from him. “Spot on. Thanks again for the tour and everything. It's been great.”

“You're welcome anytime, man. You know where to find us.”

I sure did. Twenty minutes, give or take, from Bash's paradise island.

Damn. I didn't usually believe in signs, but what were the chances there was a lieutenant spot opening up and I'd just happened to come by?

Bash's fingers were tight around mine as we headed back to the car, and I wondered what his silence meant. This news opened up possibilities I hadn't even considered, but shit...this was all happening so fast. Was this what happened when things were right? Or was I rushing into something I wasn't ready for?

One thing was for sure—we needed to talk.

BASH

“I’M GONNA MISS this.”

My eyes flew open at Kieran’s whispered words as he hugged me in tighter against his naked body. With my back to him where we lay on a pallet of blankets in front of the fireplace, all I could see were the flames making dancing shadows on the wall.

I brought his hand to my lips and pressed a kiss against his knuckles. “You make it sound like I’ll never see you again. You plan on ghosting me this time?”

“Never.” Kieran ran his nose beneath the sensitive spot under my ear, sending shivers through my body. “We need to talk about this, Bash.”

Or we could just stay like this forever, all wrapped up in each other and oblivious to anything and anyone else.

I knew better than that, though. We’d been at each other for hours, ever since we got back from the firehouse in Savannah, both of us feeling the tension of his impending departure and taking it out on each other’s bodies. I’d savored every single second, memorized every scar and the feel of his skin. The way he felt inside me. The sounds he made when it felt so good he couldn’t stay quiet.

I was going to miss this. I wasn’t deluding myself into thinking this would ever be more than a moment in time for us, not even when the firemen in Savannah had dangled a position in front of him. His whole life was in Chicago. He wouldn’t give that up for me, and I’d never ask him to.

“Bash? You didn’t fall asleep, did you?”

“No.”

“Did you hear what I said?”

I turned over to face him, and instantly regretted that when I saw the worry in his eyes. I cradled his face, running my thumb against his stubble, and smiled a little. “You really are the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen.”

The frown lines on his face eased a little, and he kissed my thumb. “Stop changing the subject.”

“I’m not. I was just making an observation.” When he sighed, I moved my fingers into his hair, wanting to keep touching him in whatever way I could. “Can I ask you something? And I want you to be one hundred percent—no, one hundred and *fifty* percent—honest with me.”

“Yeah, of course.”

“What is it you want?” Those frown lines from seconds ago reappeared between his brows. “From me, that is. Do you see this as more than just a passing—”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t hear the rest of what I was going to say.”

“I didn’t need to. That seems to be the question of the hour.”

I narrowed my eyes, but then it registered. “Shaw.”

Kieran nodded. “Right. But I wasn’t about to talk to him about it before I talked to you. These past two weeks—hell, this whole month, really—has been a roller coaster for me. You see, I always saw my life going a certain way, and I just figured that’s how it would go. You know?”

I could imagine...

Firefighter, *check*.

Serial dater, *check*.

Straight, *check*.

“But then I met you.” Kieran traced his fingers along my cheekbones. “And that way of life that I knew took one hell of a U-turn.”

That sounded promising but still didn’t answer my question. “What does that mean, though? That I threw you off course? You took a detour? I drove you off the *straight* and narrow?”

Kieran’s lips quirked, and I pinned him with a cool glare.

“If you don’t answer soon, I’m going to run out of driving references.”

“It means”—he leaned in and kissed my stern lips—“I took a road trip and now I never want to go back.”

“Kieran...” I took a shaky breath and closed my eyes. The emotions flooding me were almost overwhelming. “Please don’t say things like that.”

“Why not?”

I opened my eyes. “Because it gives me the one thing that’s the hardest to let go of.”

“And that is?”

“Hope.”

Kieran let out a sigh, and then let me go so he could sit up. When I did the same, we pulled the blankets up over our laps and stared into the flames. “You still think this is some kind of one-off for me, huh? Some kind of game?”

“No.” I turned to face him, but Kieran was still staring into the fire. His strong jaw was bunched tight, and the muscle twitching there relayed just how offended he was by what I’d said. I reached out and laid a hand on his arm. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“No? That’s how it sounded.”

“I just... Would you look at me, please?”

Kieran slowly turned his head, and the hurt in his eyes made my chest tighten. That was the last thing I’d wanted.

“What I meant is that this, us, it’s complicated, and not even because I’m the first man you’ve been with. There’s the distance between us, our homes being in two totally different parts of the country, and while it’s easy these days to hop a plane or Skype and call, is a long-distance relationship something you really want? What about when we’re not together? What then? Are you going to see other people?”

