

A close-up photograph of a man with dark, wavy hair and a light beard, wearing a black tuxedo jacket, a white dress shirt, and a black bow tie. He is looking down with a soft expression. A woman's hand is visible, resting on his shoulder. The background is dark and out of focus.

A FAUX LOVE
NOVEL

*Fake it
For Him*

WESTON PARKER

FAKE IT FOR HIM

A FAUX LOVE NOVEL #12

WESTON PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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FIND WESTON PARKER



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DESCRIPTION



The first time I saw her, I had to have her.

So I did.

Four years later, I don't expect to see her again, let alone hire her to be my fake date.

But here we are.

She's just as fiery and sexy as I remember.

She hates my guts and I love making her see red.

It's too easy to push her buttons.

What started as a ruse to get my family off my back is now something real.

She's my fake girlfriend.

So why do I feel protective of her?

She's mine on our contract paperwork.

I need to make her mine in her soul, too.

But if I don't change my bad boy ways?

I'll lose her forever.

Introduction



Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

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Four Years Ago

My nose and jaw throbbed as I dropped into the backseat of an iconic Edinburgh black cab. I cursed under my breath when my ass hit the leather and the jarring made another sharp bolt of pain shoot from my nose.

“Where to, sir?” The cabbie glanced at me in the rearview mirror, his accent heavy and a gray woolen cap pulled down low over his forehead.

I kept my sleeve pressed against my nose in an attempt to keep the blood from ruining my shirt, and I tried to pluck the name of my hotel out of my alcohol-soaked brain. “The, uh, the Dalhousie Castle.”

His eyes widened and he paused for a beat before he shrugged and pulled away from the curb. “That’s a nice place. The real McCoy. King Edward the First was a guest there once upon a time.”

“Yeah, I know.” *Spare me the history lesson.*

Thankfully, the man shut up as he navigated away from the venue, turning from one darkened street into another, and then another. *Leave it to my brother to make us travel all the damn way to Scotland and then not even have the decency to choose a place close to anything.*

I groaned as I leaned against the seat, tilting my head back in the hopes that I could stop using my sleeve to stem the tide

of blood. Maybe even see if there was any crunching of bone if I poked myself.

Holy hell, I can't believe Finn did this. Who knew he had it in him?

All my life, I'd thought my brother was the type to sue rather than throw a punch. *Guess I was wrong. Asshole.*

I sighed, but then I gagged when I realized I was still bleeding—into my mouth now that my head was tilted back—and that the taste of blood and whiskey didn't go well together. I slid my sleeve to my nose again, sitting up as a wave of irritation rolled through me.

“Fucking Finlay. Sucker-punching me like a coward. The nerve. The *fucking* nerve.”

As I vented to myself, the cabdriver glanced up again, but this time, he took a proper look at me in the mirror, saw I was bleeding everywhere, and jerked the steering wheel to pull over. “You're going to have to get out, sir. I won't have blood on my seats. It's the festive season. I'm too busy to get her cleaned.”

I bristled, my eyes narrowing as I glared at him. “Just take me to the hotel and I'll pay extra.”

“No, sir. You can get out here.”

“You're kicking me out?” Disbelief rippled through me. “Seriously? It's fucking freezing out there.”

The man nodded. “I'm sorry, sir. You're bleeding.”

“Yeah, I know.” I shook my head and then immediately regretted it when more pain flared through me. Gritting my teeth, I dug into my pocket with my free hand, pulled out a bill, and tossed it at him before I climbed out. “Thanks for nothing, dick.”

Unfazed, the man took my money and waited patiently for me to slam his door before he drove off, leaving me alone on the dark, icy, cobblestone sidewalk without a clue about where I was. Now in an even worse mood than I had been before, I looked up and down the street, trying to get my bearings.

And another cab.

But as luck would have it, I was surrounded by buildings, most of the lights already off, and there was not another vehicle in sight. I blew out a heavy breath, keeping my sleeve pressed against my nose, and I wandered off in search of a cab, a bar, or a hotel with a bar where I could wait for a cab.

“The family business definitely isn’t worth all this bullshit,” I grumbled to myself as I walked the streets of Edinburgh at one a.m., lost, cold, in pain, and more than a little bit tipsy. I stumbled around for what felt like an hour, but it looked like he’d dropped me in the sticks, without a trace of decent civilization in sight.

Following the sound of light traffic coming from somewhere in the distance, I walked along blocks through what appeared to be a residential area before I started seeing a stronger glow of lights emanating from around the corner.

A group of people spilled out of a bar, one girl ending in an orange pool of light under the streetlamp. I blinked hard, wondering if it was the alcohol or a possible head injury speaking, but I could’ve sworn she was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen.

Thick and curvy, she was still shimmying into her coat as they left the establishment they’d been in, and I got a glimpse of a full rack, wide hips, and a good ass before she covered herself in the black parka. Lifting long, layered black hair out of the hood before she flipped it up, she was in the process of turning back to her friends when her gaze landed on mine.

I couldn’t make out the color of her eyes, but her brow furrowed when she saw me, her gaze sweeping across my face before she rushed over. “Oh, my god. Are you okay? You’re covered in blood, sir.”

Snark was my middle name, but for some reason, it just didn’t come to the fore as she gazed up at me. From this close, I could see the smattering of freckles across her nose and rosy cheeks and the real concern in that puckered brow and deep frown.

“I’m fine. It’s worse than it looks.”

Her dark eyebrows shot up, her sparkly, light eyes drawing me in as she stared up at me. “Let’s go. I’ll help you get cleaned up.”

“You will? Why? You don’t know me, so why do you care?”

She scoffed. “You’re injured in a foreign country after midnight and you clearly have no idea where you are, so just stop asking questions and come with me.”

It was then that I realized her accent was American instead of Scottish, my brain clearly slow as a result of the whiskey—or the head injury, which I still didn’t know if I had. The girl turned back to her friends, still standing outside the door and watching us with varying degrees of impatience, confusion, and curiosity on their faces.

“You guys go on. I’ll catch up later.”

She didn’t wait for a response before she wrapped her arm around mine, a bundle of surprising strength and energy for such a tiny person, and she dragged me across the quiet street. She couldn’t have been more than five-foot-four, yet she commandeered my person like I was a ship she was taking charge of, marching me toward a bank of bright lights around the next corner.

She led me into a twenty-four-hour store. I blinked hard, squinting against the sudden intrusion of light after so long in the dark. She hummed under her breath as she kept marching with my arm held tight in hers, her strides purposeful and sure.

As we walked, I glanced down at her, noticing her thick, long eyelashes as her gaze darted up and down an aisle that held some basic medical supplies. Without wasting time, she selected some gauze, a small bottle of disinfectant, band-aids, and water, and then she marched us to the checkout counter and paid for it all before I could even wrap my hazy mind around what was happening.

After she dropped her change in a small tin on the counter in support of some charity, she took my arm again and

marched us right back outside into the cold. Once again, her strides were purposeful and I frowned.

“Where are we going?”

“The hostel I’m staying at is right around the corner,” she said, peering up at me without breaking stride. “Do you want to tell me what happened to you? You weren’t mugged or something, right?”

I chuckled. The movement caused more pain to flare from my face and I winced. “I wasn’t mugged and I still don’t get why you’re helping me.”

“Us tourists need to stick together, right?”

One of my eyebrows arched without my brain having given it the conscious command to do so. “You’re a tourist? You seem to know your way around pretty well for that.”

She shrugged, dropping her gaze back to the street instead of looking at me. “I’ve been here for a while. The hostel is right down here. Come on.”

“Wait. This hostel is nice, right? Like, it’s not the kind of place where they’re going to put me in an ice bath and carve out my kidneys?”

She let out a bark of surprised laughter. “Well, I wouldn’t say that it’s nice, but I’ve been staying there for a bit and I haven’t seen an ice bath yet, so I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“Funny how you didn’t mention whether you still have your kidneys,” I mumbled.

The girl laughed again, shaking her head at me. She pulled me toward a door in a wall without even a sign over it. It was a hole-in-the-wall kind of place—literally—and definitely not someplace where I’d usually stay.

In fact, I wouldn’t usually be anywhere near it, but here I was. I followed her in. Heat rolled over me once we stepped inside, and I breathed out a sigh of relief. We were in a lobby with a huge fire burning in a fireplace, a quiet bar off to one side, low ceilings, and mismatched, well-used furniture dotting the space.

The lights were dim, but the girl didn't seem hesitant or scared at all. In fact, she seemed kind of at home here, which made me wonder just how long she'd been staying. She shrugged off the parka when we got to a sofa right in front of the fireplace. Then she opened the bag containing the supplies she'd bought and motioned for me to sit down.

"I promise, no one here wants your kidneys. Just relax."

I darted another look at the old stone walls and the faded flags from all sorts of different countries hanging from the wooden beams overhead. "I'm not sure about this."

"Just sit down," she instructed gently as she sat. She caught my hand and pulled me with her. I went, allowing her to drag me down with her and wondering if she was hiding something. No one was this kind to a perfect stranger who was covered in blood and no one was so insistent about helping them, but she was so gentle and she seemed honest, so I stopped fighting.

At least if she kills me, I'd have been murdered by the most beautiful, tender serial killer in the history of the world.

Strangely, I was okay with that—and I also wasn't getting any serial-killer vibes from her, so I was pretty sure I'd be okay. At the thought, I let myself relax a little, finally pulling my hand away from my face and turning to her.

She scrunched up her nose at whatever injuries she saw now that my hand wasn't in the way, but she went about dabbing some of the disinfectant on the gauze without commenting on it. Meanwhile, I stared at her openly, examining the face of the woman who had come to my rescue.

In the soft light of the fire and with my head a little bit clearer after walking back here in the cold, she was even prettier than I'd clocked her to be out there on the street. Her features were delicate, and now that she wasn't wearing the fur-lined hood of the parka, I could see that her face was heart shaped and her cheekbones were high.

Those eyes were a bright, happy, sparkling green and her touches were gentle as she brought the gauze to my cheek. I

wincing at the initial sting, and her nose wrinkled, her eyes filling with sympathy. “If it helps, I don’t think you’re going to have a scar. The cut doesn’t seem to be that deep.”

“Damn. I’ve heard that chicks dig scars.”

“Something tells me you don’t need a scar for chicks to dig you.” She flashed me a small, amused smile, then giggled when she caught me staring at her so intently. “What?”

“Nothing. You’re beautiful, is all.”

She burst out laughing, doubling over, and she shook her head at me. “And you’re drunk.”

“I’m not that drunk anymore.” I leaned forward, wishing her head was still right in front of me instead of halfway to her lap as she laughed. “What can I do to thank you for showing mercy to a pathetic stranger on the street?”

The girl straightened up again and swiped her index fingers under her eyes as if she’d laughed so hard, she’d cried. Her fingernails were festively painted red, white, and green, with little Grinches on the nails of her ring fingers.

While I wondered what on earth would possess a person to have their nails done like that, she jerked her head toward the bar. “How about a cup of coffee?”

It wasn’t what I’d choose to drink, but I nodded again. “Coming right up.”

“I’ll have whipped cream on mine.”

I frowned as I got up, my brows climbing when I realized she was serious. “Whipped cream?”

“Yep.”

I laughed. “That’s more of a milkshake than a coffee, but okay. You’re the good Samaritan here, so whatever you want, you get.”

“Milkshake?” she echoed incredulously.

I strode toward the pocked, thick wooden bar and caught the attention of the bartender. I chuckled as I placed our order, but he didn’t seem surprised at all about the whipped cream. In

fact, he immediately looked past me, saluted the girl, and then broke away from me to make our drinks. I turned and leaned against the counter while I waited, watching as she dropped the used medical supplies back into the bag and settled into the sofa, her eyes on the fire where the flames danced in the hearth.

This girl was fascinating, and after the night I'd had, I didn't think it was possible for me to end it like this. On a positive note. One that would end with me in her bed—whether she knew it yet or not.

Four Years Ago

Life was so damn weird sometimes. The last thing I'd expected when I'd headed out last night with some of the others who lived in the hostel was to end up back here, nursing a hot-as-hell, injured American who'd obviously been in some kind of fight.

I'd been around the block enough times to know what a guy looked like when he'd been punched, and this man, handsome as he was, had obviously pissed off the wrong Scotsman. Or someone, but probably a Scot, since he seemed to be traveling alone.

I sighed as I watched him come back to the sofa, carrying our coffees carefully so he wouldn't add burned fingers to his list of injuries for the night. As he sat down, I was struck again by how good he smelled—freakishly good—*and* by how incredibly attractive he was.

His scent was masculine and expensive, spicy but not overly so. It also wasn't overpowering, just a faint hint of leather, whiskey, and citrus. Although I was pretty sure the whiskey was from his pores and not his cologne.

I didn't know why I thought the scent was expensive, but it might've been just because his clothes definitely were. A dark, tailored suit with a light blue shirt that fit like it'd been made for him. It was just a pity that his collar was so stained with

blood that he was probably going to have to toss it out after tonight.

Once he was seated, he turned slowly and handed over my drink, and those mysterious, deep brown eyes latched on mine. “Where are you from?”

“Originally?” I asked before giving myself a mental slap. *Of course, he means originally. What’s wrong with you?*

I cleared my throat, my gaze dropping to the coffee in his hands. “I’m from New York. You?”

“Same. When are you heading home?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure yet. How about you?”

“First thing in the morning.” When I looked up at him again, he gave an exaggerated shudder. “It can’t come soon enough.”

I eyed him for a long moment, looking him over from the top of that head full of luxurious, thick, dark brown hair to the cut on his cheek, wondering why he was so eager to leave. “I’m pretty sure it’s not Edinburgh’s fault that you got beat up.”

“No, it wasn’t, but I didn’t want to come here in the first place.”

I frowned. “Why did you come, then?”

“A wedding.” He said the word like it tasted bitter on his tongue, his mouth twisting slightly before he sighed. “I didn’t get beat up. I took a punch. There’s a difference.”

I chuckled. “Tell that to your face. Your eyes are going black. Did you know that?”

“Nope, but it doesn’t matter. It was for a good cause. Like you, I was a good Samaritan today. It might just take a while before my little brother sees it that way.”

“Your little brother did this to you? Why?”

The guy flashed me a devilish smile, wincing only a little bit and obviously trying to hide the pain. “Let’s just say I

know how to push his buttons. I got a few licks in too, though. He's not looking so hot right now either."

Honestly, you still look pretty hot to me, but hey. My eyebrows hitched up. "Is this really the you-should-see-the-other-guy conversation?"

He looked right back at me as he chuckled, and my insides nearly melted at the sound. Even beat up, this was probably the best-looking man I'd ever seen. His voice was like gravel wrapped in silk, and when he smiled—or chuckled, it seemed—it had a profound effect on the state of my panties.

I knew he was a walking red flag. *But I like red and I love flags.*

Usually not this kind, but it'd been a long time since I'd had such instant chemistry with someone, and it was making me feel bold. Like I could let go of the past for a minute and just focus on my immediate future.

And the way he was looking at me promised good things for said immediate future.

He was a man who appreciated my curves, judging by the way his gaze kept dropping to my body, lingering before he dragged it back up slowly. "Well, I'd rather you not see the other guy, but that's only because I don't want you feeling sorry for him when I'm so enjoying having you feel sorry for me."

"That is possibly the worst line I've ever heard." I laughed anyway, though. At least he was honest. "I'm also not feeling exceptionally sorry for you, buddy. I have a feeling you had this coming. Whatever buttons you pushed, your little brother must've had good reason for punching you or else he'd have been the one wandering the streets and you'd have been seen to by whoever you were attending this wedding with."

"Oh, no. The wedding hasn't happened yet and it's not going to." My eyes grew wide as he said it, and he leaned in slightly, once again locking his gaze firmly on mine. "It wasn't a line, Samaritan. I meant it. I'm enjoying your company."

“Do you want to just ask me for my name so that you don’t have to keep calling me that?”

He pulled away a little, gracefully leaning back against the sofa with his coffee still in his hands, but he hadn’t taken a sip yet. He did so as he thought it over though, and then his face scrunched up and it looked like he was about to spit it all right back out.

“Is that what passes for coffee around here?”

“Shh.” I made my eyes big at him, inclining my head back at Seamus behind the bar. “He’ll kick you out if he hears you insulting his coffee.”

“I seem to have a knack for making the Scottish people want to kick me out,” he mused. “As for your question, I don’t think I *do* want to know your name. I’m liking the anonymity of this encounter too much.”

Yep. Walking, talking red flag. Great. “You know, I’m going to go ahead and assume that it’s because you don’t want to tell me your name in return. You don’t want me knowing who you are, which means you’re someone you think I’ll know when you tell me your name.”

I saw a glimmer of *oh shit* in the tightening of the skin around his eyes, but it was gone as soon as he blinked. “Does that mean you’re going to push me to tell you my name even if I don’t want to know yours?”

I stared back at him, admiring those regal, statuesque features, and then I shook my head. Whoever he was, I really didn’t want to know. Not only because I didn’t want to be obligated to get involved if the police started looking for him due to the fight or something, but also because clearly, he came from money.

The way he talked, the clothes he wore, the scent, and even the graceful way he moved screamed *I’m stinking rich!*

People with money had connections, and if I pushed him for his name and I had to give him mine in return, that would mean that he could lean on those connections to find out more about me. Which I definitely didn’t want.

“Nah. I like anonymity better too.”

Curiosity flared to life behind his eyes, but he inclined his chin in agreement and then shot me another one of those devilish smiles. “Are you going to drink your milkshake, or does this stuff get better as it gets cold?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not a milkshake. It’s just a delicious coffee, and no, it doesn’t get better as it gets cold. It’s perfectly good just the way it is.”

“You’ve been here for too long if you really believe that.” He brought his mug back to his lips and gingerly took another sip. Another little shudder traveled through him. Then he grinned at me again. “Bottoms up?”

“What?”

Even as I asked it, he swigged down however much of his coffee had been left and pulled a face. Giving his head a hard shake, he set the mug down on the table. “I win.”

“Fair enough. I didn’t know it was a competition, though.”

“Everything is a competition.”

I laughed at the way he pumped his eyebrows when he said it, but then my breath caught when he leaned toward me again, bringing his mouth almost all the way up to my ear before he finally spoke. “So, how long are you going to make me wait before you invite me up to your room?”

This time, *I* was the one who nearly spat out the sip I’d just taken, my heart suddenly going crazy in my chest. I’d thought I was bold for questioning him about the fight, but clearly, he was bolder. I turned my head toward his, hyper aware that there were only inches between our faces now.

As I looked into those dark eyes and I caught a glimpse of the tip of his tongue coming out to wet his lips, I decided to throw caution to the wind. I’d already lost track of my friends and there was no way I was heading back out now to meet them anyway, and more than that, this guy was seriously hot and I’d been abstaining for way too long.

The fact that he was turning me on with every move he made and every word he spoke was testament to that. Plus, he was a stranger who I'd met all the way across the ocean and he didn't even know my name. It was the epitome of all one-night stands. He was leaving early in the morning and I'd never see him again.

In other words, he was the perfect person with whom to break my dry spell. A guy there could be no possible complications with and who had no way of finding out what I'd left behind and why. Between that and my rapidly awakening libido, there was no reason to turn him down.

Moving slowly, I set my mug down next to his and smiled as I scooted forward on the sofa. "Let's go, Battered and Bruised."

The guy's eyes went wide, and he laughed as he took my hand and gripped it tight. "Battered and Bruised? I prefer Alpha and Hot. Or Sexy and Dominant."

A shiver shot down my spine, my stomach tightening in anticipation as I led him to the stairwell. "Well, you should've thought of that before you decided to wander around battered and bruised. I might give you a chance to redeem yourself once we get up there, though."

"Is that right?" As we cleared the door into the stairwell, he used his grip on my hand to spin me around. At the same time, he walked us back so that when I completed the turn, I landed between him and the wall.

My breathing hitched. My head dropped back so I could look up at him directly. He leaned into me, his hot breath ghosting across my neck as he spoke against my ear. "I don't need a chance. I'm going to redeem myself anyway, and once I've shown you all kinds of things you've never done before and made you come more times than you can count, you'll know that I'm not so battered and bruised after all."

Well damn. It's definitely tough to argue with that.

Present Day

I looked out at the distillery my father had opened when he moved to the USA from Scotland as a young twenty-something. The rectangular white building with the dark gray slate roof had been a regular feature in my life growing up.

In fact, this building was the first thing I used to see from my bedroom window every morning when I got up. From the parking lot next to the distillery, I dragged my gaze across the small, man-made lake where my brother and I used to spend most of our time in the summers fishing and swimming. On the other side, a couple of hundred yards away, was my family compound, the twenty thousand square foot monstrosity of a home I'd grown up in.

The lake was nearly frozen over even this early in November, and the ground was crunchy with frost under my boots. Behind the distillery, the leaves of the trees in the forest bordering our property had turned copper and red, and a lot of the branches were already bare.

Winter was closing in fast now, and I cupped my hands around my mouth, blowing hot breath onto my frozen fingers. I should've brought gloves, but I hadn't been out here in so long that I'd forgotten just how the cold around here could slice to your very bones.

I shivered and stared at the glass doors leading into the visitor's center of the distillery and the offices beyond. It'd been years since I'd last visited this place, and I wasn't sure why I was here now.

My father had summoned me for *important business*, but he'd also told me to come to the distillery and not the house. I twisted around to look across the lake at the compound, wondering why he hadn't wanted me going there.

On the other hand, the last time I'd been home had been for Christmas last year, and that hadn't gone particularly well. I sighed. Being the black sheep of the family was troublesome sometimes, and after all that nasty business with Finn's ex in Scotland four years ago, it'd been more troublesome than ever.

So troublesome that I hadn't been to the distillery since, even though I still supplied only our whiskey at all my bars and clubs, and so troublesome that I hadn't spoken to Finn since then, either. He worked here at the distillery.

In the aftermath of everything that had happened in Edinburgh, Dad had told me to stay away for a while. Not to rub it in or to get in his face.

Life had happened, and four years later, I was still staying away. I took one last look at the compound, taking in the collection of buildings in a U-shape around the main house where I used to live. I doubted I'd be seeing this place again next month for Christmas, so I took a moment to really look at it, feeling a strange pang of nostalgia as I did.

I wasn't usually one to indulge in things that served only to waste time—like nostalgia—but I couldn't help it right then. Seeing the terracotta roofs and the white painted façade, the columns and the smattering of buildings around the house, a sense of sadness washed over me.

Finn and I used to race around all those buildings, chasing each other on our bicycles or playing hide and seek. As spacious as they were, they'd also often been empty. They were for guests and house staff, but there was also an in-law suite for my grandparents when they'd still been alive and well, visiting from Scotland. The last building was a massive

garage, big enough for fifteen cars that held my father's prized collection.

Once upon a time, he'd promised that Finn and I could each choose one of those cars as a gift on our fortieth birthdays. I was still four years away from that, but at this point, I didn't have high hopes that it was actually going to happen.

I guess it's a good thing that I've got my own money that can buy my own damn cars. I blew out a heavy breath, deliberately turning my back on the compound and sliding my hands into my pockets as I strode into the distillery.

It was a Monday, the only day of the week that this place was closed to the public, and it was too damn quiet. I'd have preferred hustle and bustle, not space and time to get hit by the oaky smell of the place and to lose myself in memories I'd rather not have.

The nostalgia and sensory overload were almost too much. Damn near brought me to my knees. I was about to turn around and get the hell out of there when the door to the head office opened and a smiling, cheerful, gorgeous young woman emerged.

The only fucking person for whom I would endure the torture of being back here opened her arms and squealed when she saw me. "Cal, you're here!"

My baby sister rushed over to greet me, her long brown hair trailing behind her as she broke into a run. She hugged me, and for just a moment, my rough edges were softened and I squeezed her back. "Hey, Freya. God, I've missed you."

"You wouldn't have to miss me if you'd come around more often."

She clung to me for much longer than a normal hug, but I didn't pry her off or try to get her to let go. Because of everything that had been going on with my family for the last four years, I didn't get to see her nearly often enough.

When she finally let go, she kept her hands on my shoulders and looked me over like some kind of mother hen.

“You need to stop working out and start eating more junk food. You’re way too bulky now.”

I laughed, examining her tiny frame in return. “You’re not really one to talk. Have you ever even *seen* a cheeseburger?”

She scoffed, trying to hide a smile, and she shook her head. “I’ve been watching what I eat. If you must know.”

There was a weirdly excited glint in her eyes as she said it, but before I could ask, I heard a familiar, deep voice coming from inside of the main office. Dad was obviously finishing up in there, which meant I had to ask her something else first.

“Do you know what’s going on? Were you summoned here like a lap dog too?”

Freya’s dark eyebrows shot up and she stuck her tongue out at me. “I’m the reason you’re here, silly.”

I arched an eyebrow at her as confusion set in. “You are?”

Two more people emerged from the main office then. The first was a sharply dressed man with silver hair and an epic beard and mustache. My father.

The second was a carbon copy of my father, but in a younger man’s body. My brother, Finlay Reid. The good son. The one who never stepped out of line and was destined to become the shining star our parents wanted him to be.

Three years younger than me, we had the same dark hair and brown eyes, but I was the rogue to his golden boy. The troublemaker to his goodie two-shoes.

My father’s black-brown eyes came up to meet mine, resignation in them but no longer any anger or disappointment. At least that was something.

Finn stopped in his tracks when he saw me though, a red flush appearing on his cheeks as his jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Freya wanted me to come,” I retorted, stepping up to our sister’s side and slinging my arm around her shoulders. “She was just about to tell me why.”

Finlay's spine snapped straight. His fingers rolled into fists at his sides like he was going to take another swing at me. I smirked at him.

Bring it on, little brother.

Dad sighed, stepped between us, and raised his hands in front of each of our chests as he tried to diffuse the rapidly mounting tension. "Let's keep it civil, boys. Your sister wanted both of you here and you're not going to ruin this for her."

"Ruin what?" I asked as Finn rolled his eyes.

"Whatever this is about," he said, his gaze on Freya's now. "We could've talked about it alone and sent *him* an email if it was something he needed to know about."

"Really? *Him*? I have a name, you know. And I did you a damn favor. It's about time you realized that. How stupid are you?"

Finn's broad shoulders went rigid, but I could take him if he came at me again. "I'm not stupid and you didn't do me a favor. You're a man-whore who—"

Freya groaned. "Can you guys just get along this one time? For me? I asked you here to plead for your cooperation and none of us are leaving here until I get it."

"Why?" Finn and I asked in unison.

I stepped away from her so I could see her face. She was brimming with excitement now. Her face was alive with it. A smile she wasn't trying to hide anymore broke free, and her dark eyes twinkled and her shoulders moved up.

"Because I'm getting married," she announced, her voice several octaves higher now than usual. "I want both of my brothers to be there. It's not negotiable, but I won't allow your disagreement to get in the way of my big day."

Finn's eyebrows jerked up. "Disagreement. He—"

"You're getting married?" I spoke over him, not giving a shit about what he was about to say.

We all knew what had happened four years ago. If he wasn't ready to let it go yet, then fine. He could keep pouting.

Our baby sister getting *married*, however, was a real concern to me. "To who?"

She ignored my question, her hands landing on her hips as she looked from Finn, to me, and back again. "Now, I know you guys have had your issues, but you're going to have to put them aside. If not for your own sakes, then for mine, and you're going to have to do it fast. We don't have any time to waste."

"Why?" My eyes narrowed to slits. "When are you getting married, Freya?"

"In a little less than two months. The wedding is on New Year's Eve."

I blinked at her, fucking reeling over this news. Finn, meanwhile, had returned his eyes to mine and was glaring at me so hard, I knew he was trying to blow me up with his mind. *Stupid, immature, little—*

"Shit," I breathed. "Are you serious?"

Freya gave me a soft smile that threatened to chip away again at those rough edges of my mine. "Yes, I'm serious. His name is Jim Silver and he's the love of my life. I know you're going to love him too. You just have to give him a chance."

I opened my mouth again, but my father motioned to me and jerked his head toward his office. "If you want to be at your sister's wedding, there are some ground rules, Cal. Let's talk in private, shall we? Come on. I've got an open bottle of the good stuff in my office with our names on it."

After spending so many years traveling nonstop around Europe and the United Kingdom, it felt surreal to be back home. I stepped out of the airport terminal at JFK, hiking my backpack higher on my shoulder and looking both ways for my ride.

It was early evening and dusk had fallen, but I couldn't miss the neon pink Volkswagen van parked a few spots down from where I was standing. Travelers, their families, and friends swarmed around me, but I started toward the van, knowing exactly who it belonged to.

A young woman leaned out of the passenger door as I made my way toward it. Her hand shot up as she grinned at me. "Move your ass, Ella. Drivers around the airport are crazy!"

I laughed out loud, relief and joy flooding through me for the first time since I realized I was going to have to head home. Kara had been my best friend since our freshman year, and her face was a sight for sore eyes.

Her curly blonde hair was short now, barely brushing the tops of her shoulders but still filled with colorful accessories. Her features were still as soft and feminine as ever—even if they were a little more filled out now than they had been before.

I rushed the rest of the way to the van, slid open the back door, and piled in. Kara and Mikey, our other best friend, grinned at me from the front seats. Mikey's shaggy brown hair

fell over his eyes. He laughed while shoving the van into gear, his gaze only leaving mine to check for a gap in the traffic before the vehicle lurched forward.

“Finally, the Triple Threat is back together again.” He glanced at me in the mirror once we’d merged onto the road. “You really made us wait for this reunion, huh? Four fucking years is a long time, Carver.”

“What he means is that it’s great to see you,” Kara chimed in, rolling her eyes at him. She twisted in her seat to look at me. “It really is great to see you, but he’s not wrong. That was a long-ass time. How are you? How was the flight?”

Still getting settled in the backseat, I dragged my hands through my hair. “The flight was okay and I spoke to you guys at least once a week. It’s only been three days since our last video call.”

“Yeah, but that’s not the same as seeing you in person.” Mikey flashed me a lopsided grin, reaching up to push his round glasses back up the bridge of his nose. “Either way, we’re happy you’re home, babe.”

Warmth erupted in my chest as I looked at their smiling, happy faces. I hadn’t expected for it to feel so good to see them, but it did.

Kara, Mikey, and I had gone to high school together. Kara and I had clicked on the first day of ninth grade and we’d picked up Mikey as our third just a couple of weeks later. We’d been known as the Triple Threat—or sort of, at least. It was what we’d called ourselves anyhow.

We used to do everything together, from playing in the band to spending every waking moment at each other’s houses, and it was so damn good to know that our time apart hadn’t hurt our bond. Kara even had tears in her soft blue eyes and she kept smiling at me like she would never stop.

“We’ve got a surprise for you after we’ve dropped off your bags,” she said. “Where are you going to be staying while you’re back stateside?”

“Oh, uh, I’m just going to get a motel room. I won’t be staying long, so I can figure out my accommodations for the few weeks before I leave again. I just haven’t quite done that yet, but it’s fine. We can leave my stuff in the car and I’ll find a motel while we do... whatever the surprise is.”

“A motel?” Mikey’s face fell. “Oh, no. No way. You’re absolutely not staying at a motel. You can crash with us until you get back on your feet.”

Kara nodded enthusiastically, her eyes wide and her blonde eyebrows riding high on her forehead. “He’s so right. Stay with us. Please? You’d finally get to see our apartment and we’ve got a sofa you can sleep on. It’s comfy. I promise.”

Grateful but a bit embarrassed, I shook my head. “Thanks, guys, but I can’t do that and you definitely don’t have to feel like you need to let me. I’m the one who blew all my money in Europe and stretched myself too thin. I’ll be fine and I don’t want to get in your way.”

Mikey’s brown eyes flickered back to mine, his stubbled jaw tightening, and he gave me a stern look. “That’s bullshit and you know it. We don’t feel like we have to. We *want* you to stay with us. We were going to offer once you got here anyway, but we didn’t want to if you already had a bed, since we don’t have one of those for you.”

I breathed in through my nostrils, but Kara waved her hand and turned to face forward again. “It’s settled, then. You’re staying with us. You’re going to love our apartment. It’s small, but we’ve each got our own bedroom and we’ve made the place really nice.”

“I don’t doubt it.” I chewed the inside of my lower lip before I nodded. “Yeah. Okay, thanks, guys. I’ll do my best to stay out of your hair and I’ll be gone soon.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kara said. “You’ll stay as long as you want to stay. I’ve got a privacy partition in storage at my parents’ place. We’ll get that for you so you’ll have your own space. It’s going to work.”

“This is going to be fun,” Mikey said in a sing-song voice, that sternness gone from his open features now that I’d agreed. “Tell us about your adventures. I’m pretty sure you’ve been holding back on us over the phone and we want to hear all about it.”

I chuckled, turning my gaze to the window for a moment as I thought it over. The New York skyline rose up ahead, and a sense of trepidation wormed itself into my gut as I took in the familiar sight of the city coming to life for the night.

Shit, I didn't think I'd be seeing that again anytime soon.

I closed my eyes, deliberately turning my head away from the window and hoping that just not looking would help quell some of my anxiety. I dragged in a deep breath before I proceeded to give them all kinds of details from my travels that I’d omitted before.

Random snippets of information that were fun but nothing earth shattering. I was too distracted by being back here to delve too deep right then. “In some of the countries in Eastern Europe, nodding means no instead of yes. It’s such a mind-fuck,” and “Did you know Dublin was founded by Vikings?”

My friends listened with rapt attention, not calling me out on the lack of stories about my own misadventures. I suspected it was because they knew what was going on in my head right then. They should know. They’d been there for it all, and they were still among the only people who hadn’t alienated me because of it.

When we got to their apartment, our focus shifted from my tales to them showing me around. Their place was a well-maintained four-story walk-up with exposed brick walls and bright white ceilings. I smiled when I walked into the apartment I’d only seen on a screen thus far.

They’d moved in here together three years ago when I’d already been overseas, and since I hadn’t been back yet, this was the first time I was seeing it in person. It was even more charming than it’d looked on video, though.

They really had made it nice, with black and white kitchen tile floors, mismatched painted walls in red, navy, and yellow, open cabinets in the kitchen, and a small but cozy living room with a mishmash of furniture they'd acquired over the years from thrift shops.

Since their relationship was and always had been strictly platonic, they each had their own bedroom, but we'd all be sharing one bathroom, and the couch they'd mentioned I could sleep on was a mustard yellow, well-worn, oversized sofa that looked just as comfy as I'd been promised.

We collapsed down on it together, side by side with Mikey in the middle. He slung an arm over my shoulders and Kara's on his other side, pulling us in closer as he sighed.

"Both of my girls are finally home with me. This is the life, huh?" He gave it a moment to sink in. Then he dropped his feet away from the coffee table he'd only just kicked them up on, withdrew his arms, and shot up again. "Okay, come on, ladies. We don't want to be late."

My eyebrows inched up. "Where are we going and do I have time to grab a shower?"

He leaned forward and sniffed. Then his nose wrinkled like he'd been able to smell me, even though he was now a few feet away. "Yeah. I think that might be a good idea. You reek, girl."

I rolled my eyes, got up, grabbed my carry-on since it had all my toiletries in it, and then headed to their bathroom. I'd have to at least pick up a couple of towels of my own if I was going to stay here instead of a motel. *Maybe even some cheap bedding.*

I made a mental shopping list of the basics as I stepped into their shower, and by the time I emerged, Kara had changed and she was waiting for me with a little black dress on a hanger in one hand and a pair of red boots in the other. Both of us were on the bigger side, but our shapes were different. I was round while she was more pear, but we'd always worn close enough to the same size that we were able to fit into each other's clothes.

I eyed the wine-red, shimmery dress she had on and narrowed my eyes. “Why are you dressed like that?”

She’d painted her lips the same color as her dress, and she shot me a coy smile as she thrust the hanger at me. “You’ll see. Just put this on, will you? Mikey’s ready to go and we didn’t want you to have to rummage through all your bags wearing only a towel. Speed is the name of the game, Ella. Trust me, you don’t want to make him wait tonight. He’s been looking forward to this all week.”

I took the hanger from her. She swept her arm out toward her bedroom to motion for me to change, and I stepped inside. If he’d been looking forward to this all week, it meant they’d set it up pretty much as soon as I’d admitted to them that I had to come home.

Worry and more anxiety threatened to come crashing down on my head, but I shoved it all away. I wasn’t going to let it ruin my homecoming. It wasn’t like I was a fugitive. This was still my city and these were still my friends. I had every right to be here, regardless of what I’d done before I’d left.

Besides, Kara and Mikey were the only people who even knew I’d come back to town. No one who didn’t want me to be here would even find out I was home.

Or so I thought until we walked into a swanky nightclub an hour later and I saw a bunch of our other friends waiting for us. *Okay, Mikey and Kara are not the only people who know, but these are my friends. They were never Spencer’s. It’s fine. I’m fine.*

I forced a smile to my lips, but it didn’t remain forced for long. It was good to see all these people I’d known for so long, and I was welcomed with open arms and huge grins all around. Before I’d even finished greeting everyone, Mikey was coming toward us with a tray of tequila shots, and for a moment, it felt like I’d stepped in a time machine and transported myself back to four years ago, before I’d left New York for Rome.

I wasn’t sure then that I’d ever come back here. In fact, just four years ago this New Year’s Eve, I’d sworn I never

would.

Sitting at the bar in one of my clubs, I swirled my whiskey around in the glass after taking a sip and I sighed before doing it all again. Joe, the bartender who also happened to be a close friend, slid in next to me and chuckled as he pushed the entire bottle toward me.

“Here,” he said. “It looks like you need that. What did the old man want today?”

I sighed again, my head shaking, and I picked up the bottle and topped off my drink. “Freya’s getting married.”

His light blue eyes flared wide open. “Your little sister, Freya? Isn’t she, like, fourteen?”

“Nah, man. Try thirty.” I squeezed my eyes shut and smirked as my head shook some more. “You and I are sixteen years older than we were when we met. Figures that she would be too.”

He chuckled, inclining his head so his dark, shoulder-length hair dropped forward over his face. He brushed it back and lifted his eyebrows at me. “So the old man wanted to tell you she was getting married?”

“Nah. *She* wanted to tell me she was getting married. It turns out she was the one who wanted us there. My father just wanted to lay down the rules for the big day.”

“Rules?” Joe frowned. “I didn’t know weddings had rules for the brother of the bride.”

“This one does.” I picked up my glass and took a long sip of the oaky, amber liquid. Smacking my lips, I leaned back and took a look around.

The club wasn't that busy yet, but it was early. We'd only been open for thirty minutes and this place was not a first-stop-of-the-night joint.

I owned a string of bars and clubs all around the city, but this was one of my favorites. There was a large dance floor and a massive bar down below, with strobe lights, and smoke machines, and the whole nine yards. It had an industrial look about it on the main floor, but up here, we'd made it cozier.

It was like a lounge where our patrons could come to take a break from all the sweating and gyrating on the floor below. This mezzanine deck still had a view of the action, of course, but we had comfortable booths and sitting areas, and even the bar stools had padded backrests.

The music up here also wasn't as deafening as it was downstairs. Conversations were still slightly louder than normal but they weren't altogether strained. As I looked around now though, I didn't really see any of that. I wasn't paying attention to all the little details I usually made note of when I was here.

Instead, I kept picturing my sister in a place like this—and not when she was with me, which was the only time I'd ever seen her out. I pictured her and her little minions coming here to blow off some steam, and then I pictured guys hitting on her and I shuddered.

Shit, it's worse than that, though. She's already been hit on. She's fucking getting married.

My features contorted into another hard scowl at the thought. I'd known she had a boyfriend. I hadn't known it was serious. I definitely hadn't known it was *that* serious.

I don't like it.

Not one little bit.

Joe cleared his throat, and when I refocused on him, I exhaled heavily and took another long sip of my drink before I

finally replied. “I don’t think regular weddings have rules for the bride’s brother, but this isn’t a regular wedding. It’s a Reid wedding, and apparently, that means that there are rules.”

“Like what?” he asked easily, light eyes curious on mine.

A couple more people came up the stairs. Another of my bartenders went over to help them, and Joe cocked his hip against the bar as he waited for me to respond.

“They’re using the distillery and the family grounds as a venue for the wedding and I won’t be allowed in unless I show up with a date on my arm. It’s my own family’s place and my own fucking father said that they’ll turn me away at the gates if I’m alone when I arrive.”

Joe paused for a moment, then burst out laughing so hard that it took him a full minute to get any words out. “You? A date? Does your father not know you *at all*?”

I grunted. “It’s not that funny, but it *is* a ridiculous demand. Again, it’s my *family’s* property, and the last time I checked, I was still part of that family. Where the hell does he get off telling me I’ll be turned away, as in, not allowed onto *our* grounds, if I don’t bring someone?”

“I hear you, but your dad is probably just trying to make sure you don’t fuck up another family wedding. The last one didn’t exactly go according to plan, so I’m not sure I blame him.”

I rolled my eyes and swirled my glass around absently again before I took another sip. “Wedding *shmedding*. If my siblings would stop trying to marry the wrong damn people, I wouldn’t have to fuck anything up. She was a manipulative bitch. I did Finn a favor.”

If I had a dollar for every time I’ve said those words, I’d have enough money that even my great-great-grandchildren would never have to work. Not that I was going to have any grandchildren since I was never going to have any kids—not intentionally anyway—but the point remained.

Joe, however, snorted as he flipped the black rag he’d used to clean the counter over his shoulder. “*You and I* might think

that you did him a favor, but I doubt that's the way Finn sees it. Not even now."

I waved a hand around the mostly empty upstairs area as the music started intensifying from below. "Do you see him around here? Of course, he doesn't see it that way, but it doesn't mean I didn't do him a solid. Eventually, one day, he'll come around, but you're right. For now, he's still blaming me for everything."

"Where are you going to find a date?" he asked, steering the conversation back to the issue at hand. "Is that why you're here tonight? Are you prowling for a pretty woman to con into being your plus-one?"

I arched an eyebrow at him sharply. "Do you really think any girl I could pick up here would check the box for my father? His expectation is an actual date. A woman I'm interested in for more than just a quick fuck and who's interested in me too."

Joe laughed again until he realized I wasn't kidding. "Ah, shit. What are you going to do?"

"I don't know yet," I mused. "They only dropped this bomb on me a couple of hours ago, but I'll figure it out. I just need to find someone who's properly motivated to impress my parents and to redeem me in my family's eyes. A good girl."

My friend audibly choked on his surprise, but he managed to compose himself pretty quickly. Those light eyes became unfocused for a moment before he suddenly stood up a little straighter. "Have you ever heard of a place called Faux's?"

"No." I frowned. "Where's that? Is it a bar?"

"Nah. Not a bar. Rumor has it it's the place to go if you're in need of a girl on your arm."

If I was any less practiced at keeping a straight face, my jaw would've dropped. As it was, however, I simply stared at him, my eyes narrowing a little as my mouth twisted. "An escort agency? My parents will never buy a pro as my girlfriend. In fact, I'm pretty sure my dad is serious enough

about this that he's probably going to run a background check on the name I give him once I have a date."

"Yeah, I wouldn't put it past him, but this isn't an escort service, man. Not like you're thinking. These girls aren't pros in the traditional sense. The way I heard it, they're girlfriend material. *Wife* material even. And there's no sex or anything. It's more like a temporary dating agency as opposed to being the kind of service you're thinking of."

"Like I said, I'll figure it out." I left it at that, needing to stop thinking about this.

It was starting to give me a headache and that wouldn't help things. Truth be told, if this had been anyone else's wedding or any other event with all these rules, I'd have told them to go fuck themselves.

Family or not, I wouldn't have felt pressured into starting a relationship I didn't even want just because they didn't trust me. But it *wasn't* anyone else's wedding. It was Freya's, and she was one of the only people in this whole damn world that I would do *anything* for.

I'd been six years old when she'd come along, and the first time I'd held her in my arms and she'd looked up at me with those big brown eyes, I'd been lost. For life. My baby sister had had me wrapped around her tiny little finger from that day forward, and nothing had changed.

Her whole life, I'd protected her fiercely and I'd always done everything I could to make her happy. In my family, she was sunshine, light, and joy. She deserved our very best and that meant that I *had* to be at her wedding.

Whatever I had to do to make it happen.

"How's business?" I asked Joe, changing the subject when the space between my temples started pounding. "We doing okay?"

He chuckled, dark eyebrows inching up. "We're doing better than okay. It's great. Are you actually going to come into the office next week to look at the books?"

"Yeah, I'll be around. It's my damn bar."

Just then, a group of three more people came upstairs. Two girls and a guy, and my attention was drawn immediately to the curvy, black-haired babe in red boots. Although I didn't *want* that kind of distraction right now, maybe she was exactly what I *needed* to forget the shit show that this day had been.

She was just my type, but when she and her friends came up to the bar and waited for Joe's attention to order a drink, I realized I knew her. This time, I couldn't keep my jaw from slackening. No amount of practice at keeping my expression schooled would've prepared me for this surprise.

As the realization dawned, it seemed to be happening for her too. Those bright green eyes were widening on mine and I cracked a smile.

"Ella Carver. What the hell are you doing here?"

She seemed stunned to see me. Even more stunned that I knew her name.

A guy with a mop of messy dark hair next to her grinned at me and stuck out his hand. "Mikey. It's nice to meet you. Do you think we could have some shots?"

"Calan Reid, and yeah. Sure." Joe was helping a few people who had come up just before they had, so even though I never did this, I lifted my ass off the stool to collect three short glasses. "This is top-shelf whiskey. Can I interest you in it?"

Mikey checked out the bottle I pushed toward him after I'd lined the glasses up on the bar, and he barely glanced at the girls before he shrugged. "Should be worth the splurge. Besides, we're celebrating."

The blonde nodded happily, her eyes shiny, unfocused, and smiley, like she'd already had a few. "Sure. Let's try it."

"It won't be a splurge," I assured them as I poured the shots. "It's Isle of Reid and it's on me."

I pushed their shots toward them and was caught off guard when her two friends moved together as one to swipe them up and then tossed them as shots, coming up sputtering for air a few moments later.

I winced. “That’s a sipping whiskey. You’re not supposed to shoot it.”

Joe came to their rescue, pouring them each a glass of water as he joined me again. Meanwhile, I couldn’t stop staring at Ella, who had yet to say a word. She hadn’t stopped staring at me either, not even to take her drink, and I wondered what was going on behind those sparkling eyes.

It’d been just about four years since our night together in Edinburgh, but I’d never forgotten about my Good Samaritan—and judging by the stunned silence and the way those eyes were glued to mine, I was damn sure she hadn’t forgotten about me either.

I never thought I'd see this guy again. The last time I had seen him had been in the tiny double bed in my hostel in Edinburgh. Of course, I hadn't known his name at the time and I kind of wished I didn't know it now either, but I'd heard it when he introduced himself to Mikey.

That night had been the biggest mistake I'd ever made, and one I'd lived to regret ever since. I'd had one of the best sexual experiences of my *life*, and like some naïve schoolgirl, I'd thought we'd wake up together in the morning. Maybe even grab a cup of coffee before he left and get to know each other a little bit better.

When we'd gone up to my room, I'd known we had chemistry and I'd known that it was just a one-night stand, but once we'd gotten up there, things had changed. What we'd done hadn't been impersonal or just some quick romp. It'd been intense and oh so real, and he'd whispered all sorts of delicious, possessive things in my ears. Things about how I was *his* and how he was going to make sure I knew it. Things about how he was going to get to know me inside and out. Find out what made me tick and give me everything I wanted.

Somewhere in the aftermath of what had happened, I'd realized he'd probably only meant all that in the sexual sense, but it hadn't felt like that to me at the time. Perhaps it'd been because of my lack of experience, but damn, the way he'd looked into my eyes while he'd made love to me. How he'd held me after and pressed soft kisses to my hair. It just hadn't

felt like it had been nothing, but by the time I woke up the next morning, he'd been gone and I'd felt small and used.

Calan looked at me now, those glittering dark eyes filled with surprise and laughter as he nudged my shot closer. "Are you going to drink that?"

"No."

He chuckled, black eyebrows rising slightly on his forehead as his chin tucked in a little. "Wait, are you sour after being loved and left back in Edinburgh?"

Mikey and Kara gasped, but they were so close that they often shared reactions like that, and then Kara leaned in, her voice still too loud even though I was pretty sure she'd intended to whisper. "*This* is the Scotland guy?"

"What Scotland guy?" Mikey asked as he leaned in too, clearly having heard her without any problems at all—which meant Calan had probably heard her too. "I don't remember the story about the Scotland guy. Did you guys talk about it without me?"

"No." Kara smacked his bicep, swinging those big eyes to him.

Thankfully, as she turned to give Mikey her full attention, she seemed to notice that Calan was watching her too and she pushed up on her toes to catch up our friend, whispering for real this time.

Meanwhile, I scoffed and gave my little head a shake as I looked into those deep black pools of heartless tar that were Calan's eyes. "You sure had a nice way of thanking me for helping you with your busted face."

He smirked. "If memory serves, I had a *very* nice way of thanking you. Three times, was it? Four?"

My cheeks flushed so hot I probably could've fried a damn egg on them, but I glowered at him anyway, unwilling to back down. "And yet, after all that, you bailed before dawn."

Calan shrugged. "I'm not a morning person. Besides, I told you I had a flight."

The bartender next to him grimaced, but he'd also been watching me with a weirdly intent look on his face since we'd come up to the bar, and he slapped a hand on Calan's shoulder now. He leaned in, still watching me as intently, and muttered something I couldn't hear to his boss.

Calan shrugged him off too, though. *At least it's not just me. It seems he's that dismissive to everybody.*

I caught the bartender's eye as he exhaled so deeply I saw his chest fall with the movement, and he gave me what felt like a strangely apologetic smile. *Wow. What a jerk.*

Although to be friends with a guy like Calan, I supposed he had to be used to faking sympathy for the horde of girls the man left in his wake. I lifted my chin and brought my gaze back to Calan's, then pressed the pads of my thumb and forefinger against the little glass and pushed it back to him.

"I don't want anything from you. Not even a drink."

Okay, maybe I was being a little bit unfair, but I felt the way I felt. He'd hurt my feelings—really did a number on me actually—and I didn't have to let him in just because we'd run into each other at some club.

On my first night back. What rotten freaking luck.

His gaze darted down to the whiskey before it slowly came back up to mine, and for just a moment, I thought he might apologize. I thought I might finally get an explanation for why'd he'd disappeared on me after all that, but after staring at me for another beat, he rolled his eyes.

"Don't be so dramatic, Ella. We had fun together, didn't we? It was what it was. It's not like I promised you anything."

My mouth opened, but there was no point in arguing about it. It was in the past, and technically, he wasn't wrong. He hadn't promised me anything. He'd just made me believe there was more to it once he'd gotten into my damn pants.

Instead of getting all hung up on it again, I hopped off my barstool and looked over at my friends, who had stopped whispering back and forth and were now watching me curiously. "We're going somewhere else. Anywhere else."

Mikey shot me a puzzled look but then tucked me under his arm and led me away. Kara thanked Calan for the shot before she rushed to catch up to us. She draped her arm around my waist, sticking close to my side. They led me downstairs and out the door we'd come in through not so long ago.

As soon as we were outside in the chilly night air, the fog of shock lifted from my brain and I started seething out loud. "God, he's a dick. Such a dick! How cocky can one person really be? Am I sour about being loved and left?" I scoffed. "Ack. How can I be? I wasn't loved. I was just fooled into thinking that I might be. Asshole. Shit, I can't believe I slept with him. What a dick!"

We made our way down the block, putting that club firmly behind us.

"Slept with him?" Kara shivered and pressed a little closer to my side. "The way I remember you telling the story, there wasn't much sleeping involved."

Mikey laughed, getting between us so he could wrap an arm around Kara as well when she shivered again. I scowled at them. Obviously, they weren't understanding what a huge prick he was *at all*.

"This isn't funny, guys. Seriously. He hurt me."

Their laughter and playfulness stopped immediately. Mikey even slowed and glanced over his shoulder like he was considering going back to confront the man. He tensed, but I tugged at him to encourage him to keep moving forward.

My friend was an incredible person and it wasn't that he didn't have any muscles. He just wasn't nearly as buff as Calan. In a fight between the two, there was no doubt in my mind that it was Mikey I'd be patching up this time.

He stayed in shape and used his bicycle to get around the city even in the winter months, and he was lean and probably quite strong, but he was also at least half a head shorter than Calan. I'd seen Calan's frame that night. He wasn't as bulky as a bodybuilder or anything, but he definitely had a few pounds and a lot of muscle on my friend.

“He hurt you?” Kara asked as we kept hurrying away from the club. Her voice had that breathless, hushed quality to it that people tended to get when they’d just had their socks shocked off. “Are you serious? You didn’t mention that before.”

“It wasn’t physical,” I admitted immediately before either of them got the wrong idea. “He didn’t do anything I didn’t want him to do. It wasn’t like that. It was just that I met him only a couple of months after I got overseas.”

“Okay,” Mikey said slowly, his expression puzzled behind his round glasses. “If it wasn’t physical, why’d you say he hurt you?”

“Because he did,” I said emphatically, giving him a meaningful look. “It was only a couple of months after I got there. He was the first person I... you know...”

I trailed off, my throat burning too much to keep talking. I swallowed to try to push back all that old pain.

Kara’s eyebrows finally shot up as she got it. “He was the first person you slept with after Spencer?”

I nodded, grateful that she knew me well enough that I hadn’t had to say the words myself. “He was also only the second person I’d ever been with. To this day.”

Mikey’s grasp on my shoulders tightened and he turned his head to rest it on top of mine. “Shit. Sorry, babe. I’m sorry. We’re both sorry for laughing. We didn’t know.”

“To this day?” Kara made her eyes big at me again, worry swimming in them as she stared at me across Mikey’s chest. “You mean there’s only ever been him and Spencer?”

“Yep,” I said miserably, letting my head drop forward and breathing in deep. “I thought I was ready. It’s not entirely Calan’s fault, but I just wish I hadn’t done it, you know? Or that I’d gone into it with my eyes wide open, knowing it was never going to be more than just a hookup.”

Mikey frowned. “Did he lie to you?”

“No, but he just made me feel...” I trailed off again and shrugged. “I don’t know. Some of the things he said just made

me feel like maybe there could be something real there, and when I woke up the next morning, he was gone and it sucked. I felt vulnerable and uncertain, and it took me a year to bounce back.”

Kara reached around Mikey’s back to rub mine. “I’m sorry he made you feel like that, babe. He shouldn’t have, but on the upside, your Scotland dude is damn hot. I mean, I know you told me that he was, but you really downplayed *how* hot. He was a definite step up from Spencer. If your taste in men keeps developing at this trajectory, you’re going to marry a supermodel or an A-lister someday.”

“Kara,” Mikey groaned, but I laughed.

The sound was edged with hysteria, but there it was. At least I could always count on her to make me laugh and on Mikey to admonish her for it before he joined in.

No matter how stupid the decisions I made, these two were always there to help me pick up the pieces, and I was damn grateful to be back with them. Even if this little reunion of ours wasn’t going to last very long—if I had anything to say about it.

Della Fontenot was an eccentric, glamorous, spirited woman. She wore a leopard top and too many bracelets on her wrists, and her hair was swept up into a beehive.

And I had no idea what I was doing in her office.

After Joe had mentioned this place to me, he'd dropped the name a few more times. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I'd started wondering why a dating service would be called *Faux's*. In the end, I'd wondered about it enough to have set up an appointment, and while I still wasn't sure why I'd taken Joe's advice to come here, if it hooked me up with a good girl to take to Freya's wedding, it wouldn't be a big, fat waste of my time.

Della sat across from me in her office, a tablet in her hand and those damn bracelets jingling every time she moved. She smiled, flashing pearly white teeth at me before she jumped in. "So, Mr. Reid, where did you hear about us?"

"From a friend," I said bluntly, sliding my hands onto the armrests of the fancy white chair I sat in. "What is it that you do here, exactly? I had a look at your website, but it's vague."

