

# RED CURTAIN

ISSUE #1

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## TURNING A NOVEL INTO A MOVIE

Gay romance author M.D. Gregory gives the details on her new film

## ROMANCE ON SET

Dean Thorne and Ingram North seen canoodling on the set of Wyndinham Hollow

## Spicy!

How actors prepare for "those" scenes

Healthy family meals

by social media chef  
ELIJAH COOK

# 10

WAYS TO  
GET AN AUDITION

Do celebrities  
have crushes?  
We ask them!

# FAN SERVICE

## KI BRIGHTLY

# FAN SERVICE

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KI BRIGHTLY

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## **Wishing For The Real Deal**

Dean Thorne is living the dream by costarring with the swoon-worthy Ingram North in a popular historical show—Wyndinham Hollow. The problem? Dean feels like a fraud. Their characters are in love, and with each passing day it's becoming more difficult for Dean to distinguish fact from fiction.

## **Strangled by Mob Ties**

Ingram North is in deep trouble. He worked hard for his big break in Hollywood, but he hasn't always played fair to get it. He has been paying off the mob to stay quiet about his shady past. Sadly, Ingram's bank account is close to zero. To make a complicated situation worse, Ingram feels things he shouldn't for Dean. In a last-ditch effort to end the blackmail, Ingram makes a proposal that will entangle his career with Dean's in a dangerous way.

## **Fake Boyfriends or More?**

Ingram asks Dean to go on a promotional tour guaranteed to cement them as a fictional couple in the minds of the public. The money Ingram will make from the tour is the only way that he might keep his head above water. Dean is excited because he'll get to spend more time with Ingram. Everything goes smoothly until the mobsters blackmailing Ingram turn their attention to Dean. Ingram worries for Dean's safety, but he is also scared to tell Dean the truth. Can Ingram come clean before they're both killed? Or will everything Ingram has worked so hard for—including his budding relationship with Dean—be destroyed by the criminals who helped him get his start?

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I want to send out a special thanks to Suzanne Irving for her theater and costume design expertise!

*This book is for Drea (who tells me to go edit with memes), and all the wonderful friends I have ever made while wrapped up in a Fandom. Some of my oldest and best friends were met while raving delightedly about a shared love of a good book, TV show, or movie. Thank you for all your love and support.*





DEAN THORNE



I READ SOMEWHERE ONCE THAT IT TAKES EIGHT MINUTES OF staring into someone's eyes to fall in love.

Only *eight*.

That's almost nothing.

In shooting and reshooting scenes for Wyndinham Hollow, Ingram and I had probably logged hundreds of hours of staring at each other—directly in the eyes. He had long brown hair that he scooped back in a ponytail at the base of his neck, soft looking full lips, and hazel eyes that were slightly more green than brown.

There was a gold fleck in his left iris at the very bottom, and each time I noticed, my heart flipped.

Half of our characters' story arc in season one had been longing looks while clandestinely holding hands. Season two, which we were currently filming, was murdering me slowly.

Ingram leaned forward on the park bench we were sitting on, and I held my breath as he brushed a kiss to my cheek. My body went warm all over and I fought not to reach up and tug at the lacy collar of the historically accurate, starched white shirt I was wearing.

“Cut! Oh, that's perfect, Dean. How on earth do you get those expressions down so well? You're such a dream to work with.” Caroline, the director, pointed at me from near the camera Benny had set up on a tripod. She had a sea of red curls that flowed around her head, and as a breeze kicked up,

the strands smacked Benny in the face. He batted at her hair, and she elbowed him. He was a skinny blond guy who dressed like he was eighty-five, though he was about my age, and Ingram had told me this was his first job on a series.

Feeling flustered, I shrugged at Caroline when she stopped, planted her hands on her hips, and raised her eyebrows at me. Two of the sound techs were crowded near her fiddling with equipment, but she ignored them.

Ingram wrapped his arm around my shoulders and laughed. The weight and heat of his arm had my heart racing, and I swallowed hard, trying to contain myself.

“She’s right. You’re really amazing.” He gave me a sweet smile that curled my toes in my uncomfortable leather shoes.

I broke and tugged at the collar, even though the costume designers would have a lot to say about it if I popped a button.

This season our characters were getting closer, which meant Ingram and I were also getting closer—physically, at least. I didn’t know Ingram very well as a person, and every time we were alone I was so tongue-tied and stupid I had trouble saying anything *real*. After the whirlwind of promotions that followed last season and the intense interest in what the studio would do with our characters, I was starting to feel the stress—*grinding my teeth in my sleep* type of tension. When I glanced at Ingram, he had that same calm aura he always did.

It wasn’t fair that he was so steady, but I was glad I was the only one always on the edge of freaking out—or we’d all be in trouble.

“Are we shooting again? It’s ninety degrees and we’re in wool.” I forced a smile at Caroline. “Am I amazing enough to not need another take?”

“It’s seventy, tops.” Ingram winked at me.

“I run hot.” No, I absolutely was not whining.

He hummed and smirked at me, and I wanted to crawl under the bench. My cheeks burned.

“What did you just say to him, Ingram? Are you still filming?” Caroline stared at me, and my face scalded even hotter.

“Yep,” Benny said in the same soft tone he always used, his British accent bright in the words. He sounded regal.

Caroline let out an excited shriek that scared the crap out of me. “I want that expression for the credits. I want it. Oh my God, can you do that again, Dean?”

I stared at her. *Please, brain. Please work.* “P-probably.”

She nodded, and I didn’t enjoy the gleam in her eyes as she flipped through her script like a madwoman. “To the house! I want that expression there in scene eighteen. Do you have those lines memorized? Tell me you have them memorized! You two have been working on this, right?”

“Uh. . . yes?” My heart hammered. I’d looked each scene over, but we weren’t supposed to film those ones for two days. She was trying to kill me.

“It’s okay, you’re fine,” Ingram soothed, and I had to laugh because he was causing most of my issues, but I nodded as Caroline yelled her wishes—more like *demands*—that we go back to the house, which in real life had the much less whimsical name of Smithfield Manor. The crew scrambled to follow her orders.

“There’s something in the contract about not working the actors to death,” I said, half joking and the rest hating life. We’d been filming since a little after seven this morning and it was closing in on sunset.

“It’s okay,” Ingram said again, and he stood, holding out his hand for me.

“But I’m hot and starving to death.”

Ingram studied me, and it was impossible to tell what he was thinking. He was the type of actor who had true control of his features. My breath caught as a smile spread across his face. “If you get through this next scene, I’ll take you to dinner.”

I blinked at him. We'd done quite a few things together because we were often on set at the same time, and we usually finished filming together, so this wasn't anything new. My stupid heart still slammed in my chest like it wanted to run away from my awkwardness. I nodded.

He gave my shoulder a squeeze. "That's my boy," he said quietly. "You're going to be fine, Edwin."

I groaned at the use of my character's name and let him haul me to my feet. Whatever. I was Edwin right now. "Thank you, Azariah."

He grinned, and my heart swept along fast enough that my pulse thundered in my ears. I followed after him, taking the cobblestone path to the manor. If I didn't know Ingram was totally unaware of how I was feeling, I would think he was doing this on purpose.

The manor always took my breath away. It was four stories and as many wings of gray limestone broken up by glittering curved windows. Decorative white marble casings stuck out from the sloped dormers. The main entrance was a wooden door about nine feet high with a rounded top. The wood was solid enough to survive a battering ram, and I knew that for a fact because the crew had accidentally backed a truck into it once while they were unloading furniture, and the tailgate had only left a tiny dent that was easily fixed. The manor was elegant because of its simplicity and always made me feel a little insignificant, a reminder that the show was so much bigger than me.

Ingram didn't let go of my hand while we made our way through the labyrinth of hallways and rooms beyond the entrance hall to arrive at an elaborate music room with brilliant green walls. I went to the piano, which was one of the few things in the house I was comfortable with, and immediately began to play one of the church songs that I'd read were popular during the 1750s. Caroline gasped and whispered to Benny to start filming me. I fought not to grin as Ingram walked around and leaned an elbow on the piano. He smiled, and heat swept over me.

The crew must've finished setting up because Caroline waved at me.

"You shouldn't be here," I said, starting in on my lines. Caroline often let us lead a scene if it was something small between the characters, so I didn't bother to wait for further instructions.

"Why not, my love? The maids are finished for the day. Your parents are off visiting the neighbors." He stepped closer and came to sit on the piano bench, facing away from me, but his gaze was glued to my face. My fingers continued to play on autopilot.

"Because we could get caught."

"We're doing nothing friends wouldn't do." Ingram grinned, but he had a slightly cockier attitude than usual. Right now, he was fully Azariah, his character.

"Friends wouldn't sit so close," I said, swallowing hard. The scent of his cologne tickled my nose. It had faded throughout the day but still lingered to tease me. I closed my eyes and smiled, exactly the way I—*Dean*—wanted to do, but I figured that Edwin would've liked the smell, too.

"We're more than friends, aren't we?"

My fingers stumbled on the piano, and I let the song stop, resting my hands in my lap. "Yes," I said.

He leaned closer and my throat almost closed. He'd brushed kisses on my cheek in the past, and he wasn't supposed to kiss me on the lips now, but I felt stupid with how much I wanted it. If there was any justice in the world, he would be a terrible kisser—no one should look as fantastic as he did and be one-hundred-percent perfect—but I knew in my heart he would also be great at teasing my mouth with his. He was the full package.

Ingram brought his hand up to cup my face, positioning us as perfectly for the camera as if Caroline had been barking directions at him. He was good at that, too. He always knew how to make both of us shine. I trembled and squeezed my hands together. He searched my eyes, and I fell into his gaze.

“Would you accompany me to my room?” he asked, voice nearly a purr, and my cock plumped in my historically inaccurate boxers.

*Oh my God, I can't breathe.* “Y-yes,” I murmured.

“Cut!” Caroline yelled, then giggled.

I flinched.

Ingram laughed, amusement twinkling in his eyes.

All at once, I groaned and dropped my head. Caroline stomped to our sides, and I tried not to look at her.

She dropped to her knees and took my hand, a smile playing on her lips. After a few seconds, she laughed like a loon. “No. You’re supposed to say no. Although, I get why you would say yes.”

Benny chuckled and gave me a fond smile that made me feel as if I was a dumb kid, even though he was usually very reserved. Laughter I hadn’t been expecting washed through the room. I glanced over my shoulder and found that my agent, Shauna, and my mom had snuck in and were milling near the red ornamental wooden door, well out of the camera’s line of sight.