“I would never do that. Why? Would *you* want to see other people?”

I couldn’t stop my small smile. “No, I wouldn’t. But I also don’t know if I can handle only having you for a few days a month, if that.”

“Fuck.” Kieran ran a hand over his head. “Why can’t this be easy?”

I trailed my fingers down his arm and took his hand. “Because nothing worthwhile ever is?”

Kieran looked back to the fire and said softly, “What if it could be?”

“Could be...?”

“Easy?” He turned back to me, shifting his entire body until he was facing me cross-legged. “If you’d met me at Licked and I lived around here, and the same exact scenarios that brought us together had all played out, what would you want right now?”

I scoffed and shook my head. “That’s ridiculous.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“But it’s not real.”

“Answer the question, Bash.”

The expression on Kieran’s face switched from hurt to that same determination I’d seen at Shaw’s. He wasn’t going to let me get out of this.

“I’d want it all.”

A wide smile slowly stretched across Kieran’s lips. “Which means *what*, exactly?”

I looked toward the fire, wondering how wise it was to open myself up this way. But if I wanted Kieran to be honest with me, I owed him the same courtesy, didn't I? I was a master of keeping secrets, even from those close to me, so I didn't let anyone in easily.

"A few years ago, I had a bit of a health scare."

"A bit?"

I nodded but continued staring into the flames dancing in the dark, knowing if I looked at him I wouldn't get through this. "Do you remember that night in Chicago when we went to Gravititas?"

"Kind of hard to forget."

"That's true."

He entwined our fingers. "That was the first night you kissed me."

"No, it wasn't."

"Yeah, it was. Right here." Kieran tapped the side of his cheek. "You asked if it was okay between friends. But come on, you can fess up. That was totally a date to you, wasn't it?"

"Only in my dreams."

"You weren't the only one. That night, you were all I could think about. When I say that was the first night we went to bed together, I'm not kidding. You were all up in my head."

I'd often wondered if he'd thought any more about that kiss after it happened, and hearing him confirm it made my heart thump a little faster. He'd been thinking about *us* almost from the get-go.

"Bash?"

"Hmm?"

"What health scare?"

Why was it always so hard to talk about the important things? I was a master when it came to fun and frivolous, a

genius at business and tech talk, but when it came to admitting any kind of weakness, I wanted to run and hide.

“Hey?” Kieran squeezed my fingers. “Talk to me.”

“That night at Gravitas, I told you about my parents and how they both passed. Do you remember?”

“Of course.”

“Well, a couple of years ago I went in for a general exam where they ran some blood tests, and instead of getting the standard set of results sent to me, I got a call from the doctor telling me he wanted to see me.”

“Oh shit.”

I nodded. “There was an anomaly on one of the lab results, and due to my family history, they wanted to do some more extensive tests to rule out the same cancer.”

“Jesus, Bash. That had to be terrifying.”

“That’s putting it mildly. I could barely function, I was so scared. I completely shut down. Withdrew from everyone—”

“Even your friends?”

“Especially them. I just... I didn’t want them to see me like that. I hated the idea of them thinking I was sick or weak—”

“They wouldn’t think like that. They’re your family. You were the one to tell me that, remember?”

“I know, and I’m pretty sure Shaw worked out something was going on, but he gave me my space, which is why it’s so strange he’s poking his nose in this time.”

“Is it?” Kieran’s grip tightened, and he pulled me around until he could hook a hand under my leg and scoot me up onto his lap.

“Probably not. He sees how I am with you.”

“And how’s that?”

“I told you, I want it all.”

“But only if I live here?”

I could feel the steady thumping of his heart under my palm and decided to take a flying leap. “I’m starting to think it doesn’t matter where you live.”

KIERAN

I'M STARTING TO think it doesn't matter where you live.

Was he serious? No... He'd been adamant he didn't like Chicago and would never consider moving there, but had he changed his mind?

I swallowed hard as Bash looked down to where his hand covered my heart, and I knew he could feel the way it was starting to race.

“Bash...what are you saying?”

He dropped his hands, rubbed them along the sides of my thighs, and took a big breath. “I'm not ready to let you go. And the terrifying part about that is I'm not sure I'll ever be ready.” An almost-shy smile crossed his lips as he looked up at me. “Does that scare you?”

“No.” The word was out of my mouth before I even knew I was going to say it. “I don't want you to let me go either.”

Bash's smile grew, and he bit his lower lip. “You mean that?”