Her smile widened. "Excellent. A virgin."

"Hardly." I smirked, but she was already chuckling at her little joke.

Her gaze dropped to her tablet before she brought it back to mine. "Faux Agency exists to fill a gap in the market. Traditional dating agencies help find their clients love. I help

mine find something that looks a lot like it. If you need a good fake date fast, we help find you a partner that suits your needs. It's a transaction and it's entirely professional. Our girls are thoroughly vetted and we make sure they look the part they need to play."

"I'm not looking for a prostitute," I said bluntly.

She nodded. "Good, because my girls aren't prostitutes. They're fake dates for any occasion. Smart, charming, gorgeous, my girls can impress anyone and be whoever you want them to be. Nothing physical, of course. And best of all, the whole process is secure and discreet."

For just a second, I thought I'd died and gone to fake heaven. "That's what I hoped to hear. Okay, I'm in."

"Wonderful. Tell me what you need a date for, Mr. Reid." She tapped at the tablet's screen, peering curiously at me as she waited for my answer.

"A wedding. That's on New Year's Eve, but there will also be all the usual stuff that goes with it before. The engagement party. Rehearsal dinner."

She nodded slowly and tapped at the screen again. "Perfect. We can certainly help with that. I'm going to ask you some questions now that are designed to help me find you exactly who you're looking for. Let's start with your personal preferences. What do you like in a woman?"

Wow. She didn't pull any punches. "I lean toward women with thick hips. Big boobs. I like a butt I can grab onto, you know?"

Della held up her hand and smiled. "Very well, but let's start with the other qualities, shall we? Outside of the physical things, what kind of woman captures your interest?"

I cocked my head at her, my brow furrowing. "Excuse me?"

"If you were looking for a whore, the physical would be enough to help me narrow it down," she said conversationally. "However, you're looking for a date. A woman people will

believe that you are interested in for more than just her thick hips and big boobs, correct?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Exactly.” She leaned forward a little as she expanded. “Do you like women with a sense of humor? Someone who is opinionated or someone who is shy, for example?”

I shrugged. “Their personality really doesn’t matter much to me. This is a quick job where the girl can make some good cash. Then we’ll shake hands and go our separate ways after the wedding.”

She lifted her tablet, scrolling through profiles of some of her girls, if the pictures that I saw popping up were anything to go by. “Alright. Everything you just said about the nature of the relationship is true, but we still need to find someone the guests at this wedding will believe you’ve got a genuine connection with. Let me show you a few profiles so you can see the kind of information we’ve got about these girls, and we’ll take it from there. Personality does matter, Mr. Reid.”

“Not to me.” I got up. “Just find me someone hot and I guarantee that my family will believe I went after her because of that. I’ve got places to be.”

Della blinked a few times before she stood up and walked me to her door. We shook hands, and I flashed her a grateful smile. “When you’ve made your selection and you’ve got a contract signed, will you send it to me?”

“Of course.”

“Great. Thanks. I’ll need them to be able to commit to the engagement party, which is in two weeks, the rehearsal dinner, the ceremony, and the reception.”

“Very well.” Her gaze lingered on mine for a moment, and I knew she was expecting me to change my mind and tell her more about what I was looking for, but it wasn’t going to happen.

When I said that the woman’s personality didn’t matter to me, I meant it. I was going to be paying this girl a lot of

money to pretend, and I didn't need to know anything about what she was really like in order for her to do that.

Eventually, Della seemed to realize I wasn't going to give her any more information, and she nodded briskly. "If you log into the account you created to set up this appointment, you can add any other notes for me that you might think of after you leave here. The more I know about your expectations, the more realistic the match."

"Yeah, I'll do that, but I'll need a contract in my inbox by the end of the week." Something occurred to me as I said it. "The only other note I've got is that, ideally, I'd like her to come out with me a few times leading up to the wedding. That way, we'll have some pictures of us together to prove to my father that I'm capable of having a serious relationship."

Della gave me an easy smile. "Are you capable of such a thing?"

I arched an eyebrow at her and then I laughed. "Sure I am, but why would I want one?"

As I said it, I nodded at her one last time and then left the agency, heading to work at the bar where my main office was situated. I had a lot to do, but I needed to speak to Joe first. He deserved a fucking raise for letting me know about this place.

Without it, I'd likely have been screwed but now things were looking up. It was unconventional, to say the least, but I didn't give a shit. The girl and I were getting what we needed out of it and I suspected Della took a healthy cut off the top of her exorbitant fee. Everybody would be happy, and I'd never really been one for sticking to social norms and conventions anyway.

Problem solved.

Joe was unloading inventory and restocking the liquor shelves when I arrived. Several cleaners were busy doing their thing, but mid-morning sunlight streamed in through the windows now that the heavy red drapes had been drawn back and rock music played softly through the speakers.

I grinned, feeling like a huge weight had been lifted off my chest. I walked right up to him where he was standing on a stepladder to reach the higher shelves. “So I took your advice.”

“My advice?” he asked without looking at me, taking the bottles of Isle of Reid whiskey one at a time and placing them carefully on the glass shelves, making sure their labels were turned to face outward. “What advice was that?”

“I went to that crazy Faux place. I’ll have a date lined up by the end of the week and my father can stick his old-school, judgmental ways up his ass.”

Joe shook his head, chuckling before he twisted on the ladder to look at me. “I don’t think this has anything to do with your father being old fashioned, Cal.”

“Don’t start.” I inhaled deeply before I smirked. “The point is that I’ll have a date and they can all suck it for thinking this was going to keep me away.”

Joe turned back to the shelves, adding more bottles. I joined him behind the bar and he glanced down at me. “You know, maybe it’s time to own up to the fact that sleeping with your brother’s fiancée was a fucked-up thing to do, man. I know you think you did him a favor, and in the long run, maybe you did, but you went about it the wrong way. Your father doesn’t trust you anymore. That’s what this is about. It’s not because he wanted you to stay away or because he’s got old-school values. It’s all about the trust.”

Well, shit. There goes my good mood.

Hearing those words from him stung. Badly. But Joe wasn’t wrong. My dad didn’t trust me anymore and neither did anyone else in my family—and even if it had saved my brother from committing to spend the rest of his life with that woman, it’d also changed the way they looked at me forever.

Until now.

Della just had to do her part and come up with someone who was going to make them believe that there was more to me than what had happened back in Edinburgh. A woman who

would make them believe that I'd grown from that, matured, and that they didn't have to keep me at arm's length anymore.

As I said it, I realized that I had a lot riding on this arrangement. More than I'd necessarily considered back at Della's office.

Fuck, maybe I should've given her a few extra notes after all.

I woke up to the shrill sound of my phone ringing. Disoriented, I pried my eyes open and fumbled around trying to find the device before it woke Kara and Mikey. I was still groggy and half asleep when I finally spotted it lying on the rug next to the mustard yellow sofa.

I accepted the call as I rolled back and closed my eyes again. “Lo?”

“Hello. Good morning. This is Della Fontenot calling from the Faux Agency. Am I speaking with Ms. Ella Carter?”

“Uh, yes,” I mumbled, frowning. *Crap. I really have to wake up. That’s my name. It’s not a wrong number.*

“Excellent,” Della said. “I’m calling to let you know that your profile has been matched to a client for an event on New Year’s Eve, with a contract lasting from now until then. There will be a few additional events leading up to the big night as well. You indicated that you would be available for a long-term contract. Are you still interested in earning some extra money?”

I sat up and blinked hard at the words *extra* and *money* in the same sentence being directed at me. “Huh?”

The woman at the other end of the line chuckled. “Did I wake you up, dear? I do apologize for the early hour. This is a time-sensitive offer. I’m afraid the client you’ve been matched with requires an answer sooner rather than later, and we’ll need to get the paperwork in order soon if you’re still interested and available.”

“I am,” I said quickly. “Interested and available, I mean.”

My gaze finally settled on the clock mounted on the wall above the front door, and my jaw slackened, embarrassment flooding my cheeks when I saw the time. *Eleven a.m.? Crap.*

“I’m sorry. It’s not too early for you to be calling. I’m the one who owes you an apology. Do you mind telling me where you’re calling from again?”

“Faux’s Agency, darling,” she said, sounding amused. “You signed up with us about two weeks ago?”

Faux’s Agency. Faux’s Agency. Oh, right!

As my brain finally woke up and the fog of my intoxicated sleep lifted, I finally realized what she was talking about. I’d completely forgotten about it, but once I’d realized that I wasn’t going to be able to afford to stay in Portugal, which was where I’d been before I’d flown home, I’d scoured the internet for ways to make some quick money.

I fell down a rabbit hole on social media where comments on posts about that very issue had led me to more comments and more posts, and I’d eventually come across Faux’s. It’d seemed pretty hush-hush, but the website had looked professional, and I’d signed up on a whim, not really thinking anything was going to come of it.

It’d all seemed too good to be true. *How many rich dudes are really willing to pay thousands—sometimes hundreds of thousands—for some company?*

“Right. Of course. Faux’s Agency. I really matched with someone?”

“You did,” she said happily. “In fact, you’re exactly what this client is looking for, so if you’re serious about continuing, I’d like to email you the documents for your signature shortly. The sooner we can get this buttoned-up, the better.”

“Sure. Yes. Please. I would definitely like to continue. Thank you.”

Della chuckled again. I leaned back against the sofa and glanced toward the kitchen. More specifically, I stared

longingly at the coffeemaker. If I was going to be signing legal documents soon, I'd need some caffeine.

Now.

“Excellent. Once you’ve signed the paperwork, I’ll confirm with the client and arrange a meeting.” She paused for a beat. “I must warn you, dear, this client has been pretty hands off so far, and well, he’s a bit unlikeable, to put it nicely, but he’s willing to pay very generously for the pleasure of your company at these events.”

I frowned, lifting my free hand to rub my eyes and wondering if I was dreaming. A *billionaire* who was willing to pay *generously* for the pleasure of my *company* for a few dates? I might be on the phone with the owner of this agency and she was saying that this was really happening, but it still seemed too good to be true.

“How much is he willing to pay?”

“Five hundred thousand dollars,” she said.

My entire being froze. “What?”

She laughed. “You heard me.”

A thrill of excitement shot through me. This could change my life. It would buy me more than just a ticket back to Portugal.

I could buy a place in Rome. I could put down roots and start living my dream life. My back straightened and I was wide awake now—without the need for any caffeine whatsoever. “I’m in. For five hundred thousand dollars, it doesn’t matter if he’s not likeable. As long as he follows the rules, I’ll like him just fine.”

Della laughed. “That’s the spirit. Alright, we’re all set then, darling. The documents are on their way to you. Check them out, and if you’re still onboard, sign them and send them back to me as soon as you can, okay?”

“You got it.”

My phone buzzed while she was still saying her goodbyes, and as soon as I hung up, I saw the icon on my screen that let

me know I had an unread email from Della. I clicked into it immediately and scanned the documents. As soon as the prompt popped up, I signed each one electronically.

Just as I was signing the last one, Kara stumbled out of her bedroom, her makeup from last night smudged all the way to her cheekbones and her hair a frizzy mess in a knot on top of her head. She yawned, giving me a halfhearted wave.

“Good morning. I feel like shit. Coffee?”

I laughed as I stood up from the couch, the hangover I would’ve had after our shenanigans as gone as the wind after that incredible phone call. “Let me make you some. Do you want to go grab a shower?”

“Nah, not yet. If anything touches my head right now, even water, I’ll cry.” She yawned again, stretching her arms up above her head, and collapsed onto one of the stools at the kitchen counter. “Why don’t you look like you’re about to die?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute,” I said excitedly.

Mikey appeared in his doorway. He glanced at the open windows, winced, and held up his hand to shield his eyes.

“Did we get hit by a truck last night?” He stumbled across the small living area to join us in the kitchen. “Actually, I think it was a Mack truck. Yeah. That sounds about right.”

Kara nodded her agreement gingerly. I grabbed some mugs from the open kitchen shelves and got started on the coffee. Brimming with excitement, I grabbed my phone and glanced at them as I opened a delivery app.

“I’m ordering a huge breakfast. It’s on me. As a thank you for letting me stay here and for taking me out last night. What do you guys want?”

Kara lifted her head slowly, her eyes searching mine before she frowned. “Okay, will you tell us what’s going on now? You’re way too chipper this morning.”

Mikey folded his arms on the counter and rested his head on his forearm as he mumbled incomprehensible words. Kara

glanced at him, then shrugged as she looked back at me. “Ignore him. Out with it. What’s going on?”

“I just made it big,” I blurted out, unable to contain my excitement anymore. I had been planning to wait until they were feeling a little better and had some greasy food in their bellies before I told them. “By the New Year, I’ll be able to buy a ticket back to Rome and then some.”

Kara just blinked a few times and Mikey wrenched his head up, the sleepiness suddenly having disappeared as he frowned at me. “What? How did you make it big? You haven’t even been back in town for twenty-four hours.”

“I know. It’s amazing,” I gushed. “A miracle really, but I found this agency online when I was in Portugal and I signed up. The owner just called me a few minutes ago and told me the good news.”

“What’s it for?” Kara asked. “Is it another freelance travel writing gig?”

“No, it’s not, but this will buy me the freedom to look for another one of those. This is huge, guys. It means I’ll be out of your hair sooner than we expected.”

Mikey was still frowning and even Kara seemed less than enthusiastic. Maybe it was just that their level of excitement didn’t match my own in their hungover states, but it looked like it was more than that.

She glanced at him and they shared a long look before she turned back to me. “It’s not that we’re not happy for you, babe. We are. We know you want this, but we’re disappointed that you’ll be gone again so soon.”

My heart flip-flopped as I stared into her bloodshot blue eyes. “It’s not *that* soon, and besides, the plan was never for me to stay. You guys can always come visit me once I’m settled over there.”

“We know that, but...” Mikey trailed off, glancing at Kara again before he dragged in a big breath. “Do you really think running back to Europe is going to solve any of your problems here? When you leave again, will you ever come back, and

also, how are we supposed to come visit you? Kara is a freelance makeup artist and part-time barista, and I'm a part-time server who does some web developer programming some weeknights and on Saturdays. We wouldn't even have been able to afford this apartment if my parents weren't helping."

A dull ache started up deep in my soul. He wasn't wrong. I was sure they would be able to come visit me someday, but it probably wouldn't be soon. I also definitely wouldn't be here again soon, either. It was no wonder they were less than enthusiastic.

With that perspective, I was feeling a little less excited myself, but ultimately, their lives were here and mine wasn't. Not anymore.

"Look, we'll do lots of video calls again and we *will* see each other again as well, okay? I promise, but I need to do this. I'm not *running* back to Europe. My life just isn't here anymore. That's all. After everything that happened after Spencer and I broke up, it became perfectly clear that I just don't belong here anymore. I need to go back to where I do belong."

Which was far, far away from my ex and the devastating consequences I'd caused for the both of us after our breakup. Kara and Mikey still looked kind of bummed, but they'd been fine while I was gone before, and they would be again.

So would I.

Faux's was giving me a gift, and I was damn well going to take it and start over. It was all I'd been trying to do all along, and now, this time, I might actually just be able to do it.

Della worked fast. I had to give her that. For all her leopard print and eccentricities, she had gotten the job done in record time.

Barely twenty-four hours after I'd left her office, I was sitting in the enclosed patio of a café, waiting for my fake girlfriend to arrive and hoping that Della had picked someone agreeable.

All I needed was for this girl to smile and act nice around my family, someone who would help me prove that I wasn't the homewrecker they still thought I was, and then we'd all be able to move on with our lives come January.

Freya could have a drama-free wedding, and everyone would win. I sighed as I sipped my espresso, watching as pedestrians passed by with their black umbrellas. Thankfully, there were heaters overhead on the patio, so it was nice and toasty in here.

Despite the comfortable temperature though, I was very much *uncomfortable*. I wasn't quite nervous—it would take a lot more than this to get me there—but I wasn't sure about the idea of paying a woman half a million dollars to let me parade her around for almost two months.

I'd never paid a girl for her *services*, and while this wasn't quite *that*, it still wasn't in my character. For Freya's sake, I was sucking it up, but I was skeptical about this and whether it would work.

As I sipped my coffee and watched the drizzling rain outside, I felt a presence next to my table just a moment before I heard a soft, feminine voice. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Wait a second. I know that voice. I snapped my head around and looked up, and I sucked in a sharp breath. It was followed by a burst of dry laughter shooting out of me. *Because yep, I knew that voice, alright.*

Standing next to my table was none other than my Edinburgh girl. Ella stared down at me, her pretty face scrunched up as she checked a piece of paper in her hand.

It was then that it struck me. This wasn’t just another coincidence like the other night at my club. She was here for me. This girl, the one who had acted like she hated me the last time we’d run into each other, was supposed to be my fake girlfriend.

No way. No. Fucking. Way.

Her green eyes burned into mine, and she scoffed, turned on the heels of her black boots, and walked away.

My eyebrows swept up. *I wonder if that money I’ve already paid is refundable.*

I watched her walk away though, unable to tear my eyes away from her round, full butt, perfectly framed by a fitted black coat. It swayed a little as she stomped to the door, but then, her footsteps started slowing.

Her shoulders rose and fell on a deep breath. Then she turned around again and came back. Her mouth was pressed in a thin line and I could practically hear her silently debating whether to leave or stay.

Grinning, I leaned back in my chair and swept a hand out, inviting her to take a seat. “Come on, sweetheart. It’s half a million. You can’t hate me that much.”

For a second, I thought she just might because her body angled back toward the door like she was about to leave, but then she sighed, slid her purse down the length of her arm, and dropped into the chair across from mine.

Out here in the light of day, she was even prettier than I remembered. Her features were delicate and beautiful, her lips a heart-shaped bow even though they were still pressed together. I smiled, but she shook her head at me, still not saying a word.

A server appeared beside our table, and of course, *he* got a smile out of her. “Can I have a chai tea latte, please?”

“Sure, coming right up.” He glanced at me. “Another espresso, sir?”

I dropped my chin in a nod and he returned it before he took off, leaving us to our awkward silence and to continue eyeballing each other. Ella finally propped her elbows on the table, forearms down against the white tablecloth, and leaned forward.

“My luck couldn’t get any worse,” she grumbled quietly before she fixed me with a puzzled look. Her brow slightly furrowed as she dragged in a deep breath. “What do you need, Calan? Why did you have to pay someone so much money to get it when you’re perfectly good at tricking women into thinking you’re a nice guy worthy of their time?”

“Ouch.”

She lifted her chin, clearly proud of the jab. “You have three minutes to tell me before I walk out that door, and I won’t come back this time.”

I studied her expression, the sharp, thin line between her eyebrows and the hard set of her jaw. She was serious. Whatever she was mad at me about, it was bad enough that it would be worth five hundred thousand dollars to her if I didn’t make a good case.

Thinking back to that night, I really didn’t get it. She’d come to me, helped me, we’d talked, and when I’d propositioned her, she’d gotten up and taken me to her room. I hadn’t lied or made any promises. In fact, I’d thought we were on the same page, but now, it was crystal clear that we weren’t and that we obviously hadn’t been then either.

It was a puzzle to solve another day, though.

For now, it appeared I had a case to make.

Nodding slowly, I undid the button of my jacket with a one-handed flick, leaned forward, and rested one of my own elbows on the table in turn, my gaze locked on her pissed-off greens. “I need someone to play my girlfriend from now until my sister’s wedding on New Year’s Eve. You would have to accompany me to all wedding-related events and a few other occasions in order to placate my father and make my family think that we’re dating seriously.”

Her brow furrowed, her nose wrinkling a little on one side. “Okay, but why? Again, it seems like it’d be a lot less effort and a lot cheaper for you to just pick up a girl while you’re wandering the streets of New York this time. Why not have *her* pretend to be your girlfriend?”

I gave my head a sharp shake. “Contrary to what you appear to believe about me, I don’t trick women and I don’t lead them on. I need someone who’s in this with me, who’s got skin in the game herself, and who won’t expect anything else from me as of January first.”

“A mutual understanding,” she concluded.

Again, I shook my head. “Not just a mutual understanding. A contract. One which I believe you’ve already signed. I haven’t opened the documents, but I have received confirmation from Della that the legalities have been taken care of.”

I saw the moment when Ella realized that I was right. Her lips popped open and formed a little “o”, her eyes sparking with the *oh-shit* of it all. She didn’t mention it, though. Instead, she just kept looking right back at me with a business-like expression on her face.

“If we’re going to do this, I have a few amendments to the contract,” she said firmly.

The server brought our drinks and she thanked him, but even as she accepted her cup from him, she never quite broke eye contact with me.

Once he was gone, I cocked my head at her. “I’m open to discussing amendments. I’m even willing to record this conversation so we can have whatever we agree to reduced to writing if you’d prefer.”

“Will that be necessary?” she asked. “You said you’re not in the habit of tricking women, so if we agree to certain additional terms, will you honor your word, or would I need a written contract?”

“You’re smarter than I gave you credit for before,” I mused before I nodded. “I’m a man of my word and I’ll honor whatever we agree to.”

“You don’t know me. I don’t know why you’d have given me credit either way, especially because the real smart thing to do here would be to take you up on your offer to have our agreements reduced to writing. However, what I’d like to propose probably wouldn’t be enforceable anyway so really, we’d just be wasting money and time getting another contract drawn up.”

“I’m impressed, but I’m also curious. What is it that you would like to propose that wouldn’t be enforceable?”

“No sex,” she said clearly and confidently, reminding me of her sure movements that night and the way she’d insisted upon helping me. “No funny business at all.”

I chuckled. “Sure. I don’t pay for sex, Ella. Not ever. And the contracts are already totally clear that no unwanted physical contact is allowed.”

Relief flickered in her eyes, softening them. She drew in a deep breath and nodded. “How about the other part? Are you willing to agree that there won’t be any funny business whatsoever?”

“Without a definition of funny business, that’s pretty hard to agree to, but I will give you this.” I wrapped my fingers around my mug and drank the last of my espresso as I thought about how to word this in a way that would allow me to keep my promises. “At some point, I will probably make a move on you. You’re hot and we already know that we’re good

together. When that happens, it will be your choice to take me up on my offer or not. If you don't, no hard feelings and no awkwardness after."

"I thought you didn't pay for sex?"

"I don't. I'm paying you for the show we're about to put on for my family and nothing else. Whatever happens when they're not around, that's not you as my girlfriend. That's Ella Carver, who is presumably single in real life, unless that guy you were with the other night is your boyfriend."

"He's not. I would never have signed up for this if I was in a relationship." She looked at me like I was crazy, but then curiosity washed over her features. "How did you know my name, anyway? We agreed not to exchange names."

I smirked at her. "We did agree to that, but my underwear landed on your dresser that night. When I went to get them, they were lying right on top of your passport."

Horror widened her eyes before she cringed. "I've been traveling with that passport for four years and you're telling me I've been touching your dirty underwear all this time?"

"Four years? You've been traveling all this time and you only got back *now*?"

She waved me off. "I'm going to have to apply for a new one."

While my interest had certainly been piqued by her obviously unintended admission, I knew better than to push her for answers. She hadn't agreed to honor the contract she'd signed just yet, and as much as I hated to admit it—even to myself—I needed her to honor it.

Della had somehow managed to find me the perfect girl. Ella was exactly what I'd described physically. I might have had her in mind when I'd provided that description, but more than that, she was the kind of woman my parents would love—and buy into as my girlfriend.

She was smart, funny, kind, and caring, but she was also confident and so far, reasonably outspoken. Qualities I

wouldn't have thought to list for Della, but now that Ella was in front of me, I realized she would tick all my parents' boxes.

"Relax," I said. "If you've been traveling with it for so long, I'm sure all the cooties from the *outside* of my underwear are long gone. So, have we got a deal?"

"One last thing."

I tilted my head and nodded at her. "What's that?"

"If you get punched in the face again and you need someone to help you clean up the blood, I'm not going to be as nice about it as last time."

I chuckled and held out my hand. "Deal."

Ella eyed my outstretched hand for a long moment before she slowly lifted her own and placed her palm against mine. "Deal."

T *he universe must hate me.* Either that, or it had some other, more obscure reason for putting Calan back on my path.

Whatever it was, I didn't really care. All I wanted from him was that money, and if he needed me to play pretend with him to get it, then fine.

It could've been much worse. As in, I could've had to stick around New York for much longer if I'd had to make another plan.

Even so, I would've walked away if he hadn't been able to convince me that he didn't have any ulterior motives and that this hadn't been some kind of elaborate ploy to get me to spend time with him. When I'd first realized he was who I had come here to see, there had been a moment when I'd thought he was messing with me.

A moment when I'd wondered if somehow, he'd set all this up for some reason. On my way to the door and with five hundred thousand dollars hanging over my head, I'd realized it was worth at least a conversation.

Which was why I'd turned around and come back.

That conversation had been had now, though. I withdrew my hand and got up to leave, thinking that our business here was done.

Calan clicked his tongue. "Where do you think you're going?"

“Home. Thanks for the latte.”

Those dark eyes glittered with amusement as he shook his head. “Nope. Not yet you’re not.”

“I’m not?” I arched a brow at him, leaning back in my chair again. “Where am I going then?”

“You’re coming with me to my family compound to make the introductions,” he said easily. “I want my family to think that we’re together and that we have been for a month or two. Otherwise, they’ll assume that I’m bringing a one-night stand or something to the wedding, and I can’t have that.”

“Isn’t that exactly what you’re doing, though?”

He laughed. “Nothing gets past you, does it? Come on, let’s go. It’s a bit of a drive.”

With that, he pulled out his wallet and dropped some cash on the table. Then he reached for my hand. I sighed but got up and took it, then rushed to keep up with his long strides as he led me to the door.

All the while, I couldn’t stop wondering why he had to pay such an astronomical amount of money for someone to do this with him. As much as he’d hurt me before, objectively, the guy was still insanely hot.

With that styled brown hair, so dark that it was almost black until the light hit it and the chocolate shone through, and his tall, strong frame, and regal features, I just didn’t understand why he couldn’t get a real girlfriend if he wanted one. Obviously, he didn’t want one though.

That was the only explanation I could come up with.

I ducked my head and flipped my hood up as we left the café, but as I looked up and down the street to search for a cab, the lights of a black car flashed in the parking space right in front of me. The space right in front of the door.

Despite the cold and the rain, my feet slammed to a stop for a moment, refusing to move as I realized that the car was his—and that it was a Bugatti SUV, super flashy and so

expensive that it brought tears to my eyes just thinking about it.

Back in high school, Mikey had gone through a dream-car phase. It'd kept him motivated to study hard, and eventually, it'd spilled over to Kara and me. We'd made all sorts of vision boards for what we wanted our futures to look like, and almost all of us had had that year's equivalent to this very car on those boards at some stage.

While I wasn't exactly a fanatic about it these days, I could appreciate the sleek lines of this vehicle all the same. What made it even better was that this particular model was equipped for the New York winters.

He tugged at my hand as I stared, frowning when he realized I'd frozen completely. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's just that it's a beautiful car." I hadn't planned on complimenting him, but I couldn't help it. That was some damn vehicle.

He gave me a cocky smirk. "Yeah, well, hurry up and get in before we get soaked."

"Good point," I muttered.

The last thing I wanted was to get that thing's seats wet. If I somehow managed to ruin any part of that thing and he expected me to pay for the damage, I'd probably lose most of the money I'd be getting out of this sham arrangement.

To my surprise, he came to the passenger door with me and even opened it, waiting until I'd climbed in before he shut it behind me. My brow puckered. I hadn't taken him for a gentleman, but wondering whether he truly was one would have to wait.

Right now, I have marveling to do.

And I did it.

I gawked openly at the luxurious interior of his car, taking in the dash that looked more like that of a top-of-the-line spaceship than a car driven by a mere human. Every line was just as smooth and sleek as those of the body, and I knew from

having read an article a while ago that everything in here was hand stitched.

This was not a mass-production car, and once he'd dropped into the seat beside me and shut his own door, he confirmed it for me. "It's a concept car. The only one in the world. I had it custom made because I've always been a big fan."

It was about the most personal information he'd ever given me about himself, and I was starting to wonder just how rich he really was even before he spoke again. "Maybe I'll show you my collection sometime. You like cars? Most women wouldn't have stopped to stare at it in the rain."

"I, uh, I appreciate the engineering, is all." *Bullshit.*

Calan smirked at me again and started weaving through the traffic. "The engineering, huh? Okay, I'll bite. Is that what you were doing in Scotland all this time, admiring the engineering from European cars?"

"Oh, no. I left Scotland a couple of weeks after you did. There's a lot more to admire in that part of the world than just the cars."

The corners of his eyes tightened like he was curious, but he wasn't looking at me anymore, so I couldn't be sure. Really, it was a good thing that he was focused on the road because he was driving like a demon straight out of hell now that we'd gotten underway properly.

I gripped the interior door handle and gritted my teeth, my eyes wide, but I was determined not to let on that he was making me nervous. I didn't want to give him anything to hold over me.

As I was wondering where this family compound of his was and how long I would have to endure this, he suddenly pulled over before we reached the city limits and parked in the heart of a shopping district. I frowned.

"Your parents live here?"

"Nope. You need to look the part before you meet them. Jeans and sneakers? It's not working for me."

“You didn’t have a problem with it before,” I grumbled as I reached for the door handle, wondering how much this little shopping trip was going to cost me.

Calan chuckled. “You weren’t going to meet my parents before. Besides, Della said this is part of the deal. You’ve got a wardrobe budget of five thousand.”

“Dollars?” I squeaked. “You want me to spend five *thousand* dollars on *clothes*? Like, right now?”

He shrugged as he reached for the door handle. “Well, it’ll probably be more than that, but I don’t mind if we exceed her suggested budget. It’s all on me. Let’s go.”

He climbed out of the car and I sat there for a moment, shocked to my core.

He knocked on the window, shoulders hunched over in the cold. “You coming?”

“Oh, right. Sure,” I mumbled as I followed him out. “Let’s just go drop a few thousand dollars on clothes because you don’t like my jeans.”

He chuckled as he took my arm. “I heard some of that and trust me, it’s better this way. It’ll be worth it.”

I didn’t say anything in response to that. I had no idea why or how he thought this could ever be worth it, but hey, it was his money. As long as it wasn’t mine, he could dress me up just as much as he wanted.

As he led me into a high-end boutique, I didn’t even know where to begin. It turned out I didn’t need to know, though. He ended up picking out most of the clothes he wanted me to wear anyway, and all I had to do was try them on.

After spending a staggering amount of money in a very short period of time, we were back in his car and it quickly became clear that we were leaving the city. To keep myself busy, I adjusted my new outfit, a sleek pair of high-waisted slacks that highlighted my waist, a fashionable blouse, and peacoat, paired with sky-high designer heels.

Eventually though, when I'd tugged and pulled at everything I could and we still hadn't arrived, I turned to frown at him. "Jeez. How far away do your parents live?"

"Our family compound is upstate," he said vaguely.

I arched a brow at him. "Why do you keep referring to it as that? Most people just say *my parents' house*."

He chuckled and darted a quick glance at me as he shook his head. "I guess I could say that, but it wouldn't be entirely accurate. The compound is also the location of our empire. The Isle of Reid distillery."

I suddenly remembered the whiskey he had poured us the other night, and two and two slid into place in my head. "You're the son of that whiskey guy? What's his name again?"

"Ross Reid, and yep, I am."

Immediately, I started doubting that this had been a good idea. I was ill equipped to be the girlfriend of a member of such an elite family. My table manners were pretty much limited to saying *please* before I asked someone to pass the salt and I had no idea if I was supposed to curtsy or shake people's hands.

A shudder zapped down my spine. If I screwed up socially, would it give him grounds to terminate our contract and not pay me? *I freaking hope not.*

My stomach was a mess of nerves as we kept zipping down the winding roads in an upmarket area I'd never had a reason to visit before. I wanted to broach the topic with him, but before I could, we drove through a gate at the entrance to a grand property.

Once we were on the other side, we kept driving and he didn't slow down, so I was assuming we weren't that close to the actual house yet. We were surrounded by trees and greenery, and all at once, we rounded a corner and came to screeching halt in the center of several buildings, parking in front of the main one.

It was a mansion unlike anything I'd seen before and I was in awe that people actually lived here.

Calan climbed out of the car, surprising me when he walked around it to open the door for me again, and he looked up at the house as I took his hand.

“You grew up here?” I asked.

“I sure did. I’m barely here anymore now, though.”

I wondered why. He helped me out of the car and then kept my hand held firmly in his, twining his strong fingers between my own.

“Let’s get this over with.” After he knocked, he turned to me, his voice low and urgent. “Remember, you’re my girl and you’re head over heels for me. We’ve been together for two months. Act like it. There’s half a million dollars on the line.”

Oh, of course. Because that’s how you get a girl to relax before she meets your family. I swallowed hard. At least there’s nothing like a reminder quite like that to bring out the actress in all of us.

Here goes nothing.

A member of my parents' staff opened the door. She stared blankly at me before she shot me an apologetic smile. "Mr. Reid, this is an unexpected visit. Your parents are in a meeting with a contractor who's here to help renovate the house."

"That's fine. We'll wait." I brushed past her and pulled Ella with me, leading her to one of the formal sitting rooms.

It was one my mother favored when she had people over for tea and fundraising discussions, and it was full of family photos. Some of them even went back to my grandfather's time in Scotland when he'd first started out in the whiskey business.

I didn't even notice them until Ella released my hand and started wandering around, her hands clasped behind her back like she was a kid who was afraid of getting in trouble if she touched anything. I watched her for a moment. She leaned forward carefully, inspecting each of the pictures like it was a potential wealth of information.

In her new getup, she looked like she belonged in a place like this. It'd been a good call on my part to get rid of the jeans and sneakers, that was for sure, but a lot of it was just her.

Ella fit in here in a strange way. It wasn't a thought I'd ever expected to have, but there it was. She certainly looked the part right now, so well that it was even confusing me.

I'd found her beautiful even way back when she'd stumbled into that pool of light in Edinburgh, but it was different now. She seemed different too. Her features had matured a little bit, but in this more sophisticated outfit, she looked like an aristocrat.

Her long, layered black hair was sleek and shiny, spilling over her shoulders to midway down her back, her skin like porcelain and her cheeks rosy. It was only the look in her eyes that gave her away, the childlike wonder in them as they darted from the photographs to the high, pressed ceilings, the chandeliers, and the wide windows.

"What are you doing here unannounced, Calan?" My father's booming voice suddenly sounded from the door.

Ella yelped, hurried back to me, and wrapped her arm around my waist.

My own arm shot up to wrap around her shoulders, pulling her into me instinctively. It was a protective move and one unlike any I'd ever made with a woman who wasn't my mother or my sister. I didn't let go of her when I realized it though.

If anything, the unexpected surge of protectiveness that had urged me to react that way would help sell this little charade of ours. I turned to my father, not surprised to see my mother right by his side.

"I came because I wanted to introduce you to my girlfriend," I said without missing a beat. Leading Ella forward, I locked eyes with my parents and smiled. "Mom, Dad, this is Ella. Ella, these are my parents, Ross and Davina Reid."

Ella was still tense at my side, but she smiled beautifully anyway, holding out her hand to shake each of theirs in turn. "It's such a pleasure to meet you both. I've heard so much about you. You have a lovely home. We're sorry for dropping by unexpectedly."

Internally, I was pleasantly surprised at how smoothly she'd stepped into her role. Externally, I smiled proudly and

moved my gaze back to my parents' stunned faces. My father shook with her firmly, his expression skeptical at best.

"Girlfriend?" He released her hand and glanced back at me. "Since when?"

"A couple of months ago," I said.

Ella brought her hand back to mine, leaning into me. She looked up into my eyes and smiled. "Two months, ten days, and about four hours, to be exact."

While my father kept flicking his eyes from mine to hers and back again, my mother seemed thrilled. Her hazel eyes were bright with excitement as she looked at Ella, taking her free hand in both of hers and sighing dreamily.

"Oh, this is wonderful. It's so nice to meet you, darling. Welcome to our home, and don't apologize for popping in. We're delighted to have you. We were just surprised when Mary told us Calan was here. He doesn't visit very often these days."

Her hopefulness would've made me roll my eyes if I didn't have so much riding on this. I loved my mother to no end, but she and I differed in fundamental ways, the most fundamental of which was that she was an eternal optimist—kind of like Freya.

My mother and sister had never quite given up on me the way Dad and Finn had. I knew they were both disappointed in me for what I'd done, but they'd never made me feel as ostracized as the male members of our family.

Ella smiled back at my mother, and I tried to look at her from Ella's point of view as I imagined what she was thinking right now. Mom had short white hair, an edgy cut with funky spikes reminiscent of that actress from the *Freaky Friday* movie. In fact, I was pretty sure she'd had it cut that way after watching it with my sister years ago and the style had just stuck from there.

Unlike many other women in their social circle, Mom had never had the round, bob hairstyle that most seemed to favor.

She also never wore elaborate jewelry. She hardly ever wore any accessories other than her mother's watch.

Dressed elegantly in a cream-colored pantsuit with an olive green blouse underneath, she might've intimidated many other girls, but not Ella, it seemed. Instead, the girl was still smiling at my mother and they chatted about the pictures and other elements of the room they'd just caught her admiring.

While they spoke, my father looked at me, his eyes hard with suspicion. "Why didn't you mention a girlfriend when you came to the distillery the other day?"

I shrugged. "The timing didn't feel quite right. I was going to, until Freya blurted out that she was getting married, Finn wanted me to find out about it through email, and you laid down a series of rules upon which my attendance was predicated."

"It seems to be like that would've been the perfect timing for you to tell me, though," he said thoughtfully.

Mom and Ella turned their attention back to us, and I looked the old man in the eye. "Does it? I've stayed away for a long time, Dad. You summoning me for a meeting about Freya's wedding hardly seemed like the time to tell you something about my personal life, which isn't a subject you've taken much interest in or known much about these days at all."

The room went so quiet, I'd have been able to hear a pin drop. Ella tightened her grip on my hand, though, which I appreciated. Not because I needed her support but because as she did it, her body leaned a little further into mine and I was sure my parents would notice.

Ella shifted her weight beside me, holding her ground just as surely as she held my hand. So far, she was really impressing me with this gig.

My father took us both in, then cleared his throat. "Fine. This is good news. I'm glad you're not running away from commitment anymore, son." He gave me a tight smile. "I'm sure this will go a long way toward easing Finn's mind, too."

He's seeing someone now. Norah. It's going well. He's very protective of her."

So many smart-ass comments sprang to mind, but I held my tongue for Freya's sake. This was important to her and I'd already committed half a million dollars and change to the cause. The least I could do at this point was to shut my damn mouth.

My mother stepped forward. "Finn, Freya, and her fiancé, Jim, are all coming over for dinner tonight. You two should join us."

"Thanks, but it's a long drive back to the city," I said immediately. "Enjoy it, though. We just came by for you to meet Ella."

"Nonsense," Mom said, smiling, as she looked back at my supposed girlfriend. "Stay. You can have one of the guest houses so you don't have to drive back too late and you can always get an early start in the morning."

"We've both got work tomorrow, Mom. Besides that, we didn't bring anything with us for an overnight stay."

She waved her hand with an elegant flick of her wrist. "We've got plenty of spare toiletries for guests and I'll have some of Freya's clothes delivered to the guest house for Ella. I'm sure you'd fit into something of Dad's. It's just for the drive."

Clearly, she wasn't going to let this go. She seemed pretty insistent about it as she turned a beautiful, kind smile on Ella. "Please stay? We've never met a girlfriend of Calan's and we haven't had the whole family around our table since Christmas. It would mean the world to me if you'd join us."

Ella didn't so much as glance up at me before she grinned back at my mother. "Of course, we'll stay. We'd love to join you."

My jaw would've hit the floor if it could have. I managed to keep it from dropping at all, but shit. An overnight stay and dinner with my parents tonight had not been part of our

agreement. If for no other reason than we were *not* prepared for it.

It was one thing to tell them that we'd been together for a couple of months, but now that we were staying, we were going to have to be able to give them a hell of a lot more information than that, and we just didn't have it.

Fuck. What the hell do we do now?

“**W**hat were you thinking?” Calan hissed as the door to the guest house we’d been allocated closed behind us. Those deep brown eyes of his were flashing and the mask he’d kept on in front of his parents vanished. “You do realize they’re going to grill us, right? Interrogate us about every aspect of our relationship, and if we slip up once, that’s it. There’s no going back.”

I looked right into those pissed off eyes, not flinching or backing away. “You’re paying me for being your girlfriend. A good girlfriend would want to get to know your parents and stay for dinner, don’t you think?”

“You have no idea,” he grumbled, shaking his head at me. His hands dropped away from his hips.

Clearly, this was getting him all prickly and I loved to see him get heated. It served him right for dropping this on me without a moment’s notice.

“Your parents seem nice and your mother is gorgeous. How can a dinner be that bad?” I asked as I spun away from him to take in the quarters we’d be staying in tonight.

“Again, you have no idea,” he muttered, but I was vaguely aware of the words.

As I looked around, I even forgot that he’d been answering a question I’d asked. The guest house was bigger than the house I’d grown up in. My feet carried me forward before I’d even completed the thought, and I went from one room to the next, flabbergasted by how this place could just be standing

here, empty and ready to receive guests that would only be staying for one night.

The entrance hall was grand and spacious, with a crystal chandelier hanging overhead, a side table, high, fancy ceilings, and even a mudroom. It opened up to what turned out to be one of two well-appointed living rooms and a full-sized, family-style kitchen.

A center island dominated that space, sharing it with a dining table for eight and every appliance known to man. Each of the living rooms had a large fireplace, comfortable sofas, art against the walls, and plush, patterned rugs on the hardwood floors.

I kept going, ignoring Calan and his continued grumbling as I walked into the hallway leading off the main living space. There were three bedrooms, a private garden complete with a hot tub outside, and an outdoor kitchen on the deck that was the most gorgeous indoor/outdoor setup I'd ever seen.

I was stunned.

Heading into one of the bedrooms that featured a four-post bed, another sitting area, and a sliding door to the lush green garden, I found an adjoining bathroom and pulled my lip gloss out of my purse. If I was going to be having dinner with people who had a *guest house* like this, I had a feeling I'd be expected to at least touch up my makeup if I couldn't change.

"Stop being a grumpy jerk and lighten up," I said when he appeared in the reflection of the mirror I was using to dab on some lip gloss. "I'll be on my best behavior tonight, playing my part and making sure that your family thinks we're head over heels for each other."

His long fingers were wrapped tight around his hips again, his knuckles white and his chin tucked down low. He narrowed his eyes at my reflection. "That's the ideal scenario, but the alternative is that they'll figure us out, in which case, they'll never believe it if I bring another girl around and introduce *her* as my girlfriend, which means I'll be fucked."

“That’s not going to happen,” I said confidently. “I’ll follow your lead, and if you run into any trouble, I’ll bail you out. That’s what good girlfriends do. By the time the wedding rolls around, they won’t have a doubt in their minds about us.”

Those sharp features of his drew together, the dark slashes that were his eyebrows practically running into one. “It better happen that way, Ella. My father isn’t stupid and he’s already suspicious. He’ll be watching us more closely than you think.”

I rolled my lips together before pouting them at him in the mirror. “There. That looks better, doesn’t it?”

He scoffed. “Your makeup is the last of our worries right now. How did we meet?”

“Easy. You swept me off my feet when I came to your rescue. The secret to a good lie is to keep it as close as possible to the truth.”

Those dark eyes rolled, and I turned to face him, moving my hands up to rest on the vanity as I leaned against it. “Look, Calan, right now, our biggest problem isn’t our story. It’s your face.”

“My face?” He scowled at me and I laughed.

Releasing the vanity with one hand, I made a circle in the air in front of said face. “If you walk in there all dark and scowling, they’ll know immediately that something is up. You’re introducing a girl to your parents, which calls for some nerves but not this whole, the world-is-coming-to-an-end thing you’ve got going on.”

“How do you know? Have you met many boyfriends’ parents?”

I shrugged. “Some, but the point is that you need to get your attitude in check or we’ll never even get to the story.”

He grunted and dropped his head back, and he squeezed his hips some more and inhaled deeply. Once he had exhaled and breathed slowly a few more times, he dropped his hands away from his hips and his facial features were a lot more relaxed.

I smiled. “See? It’s not that hard. Are you ever going to tell me why they’re so desperate for you not to go to this wedding stag, though? If all this falls apart, why would you even try to introduce another girl to them as your girlfriend?”

Calan huffed out a sigh. “If you don’t want me all dark and scowling, then we probably shouldn’t talk about this.”

I chuckled and moved past him to leave the bathroom now that my makeup was as touched up as it was going to get. He followed me out, and I dropped down on a sofa in one of the living rooms. “We’ve got a bit of time. Enlighten me. Your parents really do seem like nice people, even if you do have obvious tension with them.”

When he didn’t answer me right away, I thought he wasn’t going to, but eventually, he dropped down on the sofa next to mine and kicked his feet up on the coffee table. “My brother and I had a falling out four years ago. Right around the time I bumped into you in Edinburgh.”

“Oh, riiiiiiight.” I dragged out the word as I remembered. “Wasn’t it him who punched you that night?”

Calan jerked his chin in a nod. “Things have been tense between us all since, and with my sister’s wedding coming up, I’m trying to diffuse that tension. For her sake.”

“Things have been tense between you for *four years*? What the hell was that fight about?”

He shrugged. “Finn was about to make a mistake, and when he wouldn’t listen, I saved him from himself.”

I frowned and arched an eyebrow at him, my head shaking softly. “How cryptic. What actually happened, Calan? A girlfriend would know.”

“Not this one,” he said firmly. “It’s a story for another time, anyway. The only story that matters right now is the one we need to come up with. How did we meet? God, I don’t even know what you do for a living. We’re fucked.”

“We’re not fucked. I’m a travel writer,” I said. “I’m assuming you own that club we were in the other night?”

“How did you know?”

I smirked and tapped my temple. “Smarter than you gave me credit for, remember? But also, you were behind the bar, wearing a suit instead of a uniform. You picked up an insanely expensive bottle of whiskey, which happens to be from the distillery I now know your parents own, and poured it like it was yours without asking anyone. It’s not that much of a leap.”

“Yeah. Okay. I own that club and a few others like it. I also have a few bars.”

My eyebrows inched up as I nodded slowly. “An alcohol baron and a club owner. You’re really getting the whole adulting thing right.”

“Still doesn’t tell me how we met.”

“Well, if we’re going to be keeping it close to the truth, then I went out one night. To one of your bars. And some guy clocked you while you were breaking up a fight. I nursed you back to health and you charmed me.”

For a long moment, he just stared at me and then he laughed. “Damn. You must be one hell of a writer if you came up with that on the fly. Okay, Ella. This might just work.”

I winked at him. “Told you.”

“Smug doesn’t look good on you, Ella.” He groaned, but then he checked his watch and immediately got up. “Let’s go. They’ll be having drinks already and I’m sure they’re wondering where we are.”

When he extended his hand toward me all gallant-like, I was once again surprised. Then again, now that I knew where he came from, I supposed it shouldn’t have been surprising that he knew all the right things to do. I was sure Davina would’ve taught him. It wasn’t her fault he only seemed to use those skills when he wanted to.

I put my hand in his and allowed him to pull me up. Then I took his arm when he offered it to help me across the lawn. Our sides pressed together, that expensive leather, whiskey, and citrus scent of his wafting over to me with every breath I took.

Between that and the hard heat of his body everywhere it connected with mine, that old attraction I'd felt drawing me to him that first night came creeping back in. I'd promised myself I'd fight it if it happened, and I was going to keep that promise, but it was definitely going to be more difficult than I'd thought.

Not just because he was hot, but mostly because he wasn't the uncaring dick I'd been painting him as in my head for all these years. Calan Reid was very much human, even nice when he wanted to be. Thankfully, before I had time to overthink any of that, we reached the back door into the house and he lifted his hand to knock.

My heart was doing cartwheels in my chest as the nervousness I'd been managing to keep at bay broke out of the cage I'd been keeping it in. The whole arrangement of ours was a much bigger deal to him than I'd realized, and I was the one who'd gotten us into this dinner, but I couldn't allow the nerves to get the better of me now.

I took a breath, tightened my grip on his arm, and pasted a smile on my face just as the door swung open. We were shown inside once more by a member of the staff, and Scottish music flowed from the parlor as we made our way to the bar.

When we walked in, there were five other people already in the room. Davina and Ross, who were gorgeous in their own right, but also three people I hadn't met before. A young man who looked a lot like Calan, only more youthful and softer around the edges. A beautiful girl with long brown hair, and a handsome blond man with his arm around the woman's waist.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out who they were. Calan's brother, his sister, and her fiancé. Also known as the people I was being paid a crap ton of money to help him fool.

I cleared my throat when Ella and I entered the room. My sister's stunned gaze locked on mine, and I smiled. "Everyone, this is Ella. My girlfriend. Ella, everyone."

Freya blinked slowly, but then she seemed to realize that this was really happening and she released her fiancé's hand to rush over to us. "Ella! It's so nice to meet you. I can't believe you're here. I'm Freya."

My sister threw her arms around Ella.

"You can't believe she's here?" Jim asked as he came up beside her, wearing an easy smile. "We didn't even know he had a girlfriend until five minutes ago."

"That's my point," Freya squealed as she held Ella tight. "She's real and she's here, and she's his girlfriend! Oh, I'm so happy."

Ella giggled, thankfully not as offended by my sister's statement as a real girlfriend might've been. She let go of me to hug my sister back, and the embrace seemed strangely warm for a girl who was faking it.

Makes me wonder what else she faked. But no. That was real, right?

"It's nice to finally meet you too," Ella squealed, matching my sister's octave and level of excitement. "This guy can't shut up about you. I've heard so much about you that it feels like I already know you."

Funny, considering how you only found out I had a sister this morning. Obviously, though, I didn't say anything. I just couldn't help but be impressed all over again by how easy Ella was making all this.

Freya giggled and stepped away from Ella, motioning to her fiancé before she took his hand. "I wish I could say the same about you, but as he pointed out, I didn't even know you existed until a few minutes ago. This is Jim."

Ella stuck her hand out and shook with the walking Ken doll, who I'd met before and hadn't been nearly as impressed by as I was with my fake girlfriend. Jim smiled at her before extending his hand to me. I shook it, but he and I were going to have a serious talk sometime.

Just not right now.

Finn stood with one of his elbows on the bar, watching the scene unfold with distaste in his eyes and his lips all twisted. When Ella finally approached him next with a friendly smile on her face, he managed to stop sneering for long enough to greet her.

"Hi, Ella. I'm Finlay."

Miraculously, he left it at that and didn't add any snide remarks, and she kept smiling at him warmly. "I know who you are, Finn. It's lovely to finally have a face to put with the name."

His brow tightened in what appeared to be disbelief, but he didn't argue and I was left seriously surprised about the fact that he seemed to believe I'd talked about him. Fondly, considering the way Ella was smiling at him so damn warmly.

He muttered something about needing another shot of whiskey for this and turned away from her. Ella was still smiling though, and I closed the distance between us, bringing my hand to the small of her back when I joined her at the bar.

"It appears you've got some magical powers, woman. You could've told me you were a member of the supernatural."

Surprised laughter bubbled out of her and she leaned into me, keeping her voice as low as mine had been but peering up

at me almost lovingly through her eyelashes. “Will smug look good on me yet?”

“It will if you keep this up.” To give effect to what probably looked like a relieved exchange between a happy couple, I pressed a soft kiss to her forehead.

I didn’t know if that was taking things a step too far, but when I glanced down at her again, she was *still* freaking smiling. “You really are too fucking good at this.”

“I’m a relationship person,” she murmured as she took both my hands and squeezed them. “It turns out that this is just like being in a real relationship.”

I chuckled, knowing that even if anyone had overheard her, they’d think she was just joking. No one was anywhere near us, though. The bartender was mixing us our drinks, but the rest of my family already had theirs and they were making their way to the table.

When we went to join them, Freya was laughing easily while she chatted to our mom. As we sat down, she turned to Ella and charmed her right away, the two women falling into conversation like they’d known each other for years.

I watched them quietly, really fucking taken by the way Ella was interacting with everyone, until the inevitable finally happened. Freya started asking a ton of questions and our answers to them would determine if this relationship of ours lived to see tomorrow morning.

“What do you do for a living? Where were you born? How did you meet Cal? Was it love at first sight?”

Ella giggled, but she didn’t skip a beat. “I’m a travel writer, but I was born right here in New York. Calan and I met in the city one night when I ended up at one of his bars, and yes, for me, it was love at first sight. I just didn’t admit it to him right away because I didn’t want to scare him off.”

Freya laughed and Mom chuckled, nodding her agreement. Finn, however, jumped on the fact that she was a travel writer. “Doesn’t that mean you’re away often? Long distance doesn’t really seem like something Cal would be interested in.”

Ella smiled at me. “Well, I have been traveling a lot, but—”

“Where?” Finn asked, unashamedly interrupting. “When? For how long at a time? Do you really trust him when you’re gone?”

“I do,” she said, looking him right in the eyes. “Trust him, I mean.”

I slid my hand onto her thigh under the table. “She’s a travel writer, Finn. It’s part of the gig, but we’re good. I’ve even done some traveling with her and we’ve got a few more trips planned.”

Ella swallowed, clearly affected by having my hand on her thigh. A tremble passed through the muscles, and I felt her squeeze her legs together. “Yep. It’s been great. We’re good. It’s all working out pretty well for us so far.”

Unable to help myself after her initial reaction, I ran my hand higher up her leg, loving the way she looked at me with lust and surprise in her eyes. I was also really fucking loving how easily I could wrap her around my finger.

I’d had her on the hook in Edinburgh. *Why should now be any different? This whole thing could end up being a lot more fun than I’d thought.*

Freya asked a few more questions, but our exchange with Finn seemed to have knocked the wind out of her sails. Eventually, the twenty-one questions ended and Ella could come up for air.

The conversation shifted to the wedding, and Freya was so excited about it that her eyes were shining like the damn stars, reminding me that even if I got to have no fun with this arrangement, I hadn’t entered into it for myself.

“It’s going to be so special and so beautiful using the distillery as a venue,” my sister gushed. “It’s going to be a black-tie event with an outdoor ceremony. We’re getting a clear tent with heaters for the guests and then the reception will be inside.”

“We just have a consult with Swarovski,” she continued as she’d lost the need to even breathe. “I can’t wait for the guests to see the crystal décor we’re going to have. It’s going to be nothing short of magical.”

I found myself smiling—and glancing at Ella. I wanted the best for my baby sister, but I was looking at Ella because Freya had said the word *magical*, which was kind of how I was starting to think about Ella. *She has to be a unicorn in the world of fake dating.*

On the note of wanting what was best for my sister, however, I needed to know more about Jim. The rest of my family seemed pretty comfortable with him, which meant they’d gotten to know him well, but I’d been estranged from them for so long that I’d only met the guy once.

My turn to ask the questions. “So, Jim, how did you meet my sister? How did you propose?”

“Well, we met when I helped her get her shopping bags into the car,” he said thoughtfully, smiling at the memory he was obviously having. “She must’ve had, like, a dozen bags with her and she was trying to get them all in the trunk without having to put them down on the wet ground. I offered to help her and I haven’t looked back since. I’ve known from the first moment that I saw her that I loved her.”

A likely story.

Before I could ask anything else, Freya shot me a playful warning. “Back off, Cal. You don’t need to vet my fiancé. I’m perfectly capable of making my own choices. Besides, we’ve done the threatening of the boyfriend bit with Finn. Jim is fine. I promise.”

“Sure, but he hasn’t gone through it with me yet.”

Finn backed her up. “Stay out of it, Calan. Or did you really only come home to cause more shit?”

Immediately on edge, I felt like this was a me vs. them situation, and I really didn’t like that even Freya seemed to be on his side. “She can fight her own battles, Finlay. Why don’t you stay out of it?”