Mom was wearing an outfit that made me want to groan on the inside. We looked a good deal alike, and at fifty-two, she had a nice body, but I wished she wasn’t wrapped up in a Victoria Secret velour sweatsuit with the word Pink on the front in gold shiny letters. I’d begged her more than once to dress a tad more professionally if she was just going to show up when I was filming. She never listened. Her blond hair was in a messy bun on the top of her head and she had on black sunglasses, despite the hour, while she chomped gum.

Shauna waved. She had on a respectable suit in a shocking shade of turquoise that made her resemble a runway model. Her deep brown curls swung in glossy waves around her shoulders as she leaned down to listen to whatever Mom had to say.

Ah, my humiliation was complete. Everyone I saw day in and day out had witnessed my fuckup.

Sighing, I waved a hand in the air. “Can we just do it again without making fun of me forever? Pretty please?”

Shauna and Mom cackled from their spot farther away, and Caroline bit her bottom lip and nodded.

Benny just shook his head.

We reshot the scene twice more before Caroline was satisfied. I couldn’t stop myself from blushing every single time Azariah—Ingram’s character—asked Edwin if he wanted to go to his room, mainly because a parade of naked fun ideas flashed inside my head.

“Okay, that’s enough torture for Dean today,” Caroline finally said.

I slumped down, letting my forehead smack the piano keys and sending a horrendous sound echoing off the music room walls. When I sat up, Ingram brushed his thumb over my cheek.

“Of course, Azariah would’ve been charmed beyond thought by your acceptance,” he said, grinning. The jerk winked.

Whimpering, I covered my face with my hands.

“You do such a good job with this character,” Ingram said.

Part of me felt I should correct him, but if he hadn’t figured out yet that I was a walking mess, I didn’t want to be the one to give away the secret. Let him think I was just some brilliant method actor who was perfect at dropping into character.

Mom and Shauna hustled toward us, their heels cracking on the wooden floor.

“Ingram, sweetie! Come to dinner with us!” Mom called, louder than ten people needed to be. Embarrassment swamped me. She’d always talked like she needed to shout to be heard, and Ingram never commented on it or even acted as if he’d noticed.

“We were already planning on dining together, Mrs. Thorne. I’m delighted you and Miss Valbuena will be joining



us. Having lovely ladies at the table is always a plus.”

Mom and Shauna giggled like they were twelve, and the worst part? I wanted to do the same thing.

“Yes! I love it! Will your agent, Martin, be coming with us?” Shauna asked.

Ingram shook his head and smiled. “He’s in Los Angeles. We need to change out of our costumes, but we can be ready to go in about twenty minutes, right?” He shot me a glance, as if he really was my boyfriend asking for my approval of dinner plans.

“Sure,” I said faintly, but inside I was on Def Con one, ready to duck and cover. I needed some time without Ingram around so my body could stop being on edge, but I only smiled at him because—God help me—I couldn’t turn down time with him, even if it was going to do me in.



INGRAM NORTH



I SAT ON THE PINK, EMBROIDERED QUEEN ANNE CHAIR IN MY changing room—which was one of the smaller bedrooms in the manor—ready to cry as I stared at my phone. My face tingled from the makeup remover, and I tried to pretend that was why my eyes were burning. This was never going to end. Sighing, I swallowed hard and rested my head back against the chair. This was an *Ingram* problem. *Just be Azariah*. Well, I'd done that for a week now, and this issue hadn't magically gone away. Sighing, I went through the chore of shaking off Azariah's personality, which I loathed to do these days.

Ingram's life was a trash heap. Azariah had it all. Looks. Wealth. An angel for a boyfriend.

Giordano Family Fuckhead: 30k by tonight or we make your life hell.

Closing my eyes, I groaned. They'd been asking for more and more money, and I had no idea how to make this stop. Blackmail wasn't anything I'd learned how to deal with in my acting classes. This was all my fault, though. My gut churned.

Ingram: Can I have more time? I gotta explain where that money is going. I have an accountant.

That last bit wasn't true, but I'd been lying for so long I didn't even flinch. Anything to buy more days was good.

Giordano Family Fuckhead: No. You've had plenty of time. Pay up.

Ingram: I've already paid everything I owe you and more.

Giordano Family Fuckhead: You're done paying when we say you're done paying. You got that juicy part in that stupid show because of money we lent you. We deserve a cut of the pie.

Leaning forward, I let out a silent scream that wasn't really silent—it sounded more like a dying baby T. rex. What could I do about this? I glared at the floor. *Nothing. Fuck.* I went to the Venmo app on my phone and sent thirty grand, feeling sick to my stomach. At this rate, I was going to be the only homeless actor working on Wyndinham Hollow. I had to find a way to make more money and fast, which was crap. I literally had my dream job doing exactly what I'd always wanted to do.

As soon as the cash went through the asshole on the other end of the phone sent back a thumbs-up, and my gut plummeted to my toes. Things would be quiet for a while, but who knew how long that would last? Martin, who was my manager as well as my agent, would have a fit if he knew what was happening. He would murder me for not telling him, then maybe drop me as a client for having been irresponsible enough to get involved with a mob in the first place.

I'd always known I had what it took to make it big, though, and it was still my ultimate dream to do movies. I'd just needed a break to get my start.

And it turned out “big breaks” didn't come cheap, especially for a kid from Chicago who was born in the dirt. But that was all behind me.

Except for the constant blackmail.

Shrugging, I stood and dropped my phone onto the chair, then reached for my jeans. I dragged the pants on. After all the filming we'd been doing, it was weird to only wear loose cotton clothing, so I pulled on a T-shirt, followed by a white sweater, because it would undoubtedly get colder later in the evening. I walked over to the mirror above a pink wooden vanity and smiled at myself. Everything looked good. I tugged

my hair out of the queue it had been in today and scratched my scalp, flashing the cocky smile that belonged to Azariah.

*Ingram was stupid. He lied to everyone. He cheated as much as he could to get ahead.*

Azariah was wealthy, intelligent, and knew exactly what he wanted out of life. He had morals and stuck by them. He deserved to be seen with someone like Edwin.

Well, someone like *Dean*.

He'd been cute today when he'd flubbed his lines. I grinned and stopped to put on my black leather boots before I left the dressing room. Heat blasted through my stomach the more I thought about that intriguing encounter. I knew Dean was an amazing actor who did everything possible to keep his timid character at the forefront, and he'd responded just like a shy person would when I'd flirted with him.

It was adorable.

When I made it out to the hallway I ran into Shauna, and she waved at me with a big smile.

"Where's Dean?"

Shauna wilted a bit and pushed a strand of her hair behind her ear. "He's outside talking to his mom. You know how she is. The woman hasn't met a piece of his career she can't micromanage." She said all that cheerfully enough, but her smile was fierce.

"Isn't it sweet that she cares, though?" I gave Shauna my best grin.

She laughed when I offered her my arm, and we walked out of the manor. I winced because the second we stepped outside I could hear Dean's mother.

"You need to memorize your lines better, honey. Ingram's nice to you because you've worked together a while now, but when you get to the next job, no one will have even a second to waste on your mess ups. Time is money."

Dean looked strange to me in his regular clothing because my brain hadn't adjusted to the real world yet. His blond hair

gleamed in the sunshine, somehow making him look touchable. He was clean-cut in a black jacket, matching button-down, and tan jeans. My chest tightened as I studied him. Everything he wore always seemed as if it had been specially made to meld to his toned body.

He opened his mouth.

His mother did the most annoying thing I'd ever seen and slapped her hand over his lips.

He widened his brown eyes at her and yanked her wrist down. "I'm just—"

"Dean! No more. Do better."

My stomach dropped. He barely ever missed a line, and it was just our luck they'd walked in when he had. "It's fine, Mrs. Thorne," I called, picking up my pace to meet her.

Dean stared at me like I was his real-life hero, and I couldn't help feeling ten feet taller.

She waved at me with her small pink purse. "Dean will ride with me into New Gothenburg."

"Let's do Indian food," I said on a whim. "Can he go with me? We have some lines to discuss."

She hesitated.

"Please?" I cupped my hands under my chin and batted my eyelashes at her.

"Oh, sure." She smiled and nodded, then wandered over to Shauna's red Chevy Blazer. I took Dean to my black Mercedes, which I was seriously regretting dropping the cash on right about now. He studied the car with interest as he settled into the passenger seat.

"This is nice," he said, running his hand along the dash. "It's new, right?"

"Yeah. You could get one," I said, smiling at him as I sat down in the driver's seat.

"Nah. Mom has all my money tied up in investments." He buckled his seat belt and got comfortable, wriggling around as

if he was enjoying the leather under his body. “She says that someday I’ll be thankful, but that means for now I just ride around in other people’s cars.”

My mouth fell open, but I couldn’t help it. “You’ve made almost a million dollars,” I said faintly. “You haven’t spent *any* of it?”

He frowned and wrinkled his nose in my direction. “Well, we saved out a hundred grand from season one for living expenses, but other than that, no. She says that the gravy train always ends.” He held up his hands, warding off the imaginary doom.

Shuddering, my heart went cold as I backed out of the spot I’d parked the Mercedes in and pointed the car toward the long drive, which led to a two-lane road. “Well, hopefully not for us.” I winked at him.

He grinned. “At best I have a bunch of money saved, at worst she’s right, and I still have a bunch of money saved.” He shrugged and slid his hand along his seat belt strap in a way that made me want to stare at him instead of paying attention to the road. “If I never get another acting job, I’ll. . . .” He stared out his window. “Well, I won’t like it, but I’ll figure out something else.”

Not thinking, I laid my hand on his knee and squeezed it. Azariah was used to touching Edwin, and it felt natural to do the same thing right now. He smiled and that flush that so often captured people on-screen bloomed across his cheeks. He was an amazing actor, always carrying Edwin around in spirit.

I didn’t think he realized how much people loved him. Me, they could take or leave, but on the fan pages people called him “their baby” and gushed about how they just wanted to see him happy, gleefully confusing Edwin and Dean in their conversations as easily as I seemed to do it in my own mind.

People liked my character—liked me—but they *loved* him.

An idea I’d been kicking around solidified, and I felt a tad devious, but I knew it would work for us. I’d been scrolling

through page after page of fan clubs and other groups dedicated to our characters during my free time. All I needed to do was pitch this correctly and the money would roll in. Hopefully my mob problems would be over, and it would all be good for Dean, too.

I was hoping if I could offer the Giordanos a big enough lump sum, they would finally fuck off.