“Yeah. I do. You've changed my whole world, and how do I just go back to the way things were before you? I can't. I don't want to. So for me, whatever we have to do to make this work...I'm in.”

It was crazy that I didn't feel any hesitation saying those words. But they were true. I'd gone through my entire life thinking I wasn't cut out for a relationship, that I preferred a one-and-done night and on to the next, but with Bash, it was

the complete opposite. Just the thought of leaving and not knowing when I was going to see him again made me physically sick. And the thought of someone else touching him, having his attention, made it hard to breathe.

“You’re in?”

I nodded. “We’ve got options, right? We just have to choose one.”

“Easy as that?”

“This only has to be hard if we make it hard.”

Bash glanced down to our laps and then back up to me. “You definitely do a good job of that, lieutenant.”

I chuckled and ran my hands up his back pulling him in even closer. “So do you. But that’s not what I was talking about.”

“No?” Bash wriggled on my lap. “You sure?”

I brushed a kiss across his lips. “Stop distracting me. I’m trying to think with my head.”

Bash opened his mouth to respond, but before he could say it, I interrupted him.

“The one on my shoulders.”

“Very well.” He sighed and ran a hand over the back of my hair. “I’ll behave.”

“Not too much, I hope. But what I was trying to say is, this only has to be as complicated as we make it. Sure, we live in different places, but it doesn’t have to stay that way.”

Bash’s hand stilled on the back of my head. Oh shit, had I read this wrong? I was about to try to backtrack a little, in case I’d jumped the gun.

But before I could get it out, Bash said, “You mean, one of us move?”

Okay, now that he’d said it out loud, it did sound a little crazy. We’d barely known each other a month, and I knew this was moving at breakneck speed, but...

“I could definitely look into a place in Chicago.”

“No, I didn’t mean that.” I shook my head. “Your business is here, your family—”

“And your job and family is in Chicago. I’m going to need to hire new staff, get the office established. I could definitely do that from up there.”

A deep V formed between Bash’s brows as he seemed to think that over.

“Yes, that’s perfect. Alexander gave me his card and told me he’d help me find a place, and I could come back and visit here whenever—”

“Wait, wait, wait.” I placed my finger to his lips. “I didn’t mean for you to move. I was thinking *I* could. That job opening in Savannah, it’s almost like fate or something. Do you know how rare it is for a lieutenant position to open up?”

Bash pressed a kiss to my fingertip and whispered, “You’d do that? For me? What about your family?”

“They aren’t invited.”

Bash laughed. “That’s not what I mean.”

“No?”

“Be serious. You’re close. I don’t want to take you away from them.”

“Last time I checked, they’d still be reachable by plane.”

“I don’t know, Kieran. That’s a lot to ask.”

“You *didn’t* ask.” When he still didn’t look convinced, I added, “I practically invited myself.”

Bash’s eyes shone in the firelight as he stared at me with a look of wonder. “I...I don’t know. This is all seems too—”

“Fast?”

Bash shook his head. “Too good to be true. You don’t know how badly I want to say yes.”

“Then say yes.”

“Kieran, are you even listening to yourself? You’re just going to pack up and leave everything? That’s not fair to you. Why should you be the only one to make a sacrifice here?”

“But you love this place.”

“And you love Chicago.” Bash’s lips twisted. “I know, what if we meet halfway?”

“Halfway? What do you mean?”

“What’s halfway between South Haven and Chicago?”

I snorted. “Fucked if I know.”

“Hmm. Siri, what’s halfway between South Haven and Chicago?”

“To reach the midway point between South Haven and Chicago, you would drive to Oak Ridge, Tennessee.”

Bash’s nose scrunched up, and I let out a full belly laugh. “I’m guessing that’s a no?”

“Uh, how about we try to work with what we have,” he said. “There has to be a solution.”

“Agreed.” I tightened my hold around his waist and kissed my way up to his ear. “Cause now that I’ve got you, I’m not letting you go.”

Bash laughed and turned his head. “Well, I’m not letting *you* go. You can’t expect to fly all the way down here and think I wouldn’t try to keep you.”

“Oh yeah? You have a dungeon and chains I don’t know about?”

“I gave you *a* tour of the house. I didn’t say I showed you everything.”

“See? That’s just another thing I love about you. Always full of surprises.”

As I leaned in for another kiss, Bash drew his head back and put a hand on my chest.

I frowned. “What?”

“Another thing you *love*? About me?”