He scoffed, but his jaw hardened and he kept his mouth shut.

I arched a brow at him as I leaned back. “What’s the matter, Finn? If you have something to say, say it.”

He bristled. “Fine. I will. I do have something to say.”

Before he could go ahead and say it though, Freya cut him off. She scowled at us, the expression in her eyes turning pleading. “Knock it off, guys. Please? Can’t we just enjoy a nice dinner together?”

“Freya’s right,” my mother said, her cheeks a little paler and her expression a little more weary than it had been before. “Let’s keep it civil, shall we? We have guests and it’s been a long time since we’ve all been around the same table. Let’s just try to enjoy it.”

My dad glared daggers at me—because it was always my fucking fault—but I was surprised when I felt a hand on my leg this time. Ella’s fingers dragged up until they reached my own, and she linked our hands together, giving mine a gentle squeeze.

I thought that would be it, but she didn’t let go until dinner was served. It was then that it occurred to me that with her here, it was the first time in a long time that I had any support whatsoever around this table.

With her here, I didn’t feel like a lone wolf in my own family home. It was a surprisingly good feeling, and one I strangely wished I could cling to when she released my hand to pick up her cutlery. This faking thing really was just making for one surprise after another, but so far, the most surprising thing of it all was that it had mostly been good. And that was the one thing I hadn’t quite been prepared for.

After a rather emotional dinner that had started out well but had ended on a strained note, we said goodbye to Calan's family and headed back to the guest house. He was tense at my side as we crossed the grounds, and as soon as he slammed the door behind us, he started venting, blowing off steam as he undressed.

The former, I had expected. The latter? Not so much.

“God, my brother is such a fucking asshole.” He unbuttoned his shirt almost violently, shrugging it off and dropping it right there on the floor. “He’s always thought that he’s better than me. The better son. The better brother. It’s such bullshit. I let Freya ask *you* questions, but as soon as I do the same, I’m the dick who has to back off.”

He unbuckled his belt with a forceful yank, ripping it free of the loops and dropping it a few paces away from his shirt. We seemed to be making our way to the living room, but I was following him almost completely blindly.

While he was wearing slacks and an undershirt, he’d revealed enough of himself that I couldn’t help but admire every swell of muscle and every flex of those muscles as he moved. Every movement was underscored by aggravation and tension, but damn.

He was ripped. And gorgeous. And trouble.

Such big trouble, and yet, I’m still staring at him.

Shoving both hands into those thick dark locks, he pushed it back and held it, gripping the top of his head. He paced in front of the window. The fireplace had been lit while we'd been out, and it was warm and toasty in here, reminding me way too much of that night in Edinburgh and everything that had happened between us in my room.

My memories of what had happened after that night weren't so great, but the night itself had been incredible. *The things he did to me. The pleasure he made me feel...*

"I mean, the way he was up my ass at dinner was just so fucking uncalled for," he ranted. "I haven't seen him in almost a year. I showed up with a girl of my own and his girl wasn't even there. Why posture like that? Why try to—"

"Does he have a reason to be?" I asked, getting the feeling that whatever Calan had done to save him from his own mistake hadn't been as righteous as he made it sound earlier.

He swung those dark, angry eyes to mine and narrowed them. "Does he have a reason to be a gigantic dick?"

"Yes," I said simply. "Did he have a reason to posture like that? To say the things he did? It didn't seem to be coming from nowhere, and in my experience, people don't just act like that unless they've got good reason."

He kept eyeing me, but he didn't say anything. His tall, broad frame was practically buzzing with tension, the look in his eyes guarded.

As I stared right back at him, I shrugged. "Fine. Don't tell me. I'm sure someone will by the time the wedding rolls around. Of course, if it catches me off guard, we're going to have to have the obligatory fight about it."

Calan sighed, his shoulders still square when he finally came out with it. "I fucked his fiancée."

My heart lurched before it started racing, my mouth dropping open. "You did what?"

"Four years ago, I was in Edinburgh for his stag party." He turned his back to me, strode over to the window, and perched himself on the edge of the wide sill. Bringing his gaze back to

mine, he inhaled deeply. “He was engaged to a girl he’d been with for a few years. A few weeks before the wedding, he, his buddies, and I went to Edinburgh to party and see the original distillery my grandfather built. Our legacy.”

“The place where it all started,” I said softly, the events of that night suddenly starting to make a lot more sense to me. “So what happened?”

“The rest of our family came with us. My dad paid all the expenses, and the bride and her friends were there too. It was supposed to be this big blowout, but also a chance to show off where we’d come from, you know?”

I nodded slowly. “I’ve heard of that kind of thing. I didn’t know anyone was rich enough to actually do it, but sure.”

Calan let out a dry chuckle, running one of his hands into his hair but the motion wasn’t nearly as aggravated this time. It even kind of looked like he was only doing it to give his hand something to do. The other was gripping the windowsill tight, his knuckles and the beds of his nails white from the force.

“On the night of the stag party and bachelorette parties, everyone was partying. We started separately, but we ended up at the same club.” He closed his eyes, his strong chest rising on a deep inhale. “We were all fucked up, so drunk that we could barely see straight. She came onto me on the dance floor and we hooked up.”

This time, even though I’d known what to expect, I was even more stunned than before. He’d slept with his brother’s fiancée on the night of his brother’s bachelor party. While the bachelor party had still been happening even.

Okay, I take back everything I thought before. He’s not really human. He’s just a player. What. An. Asshole!

“There’s more to it than just that, but those are the highlights. It’s complicated, though.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s not. Not really. You betrayed your brother in one of the worst ways possible and so did she.

That's why they want you to have a date so badly, isn't it? They don't trust you at your sister's wedding."

"It's not like I'm going to fuck the groom." He snorted. "Honestly, I don't know why they're making me bring a date, but that's not really the issue here. Finn is."

"He's not, though. You're the issue. They think you're going to use her wedding as an opportunity to get laid and they don't want you slutting around on your sister's big day."

He grimaced, and I wondered why this was striking a nerve. Everything I knew about him suggested that he was a shallow jerk, to the extent that he'd screwed his brother's fiancée and pretended that he'd been some kind of hero for doing it.

So why did it look like I just saw regret and guilt in his eyes? Shame, even?

"It's true, though, isn't it? That is why they're insisting on you having a date?"

He nodded. "None of them get that I did it *for* him. I thought they were coming around, but clearly, they're not."

I scoffed. "How did sleeping with his fiancée save him from making a mistake? Do you honestly believe that you did it *for* him somehow? Because that's messed up, Calan. Really messed up."

"No, it's not," he said quietly, glancing out the window before he turned back to me. "Like I said, it's more complicated than it seems."

Before he could shut down on me again, I decided to press the issue. For starters, because he and I needed to have this conversation if we were going to make it to the wedding unscathed by this history, but also because that meant that not long after he'd slept with her, he'd slept with me too.

And I needed to know.

Thank God for condoms. But since it'd been four years, I wasn't worried about having gotten something from him.

This was for me.

For my own peace of mind.

“No, don’t do that,” I said firmly. “Don’t just give me some generic bullshit about there being more to the story. What else is there, Calan? Because right now, from where I’m standing, you’re the asshole. Not Finn.”

“I saved him from making the mistake of spending the rest of his life with someone who didn’t love him.”

I shook my head again. “How do you know she didn’t love him? It’s one thing to say that, but you slept with her just as surely as she slept with you, and he’s your brother. You love him regardless. Why couldn’t the same have been true for her?”

“Because Edinburgh wasn’t the first time she tried to have sex with me,” he said matter-of-factly. “You also weren’t there when it was happening, Ella. It’s one thing to be up on your high horse now, after the fact, judging me, but you didn’t hear the things she said to me when she was trying to seduce me.”

“Trying? It sounds to me like she succeeded.” *And like you’re a cocky asshole who deserves every drop of shit you’re getting from your brother.*

Calan fell silent, simply staring back at me. I shook my head at him again. “Wow. You really are a cocky asshole, aren’t you?”

None of this even sounded like real life to me, which probably meant that every word of it was true, but still. The fact that he still couldn’t face the fact that he had been one of the parties in the wrong, that he was still justifying his actions and shrugging them off as having somehow done his brother a favor, spoke volumes about him.

Since he seemed to be done justifying his actions, I turned and headed to the kitchen. I needed some time to process what all this meant as far as it related to me and our *relationship*. I was hardly in a position to walk away from that kind of money based on the knowledge that I had the moral high ground, which probably meant my moral high ground wasn’t very high after all, but still.

I needed to wrap my head around it all and figure out how to go about being his girlfriend, knowing what I did now. As I was putting on the kettle to make a cup of tea, he came up behind me. I heard his footsteps approaching, but I didn't turn to look at him, and the next thing I knew, he wasn't just behind me, he was *right* there.

So close that his chest brushed against my back with every breath one of us took. He brushed my hair from the back of my neck, hanging it over one of my shoulders as he leaned in closer to speak softly in my ear.

“Haven't you ever done something bad that you couldn't take back, Ella?” His voice was husky and low, but it was also coarse with emotion, so heavy that he seemed almost hoarse.

I shuddered in response. “Yes.”

His lips touched my shoulder. He pressed the softest kiss against my skin before he spoke against it. “Haven't you ever wanted something that wasn't yours?”

Well, damn. Now that he mentions it. I couldn't say that I didn't know the feeling.

While it didn't justify his actions, I really couldn't deny that I understood exactly what he was talking about. As for all my thoughts about having the moral high ground earlier, I really did know a thing or two about doing stuff so bad that you couldn't take it back.

From personal experience, I also knew how much it sucked having to live with what you'd done. While my past wasn't the same as his, what I'd done hadn't been much better. Hell, it might even have been worse.

So really, who am I to judge? Maybe me and Mr. Cocky Denial make a good fake couple after all.

CALAN

My moves were working. When I'd decided to come in here to give it a go, to see if she was as eager for a distraction as I was, I'd been as prepared to be shut down as I had been for things to go my way.

Now, as I leaned against her, I could feel her giving in. With every word I said, her body softened into mine, melting into me as she responded to what I was saying.

She tipped her head to the side, letting me pull down the sleeve of her shirt to expose more skin. Ever since I'd met her, this woman had been a mystery to me.

That and her gentle nature had been what had drawn me to her to begin with—and her body, of course—but even now that we'd spent so much more time together, I still didn't know much about her. I knew her name, what she did for a living, and that she really seemed to enjoy traveling.

After an entire day together, which was more than I'd ever spent with a woman I wasn't related to, that was it. That was what I knew.

As of that conversation we just had, she knew more about me than most, and it was as unsettling as it was alluring. The mystery of her and the sense that she was hiding dark secrets of her own got to me, drawing me in more than her gentleness or even that round, perfect ass.

She was a kindred spirit. I felt it all the way down to my bones. She was like me, and it was enticing. I wasn't interested in trying to fuse our tarnished souls together for all

of eternity, but our bodies? Now there was something I could work with.

Soon, I was working her shirt off over her head and she lifted her arms for me without any encouragement. I groaned as I dropped the fabric on the floor, not giving a shit if it got dirty or even ruined.

Ella leaned her head back against my shoulder, and when I looked down at her face, I saw that her eyes were closed, her lips parted, and her breathing shallow. As if she could feel my gaze on her, she cracked open just one eye.

“You’re breaking our contract.”

“Only if you tell me to stop. So tell me to stop,” I dared her, even waiting for a few seconds with my hands gripping her hips and my eyes locked on hers, but when she didn’t say anything, I kept going. *Yeah, that’s what I thought.*

I ran my hands up her sides, tracing her full curves before I brushed my palms over her breasts. I had no intention of touching them just yet, but she sucked in a sharp breath anyway, leaning back against me even more fully than she had been before.

Instead of giving her what she wanted, I ran my hands back down, letting my fingertips sink into the waistband of her slacks and then pulling them out slowly again, exploring her abdomen and all the soft lines it had to offer until she was just about panting in my arms.

Moving one hand to her breast, I gave her nipple a pinch and brought my other hand to her chin, tugging it until she was facing me. Her eyes flew open in time for her to see my head descending, but she still didn’t stop me. She wrapped her arm around my head to bring my mouth to hers faster.

With her, it seemed like I was in for one surprise after another, but I wasn’t going to complain. It kept things interesting. As soon as we kissed, my teasing touches stopped and I turned her in the circle of my arms, ready to get down to business.

Ella didn't fight me at all, letting me take charge like she'd been born to do it. She kissed me back, her arms still around my neck. I hooked one arm behind her back to undo her bra. Hurriedly yanking it off, I dropped that on the floor with her shirt and then started on her pants.

Once those and her panties were off, she finally started returning the favor, her fingers nimble as she rushed from one of the buttons on my shirt to the next. While she undressed me, our kisses grew faster and harder. Our bodies pressed together tighter until there was nothing left between us.

I wrapped my fingers around her hair, using that and my body to walk her back until we reached the island. "Hop up."

"What?" she asked, sounding almost dazed.

"You heard me." I let go of her so she could do what I told her, but I wrapped my hands under her thighs to help when she didn't move fast enough for my liking.

It'd been four long years since I'd last seen this girl naked, but fuck. She was just as sexy now as she had been then, with the only difference being her pussy now had only a small patch of hair right above her slit where it'd been all natural before.

Ella's eyes were dark when mine finally came up to meet them again, and as she looked at me, she spread her legs with purpose, cocking her head like it was her turn to dare me to do something. I smirked and stepped between her knees, relieved as shit that my pants were still on.

This counter was a little high for it to be comfortable to fuck her on it, but I definitely would've tried if it hadn't been for the fabric in the way. Now at least, I could focus on her. Taking a handful of her hair again, I tugged just hard enough to make sure she kept looking at me, and I moved my free hand between her legs, groaning again when I was met with soaked, soft flesh and the sound of her soft gasp as soon as I touched her.

Mine, something deep inside me shouted, the word reverberating through my head. I didn't say it out loud this

time, though. The same instinct had gripped me that night in Edinburgh, but tonight, I knew I was going to have to see her again tomorrow.

Which meant that I had to exercise at least some measure of restraint. It wasn't much, though, but it was something.

I held her gaze as I slid my fingers into her, noticing every gasp and moan and every shudder that ran through her. I made mental notes about what caused them, then did it again and again until Ella's brow furrowed and she clamped down on my fingers, my name on her lips as she came.

I moaned right along with her, so hard now that I was aching, throbbing to get inside her. It took everything I had not to strip and take her right here.

That had been so fucking hot, watching and feeling her come apart for me, that I was right at the edge of losing control, but I didn't want to. Not just yet. Instead, I helped her off the island when she finally came back down again and sealed my lips over hers, kissing her as I marched her back into the living room.

I knew this place as well as I knew the back of my hand, so I didn't even need to look to get us to the sofa. Once we reached it, I pushed her down gently but firmly. As she sat, her eyes opened and she looked up at me, but I shook my head when she beckoned for me to join her and sat down on my knees instead.

I was nowhere near done with her. I had some serious shit to shut out tonight and I had a feeling she did too. I was going to drive us both out of our minds, tire us out so good that by the time we finally got to bed, there would be no time to worry about the nightmares.

Ella watched me as I sank down on my knees. She leaned back against the sofa, her skin flushed a rosy shade of pink and her chest rising and falling fast. Somehow, she mostly seemed to know exactly what I wanted and she did it without me having to tell her to, which was damn nice.

I'd never felt as in sync with someone sexually as I did with her. Sure, it'd been four years but that night had been burned into my memory for life. I'd never forgotten how good we'd been together or how she instinctively gave me what I needed.

My eyes locked on hers and I spread her legs, exposing her pretty pussy to myself. I looked it over before I ran my tongue through her folds. I hadn't told her to, but she watched me anyway, writhing and moaning but never closing her eyes until I knew she was about to come again.

I would've let her if I wasn't feeling as wild as I was. I needed this more than I'd realized and it needed to last. Ella cried out when I pulled away. Pushing myself up on my knees, I kissed her hard as my fingers wound into her hair.

She held on to me tightly, clearly not minding the taste of herself on my lips as she tried to get me to lie down with her on the sofa. I shook my head though, murmuring into her mouth between kisses. "The floor is better. More space."

Without a word, she followed me down, laying me flat on my back by pushing gently at my shoulders. She stayed on her knees beside me and ran her gaze and hands over every inch of me, making my cock beg to get inside her.

She finally undid my pants. I got a kick out of it when her eyes went wide as she finally got a good look at it. That night in Scotland, her bedroom at the hostel had been pretty dark. Besides, it'd been four years, so I let her look her fill now, even if my heart was thrumming and my dick was about to start twitching.

Ella let out a soft breath, her eyes flying back up to mine, and she wrapped her fingers around my length almost hesitantly. I wondered what that was about. She didn't have to be hesitant with me, but she was anyway, seeming unsure as her palm started moving.

Meanwhile, I hissed out my next breath, my hips rocking into her touch. I looked back into her eyes until I realized I couldn't anymore. Bringing my fingers to her wrist, I stopped

her movements and got up, taking her hand and bringing her with me.

“We’re going to the bedroom.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to make you scream and these windows face the house. I don’t particularly mind if anyone hears you, but I get the feeling you might.”

Her cheeks had already been flushed, but they grew hot now as she followed me. “Yeah, that’s a good point.”

I chuckled, but the moment faded as soon as we reached the master suite, and I laid her down on the bed. I’d grabbed my wallet before I’d gotten up, and I slid a condom out of it now while she lay across the mattress.

As I showed her the package, I looked into her eyes. “Yes?”

She nodded, opening her arms for me as she responded. “Definitely, yes.”

I tore it open with my teeth and rolled it on, then joined her on the bed and helped her to get on top of me. I sat with my back against the headboard, holding her hands as I guided her over me with one of her thighs pressed to the sides of each of mine.

She held my gaze with her own as she lowered herself down on me slowly, so slowly that it almost felt like she was trying to figure out what to do. Like she was trying to remember how to ride a bike. But that couldn’t be right.

Soon enough, she seemed to find her confidence, eventually closing her eyes as she rode me like a bucking bronco. When she came again, I was right there with her, my hands in hers as pleasure exploded out of me. I wondered why the hell it had taken us so long to do this again.

There might’ve been a lot I didn’t know about Ella, but the one thing that I did know without a shadow of a doubt was that physically, it didn’t get better than this. Hot, wild, and all over

the place was my favorite kind of sex, and it looked like I'd just found a favorite new partner.

O *ops, we did it again.*
Fuck.

I hadn't intended for it to happen, but at least we'd slept in separate bedrooms this time. I'd refused to go to bed with him after what had happened in Edinburgh.

There was no way I was falling asleep in his arms again, fooling myself into believing that maybe there was more to this than there was.

I'd already repeated the second biggest mistake I'd ever made. The last thing I'd wanted was to wind up back in that same emotional ditch I'd crashed into when I woke up that morning and he'd been gone.

Although it hadn't really been the sex that had been the mistake back then. It had been what I'd ended up thinking about during and after.

On the other hand, those thoughts wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for sex, so I didn't really know. The point was that at least last night, I'd gone to sleep by myself and I hadn't been hugely disappointed when I'd woken up alone.

That felt like a win.

The silence stretched between us in his car as he drove us back to the city, neither of us even really looking at the other. I knew where my head was, but I wondered what he was thinking about. *Was last night even a blip on his radar?*

“Where am I taking you?” he asked as we sped along the freeway.

Well, I guess that answers that question. It's not. I, Ella Carver, am not so much as a blip on his radar. All one hundred and eighty pounds of me didn't even register. Great. That's just great.

“The apartment where I'm staying,” I responded, feeling as subdued as the gray weather outside. “I'll check the address now. Just give me a minute.”

I reached for my phone, doing a quick search to make sure I had the right street number. Then I gave it to him and slid my phone back into my purse. He nodded curtly, one hand on the steering wheel and the other resting lightly on the gear lever.

“You performed well this weekend, Ella,” he said before he glanced at me and winked. “Especially last night. I've got to say, your body is a nice perk to this arrangement of ours.”

Mortified, I flushed to the roots of my hair and shook my head firmly. “That was a one-time slip-up. Don't get used to it, Calan. My body is no perk.”

A devilish smirk appeared on his lips as his brows rose slightly. “Who are you kidding? You'll be back for more soon enough.”

“No, I won't. Like I said, it was a one-time thing.”

He chuckled, the sound dark and low. “Yeah, I told myself that once upon a time too. You will be back, Ella. You're not going to be able to resist for two months.”

“Yes, I am, but you could also just not make another move on me. How's that sound?”

“Why would I agree to that? All that leg quaking and the sounds you made? That's like a drug to me.”

I turned neon pink. “Shut up.”

“I'll be back between your legs in no time, even if I do shut up.” He focused on the road again, speeding as fast as the traffic would allow until we reached the apartment.

Annoyed and insulted, I slammed the door behind me after grabbing my bag of clothes and marched into the building. I hadn't even said goodbye, but that didn't really matter. It seemed social convention and decency meant nothing to the man anyhow.

There were a few things to be grateful for, though. The biggest and most important of which was that we hadn't seen his family again. There had been no awkward morning-after with them, and while I was sure no one was going to forget that strained dinner before the next time I had to see them, at least I had some time to come to terms with everything before I had to look them in the eyes again.

Even so, I was still furious—at him and myself—by the time I barged into the apartment. Kara was working at the coffee shop, but Mikey was home.

Studying at the desk in the living room, he looked up from his laptop when I stormed in. “What’s wrong? Did something happen? Where were you last night, anyway?”

He closed his computer as he asked the questions, then turned to face me and pushed his glasses up to his forehead to rub his eyes.

Regret crashed into me in waves. “I’m so sorry. I should’ve let you know that I wouldn’t be coming home. Please tell me you’re not tired because you waited up?”

“I’m not tired because I waited up,” he said agreeably. “I’m tired because I’ve been studying since the butt crack of dawn and I only stopped at two a.m.”

I winced. “Big exam or something coming up?”

He shook his head, his eyes a little red and watery. He dropped his glasses back to his nose and looked at me. “Nah, but the world of web development never sleeps. I need to keep up with all the latest trends and stuff because *that*, I do have a quiz coming up on soon. Once a month, we’re expected to score seventy-five percent or higher on a quiz about what happened in the industry in the past month.”

“Wow, that seems extreme.”

He chuckled and swiped a pencil up from the desk, tossing it lightly at me. “It’s not. Now, stop trying to avoid my questions and tell me where you were last night and why you’re so mad.”

My teeth sank into the inside of my cheek. Before, when Della had first called, I’d told them about my big break but I’d been vague on what exactly I would be doing for the money.

I didn’t think I could do that anymore. If I was going to survive these next couple of months with that frustratingly sexy McDouche who somehow knew exactly what to say to get me to bend to his will, I was going to need their support.

So I came out with the whole story, telling him everything and knowing I was going to have to do it all over again when Kara got home later. Mikey’s eyes were wide and disbelieving for most of the story, but when I got to the end and told him about what Calan had said in the car, he cursed under his breath and frowned.

“It sounds like this guy is a real douchebag, Ella. But you knew that already.”

I nodded enthusiastically. “Tell me about it, but I signed the contract and I’ve met his family. I need to see it through. I just need to figure out a way to do it without backsliding.”

“Is it really worth being stuck with him for two months? I know it’s a lot of money, but you can earn enough money to live some other way, babe.”

“Money, yes. Half a million dollars? No. There’s no way I’d be able to earn that much. Not in two months. Hell, not even in two years.”

“Sure, but you’re not paying rent here. You might not be able to earn that amount of money, but do you really need to? You could stay right here with us for as long as you need to and—”

“No, Mike. I appreciate it, I really do, but this guy is my ticket out of New York. If I want to get out, and I do, then I need to follow through. Besides, like I said, I already signed

the contract. I don't know if I could get out of it even if I wanted to."

Mikey sighed. "I really wish you wouldn't keep letting Spencer run you out of the city. It's a damn big city and he doesn't own it. So what if you run into him? You're tough, capable, and you can do hard things. You don't need to run away from him, Ella."

"I'm not running away," I repeated, really wishing that I had a bedroom I could run and hide in right about now.

Instead, I marched out of the room and into the bathroom, turning the faucets in the shower to hot before I stripped down and got inside. Once the water was cascading over me, I was surprised at the emotion that came with it.

Tears pressed at the backs of my eyes.

Four years ago, I'd had Calan to blame. In my mind, I'd turned him into the villain. The big bad guy who hadn't broken my heart but had damaged it again when it'd already been held together with little more than spit and duct tape.

With everything I'd learned since, I now knew exactly what his frame of mind had been that night, but he still didn't know what it had meant to me to have gone to bed with another man. The thing was, I *had* gone to bed with him. Willingly. *Enthusiastically*.

He hadn't pushed me to do anything I hadn't wanted him to do. In fact, I'd *begged* him to do everything he had done.

I'd also realized that it wasn't exactly sexy to say stuff like, *oh, baby, this is such a great one-night stand*. While I'd held on to my flimsy reasoning about having been mad at him because he'd made me believe there could be something more between us, he hadn't really said anything that wouldn't simply be considered dirty talk.

Which was something I now knew he was rather fond of.

At the end of the day, I'd made a series of decisions before I'd left here that had ended in disaster, and then I'd fled across the pond and I'd made another bad decision there. Which led me right back here, to where I was today, standing under the

shower spray with tears running down my cheeks and no real idea why I was crying.

Sure, the guy was an ass, but he was honest about it. Last night had been good—really fucking good—and as much as he was an indecent prick for saying it out loud in a nonsexual setting, the truth was that I probably would be back.

Not because I couldn't help myself. I wasn't big on blaming my body for betraying me when it was my brain that made the decisions consciously. So no. It wouldn't be a situation of me not being able to help myself.

I would be back because, despite it all, I still wanted him. Part of me even still felt like I wasn't that different from him.

I wanted to be, but I just wasn't.

Calan was an escape. A distraction. The money he was paying me was the light at the end of a very long, very dark tunnel.

And none of that was even why I was crying.

My friends thought I was running away. From Spencer. From my parents. My problems, and they weren't entirely wrong. I was damaged goods, and while I didn't want to feel like I had to leave again, I also didn't feel like I had much of a choice.

Life had been simpler in the United Kingdom and in Europe. Better. Easier. So much less complicated.

That was what I wanted for my future. Brightness, and hope, and simplicity. It just didn't feel like I could have that here, not without constantly having to look over my shoulder in the hopes that there was no one there who knew what I had done.

So I had to leave. I had to go back to a place where I'd found a sense of belonging that I just didn't have anymore, and in order to make a good life for myself over there, I needed Calan. More accurately, I needed his money, but that meant I had to get through the next two months with him.

Having now come full circle with my miserable thoughts, I dropped my head back under the spray and closed my eyes. All I had to do was keep on keeping on. If I could just do that, I could have everything I had ever wanted and more.

Now I just had to hope that I had it in me to get there.

I shut down the pulsating spray in the shower at the gym and climbed out, reaching for my towel on the heated rail and quickly drying off before wrapping it around my waist. The showers here were not like those usually found in gyms and locker rooms across the country.

We didn't have just one big, tiled room with a few showerheads dangling from the walls and rows upon rows of generic lockers. Our showers were in full-sized, private bathrooms that required a key to get in.

Each bathroom was shared between a few members, each of whom had a key as well as a small closet and a lockable drawer in the vanity. The closets themselves could only be accessed by our own fingerprints and our keys wouldn't work on the other bathrooms.

The gym was prestigious, exclusive, and *pricey*, and I'd often wondered what lurked inside those other closets in my bathroom. Mine held the usual—spare sets of clothes, underwear, and a couple of extra towels—but the others? Maybe the mystery-loving part of my brain was just conjuring up fantastical puzzles, but as I shaved and then got dressed, I tried to come up with stories about what might be hidden inside.

Gold. Secret bank account info. Evidence of some sort?

With my post-workout endorphins at an all-time high, I was buzzing and my mind raced with possibilities. I was still in a great mood when I stepped out of my bathroom with my

bag hiked over my shoulder, nodding at a few guys who nodded to me as I left.

I knew most of them from being their spotter or giving them tips to build strength, not muscle. *Yeah, I look good, but my power is purposeful, not just aesthetic.*

We had world-class personal trainers here, but that didn't stop people from coming to me for help and tips. It felt good, and after the killer workout I'd had, nothing was going to bring me down.

Or so I thought until I crossed the parking lot and found Freya waiting for me at my car. *Shit!*

She had a big, cheesy grin on her face and she opened her arms, bending slightly at the knees when she saw me approaching. "Surprise!"

A strange mix of suspicion and joy infused my veins and I slowed when I reached her. I chose to indulge the suspicion first. "Sis? What's the ambush about?"

She giggled, reached up to bring that long brown hair over her shoulder, and combed it with her fingers. "If I called you to make plans, I know you would've said that you were busy. Especially after dinner Sunday night. I thought maybe we could grab coffee."

"You're fidgeting with your hair," I said. "That means you're nervous. What's going on?"

She rolled her eyes at me. "Of course, I'm nervous. I've never had to ambush my own brother before to get him to have coffee with me. There's a coffee shop right across the street. It's my treat."

My eyes narrowed as I stared at her. I knew there was more to this than just her wanting to grab coffee with her brother, but the fastest way to find out what it was really about was to have the damn coffee.

"Fine," I grumbled, suspicion definitely overpowering the joy at this point.

Objectively, it was pretty darn sad that my own sister unexpectedly appearing evoked an emotion like suspicion in me, but subjectively, it seemed the lack of trust my family had in me went both ways now. I hadn't even realized it before, but right now, I didn't even fully trust my baby sister.

"How'd you know where I was?" I asked as we walked across the street together.

She shrugged. "You're not the only one who inherited the family charm."

"It was my assistant, wasn't it?"

Her eyes flared wide open, even as she mimed zipping her lips. "I'm taking the Fifth."

"Doesn't matter. I already know it was him." *And if he's handing out my current location to random people who are calling and claiming to be my family without checking with me that I even know who they are, then he's as good as gone.*

Freya glanced at me as if she'd heard the thought. "Please don't fire him. He asked me a ton of questions before he told me. He made absolutely sure that I was who I said I was."

I grunted but didn't make any promises. She didn't say anything else as we walked into the coffee shop, only breaking her silence to place her order at the counter.

A few minutes later, we were seated and we each had a breakfast burrito in front of us. I leaned forward, my gaze locked on hers. "What's going on, Freya? Are you okay? Has something happened?"

My heart hammered in my chest at the thought that she might've come to me for help. *Maybe that not trusting her thing was a knee-jerk reaction.*

When she smiled, however, it was so genuine and so easy that I knew there was nothing wrong. Jim hadn't fucked up and she wasn't in trouble. "I just wanted to spend some quality time with my big brother."

"Really?"

She made her eyes big at me. “Of course. Do you blame me? You never come upstate anymore and trying to see you is like pulling teeth. I miss you. I miss feeling like I know you.”

That last sentence was like a blow to the chest because she wasn't wrong. These days, I didn't feel like I knew her either, but I was still skeptical. I arched a brow at her, sitting back in my chair and leaving my coffee and my burrito untouched.

There was something flickering in those dark eyes of hers that looked a hell of a lot like guilt. It was the same look she used to get when she'd been a kid and I'd caught her doing something she shouldn't have been doing.

Sneaking chocolates after bedtime. Saying she hadn't broken something when she had. Lying about whether she'd been drinking at a party. The list goes on and on.

I kept staring at her the exact same way I used to in return, waiting for her to buckle under the pressure I knew she couldn't take. Eventually, she got flustered under the weight of my stare, shifting in her seat and looking everywhere but right at me.

“Cut to the chase, Freya.” I shook my watch out from under my sleeve and checked it. “I don't have time to drag this out of you, and as much as I'd like to believe that this visit is just about spending time with me, I know it's not.”

She huffed out a breath and shook her head. “Fine. I really did want to have coffee with you, and everything else that I said is true too. I don't know you anymore, Cal. I want to, but I don't.”

“Agreed, but all of that goes both ways. We can try to do something about it. Maybe after the wedding, when you have more time, but for now, why don't you tell me why you hunted me down today?”

“I'm here to do some recon,” she finally admitted. Her eyes were locked on her coffee before she slowly lifted them back to mine.

I raised my eyebrows a little more.

Freya huffed out another breath, a tormented look in those eyes now as she broke down. “I wanted to talk to you about Ella.”

I sighed. “Here we go.”

My post-workout endorphins had just been snuffed out completely and annoyance crept through me. I should’ve expected this. There was no way my family was just going to let it go without more digging about the two of us, and it made sense that they’d sent Freya for this recon mission.

She was the one I was least likely to tell to fuck off.

“Don’t jump down my throat,” she said, eyes wide. “I’m just curious, and in case you were wondering, no one sent me. This isn’t like that. I’m not here to spy for Finn or to interrogate you on behalf of Mom and Dad. This is about me and you.”

I cocked my head, my arms folding across my chest. “Is that true?”

She nodded immediately, crossing her heart with her index finger. I chuckled at the gesture, remembering all the times she’d done it as a kid. When Freya crossed her heart, she meant it.

As much as she was a grownup now and I didn’t know the adult version of her very well, it was nice to know that deep down inside, she was still her. The Freya I had known inside and out. I used to be able to tell with a single look whether she was lying or not, and unless she’d gotten incredibly good at it, she wasn’t lying now.

This really was about her curiosity, as opposed to that of my parents. I relaxed a little bit. “Fine. Tell me what you want to know. It’s only been a couple of months though, so I’ll try to answer your questions the best I can, but I don’t know everything about her just yet.”

Freya flashed me a radiant smile. “That’s a surprisingly honest answer. It is also surprisingly accurate about people who are in real relationships.”

“Yeah, well, I’ve picked up a thing or two.” From other people, but hey, at least it seemed like I’d passed the first test.

“Ella is wonderful,” my sister said, still smiling. “She’s sweet, and kind, and patient, and really easy to talk to, not to mention that she’s drop-dead gorgeous.”

“So what’s the problem?”

Freya fidgeted with her cup, rolling it slowly in her hands and glancing at the steam rising off it again. I braced myself, knowing that we were about to get to what she really wanted to talk about. “It’s just that she’s not your usual type.”

As she said it, her eyes went wide and she started backtracking almost immediately. “Not that gorgeous women aren’t your type. They are. Obviously. They’re every man’s type. It’s...”

She bit her lip, looking panicked. I stared at her, fighting the smile that wanted to break free. “Out with it, Freya. What is it?”

“She’s just—You don’t usually go for women your family might actually like.”

Fair enough.

When I realized that this was what had gotten her so worried that she’d tracked me down, I laughed, relaxing completely. I shook my head at her. “Stop looking so worried. That’s a good point. It’s okay.”

Her gaze jumped back to mine, and I saw the relief flooding her insides when she realized I wasn’t pissed off. “Thank goodness. It’s, uh, I mean, I’m happy for you. Really happy. She’s amazing and she’s exactly the kind of woman I’ve always hoped you would eventually end up with, but I can’t help but be a bit concerned.”

“Concerned?” I frowned. “Why?”

She glanced back at her coffee. “Well, it’s just, uh, I wanted to make sure that everything was peachy with you before the wedding.”

Since I had a feeling she wasn't done talking just yet, I didn't say anything, waiting her out until she sighed and looked back up at me. "Can I trust you, Calan?"

An unsettling undercurrent coursed through me, but I nodded anyway. "I've already fucked up one family wedding. I won't mess with yours."

As I held her gaze, I crossed my own heart, and while Ella might not be my real girlfriend, I meant this with every fiber of my being. I wouldn't mess with her wedding.

She watched me do it, then shook her head. "That's not good enough." She held out her hand, stretching it across the table. "Pinky promise. Like we used to when we were kids."

I eyed her outstretched finger for a beat before I locked my pinky around it, wondering if it still counted that the fingers of my other hand were crossed under the table.

The scent of oil, frying rice, and vegetables filled the air while Kara stood behind the stove, spatula in hand and wearing an apron that had the words *Sizzling Hot* emblazoned over her chest. She shook her butt to a pop song blaring over the radio, using the spatula as a microphone every so often as she danced and cooked.

I sat at the small kitchen island watching her after I'd done all the food prep, and Mikey was on the other bar stool with his laptop closed in front of him. He was rubbing his eyes after a long day of studying and staring at his screen, and I got up, looking back at them over my shoulder as I headed to the fridge.

“Can I interest anyone in a glass of our finest chardonnay?”

Kara laughed. “If by that, you mean the boxed stuff you and I picked up that tastes only slightly better than battery acid, then yes. Please.”

“That’s exactly what I meant.” I pumped my eyebrows at her. “Sadly, that *is* our finest. Mikey?”

He nodded, bleary-eyed but clearly still planning on at least staying awake to eat before he went to bed. “The day I get you two to switch sides from cheap wine to cheap beer will be the best day of my life.”

“Hey, I love cheap beer,” I protested. “Cheap anything, really. The cheaper, the better.”

“For now,” Kara sang into her spatula-microphone. She gave the rice another flip and then shot me a wide grin. “Soon enough, you’re going to be treating us to fine food and finer wine. At least once, right?”

“Definitely.” It was the least I could do for them after they’d taken me in indefinitely. “It’ll have to wait until after I get the money, though.”

“Of course,” she agreed easily. “Besides, there’s nothing wrong with that chardonnay. After the first glass, it tastes exactly like the finest wines do anyway.”

I set Mikey’s glass down in front of him and he picked it up, giving the wine a sniff before he grimaced. “I’m willing to bet it takes this stuff at least two glasses to taste that good.”

“Oh, shut it,” she chided him with a smile on her face. “We’re celebrating, remember?”

“Yeah, I remember,” he grumbled and turned to me. “Why are we celebrating again? You didn’t exactly look happy when you got home after the weekend.”

“I wasn’t, but I’m over that now.” I wrapped my fingers around the stem of my own glass and set Kara’s down in front of me on my way back to my stool. “This is a new beginning for me and it deserves to be celebrated. I just need to focus on the positives.”

“Like what?” he challenged me, gripping his glass tight as worry bloomed on his features. “I saw you when you got home. It didn’t look like there were any positives to be celebrated.”

Kara had been brought up to speed on my situation with Calan, but unlike Mikey, she was excited for me. They’d been arguing about it ever since he’d given her the lowdown on my overnight visit to the Reid compound, and she shook her head at him now as they fell back into their continuing bickering.

“Of course, there’s something to be celebrated, Mikey,” she said snootily. “For all intents and purposes, Ella is Calan Reid’s girlfriend for now. She’s met the family, it went well, and at least she knows what she’s going to be dealing with for

these next couple of months. Her eyes are wide open and her wallet is too. This is an opportunity for a fresh start for her.”

“The guy is bad news.” Mikey glanced at me before he took a swig of the wine, grimaced, and then immediately took another. “He’s not worth a single dime Ella stands to make from this contract. Not if it means having to spend the two months crying in the shower because of something he did or said.”

I rolled my eyes, but before I could tell him that I hadn’t been crying *about Calan* so much as *for myself*, Kara leaped to my defense again. “Sure, the guy is a jerk. Don’t get me wrong, if Ella was dating him for real, then it absolutely would be bad news, but this isn’t that.”

“Real or not, she’s going to be spending a ton of time with him for the duration of this contract. They may not be dating, but he made her feel pretty shitty about herself on their way home the other day, and that wasn’t fake. It was very, very real.”

“Sure. Okay. I can’t defend that, but we’re all entitled to the occasional meltdown, and that happens with or without men in our lives. Sometimes, you boys are the trigger, but the tears aren’t even really for or about you. You just say something that sets us off. She’s not crying now, right? So it’s over.”

“It’s not over,” he argued, canting his head as he stared at her. “How can you even say that? This is only the beginning. That was only their first date. God knows how many more times she’s going to have to go out with him and we also don’t know if he’s going to keep saying things that make her feel like crap. How is spending two months with a jackass worth that amount of money? Or any amount of money if it eats away at your soul and your self-esteem?”

Kara shook her head. “It’s not doing that. Don’t make it sound worse than it is. She had a moment, that’s all. The way I see it, this is the ideal no-strings-attached situation for Ella to have some fun, make some money, and get Spencer out of her system.”

“If that’s the way you see it, you’re looking at it wrong,” he said in a deadpan voice. “If I thought she was having fun, then fine. Sometimes, you have to take some pain for the gain, but all I saw that morning was pain.”

“Sure, but that’s only because you weren’t there for the gain part.” She winked at him as she moved the spatula through the rice. “The man is an ass. I agree with you on that, but he’s an ass who’s great in bed and is contractually obligated to wine and dine her before.”

“You do realize that what you just described has a name, right? It’s called *Solicitation*, and it’s illegal.”

She smirked at him. “Not if you’re doing it like this, it’s not.”

His brown eyes widened before he narrowed them to slits. “You cannot be serious right now. This is insane. Ella doesn’t even like the guy, but she’s chained to him for the next couple of months. Almost two months of her life that she’ll never get back. All for what, a bit of money?”

“It’s hardly only a *bit* of money.” She waved him off, her head shaking as she added mushrooms to the pan. “She’s also not chained to him. It’s a few dates and a few events, the wedding, and then it’s over. Plus, she already knows exactly what it is. If they decide to add a few orgasms to the mix, then what’s the harm? It’s business *and* pleasure. But it’s not required of her. She gets to choose how physical any of it gets.”

He kept glaring at her, swigging his wine. His cheeks heated along with his voice. “How can you say that? Of course, there’s harm. If a person is crying in the shower after just one date, any normal friend would tell them to break it off with the guy. Why are you encouraging it?”

She blew out a frustrated breath. “She can’t break it off with him because there’s nothing to break off. They’re not together. If the situation had been different, of course I’d tell my friend to dump the loser who made her cry, but this situation isn’t different. It’s a mutually beneficial arrangement between two consenting adults.”

He snorted, leaned back on the stool, and looked her up and down slowly. “That’s it. Who are you and what have you done with my friend? If I come home so much as pouting after a date, you’re the first one to tell me to bail, yet Ella comes home and locks herself in the bathroom, and that’s okay?”

“Were any of those women you came home pouting about paying you that amount of money?” She stared at him, both eyebrows arched. “This is the money Ella needs to start a new life and the guy is a jerk, but he’s not abusive. He’s not expecting anything she isn’t willing to give. All he wants in return is a girlfriend, and if they both want other stuff to happen while they’re pretending, then why not?”

“Forgive me for thinking you had Ella’s best interests at heart,” he said angrily, his wine almost sloshing out of the glass as he thrust it at her. “You have always preached and practiced happiness as the most important thing in life. What happened?”

“Nothing happened.” She scoffed. “You’re just being a total buzzkill. In what world does a girl get to have wild, passionate sex with a God-like man, make half a million dollars, and not catch feelings because said God-like man is, as you’ve said, a complete jerk? There’s no downside.”

“Except for Ella’s compromised integrity being at stake.”

I felt that last statement like a blow to my gut, and I leaned forward, holding up my hands to show them to just stop. “Do me a favor and don’t talk about me like I’m not even here, okay? I am here, I can make my own choices, and I already have.”

“Clearly,” Mikey mumbled, his head shaking. “Of course, you can make your own choices, but what kind of friend would I be if I didn’t tell you that I think you’re making a mistake?”

I softened my expression as I offered him a small smile. “You’re a wonderful friend and you always have been, but I’m not going to make any more mistakes. I have a plan and I’m going to stick to it.”

“Oh yeah?” He lifted his chin, looking at me over the rim of his glass. “What’s your big plan?”

I looked him right in the eyes. “I’m going to keep Calan at arm’s length until this is over, and then, come the New Year, I’m free.”

Just then, there was a knock at the door. Mikey gave me a look that said we weren’t done talking about this yet. “I’ll get it.”

Kara turned down the heat on the burner. “Great. This is just about done. We can eat when you get back.”

He nodded and got off his chair. I turned toward the door as he opened it, then nearly fell off my chair when he did.

Because right there on the threshold was Calan Reid, wearing another one of his bespoke suits and looking like a freaking runway model with his dark hair hanging just so over his forehead and those nearly black eyes serious and blazing. “Hi. Is Ella here?”

I hated the way my stomach did a little backflip when I saw him, but the flutters had nothing to do with my attraction to him. He brought nothing but drama, and the flutters were anxiety, not lust.

Yeah, I’m just going to keep telling myself that. Maybe if I do it often enough, it’ll end up being true.

Another man answering Ella's door wasn't what I expected knocking on nine doors prior to this one, hoping to find her. The guy looked vaguely familiar, so he had to be Mikey, who I'd met at my club last week, but he looked different in the harsh light of the apartment than he had standing on the other side of the bar.

Despite Ella having told me that she wasn't dating him, he was at her apartment at dinner time, holding a glass of wine and opening her door. My jaw tightened as I looked at the floppy-haired *friend*, wondering if there was something I needed to know about the two of them.

I'd asked him a question, but he hadn't answered it yet, instead just staring back at me, looking about as happy to see me as I was to see him. His eyes were narrowed, his posture rigid and his shoulders stiff.

After a tense moment, he rolled his eyes and turned his back on me. "Ella! Your pimp is here."

"Pimp?" I laughed, but Mikey did not.

Since he'd vacated the doorway he'd been blocking with his body and the door itself, I could see into the tiny apartment now. It wasn't much, but it'd been done up nicely, with pops of color and a cozy atmosphere.

When I saw Ella sliding off a bar stool and hurrying over to me, my gaze zeroed in on hers. Her greens were filled with trepidation and curiosity, wide but definitely darker than usual with her brow slightly furrowed.

A whiff of fried rice met my nostrils on my next inhale, and a frown creased my brow until I deliberately schooled my expression. What Ella did on her own time had nothing to do with me—even if it would’ve been nice to know that she had a friend she seemed to cook for and drink with on weeknights.

All of which pointed at the fact that this was a date. As she stepped out into the hallway and closed the door behind her, I smirked. “I’m sorry. Am I interrupting a date?”

“A date? With Mikey? No, of course not.” She folded her arms over her chest. “What are you doing here?”

I arched an eyebrow as I kept smirking, looking down into those green eyes and wondering why the idea of her on a date with another man had made me so uncomfortable. “I came to talk to you, but are you sure I’m not interrupting a date?”

“No,” she said emphatically, her nose wrinkling a little as she shook her head. “We’ve already talked about this. I’m not dating anyone—”

“Other than me,” I said lightly.

“Sure, except for you.” She rolled her eyes, but I saw the heat that spread to her jaw and the way she shifted on her feet. “Mikey is one of my best friends. It doesn’t matter anyway. What did you want to talk about?”

Amused by how flustered she was, I leaned in a bit. Ella pulled her head back when mine came closer, but I noticed that she didn’t move. Didn’t take a step back to regain some of the distance between us.

Either she was standing her ground, or she didn’t actually want any distance between us. Whichever one it was, I kind of liked it.

“I had coffee with my sister today.” I looked down past Ella’s eyes, noting how her long lashes swept up in a slight curve before she finally lifted her gaze to mine. “Freya’s taken a serious interest in you. She wants to spend some time with you.”

“No way.” Ella shook her head. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

“It is part of the deal,” I countered. “The contract stipulated that there were going to be a few other outings to help convince my family that we’re dating. This falls into that category.”

Hesitation flickered in her eyes and her teeth sank into her lower lip. “Are you sure that’s a good idea? Your sister isn’t stupid, Calan. The more time she and I spend together, the more likely it is that she’ll figure us out.”

“She won’t. Not unless you slip up.” I kept a careful eye on her reactions as I moved an inch closer. “Freya wants to get to know my girl and I’m going to let her.”

“I’m not your girl,” she hissed.

I chuckled, reached up, and wound a lock of her loose hair around my finger. “In Freya’s mind, that’s exactly what you are, so you’re going to walk the walk, go shopping and have lunch with her tomorrow.”

She tilted her head into my touch for a fraction of a moment before she took a step back, smacking my hand away. *Okay, so maybe I was pushing my luck a little bit there, but clearly, she’s not as uninterested in having me touch her as she wants to be.*

In the meantime, she crossed her arms stiffly over her chest and was now looking at me with a slight scowl on her face. “Let’s say I do this. What would I even talk to her about? What if I tell her something and you contradict me later? This feels like a surefire way to give her enough ammunition to shoot our story down.”

“She’s not going to be looking for ammunition, Ella. All she wants to do is to get to know her big brother’s girlfriend a little bit better. I don’t care what you talk to her about, as long as you mention how much you care about me and that you see a future with me.”

“A future?” Her head started shaking again, the conflicted feelings she was having about this reflected in her eyes. She shook her head again. “If I do that, she’s going to expect me to be around by the time she comes back from her honeymoon,

Calan. She might even grow attached to me, and then what do we do?”

I hadn't really thought that far ahead yet, but I'd handle it when the time came. For now, all I needed was for Ella to agree to lunch and a shopping trip. “Look, I'm going to be the one who has to pick up the pieces after our breakup, not you.”

“Yes, but—”

“But nothing.” It didn't really sit right with me that Freya might end up getting a little attached to a woman she wasn't ever going to see again after her wedding, but those were the breaks. “You're going to get to wash your hands of all of it and disappear from mine and Freya's lives. You'll never even have to know about the fallout after we end things.”

Ella was still conflicted, though. Her shoulders were caved in and the twist of her lips gave her away. “I know you don't have much experience with serious relationships. At least, not the ones where the families get involved, but loved ones often suffer during breakups as well, Calan. It's not as simple as you seem to think it is, and what happens if our deal gets your sister hurt?”

“That's not going to happen.” Okay, so I didn't know that for a fact, but I had a pretty good idea I was right. “By the time she gets back from her honeymoon and finds out about our breakup, you'll be long gone and she'll be a happy newlywed. No offense, but she's going to get over said breakup pretty damn quickly. Besides, she's only going to have known you for two months by then. What's the worst that can happen?”

Ella arched a brow at me but didn't argue. Instead, she sighed and dipped her chin in a nod. “Text me the time and place she wants me to meet her. I'll be there.”

“Good.” With my official business here done, I finally eased back and let my gaze roam over her properly.

The hallway was a drab, off-white that might've been painted that way or it could simply have been white that had gotten dirty. Gray squares of carpet covered the floor beneath

our feet, and the pungent odor of stale cigarette smoke seemed to cling to the very air itself.

By contrast, Ella was all bright colors and the scent coming from her was earthy. Like vegetables and homecooked meals that reminded me of being *home*. Not home as it was for me today, but like it had been back in the day, when my mother would give the staff the night off and cook for us herself.

We'd spent hours in the kitchen with her, not really learning but keeping her company and performing the tasks she delegated from time to time. It was weird that Ella should remind me of that time of my life. A time I had the fondest memories of but never really thought about.

In her bright yellow and purple lounge pants paired with a deep purple off-the-shoulder type cardigan, and big, fluffy slippers on her feet, the woman looked damn cute.

And okay, it doesn't look like she's dressed for a date.

Knowing that, I couldn't help myself when I moved toward her again, my steps slow and measured. Ella's gaze darted back up to mine, and she frowned slightly, catching her lip between her teeth again as she backed up.

She kept moving with me, inching back as I inched forward, and it wasn't long until she stepped into the wall behind her. I smirked, not stopping my slow approach as her eyes tracked my every move, curiosity and lust creeping into them as I pressed myself against her front.

"What are you doing?" she whispered huskily, one of her hands coming up to my chest. "Stop it."

"Stop it?" I bent my head to run my nose along the side of her jaw, all the way up to her temple. "Are you sure? Because you're breathing awfully fast all of a sudden."

Her chest was rising and falling against mine, her cheeks growing hotter with every passing second. "I don't... I just need space, Calan. I know you think I'm going to be back, but I won't be. At least, not tonight."

“Okay,” I breathed against her hair before pushing myself off her with one of my hands pressed against the wall. As my gaze dropped down to hers, I forced myself not to look at her rosy cheeks or parted lips, but to keep looking into her eyes. “You’ll be at the lunch tomorrow?”

She nodded again. “I said I would be there.”

“Great. Have fun with Freya, Ella.” With that, I dropped my hand away from the wall, turned my back on her, and walked away before I did something that would make her smack me—like kiss her.

I would get to do that again. I knew I would, but she’d asked me to stop, and I was stopping. Much to my cock’s disappointment, we would give her the space she’d asked for. I didn’t know why she was fighting this so hard, but she was.

Soon, however, she would be back. The chemistry she and I had was undeniable and we still had nearly two months left to work it out. After that, I was going to have to quit my growing Ella Carver addiction cold turkey.

And that was going to suck if we didn’t get a chance to work it all out of our systems before then.

When I arrived at the location on Fifth Avenue Calan had texted me this morning, it was cold and raining out. I tucked my chin into my scarf. My hands burrowed into the pockets of my jacket as I looked up and down the street. Standing under the awning of a swanky designer store, all I could do was hope Freya wasn't planning on actually going into the boutique behind me where she'd asked me to meet her.

She wasn't here yet, but I wasn't sure I should've been either. Not only was there not a single shop on this entire street I could afford to shop at, but I was also about to tell a whole lot of lies to a very nice person.

I sighed into my scarf and bounced on the balls of my feet to stay warm *and* to work out some of my anxiety. I still didn't think this was a good idea, but with Calan's dark eyes glittering and intent on mine, I hadn't been able to say no.

The guy had a way with me I couldn't quite describe. I would face him filled with resolve, and within minutes, he broke through my walls and somehow coaxed me into bending to his will. Maybe it was the whole dominant, alpha thing he had going on.

I had never had that kind of personality. I was a free spirit, an easygoing soul that generally went with the flow. I'd never thought of myself as a follower, but I'd never really had someone to follow. The only thing I really tended to listen to was my heart.

Constantly on my own mission, there had never been anyone else taking the lead, but with Calan, it was different.

Besides, Freya was *his* sister, not mine. I wouldn't have wanted to perpetuate the lie with my own siblings if I'd had any, but at the same time, I understood why she wanted to spend time with me. As the first woman Calan had ever brought home and introduced to his family as his girlfriend, it was only natural that I was a subject of interest.

It was a tightrope walk, getting them to believe the lie without taking it too far. If I'd said no, Freya would've gotten suspicious or thought I was just plain rude, but now that I'd said yes, I was staring down the barrel of a day of lying to a genuinely kindhearted woman.

A bright yellow Lamborghini SUV pulled up, and I wasn't surprised when Freya stepped out of it. The girl looked like a literal million bucks, dressed sharply in designer clothes and sky-high leather boots. She was also covered in sparkly Swarovski jewelry, her ears, neck, and wrists adorned in what clearly was a favorite of hers, considering her comment at dinner about them being involved in her wedding décor.

I glanced down at my sneakers and jeans combo, instantly feeling severely underdressed. *Damn it, I should've made an effort to glam myself up a bit.*

Shifting on my feet, I forced a smile to my lips when she spotted me and grinned radiantly. Her hand came up in a wave as she ducked under the awning. "Ella! Thanks so much for coming. I was wondering if you were actually going to be here."

Before I could even respond, she wrapped her arms around me, her soft, feminine fragrance enveloping me like an expensive hug. Groaning internally, I tried to remember if I'd even put on deodorant before I'd left.

Either way, Freya didn't seem to mind. She hugged me warmly before she let go, then immediately linked her arm with mine, being as bubbly and charming as she had at dinner. I didn't even know if she'd realized that I wasn't dressed anywhere near as stylishly as she was.

As she spoke, my insecurities melted away. It didn't look like she cared what I was wearing. She'd wanted to spend some time with her brother's girlfriend and that seemed to be the only thing she was thinking about.

"I'm so glad we're getting some girl time together," she said as she squeezed my arm. "I love my brother and I know you do too, but jeez. It's pretty hard to just chat when he's around."

My heart leaped in my chest. "Well, I don't know if it's quite at *love* yet, but we're getting there. Maybe."

In an alternate universe, I could certainly see myself falling for the guy for real. He was gorgeous, charming, funny, and a total dick in this reality, but in another? Yeah, it could've happened.

Freya chuckled and gave me a knowing look, tilting her head down. She peered at me through her eyelashes. "Oh, sorry. I didn't realize you guys hadn't said the L-word yet. With how protective he was over you at dinner and how he was constantly touching you somehow, I guess I just assumed."