Parking was a bear downtown, but I managed to find a spot in a garage, and we walked together to the Indian restaurant that I'd found one day when I was out exploring. Shauna and Mrs. Thorne were probably already waiting for us. We passed a cozy bistro, and Dean gazed through the wide front window curiously.

For a moment, I almost stopped. I wished I could take him in there and pitch my idea to him without his mom and agent staring at us, since he was the one who would have to do it with me to make everything work, but I kept marching along. And maybe it would be nice just to spend some time with him alone, too. He stumbled on a crack in the sidewalk. I caught his elbow, then slung my arm around his shoulders.

"Azariah, you know we shouldn't be doing this in public." He elbowed me lightly and chuckled. My heart lurched. He didn't often tease, but the grin he sent me was adorable.

"But I want everyone to know how much I care for you," I said, not missing a beat.

He snickered, and by the time he was under control again I was ushering him through the front door of the restaurant—Warm Heart of India. A sweet and spicy aroma tickled my nose. I liked this place because there were large pots of palms separating the tables, giving us some privacy. Shauna waved at us from a spot near a red mural of stylized elephants, and we wandered toward her and Mrs. Thorne. Our butts had barely hit the seats when Shauna stared directly into my eyes. I felt a little like I was sitting in front of a cop.

"Martin said you were cooking up some ideas to promote you and Dean." She flashed me a toothy grin. "They sound fantastic. Why don't you share with the class?"



“When did he do that?” I began to sweat.

She held up her phone and her eyebrows climbed her forehead. “Shoot.”

Clearing my throat, I leaned forward. “Are you familiar with the LGBTQ work coming out of Southeast Asia and Japan? There are a lot of gay romance series in production. They’re called BL shows, since many of them were originally based on mangas and manwhas, and that’s what the source material gets labeled as for sale.”

Shauna, Mrs. Thorne, and Dean all looked at me with blank expressions.

“Well.” I said, grabbing Dean’s hand, then patting it. “The guys who play those roles are one, amazingly talented, but two, they have perfected interacting with their fans. They do a ton of events. They do merchandise signings. They do photo shoots as their characters. Their promotion schedule is more grueling than the filming. Hell, they even appear at birthday parties sometimes. They do tours. And maybe some of that sounds like small potatoes, but it makes their fans absolutely adore them because they get out there and connect with people. They’re accessible. When someone can say, I met Dean or I met Ingram, it makes them way more likely to post about us on social media and tell their friends. I want to be part of bringing the human factor back to our business.” My throat felt tight and I had trouble dragging in a deep breath.

I truly was excited over this idea. I’d started out in this business because I loved to be onstage, and I really did want to make it as an actor—but the selfish part of me knew this could generate a lot of income. I was focused on the prize for that reason. I hated myself for pitching this right now. I wished I could sell this idea without any sort of ulterior motive.

Yes, I loved the game, and I appreciated our fans, but this was a sales ploy, nothing more.

“Wow, that sounds fantastic!” Shauna said, eyes gleaming. “It’s way more than the talk show circuit we’ve been doing. You know the studio loves anything we cook up on our own. It’s like. . . we’re just selling you, not the show, right?”

“Exactly,” I said, nearly bouncing in my seat. “And this way, even if we don’t get on the next season of Wyndinham Hollow—”

“Don’t say that!” Dean tried to cover my mouth.

I chuckled and fought off his hand by capturing it between both of mine. “There’s a greater chance we’ll get offered new roles on another show.”

Shauna frowned and glanced at Dean. “Together?”

Dean sucked in a breath and his fingers wriggled where I’d trapped them between my palms.

I released him. “Yes, that would be the goal. When someone thinks of Dean, I want them to think of me, and vice versa. We work well *together*. People like to see us as part of a *couple*.”

Shauna sat back and crossed her arms. “Like Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan?”

“Sort of, only more modern,” I said with a wince. “Maybe more like David Tennant and Michael Sheen. They got a ton of attention together after they did *Good Omens* and *Staged*. People always rave about their chemistry.”

She hummed and nodded, a thinking frown taking over her face. “That could be risky. What if something happens to one of you? What if it turns out Dean is a serial killer?” She smiled at him and toyed with the band of her watch. “You’re the more established actor here, Ingram. You’re taking a bigger risk.”

My stomach roiled. What if it turned out I was in bed with the mob and every media outlet in the country wanted a piece of the story? I made myself keep smiling.

Dean groaned and covered his face with his hands.

“It’s a good idea,” I said, nudging him.

He shook his head. “I’m a lover, not a fighter.”

Snorting, I ruffled his hair and tried not to let my fingers linger in the soft blond strands. “I trust Edwin with my life, and if he’s interested in moving forward with this idea, I might

have something up my sleeve for after-dinner fun and games.” I leaned closer to him.

Dean glanced at me with a horrified expression, playing up the shyness of Edwin perfectly. He really was a fantastic actor. “Like what? I-I’m fine doing promo stuff.” The quaver in his voice was so authentic.

Shauna rolled her eyes. “Well, I can’t see any harm in doing promo. It might be difficult to set up large events. I’ll have to see what other people are doing.” She had that manager’s tone in her voice, and I knew she would be calling Martin and going into overdrive.

“Part of what we would do involves fan service,” I said, getting into the iffiest part of this to sell. “It’s like going to conventions on steroids. We would travel together. Be seen together as much as possible. Sign autographs together. Talk to each other on social media.”

“Merchandise together?” Mrs. Thorne said dreamily, and I almost jumped out of my seat with joy. I’d sold her, and she was the one I’d been most worried about. Her eyes nearly glowed as she stared at me in wonder. The smile that tilted her lips was brighter than the sun. “I love this idea. I think we need a contract with your team for this.”

Dean cleared his throat and sent me a timid smile. “Maybe we can just have dinner? I’m fine with it all if Ingram wants to um. . . entwine his career with mine.”

“Your mom is right.” I turned toward him, and our knees bumped. His breath caught. “We could be working together for years.”

“That’s good. You’re nice to work with.” His brown eyes were wide, and I was captured for a moment by the way he projected innocence. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth.

“You understand I would be Azariah all the time,” I leaned closer to murmur. “That’s what the fans want to see. They don’t want Ingram.”

“You would pretend to be my boyfriend all the time?” A smile kicked up the corner of his lips.

My heart decided to do a weird shimmy. “Azariah *is* Edwin’s boyfriend.”

He frowned at me but jerked his head once in a nod. “Okay. Let’s do it.” That pretty rosy blush took over his face again. Maybe if we were spending more of our time together I could get him to tell me how he did that on cue.



DEAN



GLANCING AT INGRAM, I WRINKLED MY NOSE BUT DIDN'T SAY anything. He'd hustled us through dessert so we could get back here for the surprise he had in store. It was a miracle that I'd been able to convince Mom and Shauna to let us do this without their "expert" supervision. They must really trust Ingram. Ugh, he looked so good with his hair loose.

He smirked at me.

I had trouble swallowing.

The numbers above the elevator door in his apartment building lit up as the cabin ascended. I peeked over my shoulder because the glass-and-chrome elevator traveling upward along the outside of the mini skyscraper did present an impressive view—which I'd mostly been ignoring.

My nose tickled, surprising me. I covered my mouth, but it was too late. My entire body heaved forward with the strength of my sneeze.

"Bless you!" he said with a wide grin. He tugged a hair tie out of the pocket of his jeans and wrangled his dark hair back at the nape of his neck, the way he wore it while we were filming most days. He'd probably taken the piece of leather along with him when he'd left earlier.

"Why does it smell like a skunk died in here?" I asked with a groan and straightened. My stomach was still three floors below as the elevator kept heading for the top. "This is a really nice building! Shouldn't it smell like flowers or something?"

Ingram laughed, and the happy sound was completely different from anything I'd seen from him in the past, uncensored and a little too loud. He clutched his middle and tiny lines dug in around the corners of his eyes. How did he always manage to get more handsome? He sucked in a deep breath as the doors opened.

"You're right. This is such a nice building that my neighbors feel like they can do anything they want." He gestured for me to walk with him, and we stepped onto thick black carpet in a small, clean hallway. Bright lights blazed in silver sconces hung at intervals. The glare made my eyes hurt. Two gleaming black doors seemed massive tucked into artful archways set in the painfully white wall. He went left and unlocked the door. "Mr. Traud smokes a blunt on his way downstairs to check his mail, and he's a painter, so some days that happens later than others. He told me once that schedules and punctuality were for the small-minded."

"Bet he would be embarrassed about that if he knew how much of our lives revolve around schedules," I snarked.

Ingram's eyebrows shot up and he snickered while opening the door.

I gasped and walked inside his apartment. My gaze was immediately drawn to the nighttime New Gothenburg skyline. Lights twinkled and gray clouds hung low in the distance. We didn't live in a huge city, but all the lights glittering were still awe inspiring, especially as the view swept out toward Lake Ontario. This building was just a bit taller than the ones next to it, and we were on one of the highest floors. Ingram flipped on a switch to his left and the apartment was flooded with light. I bit the tip of my tongue because I hadn't ever stepped foot in a place this fancy in real life—the manor didn't count.

Glancing down, I toed off my shoes onto the gray marble square near the door, then stepped out onto a white carpet that cradled my feet like a cloud. Directly ahead of us was a group of fluffy couches the color of thunderheads surrounding a stainless steel coffee table. Ingram strutted over and pushed a button beside a fireplace set into the wall, and purple flames danced on glass stones in the grate. It was hypnotizing.

“Oh wow. This is beautiful,” I whispered.

“What did you say?” Ingram strode back to me and plucked at the collar of my jacket, and I realized he wanted me to take it off, so I shrugged out of it. He took my jacket and hung it on a hook beside the door. I cringed inside as I noted a wall of books on the far-left side of the expansive room. Did he like to read mysteries? I had nothing this extravagant at my place. This was a world away from the trailer I’d grown up in, and right now I was staying in a tiny cottage on the edge of New Gothenburg with Mom, since she didn’t like living alone.

Turning to say something reasonable and intelligent, I swallowed down a few words that hadn’t even made it out into the open yet because Ingram peeled his white sweater off and draped it on a hook near the door. The black T-shirt he’d worn underneath clung to his muscles and was almost shocking after the way we dressed so formally all the time on set. It wasn’t that I hadn’t ever seen him looking like a normal person, but each time it occurred while we were in the middle of filming madness, I couldn’t get over how perfectly solid his shoulders were or how his wide chest narrowed so nicely to his waist.

“Thanks,” I said, gesturing awkwardly at my jacket where he’d hung it.