Did I... I hadn't said *love*, had I? I ran our conversation back in my head, and as I realized the words that had come out of my mouth, I cursed. Oh my God. I couldn't shut my fucking mouth tonight, could I? If talking about moving was going too fast, practically telling Bash I loved him would definitely push him over the edge into a full-blown freak-out.

"Kieran."

Jesus, I couldn't even look at him right now, but when Bash cradled my face, I had no choice. To my surprise, it wasn't shock or alarm on his face, but pure adoration, and when he smiled at me, I felt my heart squeeze.

"I love you too," he said, brushing his thumb along my jaw. "I love everything about you."

Holy shit. I could feel the sting behind my eyes as his face became blurry, and then his fingers were wiping away any trails of wetness.

"That okay with you?" he said, his voice teasing, and I laughed.

"Yes, it's fucking okay." I pulled him toward me, our lips crashing together in response to putting every vulnerable bit of ourselves out there. My mind reeled as Bash kissed me until I was breathless, and even then I didn't want to take my mouth off him.

Bash pulled away slightly. "This is crazy."

"The best things always are."

"It's not too fast?"

I shrugged as I leaned back to look him in the eyes. "What's too fast, though? We're already in this, whether it's today or months down the road, right? Why waste time being apart if we know what we want?"

"Damn, lieutenant. That might be the smartest thing you've ever said. Well, besides the loving things about me part, of course," he said with a cheeky smile.

"Not things. You. I love *you*, Bash."

Now it was Bash's turn to get all teary-eyed, and he chuckled as he wiped his eyes. "So was this your plan all along? Fly down here, steal my heart, and make me fall in love with you?"

"Hah, more like fly down here and try to force you to talk to me. My ambitions weren't that high. But if you want to think I masterminded this whole thing, I'm good with that."

He shook his head, still staring at me in wonder. It was a look I hoped never went away.

"Whatever will your family say?"

"They might have me committed," I said, shooting him a wink. "You'll spring me if that happens, right?"

"In a heartbeat. And if Shaw or any of the others threaten you again—"

"Then I know how to use a fire hose." When Bash's eyes dropped to my lap again, I laughed. "Not that one, Jesus. At least not with them."

"Excellent answer." Bash pushed me onto my back, his naked body straddling mine, and even though I should've been spent at this point, my cock reacted as though I hadn't been inside him for hours already tonight. With him, it seemed like nothing was ever enough.

With his warm body resting on top of mine, he lowered to his forearms on either side of my head and brushed his lips against the stubble on my jaw.

"So let me get this...well, not so straight," he said, smirking. "You love me, I love you, and we've decided we can't live without each other."

I grinned and nodded. "That pretty much sums it up, yeah."

"Uh huh. Then I guess that just leaves one teeny, tiny, miniscule question."

"I guess it does." I ran my fingers through the hair that had fallen over his forehead, marveling over the fact that this man was somehow mine. *Mine*. And as crazy and strange as it

should've seemed that I would end up here, in this moment, with him, the wildest thing about all this was how perfect and right it felt. Like my whole life had been building up to meeting this amazing human, and though I hadn't expected to fall in love—and definitely not with a man—here I was, about to make the biggest decision of my life, and I wasn't scared at all.

That alone told me this was right, and no matter what we decided, we'd choose to be together.

I lifted up to take Bash's lips in the softest of kisses, and when I lay back down again and met his eyes, I could see the same question that I knew he could see in mine.

“Where do we go from here?”

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading DARE ME.

We hope you enjoyed the continuation of Kieran & Bash's love story because the next chapter is even *more* fantabuloso!!

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ABOUT BROOKE BLAINE

Brooke Blaine is a *USA Today* Bestselling Author of contemporary and LGBT romance that ranges from comedy to suspense to erotic. The latter has scarred her conservative Southern family for life, bless their hearts.

If you'd like to get in touch with her, she's easy to find - just keep an ear out for the Rick Astley ringtone that's dominated her cell phone for years. Or you can reach her at www.BrookeBlaine.com.

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ABOUT ELLA FRANK

If you'd like to get to know Ella better, you can find her getting up to all kinds of shenanigans at:

[The Naughty Umbrella](#)

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Ella Frank's Temptation Series Facebook Group.

Ella Frank is the *USA Today* Bestselling author of the Temptation series, including Try, Take, and Trust and is the co-author of the fan-favorite contemporary romance, Sex Addict. Her Exquisite series has been praised as "scorching hot!" and "enticingly sexy!"

Some of her favorite authors include Nora Roberts, Tiffany Reisz, Riley Hart, J.R. Ward, Erika Wilde, and Carly Philips.

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