I hadn't even thought about any of that before, but now that she'd mentioned it, she had a point. I wasn't the only one who'd performed well this weekend. "We're taking it slow. I don't want to scare him off by bringing it up too soon."

She laughed. "He is a bit like a frightened deer when it comes to love and relationships. You need to approach him slowly, holding out your hand and letting him get a good sniff before you make any sudden movements."

"That's so true," I agreed, relaxing when I realized that talking to her about him might be easier than I'd thought. "I'm okay with taking things slow, though. I've been burned in the past and the last thing I want is to get hurt again."

Sympathy flickered in those dark eyes as she nodded at me. "I know the feeling. You absolutely cannot tell Calan about this, but I've had my heart broken too. Not badly, but it sure sucked at the time."

“It really does.” I glanced at her as she led me into the designer store I’d been waiting in front of. I caught a glimpse of the price tag of the dress on a mannequin in the window as we passed it, and my palms broke out in a cold sweat. “Okay, so I’m just going to say this so you know. I’m so excited to get to shop with you, but I won’t be buying anything today. Don’t let it make you feel pressured to rush through your shopping trip. I’m happy to tag along, but I can’t afford these places.”

“Nonsense,” she said easily. “Today is my treat. I told Calan that. Didn’t he tell you? He tried to give me one of his credit cards for you, but I shut him down. I invited you out, which means I get to spoil you rotten, and I won’t take no for an answer.”

My mouth dried up and I swallowed hard. “I can’t allow you to do that.”

I’m not even your brother’s real girlfriend!

Freya rolled her eyes at me and grinned. “You don’t have to *allow* me to do anything. I’m just going to go ahead and do it anyway. My brother should’ve told you that about me.”

“Seriously, Freya,” I hedged as she approached a table with a display of gorgeous handbags on it. “You don’t have to buy me anything. I really am happy just to tag along. Don’t let me hold you back.”

She waved her free hand at me, then released my arm to pick up a brown leather purse. “You can protest as much as you want. It’s not going to change the fact I’ve planned a day of lavish shopping and that you’re going to be going home with more than a few things of your own.”

I squeezed my eyes shut when I saw the price of the item in her hand, opening them again only to realize that I hadn’t been hallucinating. “You know, I like thrift stores. Why don’t we hit up a few of those when you’re done here?”

Her eyes lit up. “I’ve never been to a thrift store, but it could be fun. Let’s make a deal. You let me spoil you today, and next time we go shopping, we’ll go wherever you want to go.”

“You’re really not going to give up on this, are you?”

She winked at me before she shrugged. “Reids are determined. We never give up. You should know that about us by now.”

“Well, I mean, I know it about Calan, but I didn’t realize it ran in the family.” Again, it wasn’t a lie. Strangely, so far it was turning out that I knew enough about him and could phrase my answers in a way that didn’t mean blatantly lying.

She giggled. “It definitely runs in the family. He hasn’t told you much about us, huh?”

As soon as the giggle had subsided, I saw a glimmer of sadness entering her eyes. I swallowed. Uh oh. I should’ve known it was going to get more difficult.

On the one hand, he really hadn’t told me all that much about his family, but I didn’t think it was because he didn’t care about them. It was probably just because we weren’t really dating and we hadn’t spoken much about most things.

On the other hand, I had a feeling he was doing all of this with me to get back into their good graces. He’d told me that he could only go to Freya’s wedding if he had a date, but I really suspected it was about more than just that.

Calan didn’t strike me as the kind of person to just give in to that kind of demand. He could’ve easily told his family to go fuck themselves and that he’d be there either way, but he hadn’t, and that said as much about his intentions with this fake relationship as the actual stated reasons for having entered into it in the first place.

It wasn’t just about Freya. That much was clear to me. He might not have admitted it in so many words—hell, I didn’t even know if he’d realized it himself—but it was about how all of them, as a family, had turned against him.

Which meant I had to tread carefully with this subject. If I blew it, our relationship might allow him to go to the wedding, but it wouldn’t achieve anything else. If he thought that had to do with me or something I’d said, he might knock off some of the money he’d agreed to pay me.

The amount had been stipulated in the contract, but still, I didn't want to take any risks, and strangely, I also *wanted* to help him with this. Despite how much of a jerk he could be, I'd also seen glimpses of him that suggested there was so much more than met the eye.

That was part of the reason I was so drawn to him. It wasn't just physical and it wasn't only because of the whole alpha thing. Somewhere in there was a man with a heart, and said heart wasn't as cold and dead as he seemed to want me to believe it was.

"He's actually told me quite a lot about all of you," I said finally, carefully choosing my words. "I know all about your history and about the family business. I also know about all that unpleasantness that happened before Finlay's wedding. It's really not that he doesn't talk about your family at all. Especially about you. I know he loves you deeply and that he'll do whatever it takes to make you happy. I just think he hasn't given me that many details about all of your personalities because he wanted me to discover it for myself once I started getting to know you."

She smiled, blinking away the sudden shimmer of tears in her eyes. "I love him too, and I've missed him something terrible these last few years. Can I tell you a secret?"

"Sure."

"You have to promise you won't tell him, though." She gave me a meaningful look and set the handbag back down in favor of turning her full attention to me. "Pinky promise?"

I frowned, but twisted my little finger around hers when she held it out. "Pinky promise."

"I've been hoping that my wedding will bring my family back together," she said in a hushed voice. "Calan must really care about you if he told you what happened, and it's not completely fair, but I'm hoping you and I can work together to bring him back into the fold."

Fuck. That's exactly what I was afraid of.

Still, I made myself smile at her as I nodded. I had a few weeks with this family, but while I was here, I might as well try to do some good. “Fair or not, I’ll do what I can to help.”

“Good.” She swiped her index fingers under her eyes, pressing hard. Then she took a deep breath, composed herself, and beamed at me again. “Let’s put the heavy stuff away and just shop for now, okay?”

“Okay,” I agreed, even though I still wasn’t comfortable having her buy me stuff from these hellishly expensive places.

In the end, I wound up with dozens of new things for my wardrobe. Handbags, shoes, earrings, clothes, and a gorgeous dress that showed off my figure. It was the last thing I tried on, and once again, Freya wouldn’t take no for an answer.

“I have nowhere to wear this to,” I said as I emerged from the changing room wearing it. “It’s beautiful, but it’d be a complete waste.”

“No, it won’t,” she argued happily. “You can wear it to my bachelorette party. You’ll come, right?”

My heart jerked in my chest again. “Of course. If you want me to, I’ll be there.”

“Then it’s settled. You’re coming and you’re wearing that. My brother’s going to be thanking me for getting that for you, provided he can keep his hands off you for long enough to actually do it.” She winked.

Once I was back in my own attire, she paid for everything. As we left the shop, she turned to me. “Time for lunch, I think. Do you mind if I pick? My favorite restaurant is only a few blocks away.”

I hated to think what her favorite restaurant charged for lunch, but I nodded anyway. I was already knee deep in Reid spoils. Lunch wasn’t really going to make much of a difference at this point.

To my utmost surprise, however, her favorite restaurant turned out to be a totally understated soup and sandwich place, and I relaxed a little bit more. It seemed Freya was also more than just designer wear, crystals, and Lamborghinis.

The Reid siblings were certainly multidimensional, and while I knew I shouldn't let myself get too immersed in their lives, I couldn't deny that I was enjoying my time with Freya—and my time with her brother.

There was something about the Reids—and that included Calan, unfortunately—that made me feel a sense of belonging. It was dangerous for me. I'd been searching for it for a long time and I'd looked all over the world. I never would've thought I'd find it in a family that wasn't mine, in a city I'd only ever wanted to escape from, and with a man who wasn't my boyfriend.

CALAN

At the bar with Joe, I kept wondering how it was going with Freya and Ella. At first, I'd thought it was a good idea for them to go shopping together. Plus, Freya had been so excited when she'd asked if I'd set it up that I hadn't been able to turn her down.

It had been just after Freya had made me promise that everything between Ella and me was on the up-and-up, and I hadn't wanted to give her a reason to doubt me. Now, however, I was wondering if I should've said no.

I could've just told her that my relationship with Ella was too new and that I hadn't wanted it getting messed up. I even could've told Freya that I hadn't wanted her to get ahead of herself. Anything that would've gotten Ella out of spending this time with my sister.

It was too late to take it back, but I was definitely distracted by thoughts of what the women were talking about. What they were doing. Where they were.

Thankfully, the bar wasn't busy this afternoon and Joe and I were working on schedules and inventory. I used this particular bar as my office because it was centrally located between the others and it was easy to arrange for staff and transportation of our stock.

The boring, tedious work of administration wasn't keeping my brain busy enough to stop me from wondering about the women, and I kept finding my mind wandering back to them.

Having a hard time focusing on doing my job, I let out yet another sigh and Joe finally caved.

“Okay, what’s going on with you?” He lifted his head away from the inventory spreadsheet and gave me a perplexed look. “You’ve been sighing at least once a minute. Something is bothering you.”

I was about to blow him off when suddenly, I surprised myself by talking about it instead. “Ella and Freya are spending the afternoon together.”

“What?” His gaze sharpened and chin snapped up as he stared at me incredulously. “Why? How did that happen? You better hope this girl of yours is a good actress, or else you’re in trouble.”

“I know.” I dragged in a deep breath through my nostrils. “I set it up. Freya asked and I thought it would help convince her that it was real if it didn’t look like I was trying to keep Ella from her, but now, I’m starting to realize it probably wasn’t the smartest thing to do.”

He snorted. “Ya think? The sister spending time with the girlfriend is a big step in any relationship, bro. I know you’re nervous about them finding out that it’s fake. Has it occurred to you that pushing them together might just do that for you?”

“Yeah, Ella pointed it out to me yesterday when I told her she had to go. She also pointed out that if Freya gets attached to her as my girlfriend, I may end up getting my sister hurt in the crossfire.”

Joe nodded his agreement slowly. “That’s true. It could happen. If Freya bonds with her and Ella is suddenly gone from your lives, she might very well miss her new friend.”

I tried to repeat the argument I’d made to Ella yesterday in my brain, but when I made it now, it fell flat. Even to my own ears. “When Freya finds out we’re broken up, she’ll be a happy newlywed. I doubt her brand new bond with Ella will be something she’ll mourn then.”

He arched an eyebrow, just looking at me for a long beat. “I don’t know, man. Some friendships forged quickly are set in

stone. If people hit it off, they hit it off. It might be difficult for Freya to simply accept that you're broken up and that you won't be getting back together. She may even reach out to Ella or try to stay in touch, and then what?"

I shrugged, even though I didn't feel the nonchalance indicated by the action at all. "Then I guess they'll stay in touch for a while. Ella and I will just have to come up with a good cover story about why it didn't work out and I'll ask her to make it clear to Freya that we won't be getting back together."

"And if they stay friends?" he asked pointedly. "What makes you think Freya will never find out the truth about you two?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I hadn't really thought that far ahead just yet. Let's just hope they don't get along really well."

He kept looking at me like he knew not even I believed what I was saying. His chin was tucked low and his eyebrows were a bit higher than usual. "We can hope, but you saw them together at dinner at your parents' place. Did their conversation seem strained? Did it look like they might get along?"

"Fuck." I pinched the bridge of my nose. "They're too alike. They definitely got along well at dinner."

"Then I think *'fuck'* is the right sentiment here." He chuckled and shook his head at me. "Good luck, brother. You're going to need it. If I was you, I'd also start coming up with that cover story right around now. Both of you are going to have to know it well enough that even you believe that you broke up for real by the time January arrives."

"You might be right about that."

He gave me a sympathetic grin. "Don't get too twisted up over it. In less than two months, this will all be a thing of the past. You have no real skin in the game. Just come up with a good story and stick to it. Freya will be alright as long as you don't give her any false hope about a possible reconciliation.

And even if they do stay friends, things will fizz out over time if you and Ella don't show any interest in each other."

"What happened to some friendships forged fast being set in stone?"

He lifted one of his shoulders. "Hope that doesn't happen? Hope that Freya is too busy with the wedding planning to really get attached and that Ella retains her perspective about Freya not being a real friend to her."

I brought my hands up to massage my temples. "Yeah, I guess I can hope. In the meantime, I won't tell Ella to spend any more time alone with Freya and I'll turn Freya down if she asks again."

"You know, that's the second time you've used the word *tell* instead of *ask*. Did you really tell her to go shopping with your sister, or did you ask?"

"I don't know. Does it matter?"

"Are you asking me or telling me?" he teased. "Of course, it fucking matters. This woman is supposed to be your girlfriend. You treat her well and she'll be more inclined to play her part properly, whereas if you simply tell her to do stuff, she might get over the act a whole hell of a lot faster."

"She won't get over the act." I huffed out a breath and shook my head. "I'm paying her half a million dollars to play her part properly. She'll do whatever I *tell* her to do."

"Wow. You really never have been in a relationship with a woman, huh? I don't even just mean romantic. I mean any kind of nonfamilial relationship where the woman actually wants to hang around rather than being forced by blood to do so."

I thought it over for a beat before I shrugged. "Again, it doesn't really matter. The nature of my relationship with Ella is contractual. She's being paid to do a job."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean she has to do it well." He gave one last, pointed look before he dropped his gaze back to the papers in front of him and I did the same.

Only, where he seemed to be focused on the administrative work again, I still couldn't get my head in the game. This time, however, I wasn't only thinking about what Ella and Freya might be up to. I was thinking about Ella and me instead, and about whether I was pushing her too hard.

In life, I was ruthless. Determined. I did what I wanted and got whatever I set my sights on. It was just how I lived. How I'd always lived. I didn't waste time with *feelings* and *emotions*. All that messy shit that other people got tripped up by.

That, however, was exactly how I'd gotten myself into a position where I needed to pay *half a million* fucking dollars for a woman to pretend to be in a relationship with me. Maybe it was time I eased up a little.

At least for the next six weeks or so. Ella was my partner in crime, and treating her like a piece I could move around the chessboard probably wouldn't work in the long run. I closed my eyes, breathing through the discomfort brought on by the unfamiliar.

I wasn't an *unfriendly* guy. I just also wasn't overly friendly. I had many acquaintances. Some I even loosely considered friends—if friendship was defined as inviting them to one of my clubs or bars for drinks on occasion or hitting a golf ball around once or twice a year.

I'd never had a friend of the female variety and I wasn't interested in Ella as a friend anyway. I wanted her too much in ways that friends definitely weren't supposed to want each other, but I supposed that was where the whole *with benefits* part of *friends with benefits* came in.

I just had to come up with a way of treating her more as a friend than an employee. As I thought it, I glanced at Joe. He was one of the few close friends I really had, if not the only one. I was about to ask him if he had any tips for me on winning her over to my side when a familiar face appeared in the doorway.

I recognized him immediately as the guy from Ella's apartment. Her friend for whom she'd made dinner and who

was with her that night I'd run into her here in New York. My eyes narrowed. He looked around before he zeroed in on me and came right over. He dropped into the chair beside me at the bar.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "How did you find me?"

Whatever this was about, I was absolutely sure it was no coincidence that he was here. He'd come to speak to me, not just grab a drink.

Mikey gave me a droll look. "You're not that hard to find, Calan Reid. The tabloids practically salivate over you and it's a pretty well-documented fact that you hang out here a lot."

"Hang out isn't really what I'd call it. It is my place of work, but let's not split hairs over the semantics. Why are you here, Mikey?"

He hadn't introduced himself again, but I remembered him well enough. Hell, he'd called me a pimp just last night.

With the floppy hair and the stubble on his jaw at all times, the baseball cap seemingly glued to his head, the oversized shirts, and the chinos with sneakers uniform he seemed to favor, he was a bit childlike for my liking. I would never be able to see him as a friend, but I supposed I didn't have to.

"I'm here as a friend to Ella," he said, trying for a hard, stern expression but really only managing to look like a petulant toddler. "She's a good woman, Calan. To the very core of her soul, Ella is good. She's got a heart of gold and it's gotten her into trouble before. She deserves only the very best and you are not that."

My brow swept up. "Oh, wait. I get it now. You're in love with her, but she doesn't know, does she?"

The boy scoffed, his features drawn tight as he shook his head. "No. I'm not. She's like a sister to me, but the fact that you seem to think I could only possibly be here to stand up for her because I'm in love with her is exactly why you don't deserve her." Pushing away from the bar, he gave me a final nod. "Don't hurt her."

I chuckled. “Is that a threat?”

“Not even remotely.” He shook his head. His eyes were so narrow on mine it almost looked like he was trying to develop x-ray vision in an attempt to find out what was wrong with me for even suggesting such a thing. “It’s a request from a friend who doesn’t want to see Ella get hurt again.”

It was then that it occurred to me that answers to all the secrets my girlfriend was keeping were locked in this guy’s head. One real, honest conversation with him and I could find out everything about her past, learn about all of the deep, dark things I knew she’d done but I didn’t have the details about. It could shine some light on all the mystery she was shrouded in.

For a second, I considered asking him to stay for a drink, but as tempting as it was, I doubted he’d tell me anything anyway. I could’ve tried to buy the information from him, but something told me he was one of those people who didn’t have a price.

Besides, if I was going to stick to my recent revelation about not treating her like some kind of possession or pawn, then I was going to have to wait until she told me about it herself. Patience had never been a virtue in my book, but I was going to have to force it this time.

“I won’t hurt her,” I said eventually, looking him right in the eyes. “I don’t have the power to do so. You don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Don’t I?” His gaze lingered on mine. “This situation is really fucked up, man. You might not think you have the power to hurt her, but from where I’m standing, you’ve got all the damn power. Too much of it, even. However this all ends up, it’ll be on your head. Remember that.”

Without another word, he spun on his heels, his head shaking again as he left the bar. As I watched him go, I realized that surprisingly, my heart rate had increased significantly and my pulse was thundering along much faster than usual.

I didn't know what it was about, but Joe poured us each a whiskey from a bottle of ten-year Isle of Reid and frowned at Mikey's retreating back. "Who the hell was that guy?"

I was having a great time with Freya—so much so that I’d basically forgotten that she wasn’t actually my potential sister-in-law. She’d made me feel so comfortable and she was so friendly and open that it was really difficult not to love her.

We’d only spent a few hours together so far, but it already felt like I’d known her for years. I was definitely venturing into dangerous territory here and I knew it. I just didn’t know how to stop myself from having so much fun with a girl who, in a different life, really could’ve become my best friend.

Like, right up there with Mikey and Kara.

After we’d finished our meals, she ordered us dessert coffees—which made me think of the way Calan had smiled that night in Edinburgh when I’d asked him for whipped cream on mine. I smiled at the memory now, and Freya leaned back, watching me with interest painted across her expression as she finally delved into the topic she’d invited me out to talk about: *him*.

Calan.

So far, we’d only talked about him a little bit when we’d first walked into that store, but it seemed now was the time we were really going to talk about him. And me. Him with me.

I’d known this part of the afternoon would come, but now that it had, I felt wholly unprepared to talk about it. I didn’t really know him all that well, and I was so damn afraid that

Freya would see right through all the bullshit I was about to spin.

“You know,” she said when she started. “My brother can be such an abrasive ass. I don’t know how you managed to get over that wall he’s built around himself before he pushed you away, but I’m sure glad you did.”

I blinked hard. When she’d looked at me like that, with all that interest and curiosity on her face, I was expecting her to pepper me with questions, but it suddenly didn’t seem like that was the way it was going to go.

I cleared my throat. “Well, I won’t lie to you. It was a challenge, for sure. You’re right. He can be so damn abrasive that, at times, it’s like having sandpaper scratching against the sensitive skin at the backs of your knees.”

Surprised laughter tore out of her and she nodded. “I’m glad it didn’t offend you that I said that. A lot of women would’ve leapt to their man’s defense.”

Oops.

Instead of letting on that I hadn’t even thought about leaping to his defense, I shrugged. “If it’s true, it’s true, and that just so happens to be true. He’s awfully good at shutting people out and pretending not to have any real feelings.”

Fuck.

Freya’s eyes widened, but again, she nodded her agreement. “I appreciate that we can have an honest conversation about him. I mean, obviously, he’s my brother and I love him, but I’m glad that you don’t feel like you need to justify his behavior to me.”

I swallowed nervously. “Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Of course. We’re not here to beat around the bush, are we?”

Except, that’s exactly what I’m here for, but you can’t know about that. Shit.

Freya chuckled. “The last thing I want is for us to avoid the truth. Especially since we both know that behind that prickly façade is a lot more than meets the eye. Like with most

people, I suppose, but Calan in particular does a really good job at hiding the fact that he actually cares about people. And about what they think.”

What they think? I snorted. “He definitely has you fooled.”

She frowned. “You must see something redeeming in him to be dating him.”

Crap. Reverse, reverse! I backtracked fast, hoping I was doing it well enough that she wouldn’t realize what I was doing. “Of course. Yes. He has plenty of redeeming qualities. It’s just that it all started with chemistry for us. I, uh, I didn’t see any of those qualities at first. I just saw a handsome, charming man with whom I really clicked.”

At least that wasn’t a lie. Edinburgh had still been the best sex of my life and that night in the guest house at the Reid Estate had been just as good. I would never be able to deny that whatever else Calan and I were, our chemistry was definitely there and it was definitely still off the charts.

“Chemistry is good.” Freya smiled. “Especially if it led you two to where you are now. I just hope that Calan is finally ready to let someone in.”

Oh, he’s not. He’s so definitely, abso-freaking-lutely not. “I think he might be. It’s still early days for us, but he’s opening up a little bit more with every day that passes.”

Strangely, that last part was true. *Well, maybe not every day, since I haven’t seen him today, but when I saw him, I learned a little bit more about him every time.*

Her smile turned a touch more hopeful. “I’m so glad to hear it. I was so afraid that he was going to shut people out for the rest of his life. In fact, when I first heard he was seeing someone, I didn’t really believe it. Not even when my parents told me you were there and coming to dinner, but then I met you and I saw how different he was with you than the other women he’s been with.”

“Other women?” For some silly reason, my heart clenched a bit at the thought.

Freya's eyes suddenly flared wide open and she shook her head. "None of them were real girlfriends, of course. They were just random women I saw him with back when he was in high school and then after, in college and when I was out at his clubs. He was always so cold with them, but he's different with you."

"Different?" I almost snorted again. "How so?"

She cocked her head at me. "For starters, he's obviously not cold with you and he actually brought you home to meet our parents. That was a giant leap for him."

Sure, but not for the reasons you think, I'm afraid. "Oh, right."

Still, even though I knew she was drawing the wrong conclusions, I couldn't help the tiny stab of disappointment I felt in my gut.

Until she continued, anyway.

Leaning forward a bit, she covered my hand resting on the table with her own, giving it a soft squeeze. "His edges also aren't so sharp with you, Ella. You seem to have a calming effect on him, and for the first time when he's been with a woman, I saw real emotion in his eyes when he looked at you at dinner. That's what convinced me you were the real deal."

Aww, fuck.

Something stirred in my chest that definitely shouldn't have stirred, but I knocked it down, convincing myself that it was just nice to hear it from his sister. Not because it actually meant anything.

"You think I have a calming effect on him?" I asked mildly, focusing on the one part of her statement that seemed a little out of place to me. "Why's that? We weren't exactly in a charged situation around the dinner table with your family."

She laughed softly. "You'd think that, but the last few years, every family dinner we've had has been charged in a way that you can't possibly imagine. When Finn went at him, I totally expected him to fly off the handle and he didn't, and that was because of you."

Withdrawing her hand, she peered at me with a strange depth of emotion in her eyes. “Did he really tell you why he and Finn hate each other so much? I know you said that he told you what happened four years ago, but did he really? Did he tell you everything, or only a little bit?”

For a fraction of a moment, I considered lying so I could try to get the full story from Freya, but in the end, I nodded instead. “He really told me everything. I know that he slept with Finn’s fiancée during the bachelor and bachelorette trip to Scotland and I also know that Finn has never forgiven him for it. It doesn’t seem like anyone else has either.”

Freya sighed, and real pain and sadness reflected in her eyes as she looked back at me. It was so intense that I felt a frisson of hurt shooting through my own insides. For her to look like this, I wondered how hard it must’ve hit their family.

So far, I’d only really considered it from my perspective and a little bit from Finn’s, but looking at Freya now, the repercussions had been further reaching than I’d thought. The damage seemed to have smacked her right in the heart, tearing her up from the inside out.

All the pain, the betrayal, and the shock of it still seemed pretty fresh in those beautiful, dark eyes of hers. For my money, she was still living it all every single time her family got together and it was obvious how much she loved them all.

It was no wonder she was secretly hoping her wedding would have such a profound effect on them. Repairing broken bonds had to have been hard on her so far, especially because it seemed it was impossible for Finn.

I didn’t know if I’d be able to forgive a sibling who had slept with the person I thought I’d be spending the rest of my life with. From Freya’s point of view, it had to be difficult to navigate such hostility between two people she cared so much about and probably loved equally.

Her gaze was slightly unfocused for a moment as she thought it over. Then she blinked and shrugged a shoulder at me. “I suppose you’re right. In a way, none of us have forgiven him for it. I’ve tried, but it’s hard when I don’t

understand how or why it happened. I think I'm most of the way to forgiveness, but you're right about the rest of my family. I'm still mad at him, but they're nowhere near as close to forgiving him as I am."

I tried to ignore that weight that dropped down right on the very center of my heart. "Do you think they'll ever get there?"

Asshole or not, I had to feel for the guy. From what he'd told me, it sounded like I knew more about the run-up to the incident than she did. None of what he'd said excused his behavior, but damn.

"I don't know," she admitted eventually. "His drunken error in judgment has caused rifts in our family that will probably never heal. Before it happened, we used to be pretty close, you know? It probably doesn't look like it now, but Finn and Calan used to be best friends. Calan was still, well, Calan, but Finn and I both knew as surely as the sun rose every morning that our brother had our backs. Now?" She shrugged.

I found myself reaching for her hand this time, squeezing it as gently as she had. For some reason, I felt the need to comfort her, but also to stand up for him. "If given the chance, I'm sure Calan would still have your backs, Freya. I doubt anything could ever change that."

She blinked away and smiled, and I bit the inside of my cheek, knowing that I was once again venturing into dangerous territory. The Reids were a rich and powerful family, and I was sticking my nose in where it didn't belong. Not really.

I was trying to help this time and not to hurt, but I'd dug up old skeletons before and it hadn't ended well for me that time. I just hoped this didn't turn out the same way.

CALAN

I sat in front of the fireplace in my living room, an Isle of Reid whiskey in my hand as I watched the flames in the hearth. I still hadn't heard a word from either Freya or Ella, and it was really starting to bug me that I had no idea how their afternoon together had gone.

The TV mounted on the wall over the fireplace was on, but I had no idea what was happening on the screen. A ballgame of some sort, perhaps, but I'd only flicked it on for the sake of not sitting in complete and total silence.

Surprise rippled through me when there was a knock at my door, and then I nearly fell over backward when I answered it to see my sister and my girlfriend standing on my doorstep. Freya was bright eyed and smiling while Ella looked a little uneasy, but she played the part of being happy to be at my house.

"I had a great time with your girl today, big brother," Freya said as she brushed past me, still smiling as she walked into the house.

Ella was carrying half a dozen shopping bags, and I held out one hand to help her with them while wrapping the other arm around her. She let me do it, even leaning into me and dipping her head back to look into my eyes.

I bent my head to drop a quick kiss to her forehead, hoping it looked intimate and loving instead of forced. "I'm glad you girls enjoyed yourselves. What's all this, then? Did you buy half of Fifth Avenue?"

Freya chuckled, twirling her car keys around her finger, and she winked at me when my gaze met hers. “Not half, but I think we made a decent dent. I won’t overstay my welcome. I know you have dinner together tonight and I don’t want to intrude. I just thought I’d deliver her back to you safe and sound before you started getting worried.”

As she said it, she started back toward the door and paused when she reached Ella. “Thanks for today. We’ll see each other again soon?”

“So soon,” Ella promised, letting go of me to wrap her arms around my sister. “Text me when you get back to your home upstate, okay? Are you sure you don’t want to stay for a coffee before you get on the road?”

Freya smiled but shook her head. “I’d better not. I know he’ll want you all to himself now and Jim is probably waiting for me. He never relaxes until I’m home. Good night, guys.”

“Good night,” Ella called after her as she marched to the door.

She glanced back at me over her shoulder and winked. “You have a real catch there, Cal. Hang onto her, okay?”

“Yeah, uh, I’ll do my best.” I wrapped my arm around her shoulders again and held her close until Freya had shut the door behind her.

I looked down at Ella, who stepped out of my hold as soon as Freya was gone. “Don’t look at me like that. You told me to play my part, so I told her you were cooking me dinner tonight.” She batted her lashes and pretended to swoon for me before she rolled her eyes. “My Romeo.”

I ignored the eye roll, reminding myself once again that I’d resolved to be better to her. “Did Freya fall for it? She really believed I was cooking you dinner?”

“Hook, line, and sinker.” Ella grinned and turned to look at the interior of my house. Her eyes widened as she took in the massive space, impressive regardless of the fact that we were still in the foyer. “Holy crap. Just how rich are you?”

Without waiting for me to invite her to do it, she took off, wandering from the foyer, to the expansive living room, to the dining room, and then the kitchen. She drank in every last detail. “How grand is this place? Are you sure you even really live here?”

“Pretty sure,” I said. “Why?”

“Well, it’s stunning, but it’s a little...” She trailed off, still looking around before she shrugged. “It’s just a little bleak, I guess. Why is it so dark? Dark walls, dark floors, dark furniture, and where’s all your décor?”

I frowned, blinking as I looked around. I didn’t think it was bleak at all. My floors were a dark gray, polished concrete and my walls had been painted a rich shade of navy with my last redesign. All my furniture was masculine, brown leather or stained wood.

“The designer said this would work for a bachelor pad,” I said. “What décor do I need? Not everyone needs creature comforts, you know.”

Ella looked around for another beat, glancing at the fireplace, the TV, the rugs, and the tumbler of whiskey I’d left on the coffee table before I’d gone to get the door, and then she pulled her phone out of her back pocket. “If you say so. I guess it just feels a little un-lived in, but that could just be me. It’s nice, though. Next time you see your interior designer, tell him or her I said it’s a great bachelor pad. Very modern and masculine.”

I frowned at her phone when I heard the click of it unlocking as she tapped at her screen. “Are you going to take pictures or something? My family can be quite intrusive, but they’re not going to check the gallery on your phone.”

She tucked her black hair behind her ear with one hand and tapped at the screen once more before she looked back up at me. “I’m ordering a ride. Don’t worry. I won’t take pictures of your man cave.”

For the first time since she’d arrived, I realized she seemed pretty happy and relaxed for a woman who’d just spent the day

with her fake boyfriend's sister. There was something about the softness of her features when she was like this that made me unable to stop fucking looking at her.

In a pair of jeans and worn black sneakers, with her hair loose and virtually no makeup, she was nowhere near as dressed up as my sister had been. Yet she was so damn beautiful. It felt like I had that thought every time I saw her, but that didn't mean it wasn't true.

"Why don't you stay for a while instead of getting a cab immediately?" I hadn't intended to invite her to stay and I saw the surprise flashing in her eyes when it registered that I'd meant it.

"Seriously? You don't want me out of your hair as soon as humanly possible?"

"Nah." I grinned at her. "You promised my sister I was cooking you dinner, didn't you? Let's not make a liar out of you."

She snorted. "After today, you're a bit late with the whole not turning me into a liar thing, but sure. I guess I can stay for a bit. This is because you're curious about how it went, isn't it?"

I shrugged. "Can't I be? Come on, let me get you a drink before I grill you."

When she followed me into the kitchen, I poured a glass of red wine from a bottle that probably cost as much as her rent in that tiny little apartment, but I didn't mention it. I simply handed over the glass and gestured for her to make herself comfortable at the island.

Once she sat down, I headed into my pantry and grabbed some pasta, bringing it back out and setting it down next to the stove. As I filled a pot with water, Ella finally seemed to realize that I'd been serious about cooking her dinner for real and her jaw practically dropped.

"Wait. You're preparing dinner?"

"Of course, I am. I just told you that I wasn't going to make a liar out of you. Not again, anyway. In fact, I may owe

you an apology for making you into a liar to begin with.”

“You may?” Skepticism darkened her eyes. She brought the glass to her lips and took a tiny sip before letting out a low moan. “Wow. This is good. Great, actually. Can I help with anything?”

She started sliding off the stool, but I shook my head at her as I poured myself a glass of wine from the same bottle. That moan of hers had made my mouth water, and while I didn’t usually drink wine, I suddenly wanted exactly what she was having that elicited that kind of response.

“No, it’s okay. I can handle pasta. Just relax.” *Shit. I’m not supposed to be telling her what to do anymore.* I cleared my throat. “What I mean is that you can just sit back if you want. I’m sure Freya had you on your feet all day. You must be exhausted.” I carried the pot full of water along with my glass back to the stove.

Ella’s green eyes tracked my every move. “It was actually really fun. We got along wonderfully and she spoiled me rotten, which makes me feel like absolute shit for lying to her about who I am to you, but she wouldn’t take no for an answer.”

“Of course, she wouldn’t.” I chuckled. “Freya has a bit of a shopping problem, as I’m sure you’ve noticed. Always has had one. I think she got it from my mother. Those two can destroy the inventory of any boutique they set foot in. Did you really have fun?”

“Does it matter?” she asked.

I turned on the heat and then leaned against the counter, waiting for the water to boil. “Yeah, it does actually. I’d be happy if you really had fun, but all I want to know is the truth.”

Ella stared back at me for a beat. Then her lips stretched into a soft smile. “We really did have fun. I actually had a much better time than I expected.”

Well, I hadn’t expected to like hearing that she’d had such a good time, but a strange flare of warmth in my chest said

that I did, in fact, like hearing it. I ducked my head to take a sip of my wine, making sure that the frown that had tugged my eyebrows together at the realization was wiped clean before I looked at her again.

“That’s good news. I’ll admit, I was a bit worried about you earlier. And about her. I thought maybe I’d been too pushy about you joining her.”

She arched a brow at me, but since there was still amusement glittering in her eyes, I wasn’t too worried. “Oh, you were definitely too pushy, but it’s okay. I actually feel like Freya and I could have been close friends in another life.”

My heart gave a dull thud. “You don’t think it’s going to happen in this life?”

Her other eyebrow joined the first in being raised, a sad smile tugging at the very corners of her lips. “She’s a wonderful person, but let’s not kid each other. She and I can’t be friends, not for real. Not unless I can tell her the truth, which I obviously can’t do.”

As she peered at me, I sensed that there was something else that she wanted to say and I nodded at her. “Whatever it is, just let it out, Ella. You’ve already told me that my house is too dark and that it feels un-lived in. You might as well tell me what else is on your mind.”

Her lips pursed as she thought it over, but then she took a deep breath. “Freya really misses you, Calan. I might be crossing a line here, but I think she really needs you in her life. To feel like you’ve still got her back.”

The words made me stop what I was doing and I nearly dropped the handful of pasta I’d just taken out on the floor. If this was what she wanted to talk about, then she was damn right that she was crossing the line.

Which begs the question, why am I not even a little bit annoyed by her right now?

It was official. Spending all that time with his sister today had made me way too comfortable with the man himself. I'd definitely said the wrong thing.

It'd been at least a minute and I didn't think Calan had so much as drawn another breath. He'd frozen while he'd been turning to drop some pasta into the pot, and he was still standing exactly as he had been, his body turned halfway toward the stove and his hand still clutching the pasta above the bubbling surface of the water.

Yep. I crossed a line. Damn it.

"It's okay if you don't want to talk about it," I said. "I probably shouldn't even have brought it up, but I sensed a lot of sadness in Freya today while she was talking to me about it. She still seems pretty heavily impacted by everything that happened between you and Finn's fiancée. I just thought you should know."

At the words, his shoulders stiffened and his eyes tightened at the corners. "Do you really think I don't know that?"

Oh, there he is. Mr. Gruff is back.

I managed to bite my tongue at first, watching as he finally opened his fist and dropped the pasta into the pot. Once that was done, he strode over to his freezer and pulled out a package of premade, frozen sauce.

Since he hadn't kicked me out yet and it looked like he was still going to cook me dinner, I decided to test my luck. My curiosity around his family and why he'd done what he had would continue to gnaw at me and I had to at least try to get some answers.

Otherwise, I might never know. While it was none of my business, it felt like maybe it was. *Just a tiny bit.*

"Have you, uh, have you had a conversation with Freya since it happened?" I asked before I could stop myself. "It just seems like she's got a lot of unanswered questions and I think it might help if you talked to her."

He grunted, but he didn't tell me off. Instead, he emptied the contents of the package into a pan he put on the burner and persisted with his cooking.

"Have you really tried to make amends with them? I think you might be able to bring healing to your family if you do. Of course, making amends means taking responsibility for your actions, but they already know you did it. All they want is an explanation about why you did."

With his back turned to me as he poked at the frozen sauce, all I could see was the rigid line of his shoulders and how his back was held ramrod straight. Even in his own home, he was in one of his fancy suits, although at least his jacket was off.

The hunter green button-down he wore was rolled up to his elbows, exposing those muscular forearms as he continued poking at the sauce like it'd personally offended him. He still hadn't told me off or kicked me out, though.

I'd already had plans to have takeout for dinner, so if I didn't get to eat with him after all, it wasn't like I'd starve. Besides, I was poking the bear and the bear was letting me. Maybe I lacked that self-preservation instinct, but I'd made it this far and survived.

At this point, I didn't have much to lose by pushing. "I'm sure no one in your family wants it to be fractured like this. Freya mentioned that you all used to be real close, so I'm sure

she's not the only one who misses you. It must be really hard on your mother too, and I bet your father has a hole in his life that you used to fill—”

“Enough.” His voice was a low growl. He rounded on me, those dark eyes flashing in a way that warned me he was about to erupt.

I wasn't scared of him, though. Calan held that strange magnetism that drew me to him, but he'd never frightened me. Sure, he was all alpha, and in control, and he definitely had a power over me I couldn't explain, but I just had this instinct that he'd never deliberately hurt me.

“You don't have any fucking idea what you're talking about, Ella. I'm not paying you to be our family therapist.”

There were so many comebacks that leaped to mind, but instead of uttering any of them, I simply shrugged. “Sorry.”

His temper sizzled for a moment. His jaw sharpened and those eyes kept flashing, but then he blinked it away and took a deep breath. “No, I'm sorry, Ella. I shouldn't have snapped at you. It's just...”

For a moment, I thought he wasn't going to finish. I was already surprised that he was offering me an apology I hadn't been expecting and certainly didn't deserve after how hard I'd pushed, but it surprised me even more when he explained.

“It's just that this is a sore spot for me.”

As he said it, he winced like it caused him pain just to say the words out loud.

“Why? You're the one who betrayed them. Why is this so triggering for you? Why did you even do it in the first place?”

Calan glanced at the open bottle of wine and then topped off our drinks even though neither of us had even really touched them. As our dinner cooked, he leaned against the counter and took a long sip from his glass.

He searched my eyes as he swallowed, like he was trying to decide if he could trust me or not. When he did speak, the revelation surprised me all over again.

“I know I messed things up,” he said, his voice gentler than I’d realized it could be. “I never should’ve slept with Aspen. That was her name. I don’t know if Freya told you, but her name was Aspen.”

“She didn’t mention it.”

He nodded curtly, a wry smile spreading on his lips. “That name is like our family’s version of Voldemort these days. I’m not surprised she didn’t say it.”

“Voldemort, huh? I didn’t take you for the type who read those books.”

He scoffed. “They were all the rage when I was a kid. I mean, come on, everyone in the world at this point knows that reference. I read them, alright. I watched all the movies too, but before we get completely sidetracked, you should know there was a lot more to it than just some one-night affair.”

“Should I, though? Know about it, I mean? You don’t owe me any explanations. I *want* to know, but I think Freya and the rest of your family *need* to know.”

His eyes flicked from one of mine to the other, dark and intense, and he just watched me for a minute. “I’ve tried to give them that explanation you think I owe them, but they shut me down. Just after it happened, I tried to tell them the truth, but they painted me as an adulterer who had chosen her over them.”

I tried to remain impassive, but my eyes definitely widened a bit and my jaw slackened. I was desperately curious to know more and I was practically salivating over all this unexpected information, but at the same time, I didn’t want him to think I was judging him or taking sides.

Calan tipped his head back and drew in a deep breath as the sauce simmered in the pan behind him. “My entire family decided I was this wicked asshole who’d had bad intentions all along. They made it pretty clear that they didn’t see me as one of them anymore.”

Ouch. “Sadly, I know the feeling. It seems we have more in common than we thought.”

He arched a brow at me but didn't ask any questions just yet. We were talking about him for now, and it looked like he was going to go ahead and give me the answers I was so curious about. No doubt he'd be expecting some *quid pro quo* later, but I'd cross that bridge when we got to it.

"My father told me I was no son of his. My mother wept for Finn and lashed out at me for getting drunk, and Finn, as you saw in Edinburgh, punched me."

"What about Freya?" I asked softly.

Calan sighed and dragged his fingers through that thick dark hair, shaking his head as a sad smile appeared on his lips. "I broke her heart. She begged me to keep trying to make amends, just like you suggested too, but when I decided to leave the estate and give up my stake in the distillery, she gave up on me as well. She was the only one who could look past what I did, though. The only one who still wanted me around."

"Have you tried explaining to her why you left? Why you gave up your stake in the distillery? I think all she really wants is an honest conversation. Kind of like the one we're having right now."

"Once upon a time, I tried talking to her like this, but it didn't go well." He pushed off the counter and turned around again, then checked the pasta before turning off the heat and picking up the spatula to stir the sauce. "This is just about done. Do you mind grabbing some bowls? They're in that cabinet over there."

He pointed in the direction of a slate gray, eye-height cupboard, and I nodded, sliding off my chair and leaving my wine behind for a moment as I did what he'd asked. After that, I tracked down some forks and carried it all over to him.

As I set it down, Calan poured the water out of the pasta before adding the sauce to the pot and stirring it in. I inhaled deeply as I watched the creamy mixture coating the noodles, getting a whiff of chicken, celery, and spice.

I accepted my bowl after he'd dished up for me. "Comfort food, huh?" I commented. "You're just full of surprises

tonight.”

He chuckled, but the sound wasn't light and humorous. There was something dark about it and I got it. Stuff like this was never fun to talk about. It dredged up old memories and tore open old wounds.

I didn't know if he was doing it tonight for my benefit or for his, but I was catching a glimpse of the human behind the dick again, and I liked it. Calan and I really did have more in common than I ever would've been able to imagine.

Just like it had that night in Edinburgh before everything had gone to shit, spending time with him tonight felt good. He and I were similar in so many ways he didn't even know about, and for once, I could drop the everything-is-okay act and be real, and that? It was a damn good feeling. One I intended on hanging onto for as long as I possibly could.

I honestly wasn't sure why I was talking to Ella about all of this. My resolve to be better to her hadn't included yanking open the closet and letting all my skeletons bust out, but here we were. I'd never opened up about it this way before, but maybe it was because I had no skin in the game—like Joe had said.

It didn't really feel that way, though. Not tonight anyway. Tonight, it felt like I had all the skin in the game, and yet, I was still talking.

I glanced at her as we settled on opposite sides of the kitchen island, wine and pasta in hand and an oddly comfortable silence between us. We took our first bites. When she glanced up at me and smiled while she chewed, I wondered if I was talking to her because she was looking at me with empathy instead of pity or disdain.

When we'd talked about this the first time, the shock and disgust had been painted like a neon unicorn all over her features, but it wasn't like that now. I supposed she'd had some time to digest the events of that night and I was only fleshing out the picture, but still.

It was really fucking good to be looked at like that while I told this story. "What happened between Aspen and me is my greatest shame."

Fucking hell, where did that come from? It was true, but I'd never said it out loud before. As the words came out though, I felt a weight lifting from my shoulders and I rolled

them, realizing that it suddenly felt like I could move freely again.

Well, well, well. Let's see if we can keep this ball rolling, then. The fact of the matter was that I'd been holding on to all of this for much too long. If offloading that one admission had been as freeing as it had been, I was going to keep going. See if maybe I could finally get rid of all that weight once and for all.

It was a foreign concept to me, talking and sharing to offload said weight, but it was working, and I wasn't one to argue stubbornly in the face of irrefutable evidence. "I've hated myself every day for what I did, and if I could take it back, I would, but I can't. The cards have been played and they're all on the table now."

Ella blinked hard, like she was as surprised by the brutal raw honesty of my confessions as I was, but other than that, she took it in stride. "Where is she now? Aspen. Have you spoken to her again?"

I shrugged. "Beats me. I haven't spoken to her since and I don't want to. I have no idea where she is and it's probably for the best. If my family thought I was still sniffing around her, even if I wouldn't, I'd have zero chance of getting back in."

"Do you want back in?" she asked evenly after pausing for a moment to swallow the bite of food she'd just taken. "It's just that you seem like the I-don't-need-anyone type. I don't mean it in a bad way. That's just how you come across to me."

I stared into those deep green eyes, still not finding any trace of judgment or disdain. "Let me tell you something about I-don't-need-anyone types. We don't *need* anyone. Not really, but ultimately, being the outcast gets real old. Getting blamed for tearing your own family apart? That stings and it doesn't ever go away."

Her chest rose on a deep inhale and one corner of her mouth pinched in as she nodded. "Yeah, I kind of know that feeling too."

The offhanded comments she kept throwing out about understanding my situation and the look in her eyes that said she meant them made me want to ask about her past. I would but not yet. “The thing is that I *did* tear us apart. I wasn’t the only one to blame, but Aspen is gone. I’m still here, and besides, I was always going to bear the brunt of it.”

“So what really happened that night?” She picked up her glass and took a sip of her wine, her eyes still on mine.

“You know, you might be the first person ever to ask me that. I started telling you the other night, but you didn’t want to hear it then.”

“No, I didn’t, but I do now.”

I nodded slowly, taking a generous drink of my own wine. I set the glass down and dragged in a big breath. “Everyone was hammered that night. I mean, you saw me hours after and I was still drunk at first.”

“Yeah, I remember.” A soft smile crept onto her lips. “You were in real rough shape that night. When I first saw you, I thought you’d been attacked by thugs until I smelled the alcohol and realized you’d probably just gotten in a fight.”

“If you thought I looked rough that night, you should be happy I didn’t stick around for breakfast. My nose and eyes were so black and swollen, a few cab drivers just went right on by before one finally stopped.”

She chuckled. “Well, I want to say it served you right, but I haven’t decided that quite yet. So you were hammered, but being drunk doesn’t always lead to having sex with your brother’s fiancée.”

“Thank fuck.” I took another bite of my food, wincing as the vague memories I had of that night washed over me. “Aspen cornered me in the bathroom of the club we were at. She’d been coming onto me on the dance floor and I finally shook her off, but then she appeared in the bathroom and locked the door behind her.”

“The poor other patrons who might’ve needed to use it,” she said lightly, and I appreciated the moment of levity but I

didn't grab onto it.

I needed to get this out and over with. "I was so wasted I could hardly see straight, but I pushed her off when she first wrapped her arms around me. She was relentless though, and I know it's going to sound like I'm trying to make excuses, but she was so much more in control of herself than I was."

"How so?"

"I don't remember her swaying on her heels, for starters. Meanwhile, I was gripping the sink to stay upright, but anyway, she told me that Finn didn't make her happy and that she'd always wanted me instead."

I fell quiet then, and understanding glimmered in Ella's eyes as she exhaled a sharp breath. "It's okay, Calan."

"It's not, though." I grimaced, shaking my head at her. "It never was. I'll spare you the dirty details, but she kept coming at me. Kept telling me how she always thought about me when she was with him and stuff like that. Eventually, she hit her knees and crawled over to me. She took off my pants and I'll stop there, but I think you can fill in the rest."

Ella nodded. I'd expected the disgust to come back at that last part, but it still wasn't there. Instead, she sighed and then took a deep breath. "Thanks for telling me all of that. You really didn't have to, but I'm glad you did. I happen to know a thing or two about doing something you regret, and I don't know how to fix it, but I do know that having someone who knows what you did and accepts you anyway helps a little bit."

"You've done something you regret, then?" Of course, I already knew that she had, but when she nodded, I was relieved she wasn't just feeding me bullshit in an attempt to make me feel better.

On the other hand, I'd given her no reason to want to make me feel better, so I guessed it made sense that she wasn't feeding me bullshit just to absolve me of some of my guilt. Ella glanced down at her bowl, mostly empty now, and pushed a few pieces of pasta around before she took another deep breath and suddenly brought her gaze back to mine.

“What I did was why I was in Edinburgh in the first place,” she blurted out. Shame colored her cheeks but her gaze remained steady on mine. “My friends thought I ran, and I’ve been denying it, but maybe it’s true. Maybe that’s exactly what I’ve been doing all this time.”

More pressure lifted from my shoulders. “What did you do that was so bad that it kept you away for four years?”

“I was in a long-term relationship with this guy Spencer. We were serious, and I honestly thought he was the one. I thought we were going to get married and spend the rest of our lives together.”

Pain flickered in her eyes, and tears glistened, but she didn’t let them fall. Instead, she just stopped for a moment to compose herself. Those eyes closed as she inhaled and exhaled deeply a few times. Since I knew what she was feeling right now, I let her be, somehow knowing that she’d keep talking when she was ready.

“Our families were always close,” she said finally, opening her eyes again and reaching for her glass. She took such a big sip of her wine that there was hardly any left.

I reached for the bottle, topping us off.

She chewed her lips before she spoke again. “Spencer and I practically grew up together. Our dads met in college and they pledged the same frat. They were roommates for three years, and after they graduated, they got married within a few months of each other, and eventually, they even bought houses in the same neighborhood.”

My mouth dried up. “So you didn’t practically grow up with him. You *did* grow up with him?”

She shrugged, her eyes on her wine. She turned the stem gently between her fingers. “Sort of. His dad got transferred around the country a few times, but they kept the house. When he finally got to choose where he wanted to settle, they came home. Gave notice to their tenants and moved back into their house.”

“That’s when you got together?”

She shook her head. “Not immediately, no. We started dating in our junior year of high school. My father had always considered him to be like a son. Even when they weren’t living here, we spent some summers together and stuff like that. My mom loved him too. She often dreamed out loud about the grandchildren he and I were going to give her.”

As I looked at the girl sitting across from me, I realized just how little I really knew about her. All this time, I’d seen her as this beautiful, mysterious puzzle and I’d known she was hiding something, but it occurred to me now that there was a lot more depth to her than I’d thought.

She was a whole person. I’d known that, obviously, but I hadn’t *known* known it. She a whole complex person with a dark spot of her own in her history and a present that was nothing like the future she thought she would have.

After swallowing another sip of her wine, she finally looked at me again. “Spencer eventually became a lawyer. Everyone kept talking about the promising future we had ahead of us, and I’d always wanted to travel, but I was willing to set it aside. His career was here and I guess I kind of figured we’d travel when we could.”

My heart started beating faster, my muscles tensing. I braced for what was to come.

“I loved him, you know?” She chuckled as she swept more tears away from her eyes and shook her head. “I was willing to give up everything I wanted to be his wife. The mother of his children, but then I found out he was sleeping with one of my friends.”

My stomach fell. *Shit, so she knows the pain I put my brother through firsthand. It’s no wonder she reacted the way she did when I first told her.*

Her teary gaze swept back up. “My heart broke into millions of little pieces when I found out. Everything came crashing down around me. My relationship. The future I thought I would have. It all just shattered right along with my heart and I don’t know what came over me, but I saw red.”

“That’s understandable,” I said sincerely. “Anyone would be in your position.”

Her head kept shaking. “Trust me, not everyone would’ve done what I did after. I’m not the sort of person who ever wants to do harm, but when I found out about the affair, I wanted to make him feel the same pain I did. I wanted to shatter him as surely as he’d shattered me. I wanted to ruin him, so I did.”

I was on the hook, listening to every word with rapt attention. What she’d done was very different to what I’d done, but it was no less dark, the consequences no less serious.

“Spencer had done some things in his past he wasn’t proud of, but I knew about all of it. Obviously.” Her voice broke, but she pushed through. “For example, he had a DUI that he’d had removed from his record by friends of his parents who were in law enforcement. He also had some possession charges that he managed to evade.”

Ah fuck. All at once, I realized where this was going and my hand shot out, covering hers on the table. Ella glanced at it but didn’t pull away.

“He had a job lined up at this fancy law firm. It was his dream job, and I exposed him for all his wrongdoings in the past and his affair with my friend, effectively sabotaging his career and flushing it down the toilet. The whole thing became this huge scandal that ended up bringing my friend down, too.”

My heart was positively thundering now, beating harder and faster than it had in a very long time. Now that she’d actually said the words, I was speechless.

It wasn’t something that had ever happened to me before, but she’d managed to blow me away completely. This tiny slip of a woman had ruined a man and the woman he’d had an affair with and me? I’d never been so turned on in my entire goddamn life.

Calan hadn't said a word for at least a minute, and my heart was fluttering in my chest as I wondered if I'd made a mistake by telling him all of that. It'd felt like the right thing to do after he'd been so honest with me, and I'd meant it when I said it helped a bit to have people in your life who know all your deep, dark secrets and accept you anyway, but what I hadn't considered was that he might not accept me now.

He could even contact Della and ask her to send him someone else, in which case, I'd just ruined my own future this time. I swallowed hard, my throat burning and my whole body feeling like one big exposed nerve.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this vulnerable, but Calan still didn't say anything. He was just staring at me, those dark eyes boring into my soul as he sat there, silent and probably wondering how the hell he was going to get rid of me as his girlfriend.

Something on the stove hissed, and I caught a whiff of the acrid scent of something burning. Calan must've realized it, too, because he suddenly got up so fast that his stool fell over. He rushed over to the burner and hurriedly slid the pan that had held the sauce off it.

"Fuck. I only turned down one of the burners," he muttered before checking that they were both off now.

With that though, it seemed the trance he'd been in was broken. As he turned back me, I saw righteous fire burning in

his eyes. “Spencer deserved all of that, Ella.”

“Maybe.” I swiped my tongue across my lips, too nervous and still feeling too vulnerable. “I should’ve taken the high road, though.”

“Why? Something very few people will tell you is that you don’t get anything for taking the high road. At least you got revenge.”

“Yeah, I got revenge, but it cost me my dignity, my integrity, and my family. It also left me with this sucking, hideous wound of guilt that will probably never go away.”

His eyes settled on mine. “Did you think you could outrun it? Is that why you left?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, I think so. I left because my life here changed irrevocably after I did what I did, and I thought it would be better to just go and never look back, so that’s what I did. It’s also why I plan on leaving again just as soon as I can.”

Calan’s dark eyebrows hiked up. “You’re planning on leaving again? Why?”

“My life isn’t here anymore. It took Spencer a lot of time to get his back on track and now that I’m here, I’m terrified of running into him. Or his family. Or mine, for that matter. I just don’t belong here anymore.”

He frowned. “Your own family? Why would you be terrified of running into them? Surely, they were on your side in all of this.”

I shook my head. “They hate me for what I did. According to my mom and dad, I should’ve forgiven him and moved on.”

“What?” The word fell out of him like a shot. “They wanted you to take him back?”

I gave him a sad smile. “You have to understand how much they love him. I mean, fine, they love me too, but they said that I had to understand that he just made a mistake. He grew up in front of them. They said that they knew his heart and that it belonged to me, and that I couldn’t blame him for one slip-up.”

“But it wasn’t one slip-up,” he said, eyebrows tugged together and his mouth all twisted and angry on my behalf. “It was an affair.”

“Exactly. At first, I did try to look past it, but I just couldn’t. I knew our families would be devastated, but I broke up with him and then I had to get even too. I couldn’t just leave it be.”