He shrugged and smiled, wandering toward a doorway on our left. I followed him to the kitchen in time to watch him take two fancy, wide-mouthed glasses out of a skinny cupboard with a stone front. He set the glasses on a matching stone counter, then took down a big silver cup with a lid.

“Do you mind if I make us drinks?” he asked, tilting his head while he waited for my answer.

*Why are you so cute?* “Sure,” I murmured. “What’s the surprise you mentioned?”

“Let me concentrate for one minute, then I’ll tell you.” He grinned, and my heart flipped happily, so I nodded and leaned against the cool countertop beside him.

“Do you rent this place?” I asked, glancing around the kitchen big enough for ten people. I loved the shiny silver sink



and fixtures and the wooden island in the center. It was definitely an expensive space, but I could also see myself cooking in here. It was polished, yet approachable, just like Ingram.

“Yep. Costs me eight grand a month.” He opened another cupboard and took down two bottles, then carefully measured alcohol into the silver cup. He emptied some brown liquor into a glass, swirled it around, then dumped it into the other. I was fascinated as I watched him do the same thing to the next glass before rushing over to drain the rest of the liquid into the sink. Next, he took the silver cup to the fridge and poured something in it I couldn’t see because his back was facing me. Last, he grabbed ice and dumped it in the cup. When he came back, he put the lid on the cup and shook it all around for almost a solid minute while he made goofy faces that had me laughing. At last, he poured the drink into the glasses.

“You’re good at that. A natural.”

He smirked. “I haven’t always been an actor.”

Bouncing on my toes, I could barely contain myself as a rush of excitement blasted through me. *Finally! I have something to talk about with him!* “Me neither! This is my second job. My first one was—”

“Modeling for NG Burnish.” He winked at me, just like Azariah would Edwin.

Nodding, I smiled. “You knew that? Yeah, it’s a local clothing line. It’s growing, slowly but surely. The owner told me I could go back to it if I wanted, but modeling wasn’t my thing.” I shrugged. I hadn’t hated going to get pictures taken in nice clothes. In fact, I’d loved that part. The problem had been the live appearances. I was always shaking in my overpriced boots, and I was totally alone walking around in the clothes.

Ingram handed me one of the glasses and clinked his against mine.

I stared down into the slightly murky depths as he took a sip from his drink and hummed.

“So, I talked to a man who runs a fan group dedicated to Wyndinham Hollow. We’re going to film here and answer some questions from people in his group. It’s easy.” He smiled, but my stomach dropped.

“L-live?” Panic settled in on me and squeezed my chest. The top of my drink rippled, and I firmed up my hand so it wasn’t shaking.

He laughed and tapped my cheek, almost like he was trying to coax a smile out of me. “They want to see Edwin, and he’s shy. It’ll be fine. If this goes well, I’m hoping Wyndinham Hollow’s production company will throw some money at selling us, or maybe our agents can talk their company into pitching in. We could do something huge.”

My throat shrank as I tried to swallow some spit. I sipped the drink and the awful taste had me coughing. Ingram’s mouth fell open, and then he began to laugh, a rich sound like the one in the elevator.

“Why did you give me rotten olive juice?” I asked, voice croaky. The briny taste held my tongue hostage. He took the glass from me and set it on the counter.

“It’s a dirty martini. Haven’t you ever had one?” The intense interest in his gaze made me feel ridiculous.

Shaking my head, I shrugged. “Mom doesn’t like drinking because she says it’s bad for her skin, so I don’t do it at home, and I always worry I’ll act the wrong way if I’m drunk in public. . . .”

Ingram set his glass beside mine and held up a finger. “Hold on. I’ll mix something *just for you*.”

My stomach warmed with the way he said those words—the way a *real* boyfriend might—and I curled my arms around my middle, holding myself tight as he rushed back to the fridge. The ingredients he brought out seemed much nicer than what he’d used in the other drink—cherries and sparkling water, along with a small, corked bottle full of pink liquid. He carried his treats over to me. A new silver glass was procured out of a cupboard, and he poured a bit of this and that into it.

When he was finished, I had a brand-new glass, this one shaped like a goldfish bowl with a red stem on the bottom, and inside was a fizzing, deliciously sweet-smelling liquid.

“What is this?” I asked, then sniffed at the drink until I caught a hint of vanilla.

Ingram stretched up tall, grinning from ear to ear. “I call it a Cherry Pick-Me-Up. There are a couple of shots of booze in it. Be careful.” He flicked his fingers at me, and I raised the glass. The second the liquid hit my tongue I moaned.

“It’s good,” I murmured, feeling unreasonably shy. I couldn’t look him in the eye, so I stared at his happy mouth instead.

“Would you say I handled your cherry well?” He covered his lips with one hand and his eyebrows danced as if he was holding in a laugh.

Sighing, I shook my head. “I didn’t know you told bad jokes. I guess you were bound to have a flaw eventually.” I gave him my *Edwin is not amused at your antics* stare.

Ingram flinched but didn’t say anything as I drained the glass. He held up a hand like maybe he wanted to stop me, but I was already done.

“When is the interview thing supposed to happen?”

He took my empty glass and set it on the counter before he refilled it with what was left in the mixing container. “Ten minutes.”

“Oh no.” Slouching against the counter, I cupped my cheeks. My face burned. “I feel a little like Azariah just proposed to Edwin with all this *let’s work together forever* stuff.”

Ingram bumped my hip with his, and I glanced at him. “I guess, in a way, Azariah did.” He held the drink out to me, and for some reason the moment felt far too formal, but maybe that was because he served me with a sincere smile that did terrible things to my insides. My cock tingled and my skin felt electric as my stomach clenched.

“Let’s go get comfortable. I have to set up some of the equipment.”

Nodding, I let him lead me along with a hand on the small of my back and a drink clasped in his other one. We went out into the living room, then across to a short hallway with a few doors to pick from. We turned left, and he flipped on the overhead light.

My breath caught in my throat. A blue-and-white embroidered couch that reminded me of something from the manor sat in front of another one of those wide windows that showed off the view. In front of the couch was a coffee table, and Ingram set down his drink, gesturing me over. Pots of red flowers cozied up on either side of the couch, and they seemed to match somehow. I had no idea what the blooms were, but the petals were simple and uncomplicated, and I wanted to shove my nose into one but stopped myself from doing it.

“This is beautiful. Did you arrange this space yourself?”

He went to a camera on a tripod across from us and turned it on, then did the same to a wide screen on the wall. I gasped because there was already a man on one half of the screen, clearly talking to someone off camera like he was getting ready. He appeared to be younger than me, maybe nineteen or twenty, and he was energetic, waving his hands around as he spoke. The T-shirt he wore had the Wyndinham Hollow logo on the front. The other side of the screen showed us, and the bottom was blank, except for a starburst screen saver.

“You agreed to do this before tonight,” I murmured, glancing at him.

“Yes, I would’ve done it without you, but I thought you would see the value in it.” He smiled at me, and his tone was a bit colder than usual.

Sighing, I noticed a small makeup case tucked under the coffee table in front of me and grabbed it. After a quick perusal, I snatched out a pink lip tint and ran it over my mouth. “Am I good?” I pursed my lips in his direction.

“Beautiful.” He winked.

My head felt fuzzy. Hell, I shouldn't have been drinking before something like this. "You're so good at this stuff. I've never done anything this small. Usually I'm interviewed as part of the bigger cast because Shauna knows I'm terrible at speaking. You know, you're there. Why am I telling you that?" I asked, then wanted to slap a hand over my lips, but I was wearing makeup, so I didn't.

Ingram came over with a remote in his hand that he set on the couch cushion at his side. He sat close enough that his thigh nudged mine, and my neck and cheeks were blazing.

"Just hold my hand," he murmured. "I'll keep you safe."

Groaning, I laced our fingers together and clung to him like I was drowning in the ocean and about to be swept away.

"Hi, we're ready to get started in one minute. I'm so, so, so excited you can be with us tonight, you have no idea!" the man on the screen gushed, waving at us.

I waved back and so did Ingram.

"We're happy to be here, too," Ingram said, speaking for us both, and relief washed through me.

"We're live in ten seconds," the presenter said in a lilting Irish accent. Time passed in a blur. The next thing I knew he was saying, "I'm Omber MacAuley, and I'm truly happy to tell you we have about forty thousand members of the Wyndinham Hollow fan club tuning in right now. Och! That number just went up to fifty thousand. Aaaaand climbing." He beamed at us and used a hand to push red curls off his forehead.

Groaning, I hid my face against Ingram's shoulder, and Omber laughed. The first few minutes were a haze of Ingram smoothly answering questions about the show, which had been submitted by fan club members, while I tried not to fly apart.

"Let's be real here. No one is watching to hear about the vases in the hallways," Omber said, flashing pearly white teeth. "When will we get one of those scenes from Edwin and Azariah? You know what I mean, aye?" He raised his

eyebrows. “The ones where we need artful angles and maybe catch a flash of buttocks?”

My face felt like I had a sunburn.

Omber made a happy sound. “Oh, Edwin is cute!”

Ingram nodded and did a good job of looking smitten as he smiled at me, but I was so useless he was probably calling me a thousand names in his head.

“We wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise,” I said, giving my first real answer to a question.

“Lauren from New Orleans wants to know what it’s like to kiss Azariah,” Omber said, practically leaping on me, if that were possible with who knew how many miles between us. I tensed, a mouse spotted by a lion.

“W-we haven’t yet,” I said, then cleared my throat and repeated myself.

Omber laughed, but it was more of a giggle. “Why not?” Even though he wasn’t in the room I could tell his gaze darted to where my hand was held on Ingram’s lap. “Are you sure you haven’t?” He sounded nearly wistful.

“It wasn’t in the script yet,” I said with a smile. “To get an answer, you would have to ask our writers, Collin and Emily Rees.”

Ingram nudged me with his elbow. “You did offer to go to bed with Azariah today and that wasn’t in the script. You could’ve maybe slipped a kiss in there, too. I wouldn’t have minded.”

Omber gasped and clapped, then laughed hysterically as I covered my face.

“I can’t believe you said that,” I grumbled.

Warm lips on my cheek almost sent me sliding to the floor. I lowered my hands enough to look at him.

Ingram winked. “Kissing Edwin is amazing.”

After that Omber asked if we would like to see the fan club’s well wishes, and there was nothing to do but agree, even

though I was deeply frazzled. For fifteen minutes we read things that scrolled across the screen.