Calan shoved a hand through his hair, shaking his head. He scoffed back a laugh. “For what it’s worth, I don’t know how they could’ve expected you to just move on like it never happened. They should’ve had your back.”

I sighed. “It gets worse, though.”

“It does?”

“Yep.” I squeezed my eyes shut and took another gulp of my wine.

With all the adrenaline coursing through me, I was drinking this stuff like water but I wasn’t starting to feel tipsy. I was probably too wound up for it to have that effect. Or something.

“All of his friends turned their backs on him after I told them everything,” I admitted. “We had some mutual friends from high school and they took my side. The friends he made in law school didn’t want to be associated with him once the truth came out. I think they were scared that it would tank their careers too.”

Calan whistled between his teeth. “I’d imagine, yeah. You wouldn’t want to get any of that spatter on you when you’re first starting out as a lawyer. What about his family?”

“I went to them too and they were furious with him. They wanted nothing to do with him at first. I’m not sure if they ever forgave him, but his parents took some heat for using their connections to wipe his record clean. I’m not sure what happened with all of that. I also don’t know if it wrecked our parents’ friendship, but it could have.”

My throat grew tight. “The ripple effects were insane. Pretty much everyone around him felt them and everyone else

distanced themselves before it could get to them, too.”

More tears pricked at the backs of my eyes. Reliving all of this was doing a number on my soul, making it feel dirty and tainted all over again. If I had known then how far-reaching the effects would be, I wasn't sure if I'd still have done it.

I'd meant to hurt him, and sure, I'd wanted to destroy his life just as I felt like he'd done to mine, but I hadn't intended to bring so many other people down with him. I definitely hadn't intended to hurt his parents.

That was the problem with revenge, though. For just a few seconds when I'd realized I'd gotten it, it'd felt so darn good. I stood back and watched him burn, but then those flames had caught up to me, tarnishing my being for the rest of eternity.

Because once I'd set that fire, there had been no taking it back. No getting control over it again once it started burning.

I blinked away the fresh tears and sucked in a deep breath. “After he lost his dream job at that firm, he lost out on plenty of other offers too. Stuff like this tends to spread like wildfire, and to this day, no big law firm will take him on.”

“To this day?”

I nodded. “Last I heard, yes. Apparently, all the top firms have blackballed him. I haven't seen him or spoken to him, but Kara said he still has a lot of work to do to fix his reputation. He's been trying to work his way up, but he still hasn't fully recovered yet.”

“Yeah, well, he's an asshole. So am I.” Those long fingers dropped out of his hair and he looked me right in the eyes. “All of us assholes have to take the consequences of our actions, Ella. It's just how it works. He fucked up, and if he's still paying for it, then he can just join the fucking club.”

“I'm an asshole too,” I said after a moment. “I took way more from him than was my right. I could've stopped after I emailed his firm about his past transgressions. After I spoke to his family. His friends. But I didn't. I took a burning torch to every aspect of his life and set it all on fire. That means that I have to take the consequences of my actions too, and I am,

which is why I left and why I will leave again. To give him space to rebuild what I burned down.”

His dark eyes burned into mine. “You don’t have to leave, Ella. Those transgressions should never have been wiped from his records in the first place. He should’ve taken accountability for them and found a way to make his dream happen regardless. What you did wouldn’t have worked if he hadn’t been a connected snob who thought his parents’ friends owed it to him to clean up his messes.”

“Well, maybe, but my point is that we’ve all made mistakes, Calan. Sure, some of us have made bigger mistakes than others, but if your family can’t forgive you for yours? Well, I can.”

Before I even realized what was happening, he closed the distance between us in a few long strides, took my face in his strong hands, and kissed me in a way that took my breath away.

His lips were firm and soft, but the kiss was hard and meaningful, his tongue demanding access that I gave willingly, parting my lips. I kissed him back with everything I had. As I did, relief washed over me.

We’d just had the hardest of conversations, baring our souls and our deepest pain to one another, and here we were on the other side, kissing each other like we needed to as much as we needed to keep breathing. There was definitely acceptance in this kiss, but there was so much more than that as well.

It felt like affirmation. Understanding. Solidarity.

We’d kissed before—quite a lot, actually—but this time was different. Those kisses that had happened before had set me on fire, but this one? It was a slow burn that had started someplace much deeper, and it was a burn that felt like it was consuming me, blazing away the sins of my past and his, and like it was going to leave us both raw but new on the other side.

Calan wasn't a guy I should've been kissing like this. Hell, I wouldn't have even thought he was *capable* of kissing like this, but he definitely was, and it felt so damn right that I didn't even consider putting a stop to it.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I reminded myself that he'd predicted so crudely that this would happen. That we'd hook up again and that I would be back for more. I also remembered how I'd felt when he'd said it and I knew damn well that I'd resolved to keep him at arm's length, but none of that mattered to me right now.

My eyes were wide open—metaphorically, anyway. I knew Calan was no knight in shining armor. He wasn't the man I was going to marry or the guy who was interested in my heart.

But right now, he was my reprieve. My sanctuary from the turmoil I'd stirred up by talking about everything that had happened. In a way, he might even be my redemption.

His family might not have forgiven him just like mine hadn't and never would forgive me, but right here and right now, we didn't need them to. I'd forgiven him, and if the way he was kissing me said anything, he'd forgiven me too.

Ella moaned into my mouth, her fingers in my hair as she pressed herself into me. As always, the feel of her soft curves against my body got me hard in the space between one heartbeat and the next, and I swept my tongue into her mouth, kissing like I doubted I'd ever kissed anyone before.

In fact, if I could avoid kissing completely, I usually did. With her, not so much, but tonight, there was a definite need deep within me to completely and utterly consume her.

I'd never felt it quite as intensely, but there it was. I didn't dial it back or shove it down either, laying it all out there for her to feel instead. Ella responded the same way, crushing her lips to mine as she pushed up on her tiptoes and devoured my mouth.

My hands dropped to her luscious ass and I squeezed hard, and in return, she pushed it further into my palms, prompting me to do it again. Lust coursed through me, igniting my veins and making me leave everything else behind.

What we'd talked about didn't matter. Nothing did. Not even the gaping wound that felt like it was hemorrhaging right into my chest after I'd torn it open and exposed it to her.

The only thing that mattered to me right now was her. Getting inside her. Taking care of her the only way I knew how.

With that thought in mind, I ran my fingers up her sides to her shoulders, pushing the awful, college-grunge cotton jacket

she was wearing off them and dropping it on the floor. Her shirt went next, our mouths only parting for long enough to let the fabric pass between us before we came together again.

Ella's fingers worked at my belt and she got it loose fast, not bothering to pull it out of the loops and undoing my button next. There was something passionate and intentional between us right now. Something that hadn't been there before.

Neither of us were doubting this and neither of us were backing down or easing up. We were both savage, and it was really fucking good not to feel like I had to slow down.

Once my button was loose, she tugged the zipper down and then pushed my pants and underwear right off. I kicked my shoes away, breaking the kiss for a moment because I refused to be the guy who fucked her wearing only my socks.

When those were off, I backed her up against the cabinet, my gaze on hers as I lowered myself to my knees and started working on her jeans. Why she hadn't worn any of the outfits I'd gotten her today, I didn't know, but I kind of liked that she hadn't.

Ella was who she was, and she was unafraid to show it, even when faced with a Fifth Avenue shopping trip with a billionaire's daughter. I really liked that about her—even if her clothes really were terrible.

I made quick work of her jeans, removing her sneakers before glancing up at her again. Left only in her bra and panties now, her chest was heaving, her lips swollen and her eyelids heavy. I groaned as my gaze roamed further down, pausing for a moment on her nipples, hard and straining against the cotton of her bra.

I liked that too, that she wore normal underwear instead of lacy lingerie. There was something innocently sexy about it that really got me going.

My gaze dipped lower then, and I grinned when I saw the damp spot on her panties. *Looks like I'm not the only one who's really fucking turned on right now.*

Usually, I'd tease her, make her beg for it after she'd been so sure it would never happen again, but that just didn't feel right. This wasn't about proving a point or basking in the knowledge that I'd been right. It was about something else entirely. I just wasn't sure what.

Hooking my fingers into the elastic of her waistband, I tugged it down, letting the panties drop to her feet before I ran my hands up to the inside of her thighs. She trembled under me, her lips captured between her teeth again when our eyes met for a fraction of a second.

I leaned forward, pressing my nose almost right up to her pussy before I let my gaze drop again, taking in her pink flesh and the tiny patch of hair on her mound. The rest of her was bare, and I definitely liked that too.

Bringing my hands up higher, I spread her legs enough and took hold of one of her hips before my tongue came out to lick through her folds. I didn't waste any time, making sure I kept a firm grip on her while I ate her out.

Ella screamed my name as she came, her thighs shaking beside my face as I sucked her clit between my teeth. I licked her through it, then took her hand and eased her down on the floor with me. Despite the orgasm and her still shaking hands, she took off my shirt with practiced, slow movements, pushing it off before laying me back on the floor and kissing me all over.

Much as I hated to admit it, my muscles were so tight with restraint to let her do it that I was trembling by the time she reached my dick. I thought I could let her suck me, but as soon as her breath ghosted over my skin, I knew it wasn't going to work.

Sitting up, I kissed her again, my eyes on hers. I wound my hands into her hair and held her face to me as we lay down. My tip slid between her wet folds and a jolt of pleasure shot through me, also reminding me that we needed a condom.

“Shit. Give me a minute.”

She nodded, panting. I grabbed my wallet out of my pants pocket and plucked a foil package out of it.

“Do you ever run out of those things or forget to restock your wallet?”

Despite the teasing tone of her voice, it was also edged with something else. *Vulnerability, maybe?*

At this point, I had nothing to lose by continuing with my honesty streak, so I just shrugged while I rolled it on. “I haven’t needed to restock recently. I always carry two and I haven’t been with anyone else since the guest house, so…”

She sucked in a sharp breath, but I felt the smile that spread on her lips when she kissed me as I covered her body with my own. Her legs wrapped around my hips and her arms looped my neck, her fingers in my hair as I pushed into her.

I groaned, her heat enveloping me like it was welcoming me home. Ella tensed under me, whispering my name into my mouth as her hips started rocking with mine. It didn’t take long before we found a rhythm and kept it, both chasing our own highs as our kisses grew sloppy and our bodies came together again and again.

When I felt her constricting around me, I lost it, not even waiting until she was done and letting go, coming with her instead. I came so hard that I might have roared, my heart galloping and faint ringing in my ears by the time the pleasure subsided. I held her for a long time, just lying there with her in my arms and wondering why my need for her wasn’t quite sated.

Either way, I kept holding her, finally pulling out of her only to pull off the condom and drop it on the floor beside us. Ella lay on my arm, her own breathing slowing and even, her eyes closed even though I could tell that she wasn’t sleeping.

When my ears finally stopped ringing, I gently extricated my arm from under her head and sat up to look at her. Naked on my kitchen floor, her skin was flushed and glowing. The misery of before had been wiped off her pretty face, and

instead, there was a lazy smile on her lips now as she blinked her eyes open.

“You don’t happen to have any ice cream, do you?” she asked as she propped herself up on her elbows.

I laughed, surprised but more than willing to indulge her. “Actually, I do. Mint choc chip.”

“Mint choc chip?” Her black eyebrows inched up. “Why did you buy the equivalent of frozen toothpaste?”

“Frozen toothpaste, huh?” I let out a disappointed sigh, grinning. I shook my head. “Well, I guess it’s all mine then. Enjoy your craving while you watch me eat it.”

Ella groaned, but then she sat up too and pushed her hair off her face as she gave me a teasing smile. “Try it. I dare you. Frozen toothpaste or not, I need ice cream.”

I chuckled, leaning forward to press a hot, hard kiss to her lips. Then I wrenched my mouth away from hers and stood up grabbing the condom along the way to dispose of it and wash my hands. “I guess it’s a good thing we ate dinner before I burnt the shit out of it. I’ll share my frozen toothpaste with you on one condition.”

“What’s that?” she asked, looking around.

I strode to the freezer and glanced at her over my shoulder, enjoying the sight of her pale, creamy skin and full figure all bare on my floor. “You stop looking for your clothes and eat it naked.”

A fresh glow rose to her cheeks. “What? Why?”

I shrugged and winked at her before I opened the freezer. “I’m too lazy to get dressed and it would be ungentlemanly of me to be naked if you’re not.”

“After everything you and I have been through together, this is what you think would be too ungentlemanly?”

“Yep.” I pulled out the tub of ice cream and stopped on my way back to her to grab us each a spoon. “Besides, I like it when you’re naked.”

She flushed. I dragged my gaze deliberately over her body, taking in her round, heavy breasts and the dusky pink nipples that were still half hard. As soon as I handed over the spoon, she used it to whack me on the forearm.

“Ouch. What was that for?”

She arched a brow at me. “You know what. It’s embarrassing when you look at me like that and it’s not in the heat of the moment.”

I chuckled, pried the tub open, and set it down in front of her. “Embarrassing? Why? Neither of us have anything to be embarrassed about. Plus, I’ve seen it all and then some. A few times, at this point.”

“Calan,” she groaned, covering her face in her hands and shaking her head before peeking up at me between her fingers. “Where are you going?”

“Just getting the wine.”

“Perfect. Frozen toothpaste and stupidly expensive wine. It’s a pretty awesome dessert.”

I chuckled, finding that the sound was coming easier and freer now with her than it ever had before. With anyone. Even my family. “True. What’s wrong with mint choc chip, though? Why do you keep calling it frozen toothpaste?”

“Because that’s what it tastes like,” she said playfully.

I turned with our glasses in my hands and she got a full frontal view, the humor melted out of her eyes and her teeth sank into her lower lip.

“Well, you definitely don’t have anything to be embarrassed about,” she said. “Except your taste in ice cream.”

I rolled my eyes at her as I handed over the wine and then sat down again, spoon in one hand and glass in the other. “Mint choc chip is my guilty pleasure. I refuse to apologize for it. It’s fresh and chocolaty at the same time. Nothing there to apologize for.”

Ella laughed, lifting her gaze to mine and pretending that she hadn't been staring at my body all this time. "Let's just agree to disagree."

She stuck her spoon into the tub, brought it to her mouth, and wrapped her tongue around the frozen treat in a way that made me wonder if it was too soon to kiss her again. I didn't think so, but she seemed so happy and relaxed—which she'd never been in my presence—that I didn't want to ruin it.

Strangely, I was happy just sitting here with her, laughing, eating our ice cream, and drinking wine. It felt like she'd come out of her shell a little bit, and maybe the same was true for me. We'd pushed past each other's prickly exteriors and that made it feel like there was a bit of trust between us now.

It felt surprisingly good. I wouldn't say I'd let her all the way in, but I wasn't opposed to feeling something other than passion for her or resentment from her right now.

"What's your guilty pleasure, then?" I asked as I stuck my own spoon into my side of the tub. "What flavor do you like? I'll make sure I have it for next time."

"Next time?" For a second, I thought she was going to lash out at me again, but instead, she smiled. "Anything that has caramel in it."

"Sold." I grinned back at her, mentally adding her caramel ice cream to my shopping list. I didn't know why I was doing it, but I did it anyway. I tended to listen to my gut, and right now, it was telling me to buy the damn ice cream. "So, apart from Edinburgh, where else have you been?"

While she told me all about her travels, which had covered an impressive amount of countries in Europe and the greater part of the United Kingdom, we finished the wine and made a healthy dent in the ice cream.

By the time it was starting to melt, Ella smiled and started looking around again. "I should go. Do you know where I put my purse? I need my phone."

"Uh, I think it's in the foyer, but you're welcome to spend the night." I smirked at her. "I'm sure I can think of some

ways to wake you up that will be a lot more fun than an alarm.”

She laughed and nodded but got up anyway. “Thanks, but I really should get home. I promised my roommates I’d help them with some DIY home renovation tomorrow.”

Disappointment surged through me. I never really did sleepovers, but part of me had been hoping she would stay. Since it was clear she wasn’t going to, I stood up too and stashed the rest of the ice cream back in the freezer before walking with her to the foyer.

“DIY home renovation? That sounds pretty dangerous.”

She giggled. “Nah. We’re just going to be painting their kitchen cabinets. Mikey told me that Kara needs to do it every six months or else the color starts getting on her nerves. Besides, they’ve already got enough to say about this arrangement of ours and I don’t want to give them more ammo.”

“Mikey, huh?”

“Yeah, why?” She glanced at me as she scanned the space for her purse, finding it on the side table above all the shopping bags. “Out of everything I just said, he’s what you’re concerned about?”

I shrugged. “Yep. He’s a good friend. He’s got your back. You’re lucky to have him.”

Ella seemed a little caught off guard by the comment, but she nodded anyway. As she did, I spotted my own phone in the living room and held up my hand. “Let me get you an Uber. I’d have driven you myself, but I’ve had too much wine. It’s the least I can do, though.”

Her dark green eyes hooked on mine and she didn’t argue, but she did give me a questioning look. “You’re really not as much of an asshole as you want people to believe.”

“Sure, I am. I just happen to be nice to a select few people I consider friends.” I grabbed my phone and quickly pulled up the Uber app.

When I looked back at her, she was frowning at me. “So we’re friends now?”

Something intangible passed between us, but whatever it was felt pretty damn real to me. It was sweet and heavy at the same time, tinged with surprise but also maybe just a little bit of disappointment.

“Whatever else we are, Ella, from now on, I do consider you a friend.”

It took a while, but a few seconds later, a smile spread her lips. “Friends, huh? Well, I think I like the sound of that. It’s definitely going to beat the alternative. Okay, friend Calan. I guess I should get dressed now. Thanks for calling the ride, and thank you for letting me crash your dinner.”

“Any time,” I said, and I meant it too. “It was great having you here. Let me help you find your stuff before the driver gets a show he’s not expecting.”

She laughed and followed me back to the kitchen. Once we were dressed, I walked her to the curb and even kissed her good night, wondering why it felt like so much had changed since I’d spoken to her just last night.

My friends and I were neck deep in our kitchen improvement project. The scent of paint with a hint of chalkiness to it hung in the air and I was pretty sure I had turquoise paint in my hair.

I ran the brush along the edge of the cabinet I was painting, squinting my eyes as I tried not to get the paint anywhere it wasn't supposed to go. Kara and I were under strict instructions from Mikey to do this *the right way*.

Apparently, there had been an incident some time ago that had involved Kara simply running a paintbrush from one cabinet to the next, line after line. Obviously, it hadn't gone well—or looked good. Since she'd already decided that the cabinets needed to be turquoise this time, much to his disappointment, I felt like the least I could do was a proper job.

“Stop scowling at the paint,” she chided him, and I held my brush still to glance at her for a moment. Just in time to see her roll her eyes. “We needed to add a pop of color to the unit. White or light gray would not have achieved that.”

“No, but we didn't need to add another pop of color.” He took a pointed look at the mustard yellow sofa and the painted walls. “White or light gray would've given the place back a touch of class.”

She snorted. “Class? The only class we've got are the classes we attend after work. Now get to it. I won't wait for you.”

square. There's no use bitching about it or scowling at the paint."

He sighed heavily, but she wasn't wrong. After an intense round of rock, paper, scissors, Kara had come out on top three times out of five, which meant she *had* won. Mikey would have to make his argument for white or light gray again in another six months and live with the turquoise for now.

I knew he wasn't happy about it, but as I turned back to my cabinet and looked at the vibrant, rich, joyful color, I decided I liked it. The chalk paint we were using was easy to work with and the color was lustrous, which made me wonder if I had learned something today that I might be able to apply in my own place once I got one.

In my mind's eye, I pictured the last apartment I'd stayed in when I had been in Rome and I tried to imagine that kitchen with turquoise cabinets. Or olive green. Maybe even a vibrant purple.

A smile ghosted across my lips as I thought about it. Having a place I could make my own—with or without painting the cabinets—would be amazing. While my wanderlust and my bank account hadn't provided me with much opportunity to do that kind of thing until now, I was feeling the strange urge to have someplace I could lay down roots.

The ants in my pants would probably never allow me to stay in just one place forever, but if I had a home base, someplace I could return to after my travels, that would be amazing. I sighed softly, wondering for the first time whether it really had been wanderlust fueling me all these years.

After talking to Calan last night, it occurred to me now that it might've just been fear. If I wasn't stagnant and I kept moving, it was so much less likely that anyone I knew would find me. Maybe it'd been a combination of the two, wanderlust and fear.

I'd always wanted to travel and see the world. That part of my soul hadn't only appeared after I'd wrecked Spencer's life. It'd been there since I was a kid.

Plus, as a travel writer, my pieces were better if I had been to the place I was writing about. Desktop research was great and all, but it couldn't account for everything.

The pieces I wrote were different, and it was because I immersed myself in the cultures of the place I was writing about. Even if it was just a story about a landmark, there were people around. People in the backstory. I tried to connect with all that, to find out what the landmark meant to those people and how it affected their day-to-day life.

Apart from that, there were other things I wouldn't know from research alone. Scents, sounds, feelings, all of which I also liked including in my pieces. Like the way certain monuments brought a sense of peace and serenity as soon as you saw them and were shrouded in a heavy kind of silence despite the amount of people visiting.

Or how walking into the Colosseum had conjured up ghostly visions of the men who had fought and died there. For me anyway. It'd almost been like I could hear the crowds chanting and feel the ground vibrating beneath my feet.

My favorite pieces to write, however, were about cultures and places that were off the beaten track. I wrote about the capital cities and their most iconic landmarks because those pieces always sold well, but once that was done, I ventured off into the mostly unknown.

For the last few years, that had been enough for me. The thrill of the chase, trying to find something to write about in a way no one ever had, had been my one true love. The thing I looked forward to most.

Now, I didn't know. I just wasn't feeling as much of an itch to get my feet back on an airplane as I thought I would.

On my hands and knees painting the trim near the floor, I was oddly content exactly where I was. With Kara and Mikey's banter in the background and the earthy scent of the chalk paint wafting to my nostrils on every inhale, I felt at peace.

Until Kara decided to turn the conversation to me.

“What time did you get home last night? I didn’t even hear you come in, but I thought you were only going shopping and to lunch. I tried waiting up to see what you’d bought, but eventually, I gave up.

“Oh, uh, it was late,” I said. “My shopping bags are behind the sofa, though. I’ll show you later. Freya is a beast with a credit card. She bought me so much stuff and she refused to take no for an answer.”

Kara’s short blonde curls bounced as she shot up onto her tiptoes and peered over at the sofa like she was going to be able to see my purchases from all the way over here. “That’s some friend. How is it that you’ve been back in town only a couple of weeks and you’ve already got a Sugar Mama, and I’ve been here all along but I still don’t have one?”

I laughed. “She’s not a Sugar Mama and she’s not a friend. Not really, anyway. Although...” I trailed off, not sure how much more I could tell them without opening myself up to another lecture from Mikey. Technically, I had already broken the Faux’s contract by telling them about the arrangement. Calan knew I had told them the basics, but still, revealing more might be pushing my luck.

Kara stared at me expectantly though, an eyebrow arching as she set her paintbrush down. “Although?” she asked. “What happened? It had to have been a good day out if you stayed with her that late.”

“I, uh, I didn’t stay with her,” I finally admitted, my eyes on the trim I was carefully edging my brush over. “She dropped me off at Calan’s pretty early and I was going to take a cab home from his place, but then the night took a surprisingly good turn.”

Her eyes lit up. “Good in the orgasm way?”

My cheeks heated as I shrugged. “Well that too, but it wasn’t just that. We talked.”

“You talked?” She frowned. “How is that possibly a good turn?”

I sighed and finished off this part of the trim before I sat down on my butt on the kitchen floor. *This seems to be my weekend for that.*

“It was good because we finally talked for real,” I said slowly, trying to articulate how I was feeling about it this morning. “All this time, most of our conversations have either been hostile, cryptic, or superficial, but last night, he finally opened up and so did I. It felt great, not only getting through to him but being able to talk through so many of the things that have made us who we are.”

“Wait,” Mikey said suddenly, his eyes going wide as he snapped his gaze to mine. “You told him about Spencer, didn’t you?”

“What?” Kara frowned and tutted her tongue at him. “Don’t be stupid. She wouldn’t have—” She cut herself off when she looked at my face, her eyes going just as big as Mikey’s. “You told him?”

“I did. It was time. Besides, after everything he shared with me, it felt right to do the same.”

Mikey’s head shook, and it was clear that he was bothered by this. His nose wrinkled, his brow puckered, and his legs started bouncing even while he was sitting cross-legged on the floor.

“I can’t believe you did that,” he said. “You shouldn’t trust this guy, Ella. He’s a selfish, arrogant asshole, and for all you know, he was only ‘*vulnerable*’ to get back in your pants. From the sounds of things, it worked, so I guess he’s got your number now.”

Okay, that stings. I shook it off. “I’m a big girl. I can make my own decisions.”

“Not good ones, apparently,” he said.

Kara and I exchanged a glance, both of us rolling our eyes. He wasn’t going to come around. Not to Calan and not to my arrangement with him. Not even if I felt so much better about it today.

“Sorry, Dad,” I joked eventually, deciding to play it off instead of getting into it with him. He was trying to protect me, and while I didn’t need him to, it was nice that he cared enough to try.

Kara laughed. “Get back to your painting, *Dad*. These cabinets aren’t going to finish themselves and you said we had to get it done today. Your house, your rules, *Dad*.”

He scoffed at both of us and picked up his paintbrush again. For the rest of the afternoon while we worked, we kept calling him *Dad*, annoying the hell out of him. It led to a playful fight of us painting each other with our brushes.

The first time I felt the wet, thick, sticky liquid being brushed onto the back of my arm, I yelped and grabbed the spot, not immediately understanding what it was. My hand came away turquoise and I spun around, narrowing my eyes before I retaliated.

Obviously, nobody won. We were all turquoise and reeking of paint by the end of the day when Kara finally called a truce. “Okay. Okay. I know this stuff is washable, but we should stop before we end up having to scrub the entire apartment.”

I held my hands up in surrender, the paint tugging at the short hairs on my arms where it’d gone dry. “Who’s showering first?”

Kara put up her hand. “I’m the messiest, so it’s going to be me.”

She was right. She had paint smeared across her forehead, her cheeks, and her previously blonde hair. A chuckle worked itself out of me and I nodded. “That’s a good color on you. It really brings out your eyes.”

She waggled her eyebrows at me before winking. “I might just have to make an appointment with my hairdresser.”

Mikey groaned. “Please, God. No. We are twenty-eight years old, Kara. The time for funky hair is over.”

“It’s never over,” she said cheerfully. “Not if you’re one hundred percent awesome, like me. Besides, I’m a freelance

makeup artist. People expect me to be funky and independent.”

Before he could respond, she wiggled her painted fingers at us in a wave and took off to grab a shower. When the door shut behind her, Mikey and I started cleaning up, putting the lids back on the tins of paint and washing the brushes.

“Look, I’m sorry if I’m coming across as judgmental,” he said quietly as he balled up some of the newspaper we’d used to cover the floor and stuck it into a black garbage bag. His hair fell over his forehead as he looked at me. “I just want to make sure you’re being careful. Guys like Calan can be dangerous.”

“I know,” I replied, my tone equally soft and gentle. “I won’t let him hurt me, Mikey. It’s just going to make it easier spending all this time with him now that we’re in a better place. That’s all.”

Those kind eyes surveyed mine for a moment before he let out a deep breath. “I trust you. It’s just that as your friend, I need to say my piece. I get that it’s going to make things easier and I’m happy for you because of that, but just be careful, okay? Be smart.”

“I will.” I paused for a beat and smiled. “Thank you. You can stop worrying about me now, though. Only six more weeks to go and this will all be a thing of the past.”

Which was what I was focused on, but at the same time, I wasn’t looking forward to it quite as much as I had been before. There was a tiny—the tiniest—part of something deep down inside me that already knew I was going to be sad to see the Reids go.

I really did like Freya, and Calan? Well, it was complicated, but I was starting to like him just a little bit too.

Two weeks after Ella and I had had our big talk, things were still as comfortable between us as they had been when we'd eaten that ice cream on my kitchen floor. It was weird, but I was starting to ease into this arrangement we had going on. Even weirder yet was that I was honestly enjoying any time spent with her now.

There was snow on the ground as we arrived at my family estate for Freya and Jim's engagement party. The entire place was decked out for Christmas—and the party. Decorations had been strung along the top of the main gates. Bright red and green striped candy canes hung in the trees.

Festive flags had been stuck into the ground here and there, and when we approached the house, I saw a massive canvas mounted on an easel with elegant script printed on it, welcoming guests to the celebration of their engagement.

Ella smiled in the passenger seat beside me, her hands clasped together in her lap like she was nervous but excited as she looked around. "Wow. Your family really goes all out for the holidays, don't they?"

I shrugged. "My mom loves the festive season. Always has. Wait until we get inside."

She nodded and I got out of the car, jogging around it to open her door before I went to the backseat and pulled out an immaculately wrapped gift for the couple. It was hard to buy something for someone who had everything, and bought what she wanted if she didn't have it, so I'd enlisted Ella's help.

We'd gone shopping a few days ago because she'd insisted on not simply ordering everything online, and I was confident we'd hit the mark with what we'd found. It turned out being in the brick-and-mortar stores had helped after all and we'd put together a bespoke gift box full of items for a night in.

Ella had been instrumental in making it happen. I wouldn't have come up with anything remotely as special, personal, and perfect for a newly engaged couple. She'd been phenomenal, though. Leading me through shop after shop, she'd picked up every candle and brought it to her nose until she found a few with the *right* scents.

When she'd first told me what she had in mind for a gift, I'd balked, but she'd laughed and told me this wouldn't be that kind of night in. It wasn't about sex, she'd said, but about romance. Since I didn't know the first thing about that, I'd let her take the lead.

The candles she'd chosen had a pleasing, fresh, but sensual vanilla scent with hints of citrus. We'd also added a very expensive bottle of champagne along with two Swarovski champagne flutes for them to use on special occasions.

Over and above that, there were massage oils, bubble baths, and all sorts of bath bombs and other products. To top it all off, we'd included a couples' boardgame that Ella had assured me was also not about sex.

For my money, all the stuff we'd bought was leading there anyway, but I was trying really hard not to think about it. As Ella had playfully pointed out, they didn't need any of this for that. They were young and in love, and probably doing it all the time anyway.

Gag.

As I took her arm and led her up to the front door, she glanced nervously at the gift in my free hand. "Are you sure we got the right thing? It might be a little underwhelming. I mean, how is it going to compare to what they're going to get from the other wealthy guests? Maybe we should've gone with that trip to the Maldives."

I chuckled, shook my head, and held her arm just a little bit tighter. “Nah. This is great. It’s thoughtful and it will stand apart. Freya will appreciate it more than any trinket for their house and you were right when you said that she could buy her own plane tickets if she wants to go somewhere.”

Ella dragged in a deep breath and I slid my hand down the length of her arm until it reached hers, holding it tight as we walked up the stairs. Feeling her next to me, I was glad she was here. We’d had a good two weeks together and we’d spent time hanging out that wasn’t outlined in our contract. It’d all happened organically and both of us had let it.

I’d even asked her to go Christmas shopping with me and she’d agreed. As we stepped into the house, I thought about that shopping trip and how she’d said she only bought gifts for Kara and Mikey. I’d asked about her parents, of course, but she’d said that they still didn’t speak to her after what’d happened with Spencer, and that the first Christmas after, she’d sent them gifts that had been refused and returned to sender.

As far as I was concerned, it was pretty low of them to turn their backs on their daughter like that. Not even accepting a delivery she’d sent was extreme. When she’d first told me that her parents were still angry at her, I hadn’t realized just how angry.

Frankly, it surprised me how much Ella and I had in common. I never thought we’d have much in common at all, but the more I learned about her, the more I realized the complete opposite was true. I was also surprised by how nice she was to me after I’d been so shitty to her originally, but it looked like when she’d said she forgave me, she’d meant it.

She smiled up at me as we crossed the foyer. “You ready?”

I nodded. “Let’s do this.”

Tightening her grip on my hand, she kept smiling as we made our way inside. We’d barely left the foyer when Freya spotted us, squealing before she hurried over to greet us. She threw her arms around Ella first, giving her a bigger hug than she did me, but that was okay.

I was just loving seeing her so happy.

“Thank you for coming,” she said with a bright smile when she released me. “The party is in the solarium out back. Go get some drinks and mingle. We’ll be out as soon as we’ve said hi to everybody.”

Jim came over then too, shaking my hand and greeting Ella with a friendly smile. “It’s good to see you. Thank you for being here.”

“Of course,” Ella said happily, even though I wasn’t sure how to feel about being thanked for attending my own sister’s engagement party.

On the other hand, she’d thanked me too. Ella shot me a slightly constipated smile that said *Just relax and behave*.

I exhaled deeply and my gaze lingered on hers. *Fine, but don’t tell me what to do*.

Her eyes rolled as if she’d heard the thought. I nodded at Jim and Freya before they took off to greet the next guests who arrived. Pulling my fake girlfriend through the house and to the solarium, I chuckled when I saw her gaping beside me.

“Talk about glitz and glam,” she murmured as she looked around to take it all in. “Are those crystals hanging from the damn ceiling?”

I glanced up and realized she was right. There were Swarovski crystals everywhere, glistening beads hanging from the ceiling and dripping in thin strips down the tablecloths to look like icicles. The solarium had immaculately set tables dotted around the space and a massive, decorated Christmas tree in the corner.

A bar had been set up in the dining room that led out here, and the parlor had attracted its fair share of guests as well. There were people everywhere, and I introduced Ella to friends and family members as we moved through the crowd, proud to have her on my arm.

She was charming and her usual self, and everyone we left behind had a smile on their faces when we moved on. When we finally ran into my mother, she made a fuss of Ella too,

hugging her before putting her hands on her shoulders and looking her up and down.

“You look stunning, darling. That outfit is divine.” Mom grinned at her before glancing at me. “You two make a beautiful couple. I’m not sure if I told you that before, but you look damn good together.”

“Thank you,” Ella said sweetly as she adjusted her grip on my hand and leaned into me a little. I couldn’t deny the frisson of pleasure that sped through me when she did. *I really fucking am enjoying our time together.*

I grinned down at her and draped my arm around her shoulders to bring her even closer. My gaze darted down to the outfit my mom had just complimented. I knew it was one Freya had bought her, an elegant, forest green dress that fit her like a glove, and she wore it damn well.

An idle thought about seeing it on my bedroom—or kitchen—floor later skated through my mind, but I shut it down fast. This was *not* the time or the place to be walking around with a tent in my pants, and that was definitely going to happen if I thought about Ella out of that dress.

“Thanks, Mom,” I said, turning my attention back to my still smiling mother. “We’re going to go find our seats before dinner is served and the speeches begin,”

Mom inclined her head and gracefully lifted her hand to point at one of the tables. “You’re right over there. Make sure you get some drinks as well. Dad brought out only the best whiskey and he imported some incredible wines from France and Franschhoek in South Africa. Try them while you can. I plan on keeping them all to myself after the party.” She grinned at Ella. “I’m willing to share with you, though, dear. Go ahead. Have fun.”

Something warm invaded my chest at the sight of the interaction between them. Mom was so welcoming and friendly to Ella that I didn’t feel as much like a pariah as I had these last few years.

After we found our seats, I let go of her hand and straightened up. “Sit tight. I’ll go grab us some drinks. Do you want some of that wine my mom mentioned, or something else?”

“I’m having the wine,” she said immediately. “I’ve never tasted any from South Africa, but I’ve heard it’s amazing. A water too, please. Unless you want to be carrying me out of here later.”

I chuckled. “I’ll carry you any time, but I’ll bring the water. Anything else?”

She smiled and shook her head. “That’s about it for now.”

“I’ll see you soon.” For some reason, I bent over and pressed a soft kiss to her mouth. It wasn’t necessary to sell our relationship, but I did it anyway. Just because I wanted to.

Ella seemed surprised at first, freezing for a moment before she pushed her fingers into the hair at the back of my head and kissed me back. I groaned softly, pulling away before things got too heated. “I’ll be back.”

She smiled. “I know.”

A little hot and bothered, I headed over to the bar, hoping the few minutes I’d have alone would cool me down. My physical attraction to Ella wasn’t fading now that we’d been together a few times. In fact, it only seemed to be getting more intense.

Before I could ponder it too much, I saw Finlay with a beautiful blonde at the bar and it felt like someone dumped a bucket of ice over my head. *Well, at least I don’t have to worry about cooling down anymore.*

My brother’s eyes narrowed and he even tucked the woman behind him a little. I approached, trying to be the bigger man and act like the guy who deserved to have a girl like Ella as my date. I held out my hand to my brother. “Finlay.”

He didn’t take it, simply shaking his head as he dismissed me from his gaze.

The blonde frowned. “Finn? Who’s this?”

“Calan,” I answered for him, not even extending my hand toward her. If he wouldn’t shake it, he sure as hell wouldn’t want her to. “I’m his brother.”

Finn pulled her in close, like he was trying to protect her, and snapped at me. “Keep your hands and eyes to yourself, asshole.”

He took her hand and led her away from the bar, heading to the one in the parlor instead. I quietly seethed. *Holy hell. That really wasn’t necessary.*

I got that he was still pissed off, but acting like he needed to protect her was taking things a step too far. *What did he think I was going to do? Throw her over my shoulder like some caveman and fuck her against the wall?*

Blood simmering, I turned to the bartender when he came up. “I’ll have four shots of tequila, an Isle of Reid 25, and a glass of whatever South African wine you’ve got. Red. Oh, and a bottle of water.”

The man nodded and poured the shots first. I tossed them down one after the other, hoping they’d take the edge off after that exchange with Finn.

My father appeared at my side just as I was setting the last shot glass down. He made a show of looking over all four of the little glasses, then let out a sigh. “Don’t get messy, Calan. Tonight is important to your sister.”

“Yeah, I know.” I brushed him off, picked up the rest of our drinks, and carried them back to the table.

As I sat down, Ella smiled at me like she meant it and was genuinely happy to see me. Even after four shots of tequila, that smile was what finally worked to lure me away from the edge. *Who gives a shit what Finn thinks? I didn’t come here for his girl. I’ve already got one of my own.*

I still didn’t like the way he’d acted, but I dragged in a deep breath and wrapped my arm around Ella’s shoulders as I settled back in my chair. Not on edge anymore but also

wondering just when he was going to stop pretending that I was the worst guy in the whole damn world.

While family members and friends made beautiful, touching toasts to the couple, I realized Calan was off. He was definitely in a mood.

As people talked, he kept making comments about the speeches and the people in the room. If it wasn't, "Who the hell are you, anyway?" or "Would it have killed you to write a decent speech?", it was "You're not fooling anyone. You're not her friend. You're a bitch who's only stuck around because of her money."

When he finished his drink, he moved onto mine and I put my foot down. Reaching out, I grabbed his hand and leaned in, keeping my voice down so that we wouldn't draw attention. "What is this about? Did something happen?"

He didn't even look at me, pulling away and withdrawing his other arm from around my shoulders. "I'm fine. Leave it alone."

"I can't," I hissed, eyes narrowing. I leaned even closer to him so no one else would see the look on my face. "You're going to make an ass of yourself if you keep acting like this, and today is about Freya and Jim."

He rolled his eyes, but his jaw was tight, and his posture was too rigid. I hadn't gotten through to him yet, and I knew that I had to. If I didn't, he was going to end up doing something he would regret and that would give his family all the more reason to hate him.

I couldn't allow that to happen. Over the last couple of weeks, we'd gotten to know each other pretty well. As much as Calan liked to pretend that he was just a jerk who didn't give a crap about anybody or anything, I knew for a fact now that wasn't true.

Something had happened that had set him off. He wasn't just trying to be a dick for the sake of it, and he also wasn't really a dick. He was just a guy who really liked to pretend to be one so no one knew how much stuff bothered him.

"You promised you wouldn't screw this up," I whispered in his ear. My hand wrapped around the side of his neck so that it would look like an intimate exchange to anyone watching. "Look at her, Calan. Just look at her."

I pulled away a little and his gaze slid to his sister, who was tearful and sniffing while her best friend continued making her toast. A flash of shame crossed his expression, and he exhaled. "I shouldn't let Finn get to me so easily."

I nodded and put my hand on his knee. "Whatever he did, put it on the back shelf and we can talk about it later. Right now, we're here for Freya. This is your chance to prove that you're not the same guy you were four years ago. Get it together and show them you're not who they think you are."

The tough love worked. Calan settled back, putting his hand on mine to keep it on his knee and keeping his mouth shut. When a waiter came by and asked if he could bring Calan another drink, he shook his head.

"I'll switch to coffee. Thanks."

The man nodded. "Right away, sir."

Relief spiraled through me. Something I'd said must've gotten through to him, which meant I didn't have to play damage controller anymore.

For the remainder of the speeches, he sipped his coffee, held my hand, and at least pretended to listen. When the last person set down the microphone, he exhaled and applauded right along with everyone else, rising to his feet and taking only a tiny sip of champagne.

We sat down after the toast, and waiters immediately started circling with plates in their hands. Dinner was served, and throughout, Calan kept up casual conversation with the others around our table, his chair closer to mine than it had been before.

I didn't mind him staying close, though. It was better than the alternative, which was him rushing off to go confront his brother about whatever had happened between them. At the thought, my gaze sought out Finlay and his date, a stunning blonde with her hair swept back into a beautiful, delicate French braid and her thin body clad in an expensive navy dress.

I wondered if Calan's sudden mood had something to do with her. At the thought, a ripple of jealousy passed through me. I frowned, knowing I had no reason or right to feel what I'd just felt. Besides, I couldn't ask him if it had been about her without drawing his attention back to his brother, and I couldn't do that unless I wanted him to cause trouble.

Which I didn't.

Ultimately, this wasn't about me either. It was about Freya and Jim, and as they opened their gifts after dinner, I *oohed* and *ahhed* right along with the rest of the guests. Calan was still pretty rigid at my side, but he held my hand and watched them as well.

Two massive armchairs had been brought in and the couple sat on them like thrones as Freya's friends handed over gift after gift for them to open. People had gone all out, just like I'd expected, but I'd underestimated just how lavish the gifts would be.

They were given top-of-the-line kitchen equipment and artisanal products for their pantry. Fancy artwork and what appeared to be a solid silver keepsake box. "I don't even want to know how much that thing cost."

I hadn't meant to mutter it out loud, but I realized I had when Calan squeezed my hand. "It's not that expensive. I saw it online. A couple grand. Unless it's the plated version, in which case it's only a couple hundred."

I swallowed hard when Freya was handed our gift next. “If I’d known the caliber of the stuff they were going to get, I never would’ve suggested what I did.”

“It’s perfect,” he said with sincerity and honesty in his voice. He glanced at me and smiled for the first time since he’d gotten back with our drinks. “She’s going to love it. Watch.”

I turned my gaze back to her as she unboxed our gift.

“It’s an at-home date night! Baby, how amazing is that? It’s exactly what we need after the chaos of wedding planning.”

“Told you,” Calan murmured at my side, grinning when I looked at him again. “You did good, *baby*.”

I wanted to roll my eyes at him, but I couldn’t quite get that far. Laughing instead, I shot back, “Well, you paid for it, *baby*. You did good too.”

He chuckled, finally seeming to relax just a little bit. Dessert was served while they finished opening their gifts, and I moaned around the first bite of chocolate mousse. Calan’s gaze shot to mine, heat and amusement flickering in those dark eyes.

“Care to pop out to the guest house with me?”

I shook my head and pointed my fork at the work of art on my plate. “Not on your life. This is incredible. Where I come from, mousse doesn’t look like this.”

Seriously, the entire dessert was gorgeous, and while the bite I’d just taken had been chocolate mousse, there were so many other elements that I didn’t even know where to begin. The whole thing was an elaborately crafted masterpiece.

With a cookie base, a ball of chocolate acted like a dish, holding the strawberries, raspberries, and some kind of crumble. A hardened chocolate shell with golden powder sprinkled on it rested on the side of the ball and a variety of gels, mousses, and foams decorated the plate around it.

I took a mental picture and then decided on the real thing, pulling out my phone and snapping a quick photo so I'd be able to show Kara later.

Calan chuckled. "If you come to the guest house with me, I'll show you something just as good."

I wrinkled my nose and stuck only the tip of my tongue out at him. "Nah. I've had that already. Firsts are always more sexy."

"You thinking of leaving me for that dessert?" he teased.

Bringing my eyes to his, I swept my gaze purposely over his chiseled, clean-shaven features and shrugged. "Yeah, I think I might."

His shoulders shook with laughter as he turned to his own plate. "Okay, but just so you know, I'm a lot more fun to hang out with than chocolate."

"Blasphemy," I said playfully, glad his mood was finally improving.

He wasn't wrong, though. He really was more fun to hang out with than chocolate—except for when he suddenly flipped to Dark Mode. Thankfully, that seemed to be over for tonight and we ate together while Freya and Jim went around thanking people for their gifts.

At the end of the night, people slowly starting filing out and Freya hurried over to me, her deep brown eyes wide and happy. "I'm so glad I caught you. I have something for you."

"You do? Why?"

She chuckled. "I saw it and it made me think of you."

Jim handed over a small gift box from his pocket. Hesitantly, I took it, opened it, and gasped when I saw what was inside. Calan was right next to me, his hand heavy and comforting at the small of my back.

"Freya, this is..." I didn't even know what to say.

Nestled in a bed of velvet inside the box was a pair of stunning Swarovski earrings glittering next to a bracelet with

my initials on it. I blinked hard, my hands shaking. I wondered how *not* to accept something that would be difficult to give to someone else, considering the engraving. “It’s too much.”

Freya shook her head enthusiastically, her eyes glimmering with tears as she watched me gape at the jewelry. “It’s just a little welcome to the family gift. I’d love it if you wore them to the wedding.”

Overwhelmed, I couldn’t think of a single thing to say.

Calan stepped in and saved me when he realized I’d been rendered speechless. He chuckled and reached out to hug his sister. “You always know how to get someone right in the heart strings. Thanks, sis. They’re beautiful.”

“You’re welcome,” she said as she melted into him and hugged him back. “You guys are staying over tonight, right?”

“Yep,” he said. “Mom insisted. We’re in the same guest house where we were last time, if you want to come grab a drink with us once you’re done here.”

“We might, but I doubt it.” She stepped away from him and took Jim’s hand. “Today has been exhausting, but we might see you in the morning.”

Calan nodded. “Alright then. The offer stands, but if we don’t see you later, sleep well.”

She smiled at us and I thanked her again, giving her a long, hard hug as words mostly continued to evade me. Once we’d said goodnight to his parents as well, he led me across the grounds to the guest house, and I put the gift box down on the kitchen counter.

“I’m a terrible person,” I finally moaned as I covered my face in my hands, feeling like my heart was shattering into hundreds of little pieces. “I can’t accept this, Calan. How are we going to fix it?”

What the hell is she talking about? She's not a terrible person. She's one of the best people I've ever met.

These last couple of weeks, every now and again, I lost myself a bit with her, dropping the bravado and slipping into a protective caretaker role I had no idea how to play. She'd triggered it when she'd told me about her ex, and now, whenever she got even the slightest bit upset, I did everything I could to help make her feel better.

It had never been more true than right now, though. In this very moment, I felt like I'd move heaven and earth to put the smile back on her face. I just didn't know how to do it.

This was unfamiliar, uncharted territory for me. Actually giving a shit about someone other than myself.

"What do we have to fix?" I asked, genuinely confused. "Why can't you accept it? I thought it was a great gift."

"It is." She peered at me through her fingers, her eyes teary and miserable. "That's why I can't accept it. I'm a fraud, Calan."

"You're not a fraud," I said immediately. "You're here, aren't you? Clearly, she likes you and she wanted to do this for you. That has nothing to do with—"

"She said it was a welcome to the family gift," Ella protested. Her hands slid down her face to grip the counter behind her. Her shoulders sagged, her eyes closing, and she dropped her chin and breathed in deep. "That has everything to

do with our lie, Calan. She didn't buy it for me just because she likes me. She bought it because she thinks she's building a relationship with her brother's girlfriend."

She looked so damn defeated as she stood there, still wearing her beautiful dress but stripped bare emotionally. "This is harder than I thought it would be, and now that things are starting to feel real, I'm not sure how to move forward. I'm not sure if we *should* move forward."

No! Fuck. I stepped up to the plate—as well as I could anyway—and wrapped my arms around her shoulders, hoping that hugging her would help. *Hugs were supposed to help everything, right?*

I'd never been much of a fan, but I knew some people liked them. *Why else would people just keep randomly holding each other?*

"Just take a deep breath," I murmured against her hair. "It's going to be okay. You're not a fraud. Right now, we're as together as anyone else. There are never any guarantees that it's going to work out."

"Yeah, but in our case, there's a contract that guarantees it's not going to." Her voice was muffled by my chest as she buried her face in it. "I don't know if I can keep doing this. Not for another whole month. The idea of sitting there at the ceremony pretending to be something I'm not makes me sick."

When she said it, I realized she wasn't just upset. She was getting cold feet, and if I let her, she was going to walk away. I held her a little bit tighter, not liking the thought of her leaving just yet. "You can't bail on me now, Ella. We're halfway there. I need you."

She snorted before she looked up at me, misery and tears still swimming in those big green eyes as she shook her head. Her face was pale, her expression drawn, and the corners of her mouth turned down as she dropped her head back to keep her eyes on mine.

"You don't need me. If I break up with you now, they'll think you're heartbroken. It might even work in your favor."

“Not if they think I’m going to go after Finn’s girl as a rebound,” I pointed out, sliding my hands down to her hips. “Please, Ella? I thought you had plans for that money.”

“I do, but I’m honestly not sure if it’s worth it anymore. You might have to find someone else. I know it’ll take a bit of explaining, but you can blame it on me. Tell your family I hopped on a plane and you don’t know if or when I’m going to be back.”

“I can’t do that,” I said. “If I do, they’ll think I did something that made you ghost me. Besides, I don’t want to blame anything on you. I just want to keep going.”

“Yeah? Well, I don’t. More accurately, I can’t.” Her gaze drifted back to the gift box on the counter and she dragged in another shuddering breath, her body going limp in my arms. It was like I could feel the fight and determination draining out of her, and I didn’t like it one bit.

“I’m not going to let you duck out,” I said vehemently, bending my knees and pulling back so I could look her right in the eye as I gripped her hips. “We’ve got a legally binding contract in place.”

She was so dejected that not even that snapped her out of it. “So sue me.”

I scoffed. “What the hell has gotten into you? Is all of this really just about one gift?”

“It’s not about the actual gift, Calan. It’s about what it means to someone you love. She’s your baby sister, for crying out loud. Are you really okay with lying to her like this?”

“I put all this together knowing I was going to be lying to her about this. You knew that you were going to have to as well. I don’t understand where this is coming from now.”

Ella stepped out of my grasp and narrowed her eyes, her hand coming up to press against her chest. “It’s coming from in here. How do you not understand? I know we knew that we were going to be lying, but I didn’t know how difficult it was going to be. I didn’t know how real it was going to feel.”

“So what if it feels real?” I argued, shoving a hand into my hair. “If it feels real, it looks real. So let it feel however it feels. We know the deal. We’re not going to get hurt.”

“No, but Freya will. Your family really believes us, Calan. Didn’t you hear your mom earlier, offering to share her wine? Freya’s gift...” She shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut. “We can’t do this to them. *I* can’t do this to them.”

“Yes, you can,” I said fiercely. “You’re not bailing at the first sign of trouble. I won’t let you. Pull it together.”

Ella spun away from me, placing her palms flat on the counter behind her as she hung her head. “I can’t. It doesn’t matter what you will or will not let me do. I cannot go through with this.”

“Yes, you can,” I repeated, staring at her collapsed shoulders as she gulped in a few deep breaths. If I was a real caretaker, I’d know what to say to pull her back from the edge just like she’d done for me earlier, but I wasn’t and I didn’t.

“You got my head on straight at the party, Ella. If it wasn’t for you, I would’ve fucked up, but you didn’t let me. I won’t let you. Even if I have to lock you in here for the rest of the month, I’ll do it. What we’re doing here is worth it. It’s going to allow you to live your dream, remember? It’s my turn to shake some sense into you now, like you did for me, and I won’t let you throw it all away just because you’re having a crisis of conscience.”

Her head remained down, but she didn’t argue. Simply continuing to breathe deeply, she seemed to be listening, so I went on.

“Since you seem to need a reminder of the facts, here it is. Freya will be a happy newlywed when I break the news to her that we called it off. My parents don’t give two shits. They barely said a word to me at the party and my mom has plenty of people to share that wine with. And Finn? Well, there are no problems there. My family will be just fine, Ella. I promise.”

When she still didn’t move or look up, I walked up behind her. Moving slowly, I gently brought my hands to her hips

again. “You’re just getting in your head about this. All you have left to do is to get through the bachelorette weekend next weekend, the rehearsal dinner, and the wedding. The end is so close now.”

Since she still hadn’t moved, not into me or away from me, and still hadn’t said anything, I figured she was unconvinced but willing to hear me out. I kept hold of her hips, moving into her before sliding my arms around her waist, and I pulled out the only weapon left in my arsenal.

“Please see this through to the end for me.” I slid my hands from her waist into her hands as I asked nicely. “Please, Ella? I’ll do anything. Just don’t leave me now.”

For another long minute, she stayed exactly as she had been, but then she finally lifted her head, straightening up to press her back to my front and letting her cheek rest against my shoulder. As she turned her gaze up to mine, I saw that she still wasn’t happy about it, but she had caved.

“Okay, Calan. I’ll see it through, but don’t come crying to me when we break your sister’s heart.”

I smiled and pressed my lips to her forehead. “I won’t. I’m pretty sure my tear ducts stopped working before I even hit adolescence, and we won’t break Freya’s heart. You spent one day with her, baby. She’ll be fine.”

“Baby?” she asked after a moment, a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her lips. “Is that really going to stick now?”

I shrugged. “Maybe, and just so you know, Freya gives gifts like those easily and freely. She’s generous. Just like you’re being by agreeing to keep doing this with me.”

“I don’t know if I would call it generosity,” she said in a small voice, but at least the misery seemed to be fading.

I ran one of my hands up the length of her spine and into her hair. I wrapped my fist around it and tugged it gently. “Really? Because I was about to offer a reward for your generosity.”

She stared up into my eyes, still sad but not shutting me out or down. That seemed like a good sign. “A reward, huh? Like what?”

“I don’t know.” I brought my head down and traced her earlobe lightly with the tip of my tongue. “I’m sure I’ll think of something, though.”

“I’m sure you will,” she teased, sighing. She finally slipped her arms around my waist and linked her fingers at the small of my back. “There is something I want, though.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

A hesitant smile spread on her lips. “Tell me, Calan. Have you ever cuddled?”

For someone who claimed not to cuddle, Calan was damn good at it. We were in the massive, four-post bed in the master bedroom of the guest house, his arms wrapped tightly around me and my head resting on his bare chest.

“This wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I offered to reward your generosity,” he grumbled, but he didn’t let go of me.

I chuckled, turning my head to look up at him. “What, you don’t like my pajamas?”

“They’ve got cats on them,” he mused. “Let’s just say it’s not the pussy I was expecting.”

Smacking his arm, I laughed and burrowed deeper into his side. “Has anyone ever told you you’ve got a one-track mind?”

“Only when I’m with you.”

“Yeah, right.” I glanced up at him again, but his expression was surprisingly serious.

The arm not around me was hooked under his head, his gaze on the ceiling and not a hint of smirk or a grin anywhere. “Do you honestly expect me to believe you’re not sleeping with anyone else?”

“I’m not,” he said with a certain gravity in his voice that made me believe him. “Are you?”

“Nope.” My heart stuttered in my chest when those dark eyes came down to meet mine. Not really knowing what to

think but having had enough emotions for one night, I turned my head to press a kiss to his chest. “Well, you’ve still got a pretty one-track mind.”

“I’m in bed, half-naked, with a beautiful woman. What exactly do you want me to be thinking about?”

“Fair enough.” I smiled against his skin and ran my fingers lightly along his side. “Do you want to talk about what happened earlier that set you off?”

“No, not really. Finn was just being an asshole. I meant it when I said I shouldn’t have let him get to me so easily. At this point, I don’t even really know why I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Tonight wasn’t about you or about him. That’s why you weren’t expecting it. You must’ve thought he’d be civil for Freya’s sake.”

“Yeah, maybe that’s it.” He stroked his fingers through my hair. “You know, cuddling isn’t too bad, but is the pillow talk mandatory? I really don’t want to think about my brother right now.”

I tried putting myself in his shoes, imagining what it must feel like to constantly be on your guard with your own family. I didn’t have any siblings and my parents weren’t close to their own, so I didn’t even have any cousins I could equate it to.

Ultimately, though, I was proud of how he’d switched over from the liquor and that he hadn’t gone off like a shot, so I told him that instead of asking more about whatever Finn had done this time. “I’m proud of you.”

He frowned. “You are? Why?”

“You made a conscious choice back there not to allow him to bring out the hothead in you. You chose not to cause a scene or create any drama.”

“Yeah, that’s not like me,” he joked, but it fell flat. “If you hadn’t been there, I would’ve fucked up. That’s why I said I needed you.”

“You don’t need me. You just need to remember who you are and what you’re trying to achieve, but keep talking like

that and I might just let you reward my generosity your way.”

A devilish grin tugged at his lips as he thought it over. Then he suddenly rolled, putting me on my back and covering my torso with his own. Pinning me to the mattress, one of his hands slid into mine and lifted it up to press it into the pillow against the headboard. That grin stayed on his lips as he lowered his head, pressing kisses to my neck.

He spoke against my skin. “Keep talking like what? Keep telling you why I need you to do this with me?”

I nodded. My eyes closed and I focused on the weight of him on top of me and the feel of his strong hand in mine. Calan was so very real like this, when he was everywhere, consuming all my senses and stealing the breath right out of my lungs.

As much as I knew it was bad for me, I loved being with him this way. Not only because he always rocked my world, but mostly because this was when it felt the most real. When he wasn't acting, hiding, or putting up that bad-boy front. When it was just us, being honest and having fun together.

This was why I had agreed to see it through. The truth was that I hated lying to his family. I really did. Carrying that gift back here, it'd felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. I'd kept hearing Freya's voice in my ears telling me what it was for and it'd hurt.

It'd really torn me up knowing that she'd bought me something that expensive for no reason other than to show her affection to her brother's so-called girlfriend. It'd also really driven it home to me just how serious our lie was.

We were *pretending* to have a relationship and she was *welcoming* me into their already broken family. Since my own family was broken too, the last thing I wanted was to bring more destruction to theirs.

But when it was just him and me, that was when it felt good. Right. When it was just us, we could stop acting. We were honest. More honest than either of us were with other people, it seemed.

“I need you because when you’re with me, your voice is in my ear reminding me of what it’s really about,” he murmured as he kept kissing my throat. “When you’re there, you don’t let my ego get the better of me.”

I pushed my fingers into his hair, arching my back into him as his lips kept trailing down. “You’re my partner in crime, Ella. I didn’t realize how much I needed that until now. Is that what you want to hear?”

I hummed a noise at the back of my throat, and when he looked up at me, I shook my head. “The only thing I want to hear now is more about those plans you had to reward me.”

That naughty grin appeared on his lips again. The fingers of his free hand dipped underneath the hem of my pajama shirt. “Well, it starts with getting you out of these hideous pajamas.”

“They’re not hideous,” I protested even as I lifted my back when he started pulling the shirt off. “They’ve got kittens on them. Who doesn’t like kittens?”

“Me, but that’s a conversation for a different day.” He pulled the shirt free and tossed it away, smiling as he lifted his head to look at my boobs. I’d taken my bra off when we’d gotten in bed—obviously—and Calan sucked one of my nipples into his mouth, swirling his tongue around it until it was nice and hard before he released it. “That’s much better.”

My breathing had sped up already, but when he brought his mouth to the other nipple, I moaned. “What’s wrong with kittens?”

He smiled, tugging my nipple between his teeth in a perfect mix of pleasure and pain before he arched an eyebrow at me. “They’re like tiny demons with knives as claws, packaged to look cute so people will willingly bring them into their houses. Is this really what you want to talk about?”

I shrugged, my cheeks heating. I watched him lick a slow circle around the nipple he’d just let out of his mouth. “Well, yeah. I like learning new things about you.”

“And I like making you come,” he murmured against my skin. “Think you can let me do that now without distracting me with talk of those tiny demons?”

My pulse spiked when he hooked his fingers around the waistband of my pants and started pushing them down. “Wait a second.”

He stopped immediately, eyes darting up to mine. “What’s wrong?”

“You’re afraid of kittens.”

He groaned, resting his forehead against my stomach. He started slowly pulling my pants and panties off again. “You should be careful about telling me to wait when it’s for something like that.”

“I should?”

“Yep. I might make you wait in return and I’m not sure how much you’ll like that.”

A bolt of excitement shot down my spine. “Can we try it?”

“What?” He lifted his head again to frown at me. “Really?”

I nodded, my teeth sinking in my lower lip. “I’ve never done it before and it sure got my attention when you said it. I want to try it.”

“Ella Carver.” He kissed a path down my belly as I kicked my pants off. “Are you ever going to stop surprising me?”

“Hopefully not,” I said, meaning it. “Just be gentle with me, okay?”

“Always,” he promised. “Tell me when you stop having fun, okay?”

I nodded, once again probably trusting him more than I should have. Calan had never disappointed me in bed, though. In fact, Kara had been right when she’d said this arrangement was the perfect opportunity to have some no-strings-attached fun.

Calan was way more experienced than I was. I figured I might as well capitalize on that experience while I had him rather than focusing on all the negatives about our relationship. And capitalize, I did.

With his mouth and fingers, he drove me to the brink of insanity so many times that I forgot any of those negatives even existed. He had a way of making me forget. Of taking over and just making me feel.

“Calan,” I moaned when I finally couldn’t take it anymore, my skin dotted with sweat and my muscles burning with restraint. “Enough.”

Those dark eyes bored into mine as if he were assessing how serious I was, but when he saw that I meant it, he pressed his fingers into me again, sucking my clit between his teeth and finally taking me all the way there. My body tensed, my toes curling, and the pleasure that erupted from my core overwhelmed me, leaving me panting and boneless in the aftermath.

By the time I finally opened my eyes, Calan had put on a condom and he took my hands, his eyes on mine as he silently asked permission. I lifted my legs in response and wrapped them around his hips. I took his face in my hands and kissed him deeply. He sank into me, groaning into my mouth and tightening his grip on my fingers.

I kissed him harder, my hips matching the pace of his as I tried to give him everything he needed, like he had just done for me. Calan and I had no future. I knew that better than I knew my own name, but we sure were good together.

So good that I was really starting to dread the day when I would have to walk away.

Water splashed against the tile floors of the shower as Ella finished up. I smiled as I got dressed, relieved that she hadn't changed her mind and taken off in the middle of the night.

With my hair still damp after a shower of my own, I buttoned up my shirt and headed out to the kitchen to rustle up some breakfast. If I wanted her to stick around, I knew I was going to have to pull out all the stops.

I'd gotten too close to losing her last night, and I couldn't afford for that to happen. No matter what, I needed her to see this through.

With that in mind, I opened the fridge just as a knock came at the door. I frowned but shut the fridge again and went to get it.

"Good morning, Mr. Reid," a member of my parents' staff said, carrying a huge tray with cloches covering whatever was on it. "Your mother asked me to deliver your breakfast. If there's anything else you need, please let me know."

My brows swept up in surprise, but I stepped out of the way to let him in. This was the first time in a long time that my mother was having breakfast sent over. In fact, I didn't think she'd given a damn about my breakfast since before Edinburgh.

The mouthwatering scents of bacon, sausage, toast, and something sweet wafted to my nostrils as I followed the staff member to the dining room. He set the tray down and dipped

into a slight bow before rushing out. I headed back to the kitchen to make coffee while Ella finished up in the shower.

When she came out to join me in the dining room, I had two steaming cups of coffee ready and I was waiting at the table. Her eyes widened when she saw the spread my mother had sent. I'd lifted the cloches and arranged the different plates to look like a mini-buffet, and Ella's jaw slackened as she took it all in.

She was dressed, but her hair was still wet, and she'd been drying it with a towel, but her movements stopped as she stared. "Where the hell did this come from?"

"The main house," I said as I motioned for her to take a seat. "Let's eat before it gets cold."

Her green eyes skipped across the offering on the table, her head shaking as she sat down. "Have you people ever heard of cereal?"

I shrugged. "We've heard of it. We just don't eat it very often. Why? Want me to call them to bring some cereal instead?"

"No." She patted her stomach and hung her towel across the back of the chair next to her. "This is amazing. I was just wondering how you're all built the way you are if you eat like this all the time."

"Gym memberships and knowing how to use them," I joked.

Ella rolled her eyes, half lifting herself out of her seat to grab some food. She piled her plate with steaming deliciousness and then settled in.

"Thanks for this," she said as she glanced up at me. "The coffee, I mean. I assume that's your doing?"

I nodded. "It's not much, but my mom beat me to the main event."

"You're lucky she cares enough to do it," Ella commented lightly as she picked up her cutlery.

I made a plate of my own, and as I sat back down to eat, I glanced at her. “*We* are lucky she cared enough. This isn’t all for me, you know. I’m pretty sure it wouldn’t have been here if you hadn’t been.”

She took a bite of her food and chewed it before washing it down with a sip of coffee. “It’s still not bothering you that we’re lying to them?”

“Nope. We’re good together. All that’s important is that they believe that, and they do.” I sliced into a sausage, about to pop it into my mouth when there was another knock at the door. “I’ll get it.”

I was surprised when I found my mother waiting outside this time. Dressed as impeccably as always, she smiled, brushed by me into the house, pulled off a pair of fancy winter gloves, and rubbed her hands together. “It’s damn cold out there. I’m so glad you two are up. I was wondering if it was too early.”

She inhaled deeply, another smile gracing her face as she glanced at me. “I hope you’re enjoying breakfast. Is Ella up yet?”

“I am, Mrs. Reid,” she said, walking out of the dining room and tucking her wet hair behind her ears. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know you’d be coming, or I’d have made sure that I was ready.”

Mom waved her off, still all smiles, and she shook her head. “It’s no problem, honey. You’re part of the family now. I’m glad you’re getting comfortable with us.”

I blinked hard. Fuck, that was the last thing Ella needed to hear after last night.

She’d paled a bit, but since she’d been blushing only a few seconds ago, I doubted Mom would realize it was anything other than simply the blush receding. Ella’s green eyes were frozen wide as they met mine, but she recovered quickly when Mom strode past her into the dining room.

“I don’t want to interrupt your breakfast,” she said. “You eat and I’ll talk. I just wanted to come spend some time with

you two before you take off again.”

Ella shot me a horrified look, but I rested my hand on the small of her back and guided her to the table. I pressed a soft kiss on top of her head and she took her seat once more. This was fine. We were both going to be fine. We just had to play our part for a few minutes while Mom was here, and then we'd be on our merry way.

As I poured my mother some coffee, her gaze was on the scene in front of her, my bare feet and Ella's bare face. The two of us had obviously been in the middle of breakfast together when she'd arrived.

I knew what she was seeing and I knew what it looked like, and part of me was relieved as hell that she'd come by when she had. Right now, we were the picture of domestic bliss, our plates laden, our coffee cups clearly having been drunk from, and us being so comfortable together that we hadn't even finished getting ready before sitting down to breakfast.

It felt like one for the win column, but Ella's jaw was too tight to chalk it up as that just yet. *Shit, I'm going to have to be careful here.*

“I wanted to thank you both for coming to the party last night,” Mom said. “It meant the world to Freya to have you there. She wanted to come around this morning herself to thank you, but I asked her to let me.”

“It was an absolute pleasure to be there,” Ella replied graciously. “The party was wonderful and it was an honor to be included.”

Mom smiled. “Of course.”

I took my seat in front of the large window just as it started to snow outside. Mom's gaze drifted to the window for a moment. “It's been a long time since we've had an incident-free family gathering.”

Her voice was so soft that I almost didn't hear what she'd said, but as she shifted her gaze back to mine, I saw the happiness and relief in her eyes, and I knew I hadn't misheard.

I reached for Ella's hand across the table and squeezed it—and it wasn't only for show.

“We had a great time. Finn definitely wasn't happy to see me, but he seems happy otherwise, so I'm glad that he's moving on.”

Mom's lips pursed slightly as she dipped her head in a nod. “Norah has been good for him. A much better fit than Aspen ever was, but don't tell him I said that.”

A tiny flare of shock shot through me at the casual mention of that name, and Ella responded before I'd completely recovered from it. “I didn't get the chance to meet her, but she seemed lovely.”

Mom stared between the two of us for a moment before she nodded. “She is lovely. He really does love her, but I didn't come here to talk about them.”

At the apprehensive look she gave me next, my heart tightened. “What did you come here to talk about, Mother?”

She drew in a deep breath. “Your father told me that he saw you had a run-in with Finn and Norah at the bar. He also saw you drinking excessively after. We were both surprised that it ended there, but I'm proud of you, Calan. You really have grown.”

“Thank you,” I said cautiously, sliding my hand away from Ella when I felt hers stiffen under it. She kept smiling at my mom, but I knew this was triggering her fight-or-flight response again.

Internally, I sighed. I'd just gotten her back on board and now this. I didn't know if I was going to be able to convince her to stay again if this conversation went sideways. Mom was oblivious, though. A sheen of moisture appeared in her eyes as she glanced at Ella.

“I would like to invite you both to the annual Christmas Eve party at the house,” she said, stunning us both. “You can stay over here again and spend Christmas with us.”

My heart started slamming in my chest. I hadn't had a pleasant Christmas with my family in years. Last year had

been such a clusterfuck that I'd promised myself I'd never put myself through it again.

"No," I said, going with my gut reaction. "I doubt Finn wants me there. Just because we made it through last night without incident doesn't mean he's ready to have me around all the time."

Mom shook her head. "It's not entirely up to Finn, darling. Your dad and I have agreed. Freya wants you there. So Finn is the only one being a stick in the mud."

"Yeah, but I understand why he wouldn't want me at Christmas," I said, fighting the urge to grab Ella's hand again.

Things just felt easier when I knew I had her support, but her spine was still ramrod straight and she was eating like she was hoping the sound of her own chewing would block out this conversation. Mom gave me a hopeful smile. "I understand his reasons myself, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't come. Things are different now, Cal. Better. You have Ella, and slowly, with time and exposure, Finn will come around. He has to. You're family."

I glanced at Ella and so did Mom. "I understand if you have plans with your family, dear. How do your parents usually spend the holidays? They're welcome to join us as well if you think they might like to."

Ella nearly choked on the bite of toast she'd just taken, blinking fast as she turned to my mom. Since I knew she hadn't seen her family in years, I spared her from having to explain the situation right here and now.

Bracing myself for having to face her wrath because of this, I stole my mother's attention away from Ella by nodding at her. "Okay, yeah. We'll be here for Christmas, Mom."

My mother smiled radiantly and nodded, then stood up. "That's wonderful. We'll look forward to having you both here. For now, I'll leave you to enjoy your breakfast in peace."

After hugging Ella goodbye and giving me a hug when I walked her to the door, she left. I walked back to the dining

room to find Ella fuming. Her cheeks were red, her features taut as her green eyes flashed at me.

“You had no right. I’m not spending Christmas with your family, Calan. It wasn’t part of the deal and I’m not letting you steamroll me into it. End of story.”

Disappointment coursed through me, but I nodded. “I thought you might feel that way. If that’s really what you want, then I’ll come up with an excuse for why you couldn’t come.”

Surprise registered on her expression before the fight drained out of her and she slumped back in her chair. “Thank you. I’m sorry I reacted that way. I just, uh, I was expecting you to try to strong-arm me into it.”

“I understand,” I said as I went back to my chair. “The offer will be on the table if you change your mind, though. I’m going to go, even if you don’t.”

This might be the best chance I was going to get at redemption, and even if that chance would’ve been a hell of a lot better with Ella at my side, I couldn’t rely on her for everything. If she did decide not to come, I was just going to have to find a way to show my family that they could still trust me, even if I was all by myself.

A week after the engagement party, I was in Maui and I'd realized that I had no idea what I had been agreeing to when I'd said I'd go to Freya's bachelorette party. I'd thought we were going to go to a swanky nightclub—perhaps one of Calan's—and at most, that we'd be spending the night at a nice hotel after.

But no.

Instead, we'd taken a chartered flight to Hawaii and we'd be spending three nights at the most luxurious hotel on the island. I was still in a state of disbelief as we checked into our suite and I was shown to my room.

Because yep, I had a bedroom. The suite came with five of them and I was sharing with Jim's sister, Polly. I'd only met her this morning, but I didn't mind sharing with her.

On the plane, she and I had hit it off and become fast friends. We were the only two people here who didn't really know anyone else, so we'd naturally gravitated toward one another. She was nice. Friendly. Better than I could say of any of the other girls, outside of Freya.

In total, there were ten of us, Freya, Polly, and me, and seven of Freya's closest friends and bridesmaids. The other girls were not my type. They were uppity socialites with sticks up their asses and way too much makeup caked on. They'd sneered at me, more so when they found out who I was, and they'd given Polly similar treatment.

Shortly after we'd taken off, she'd come to sit next to me, and she and I had started talking. Finding out she was my roommate was definitely a relief. These other girls? I didn't know if Calan had a history with any of them or if they were simply such snobs that they couldn't believe I'd made the cut for an invitation, but they didn't like me.

Thankfully, I didn't give a damn. I had Polly as company and our bedroom had a view of the most gorgeous, luscious tropical garden I'd ever seen. Besides, I was on an unexpected trip to Maui, so I really didn't care if they wanted me here or not.

As Polly and I left our bedroom, the suite already looked like a bomb had hit it. Polly and I glanced at the purses, towels, jackets, and other bits and pieces that were strewn around, and it seemed like she was just as taken aback as I was.

"Let's hit the pool, ladies," Freya cried as she emerged from the bedroom she was sharing with another friend. "Time to get our drink on and our tans back."

A cheer went up, but I couldn't get a sound out. I was too stunned that she'd already changed, shedding her winter gear in exchange for a gorgeous but skimpy black bikini, an opaque black cover-up with gold trim that matched her bathing suit, and a pair of golden gladiator sandals. Sunglasses sat on her head and she had a bag already packed with a towel and a bottle of sunscreen sticking out the top.

My head spun. *How the hell did she do all that so fast?*

I had no idea, but she wasn't the only one. One by one, the other girls started walking back into the common area and all of them had changed as well. Within seconds, there were girls who looked like supermodels in the sitting and dining areas, spilling out onto the balcony with the gorgeous ocean view, and loud pop music started playing through speakers that had to have been built into the walls.

Meanwhile, Polly and I were still in jeans and sneakers, both of us having spent the last few minutes staring at the luxurious white furniture in the suite and the spectacular vistas

outside. She glanced at me, her blue eyes as shiny with shock as I was sure my own were.

“We should go get ready,” she mumbled.

I nodded. “Let’s do it.”

Freya spotted us heading back to our room and grinned. “We’ll have a drink while we wait.”

I wanted to tell her that we’d just meet them there, but she’d already thrown her hand in the air and exclaimed that they were hitting the bar first. The other girls clamored around her and another cheer went up as they recited some kind of chanting toast by the time we got to our bedroom just a short walk down the hallway in the suite.

Polly chuckled. “They’re something else, those girls. I grew up surrounded by chicks like them, but I’ve never been part of the group like this. Something tells me we’re going to have trouble keeping up, though.”

Eyes wide, I nodded and started digging for the swimsuit Calan had insisted on buying me for the trip. It was a red one-piece that may as well have been a bikini for all the cut-outs, and nothing like I would’ve chosen for myself, but after having seen the others’ outfits, I was happy to have it.

Polly pulled out a stunning blue tankini and smiled at me. “I’ll change in the bathroom. Just let me know when you’re ready and I’ll come out.”

“Thanks.” Relieved that she wasn’t expecting me to change in front of her, I returned her smile and waited until the door to our adjoining bathroom shut behind her before I started stripping down.

As much as Polly and I had struck up a friendship, we’d only met each other on the plane and I definitely wouldn’t have been comfortable changing in front of her. Plus, if her brother was a Ken lookalike, then she was Barbie.

I hadn’t taken notice of their family at the engagement party since I’d been too busy trying to keep Calan out of trouble, but their parents had to be lookers to have produced offspring as beautiful as Polly and Jim.

Like him, she had blonde hair, but where his had been cut short, hers was long, thick, and shiny and it hung to just above her ass. She had these big, bright blue eyes, porcelain skin, and a killer smile. If I had to guess, I'd say she was about as tall as her brother as well—give or take an inch.

She was really nice, but that didn't mean I wanted to get naked in front of a girl who looked like her. Then again, she was going to see almost every inch of my full figure in this swimsuit anyway.

I took a deep breath, doing my best to shake off the insecurities, and I quickly shed my clothes and donned the swimwear with the matching cover-up. As soon as I was ready, I called out to Polly. "I'm done!"

The door cracked open immediately and she smiled, looking gorgeous but still just so damn friendly. "Are you ready to go?"

"As ready as I'm going to be."

She giggled, grabbed a beach bag, and tossed a few goodies into it before we left our room. Once we joined the others, Jägermeister shots got passed around and we tossed them back. Then we finally hit the pool.

Surrounded by all that gorgeous greenery and looking out over a private beach and the ocean, the pool was just as amazing as the rest of the hotel. Polly and I snagged two lounge chairs near the bar, settling in to do some sunbathing next to the pool after ordering two cocktails.

While we sipped them, Polly turned to look at me. "I'm going to apologize in advance for coming right out and asking this, but I've been wondering since we first started talking. You're so nice, and so normal, and so sweet."

"Okay," I said, giggling, and took another sip of my tart Mai-Tai. "Shoot. What is it? You don't have to apologize for anything with me."

She arched an eyebrow. "You might change your mind about that in a second, but what on *earth* do you see in *Calan*? I mean, he's gorgeous, obviously, but personally, I've always

wondered how someone like Freya could have such a donkey-butt for a brother, and now I find out someone like you is *dating* him, and it just feels like I'm missing something."

I laughed. "Yeah, I get this question a lot, so you really didn't have to apologize."

I paused for a moment to think it over, my straw between my teeth, and I stared at the azure blue sea behind her. Waves swelled on the sparkling surface and I smiled, doing my best to make it a soft, lovey one as I turned back to her.

"There's a lot more to him than what you see at first glance," I said, and I wasn't lying. "Calan comes across as a donkey-butt. I wasn't his biggest fan myself at first, but he's layered and complex. Once I started getting to know him, I realized that under that bad-boy bravado, he has a pretty good heart."

"He does?" Her pretty face scrunched up, her nose wrinkling. "I'll have to take your word for it."

I laughed again, but it was softer this time. The thing was that the more I talked about him, the more I realized that I truly believed the things I was saying. Our relationship might've been fake, but I knew who he really was. Perhaps better than anyone else here.

I wasn't making stuff up to get him into Polly's good graces. What I was saying was the truth and he deserved to have someone who would be staying in his life know it. "You don't have to take my word for it. I'm sure you'll be getting to know him better as the years pass and you'll see for yourself eventually."

My heart ached a little bit at the thought that I wouldn't be around when that happened, but I didn't let it show. "At his core, he's a lot softer than you think. Calan Reid is sweet deep down inside. Caring. Emotional."

Her jaw dropped and she shook her head. "No way."

"Yes way," I assured her, thinking back to all the times he'd dropped those sky-high walls around the center of his

being and let me see who he really was. “I know he’s made his mistakes, but he’s also paid the price.”

Just like I have.

“Right now,” I continued thoughtfully, “he’s doing everything in his power to do right by his baby sister. I think that’s admirable.”

Polly took a long sip of her Mai Tai as she mulled it over, only releasing her straw from between her teeth when she’d drunk almost half of it in one go. “I don’t think you’re lying, but I do find it kind of hard to believe. Just tell me one thing?”

“Sure. Anything.”

“Does he treat you well?” she asked. “Does he take care of you? He’s always struck me as one of those alpha assholes who growl shit at their women and expect them to drop to their knees.”

Well, he does get growly but... “Strangely, Calan treats me better than any man ever has. He cares about what I think, what I want, and how I feel, and he goes out of his way to make sure I get what I need.”

Even when that means convincing me to stay when all I want is to go. I smiled at Polly, then added a wink just in case the smile was too sad. “His edges are rough and he’s definitely not going to make me a cup of tea and let me cry on his shoulder, but he’s got his ways of taking care of me.”

Her cheeks went beet red and she pretended to fan herself, and I laughed again, more freely now. “Not just like *that!*”

She arched a brow at me. “But like *that* too, right?”

Blushing beet red myself, I shrugged and mimed zipping my lips. “A lady never tells, but let’s just say that Calan and I understand each other. Inside and outside of the bedroom.”

Polly chuckled and sat back on her lounge again, facing the view once more. She shook her head. “Well, it’s good to know he makes you happy. I’m glad. You deserve it.”

The words hit me like sledgehammers to the chest, but it was because they were true. Calan did make me happy. Him

and all his rough edges, tender moments, and unexpected ways of taking care of me. But he wasn't mine. We were happy together, but we wouldn't be that way for long.

That's fucked up actually.

I was happy when Polly distracted me by starting to tell me more about each of the girls who were on the trip with us. My mood had plummeted, but I managed to get through the day and have some fun despite the dull ache in my heart.

After the day at the pool, we got ready to go dancing for the night. I wore the dress Freya had bought me specifically for this occasion and I knew I looked good. With all the alcohol flowing through my system after a day of cocktails in the sun, I wished Calan could see me in it.

I was debating whether it was appropriate to send a fake boyfriend a selfie of me in a sexy dress, but Polly saved me from myself when she came up behind me. "Let's go, gorgeous. Our chariot awaits." She grinned. "And by chariot, I mean the hotel shuttle taking us club-hopping."

I nodded and followed her out without sending him the picture, but that didn't mean I stopped thinking about him. All night, we drank, and we danced, and I imagined him surprising me here, wrapping his arms around me from behind while I swayed on the dance floor.

When I realized that my own idle fantasies were turning me on in public, I headed to the bar to order a water. I'd had way too much to drink, and if I was starting to picture Calan bending me over the bar right here in front of everyone, it was about time I had something other than alcohol.

When I got to the bar, I recognized two of the girls in front of me. I didn't know their names, but they were Freya's friends, and I couldn't believe what I was overhearing them say about her.

"I can't believe she's still treating us to shit like this when she's not even our real friend," one said with a laugh.

The other joined in. "I know, right? Freya is such a sucker, though. I think she thinks that if she just keeps paying for our

mani-pedis and taking us on shopping trips that eventually she'll be our friend."

The first girl rolled her eyes. "As if. All the free flights and vacations over the years would've bought and paid for our friendship by now if it was for sale. She's just stupid. Or maybe she's naïve. I don't know. But as long as she keeps paying, I'll keep showing up. That's for sure."

I doubted they'd noticed me standing there yet, but these women were supposed to be some of Freya's closest friends. Reeling over what I'd heard, I considered walking away. This was none of my business.

Don't stick your nose in where it doesn't belong, Ella. Just. Don't.

I woke up to my phone ringing at seven a.m. After cracking open one eye and seeing the time, I groaned and considered letting the call go to voicemail. I wasn't used to getting calls this early, but when it kept ringing, I pushed myself up on my elbow and grabbed the damn phone.

"Hello?" I said groggily, immediately wincing at pulling the phone away from my ear at the loud music in the background. "Who is this?"

"Cal? It's Freya," my sister slurred.

I frowned, realizing that she was drunk half a second before I realized she was crying. As soon as the first sob came over the line, I was wide awake. I sat bolt upright in bed, fear and confusion creeping over me like fire ants on my skin. *What. The. Fuck?*

"Freya? What's going on? What happened?"

"Ella got into a huge fight with one of my bridesmaids," she explained, sobbing, hiccupping, and slurring.

I gripped the phone tighter. "What?"

"It's such a mess, Cal," she cried. "She fucked everything up. I just lost two of my bridesmaids and my maid of honor."

My heart thudded against my ribs and I rolled out of bed, gripping my phone so tight it was probably going to crack. "Fuck. Okay. Where is Ella? What was the fight about?"

“*Ella* is throwing up in an alley somewhere with Polly. How can you care about her right now? She wrecked my wedding, Cal.”

I dragged in a deep breath, heart still pounding. I walked to the window and stared out at the sun starting to rise, the city coming to life. “Listen to me, Freya. Get the other girls, find *Ella* and Polly, and get back to your hotel. It’s not safe for you to be wandering around when you’re all hammered.”

Freya was too drunk to listen to reason, though. Still sobbing, yelling, and not moving away from the loud music, she kept ranting, clearly too emotional to care about her own safety. “You’re such a jerk to be dating someone like that, Cal. She’s a bitch. Why didn’t you warn me that your girlfriend was a total shit show? I never would’ve invited her if I’d known.”

Confusion clouded my mind. I had no idea what could’ve happened, but knowing *Ella*, I was absolutely confident there was a lot more to this story than Freya was telling me. Maybe even more than she knew.

Ella would never have done anything to derail Freya’s wedding. Not when she was with me only to make sure I could be there so my sister would have everything she wanted on her big day. Not after feeling so bad about Freya welcoming her to the family and how she’d talked about my sister after they spent that afternoon together.

Something had obviously happened to have Freya think that *Ella* had tanked the wedding, but that couldn’t be what was going on. I refused to believe it. Not even for a second.

“Freya? Look, I’m sorry this happened. We’ll work it out, but just for now, do you think you can get everyone together and go back to your hotel?”

“No,” she spat at me. “This is a complete *disaster*, Calan! The wedding is less than a month away and I *lost* two of my bridesmaids *and* my maid of honor. We haven’t even had the bridal shower yet, and now what? *Three* of my best friends are gone because your *girlfriend* is a *psychopath*.”

I inhaled and exhaled deeply, knowing that my next call would be to Ella, but I needed to make sure that my sister was safe first. I knew some people in Maui, but no one I could call up in the middle of the night to go drag my sister and her friends out of a club, but I had to do something.

“Okay, listen to me, Freya. This is not a disaster. I’m going to fix it, okay? For now, just tell me what club you’re at.”

She started giving me the name, but then I heard her being kicked out of the club for being too drunk. My stomach tightened into knots and before I could reiterate that she needed to get her friends and get back to the safety of the hotel, the call dropped.

Desperation clawed through me like a living being. My sister was way too drunk to be stumbling around the island in the dark by herself, and if she was in that state, then so were her friends. Whoever remained of them anyway.

Still staring out at the city as I gripped my phone, I tried calling Ella but she didn’t pick up. When she still didn’t pick up after I tried again, I started pacing. Freya’s friends bailing on the wedding wasn’t a disaster, but this was.

Or at least, it had the potential to become one.

Unfortunately, my sister wasn’t the only person I was worried about. Ella was out there too, apparently throwing up in an *alley* with Polly. I’d only met the girl once or twice and I didn’t know her at all, so I didn’t have her number, but Ella could hold her liquor, which meant that if she was that drunk and Freya was too, I probably wouldn’t have had much more luck with Polly anyway.

A groan rumbled out of me as exasperation tightened my muscles. *I fucking knew they shouldn’t have gone alone.*

I’d thought I was just being an overprotective dick for even having the thought, though. They were all grown-ass women who could take care of themselves, after all, so I hadn’t said anything. Now, however, they were drunk off their asses, out on the streets, and with no one nearby to even check on them.

My mind conjured up completely unhelpful images of Ella in a dark alley, too sick to be aware of her surroundings as two shadowy figures stole closer to her. I growled out loud, tossing my phone clear across the room. My hands flew to my hips and I squeezed hard, trying to remind myself that wasn't what was happening.

It could've been, but it probably wasn't.

After sucking in a few more deep breaths, I finally strode over to my phone and picked it up again. Then I headed to my kitchen and put on a pot of coffee, my mind racing with ideas of how I could help. Maui was a ten-hour flight away, at best, and that was only if I could charter a plane and fly out there direct.

Ten fucking hours from the moment my ass hit the seat was too long. By then, they might all be dead—or God only knew what else might've happened to them. I sure as hell didn't want to think about it.

My parents would take even longer to get there than I would. They were upstate at the compound, as far as I knew. I didn't know where Jim was, but Freya hadn't called her fiancé for help. She'd called *me* and I was going to figure this out.

As I watched dark espresso filling my cup, I opened my web browser and did a search for the hotel I knew they were staying at. Hitting the dial button straight off the search results, I gripped the phone and waited for the front desk to pick up.

“This is the Maui Grand Paradise,” a friendly female voice said. “How may I direct your call?”

I cleared my throat, trying my best to keep my rising panic out of it. “Hi, this is Calan Reid. My sister and her friends are in the Presidential Suite for her bachelorette party. I need you to send someone to the Wailea Wailer Club. I just spoke to her and they need help.”

The tone of the woman on the other end changed instantly. “Our driver has been in touch with us about this group.

They're drunk, sir. Drunken women on a bachelorette party are not our responsibility."

"They're guests at your hotel," I snapped. "What did your driver say?"

"I'm not at liberty to discuss that, sir. Our shuttle was waiting for them at the club and they failed to report at the arranged hour. We cannot be held accountable for their actions or whereabouts."

"Just tell your fucking driver to bring them back to the hotel. He can round them up one by one himself. Just make sure he does it. I'll reward him generously when I get there."

I hung up before the woman could say no, frustration nearly choking the damn life out of me as it tore up my insides. I tried Ella again, but she still wasn't answering, and Freya wasn't either.

I put in a call to a club owner I knew out there, but he couldn't do much either. Then again, it was the middle of the night over there and it wasn't his club or hotel in question. Eventually, though, he offered to send one of his bouncers out to check if he could find any of them, but they'd already been chucked out of the Wailer and I didn't know where else he could look.

"Thanks," I said with a deep sigh. "I appreciate it. I'll be there as soon as I can. They're staying at the Grand Paradise. If he finds them, let me know."

"Will do, brother," the guy responded before he hung up.

With panic, frustration, and flat-out fear coursing through my insides, I gritted my teeth and called the only other person I knew who would drop everything for Freya.

I called Finn.

The pounding in my head woke me up. Before I'd even opened my eyes, the first wave of nausea rolled through me, and considering the taste of something dying in my mouth, I knew this was going to be a hangover from hell.

Moaning out loud, I finally wrenched my eyes open, relief trickling through me when I recognized that at least I'd made it back to my own hotel room. As I sat up slowly, I searched my brain for memories of last night, but I ran dry after that awful conversation I'd had at the bar.

What the hell happened?

I groaned and scrubbed my hands over my face. Then I tensed when I realized I wasn't alone. Someone was in the bathroom and I froze up completely. *Oh, no. Oh, God. Please don't let me have brought someone home from the club.*

Another wave of nausea rolled through me as I glanced at the queen bed next to mine. Polly's bed. The bed of the girl who was the sister of the man Freya was marrying. If I had brought someone home, she had been sleeping right there when it'd happened.

Whatever it was that happened anyway.

The fact of the matter was that she was Jim's family and he was marrying Freya, who was Calan's family. If I had slept with someone else, Freya and Calan would both be finding out about it. With the pain in my head now echoing in my heart, I stared at the bathroom door, thinking the worst and instinctively checking in with my body.

It didn't *feel* like I'd slept with anyone last night, but I couldn't remember a damn thing, so it wasn't impossible. With Calan, I always felt it the next day but he was huge and he always gave me a pretty good workout.

Anything less impressive or enthusiastic, and it was possible that I might not feel it this morning. The door handle started turning and my aching heart leaped into my throat. I almost cried with relief when Polly was the person who emerged.

Wearing an oversized T-shirt and last night's makeup all the way down to her chin, she looked almost as bad as I felt. Both of us groaned in shared sympathy as our eyes met.

"There's some water and painkillers for you if you want them," she said, her voice husky and hoarser than it had been yesterday.

At the sound of it, a vague flash of a memory appeared in my brain. *Singing. Lots of shouty singing. And vomiting. Sooooo much vomiting.*

I winced as I glanced back at Polly, and she nodded and climbed back into her own bed. "Yeah, I know. I feel like death warmed over. Are you okay?" Real concern darkened her eyes and her brow furrowed, but on the other hand, our thick drapes were still drawn and the room was pretty dark.

Maybe I'm imagining it.

"I'm okay," I said carefully. "Just very fucking hungover. Do you have any idea what happened last night? I've never blacked out before, but I don't remember very much."

Polly grimaced, turning her body toward me. She picked up a bottle of water from the nightstand between us. I reached out to grab the water and the painkillers she'd mentioned before. I took the pills along with a healthy swig of my water.

"It was pretty bad, Ella," Polly said sympathetically as she glanced at the door. "You may not want to go out there too early."

My heart stuttered. "What? Why not?"

Polly dragged in a deep breath, her face contorting as she shared the worst news I had heard in a long time. “Well, um, you sort of single-handedly imploded the bride’s entire side of the wedding party.”

A wave of nausea slammed into me, so intense that it bent me over. I clamped my hand over my mouth, rushed to the bathroom, and made it to the toilet just in time. I heaved a few times, glad that my hair was already in a ponytail. I didn’t know when it had happened or who had done it. It’d been loose last night.

I got up on shaky legs and went to brush my teeth. My face was deathly pale as I looked in the mirror over my vanity and my hands were as shaky as my legs. My knees felt numb, and even after brushing my teeth three times, I still felt sick.

But I knew I had to go out there and find out what I’d done. I couldn’t hide in here all day. I had to face the truth—even if I would probably be making a few return trips to the restroom.

“What did I do, Polly?” I asked as I stumbled back into bed, wishing the heavenly soft mattress could swallow me whole.

My new friend nodded at more painkillers on the nightstand. “Take those first. I’m pretty sure the others are long gone, and if you feel anything like me, you’re going to need them. The small pink one is a nausea tablet. Take that too.”

I nodded, determined to keep these down long enough to work. I swigged them down while she gave me the lowdown. “So, uh, long story short, you overheard two of the bridesmaids trash-talking Freya.”

“Yeah, I remember that, but nothing else,” I said softly. “What did I do?”

“Well, uh, by the time I caught up with you at the bar, you were drinking shots of vodka like you were trying to keep a distillery in business,” she explained. “I had some with you, which was when you told me what you heard.”

She winced and glanced at the door again. Her voice grew softer. “You got real angry while you were talking about it. We agreed we were going to leave, though. You kept saying it was none of your business and that you should keep your nose out of it.”

“I remember thinking that too,” I murmured, and I tried to recall any of these other things she was telling me. “I’m assuming we didn’t leave and I didn’t stay out of it?”

She shook her head, biting her lips for a moment before she let out a harsh breath. “No, you didn’t. I went to the bathroom and we were going to meet at the door, but when I got there, you weren’t there. By the time I found you, you’d tracked down the group.”

“Oh, God.” I buried my face in my hands, but I needed to hear this. *What did I do this time? How is it possible that I’ve ruined more lives?*

“You were confronting them,” she said quietly. “You called them users who had latched onto Freya because of her money. I mean, I’ve suspected that was the case since I met those girls, but you really gave it to them.”

“I overheard them admitting it,” I mumbled, scrubbing my hands over my face again and again. “It wasn’t just a suspicion. I *heard* them.”

“I know, honey,” she said sincerely. “Honestly, I think even Jim knows the truth. It’s just that no one has ever said anything and you did. You confronted them, but Freya wasn’t there.”

Relief washed over me, but it turned out to be premature. “When another bridesmaid came to the defense of the first two, it became pretty obvious that none of them are Freya’s friends. They were all leeches just associating with her for her money and what it could get them. Some of the stuff they said was horrible.”

“So you heard them too?” I peeked out at her between my fingers. “You did, right?”

She nodded, but then she let out a long sigh. “Obviously, I didn’t overhear the first stuff, but I did hear some of what was being said by the time I joined you. Anyway, once you knew that they were all in on it together, you got kind of mean and personal.”

My stomach revolted, but I managed to keep it down this time. “How? What did I do?”

Polly gave me a one-shouldered shrug. “You acted like any loyal friend would, but it wasn’t pretty. You jumped down their throats and told them all how ashamed they should be. How they were worthless pieces of shit and how Freya didn’t deserve to have such assholes in her life.”

A tiny part of me was proud for standing up for her like that, but if I’d single-handedly imploded the bride’s wedding party, then this obviously wasn’t the end of the story. “What happened next?”

“It turned out that Freya heard the whole thing. I’m not sure how, but we were all pretty drunk. I was so captivated by what you were saying that she could’ve been standing right next to me and I wouldn’t have realized it.”

“She heard it?” I whispered.

Polly nodded. “Yeah, but it was really damn jarring for her to learn that all of her friends had been making fun of her behind her back for years. She was so drunk that she was falling over, so I don’t think she was thinking too clearly, but instead of blaming them, she lashed out at you.”

A loud groan tore out of the center of my being. *How had I gotten myself into a situation like this again? Where I tore apart lifelong friendships and imploded someone’s life?*

“I want to curl up into a ball and die,” I moaned and sank under the covers. *Why did I have to open my big, fat mouth?*

Banging suddenly started up at our door and I flinched. Thankfully, Polly was a good friend. “Go away. I don’t care which one of you assholes is out there. We’re—”

“It’s Calan,” he said before the door burst open. “Where’s Ella? I need to see Ella.”

At the sound of his voice, my heart thundered, beating way too fast at the thought that he was here. Last night, I'd been fantasizing about it, and now when I needed him most, he'd shown up. He was here. But then I remembered that I'd ruined his sister's wedding and my relief and disbelief turned to dread in my stomach.

He was here, but it probably wasn't to comfort me.

I looked around wildly, my heart rate not calming down until I saw the lump under the comforter. I strode right over to it, reached for the edge of the bedding, and yanked it back. I wouldn't be able to breathe properly until I saw her.

Until I knew she was safe.

As soon as her blood-red eyes met mine, they welled up with tears and she reached for me. She did it tentatively and almost like she was scared I was going to knock her hand away, but I'd never felt so needed.

Seeing her looking so broken tore me up inside and I got right into bed with her, wrapping her up in my arms and taking my first proper breath since I'd woken up this morning. I hadn't even taken off my shoes before I'd climbed in, but I didn't give a shit.

Ella was okay. It'd been twelve hours since I'd gotten that call, and now, for the first time, I knew that she was okay. Emotional and probably hungover as fuck, but in her own bed, in their hotel, with Polly still at her side.

I inhaled deeply, trying to calm my racing heart, and I rested my head on top of hers. Their room smelled like an old bar towel, but I ignored the scent. Instead, I just kept holding her, so relieved that she was safe that it was now the reason I could barely breathe.

"So, uh, I'm just going to go," Polly said awkwardly. She climbed out of her bed and offered me a tight smile as she headed to the door. "It looks like you guys need a minute

alone, but I'll be back for my toothbrush soon. I'm going to find one of the empty rooms and borrow their shower."

With that, the tall blonde disappeared, shutting the door firmly behind her and finally leaving me alone with Ella. *My Ella.*

"God," I murmured, my voice thick with emotion. I dropped another soft kiss on top of her head. "I was so worried about you, Ella. So fucking worried. I tried calling you like, a dozen times. Why didn't you pick up? Why didn't you call me back?"

Her fingers crawled up to my chest and clung to my shirt. Tears streamed down her cheeks when she finally looked up at me. "I'm so sorry, Calan. I ruined everything. I would've picked up. I would've called you back. It's just..."

"You don't know where your phone is?" I guessed.

She nodded, shame flashing in her eyes and coloring her cheeks. She let out a shuddering breath. "Fuck. I made such a mess. The least I could've done was to save you the trip."

"It's fine," he said.

"You're here."

"You needed me to be."

Those wet eyes came up to mine. "But I ruined your sister's wedding. I didn't mean to, though. I know it doesn't change anything, but I swear I didn't mean to. I didn't even know I had until I woke up just now and Polly filled me in."

"Why don't you fill *me* in?" I asked gently, stroking my fingers down her back as I held her to me. "I got some of the details from Freya, but I want to hear your side of the story. She was pretty belligerent when I spoke to her."

"She must be so mad at me," Ella whispered, burying her head in my chest. Her voice was muffled as she told me the whole, sordid story.

While it sucked that it'd fallen on Ella to tell the truth, what she said about Freya's friends didn't exactly come as a surprise to me. Some of those girls had been clinging to my

sister since middle school, like ticks to a dog's butt, slowly poisoning the poor creature until it didn't stand a damn chance.

Ella didn't look at me once while she told me her story, but once she was done, she was crying all over again. She finally lifted her gaze back to mine. "I'm so sorry, Calan. I'm sorry. You did all this for Freya and now I've ruined the wedding."

"Your intentions were good, Ella," I said. "I'm pretty sure Freya will realize that too. Her so-called friends are the people who wrecked everything, not you, and besides, it's a good riddance kind of situation. Deep down inside, Freya knows that. Or at least she will once she's sobered up."

I fucking hoped so, anyway. Finn was with her now. I'd only stayed with them long enough to make sure my sister was in her room and still breathing before I'd taken off to find my girl.

Ella pulled back and blinked at me. I lifted my hands to her beautiful face and wiped away the tears and what remained of last night's makeup. Her brow furrowed.

"What?" I asked. "Is there something else?"

She kept staring at me for another moment before she shook her head. "You came all this way."

"Of course, I did." I offered her a small, teasing smile. "I was worried you were passed out in an alley somewhere. I had to get here myself. Had to see you."

I had to hold on to you to make sure you're okay. I didn't say that last one out loud, though. As I said the rest of it, acknowledging how I'd felt all day, it suddenly hit me like a ton of bricks that my primary concern should've been for my sister.

And it had been.

Mostly.

Liar.

Ella had been the one I'd been most worried about. It was Ella I'd pictured with two shadowy figures coming down an

alley to do her harm, not Freya. Ella I'd been out of my mind about the entire flight over. Ella I had come to check up on as soon as we'd arrived.

If Freya's room hadn't been the first one we'd happened across, I didn't even know if I would've looked in on her at all before I'd come to find my girl. *My girl. Since when do I even think about her like that? Fuck, am I falling for her?*

As I stared into those watery, reddish green eyes, I knew that something had changed. Even just a few weeks ago, it hadn't felt like my heart would stop beating if something had happened to her. I wouldn't have rushed right to her side, my lungs threatening to cave in on themselves if I didn't see her. Didn't feel her. Didn't know she was okay.

Holy fucking fuck. This cannot be happening.

And yet, it was. I knew it all the way to the core of my supposedly rotten being. I cared about this girl more than I'd ever cared about any other.

Before I could even begin to wrap my head around it, the door opened and two more people came into the room. It took me a beat before I managed to tear my gaze away from Ella's for long enough to see Finn and Freya.

My sister's hair was damp, which meant she'd probably taken a shower. Her face was devoid of any makeup, but her features were soft and determined as she stepped out ahead of Finn. "Can we talk?"

My brother and I shared a look, and for the first time in four years, it wasn't full of hatred. If anything, he looked curious when he broke our eye contact to glance at Ella.

She'd tensed in my arms, sinking into my side. I tightened my grip on her instinctively, needing to protect her even from the person I loved most in the world. *Outside of her, that is. Fuck, I really do love her. Shit.*

Freya glanced at my arms holding Ella to me like a baby I was afraid someone was about to steal away, and she rolled her eyes. "Please, Calan? Let go of her. This is her decision.

I'm not going to hurt her. You don't have to hang onto her like you're afraid I'm going to bite her."

My first instinct was to snap at her, but I breathed through it, glancing at Ella instead. "What do you think?"

Ella nodded. "I think I should talk to her."

"Good," Freya said, sounding surprisingly cheerful. She grabbed Finn's hand and backed toward the door. "We'll wait in the living room. If you feel half as bad as I did, you might want to take a shower first. Helped me a bit."

With that, they left and Ella and I were alone again. She inhaled deeply, then climbed out of bed without a word and crossed over to their bathroom. After the world's fastest shower, she came out wrapped only in a towel, and it took everything in me not to drag her naked body back to bed.

This wasn't the time, though.

Climbing out of bed myself in an attempt to lessen the temptation, I slid my hands into my pockets and waited for her to get dressed. Like Polly and even Freya, she opted for an oversized T-shirt and shorts and tied her wet hair up without even brushing it first.

When she was ready, I took her hand and walked out to the living room with her. We sat down and I pulled her into my side. Finn poured us all some water and Ella stayed close to me, still clinging to me for comfort, which was exactly where I wanted her. It was exactly who I wanted to be for her.

"I'm so sorry about last night, Freya," she started with a tearful apology, looking my sister right in eye. She sucked in huge gulps of air to help her through it. "I'm so, so sorry I ruined everything right before your wedding. It wasn't my place and I know—"

Freya held up a hand, giving her a smile instead of scowling at her. "You didn't ruin anything. I owe you a huge thank you, actually. I had no idea those bitches were so two-faced. I probably never would've found out if it wasn't for you."

"But—"

Freya shook her head, still smiling. “No, Ella. I’m serious. There are no buts here. I’m the one who should be apologizing for taking it out on you last night. I was drunk and I was shocked, but I was also wrong. I should never have said any of those things to you.”

My sister turned her gaze to mine. “I’m also sorry for what I said to you. I only remember snippets, but it must’ve been pretty bad if you grabbed him and hopped on a plane right away.”

Ella’s side pressed up against mine. One of her thighs hooked almost over my knee. Her hand in mine, her shoulders were so close I could feel every breath she took.

Freya shook her head. “You did me a favor, Ella. Those assholes are out of my wedding, and if you’d do me the honor, I’d love for you to stand up there with me instead.”

Holy shit. I hung onto her a little bit tighter. *I definitely didn’t see this coming.*

After she’d almost run out on me because of a gift, I couldn’t imagine how she was going to react to this. Only now, I still couldn’t let her go. But the reasons had changed. Or maybe they had been the same last weekend. I just hadn’t confronted them yet.

Either way, I was in love with this girl and I couldn’t let her go. Not even if Freya seemed to have made it her personal fucking mission to get so close to her that she was almost surely going to try to run again.

After the whirlwind bachelorette weekend, I was back home, sitting cross-legged on my favorite mustard yellow sofa. I'd just finished catching Kara and Mikey up on all the drama, and as they stared at me with wide eyes, I finally confessed the worst—and best—part. “Freya wants me to be in the wedding party. She said it would be an honor if I'd stand up there with her.”

Kara spun around, nearly dropping the decoration she'd been about to hang on their Charlie Brown style Christmas tree. The bright red bauble started slipping from her hand, but she managed to tighten her grip just in time.

“Are you serious? That's amazing. What did you say? Are you going to do it?” Kara had been completely engaged in the story ever since I'd started telling it, but Mikey was uncharacteristically quiet.

Turning to her, I shrugged but I couldn't stop the tiny smile. “Would it be so awful if I say yes? I told her I'd think about it, but I want to do it. I honestly can't believe she asked and I know I'm not even Calan's real girlfriend, but she thinks I am. Plus, she's becoming a real friend to me, so I'd love to be there for her on the big day.”

Kara hung the bauble on the sparse tree, her tongue sticking out between her lips as she thought it over. “Wellllll, I mean, you're going to be in their wedding pictures for the rest of their lives, so there's that, but if you want to do it, I say go for it. Freya would've been standing up there with a bunch of

phonies if you hadn't intervened, and your heart is in the right place. At least you're not using her."

Mikey scoffed and shook his head but didn't say anything. I turned to him, arching an eyebrow as I waited him out. He looked back at me, his chest rising and falling, but his jaw hardened. Clearly, he was determined to keep his mouth shut.

"What?" I asked finally, exasperated and confused by his attitude. "Just say it, Mikey. What are you thinking? Will I be a horrible person if I say yes?"

He kept staring at me, his posture tense. He breathed in deep once more. "You honestly want to know what I think?"

"Yes," I said emphatically. "Please! I know you're not a fan of my arrangement with Calan, but things are different between us now and this is about Freya anyway. Not about him. You're sitting here like you're about to explode. Please just tell me what you think."

"Fine. I wouldn't have been able to hold my tongue for much longer anyway." He straightened up to his full height, arms crossing over his chest. "If you really want to know what I think, then here it is. I'm worried about you, Ella. Like, really worried about you."

I frowned. "What? Why? There's nothing to be worried about."

He snorted loudly and shook his head hard and fast. "The fact that you think that is even more reason to be worried. You had really bad judgment when it came to all things Spencer and I think it's happening all over again."

My heart started throbbing in my chest and pain shot through me. "That's not true. It's not happening again."

"It's not?" He kept his gaze steady on mine. "Five minutes ago, you were telling us how you knew it was none of your business, but you got involved anyway. And fine, Freya had a right to know that these women weren't really her friends, but you should've spoken to her about it sober and in private."

"I know the way it happened wasn't ideal, but it all worked out okay."

He gave me a long, hard look. “Did it? Freya was going to stand up with phonies, and if you stand up with her, she still will be. Let her fiancé’s sister handle it, Ella. That’s the right thing to do.”

“But Calan—”

Mikey’s eyes rolled and he gripped his arms so tightly to his chest now, his biceps were bulging. “Calan. It always comes back to that fucking guy. You said this wasn’t about him, but it is. It always is.”

“Well, it *is* his sister,” Kara tried reasoning, but Mikey shut her down.

“That’s exactly my point. It’s his sister. His family. His fucking problem. Ella was supposed to be his date to the wedding and nothing more, but that’s not what’s happening, is it?”

“I was always going to have to be there for a few extra events to make his family believe our relationship is real,” I argued, but Mikey scoffed again, his head starting to shake once more.

“Sure. A few extra events. You know as well as I do that this has gone way beyond the provisions of your contract, which were fucked up to begin with. You just spent an extended weekend in Maui with the guy, Ella. For fuck’s sake, open your damn eyes.”

“Open my eyes to what?” I lifted my chin and leaned back against the sofa with my own arms crossing. “My eyes are already wide fucking open. As for Maui, he wasn’t supposed to be there, but you know? It was really nice when he showed up when I needed him. I’m getting to know them and they’re not as bad as you seem to think they are.”

“Maybe they’re not,” he conceded. “Maybe they’re the best people on the whole planet, but this situation? It’s even worse than I thought it was.”

“It’s not!” I cried out, the exasperation sinking to the core of my being. “What is this really about, Mikey? What is so bad about this situation?”

Breathing heavily, he looked me right in the eyes, his body practically vibrating with either rage or frustration of his own. “You claim not to have any feelings for this guy, but your actions suggest otherwise. Honestly, from where I’m sitting, you’re falling headfirst into a world of pain, and when it hits, you’re going to be heartbroken and you’re going to flee to the other side of the world again. And this time, you’re going to have the money to stay there. What you’re doing with him is going to be your ticket and your motivation to run for the rest of your fucking life and you can’t see it.”

My hackles slammed up, but then I deflated. Hearing it that way? He wasn’t wrong. The few days we’d spent in Maui together had been incredible, and the way my heart had raced when I’d first realized he was there? I was falling. For sure. For a man who only needed me for the next few weeks.

After that, he’d go back to propositioning random strangers he met on the street and I’d be heartbroken, pining over him and hating myself for once again having believed that maybe we could be something more.

Kara’s mouth fell open as she stared at me. “Seriously?”

I sighed, shrinking into the sofa, and I drew my knees up to my chest. “Yes. Seriously. I should’ve noticed sooner, but I’m pretty sure I’m head over heels for him in the worst way. He’s trouble. He’s messy. He’s made mistakes, but he’s also showed up for me when I needed him. He has this way of making me look at things differently. Of allowing me to show him the worst parts of myself and still making me feel accepted for them. Loved, even.”