*I love you.* ~ *AngelEyes589 in South Dakota.*

*I want to have your baby, Dean!* ~ *Anna in San Diego.*

And of course, no matter how ridiculous the comment, we smiled and said thank you to each person by name.

Seeing how much everyone liked me—weirdly, I had a lot more personalized messages than Ingram—gave me a happy buzz. Or maybe that was the drink I'd gulped. Either way, I was laughing and having fun by the end.

Ingram rubbed my hand where I gripped his arm too hard, and I unclenched a bit. Tears prickled in my eyes, and I swiped at one that rolled down my cheek.

“Thank you, everyone! Sometimes I feel like I don't deserve to have such a great character like Edwin, but you've all convinced me I can do this for real.” I waved at the camera.

Ingram hugged me. “Thanks, bye. Have a good night.” He used the remote to turn off the camera, and our section of the screen went dark.

Omber took up the full screen and grinned out at the fans still watching. “We had about five hundred thousand people tune in tonight! Thanks! Hopefully we can do better for Dean next time. We must let him know how much we love him.” Omber waved, then a message directing people to the fan site filled the screen.

“Five hundred thousand?” Panic slapped me all over again. “Ingram, you carried that interview. You have all these wonderful ideas. Are you sure you don't want to wait?” I curled forward, but he put a sturdy hand on my chest and rubbed, urging me upright again. I had trouble catching my breath.

“What do you mean?” he asked, confusion heavy in his tone. I glanced at him, and he flashed me a small smile. “Wait for what?”

I'd forgotten about my drink, but I snatched it up and chugged.

He whistled and tugged the half empty glass from me.

"You should find someone who can hold up their end of the bargain." I shook my hands at him. "I might pass out with an actual live audience. I can't believe that many people saw us." My voice was almost a squeak by the time I finished speaking.

"Wanna know a secret?" Ingram asked, and there was a twang in his voice I'd never heard, but his smile was huge. He leaned his forehead against mine, and I felt like I could float away.

"Sure," I whispered.

"Millions of people watch our show."

Groaning, I curled forward and dropped my forehead on my knee, and nothing he could do stopped me. "I'm going to be sick."

Ingram went to his knees beside me and leaned down until he could look me in the eye. He stroked my cheek, and I almost melted into a puddle of goo.

"I promise, on my honor as Azariah Stuyvesant, I will always be here to hold your hand. I'll be at your side the entire way. This interview tonight was nothing. This was testing the waters. Now that people have seen this, offers to have us do a million different things will come pouring in for real."

My hands shook as I sat up and reached for Ingram, and he pulled me into a tight hug. He rubbed my back and smelled so good. He was just the right amount of comforting. Why couldn't he be my real boyfriend?

"You promise? I won't survive without you. You could get someone else to do this with you in the future." I rested my head against his and huddled in his arms.

"I won't leave your side," he whispered in my ear, and my cock plumped up despite the fact that I was still having a



meltdown about being live in front of that ridiculous number of people.

Ingram was perfect, and at least for a little while, I would get to pretend he was *mine*.



## INGRAM



AT LEAST SEVENTY-FIVE MEMBERS OF THE BACKGROUND talent had arrived for the party we were filming today, and the excess of people had forced the costume and makeup crew to set up in several rooms that were typically never touched in between filming. Dance music blasted from a speaker in the corner, and I had a suspicion that Desi, the lead sound technician, had been talked into lending out some of her equipment.

Lounging on a glossy wooden dining chair at a long table, I attempted not to move a muscle while Polly, the head makeup artist, glared at my face. She bent forward from her spot perched on the dining table. A few other women and one man patiently patted and dabbed makeup on others farther along the table.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, since Polly only scowled harder. “I don’t have a giant pimple you have to hide, do I?”

She smacked the tip of my nose with a powder brush when I stuck out my tongue, then pointed at my purple jacket and silver waistcoat. “Your undertone is gold, and this ensemble is throwing me all off.” She glared at the waistcoat. “Who put you in this crap?”

“Marva.”

Polly craned her neck until she spotted Marva across the room tugging out a dress for a young girl, who clapped and took it from her, then danced off to change in a privacy tent in the corner. Marva turned toward us and flashed Polly a

peaceful smile designed to drive Polly directly out of her mind. Marva flipped her long brown braid off her shoulder and spun away to help the next person standing in line.

“She lives to make my job harder. Did you see that?” Polly wrinkled her rounded nose and puffed her blond bangs off her forehead in frustration.

“She claimed the jacket went with my eyes.”

“Your eyes are hazel. Green goes with hazel!” Polly leaned far too close to me, and I let her do it.

“Marva says she puts me in too much green.” I shrugged and held in a smirk. The battle between Marva and Polly had been going on as long as I’d known them, and they seemed to live to irritate each other. Polly muttered under her breath while dragging her makeup box closer, and I noticed Marva checking on us with a smirk. I winked at her, and she turned away with a hand wave.

After Polly used a tickly brush to dab powder across my eyelids, she smiled down into my face. “I saw you and Dean this morning on YouTube. The interview you did last night was posted there. About three million views so far. You’re doing well! It was amazing. Dean really *becomes* Edwin, you know? I bet the fans ate it up. He looked fantastic, but you could’ve stood to wear a brighter lip tint.” She glared at my mouth, but her lips twitched toward a smile.

“No one can recreate your wonders at home. I did the best I could, Miss Polly.”

She huffed but didn’t give me any more grief, then shooed me out of my seat.

“If my makeup was the worst part of the interview, I’ll take it.” I tweaked a strand of her short bleached hair.

Polly snickered and slid across the table on her butt over to Dean, who stared intently at a dog-eared version of our latest script. This one had been rewritten twice, and I could see the stress on his face. He didn’t like it when the script changed after he had it. His blond hair glinted in the afternoon sunshine pouring in the nearby windows, giving him a gleaming halo.

His lips moved while he read, and he jumped in his chair when Polly tugged the book out of his hand. He blinked at her for a moment, then nodded and flashed her a soft smile, as if he was waking from a nice dream.

“Hello, Pollyanna. Sorry.”

She pinched his cheek. “Don’t you dare use my full name. You know I hate it.” Her smile grew, though, so I could only assume she didn’t mind as much as she let on. Or maybe Dean got special dispensation.

He looked longingly toward his script as she laid it aside on the table.

“You always know your lines. Don’t worry so much.” I squeezed his shoulder, and his eyes went wide. Whatever world he’d been living in while he’d studied his lines must’ve left him totally unaware of his surroundings because he stared at me for a few moments like we’d never met.

“That’s because I read over them.” A small tremble of a smile twitched on his lips, which I couldn’t help but return.

Polly quickly began work on Dean, and it was a good thing she was fantastic at her job because TJ, one of Caroline’s assistants, came over at top speed with his eyebrows furrowed. Tall, muscled, and wearing a black T-shirt, jeans, and cowboy boots, he belonged in a commercial advertising motorcycles, rather than creating sets with dainty furniture.

“The boss wants you in the ballroom right now, dude,” he said gruffly and slapped me on the back as he rushed past. “Take Dean with you.”

Dean stood and shoved back his chair. “We don’t have any lines for this.” He bit his lip, and Polly shrieked, which made him stop as she used her brush to dab at his mouth again.

“No. Bad Dean!”

Dean groaned. *No, he’s Edwin now.*

“Great, just follow my lead, then,” I murmured, and a warm heat swirled in my chest as he took my hand and deferred to me. We darted through the crowd. He was sweet

and said a soft “hello” to any of the background talent who made eye contact with him, and while he didn’t have to do that, it was nice of him and made me appreciate him more. Unlike Edwin, I’d done a lot of smaller gigs before I landed this part—enough that I was worried I would be pigeonholed as the toothpaste guy because I’d done three different commercials—and I’d always felt small and insignificant when the main cast ignored me. I tried to follow his example and smile at everyone.

Edwin was better at this job than he realized—and, I suspected, a nicer person than me.

The noise of the crowd rang out through the open doors of the ballroom. When we stepped inside, Edwin let out a small gasp. This scene was supposed to be a spring gala in the show, and fresh flowers were on every available surface. The snack table was crowded with multitiered golden cookie and cake towers that looked amazing, and of course, no one was allowed to touch a single thing on any of them until filming was finished for the day. Not that most of the cast would nibble the sugary confections. Everyone perpetually seemed to be talking about their newest diet. I forced my gaze away from the table as my stomach growled and eyed the lilac blooms entwined with yellow silk streamers draped in loops along the walls.

Dean—no, he was *Edwin* right now—pointed out pots of red roses that were big enough to hold a full-sized man. A pair sat on each end of the middle section of the ballroom.

“Why are those there?” He glanced at me with a confused furrow on his brow and my pointer finger itched to smooth it away.

“I presume they’re arranged to mark the staging area for the dance, so there is a visual separation between that action in the scene and the rest of the people at the party.” I shrugged, because it was a guess, but something I would’ve chosen to do if I were the director.

Caroline came rushing over, an explorer from a different century dropped among the colonial wealthy. Her tan shorts

and white T-shirt seemed stunning along with her wild curly red hair. She grabbed Dean's hand and tugged until he left my side.

“Sorry, I need him, Azariah! You'll get him back in five!” She grinned and her freckled cheeks puckered until dimples flashed. “Remember we talked about blocking for this scene during the meeting this morning! Be where you're supposed to be!”

Nodding, I frowned as she took Edwin away, and a strange unpleasant sensation curled in my stomach when he grasped the hand of a pretty woman with long brown hair and a wide smile. Her lavender dress clung to her cinched waist and high breasts. She belonged with all the spring flowers.

Edwin gave her his bravest smile, which still left him looking ready to flee. I laughed away the awful tension in my stomach because, of course, Azariah wouldn't enjoy seeing his boyfriend dance with a beautiful woman—hell, that was half the point of this scene for our characters. I blew out a long breath and watched them, leaning into the terrible feelings because that was what Caroline would want to see on camera.

My anger.

My rage at watching a woman caress his hand with her fingers.

My gut churned with acid jealousy.

I didn't like how I wanted to stomp over there and hit someone, but I embraced the energy and allowed myself to think about some terrible things I might want to do to the woman, including upend the punch bowl over her head.

Benny and two other camera people got into position around the room. He flashed me a smile as he fiddled with his suspenders. I sighed on the inside but waved. I always felt honor bound to acknowledge him, since he'd been on the tech crew of *Triumph of Tulips*, my first big play in England. He'd even come to work on this series because I'd heard they needed the help, and he wanted the experience. He thought he owed me, but really, he didn't. I was relieved when he looked

away because there had always been something slightly uncomfortable about our interactions. I could never put my finger on what, though.

Caroline stood on a stepladder with her hands cupped around her mouth. “Okay, everyone! Welcome! Take your spots! We’re going to attempt this without music, first, to try to save booth time later!”

Patrick and Elyssa, who portrayed two other popular characters on the show, were supposed to be getting together at this party, so they were positioned right in front of the cameras. They made a dazzling picture together. She was taller than him, blond and svelte, and he was short and stocky with bulky muscles, but somehow it all worked great on-screen.

Everyone else had been forced to learn a dance with a ton of steps, and I was glad I’d missed out on that. As the scene started, Dean fumbled and didn’t dance well, which was a stroke of genius on his part because it was so *Edwin*. The graceful woman with him laughed as everyone else took off in a whirl, but no one was moving in sync. Before too long, Caroline reset the scene and added music.

This time the scene went off without a hitch, and I took my spot at the end of the dance area between two flowerpots. When Edwin danced past me—still not respecting the beat—I snagged his elbow and pulled him away. The woman hit me with her best frustrated pout, and I put a finger to my lips and winked as I dragged him off.

Edwin shook his head and pointed back at her. “Shouldn’t I stay with the girl I came with? My parents want me to get to know her better. They’re hoping for a miracle.”

“Absolutely not.” I scowled at him.

Edwin cringed and sighed. Our words weren’t scripted or meant to be picked up by any mics; they were simply to make us look natural. I loved that he so easily fell into the improv parts of our acting together. Benny turned his camera to follow us, and I did my best to ignore him, hauling Edwin to a spot in the corner, behind other people dancing and laughing. Benny was supposed to film us the entire time so Caroline could use



what she wanted for our part in this party, and while we didn't have any spoken lines, this was almost more difficult because we had to tell the story of what was happening with our body language.

I wrapped my arms around Edwin and urged him a few steps closer until his chest was tight against my front, while the other people ran their lines on the opposite side of the room. He smelled good, and it wasn't a hardship to smile down into his face. His cheeks pinked up and he curled his hands over my shoulders, trying to shove away a little, but I didn't let go.

"We'll be noticed," he murmured.

I shrugged and gestured with my chin at the people nearby. "No one is paying attention to us, least of all your parents." I ran my thumb across Edwin's cheek. "You're beautiful like this."

"Ingram," he hissed, glancing around.

I tutted in a distinctly British way that I'd internalized while living abroad. "What if someone could read lips and sees my name? At least curse me out as Azariah for my impudence."

Edwin chuckled. "Azariah, you're always making me feel witless."

Leaning closer to his ear, I smirked. The devil on my shoulder poked me and I didn't even attempt to hold back. "I would love to make you feel ecstasy."

He gasped and stepped back, hand flying to his heart, and I dragged him against my front again.

"Cut!"

We both flinched as Caroline's voice echoed around the room.

"Dean and Ingram! Keep up the good work. I see you over there. It's great. Flora! I need to see a bigger smile. Bigger! You want him to overlook your lack of dowry. You want this man to solve all your problems! You need a rescue."

“This isn’t a very empowering plotline!” Flora shouted back, waving a hand fan at Caroline. Someone had aimed a cannon loaded with white lace at her. Even her long dark hair hadn’t escaped the ornate extravaganza because Polly had pinned it up in a complicated style with white ribbons that fluttered as she moved.

Caroline picked up her stepladder and situated it in a better spot before climbing onto the top rung. “Take it up with the writers! This episode was Emily’s baby, so you can’t even blame Collin.”

“Oh, I will! Where is this girl’s agency, Caroline? Jesus.” Flora pretended to swoon and luckily the man next to her was game to catch her.

“You just passed the Bechdel test,” Dean shouted, surprising me.

“Boo!” Flora whirled and called back toward our corner.

A ripple of laughter raced around the room, and Dean grinned up at me.

“Ingram, bring Dean back! I want another shot at that scene where you snag him!”

Dread lumped in my throat as I returned Edwin to the woman, who smiled for him again. I had to stand there and wait once more to rescue him out of her arms, and when the time came, I was excited to do it, hustling him off to our corner. When we arrived at our mark, I pulled him tight to my front and was shocked at the powerful reaction I had as he settled naturally into my arms—where he belonged. I knew none of this was real, but I felt like I’d just won an important victory, and adrenaline pelted through my body.

My cock took a serious interest in Edwin’s muscled heat snug against my chest, and there was nothing I could do about it. My groin tightened. I stared at his full pink lips and wished I could kiss him.

Azariah would want to kiss Edwin, so it was only natural to have that urge. Edwin nudged closer to me. Maybe with all our layers of clothing he couldn’t tell I had a problem, but he

nestled against me while staring up through his eyelashes, and I held in a groan. I could be wrong, but maybe there was something friendly—and *hard*—pressing against my thigh. We said nothing as I danced with him, not doing anything particularly accurate to the 1750s, but not caring, either.

Edwin flashed me a shy smile. It was too much. I bent my head and justified brushing a kiss to his cheek. Edwin's eyelashes fluttered and he rocked against me. My cock plumped and had me biting the inside of my cheek.

“Reset the scene! I want it again!” Caroline called, and a small frown flickered across Edwin's lips as I took him back to his dance partner.

We did it all again, and we'd been in each other's arms for what felt like an hour by the time Caroline shouted, “Take a twenty-minute break!”

Edwin jerked out of my grasp, cheeks flushing red, and rushed off. My heart twisted while I watched him weave through the crowd. Shit, did I owe him an apology? Should I mention the fact that I'd been half hard the whole time we were dancing or ignore it? Was he actually sporting wood or had I imagined it? I was pretty sure he had been as happy to be pressed close to me as I was to touch him, but who knew?

With my thoughts spinning a mile a minute, I followed Edwin, dodging the background talent who streamed toward snacks in another room—Marva would have a fit later if someone ruined a piece of clothing. Edwin reached his dressing room, which was upstairs next to mine, directly ahead of me. I didn't knock, simply burst inside after him.

“I'm so—”

“You're a genius!” he said, spinning around with a big smile on his face.

I blinked at him because I didn't think my intelligence had anything to do with the wood I'd caught dancing with him, so I shrugged. “I'd like to think so, but—”

He pointed dramatically at three large vases of flowers lined up on a high wooden dresser to the side of the room. I

blinked at the gifts as he rushed over to a large box on the floor in front of the dresser, then pulled out a brilliant green T-shirt with NG Burnish on the front.

“They want us to wear their clothing on our next interview! The owner sent me a message this morning because he still had my number. Surprise!” He hopped up and down, which had me chuckling. “They’re talking to Martin and Shauna about a deal. Twenty grand for fifteen minutes of wearing awesome clothes! I do that anyway!” He was all smiles as he bounced in place. “Who would have thought one single interview would get people interested in us like this?”

Relief smacked me. I should be professional. I was older than Dean by almost six years, and he seemed so innocent. It was up to me to apologize and let him know he could move away from me if I was hard in the future—he didn’t have to get up close and personal with my dick. But he was happy and hadn’t mentioned it, and I swore he’d been hard, too. The longer I looked at him, the more his cheeks pinked up and his smile widened.

This was exactly what I’d hoped for and the first step in building up a pile of money to dump on the Giordanos. I could see the light at the end of the tunnel. Maybe I could be out from under my shitty choices once and for all.

“Who are the flowers from?” I asked, ready to be off the topic of sponsors for now.

Dean dropped the shirt back into the box with a bashful grin. “The peonies and daisies are from Emmaline in Vancouver.” He pointed at the white vase popping with color. It was very fortunate that my clothing matched so well.

Tugging my phone from my pocket, I went over to him. “Let’s take a pic and post it on Insta saying thanks.”

He nodded and we did just that. I was happy to upload everything to my Insta account.

“I’ll do the next one! The tulips are from Darren in Iowa.” Dean grinned as we snapped a selfie together. “I’ll put this one on my account!” He was ecstatic today, and I loved that this

was making a positive impact on his mood. He'd been so stressed last night that I'd started to worry the extra attention would take a real toll on him. I would just have to work hard to shield him from the rougher parts.

Nodding, I slid over to the last vase, which was a huge silver pot due to the fact that it contained at least three dozen pink roses. "Who is this from?" I asked, genuinely curious.

He picked up a red card sparkling with glitter from the dresser and handed it to me. "The name is a tad strange. I think it's a last name."

Laughing, I flicked glitter off my fingertips and read the card.

*Dear Edwin and Azariah,*

*You two belong together forever.  
You're perfect when you're touching.  
I loved watching you two in  
Azariah's place last night. I'll keep  
an eye on you both.*

*-Giordano*

My blood ran cold as I tried desperately to recall the interview. We hadn't told anyone we were filming at my apartment. I didn't even think I'd told the organizer of the event where we were filming from. . . or had I? My stomach flipped unpleasantly and the floor imitated an ocean wave.

What had I done? Had I dragged Dean into my mess? I glanced at him, and he smiled back at me.

"Isn't this nice? I can't even begin to guess how much this arrangement must've cost the person who sent it. Mom is going to flip right out when she sees it." Dean's smile faltered. All at once, I didn't want to think of him as Edwin. Fuck, I

wasn't Azariah, either. I was a stupid asshole from Chicago who faked his accent and didn't belong here. "Are you okay?"

Determination swelled in me, the same drive that had gotten me into this trouble to begin with, and I nodded. This wasn't going to put an end to my career. I would fix it before it could hurt me—or Dean.

"Of course, beloved. You deserve these gifts and more from your fans. Everyone adores you." I laid the praise on thick, but I was desperate to think about anything other than the name on that card.

Dean stared at his brown leather boots and a blush spread up his neck. "I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable on the dance floor."

"I beg your pardon?" I asked, thrown for a loop.

The tips of his boots tapped on the wooden floor. "I was. . . and I brushed up against you." His words were barely a whisper. Hell, I'd made him take the lead for this embarrassing conversation.

I couldn't help it. I stepped forward and gave him the best hug I could because he looked so disgraced, as if he would ever do anything to hurt someone else. "I had the best time of my life just now," I murmured into his ear. "Zero regrets on my end."

Dean burrowed in closer. "I don't want you to think I'm a jerk who takes advantage of people."

I wanted to laugh and groan at the same time. "You weren't alone."

He tensed in my arms, then relaxed and let out a long sigh that left me with a perfect armful of Edwin. He stepped back and beamed up at me, and the happy sparkle in his gaze sent my heart soaring.

"Let's take this pic for Giordano, whoever he is." Dean grinned.