“Kara and I have shown up for you when you needed us too,” Mikey pointed out. “Doesn’t mean you’re in love with us. You just said it yourself, Ella. This guy is trouble. I know you stand to make a lot of money from this, but I think it’s time to cut him loose.”

“I can’t do that.” Not only because of the money. In fact, that was very much playing second fiddle at this point. I couldn’t cut him loose because I didn’t want him out of my

life just yet. I couldn't bear having to lose him right now. Today.

I looked back up at Mikey. "I know that he's trouble, but he's also not the guy you think he is. He's messy. Hell, *we're* messy together, but he's also made me feel things I've never felt before. He—"

"Oh, snap out of it." He glared at me. "A vibrator can make you feel those things too. If you're that hard up, go out and fucking splurge on a good one. Shit, I'll even buy you one for Christmas."

Hurt ricocheted through me. "I wasn't talking about the sex, Mikey. Do you really think I'm that shallow? The sex with him is amazing, sure, but that's not what this is about at all. I've never had a boyfriend who supports me like he does."

"You still fucking don't!" Mikey roared. "He's not your boyfriend, Ella. He's your client. He's paying you for all of this. I'm so sick of having to hold my tongue and act like this is all fine. It's not. It's just not."

"Yeah? Well, I'm so sick of your judgment, and you know what? I don't have to sit here and take it. You have no idea what you're talking about. You have no idea what my relationship with him is like and you have no fucking idea who or what he is, and I'm tired of constantly having to justify myself to you."

As I scooted forward and off the sofa, Kara stepped up and put her hands up, trying to diffuse the situation. "Let's just all take a deep breath, shall we? I get that you both have strong feelings about this, but it's getting ugly now. You two love each other. Don't forget that."

"I used to love him," I said as I glanced at Mikey. "These days, I'm not so sure he's the guy he was when we became friends. I sure as hell don't remember him being this preachy and judgmental."

As I said it, Mikey scoffed. "Yeah, well, I don't remember you spreading your legs for money and fooling yourself into believing the guy loves you for you."

Red flashed in my field of vision, and my hand rose to slap him before Kara got between us. Trembling with rage, I dropped my hand back to my side, spun around, and grabbed my bags. I'd never been so happy not to have had anywhere to unpack.

I darted into the bathroom to grab my toiletries, and all I could think about was getting out of there. Kara protested when she realized I was leaving, but I was too angry to hear what she was saying. Ears buzzing, I calmed down enough to thank her for letting me stay, and then I left, but I had no idea where I was going.

Too worked up to think properly, I found myself calling Calan. The line barely rang before he picked up. "Ella? Missing me already?"

"I don't have anywhere to sleep tonight," I said, my voice shaky and my heart pulsing with pain. "Can I come over?"

"I'm on my way, baby. Hang tight. I'll be there as soon as I can. Okay?"

"Okay," I mumbled, my eyes slamming shut. I inhaled deeply.

Mikey could talk as much shit as he wanted about this guy, but Calan had never failed to come through for me. Even now, without asking any questions, he was just on his way.

Did that mean he loved me too? Probably not, but he was still willing to be there for me, and right now, that was enough. It was all I had. It was everything.

I slammed to a stop outside of Kara and Mikey's apartment building, tires squealing. My girl was leaning against the exterior wall. Her cheeks were glistening with tears and her head was resting back, her eyes on the sky until she heard me arrive.

When she dropped her chin and looked at me, it was clear she was distraught—and since she was surrounded by her bags, I assumed she'd had a fight with her friends. I engaged the emergency brake with a yank, practically falling out of my car in my haste to get to her.

Ella was dressed in the same jeans and sweater ensemble she'd had on when I'd dropped her off earlier, but her hair was messy, like she'd spent all this time shoving her hands into it. Her mascara had run, blackening the bottoms of her eyes and running in stripes to her temples where she'd wiped the tears away.

Something squeezed in my chest at the sight of her like this. I hated it. I was struck with the sudden urge to burn it all down—I just didn't know what *it* was yet—and to fight all the armies in the world as long as it would make her feel better.

The urges were alien to me. Completely foreign. But they were there and they were very, very real, confirming once again that what I'd realized in Maui was true. If I could, I'd have charged right past her, fists banging on my chest as I tore into the building and faced off with whatever demon inside had done this to her.

But I wasn't a superhero.

I was just a guy in love with a girl who needed me right now.

Still halfway across the sidewalk to the building, I opened my arms to her and she walked right into them, hugging me. I folded my arms around her shoulders and held her tight. I rested my head on top of hers, content to just hold her for as long as she needed me to, even if my heart was racing and all I wanted to know was who to punch for hurting her.

We stayed like that for a long time before she finally released me, her body seemingly so much smaller than it was before. She glanced up at me with shimmering, sad eyes. "Thanks for coming."

"Of course." I took a step back and walked around her, heading over to where she'd left her things.

"Do you want to talk about it?" I asked as I collected her bags and popped open the trunk.

Ella shook her head, miserable and obviously still fighting to hold back tears. She bit her lip, her arms now wrapped around herself, and drifted over to my car. I was burning to know who was responsible for this, but I left it alone, focusing on getting all her stuff loaded up instead.

As I was putting in the last bag, someone called Ella's name. I looked over my shoulder and slammed the trunk shut. Mikey raced toward us, looking pissed. Jaw as hard as ice and muscles locked, he sped past the pedestrian gate and finally slowed down as he neared her.

He cut a glare at me, his eyes widening and his jaw slack, and he turned back to Ella. "Seriously? After everything we *just* talked about, the first person you call to bail you out is this fucking guy? *Seriously?*"

Aggravation rolled through me. *So he's the one who hurt her.*

I was tempted to give him a piece of my mind—or a broken jaw—but I hung back, trusting Ella to handle herself and her friend. She was still struggling to hold back tears, her

throat working. She turned on him with fire roaring back to life in her eyes.

She was a fighter, my Ella. It was one of the things that I loved about her, the size of her balls and her unwavering determination to face everything head on. “Why did you even come after me, Mikey? Why are you doing any of this, actually? Why are you acting this way? Can you please just *stop?*”

“I told you why I’m acting this way. I’m worried about you. You’re one of my best friends in the world and you’re so much fucking better than this.”

“Better than what?” She tossed her arms out to her sides. “I know it probably looks crazy from the outside looking in, but it’s more complicated than that. Why can’t you just trust me on this?”

Mikey laughed humorlessly and shook his head. “Yeah, you know what? It does look crazy. It doesn’t even just *look* crazy. It *is* crazy and it’s not that complicated. Why would a girl like you ever love an asshat like Calan Reid? The short answer is that you wouldn’t. Not if you saw him for what he really is, which you don’t, because he’s got you fooled and he’s going to hurt you, Ella.”

While I heard everything else he said, my ears had started ringing when he’d said that word. *Love. Did I hear that right? She loves me?*

“Shut up, Mikey,” she snapped, finally risking a quick, fearful glance at me, like she was afraid I was going to bolt because of what he’d said. When she saw me still standing there, leaning against the car and waiting for their showdown to come to an end, she spun back to him. “Just go back upstairs. Obviously, you and I aren’t going to get anywhere with this.”

Mikey strode forward, advancing on her with that messy brown hair shielding his eyes. He seemed a little off kilter to me. Possibly drunk or just blind with rage.

“You don’t know what you’re doing, Ella.” He got in her face, voice and body shaking. “You’re going to regret this, and when you do, I won’t be there to pick up the pieces. You’re a—”

“Okay,” I said evenly, inching in between them and pushing Ella back gently. “That’s enough. Why don’t you take the night, calm down, and you can try to talk to Ella again in the—”

I didn’t even see it coming. Mikey’s fist rammed right into my nose and pain seared through me. My hands flew up, and I stumbled back, so fucking surprised that I couldn’t get a word out or a swing in.

He’d punched me. That wiry little fucker had *punched* me.

Ella shot out from behind me, shoving her friend away and getting in *his* face this time. “Go away or I swear I’ll never talk to you again. Jesus, Mikey. Who the hell are you? What happened to you?”

The sudden act of violence seemed to have startled the guy, and even though my vision was blurry, I saw him deflate. He lifted his hands and looked at them like he didn’t know who they belonged to. He shook his head, spun around, and headed back into the building.

Meanwhile, I pinched my nose and tilted my head forward, cursing under my breath. Blood dripped onto the pavement and I flinched when someone touched my arm. As soon as I realized it was Ella, I relaxed, glancing up at her and trying to smirk through the pain.

“Is it bad?” I asked.

She groaned. “It’s Edinburgh all over again. Here, take this.” After disappearing for a moment, she handed me a shirt. “Hold this to your nose and give me your keys. I’ll drive.”

“Like hell, you will,” I objected immediately. “That car is my baby. It’s my—”

“Stop being such a guy.” She took my arm, led me to the passenger door, opened it, and held out her palm. “Nothing is going to happen to your baby. You’ll be right next to me.

Besides, I can't exactly fix you up on the sidewalk and you're in no shape to drive."

I cursed under my breath some more as I dug into my pocket and fished out the damn keys. "Fine, but stay under the speed limit and keep a five-car following distance."

"A sure way to get in an accident," she muttered, waiting for me to sit my ass down before she shut the door and walked around to the steering wheel.

I got comfortable, leaning my head back as I held the sweet-scented fabric against my nose. She checked out the dashboard from the driver's side and suddenly grinned. Nerves rippled through me. Her tears were gone, replaced by definite glee as she pressed the button to start the engine.

"I'm sorry you got hurt," she said sincerely, running her fingers lightly across the steering wheel. "I can't say I'm sorry that it's giving me an excuse to drive this thing, though."

"Straight home," I muttered, but at the same time, it was a bit of thrill that she was as taken by my car as I was. "No speeding."

"Yes, sir," she said jokingly and slowly eased her foot down on the gas to pull into the street.

I groaned. "Don't call me that right now. We can try it once the blood stops, but absolutely not in this context."

She chuckled, sitting straight up with both hands on the steering wheel. I kept waiting for her to accelerate, but she didn't. She also didn't say anything else, her sole focus on driving. I watched her for a minute before I reached out and put my hand on her leg.

"You can go a little bit faster than a crawl. At this rate, we won't get to my place until Sunday."

"Yes, sir," she joked again, but I heard the nerves in her voice this time, kicking it up a few octaves higher than usual. "I'll do my best to get us there by Thursday."

I laughed, but then grimaced when it sent more pain spiraling through me. Deciding to let her concentrate on

driving, I kept my mouth shut the rest of the way home. I just held the shirt against my nose and obsessed about what Mikey had said like some preteen girl.

As her best friend, he'd know stuff I wouldn't. Like the fact that she loved me apparently. The mere prospect made my head spin. *Is he right? Does she love me, or did they have a misunderstanding?*

Based on the pain in my face and the fact that she'd said she had nowhere to sleep tonight, it was kind of obvious that they'd fought, but still, I didn't know if she'd *admitted* to loving me and that was what had set him off, or if he was just making assumptions.

Since he'd brought it up at all, it was a safe bet that their fight had been about us, but why?

All these questions burned holes in my brain, but I didn't ask them. If Ella wanted to talk to me about their fight, she would. I had to respect that. I'd long since realized she wasn't a toy I could push around or a puppet I could pull the strings of however I wanted.

It was difficult but I didn't ask any of my questions. I didn't demand to know the answers. I just sat there, giving her space as she drove us home like a geriatric with severe confidence issues.

When we finally got to my place, we climbed out of the car and Ella silently followed me inside. I glanced at her as I shut the door behind us. "I'll fetch your bags later. Let's get this sorted so I don't bleed all over your stuff. Then I'll go grab them."

She nodded, and the flash of humor I'd seen in her in the car seemed to be gone. Instead, she just looked empty, sad, and nervous. At least that meant I'd done the right thing not pressing her for answers. Taking her hand, I wrapped my fingers around hers and brought her knuckles to my lips, then brushed a soft kiss to them and led her to my bathroom.

She took the first-aid kit I handed over, and she cared for me just as gently and naturally as she had back in Edinburgh. I

never thought we'd be back here—or that she'd essentially be living with me—but that was what was happening right now. If I had known it was going to happen, I'd have thought I'd resist it a bit harder than this, though. Thought I'd have fought having a live-in girlfriend, even a fake one, tooth and nail.

Instead, I wasn't resisting at all. I wanted to be where I was and I wanted her to be here with me, taking care of me exactly like this. What that said about two people whose relationship was supposed to be fake, I didn't know, but I didn't question it.

What I *did* do was let her fix me up. Then I stripped us both down to our underwear and pulled her into bed with me. “You want to try cuddling again?”

“That sounds great,” she murmured and she rested her head on my chest and burrowed into my side, holding on to me like I was her ultimate protector. “We'll get my stuff tomorrow?”

I nodded. We hadn't even brushed our teeth, but I guessed we were just going to be rebels about it tonight. I sure as fuck wasn't letting go of her for something as mundane as dental care right now. I reached out and flicked off the light on my nightstand. Then I closed my eyes, not even thinking about taking it any further. Tonight, for the first time in my life, the only thing I wanted from the half-naked woman in my bed was for her to let me hold her while we slept.

I had accidentally moved in with someone. Strange but true. For normal couples, living together was a huge step. Something that was discussed and considered to death, pros and cons measured and the state of the relationship thoroughly assessed for its readiness to handle cohabitation.

In our case, all it'd taken had been that one phone call. I'd called, he'd come running, and that had been the end of it. For a week now, we'd been living together, and so far, it'd been nothing short of domestic bliss.

We hadn't discussed our situation at all, nor had we labeled it, made any rules, or broached the subject of how long it would last. Calan seemed perfectly happy to let me stay and I was perfectly happy to be there, so we'd just sort of left it.

As we arrived at the Reid Estate for the Christmas Eve party, he carried our bag—singular—into our guest house and held my hand in his other. He smiled at me and winked as he shut the door behind us. “So I guess you're coming to Christmas after all, huh?”

“Don't remind me,” I teased, remembering how vehemently opposed I'd been to the idea the last time we'd been here.

It hadn't even been that long ago, but in that time, things had changed. Things shifted between us, and right now, there was honestly no place else I'd rather be.

Calan, Freya, and even Finn had made me feel so welcome back in Maui that it even felt right to be here. Natural.

When his mother had invited us for the occasion, I hadn't thought I'd ever feel like part of their family, and certainly not enough to spend Christmas with them, but strangely, I felt like I belonged here now.

I hadn't fallen and knocked my head. I was painfully aware that I was not, in fact, part of the family and that I never would be. It wasn't that I was deluding myself into believing otherwise and no head injury had contributed to an altered state of reality.

But while I knew I wasn't one of them, it didn't change the fact that I *felt* like I was. Even if it was just for now.

I shook my hands out at my sides as Calan strode off to drop the bag we'd packed together in the bedroom. It was so damn surreal that I'd grown to be so comfortable here in such a short amount of time. This was only my third visit to the guest house, and yet, I felt like I knew every inch of it.

I also knew Calan well enough at this point to know he'd want a drink before we got ready for the party, so I poured us each a whiskey at the bar and handed his over when he came back to the living room.

"Thanks," he said, brushing his fingertips over the back of my hand as he accepted the glass. "Twenty-five-year?"

"Fifteen." I wrinkled my nose at him and then winked. "Sorry, but it looks like you're going to have to slum it until we get to the party."

He let out a dramatic sigh before he shrugged. "I thought my family was starting to like me again, but I guess I was wrong if they left us this swill to drink."

I laughed, knowing he was joking. "Swill, huh? I didn't realize Isle of Reid produced any of that."

Calan waggled his eyebrows at me and opened the buttons of his jacket before he sat down on a high stool at the bar. "We don't. Besides, the fifteen-year is better than the twenty-five. Age doesn't always make things better."

"Fair enough. Although I didn't know whiskey could be compared to arthritis. Age doesn't make that better either."

He laughed, happy and relaxed. The soft orange downlights built into the top of the bar shone down on him. Dressed as always in a bespoke suit with his dark hair styled away from his handsome face and amused light in those ebony eyes, he looked so gorgeous and so peaceful that I couldn't stop staring at him.

For almost a whole week now, I'd been seeing more of him than I ever had or ever thought I would, and yet, it was like he was only becoming more beautiful.

Except for the nose.

It was healed-*ish*. There were still remnants of two black eyes, but the bruises were no longer dark purple and red. They were a yellowish brown, but at least that meant he was getting better.

Mikey had hit him square in the middle of his face, and I hated to think of what would've happened if Calan hadn't taken it as well as he had. As it was, all week, I'd been worried that he'd go back, hunt him down, and clock him for what he'd done.

Calan hadn't even provoked him. He'd been completely calm, but Mikey had gone off anyway and I still didn't understand why. He couldn't possibly be that worried about me, and if he was, I didn't understand that either.

Peacefulness washed across his features, softening the hard edges and making him look truly happy for the first time since I'd met him. It took him to a whole other level of beautiful. It also made me feel like I was good for him. Like I'd contributed to bringing said peace to soothe the turmoil he'd previously felt deep down in his soul.

Calan smiled as he held his drink up for a toast. "To your first Reid Christmas. Fair warning, these events don't always turn out as pretty as the décor."

I clinked my glass against his. "Whatever happens, we'll face it together."

As I took a sip of the smoky, rich liquid I was getting way too used to, Calan's gaze rested on mine, searching for

something I wasn't sure if he found. Neither of us had acknowledged the L-O-V-E word that Mikey had dropped, but deep down inside, I felt like I was his and that our relationship was legitimate.

Especially these days.

I knew we had to talk about it, but for now, I was content just to let this be my reality. We only had one week left until the contract ended, and I wanted to enjoy every minute. While I was terrified that Mikey was going to be proven right come January first, I couldn't let myself think about that.

Not now. Not when we had to face his entire family and their friends in a little over an hour.

For just a second as Calan stared at me though, I thought he might say something. I thought he was finally going to broach the subject, but then his serious expression faded and he jerked his head at the bedroom.

"I saw you packed a dark purple dress to wear to the party," he said with a slight smirk touching his lips. "My bruises are going to clash."

I waved a hand at him, smiling as I pumped my eyebrows. "You always look good, Mr. Reid. Black eyes or not. We'll be fine."

"How much time do you need to get ready?"

I shrugged and checked the watch on my wrist. Before we'd left the city, he'd had a hairstylist come to his place and she made me look and feel like a princess. My long hair was wavy now, with spiral curls and a beautiful, sparkly clip securing the fronts behind my head.

All because I'd made a comment this morning about not knowing what to do with my hair. Calan was turning out to be a surprisingly considerate boyfriend for a guy who'd never been in a relationship before. Beneath his prickly disguise, he was turning into a real dreamboat. The kind of guy a girl would be crazy to let go.

And not only because of the hair, but because that was the way he responded to all of my needs. I wouldn't have taken

him for being so intuitive or so responsive, but he was. I tried to be the same for him, but I didn't think I was as good at it.

"No more than twenty minutes," I finally replied. "Should we go finish our drinks while we get ready? That way, we'll have more than enough time and we'll still be able to consume our liquid courage."

He chuckled as he stood up and followed me. "Liquid courage, huh?"

"Yep. Speaking of which, how are you feeling?" I asked as we walked into our bedroom.

I crossed over to where he'd hung my dress against the closet, and immediately set my drink down so I wouldn't spill on it before I even had it on. As I carefully removed the garment, he stripped out of his jacket and shirt, shrugging as he kicked off his shoes.

"I'm okay," he said. "Hopeful that this isn't going to turn into yet another shit show. Finn and I were starting to patch things up in Maui, though. We'll see how it goes."

I nodded, leaving the dress on the hanger but out of the bag as I went back to him and took his face in my hands. "Just stay calm and it'll all be okay."

He touched his forehead to mine. "That's why you're here."

I laughed softly, pushed away from him, and dug my makeup bag out of our suitcase before I went over to the dresser. Since I never wore a lot of this stuff, it didn't take me very long to apply the basics.

When I was done, I shimmied out of my jeans and carefully worked my sweater and shirt over my head so I didn't ruin my hair. It was slow going, but eventually, I was left only in my bra and panties, but since we'd changed in front of one another a lot by now, I wasn't self-conscious at all.

About to head over to the bed for my dress, I was still standing in front of the dresser when he came up behind me, wearing only his underwear and holding the Swarovski

earrings from Freya. Smiling as he looked at me in the mirror, he watched me slide them on and then pressed a hot kiss to the side of my neck.

I sighed, leaning into him. My blood heated up when he planted his hands firmly on my hips. “We don’t have time, Calan.”

“We’ll make it,” he murmured against my skin. Then he picked me up and put me on the dresser, making me forget that we even had a party to go to as he covered my mouth with his own.

Calan’s kisses were hard and urgent, his tongue delving into my mouth and his hands running up and down along the insides of my thighs. I didn’t hesitate, looping my arms around his neck and holding him tenderly, kissing him back with way too many emotions rising up within me.

What he and I had together was real, even if our relationship wasn’t. I just didn’t know if he’d realized it yet and, if he had, if he even wanted any of it at all.

All I knew for a fact was that I did. I wanted it. Him.

All of him. His body, his heart, and even his drama.

Calan Reid was trouble. I’d always known that, but he was the kind of trouble I didn’t want to stop myself from getting into anymore. Not when he was the exact kind of trouble that made me feel like maybe redemption was possible.

Like maybe, just maybe, I stood a chance at love and a happily ever after despite the sins of my past.

Ella and I arrived at the party half an hour late, but for good reason. *At least, it's a good reason in my book.*

I couldn't keep my hands off the woman and I wasn't even really trying to resist. There didn't seem to be any reason to. She was as insatiable as I was and I was more than happy to just keep rolling with it.

Our relationship had definitely changed since she'd moved in with me, our bond growing stronger by the day. Even now, as we walked into my parents' house, we were holding hands, our sides practically glued together. We were bombarded by my parents, my brother, and Freya.

My parents were holding hands too, both dressed in red with touches of gold. Freya had shiny green reindeer horns on her head and Finn had on a red knit sweater with the Grinch on it. It was as cohesive as I'd seen them look in a long time, but what surprised me was that they had included me.

Mom had sent over a red bowtie to the guest house. I'd found it on the nightstand when Ella and I had finally gotten around to getting dressed, and it was decorated with little Grinches as well. Although it'd pained me to do it, I'd put it on at Ella's insistence.

Now, I was happy I had, surprised at how good it felt to feel like part of the Reid family unit. Guests were milling around behind them, but they'd rushed over to us as soon as we'd walked into the parlor.

One by one, I saw them noticing my nose and they didn't even greet us before they started asking questions, speaking over each other as they drew to a stop in front of us.

"Who tried to rearrange your face this time, Cal?" Finn asked, the concern in his eyes not what I'd have expected to see from him.

"Oh, my god. Are you okay?" Freya frowned. "That looks terribly painful."

Mom came up and cupped my cheek gently in her palm, her eyes cloudy with worry. She inspected my nose like she was trying to figure out if it was broken. "Good heavens, Calan. I hope you pressed charges."

Dad grunted, and his gaze cooled as he reached for his phone. "I'll call our lawyer."

Ella stiffened at my side. She was worried I was actually going to let him do it. "There's no need for that, Dad. Thanks. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, but I'm okay. Really. I'm fine."

Dad sighed as he surveyed my face. "This isn't a good look right before Freya's wedding. I wonder if they'll be able to hide the bruises for the pictures."

"They'll be gone by then," I said confidently and brought my gaze to my sister's. "If not, I'll finally let you put makeup on me. I won't ruin your pictures. Promise."

She chuckled but shook her head. "I'm not worried about what you're going to look like at the wedding, Cal. I'm worried about you. Are you sure you're okay? What happened?"

Ella stepped in, coming to my aid when she realized I didn't really know how to handle this situation. I didn't want to throw her friend under the bus. They weren't speaking to each other right now, but I knew how much he meant to her.

Eventually, they would make up, and when they did, I hoped to be able to smooth things over with him. I'd been surprised when he'd thrown that punch, but I didn't hold it

against him. Not really anyway. He'd been trying to protect Ella and I couldn't fault him for that.

So while I hesitated, Ella smiled and explained what happened. "One of my friends flew off the handle a bit. We were having an argument, and when Calan tried to calm him down, he lashed out."

She wrapped her hands around my arm, holding me close as she met each of their gazes in turn. "I'm sorry. It was my fault. If it hadn't been for him trying to protect me, he wouldn't have looked like this. The bruises are fading fast now, though. I'm quite sure he's right that they'll be gone by the wedding."

Finn was the first to accept her explanation. He grinned and even cracked a joke. The first he'd made about the incident in Edinburgh.

"At least it's not as bad as the busted nose I gave you, huh? Those bruises lingered for a couple of weeks."

At first, I wasn't sure how to handle it. I didn't know if this meant I could joke about it now too, but when he stepped forward and clapped me on the shoulder, I returned his grin and decided to lean into it.

"And yet, neither of you managed to break it. I guess it just goes to show that I'm the strongest of us all."

He laughed. "Or the most hardheaded."

As he and I exchanged an understanding look, I felt strangely hopeful. This felt like the beginning of real forgiveness from my brother. It was the most I'd felt like we might just be able to fix things since he'd found out what I'd done, and I'd be damned if it didn't feel good.

Great, even.

Mom beamed at us, tears glistening in her eyes. She put her hands together in front of her chest and drew in a deep breath to compose herself. "Well, I think we should get back to the party. It's wonderful to see you both here. Ella, I'm so glad you managed to join us after all. You look beautiful, darling."

She blushed. “Thank you. So do you.”

Mom accepted the compliment with a graceful smile, inclining her head toward the bar. “Get yourselves some drinks. Dinner will be served in about twenty minutes, and after that, we’re gathering in the TV room to watch some carols by candlelight.”

“*Watch* carols? What do you mean?”

Mom grinned. “As part of Isle of Reid’s Festive Outreach program last year, we gave some video equipment to an orphanage. They have some older children there who are aspiring film makers, and this year, they’re going to be using that equipment to stream the orphanage’s caroling. They’re hoping to gain some attention for the organization and themselves with it. We promised we would watch.”

“Oh, right. Sounds good.” I glanced at Ella, who was looking at Mom like she was in awe of her.

“That’s amazing,” she said. “I hope they achieve what they’ve set out to. If you’d like, I could write a piece on the event. It won’t make as much of an impact as going viral on social media, but it might help a little bit.”

“That would be incredible,” Mom agreed. “These children could use all the help they can get. The orphanage also always needs more donors and people who are willing to donate their time to do things like maintenance, so the more eyes they can draw to their plight, the better.”

Ella nodded slowly, excitement radiating from her as Mom smiled. “Thanks for offering, Ella. It sure is going to be useful having a writer in the family.”

My heart jerked, but Ella didn’t appear to be freaking out again. On the other hand, with the amount of times my family had referred to her as being part of it at this point, I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised.

The first time it’d happened when Freya had given her those earrings, it’d come as a huge shock to her. She’d felt like an imposter, which I understood, but now, things were different.

Ella was getting used to them making comments like that, and even to me, it was starting to feel true. Like she *was* part of it.

“Let’s go get those drinks,” I said, taking her hand in a firm grip and dragging her over to the bar.

Mom and Dad went back to their guests, only about twenty of their closest friends tonight, and Finn and Freya walked with us. Freya joined Jim, who’d already been waiting at the bar, and Finn grinned at them.

“What do you guys think? Any chance of us having a little niece or nephew by next Christmas?”

Freya widened her eyes at him. “Hold your horses, big brother. Jim and I intend on enjoying ourselves as a married couple for at least a year or two before we bring another person into the world.”

“Pity,” he said. “I’m going to be an awesome uncle and Calan’s going to be okay too. You should give us a baby to spoil.”

“Okay?” I echoed, shaking my head as I chuckled. “I’m going to be amazing, not just okay. You’ll see. I’m going to be the cool uncle. The one the kid looks up to and loves more than anyone.”

Finn scoffed, laughter in his eyes as he frowned. “You’re going to be the cool uncle? I don’t think so. Have you ever even *held* a baby?”

“No, but they don’t remember who holds them. They remember who buys the most epic gifts for their birthdays and saves their butts from getting in trouble with their parents.”

“That’s only years down the line, though,” he argued teasingly. “It all starts with a bond between you and the baby, which you won’t have because you won’t hold it.”

I thought it over, but I couldn’t really argue. I suspected he was right. All things considered though, none of that really mattered to me right now. My brother and I were bantering for the first time in years and that was what was important.

Freya was watching us with a soft smile on her face. “You guys could just have babies of your own to spoil and bond with. I’m the youngest. Why does it have to be on me to go first?”

Finn shrugged. “You’re the closest to being married.”

“That doesn’t matter. You can have a baby when you’re not married, you know.”

I chuckled and ordered drinks for Ella and me. Then I winked at my sister. “Yeah, we know that, but we need you to show us how it’s done. Besides, you’re the youngest, but you’re also the most emotionally mature, which means it’s on you.”

Finn held up his hand for a high-five and I smacked my palm into his, more and more surprised by how easily we were falling back into the relationship we used to have. I wasn’t going to fool myself into thinking that everything was suddenly okay between us. I knew we were nowhere near that, but we were taking baby steps in the right direction.

In Maui, we hadn’t spoken directly to each other much, but we’d spent a lot of time together with Freya and the girls who had remained. He’d also spoken to Ella a lot, and I knew it was because he was both comfortable with and convinced by her that he was putting in the effort with me.

We were both making an effort, and since it was a point I wasn’t sure we’d ever reach, it made me feel joyful as fuck. *‘Tis the season, after all.*

The rest of the party went just as well. My family was seated together at one of the long tables that had been set for dinner. Everyone was happy and it felt a little like we’d gone back in time, to when we’d been so close that it’d been rare for us to go more than a day or two without talking.

In addition to all that, I had a beautiful woman on my arm that I was in love with and all our family and friends were here. Cheesy as it was, I couldn’t wipe the damn grin off my face all night.

As we were heading to the TV room to watch the carols, Ella wrapped her hands around my arm, eyes shining with laughter. She pulled me to a stop and pointed up with her free hand. “Mistletoe.”

My gaze followed where she was pointing and I saw that she was right. She’d stopped me under the mistletoe, and when she pulled me closer to her for a kiss, I went willingly, still grinning and feeling like I’d never stop.

On Christmas Day, Calan and I spent most of the morning lounging in bed. And fooling around. It was the best Christmas morning I'd had in years, and frankly, it'd been the best Christmas Eve I'd had in years too.

Now that things felt so real with Calan, I was finding that it wasn't bothering me so much to constantly be referred to as part of the family. I was even enjoying it a bit—and maybe I was hoping that if they kept saying it, Calan would start wanting it and that he'd make it true.

But short of that, I was just happy to have a sense of joyfulness and belonging on Christmas again. Before I could get wrapped up in the pain of how long it'd been since I'd had that, Calan pressed a hard kiss to my lips before he rolled out of bed.

“It's ten thirty, baby. We need to be there at eleven. Come shower with me?”

“Uh uh.” I shook my head, grinning at him as I drew the covers up to my chest. “If we get into that shower together, we're going to be late. Again. You grab a shower first and I'll finish my coffee.”

He let out a long-suffering sigh, his dark hair all messy from having had my fingers in it all morning and his lips slightly swollen. He definitely wasn't suffering.

I laughed and pointed at the bathroom. “Go, Reid. We can't be late again.”

“Fine, but you’re making it up to me.” He playfully smacked my ass when I rolled to get my coffee.

Laughing some more, I winked at him. “You know I will, but not now.”

“Fair enough,” he agreed before he spun around and marched his naked ass into the bathroom, those muscles flexing and releasing as he walked and begging me to change my mind about joining him.

I didn’t give in, though. Instead, I finished my coffee and sent Merry Christmas texts to Kara, some of my other friends, and even Mikey. Like I did every year, I scrolled to my mother’s phone number, stared at it for a while, and then locked my screen, my heart aching over not being able to talk to her today.

Thankfully, Calan was coming out of the shower by then and I took my turn, washing and getting ready at double speed so that we were on time. At precisely eleven a.m., we walked into the main house to find Davina and Ross, Freya and Jim, and Finn and Norah around a grand tree in the sitting room.

The Reids definitely knew how to do Christmas. Although they’d decorated the grounds as far back as the engagement party, they’d added even more to the inside of the house now that the holiday had actually arrived.

Sprigs of holly were on every table, tinsel wrapped around the banisters, and freestanding Santas were on the mantel, the bar, and other surfaces. Mistletoe hung from the door arches and a variety of sparkling snowflake decorations hung in clusters from the ceilings.

I’d seen no fewer than four Christmas trees in their home, all decorated lavishly, but this one was obviously the main event. It stood at least fifteen feet tall and there wasn’t a branch that remained bare.

Underneath it was a mountain of gifts, but it would only be us here today. The other guests from last night had gone home, and by the looks of things, the Reids were about to spoil each

other rotten. I'd helped Calan pick out some gifts for them all, but I wasn't expecting to receive any.

He and I had already exchanged small gifts this morning. Although his to me hadn't been as small as we'd agreed to. It was a bracelet with small, heart-shaped Swarovski crystals on it that matched the earrings Freya had gotten me.

Mine to him had been a cool nightstand organizer that doubled as a phone-docking station, had space for a wallet, watch, sunglasses, and a few other things. It was a novelty item, but I'd thought it was pretty cool—and very useful. It hadn't been expensive, but he didn't seem to mind.

In fact, he'd raved about it like it was the best gift he'd ever received.

I smiled, shaking myself out of my thoughts as Davina and Ross got up from the sofa they'd been sharing to greet us. They looked festive and gorgeous in matching but elegant Christmas-themed sweaters.

Davina smiled as she hugged us. "Merry Christmas, beautiful children. We're so happy to have you all here."

Ross shook hands with his son before offering me a gruff, quick hug. "Merry Christmas, Ella."

"To you too." I hugged him back, then exchanged hugs with everyone except for Norah.

She and I had never even spoken, so I didn't hug her, but I did offer her a genuine smile. After we'd greeted each other, she smiled at me. "It's nice to finally meet you. I've been wondering when you and I would have the chance to get to know each other a little bit."

"Same here," I said honestly. "Want to have coffee later?"

"I'd love to."

Finn hovered a few feet away from us, his expression uncertain, but he didn't say anything, simply waiting for his girlfriend to return to him while Calan went to get us some more coffee.

I accepted my mug gratefully, taking a seat next to him on the rug in front of the fire. Freya and Jim were on the floor with us even though there was plenty of space left on the sofas. This felt cozier to me though, and they seemed to agree.

As we sipped our coffee, Davina stood up and walked over to the Christmas tree. “Everyone has had something to eat this morning, right? We’ll be having lunch soon, but there are also some cookies if you’d like them.”

She waved a hand absently toward the bar, but no one took her up on her offer. She smiled and her eyes filled with tears when she looked around the room. “All my little chickens back in the coop for Christmas. I can’t tell you how happy this makes me. We’re also so blessed that you’ve all found such exceptional partners and that our family is growing.”

Ross got up and joined her, sliding his arm around her waist and pulling her into his side to press a quick kiss to her temple. Then he flashed us a knowing grin. “Before Mom gets all emotional, let’s open some gifts.”

He released Davina and started reading names off the tags stuck to the gifts. He handed them out and insisted on hugs and pictures being taken with all his kids before he let go of the boxes. There was lots of laughter and jovial banter, and I was beyond flattered when Ross called out my name. “This is from Freya.”

I turned to her with big eyes. “What did you do? You’ve already given me a gift.”

She giggled. “Yes, but that wasn’t a Christmas present and this is. Besides, you and Calan got me something and I like shopping for the people I love, so obviously you were going to get something.”

“Thank you.” I gave her a squeeze before I got up to collect the gift. I hadn’t even opened it yet when Ross said my name again.

He held out a long box, wrapped in beautiful golden paper with a red ribbon tied around it. “Davina and I got you something too, honey. We hope you like it.”

Surprised and beyond moved, I was a little tearful when I opened it to find a gloriously soft, fluffy robe. As I trailed my fingers over the fabric, another wave of emotion crashed into me.

“Thank you so much,” I managed to get out, hugging her before I excused myself to go to the washroom.

Once I was locked away inside it, I wiped away the tears that had started falling as I’d hurried down the hall. Grief swept over me as I stood there, gripping the sides of the vanity with my head hanging forward and my shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

Christmas was always hard for me. I missed my parents every day, but it was so much more intense this time of year, the longing wrapping itself around my insides and strangling my heart. I missed my mother’s hugs and my father’s Dad jokes on Christmas morning. I missed the traditions we’d shared.

As I stood there, I imagined them sitting in their living room right this moment, sipping tea and snacking on cranberry lemon loaf just like we did every Christmas morning. Michael Bublé Christmas tracks echoed through my mind and I could practically see the tinsel dangling from our tree branches, tempting our cat, Boots, to whack it every time he ran by.

I missed them so much that my chest felt like it was cracking in half, my lungs refusing to function properly. After I’d stayed in the bathroom for as long as I could without cluing anyone in to my anguish, I finally managed to collect myself enough to rejoin the festivities.

When I opened the door, Calan was standing in the hall, waiting for me. His deep brown eyes met mine, concern etched in the lines around his mouth and eyes. “Are you okay?”

“Christmas is just hard,” I admitted in a soft, small voice. “I miss my family and how things used to be before I blew my life to smithereens. Guess it just hits a bit harder this time of year.”

He nodded, wordlessly wrapping me up in a tight, comforting hug. Calan held me for a long time, lending me some of his strength to get through the rest of the day.

As he was releasing me, Finn came down the hall. He looked between us, worry in his eyes when he seemed to realize I'd been crying. "You okay?"

"Fine," I lied. "It's just, uh, it's not easy spending Christmas without my parents, is all. It's nothing to worry about."

His gaze darted to Calan before it came back to mine and he offered me a warm smile. "Good. I'm glad you're not crying because of him."

Calan rolled his eyes, but before he could say anything, Finn spoke to me again. "Look, I've been meaning to apologize about not welcoming you into the family more warmly. I had some unresolved anger toward Calan, but I can see that you've helped him grow and I'm really glad you're around, Ella. I'm sorry I haven't been better to you. My feelings toward my brother didn't involve you. I should've been friendlier."

He clasped Calan's shoulder and turned to face his brother. "I'm happy for you, bro. And I'm glad you're back around more often. The past is in the past, right?"

I looked up at Calan just in time to see his jaw slacken, surprise in his wide eyes. He nodded at his brother. Joy bubbled in my veins when Calan took Finn's outstretched hand and shook it, and I wondered how he felt right now. What it felt like to finally have that forgiveness.

It was a Christmas miracle that gave me a tiny bit of hope. Perhaps next year, it would be my turn for one of those. It was unlikely, but right now, that hope was the only thing I had to cling to. *If not next year, then maybe the year after.*

I didn't know. I just hoped that one day, I'd receive forgiveness too. That one day, I too would be able to feel like a part of my own family again.

The wedding day had arrived and the grounds hadn't been this busy for a long time. People were already arriving, a continuous stream of cars entering through the gates I could see from the private room in the distillery that had been designated as Jim's space for the day.

Jim, his father, Finn, our father, and I, as well as a few of Jim's closest friends who were part of the wedding party, were sipping whiskey, hanging out until the ceremony was scheduled to start. I smiled, stepping away from the window and turning to face the others again. "This is going to be one hell of a New Year's Eve. You guys sure did know how to choose a date."

Jim was suffering from a case of natural, pre-wedding jitters, questioning everything from his cufflinks to their sanity in having chosen New Year's Eve for their nuptials. We were all trying to talk him up, but nothing seemed to be helping.

He glanced at me, blanching when he saw all the cars rolling in. "We invited too many people. Why did we think so many people would want to celebrate New Year's at our wedding? We—"

I arched a brow at him. "Look at all those cars, Jim. Just look at them. All those people are here because there's nothing else they'd rather be doing to usher in the New Year. I meant what I just said. What better way is there to celebrate the arrival of a new year than to watch two people you love tie the

knot? Personally, I think it's going to feel like a good omen for the year ahead for everyone who's here."

"Are you sure?" he asked, his voice strained and agitated as he tugged at his collar.

Finn stepped up beside me, nodding at Jim as he picked up seamlessly from where I'd left off. "We're sure, Jimbo. People are always looking at the shit going on around them to judge what the new year is going to bring. If there's a storm and fireworks get called off, boom. It's going to be a crap year. If people are all happy and celebrating without any drama, then yay. We're going to have a great one. This? You guys in love and with all the romance in the air? It's going to make people feel like it's going to be the best year yet. That's why they're all here."

"Besides, they could've just declined your invite if they didn't want to be here for it," I added. "Relax, bro. Everything is going to be awesome and your cufflinks are fine."

They were too shiny for my taste since my sister had Swarovski custom make them for him, but at least he was going to fit in with the rest of the décor. As Jim nodded, his dad and some of his boys took him over to the bar in the far corner of a tasting room that had been turned into the groom's suite.

Dad, Finn, and I were left in the sitting area, and since I'd been hoping to have a minute alone with them, I took the opportunity. Brown leather couches were scattered around us and a fire was roaring in the hearth. The atmosphere was filled with the buzz of anticipation. It seemed as good a time and place as I was going to get to try to do what needed to be done.

"Can I talk to you both for a moment?" I asked as I took a seat on the armchair across from the sofa Dad was on.

He nodded and a slight frown creased the skin between Finn's eyebrows before he nodded as well. Sitting down in the armchair next to the couch, he spread his legs and leaned back, bringing his drink to his lips and looking at me expectantly.

I held his gaze, not glancing away for a second while I spoke. Not even to look at my father yet. “It occurs to me I’ve never offered you a genuine, sincere, honest apology for what I did and I’d like to do that.”

Finn shook his head. “It’s in the past now, Cal.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t mean I should be let off the hook.” It would’ve been a lot easier if it did mean that, but I’d never been one to take the easy way out. “I *am* sorry, Finn. I’m so incredibly, indescribably fucking sorry. What I did was wrong and it doesn’t matter how I’ve justified it all this time, it was wrong and I should never have done it. I take full responsibility and I accept that I can’t change what I did in the past, but I can promise you that nothing like that will ever happen again. You can trust me. I know you don’t yet, but I’ll earn your trust back, little brother. Even if it’s the last thing I do.”

Dad watched silently, not intervening but taking me in like he was trying to decide if *he* could trust me again. I turned to him, needing to include him in the next part. “I’d also like to thank you both for cutting me some slack these last few weeks, for allowing Ella and me to attend all those events, and for making her feel as welcome as you have. I didn’t deserve it and I hope you know how appreciative I am.”

Finn drew my attention back to him when he blew out a deep breath, his eyes on mine as he shook his head again. “You shouldn’t be thanking us for that, Cal. I never should’ve isolated you from your own damn family to the extent where you felt the need to say thank you for it. I’m the one who should be apologizing, really. At the very least to Mom and Dad, and to Freya for putting all of them in the middle of it.”

“You had every reason to do it,” I said. “I understand that now. I fucked up, Finn. In a big way. It’s taken me too long to acknowledge that. I wouldn’t have wanted me around either.”

“Yeah, thanks, but it’s still your family too. I shouldn’t have forced them to take sides. Either way, thanks for bringing it up. I’ve been wondering if we were ever going to be able to have a real conversation about it.”

“I’m proud of both of you,” Dad said, his voice gruff but sincere. “Get it all out now, though. Just in case someone’s temper flares up and you need time to calm down. Freya will be overjoyed that her wedding has brought reconciliation, but not if one of you winds up pushing the other into the fire now that you’re talking about it.”

I chuckled, raising my hands to show him my palms. “I won’t be throwing Finn into a fire today. I swear. I just wanted to clear the air. It felt like a good time to do it. I’m hoping we’ll be able to enter the new year with a clean slate.”

“Same,” Finn said, surprising me when he smiled. “I’m fucking sick of hanging onto all that anger. It feels good to be able to let it go. Truth is, I’ve been feeling like shit about isolating you so much for a long time now, but I wanted you to feel the same way I did. I wanted you to hurt. It wasn’t fair, considering that you’re as related to them as I am, but it was the only thing I could think of that I knew would make you feel the same pain. In hindsight, I would’ve done it differently, but we can’t go back.”

“No, we can’t,” I agreed, grinning right back at him. He was right. It really did feel good to let it go. “Again, though, I deserved it. I did a shitty thing to my baby brother and you were right to want to hurt me back. I should’ve been protecting you, not piling onto the hurt.”

Finn leaned forward and held out his glass for a toast. “Truce?”

“Truce.” I clinked my glass against his, then against Dad’s when he joined in. As I stretched my arm out, I caught sight of the time on my watch. I took a drink, then set the glass down. “It’s time to go, gentlemen. You think Jim is feeling better yet?”

As one, we all turned toward him and his friends at the bar. He was all smiles again, clearly nervous and sweating bullets, but it looked like they’d managed to talk him off the ledge.

We made our way to the ceremony site outside, and I paused in the door for a moment to take it in. This was my sister’s fucking wedding day, and while I couldn’t quite

believe she was getting married, I was proud of her for how she'd managed to make it her own.

Like Freya had said, the ceremony was being held under a clear tent with outdoor heaters, the entire thing decked out in Swarovski crystals. It was snowing, which looked beautiful under the tent as the bridal procession started to enter once we'd all taken our seats.

It was a magical moment, sitting in the front row and turning to see the doors open, classical music filling the air as the girls appeared one by one. Then Ella was there and she took my breath away, dressed in powder blue and carrying a bouquet of white flowers.

For just a moment, I was completely swept away as I watched her walking down that aisle, imagining a day when the flowers wouldn't be the only thing that would be white and she'd be walking down the aisle to me instead of as a witness for Jim and Freya.

The reverie was broken when Finn gave me a nudge and leaned in closer. "You're a lucky man, bro."

I grinned, in complete agreement with him until I remembered that it wasn't real. Our contract would come to an end at midnight tonight. With her attendance at the wedding, all the terms had been fulfilled and she'd be receiving her payment in the morning.

Unless I did something to stop her from leaving, Ella would be gone from my life tomorrow and I'd never see her again. The realization hit me like a freight train, leaving me dizzy and obliterated on the inside. This was it.

This might very well be the last day I got to spend with her, and I definitely wasn't ready for it all to end. Not even close. I wasn't sure I ever would be.

At around seven p.m., the ceremony was over and we were at the reception, and I *still* couldn't take my eyes off Calan. It'd been hours since I'd seen him for the first time today, and yet, I still couldn't get over how much more authentically himself he was today as he celebrated with his family.

There was a lightness to him I'd never seen before. He was constantly smiling, joking around with friends and family, and honestly, he was the life of the party. Best of all, every time he looked at me, he lit up even more.

I had no idea if I was imagining it, but to me, it really looked like he felt the same way about me as I did about him. That he knew what we had was real and that the contract coming to an end didn't mean anything anymore.

We hadn't spoken about it and neither of us had been acting like our relationship was coming to an end with it. I was afraid to let myself hope, but damn it, I really wanted it to be true.

After spinning his mother around the dance floor again, Calan came up to me at our table, love and laughter shining in those dark eyes. He dipped at the waist and held out his hand. "Will you dance with me?"

"Of course." My heart squeezed as I planted my palm in his. He led me back onto the dance floor and spun me into his arms. I dipped my head back and looked into his eyes, and I slid my arm around his neck and toyed with the short hairs

there. “It’s been a beautiful wedding so far. Freya must be ecstatic.”

“I think so,” he replied quietly, those eyes boring into mine. “I’m going to kiss you now, baby. Right here in front of everyone. Is that okay with you?”

“Please.” I smiled. His head descended and he sealed his lips over mine. I swore I could feel him fusing himself to my soul.

Camera flashes went off, pulling me out of the moment a little bit, and I broke the kiss, resting my head against his chest instead. We swayed together on the dance floor. I listened to his heart beating against my ear and held him tight, wondering if my mind was playing tricks on me or if what I thought was happening between us really was true this time.

When the song was over, he excused himself to go grab us some more drinks, his gaze lingering on mine for a moment as he backed away. I smiled and headed over to wait for him at our table. Davina came to sit next to me, settling in on his chair as she watched him go.

She smiled and reached out to let her hand rest on my forearm, all kinds of soft, warm emotion in her eyes as she stared at me. “You and I never seem to have a moment to ourselves. Calan is always glued to your side, so while we’ve got a minute, I wanted to tell you how happy I am that my oldest son has found someone who makes him better. You make him better, Ella. Thank you.”

Tears filled my eyes and hers, and I nodded before returning her smile. “You raised a good man, Davina. Truly. All of your children are amazing.”

She chuckled. “They have their moments, that’s for sure.”

Calan came back with our drinks and she excused herself, giving him a quick hug before she went off to talk to some of their other friends. He cocked his head at me as he handed over a glass of champagne. “What was that all about? It looked like I was interrupting something.”

“You weren’t interrupting. She just wanted to speak to me for a minute. It was nothing bad.” I took his hand and cradled it in my lap.

His free hand snaked around my shoulders and he pulled me into him as he sat down, scooting his chair closer to mine so I could lean against him. “Nothing bad, huh? Want to tell me what it was, then?”

“She just wanted to tell me again how happy she is that we’re together.”

His lips brushed against my temple. “So am I.”

“Yeah, me three.” I cuddled into him, breathing in that expensive, spicy scent and praying that I wasn’t imagining things after all.

We sipped our drinks, not moving out of each other’s grasp as we watched the festivities happening all around us. Eventually, Finn came over, smiling as he looked between Calan and me. “Do you mind if I borrow him for a minute? Some of the guys want to do shots and Jim wants the photographer to get pictures of it for the party part of their album.”

Calan sighed but brushed a soft kiss to my lips before he got up. “Excuse me for a minute?”

I nodded. “Of course. Go have fun.”

“Thanks, Ella,” Finn said. “I’m glad you’re around. I’ll have him back to you real soon, okay?”

“There’s no rush,” I replied to him before I looked back at Calan.

Those dark eyes lingered on mine for a moment. He dragged in a deep breath, nodded, and then walked away. I had the distinct feeling that he’d wanted to say something else but had decided against it.

I watched him and Finn walking toward their friends, and I couldn’t help but wonder what was going on in his head. Whether he felt this connection between us as acutely as I did.

Freya broke me out of my thoughts when she appeared in my line of sight, deliriously happy with a huge smile on her face. She beckoned for me to join her, Polly, and some others on the dance floor. I returned her smile and stood, glad that the night was going so well for her.

I knew she'd been nervous about Finn and Calan, her anxiety about their fragile truce unexpectedly coming to an end consuming her these last few days.

As I joined them, she took my arm and shot a pointed look in the direction of her brothers at the bar. "Are they okay?"

I nodded reassuringly. "They're fine. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

She kept watching them for another long moment before she smiled at me again. "You're a true friend, do you know that? Really. Thank you. I'm not sure they would've ever made peace if it wasn't for you."

My heart gave a dull pang. "I'm pretty sure you and the wedding deserve more credit than I do. I'm just happy they got this far by tonight. I'm sure they'll keep getting closer from now on."

Polly flung her arms around our shoulders, sticking her head between us with a wide smile on her lips. "This is a beautiful moment, ladies, but let's get back to having fun, okay? You'll have plenty of time for deep, meaningful conversations when you're not supposed to be shaking your asses."

I laughed, swallowing down the dread that we might not, in fact, have plenty of time for those later. Even if Calan and I *did* break up at midnight though, this was still Freya's wedding and she deserved to have the best night ever, so I nodded and slid out from under Polly's arm.

She winked at me as she started swaying to the beat of the music again. Then Freya joined in and the heavy moment was over. One song bled into the next and I forced all my worries out of my head as I focused on having fun with the girls.

After jumping up and down, dancing, and even doing the Cha Cha Slide, I was sweating and in desperate need of water and some fresh air. I smiled at Polly while Freya went to coax more people to join us. “I’m going to get some air. I’ll be back in a few.”

I almost had to shout the words to be heard over the music, but she must’ve heard me because she nodded and shot me a thumbs-up before turning back to the others. Making my way through the crowd of gyrating bodies, I went back to our table and grabbed my bottle of water before heading to the exit.

It was quiet out in the tent now and I was relieved to have a minute to myself as I shut the door to the distillery behind me. As I took a deep breath, I realized that the sweet scent of cigar smoke was hovering in the air. Standing up straighter again, I looked around, seeing I wasn’t alone out here after all.

Ross was standing off to one side, having pulled away one of the tent flaps as he puffed on a cigar. He gave me a small grin and held the cigar out to me. “Puff?”

“No, thank you,” I said politely. “That stuff wreaks havoc on my sinuses the next day.”

Nodding slowly, he brought the cigar back to his own lips and took another puff, but his gaze remained on mine. “I’m surprised to see you out here without my son. You two have seemed to be glued together practically since he first brought you around.”

A little embarrassed and wondering if we overdid it, I chuckled. “He’s with Finn. I just wanted to come get some fresh air.”

Ross’s dark eyebrows rose. “They’re together?”

“At the bar,” I explained. “Jim wanted some party shots for the album. I’m sure they’d appreciate having you in one or two of those pictures as well.”

He stared at me for another beat. “In a minute. I’m glad to finally have some time alone with you, Ella. I wasn’t sure you and I would ever get the opportunity to talk without Calan.”

My heart skipped before it started racing. “Oh.”

He took another puff of his cigar and glanced out at the snow fluttering to the ground before he turned back at me, his expression thoughtful. “This may not be my place, but despite the difficulties we’ve had these last few years, Calan is still my son. I would be remiss if I didn’t tell you that I hope you love him, Ella. It’s clear as day that he’s head over heels in love with you. I won’t ask you to tell me how you feel, but for all our sakes, I do hope that it’s the same as him.”

I blinked hard a few times, completely bowled over and uncertain about what to say. I could tell his dad that I loved him, because I did, but since I hadn’t told him that yet, it felt a little bit premature to be admitting it to his father.

Plus, if our relationship did end with the contract, I would be nothing but a memory to Ross as early as tomorrow morning. While I was still hoping it wouldn’t happen that way, as things stood right now, that was exactly what was about to happen.

I didn’t want to give his father hope or ammunition to use against Calan when they found out we were over. I didn’t want him to blame his son for having done something wrong simply because I said all the pretty words now.

My throat threatened to close up as emotion swirled around inside. Finally, I just gave him the best smile I could muster. “Calan is a wonderful man, Mr. Reid. I would never hurt him.”

Those eyes narrowed a touch, but then he nodded and turned back to the open flap as he blew smoke into the freezing cold outside. “It’s good to hear that. We’ll be rooting for you.”

“Thank you.” With my head spinning and desperation clawing at my soul to find Calan and tell him the truth, I flashed Ross one last smile. “I’d better go find him. Have a good night.”

“You too, darling.”

I spun around and let myself back into the reception area, looking around wildly but not seeing him anywhere. Freya,

Polly, and even Davina were still on the dance floor, Jim and his friends watching them from the bar, but Finn and Calan were gone.

It felt like the walls were closing in on me now, and I definitely needed to get out of here. I needed to find him, drag him away, tell him how I felt, and then see if the world righted itself after Ross had thrown it upside down.

I'd been hoping so hard that it wasn't my imagination that Calan loved me too, but hearing those words from his father had thrown me for a loop. It was making it impossible to think about anything else. To keep going like nothing had happened.

Still desperately searching the crowd, I wandered down one of the hallways leading away from the reception. Neither Finn nor Calan were anywhere to be seen and it stood to reason that they might've gone to grab a drink from one of the other bars in the building.

The trouble was that I had no idea where to even start looking. As I kept moving down the hall, I suddenly heard the faint murmur of voices and my heart leapt into my throat. Fully aware of the fact that I shouldn't eavesdrop, I did it anyway when I realized that one of the voices belonged to Calan.

When I was finally close enough to make out what he was saying, it felt like I'd been kicked in the stomach. "I paid her to be my date."

"What?" Finn's voice cracked like a whip, shock and surprise dripping from it. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"I found this agency called Faux's. They set people up when they need a significant other for something, and after Dad told me that I had to bring a date, they saved my ass. Set me up with Ella so I'd have a believable girlfriend, but the contract ends tomorrow."