I felt sick as horror washed through my stomach, but I nodded and forced my smile to stay put. What else could I do

except pretend everything was fine? Dizziness hit me as Dean took the pic and happily posted it to his Insta account along with a thank-you.

I should open my mouth. I should tell him what was going on with me. I should let him know what he was doing was a bad idea. But I kept quiet and pretended I was on top of the world, the same as always.

I stared at the roses and couldn't help but notice they were covered in thorns.





DEAN



SWEAT GATHERED AT THE SMALL OF MY BACK, BUT INGRAM’S hand was a comforting weight between my shoulder blades as I leaned toward the microphone positioned in front of me on the long table. Overhead a bright light pointed at us, which made it harder to see beyond the edge of the stage. I glanced out over the crowd, most decked out in fancy dresses or other outfits that were more authentic to the 1750s than anything I’d ever worn. Heck, I’d had one man stop me in the restroom to show me the website for the underwear he was wearing, since he’d noticed my boxers.

That had been mildly creepy, but oh well.

“Uh. . . .” I laughed nervously, and an echo from the audience bounced back, but it seemed mostly indulgent and not as if anyone was mocking me.

Ingram cleared his throat and smiled. “We’re not certain where the writers are taking the relationship for Azariah and Edwin, but we do know they’ll be together next season, so no one needs to get nervous.” He winked, and there was a round of enthusiastic applause.

The woman who was moderating the panel smiled at me. She had on a frilly yellow dress with a fluffy skirt that I was pretty sure didn’t match any particular era but made her curves stand out. She flicked her long brown hair over her shoulder and bit her lip in my direction. “This next question is for Elyssa!”

When I slumped, relieved, against Ingram's side, there was more laughter.

"You're doing great," Ingram murmured in my ear. His cologne swirled into my nose, and I held in a groan. He always smelled so good—he changed it up a lot, but the scents he chose were all masculine and made me want to daydream.

"No, I'm not," I grumped back, but he put his arm around my shoulders. I leaned against him, and that was the way I spent the rest of the forty-minute panel at the Baroque Ball. At some point, I must've gotten too comfortable because my ass was half off my chair and my leg pressed tightly to his.

"Do you have any final words to add, Edwin?" the moderator asked, and she beamed at me.

Sitting up straighter, I leaned toward the microphone in front of Ingram instead of mine, since it was closer with the way he'd sort of tugged me in against his side. "I'm very grateful that everyone has chosen to come see us today. I'm having so much fun here. I want to thank Miss Adelaide for teaching me and Azariah a new waltz at the dance earlier." I waved toward the crowd.

The applause I got was shocking, and Flora leaned forward to shake her head at me as she tucked her long dark hair behind her ear. Her nose wrinkled and she squinted. I wasn't sure if she was actually irritated or just giving me shit, but I shrugged. It was true, the rest of the cast had answered most of the questions, but I seemed to have a following here in New Gothenburg and had been getting the largest responses from the crowd. Part of me thought it was because I was a hometown boy.

The moderator began to talk about the costume contest that would take over the stage we were on in a few minutes, and TJ—Caroline's tall minion—waved us toward the curtains on the right side, so we all got up and exited that direction. I mulled over the fact that I was contractually obligated to be here because I might've been tempted to skip this otherwise. Backstage wasn't very spacious, and we dodged racks of

costumes for an upcoming play and props that might create a coffee shop when they were assembled.

“That was good!” Elyssa said, spinning around to take my hand. She grinned and her blue eyes sparkled. “You’re doing better!”

“That *was* better, wasn’t it? It was still bad,” I said.

She giggled, giving my hand a squeeze. “Small steps are still steps!”

When I glanced over my shoulder, Ingram was right behind me, smiling from ear to ear. “It was fantastic. You’re always on as Edwin.” He gave me a half hug with both hands on my waist. “People love it. They find you as charming as Azariah does. Who was that man you were talking to when you left the bathroom right before we went onstage?” he asked, and the question shocked me because it came out of nowhere. His lips thinned.

With the distraction of trying to look back at him and walk, I stumbled and almost fell, even though there were a few dim lights illuminating the path between props to the door. Only Ingram’s grip kept me on my feet.

“Why, are you jealous?” Patrick asked from behind us.

I was relieved to escape out into a brightly lit hallway that we had taken over to use as a changing room. The women in the cast didn’t care if we saw them in their underthings, and I mostly just stood with my back to everyone, facing the privacy screens that had been used to block off the end of the hall. Cherry blossoms dotted pink silk that I’d been assured would have been available for purchase in the era of Wyndinham Hollow by the woman who’d set up the area for us. I was grateful to get to the spot where I’d dumped my street clothes near the screen, but then it moved back.

An Asian man, who was about an inch shorter than me with a cute, dimpled smile, captured my attention. He was dressed in a beautiful layered outfit of robes that took my breath away.

“Hello,” I said, surprised.

He grinned up at me, brown eyes sparkling with excitement. “Hi! Do you like it?” he asked, plucking at the top layer of his robes. Clearly, he’d noticed I was stunned. “It’s from the Tokugawa period in Japan. It’s the same era as the Baroque period in England!” He bounced on his toes.

“That’s fantastic! Uh, but you’re not supposed to be back here.” Awkwardly, I hooked a thumb over my shoulder.

“Can I talk to you for a moment? I saw what you were doing with Ingram, the interviews and promo, and I was wondering if I could convince you to include me in something you’re doing live. Sorry I’m talking so fast, but I know I only have a minute before someone makes me leave,” he said, then took a huge breath. His face flushed, and I found myself smiling. “My team is trying to get our show idea picked up by the production company handling Wyndinham Hollow, and generating fan interest might help us.” He bit his lip.

“You’re a writer?”

He nodded. “Yes! My name is Niko Wakabayashi. And I’m also a costume designer. And story creator. And okay, technically this is based on a series of twenty books I did well with, but my books would do *even better* as a show.” He shoved a book at my chest, and I took it, staring down at the colorful cover. “I’ve been working on scripts.”

“I recognize this series,” I said, glancing up at him in interest. “And your name.”

His mouth fell open. “Yeah? You do?”

“They’re mysteries. I love a good mystery, especially historical ones. Tokumatsu is a great detective.”

Niko smiled and a blush spread across his face. “What do you say? I wore all this today hoping to pique your curiosity. It was a huge pain. Take pity on me.” He pointed a hopeful pout in my direction.

Snickering, I glanced at the book again. “Only if you sign this for me.”

He grunted, and about a half a second later he had a pen in his hand and flipped open the front cover. He scrawled a big

*Thank You, Edwin*, then his signature.

“We’re interested,” Ingram said, coming up behind me. I wasn’t sure how much he’d heard, but by the serious work expression on his face, I thought maybe it was everything. “You will have to give your contact information to my agent.” Ingram must’ve taken lessons from Boy Scouts because he smoothly handed Niko a card. “But if you really want this to happen, you should talk to Caroline. Hey, Caroline!” he called over his shoulder.

She popped around him, out of breath, cheeks red. She had managed to get out of her elaborate dress already and was down to black leggings and a scarlet tank top.

“Wow!” she said, looking at Niko’s outfit, her mouth forming a little *O*. “That’s amazing!”

With a smirk, I handed her the book, and she took it. “You should talk to Niko,” I said, pointing out his name on the cover. “Aren’t they doing another round of show considerations in the spring? He has scripts.”

A delighted grin spread across her face. “Yes. Oh my God, yes. Is this set in Japan?” she asked, not even bothering to flip through the book. She waved it around.

“Yep,” Niko said. “There are twenty books. I was on every best seller list in the US for half of them. I’ve been contacted by a few streaming services, but I wanted your company to handle my work, and no one has called me yet.”

Caroline gasped and pressed the book to her chest. “I would love to film in Japan! Oh my God, let’s talk.”

Niko held out his elbow for her, and I laughed as they snuck back out through the privacy screen, and then they both worked together shifting it around until it was set in place again.

“Well, if other people think what we’re doing will help them, we must be doing something right,” I said, glancing up into Ingram’s face. For a second, I got caught staring into his eyes, and he smirked.

The screen moved again, and I snorted as Shauna snuck in. She'd chosen to wear a black skirt suit, almost like she was protesting all the over-the-top clothing sparkling everywhere today. She even had her curly hair up in a bun.

"This event is wild." She shook her head, looking gobsmacked. "I just saw a woman wearing fifty thousand dollars' worth of diamond jewelry. Can you imagine?"

Ingram and I both laughed.

"I'm going to go get changed," Ingram said, and he gave me a hug from behind that had my stomach going warm. I caressed my fingertips over the back of his hand, and he lingered a second longer than I thought he'd meant to. After what had happened while filming the gala scene a couple of days ago, I'd been feeling more excited when he touched me—and my face heated as I remembered how hard he'd been.

Did he like me as much as I did him?

He smiled down at me, then went over to the rack, where he would hang the outfit he was wearing, and he took off his green jacket.

"I was talking to the Baroque Ball's coordinator. This is the first time ever that the event has entirely sold out." Shauna beamed at me.

"A lot of people traveled to see the cast," I said, gesturing over my shoulder. I struggled to remove my formfitting jacket, and she nodded as I took the heavy gilded material off and hung it on a hanger, which she snatched from me. She hummed as she put the costume on the pole of a moving clothing rack that Marva would be in to collect.

"A lot of people came to see you," she whispered, tapping my shoulder.

"It's New Gothenburg and I grew up here. Of course they did."

"I don't think that's why. You and Ingram have been working overtime with all the stuff you've been doing online." She cocked her head to the side as if daring me to argue with her.

Sighing, I rolled my eyes. “We did one more live interview. I wouldn’t exactly call that working overtime. Plus this event.”

From nearby, Flora snorted. She was down to a black bodysuit she’d worn under her dress and was pulling on her jeans. “You’re making a name for yourself, Dean.” She didn’t sound happy about it, more grumpy instead.

“Ingram is organizing most of it.”

“Hell, I need to get him together with my publicist,” she grumbled.

On her other side, Patrick laughed. “I want Ingram to help me with lots of things.” He winked, and my mouth fell open—I couldn’t stop it. Did he *like* Ingram?

“I love it,” Elyssa declared. Somehow, she’d already pulled on a long-sleeved tie-dyed dress. “Any cast member doing well helps all of us.” She came over to me with a large box in her hands and shoved my clothes off the chair they’d been lying on. “A courier delivered this here for you. Open it!” Her eyes were shiny with interest, and we’d snagged the attention of other people around us.