Finn's shock shifted to full blown anger. "So, like usual, you're all bullshit, then? You brought a paid date to our baby sister's wedding? What the hell is wrong with you?"

Just as I thought things might get heated, Ross blew past me and intervened, striding into the room and speaking clearly in that booming voice of his. “Pull it together, boys. Finn, I heard you shouting from all the way down the hall. Keep it down, would you?”

“No.” He scoffed. “Did you hear what I was shouting about?”

I’d kept moving, my feet carrying me forward and into the doorway. I hadn’t even been aware I was doing it until Finn spotted me, his muscles bunched tight. He narrowed his eyes when they landed on mine.

“You! You’re a fucking imposter. You’re just as bad as those women who were using my sister. You’re a fucking joke and—”

“Do not speak to her like that,” Calan seethed, his hands tightening into fists at his side as he rounded on his brother. “She saved Freya and she saved me, too.”

“Yeah, but she’s being paid for it!” he ranted, turning on Calan with his hand trembling as he squared off with him. “Jesus, Calan. Why is there always a hidden agenda with you? Why can’t you ever just be fucking honest?”

“I’m trying to—”

“No, you’re not. As always, you’re just trying to cover your own ass. You bought this girl’s time and made her lie to us. She’s nothing more than a whore and—”

Calan roared as rage twisted his features. He grabbed Finn’s collar and Finn lifted his arm, clearly ready to give Calan a fresh black eye. They almost came to blows, but Ross managed to pull them apart.

“Calm down. Both of you,” he snapped, then turned to Calan, his eyes flickering with cold fire. “What the hell is he talking about?”

Calan opened his mouth, but as he dragged a hand through his hair, he spotted me—and someone standing behind me. His gaze zeroed in on whoever it was and he visibly paled. I turned

and saw Freya. My stomach plummeted to the center of the earth.

All the color had drained from her cheeks and her lips were parted, eyes shining with tears. “Is this true? He paid you to be here?”

Hot tears pressed at the backs of my eyes. My entire body shook as I stared back at her, unable to say anything for the longest time. It felt like long, icy fingers were wrapped around my neck, trying to choke the life out of me.

There were so many things I could say. So many things I wanted them to know, but as the tears started streaming down my cheeks, I realized they wouldn't care. Calan and I had betrayed them. Lied to them. And the best thing I could do for him and his family was to get out of here and let him blame it all on me.

Hopefully, he could make them understand and save Freya's wedding. As for me, I wasn't one of them. I wasn't family, and the longer I stayed, the worse it would get. Finally, I managed to find my voice even as my heart splintered into a million pieces in my chest. “I'm so sorry, Freya. I should never have come.”

With that, I rushed past her, sobbing, as I wrapped my hands around my midsection and fled.

I *should've seen this coming. What the fuck was I thinking, opening up and telling the truth like this?*

I'd let myself feel safe with my brother for five seconds, deciding to bare it all at Freya's wedding in the hopes that Finn and I really could start the new year with a clean slate.

Idiot.

Everything in me turned to stone as Ella started sobbing and ran out. For the first time in my life—even more so than it had four years ago—it felt like my world was falling apart around me. It felt like I'd just lost everything that was important to me and it was like I could see it all going up in flames.

And yet, the only thing I could focus on was the empty spot where Ella had just stood. The crushing weight of guilt, desperation, and heartbreak kept me rooted to the ground but only until it finally sank in that she was going.

Going, going, gone.

The realization freed my limbs and I took off after her, ignoring everyone else as I broke into a run. My father yelled after me, but I still didn't stop. "Get your ass back here, Calan!"

If I could've, I would've, but I couldn't. For the last four years, I'd wanted nothing more than to repair my relationship with my family, but right now, nothing seemed more important

than catching up to Ella, making sure she was okay, and explaining myself.

If it hadn't been for her, I wouldn't have had a shot at making things right with my family anyway. She was the reason I'd had a chance at all. The reason I'd had a few weeks of peace and reconciliation with them—all of which I'd just tossed a stick of dynamite into.

Ultimately, however, it wasn't her fault that I had just gone and fucked it up. I'd gotten ahead of myself, wanting to come clean to Finn so I could get his help with what to do next. Since I had zero experience with relationships, I'd figured Finn might have some ideas about how to tell Ella how I felt.

Obviously, that had blown up in my face, but even so, as my footsteps thundered against the polished concrete beneath my feet, I knew I had to do *something*. We were way past the point of that something being elegant, moving, or even eloquent, but anything was better than nothing at this point.

I pushed open the wide double doors at the main exit, finally spotting her crossing the grounds, making the trek along the lantern-lit path next to the small, man-made lake. Clearly, she was heading back to our guest house.

What she planned on doing once she got there, I could only guess. It probably involved borrowing a car, getting a cab, or even bewitching a damn broomstick. Whatever got her away from the family compound the fastest.

Breathing hard, I raced after her, only calling out once I got a little closer. "Ella! Wait. Stop. We need to talk."

I saw her stiffen, but she didn't stop moving, hurrying across the snowy ground as fast as her feet could carry her. "Leave me alone, Calan. I don't want to talk."

Shivering like a leaf and obviously angry, she hugged herself tighter, keeping her head down as she broke into a jog. I followed after her, already sliding my jacket off so I could give it to her. "Let's just get back inside. It's freezing out here. If you still want to leave, I can call a car. We don't need to run all the way home."

“You might not have to, but I do. I can’t go back there, Calan! You embarrassed me. I can never show my face in front of your family again. Just let me go.”

“No.” I fell into step beside her, racing to keep up. “Here. At least take my jacket.”

I started spreading the material to drape it around her shoulders, but she shook her head. “I don’t want your jacket. I don’t want anything from you. I knew this was going to end badly. I fucking knew it.”

“Hey, it hasn’t ended,” I reasoned. My heart pounded wildly when I realized that this might be it. This might be the end. For real now. Forever. “Can we please just talk?”

“No.” She finally glanced up at me, tears still rolling down her cheeks and her face contorted in pain. “I should’ve listened to my gut and not even come to the wedding. As soon as Freya’s friendship was on the line, we should’ve called it. I never wanted to hurt her or your family, and now I just feel like yet another tool used against them.”

“That’s not fair, Ella. I didn’t do this with bad intentions. You know that. You know exactly why I approached Faux’s.”

She scoffed, her head shaking. Misery and dejection shone from those eyes even as she kept hurrying along. “No, Calan. I don’t know any of that. I thought I did, but now, I’m not so sure. I don’t know if I can believe anything you say.”

“What? Why not?”

Her jaw slackened and she threw a hand out in the direction of the distillery. “What kind of person does *that* at his sister’s *wedding*? You told me you were doing all of this *for* her, but if that was true, you wouldn’t have chucked a live hand grenade at her on the biggest day of her life so far. Right now, I don’t believe you and I don’t even feel like I ever really knew you at all.”

Each one of her words stung, but I couldn’t give up. I couldn’t just let her go. “Look, I can explain that. I swear I didn’t do it to ruin Freya’s wedding.”

Ella snorted, her eyes narrowing as she shook her head. “There’s always an explanation with you, isn’t there? You’re fucking allergic to taking responsibility. You dragged me into this and now I’m part of the reason she’s going to look back on today with such horrible memories.”

“I dragged you into this?” I knew we were getting off subject here, but shit. If she was so guilt-ridden over her part in ruining the wedding, I wasn’t going to get anywhere with the other stuff before we got that part straight. “You came into it with your eyes wide open, Ella. You knew what we were doing and you knew why. None of that has changed. Can we please just—”

“It hasn’t changed?” she yelled at me, head shaking. She screwed her eyes shut with fresh tears running down her cheeks. “Everything has changed, Calan. Everything! *You* changed it. How many times did I try to walk away? How many times have I told you that we can’t keep lying to them?”

I stood my ground, needing to make her see. “What’s changed, Ella? You needed money and you’ll be getting it. I know you tried to walk away, but it’s not like you were kicking and screaming the whole time and didn’t stand to gain anything. You sure had no problem with it when we were having sex.”

Her eyes went wide and I practically saw the hurt cascading over her as her pretty face fell. “You really are an asshole. Just stay away from me, Calan. I mean it.”

She spun and marched away. I wanted to yell back at her, remind her that this wasn’t all my fault and that the only thing that had changed was that my family knew the truth now—because of *me*—but I didn’t have it in me.

All the wrong things had already come out, and as I watched her trudge through the snow in her high heels, I realized that if I had any chance at all to deescalate the situation, I needed to stop focusing on the wrong things. So what if she blamed me? So what if she doubted me?

She was wracked by guilt, and since I’d been the one who fucked up, obviously she was lashing out at me. What it came

down to was that I still hadn't explained myself and I still didn't want to lose her.

I just needed to stop saying the wrong fucking things. Kicking my feet into motion again, I followed her and wrapped my jacket around her shoulders without asking this time.

She tried to push me off. "Don't."

"Ella, just take it. At least I'm wearing long sleeves and an undershirt. You're going to freeze to death before we even get to the house."

She didn't react immediately, but eventually, she conceded, wrapping the fabric around herself and holding it closed in front of her chest. *It's not much, but it's something.*

Since she was still shivering, I moved in close to her side, draping my arm around her as both of us froze our asses off. Neither of us said anything else, though. I still felt like I could feel her pain slicing through the center of my being and I hated knowing I was responsible for it, but I didn't know what to do or say to take it away.

I didn't know how *not* to make it worse.

It felt like I'd end up causing more damage if I opened my mouth again, so I kept it closed until we stepped into the guest house. The warmth of the interior washed over me and I breathed out in relief. I guided her straight to the lit fire in the hearth and stood right there with her as I waited to defrost a little.

Once my brain felt a little less frozen, I drew in a deep breath through my nostrils. "I'm sorry, Ella. I didn't mean for any of that to happen the way it did. What do you need? How can I make it up to you?"

She turned to face me, tears still brimming on her eyelids, but the corners of her mouth lifted in the barest hint of a smile. "I just want to go home, Calan. I think it's for the best. We've both said things we can't take back and the term of the contract has come to an end. Let's not hurt each other more."

As she said it, it felt like giant parts of my internal organs were being torn apart by a rampant beast rattling around inside me, but I didn't mention it. The last thing I wanted was to hurt her more, and right now, I just didn't know how to dial this back so far that we'd be able to have the conversation we needed to have.

The contract term had come to an end, and if she wanted to leave, I couldn't keep her here. I wasn't sure I should try because I wasn't used to feeling this way. I'd never felt more helpless and it felt like I was standing right at the edge of an abyss.

Like what remained of my life was in such a fragile state that if I took even one step, I'd drop right into said abyss and I'd never be able to pull myself out of it. It was unlike anything I'd ever felt and I didn't know what to do about it, but I doubted she wanted to stand around and wait until I finally figured it out.

I was also genuinely afraid that, if I tried pushing, if I tried to talk to her, I'd end up pulling her into that abyss with me. Until I managed to find a way to put several miles between it and myself, it was better to let her leave.

"I'll call you a driver," I said, reaching into my back pocket for my phone.

Ella shook her head again. "I'll call Mikey and Kara. You need to get back to your family, Calan. They're what's important right now."

Logically, I knew she wasn't wrong, but yet, despite having realized that it was better to let her go for now, I couldn't bring myself to take so much as one step away. Ella Carver had changed my life for the better these last couple of months.

She'd made me feel things I'd never thought I could feel. Made me see things from a whole new perspective. I was at the edge of that abyss now because I knew I was losing her, and even though I was still afraid of pulling her into it with me, I couldn't bring myself to just let go.

With those two parts of my brain, heart, and soul waging a full-fledged war within me, I watched as she dug her phone out of her purse and made the call.

Fuck, I know I have to let her go. I know I can't keep her here if this isn't where she wants to be, but how the hell am I just supposed to let it happen? How am I supposed to watch her leave, knowing that she's never going to come back once she's gone?

Calan had barely said a word since I'd called Kara and Mikey. He sat on the sofa in the living room, most of the lights still off as they had been since we'd walked in.

A fire danced in the hearth and the lamp in the corner of the room was on, but aside from the soft glow of orange highlighting certain parts of his sharp features, his face was shrouded in shadow. He gripped a glass of whiskey in one hand, but he hadn't taken a sip yet.

Instead, he was staring at the fire, looking more broken than I'd ever seen him before. His handsome features were contorted, his brow furrowed and a haunted look in those eyes I couldn't blame him for. Everything had gone to shit in the space of an hour, and while I still didn't know why he'd told Finn the truth, I wasn't surprised that he had clammed up in the aftermath.

Gutted, heartbroken, and reeling, I didn't know what to say either. I didn't know how to act, so while he sat in front of the fire, I sat at the kitchen counter, waiting on tenterhooks for Mikey and Kara to arrive.

Or for Kara, at least. I had no idea if Mikey would be coming with her. It was past eleven on New Year's Eve, after all. He'd been trying to warn me about Calan for weeks. I didn't know if he'd have dropped everything to come rescue me now when I'd been so horrible to him before.

When I'd called, I wasn't even sure Kara would answer, but she had and it was a testament to her incredible friendship

that she said she'd be leaving in five. With nothing left to do but wait, I'd left all the Swarovski gifts from the Reids on the dressing table in the bedroom, grabbed my toothbrush, and then I'd come to sit here.

As I glanced at Calan again, I had to fight the urge to go to him. To help. I didn't even know what he was doing here anymore. He needed to go back to his family and attempt to patch things up all over again, but perhaps he'd had enough confrontation for one night.

Perhaps he didn't even care anymore.

I honestly didn't know. As he sat there, it didn't even look like he was really even in his body anymore. He hadn't moved for the longest time, but he was still blinking, and his eyes were open, so he hadn't fallen asleep or anything.

More tears welled in my eyes but I beat them back with a mental stick. I didn't want to cry anymore. Not right now. My heart was in shards, my anger at myself a living thing breathing fire into my veins. Out there, I'd tried to blame it all on him, but the truth was that it wasn't only his fault.

Things between us had gotten out of hand. We'd been digging our own grave deeper and deeper for weeks now. I'd known it was a bad idea. Known he was a bad idea, but I'd stuck around.

Every time I had a crisis of conscience, I'd allowed him to talk me out of leaving. I should've been stronger than that and I definitely shouldn't have been so naïve as to let myself fall head over heels for a man who had been a walking red flag since the moment I'd met him.

It'd been so unbelievably stupid, and I should've known better. Hell, even if I didn't know better, I should've listened to Mikey's warnings. Calan and I had both been emotionally and financially invested in this insanity, but Mikey was an independent outsider.

As soon as he started expressing his doubts to me, I should've pulled back, but I hadn't, and now not only was I hurting, but I'd hurt other people in the process. *And for what?*

Calan and his family were worse off in their relationship now than they'd ever been before, and if Freya never spoke to him again, I wouldn't be surprised. She'd been the last person he'd had left in their family and now we'd hurt her more than any of the others and we'd done it on the day she'd been hoping to bury all those old hatchets for good.

A sob rose from deep within, but I bit it back. I shot off the stool I'd been sitting on when the intercom went off, signaling someone was at the front gate. *Kara!*

Calan stood up to buzz them in, then turned to me with a tortured expression. The broken pieces of my heart all tried reaching for him, longing to wipe away the pain he was obviously feeling inside. But I couldn't do that.

It wasn't my place anymore. Never had been. I'd simply let myself forget it for much too long.

He opened his mouth, but I shook my head, inhaling deeply. I walked to the door with my purse in my hand. I'd have to get all my things from him at some point, but I couldn't let myself make any arrangements right now.

It would've been practical, but I just couldn't. I couldn't make any plans with him. Not even just for that.

Instead, I opened the door and walked out, willing myself to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Calan was right there behind me, walking me to the car. He didn't touch me or say a word, but I felt him there, his presence still larger than life even if it felt darker now. I couldn't explain it, but it was like something inside him had snapped tonight and he had let go of all that hope that had been making him feel lighter these last few weeks.

Snowflakes were still drifting down from above, and I shivered, but at least I had a shawl wrapped around my shoulders now. A shawl I would be returning to his family along with this dress, but just like everything else, that could wait.

Kara's headlights caught on the snow, making it glitter as she rolled up in front of the guesthouse. To my surprise, she

and Mikey were there, and they got out instead of just opening the van's back door for me to get in.

As she climbed out, she handed over a duffel bag, her gaze sweeping over me before it settled on Calan for a moment. "We're coming inside for a few minutes."

He must've nodded because she returned it and then came up to me, wrapping me in a hug before ushering me back into the house. "There's a change of clothes in there. We weren't sure if you had anything warm enough, so we brought you sweatpants, a hoodie, some boots, and a winter coat. Go put it on. You can't walk around in an evening dress and the heat in the van is on the fritz."

Gratefully accepting the clothes, I let her walk me inside and then headed back to the bedroom, changing as fast as I could while I fought more tears. Even after everything that had happened, Mikey was here and Kara had been thoughtful enough to bring warm clothes.

I will never deserve friends like them.

While I dressed, I heard voices filtering down the hall but I couldn't make out what they were saying. They seemed harsh, though. Calan's voice was in the mix too, but I'd heard enough from him. I wished we would've been able to talk.

Even if only so I could get closure.

I wanted to know so badly why he'd spoken to Finn about us tonight. Why he'd told him the truth when we'd come so close without anything going awry, but perhaps that was the answer. Perhaps he just couldn't help himself. Perhaps he secretly lived for the drama even when it could only be caused by self-sabotage.

I couldn't quite bring myself to believe it, but at this point, it was one of the only viable reasons I could come up with for him spilling the beans when we were within spitting distance of the finish line. If only he'd waited a couple of more hours, our relationship would've been over anyway.

Sure, I'd thought that maybe it wouldn't end, but clearly, he hadn't even been able to wait until the morning. With my

throat aching under the strain of constantly having to swallow back tears and agony, I left the bedroom to find Mikey and Kara waiting for me.

“Where’s Calan?” I asked quietly.

Mikey shrugged and took a step forward. “I kicked him out. Ready to go? Is there anything I can carry for you?”

I shook my head no. “It’s just me and my purse.”

He offered me a wry smile. “I guess I could carry you.”

I let out a humorless, teary chuckle. “Thanks, but I think I need to walk out of here on my own two feet.”

Mikey nodded and stepped up on my left while Kara took my right. She wrapped her arm around mine while Mikey planted his hand at the small of my back. “Okay, let’s get going, ladies. It’s a long drive back.”

“Thanks for coming to get me.” I led them back to the front door and then outside again, but to my surprise, Calan was still here, waiting right in front of Kara’s van.

When he saw us emerge, his jaw tightened and he ignored my friends as he strode up to me. “Look, Ella, I’m going to ask you one more time if we can talk. Please? It’ll only take a minute. No bullshit. No excuses. No wedding talk. We need to talk about us, not Freya, or Jim, or my parents, or Faux’s. You said that I’m allergic to taking responsibility, but I’m not. Just let me explain.”

“I’m tired, Calan,” I said weakly, feeling like I was about to fall apart at the seams. “There’s nothing to talk about anyway.”

Mikey’s hand dropped away from my back and I knew he was getting ready to get rid of Calan, probably by shoving him away if he had to, but Calan brushed past him, wrapping his long, strong fingers around my hand and not backing down this time.

“I’m so fucking sorry, Ella,” he said fervently, honesty and determination bleeding into every word. Standing right in front of me, he dipped his head to look right into my eyes and

ignored Mikey scowling at him from the side. “I am so incredibly sorry about everything that has led up to this moment, but I know how it feels to live with regret, and I refuse to let you leave without putting all my cards on the table.”

My heart hurt so, so very much to have to do it, but I shook my head. “There are no cards left to be played here, Calan. This was a mistake. Every minute of it from beginning to end.”

Those dark eyes bored into my own. “I’m in love with you. Truly, madly, and deeply, and I have been for weeks.”

Disbelief slammed into me, so real and so unexpected that my knees buckled, but Kara’s arm and Calan’s hands in my mine held me up. “What?” I asked.

He nodded, tightening his grip on me and taking a step closer. Mikey cursed quietly but Kara’s eyes were as wide as mine, her body as rigid. Calan was still staring at me so intently, I didn’t even know if he realized they were still here.

“There’s a goodness in you that is rare in this world,” he said. “You make me want to be good too. You make me want to be better and better every day, and not only for you, but for myself and my family as well.”

My lungs, heart, and pretty much all my internal organs forgot what they were supposed to be doing. The world around us faded away, and suddenly, Calan was all I could see. Tears glistened his eyes now too and his voice was shaky, but it left no doubt in my mind that every word he was saying was true.

“I trust you completely. More even than I trust myself. I’m terrified of anything bad happening to you. Ever. I wake up thinking about you. I think you’ve driven me to the brink of insanity and I don’t know how to find a path back to normal if I lose you.”

He squeezed my hands and closed the last bit of distance between us. He brought our joined hands to his chest to let me feel the pounding of his heart. “I told Finn the truth tonight because I was hoping he’d be able to help me figure out how

to talk to you about this. How to make you believe that how I feel about you isn't about the contract. How it's not fake to me anymore and hasn't been for such a long time that I'm not sure it ever was. I should've just come right out and told you, but everything felt so much more complicated to me just a couple of hours ago and I thought he might be able to help me uncomplicate it."

As he said it, hope and fear intermingled in the very center of my being. I stared up at him as snow continued to fall around us. It was heavy with silence except for the sounds of the wedding in the distance.

I swallowed hard. "I'm scared, Calan. I'm in love with you too, but what if all this chemistry we've got only exists because of the drama? The lies? The contract? The fighting?"

"There is no way." He released my hands to stroke my cheeks and wipe away the tears. "I am going to love you until I'm dead, whether you love me back or not. Whether I lose you or not. I'm yours, Ella Carver, and that's never going to change."

My heart was racing faster than ever before, so many emotions swirling around inside me that I didn't know which was the most dominant. The only thing I knew for an absolute was I loved him too, and so that was what I went with.

"I love you, Calan Reid. I'm scared, and I'm excited, and I have no idea what's going to happen after this or how we're going to move forward when everything is in tatters, but I do love you."

His lips spread into a slow, wide grin as he leaned in to kiss me. Kara swooned as I wrapped my arms around his neck, kissing him back with everything I had left to give. As our lips locked, the sky exploded with light, New Year's Eve fireworks going off across the lake and over the wedding tent.

Once again, the night had taken an entirely unexpected turn, but this time, I knew that regardless of what happened tomorrow, or the day after that, or the day after that, Calan and I would be facing it together. And right now, that was all I really needed to know.

I wanted to get her inside where it was warm and have her all to myself for the rest of the night, but as I took her hand and started leading her to the guest house, Ella planted her feet and shook her head at me. “We have to go back to the wedding.”

“Now?” I frowned. “Why? We can work it all out tomorrow. Let them have tonight, baby. Let *us* have tonight.”

“We have a small window where we might be able to make this right and we have to take it,” she insisted, using her grip on my fingers as leverage to pull me closer to her. Bringing her free hand to my cheek, she touched it gently, her eyes resting firmly on mine. “We cannot let them go to sleep tonight thinking what they do about you, and about us, right now. Freya wanted her wedding to bring peace to your family and it almost did. After we nearly ruined the whole damn thing, we have to at least try to give her what she wants more than anything else.”

Shit. She's right. As I filled my lungs with the crisp night air, I was about to agree when Mikey finally snapped at her.

“Are you fucking kidding me? You're crazy, Ella. I officially don't recognize you anymore. When you called earlier, I hoped that you'd finally come to your senses, but obviously, this was a giant waste of time.”

Ella tensed, but as I watched, she rallied, her expression smoothing over. She slowly released me and turned to walk up

to her friend. Taking his hands, she gave him the smallest, most sincere smile before she released a shuddering breath.

“I love you, Mikey. You’re one of the best friends I’ve ever had and I’ll never know what I did to deserve your friendship. Thank you for coming all this way for me tonight. Thank you for always being there for me.”

“Why do I feel like you’re about to break up with me when we’re not even in a relationship?” he grumbled but didn’t take a step back or withdraw his hands from hers. “What is it, Ella?”

“You know, just a little while ago I was thinking that you were right. That I should’ve listened to your warnings about him, but the truth is that those warnings might just have been why I’ve had one foot out the door almost since the very beginning.”

He snorted. “Clearly, one foot wasn’t enough to keep you from falling for the asshole.”

“Why are you so opposed to this?” she asked quietly. “You don’t know him and you heard everything he just said. You know how he feels and why everything went sideways, and you also know that his intention has never been to hurt me, so what is it? I know you’re not in love with me yourself and I know you’re not just a vindictive person who doesn’t want his friend to be happy. Tell me what’s going on.”

When Mikey’s shoulders rolled and his eyes narrowed, I moved forward but Kara touched my arm, shaking her head at me. She pulled me back and I sighed but stayed with her. I knew Mikey was important to Ella, and once again, I was impressed with how she was handling the situation, trying to understand instead of just telling him to back the fuck off, but I really didn’t like how he treated her. Like she was too stupid or too fragile to make her own decisions.

He was her friend, not her father or her keeper, yet he was behaving like she was some kind of possession gone rogue. I didn’t understand it at all, but if she’d kept him around this long, there had to be a reason.

Mikey stared back at her for another beat before he deflated visibly. “Seeing what you went through with Spencer almost killed me, Ella. I’m not even just talking about how it all went down in the end. I’m talking about years of watching you pander to him. Of watching you break off little pieces of yourself just so you would fit better with him. I saw you bend over backward for a guy who so obviously wasn’t willing to give an inch for you.”

She blinked a few times rapidly, her tongue coming out to wet her lips. Her mouth opened and closed, but no words came out. Mikey was clearly on a roll though, not needing her to say anything to tell her all these things he’d been holding on to for so long.

Even Kara was crying now, and I saw that she shared his pain. Stepping up to her side, I put my arm around her shoulders when they started shaking with silent sobs. Frankly, I felt like I might just cry too. It wasn’t something that happened often, but fuck, hearing what he was saying and knowing that he was talking about Ella—my Ella—was really fucking tough.

I’d wanted to track Spencer down before to tear him a new one for hurting her, but now, I was pretty sure I’d simply tear him apart with my bare hands if I ever found him.

Mikey’s voice started shaking, but he pushed on. “For years, I watched you surrender all those little things about yourself, your own hopes and dreams, and I saw him taking and taking, never giving a thing in return, but I couldn’t say anything. Not when your parents loved him like a son and you were giving up so much to be with him, but your parents don’t even know Calan and I don’t have to shut up this time.”

My chest tightened, but Ella stayed calm. There were tears tracking down her cheeks again, but she didn’t even try to wipe them away. “I’m sorry you felt you couldn’t say anything. I wish you would have, but I get it. I wouldn’t have listened anyway and you felt like the same thing was happening now. With Calan.”

He jerked his chin in a nod. “Isn’t it? This man literally bought and paid for you, Ella. You’ve done everything he’s asked because it’s in some contract, and once again, it doesn’t look like you’ve had much of a choice. Once again, I’ve had to watch you put what you want on the backburner for a guy who isn’t willing to give an inch for you. How is that fair, Ella? How is that *not* crazy?”

She stared at him for another beat before she glanced at me over her shoulder. If it wasn’t for the small smile she gave me, I’d have thought that maybe she believed what he’d said even if nothing could be further from the truth.

As she turned back to him, she took his shoulders to move him to face the distillery. In the dark and with the snow still coming down, we couldn’t really see the building from here but we could see the glow of the lights and we could still hear the faint sound of the music in the distance.

“Right now,” she started softly. “Calan’s family is over there, celebrating his sister’s marriage. She’s the person who means the most to him in this world, and yet, he’s over here with us instead of being over there, trying to clear things up.”

“Yeah, because he needs you with him to be able to do that.”

Ella’s head shook. “When I ran out earlier, he came after me immediately. I screamed at him that he’s an asshole and took off again, and you know what he did? He followed me again, gave me his coat since I’d run wearing only my dress, and when we got here, the only thing he asked was what I needed.”

Mikey didn’t argue this time, his gaze on the lights across the lake. Ella must’ve taken his silence as her cue to keep going. She smiled as she stepped into his side, taking his arm in her hands and squeezing it. She leaned her head against his shoulder.

“After I told him I wanted to go home, he offered to call me a car, but I called Kara instead. At that point, he definitely could’ve just gone back to the reception and told them all that I was gone. He could’ve tried to make amends and he could

even have lied about it, but he didn't. In fact, you just heard him say that he told his brother the truth at his sister's wedding because he didn't know how to tell me how he feels about me."

She dragged in a breath so big, it made her chest rise and fall under the thick coat they'd brought her. "Does that sound like the actions of a man who's unwilling to give an inch? I respect you and I know you're just trying to protect me, but you don't have to, Mikey. I know to the depths of my soul that this is right. I don't expect you to understand, but after taking some time to process, and as my friend, I expect you to accept that I've made this decision and to respect that I love him."

She gave him a quick hug, then let go of him and strode over to where I was still standing with a sobbing Kara. "Thank you for coming to pick me up, but you can leave now if you want. I'm sorry for wasting your time and ruining your night. I'll make it up to you. Somehow. Just tell me what I can do."

I gave Kara a final squeeze and withdrew my arm in favor of holding Ella instead, my mind racing with what I could do to help her make it up to her friend. "If you want to stay, there's one more room available at the property next door. Why don't you come back to the wedding with us, have a few drinks, and then sleep over there?"

Kara wiped her cheeks and arched an eyebrow at me. "You're inviting extra guests to your sister's wedding?"

"It's a nice wedding," I said. "I've already blown it up. Why not bring two extra people back with me to boot?"

I cracked a smile and she grinned, but Mikey didn't. She glanced at him before she sighed. "Well, I'm in, but we're going to have to talk him into it."

"Come on, Mikey," Ella encouraged him. "Maybe if you see his family and where he comes from, if you speak to them and witness the way he interacts with them, then you'll have a better idea of why I love him. Plus, there's really good booze down there. Only the best stuff. At worst, you'll be able to get the most expensive buzz you've ever had and you won't have to pay so much as a dollar for it."

“What she said.” Kara went over and batted her lashes at him, a wide grin spreading on her lips. “Come on, don’t be a party pooper. Besides, it’s a wedding. There are always single girls at weddings, looking for a young, handsome guy exactly like you to keep them company when they’re feeling all alone.”

He blew out a heavy breath, but after a few more seconds, he nodded. He didn’t look happy about it, but at least he’d agreed to stay. I wrapped my hand around Ella’s and we all hurried through the snow back to the distillery.

Ella was still in her sweatpants and I had no idea what we were going to say to try to fix things, but when we finally reached the wedding, I was relieved to see my sister dancing with Jim and some of our cousins, laughing and having fun.

They’d moved out into the tent again to watch the fireworks still going off and a speaker had been moved out so people could keep dancing. It looked like the celebration was still in full swing, which meant that maybe I hadn’t done as much damage as I’d thought.

As we rushed in, I headed straight to the person who mattered the most. Freya. She was still dancing, but she saw us coming as Jim spun her in a circle, and I swore I saw her light up with hope. But then Finn was there, his hand landing heavily on my chest before he shoved me back and put himself directly between my sister and me.

“Back off, Calan. Haven’t you already done enough?”

Ella was still holding my hand and her touch kept me calm. I thought back to how she’d handled Mikey earlier and drew inspiration from that, hoping that Finn would be back by my side by the end just like Mikey was still at hers.

Reluctant and uncertain, for sure, but he was here. Maybe I could convince Finn to give me the chance to convince him as well.

“I’m sorry about how I handled things earlier,” I started. “I didn’t explain myself very well nor did I give you any reason not to react the way you did, but I’m not running this time. I’m

owning the mistake I made, I'm taking responsibility, and I'm hoping that you'll talk it out with me and let me make it right."

Mom and Dad moved in next to Finn, who was still just glaring at me. Dad looked as skeptical as Finn and he stood close to his side, like he, too, was trying to protect Freya from me. Mom glanced at both of them before she turned to Ella and me.

"I'd like to hear him out," she said.

A moment later, Freya appeared, looking gorgeous in her wedding gown with her eyes clear and not swollen. It didn't look like she'd cried at all, and while there was definitely some anger in her tightish jaw, she motioned for me to continue.

"Speak, Cal. I want to hear what you have to say for yourself this time."

I nodded, completely focused on doing it right this time. With Finn and with Ella earlier, I'd said all the wrong things. I hadn't made much sense and it'd almost cost me everything. This time, I wasn't just going to say whatever came to mind.

I spoke with slow, deliberate purpose, weighing everything in my mind before I let the words leave my mouth. "At the beginning of all this, I hired Ella to be my girlfriend. You guys wanted me to have a date and said I couldn't come without one, and I wanted to get you off my back. I wanted to be here for Freya and I didn't want to be the guy who constantly had to be watched. The brother nobody trusted. Ella was my cover. My damage control."

I exhaled slowly before I inhaled again, looking at Freya the most often but making eye contact with everyone—and even Mikey—in turn. "What I didn't know when I approached the agency was that they were going to set me up with someone I met before. Ella and I actually met that night in Edinburgh after I left you. She was kind to me that night, helping a complete stranger she'd literally found on the streets and then patching me up."

As I said it, I tightened my grip on her hand, not really believing how far we'd come since that night. "Because of the way she treated me, I never forgot about her, but we didn't keep in touch. I had no idea she'd signed up with Faux's or even that she was back in the States."

Mom started smiling when she saw the way Ella and I were holding on to one another, but she didn't interrupt me. "She almost walked away when she saw who they'd matched her up with and I had to beg her to follow through. Obviously, she eventually agreed, but she definitely wasn't super excited about all the time we would have to spend together."

I thought back to that day in the coffee shop and grinned, turning my head to drop a quick kiss on top of her head. "That's when things started changing, with all that time we spent together. We were forced together by our situation, but I fell for her. No word of a lie. Ella's support, her kindness, and her understanding helped me work through things I kept buried for years and she helped me rediscover who I used to be, and who I want to be going forward."

"Who's that?" Freya asked, tears shimmering in her eyes, but I saw the faint smile on her lips. "Who do you want to be, Calan Reid?"

"I want to be your brother and their son." I glanced at each of my parents. "I want to be a member of this family. A good man. A man worthy of Ella's love and your trust and forgiveness."

Freya stared at me for another beat after I'd finished talking, then suddenly broke into a wide grin and threw her arms around me. She held on to me for a long time before she hugged Ella. She beamed as she pulled away.

"I forgive you," she said excitedly. "Both of you. You're idiots for lying to us in the first place, but I get it. I even think I might've gone just as far or even further to be able to be at your wedding, and as long as you're being honest now, that's good enough for me."

She spun around and put her hands on her hips as she faced our family. "The best wedding gift you could possibly

give me would be to forgive them and for us to move forward. Together.”

My heart catapulted itself into my throat, but my mother nodded almost immediately, smiling at both Ella and me. She told us that she was sorry we felt pressured into that kind of situation in the first place. She hugged us each for a long time before she finally broke away to introduce herself to Kara and Mikey.

Dad and Finn took a little longer, but Dad held out his hand and shook mine. “Let this be the last time you lie to us, but okay, Cal. At least I know your love for her is real. I’ve seen it myself and there’s no faking that.”

Finn sighed deeply, not quite shaking my hand or expressly saying that he forgave me, but he offered Ella a tight smile. “I’m sorry about what I said earlier. I seem to be giving myself a lot of reasons to have to apologize to you, but I shouldn’t have said what I did. If you’re going to be sticking around, can we put it behind us and start over?”

Ella beamed at him. “Of course. I look forward to it.”

His gaze swung my way next, but he just tipped his head to the bar. “I’ll be over there if you want to talk. For now, I think I just need another drink.”

“I’ll be there in a few.”

First, I was going to dance with my girl for as long as she wanted me to, and after that, I would find him. If not tonight, then tomorrow. There was no rush. Things were going to work out this time. I could feel it all the way down to my bones.

After dancing the rest of the night away, Calan and I returned to our guest house. He'd had a quick chat with Finn, but they'd agreed to talk more tomorrow. Mikey and Kara were staying in that room Calan had offered them on the property next door, and they'd had a blast ringing in the New Year on the dance floor with us.

Although Mikey hadn't said it, I knew he'd been impressed with Calan and that he believed what he'd told his family. The look on his face after they'd hugged us had said it all. When he'd looked at Calan, his features hadn't been twisted with anger or distrust. His eyes hadn't been clouded over or stormy.

Instead, his expression had been open, his features soft and his eyes filled with pleasant surprise. I didn't know for sure, but I had a feeling Calan had finally managed to convince my friend that he wasn't who Mikey had thought he was.

They might even turn out to be friends. *Here's hoping.*

Emotionally exhausted and still finding it hard to wrap my head around everything that had happened in just one night, I was happy for some alone time with Calan when he closed the front door behind us.

I yawned, kicked off my sneakers, and stretched my arms up above my head. "Man, what a night. That was crazy. Wasn't that crazy? Why'd you wait so long to tell me how you feel?"

Arms wrapped around me from behind, holding me close to his chest. He nibbled playfully at my earlobe. “I didn’t know you had such bad taste in men. If I knew you’d actually fall for an asshole like me, maybe I’d have fessed up earlier.”

I giggled and rested my head against his shoulder, peering up at him. “Well, you have exceptional taste in women. Maybe that’s why I fell for you.”

“Because I fell for you?” he teased, tracing my ear with the very tip of his tongue. “Far be it from me to say so, but maybe you should have higher standards.”

“Nah, my standards are just fine. Loving a man who loves me the way I need to be loved? Who allows me to love him the way I want to love him without telling me how I should be doing it? I think I’m doing just fine.”

“Good to hear it.” We strode down the darkened hallway toward the glow of lights that were still on in the master bedroom.

After we’d left to go to the wedding the first time, the staff must’ve come in and switched on some of the lamps because the main lights were off in all the rooms and we hadn’t bothered with them earlier. I was happy for that now.

Less so when I saw my dress still neatly draped over the bed where I’d left it after hurriedly changing into Kara’s clothes. Calan tensed a bit behind me when he saw it, then ran his hands down my sides and hooked his fingers into the hem of the hoodie, pulling it up and off me.

Kara’s shirt underneath went next. Then he pushed off the sweats, nudging the backs of my knees to step out of them. Left only in my bra and panties, I stood there, staring at the dress and remembering just how close we’d come to losing each other tonight.

Calan’s thoughts seemed to be on the same page as my own. He finally let go of me to step around me to the bed and sweep the dress off. Then he sat down on the edge of the mattress, faced me, and held out his hands.

I took them, stepped between his spread knees, and looked down into those dark eyes, more expressive now than ever before. At least, they were expressive if I was seeing what I thought I was seeing, which was a healthy dose of fear mixed in with a little bit of hope.

His black hair was tousled after the night, messier than usual and still slightly damp from our walk back through the snow. As I stared at him, he seemed to be drinking me in, waiting for me to either tell him what I was thinking or to make the first move if I wanted to.

Releasing his hands, I ran my fingers up his strong arms to his jacket, pushing it off his shoulders and letting it lie on the mattress behind him. After that, I undid the buttons of his shirt, tugging the hem out of his pants and then getting rid of that too.

He kicked off his shoes and lay back, hooking his hands behind his head. I climbed into his lap. Pressing my hands to his chest, I focused on the steady beat of his heart under one of my palms and took a deep breath.

“Does this really belong to me?” I murmured, not wanting to speak too loudly for fear of breaking the little love bubble we seemed to have entered once we’d walked into the room.

The atmosphere between us right now was gentle and loving, the air itself feeling almost soft against my skin. Calan slid his hands over my own as he nodded. “My heart, my body, and everything I have is yours, Ella. I didn’t plan for it to happen this way and I’ll understand if you—”

“I love you.” I leaned forward and tucked my hair behind my ears before flattening my torso against his to speak against his lips. “I didn’t plan for it to happen either, but you don’t have anything to worry about, Calan. I feel exactly the same way you do.”

“So what happens now?” he asked as he stared into my eyes from less than an inch away. “I don’t know what’s supposed to happen now.”

“Neither do I,” I admitted. “I don’t think we have to have it all figured out right now, though. I suppose the only thing we really need to decide is whether we’re going to keep living together. If you want, I can move back to Kara’s—”

“You’re not going anywhere,” he practically growled and his arms banded around my hips. “I realize that it’s not conventional to live together from the beginning, but we’re already doing it, and it’s working, so unless you decide you’d rather move out, you’re staying.”

I smiled against his lips. “There’s no place else I’d rather be.”

The statement seemed to give him pause. He stilled underneath me, his eyes taking on a contemplative distance before he focused on me again. “Is that true? I know you were willing to give up your dreams of traveling before and I don’t want you to feel like you have to do that for me. Joe can manage the day-to-day of my business and I can oversee it from anywhere. If you want to travel or if you have to for work, I could be right there with you.”

I pushed my fingers into his hair and breathed him in, unable to believe that such a good heart had been buried under all those spikes of his all this time. “I’m not saying that I never want to travel again, but for now, I’ve got enough material I can use to write pieces I’ve always wanted to write but never got around to.”

“What about what you want, though? Regardless of all the material you’ve gathered to keep writing, do you want to take off again?”

Instead of answering right away, I took a minute to really think about it. Here was a man I loved, who was offering me everything I’d ever wanted on a silver platter. If I told him I wanted to be on a plane by tomorrow night, I knew he would make it happen without breaking a sweat.

All I’d have to do was say the word, and yet, I couldn’t find a single trace of desire within me to be anywhere else right now. It was so strange, but after all these years of feeling that constant itch to go, to keep moving, to see more, do more,

and to never stop skipping from one place to the next, I finally felt at peace.

I finally felt like I'd found a place to belong. A home. A place I wanted to come back to even if I did leave.

It felt like I'd finally found what I'd been searching for all my life and all over the world, and I hadn't even realized that was what it was. Even when I'd been with Spencer, I'd felt that urge, but now, I truly believed that it was because, deep down inside, I'd always known he wasn't the one for me.

"What I want is you," I said eventually, tearing up as I spoke the most honest truth I ever had. "I don't want to go anywhere right now, except maybe home tomorrow morning, but I don't want to take off. If I ever see the inside of another airplane, I want you to be with me. I want it to be on a trip we planned to take together and I want to get homesick with you."

Those deep brown eyes slowly moved from one of mine to the other, and he smiled against my lips and spoke between kisses. "As long as you don't get sick of me, I'm in."

"Never," I promised, tightening my grip on his hair. I moaned into his mouth as he kissed me senseless.

With his arms around my hips, he rolled us over, his weight pressing me into the mattress, and he devoured my mouth like he could never get enough. I took everything he offered and I returned it with my own, writhing underneath him as he rocked his hips against mine.

We made out like excited teenagers who were just happy to have the chance to be together without anything holding us back, and by the time I stripped off his pants and underwear, I was so turned on I might've been glowing.

Calan kept kissing me, his mouth trailing along my throat and to my chest. I arched off the bed as he sealed his mouth over one of my nipples, and I reached for him, wrapping my fingers around his long, thick shaft.

He groaned against my skin, his mouth traveling further down to lavish every inch of me with loving, tender, but hot,

open-mouthed kisses. I squirmed, my legs spreading wider to make space for his head as he descended between them.

But I didn't want to let go of him either, so I turned with my back against the bed, obviously surprising him when I closed my lips over his tip.

"Ella." He sucked in a breath.

I grinned around him, finally releasing him from my mouth just for a moment. "What? I've never done this before. Humor me."

"If you insist," he teased on another groan. Then he ran his tongue through my folds and I forgot all about talking.

My first orgasm happened hard and fast, my hips bucking as pleasure raced through me, making me scream his name around his throbbing cock. He licked me through it, quickly pulling out of my mouth and kissing me deeply as he positioned himself between my legs.

"Any chance you're on birth control?" he asked as he nudged at my entrance, his breathing ragged and his voice rough.

I shook my head. "I've never really had any reason to be, but I'm going to look into it. Like, tomorrow."

"I don't—"

"I want to," I assured him and kissed him again just before he rolled off me to grab a condom out of his wallet.

It took him a minute to locate his pants, his wallet, pull the package out, tear it open, and roll it on, but in that time, I just looked at him, admiring the strong planes of his torso and the rippling of the muscles in his forearms.

When he came back, he kissed me again and sank into me. He made love to me for as long as we could both hold out, and then we went over the edge together. He never let go of my hands, never stopped kissing me, and it was only when he had to slide out of me in the aftermath that either of us spoke again.

"Happy New Year," he whispered as he held me close.

I pressed a kiss to his chest, listening to the steady thrum of his heart as I curled into him. I'd never really bought into all that hocus pocus surrounding the new year, how people believed in the magic of the new beginning it signified and all that jazz.

But as I lay there, listening to his heartbeat, knowing that we were really together now and that we both wanted to stay that way, I wondered if this new year was also the beginning of our happily ever after. If maybe, this right here, tonight, was where our story would really begin.

I sure hoped so and I had a feeling he felt the same way. We'd already been through a lot together, and if we could just hang onto what we had now, nurture it, and keep growing it, then I knew we'd be okay.

We'd be together. No matter what. For the rest of our lives.

The End.

EPILOGUE

Three Months Later

I held Ella's hand as we pulled up in front of a two-story brick home in Bridgewater. A mailbox at the end of the driveway read *Carver* in bold, capital letters, and Ella was just about vibrating with nervous energy beside me.

Spring had sprung and it was a beautiful day, the sky a clear, deep blue with no clouds in it at all. Her parents' front yard was green. Potted flowers on the porch were starting to bloom, and from the outside at least, everything about this place seemed warm and homey.

Yellow curtains hung in the windows and a sedan was parked in front of the garage. I glanced at her, squeezing her fingers, and I shut off the engine. "This is it. Are you ready?"

She gnawed on her lip. She had been doing it for so long that it was red. Her brow furrowed and those dark green eyes darted around from the car, to the front door, and back again. I blew out a quiet breath, turning in the driver's seat to face her.

"Stop, baby." Reaching up, I tugged her lip free and then leaned in closer to brush her hair behind her ears, holding her face in my hands after. "If you're not ready, you don't have to go in there. Just say the word and I'll start the car. They'll never even know we were here."

"I have to go in," she said, her voice soft but determined. Her gaze finally landed on mine and settled there. "It's been

long enough. It's time. I can't chicken out. I won't."

After looking into her eyes for another beat, I nodded and gave her a quick peck on her lips. "Okay, then we'll go in. I'm here if you need me, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed softly, closing her eyes and dragging in a few deep breaths before she turned and opened her door.

Almost immediately, the sound of birdsong drifted to my ears, the traffic in the distance barely even audible at all. Ella's parents' house was on the outskirts, their property flanked on both sides and at the back with tall trees with branches that carried new, bright green leaves.

It was a pretty nice place, really, but I knew Ella wasn't seeing any of that at all. As I followed her out of the car, she smoothed her hands over her shirt again, her gaze focused on the front door.

January had been good to us. We'd settled in as a real couple, spent a ton of time with my family, and when Freya had come back from her honeymoon, she and Ella had sat down for an entire afternoon to talk. Their friendship had grown by leaps and bounds, and barely a day went by that they didn't talk.

Finn and I had also had a few long talks and he'd finally come to realize that I hadn't hired Ella to bullshit them, but to help find a bridge back into my own family. He still thought I could've found a better way to do it and maybe he was right.

Maybe there had been another way, but I sure hadn't seen it at the time, and he'd admitted that he didn't have any ideas either. Besides, he adored Ella. She and Norah were becoming friends, and he had eventually let it go, telling me that all was well that ended well.

With our relationship on track and all the drama with my family behind us, Ella had turned her attention to her own situation by February. She'd also gotten back into writing and was doing better than ever, focusing her pieces on off-the-beaten track adventures and romantic breakaways for couples.

She didn't write about the normal couple-type stuff at all, swapping candlelit dinners for lantern-lit picnics in jungles and that kind of thing, but it turned out that more people than I might've expected were obviously looking for exactly that.

I'd been surprised that she'd gathered so much information about those kinds of adventures on her travels. She'd just shrugged and told me that she'd always been a closet romantic. With her career back on track, our relationship settled, and her preliminary research into Spencer done, she'd finally tracked him down last month.

I'd been with her, and while it had very nearly turned into a shit show, she'd managed to turn it around. I'd watched—in awe of her again—as she'd opened up to him, apologized, and told him that she'd forgiven him, even if he might never do the same.

The guy hadn't been particularly warm or even particularly receptive, but he'd accepted her apology and had ended their conversation by apologizing to her in turn. Then he'd said that he'd put the whole thing behind him, that they'd brought out the worst in each other, and that he wished her luck but that she should put it behind her as well.

Which was what we were here to do.

She'd said all along that the hardest part was going to be talking to her family. There was a lot to say and she was scared. She was angry with them. She was hurt and she knew she'd hurt them too. After all, she was the one who'd run off to Europe.

As we got to the porch, she tightened her grip on my hand and held me back for a moment, those green eyes wide and shiny with emotion as she looked up at me. “Whatever happens, thanks for coming with me today. I wouldn't have been able to do it without you.”

“Yes, you would've,” I countered gently. “There's nothing you can't do if you put your mind to it, Ella Carver, but I'm happy to be here with you anyway.”

She inhaled deeply, closing her eyes for a beat. Then she nodded and started walking again. I could practically feel the nerves trickling through her, radiating from her heart like a beacon of despair.

I understood, though.

This was a big day. A day she'd waited a really long time for. If it didn't go well, her heart was going to break all over again and she'd have to somehow make peace with the fact that her family had chosen Spencer over her for good. That there wasn't going to be any redemption for them. That she was forever going to be out of the fray.

While I hoped that wouldn't be the case and that her parents turned out to be the kind of people I thought they had to be in order to have raised a daughter like her, I was nervous too. My mother and sister were standing by in case she needed them and even Finn and Dad had said that they could come to our place anytime.

My family was ready to accept her with open arms as one of our own, which was great. I was beyond grateful, but I knew that Ella really missed her own people. If we could have her family as well as mine, that would be the absolute best thing that could happen.

If not, well, at least we had mine.

Kara and Mikey knew we were here, too. They'd offered to come, but Ella had thought it would be better if it was just her and me. She didn't want to overwhelm her parents by showing up with an entire group of people and she wanted them to meet me—even if they didn't end up talking to either of us much at all.

They were waiting for us at their place, keeping the champagne on ice for what would either be a celebration or a goodbye to that part of her life. Her breath caught as she knocked, and she held it until the door swung open and a woman appeared on the other side.

Even if I didn't know whose house this was, I'd have picked this woman as Ella's mother. She was the spitting

image of her daughter, albeit with a few extra lines on her face and some gray hairs mixed into the black.

She had the same petite but curvy build. The same forest green eyes, and they lit up the same way Ella's did when she was surprised and happy. At the sight of that light going on in her mother's eyes, everything in me rejoiced.

Not a thought I have very often, but it's true.

"Hi, Mom," Ella said with a sheepish, scared smile on her lips. "I, uh, this is Calan. Is now a good time?"

The woman pulled her in for a tight hug right away, silent tears quickly building and streaming down her cheeks as she held her. "Oh, Ella. Oh, my darling. My baby. You're home. Of course, it's a good time. It's always going to be a good time for you."

I grinned from ear to ear, already knowing that this was going to go better than any of us had expected. Ella was finally home and it seemed her mother, at least, was happy to have her here.



LATER THAT NIGHT, after we'd spent all afternoon with Ella's parents and had driven back to the city, we were having dinner with Kara and Mikey in their turquoise kitchen. The champagne they'd been chilling had been broken out, and my girl bubbled with excitement as she told her friends all about our visit with her parents.

"We're going to have dinner together next week," she was saying.

I sipped my awful champagne. I really wished they would have let me bring a bottle, but now we were all going to have horrible hangovers tomorrow because they'd insisted on getting it themselves.

Still worth it, though. I'd spend the rest of my life with a horrible hangover if it meant getting to watch her like this, truly happy and with her soul completely free as she spoke to

her friends. Friends who, despite their terrible taste in alcohol choices, were becoming my friends as well.

Even Mikey and I were no longer enemies. It'd taken him a couple of months after the wedding to really accept that my intentions were pure and that I'd never knowingly hurt Ella or manipulate her into bending to my will, but now that he'd realized that I honestly loved her and wanted the best for her, he was finally really on board.

He elbowed me as Ella kept talking, bending his head closer to mine with his eyes sparkling with laughter. "Did Mr. Carver put you through the interrogation? I can imagine he'd be pretty intense about it."

I laughed. "It was nothing I couldn't handle, but maybe the very intense part is still coming."

Raising his glass, he nodded and waited for me to clink my glass against his. "Well, I guess this is your official 'Welcome to the Family,' then, huh? If not even her dad managed to scare you off, it looks like you're here to stay."

"Nothing is going to scare me off," I repeated for what felt like the umpteenth time this year. "Thanks, though. I thought I already *was* part of the family."

He chuckled and shrugged one shoulder. "You were to us, but now I guess your real lives together are about to begin and the drama from your past is officially that—in the past. So cheers. We're happy to have you, Cal. Especially because it's starting to look like our girl is actually going to be sticking around this time."

"Definitely," Ella agreed in a sing-song voice as she smiled at Mikey and me. "We are planning a few trips, though. There are some places I want to check out for my next pieces and they happen to match some of the places on Calan's bucket list. But we won't be gone long, and we'll bring gifts."

"Yay," Kara cheered, coming over to Ella from where she'd been standing behind the stove to give her friend a quick hug. "How are you feeling, babe? You look better than I've

seen you in a long time, but you've told us how it went. Now it's time to get real and tell us how you are *in here*."

She tapped Ella's heart before she let go of her and picked up her glass. Her eyes were on Ella's as she cocked her hip against the counter. Mikey grew serious next to me, momentarily stopping his joking around and laughter as he waited for her response.

Ella's eyes got misty, but she smiled. "I feel amazing. I can't even put it into words, but it just felt so damn good to get it all off my chest, to apologize and to hear them do the same. I wasn't sure I'd ever get to feel this, but they've accepted me back into the family and we're going to work on healing together. I can't wait."

"Oh, honey. I'm so thrilled for you," Kara cooed. She raised her glass above the counter and made eye contact with each of us before her gaze settled back on Ella's. "Here's to all the pain finally left behind in the past where it belongs, and to plenty more sexy times with this man right here. With all the strings attached this time."

Mikey laughed but lifted his glass to hers. Ella blushed but leaned into my side, smiling as she clinked her glass against theirs. I followed suit, lifting my glass but turning my head to plant a kiss on top of her head.

I never knew this kind of happiness existed. Never thought I could feel so light, and free, and joyful all the fucking time. I didn't even know if I'd have wanted it if I had known before, but now that I had it, now that I knew how this felt, I was going to do whatever it took to keep it.

To keep Ella and to make every dream she'd never even had come true.

Just like she had done for me.

**Did you love Calan and Ella? Want more? I've got an
Extended Epilogue just for YOU.**

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MY YOUNGER BROTHER HATES ME... he's getting married.

And of course, my mother is going to have a field day with me still being a bachelor.

But love is for the birds. I don't have time for that madness.

So, a fake date from an agency will work in a pinch.

Hope this poor damsel in distress is up for having to meet my wretched family.

If she survives, I'll have to give her a bonus. Or hire her for my lonelier nights.

Much to my surprise, she's not at all what I thought she would be.

Curvy, bold, hilarious – everything I want in my life.

This isn't good.

Why in the world would a woman like her sell her time to a man like me?

Surely there's more to her story than meets the eyes.

Not my problem. I just need one thing from the delicious beauty.

Fake it real good, baby. Fake it good.

I gotta have this!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Weston Parker
EVERY *good girl* DESERVES A *bad boy*

Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, my daughter, two dogs, three cats, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

You're going to find Billionaires, Bad Boys, Military Guys, and loads of sexiness. Something for everyone hopefully. I'd love to connect with you. Check out the links below and come find me.

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Fake It For Him

A Faux Love Novel #12

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