Shrugging, I opened the box. Inside was another box, but this one was decorative and mint green. The writing on the top was French. I pulled the new box out, and she moved the shipping packaging, frowning at it.

“This was overnighted from Paris!” Her eyebrows arched.

“Really?” I opened the top of this box and gasped at a cake shaped like Smithfield Manor, where we filmed. I stared down at the artful baked goods stupidly, then unhooked the cardboard corners so that all this hard work could be displayed fully. Everyone gathered around to gape at it, and I snapped a couple of photos.

Glancing around, I searched for Ingram, but he’d vanished, along with his jeans and other regular clothes.

“Should we eat it?” I asked. “I’m not sure we should.”

“I can always eat cake,” Flora said, grinning. “Who was this addressed to?”

“Dean,” Elyssa said, shaking her head. “Of course.”

“Guess we know who the real favorite is.” Ingram surprised me when he came over with his agent, Martin, at his side. He grinned at me like a proud kid with a straight A report card.

“We need plates and forks!” Elyssa declared. She stuck her head out of the privacy screen, and I wasn’t sure who was on the other side, but less than a minute later, someone passed the requested items back to us.

“I don’t think I can do it,” I said, staring at the beautiful cake. “It’s too nice. I feel like I’ll be eating the Mona Lisa.”

“Well, I can,” Ingram said, and I gasped as he reached down and plucked a dormer from the left side of the cake. The top came off in his hand and he plopped it on my paper plate.

Everyone laughed, and I shook my head, going slightly teary eyed.

“This is a huge piece.”

He shrugged, and we moved to the side so everyone else could attack the cake. “I’ll share with you, Edwin.”

My body tingled in ways I wasn’t used to, heat settling low in my groin, and my stomach fluttered. I dug my clear plastic fork into the cake, then held the bite up for him.

“I really shouldn’t be doing this,” Flora said loudly. “It’s probably a thousand calories. They cook with real butter in Paris.”

“Oh, shut up and eat the damned cake. We all want it,” Elyssa shot back with a laugh.

I held the piece of cake up higher for Ingram, and he bent forward, waggling his eyebrows at me. I couldn’t handle staring into his eyes, so I looked down at the cake. My entire body burned hot when I used the same fork to put a bite in my mouth, then glanced up at him. He watched me intently as he chewed, and my cock twitched as I swallowed.



“You two don’t have to do that right now,” Patrick called over to us with a chuckle. “There’s no one in here to impress.”

“We’re always in character.” Ingram laughed, and I turned away from him, but he only put his arms around me so I couldn’t get away. I ended up feeding him cake over my shoulder, which meant I had crumbs everywhere.

Flora kept glancing at us and giggling, which egged on Ingram.

When the cake was done, I found a garbage bag we’d been using to toss junk into all day and put the plate and fork in there, but Ingram was right behind me. His eyebrows furrowed when he stared down into my face. I straightened.

“What?” I asked.

“Did you talk to anyone unusual today?” His smile brightened, but I couldn’t get past the concern in his gaze that had my stomach twisting.

Snorting, I shook my head. “Are you serious? Do you mean during the autograph signing when I almost passed out? Or when Mr. Wakabayashi burst in here and one of my favorite authors asked to work with us?”

“Why, are you jealous, Ingram? Don’t like people talking to your beloved?” Benny asked from nearby, his voice lilting with his teasing. I hadn’t seen him sneak back here, but he had his camera with him, and he was filming now that everyone was dressed. I hid a smirk at the tan slacks and matching suspenders he had on along with a checked short-sleeved shirt. The crowning touch was the white Panama hat plonked on his head.

“Who is jealous?” Jillian asked. She wandered closer and gave me a hug. Her graying blond hair resembled a beehive studded with pearls, and when she stepped back, I was shocked—as I frequently was—with how much we looked alike. I resembled her more than my real mother, which made sense because that was her role on the show. “Oh, well, who wouldn’t be? During the autograph signing the line was to the back of the hall for Dean.”

Embarrassment had me glancing at the floor, and she laughed, gave me another hug, then wandered toward the cake.

“I’m beat. This was exhausting.”

Ingram brushed his fingers through the hair on the side of my head, and I stilled because he’d never done that before. He’d been touching me more. . . and I loved it. “If you’re tired, I’ll take you home. Where’s your mom? She usually never misses events.”

Fluttering my eyelashes, I grinned. “Hmm. I tricked her. Her birthday is next week. I got her a spa package so she wouldn’t be hovering. I think she realized why I’d booked it for today, but she also wasn’t about to turn it down.”

Ingram raised an eyebrow. “I didn’t realize you’re devious.”

“Every once in a while.” I shrugged a shoulder.

Caroline came bustling in past the privacy screen, which wasn’t doing much to keep the area cordoned off at this point because two other people stuck their heads in behind her, then their phones. I only shrugged the small invasion off because no one was naked. Caroline hoisted a cardboard box higher, and TJ rushed over from the other end of the hall to take it from her as she began to hand out spiral-bound scripts.

“The final episode has some big changes! It was delivered here because Collin and Emily wanted to give everyone enough time to prepare.”

“You’ve been telling us they couldn’t decide what they wanted to do,” Flora said, grinning as she took her copy.

Caroline practically danced on the spot as she handed scripts to me and Ingram, and I gasped because typically ours had white covers, but these ones had blue covers—like the main cast. So far, we hadn’t had enough screen time to be considered anything more than side characters. I stared at her, and she tapped the cover.

“Emily has noted the interest in a certain someone,” she whispered.

Ingram grinned at me as he took his script, also with a blue cover, and my heart fluttered with the way happiness lit up his eyes. He knocked his shoulder against mine. “Do Edwin and I finally kiss on the lips?”

She smirked. “You’ll have to study your script and find out. We don’t have anything else scheduled today. You can all run away,” Caroline called.

There was a general cheer of approval.

“I happen to like talking with our fans.” Ingram huffed.

“Well, then, you can go back out there and do it,” Flora said, giving him a huge amount of side-eye.

“No, no, I’m good,” he said in a hurry, and she laughed.

“What happened to Mr. Wakabayashi? And my book?” I asked.

Caroline spun toward me, and I thought she was going to float off the floor with the way her smile stretched across her face. She grabbed my signed book out of the box TJ held as he trudged along behind her and passed it to me. “I helped him set up a few appointments. If he gets the deal, he’s going to be the showrunner, and I hope he asks me to direct. Creator requests aren’t always taken into consideration for the tech team, but I can’t even imagine how much fun it would be to go to Japan to film. We would be in the mountains! We would be on beaches! Ugh, it sounds beautiful.”

“You would be working,” Flora singsonged. “You would be stressed out of your mind.”

“Yes, but I would be stressed out of my mind *in the mountains*,” Caroline said with a laugh, and then she flushed. “And I bet they would have Niko be on-site at all times to give his opinions. He is so knowledgeable about the time period. He’s a historian as well as a novelist.” She grinned down into the cardboard box and cleared her throat.

Ingram chuckled. “The plot thickens. I think you have a crush.”

She waved a hand at him and shook her head—but didn't deny it.

I glanced at Ingram.

“Finish changing. Let me take you home,” he said.

I hid behind my script.

He chuckled. “Then we can see what happens to Edwin and Azariah.”

“Yeah, I want to see, too. I wonder how many days we'll be on set with a *blue* cover.”

The ride back to my house from the New Gothenburg Convention Center, which overlooked Lake Ontario and was close to the Yacht Club, didn't take as long as I would've thought it might. Or maybe I was just content to sneak peeks at Ingram's face while he fought the five o'clock traffic in between grinning like he'd won the lottery.

“Did you have a decent time today?” he asked, cutting a glance at me.

I bit my lip. “Yes. I did. I was surprised. This was so much more fun than modeling used to be. I know things about the show, so I don't feel dumb when people ask me questions. But I couldn't have done it without you.” I wasn't sure where the boldness came from, but I reached over and squeezed Ingram's knee.

He sucked in a deep breath and smiled.

My stomach muscles trembled, but Ingram liked me—he must. Maybe his physical reaction to me while we'd danced was just that—a response to some delicious friction—but I'd been thinking about the nice things he did for me all the time. I doubted pure physics was the only reason he'd gotten hard for me.

Or, at least, I hoped not.

“Will you read the script with me? This is the third crack they've taken at rewriting it, and they've run out of time. Hopefully there are no more changes,” I said.

Ingram chuckled and nodded. “Anything you want, Edwin, my love.”

Goose bumps raced across my skin. *What if instead of Edwin he said Dean?*

Ingram pulled the Mercedes into the small driveway attached to the cottage I rented with Mom. The single-story place wasn't super expensive, and it was much nicer than the trailer I'd grown up in. The walls were stone and the roof was gray slate. The porch roof had real timber supports that created a decorative arch, and on each wooden pillar a light hung that glowed, inviting everyone inside. I groaned because Mom's car was here already. We were so excited to see what was in the script that we didn't waste any time. We rushed in the front door, and Mom was sitting on the couch painting her nails.

“Mom, I sent you to a spa! Why are you doing that?” I asked, dumbfounded. I walked over and laid the signed book on the coffee table beside her. “An author I like was at the event.”

She didn't bother glancing up from her toes. “That's nice, sweetie,” she said, voice loud in the small room. “They didn't have my favorite color of pink, so I didn't get a mani-pedi. Sometimes you just gotta do things yourself.” She smiled at me, and I noticed the polish matched her lipstick.

Ingram hummed as he glanced around the living room. There was only a couch, a small TV, and one armchair, and besides the lack of space, the air was filled with the chemical stench of nail polish.

“We could go get comfortable in my room,” I whispered.

He stared at me, nostrils flaring, then nodded.

My mouth went dry as he flashed his perfect smile.

Leaning down, he pressed his lips to my ear. “Edwin, are you inviting me into your chambers? How scandalous.”

Heating up until I thought I would burst into flames, I elbowed him. He followed me to a short hallway, and we took the only door on the right into my room. I felt like I didn't know how to walk as I went over to my bed on shaking knees,

horribly conscious of every part of my body moving. Again, this room was simple. I only had a bookcase, nightstand, and a queen-sized bed covered in a red comforter.

“There’s not much space in here,” Ingram said, kicking off his shoes. I felt bad because his apartment was huge. Did he want to leave? “We’ll have to make do.” He crawled onto the bed and shoved around the pillows until they supported his back. I stood there, a strained statue, but then he tugged me down. I bounced on the mattress, lurching awkwardly. With a laugh, he pulled me until I found myself resting with my back pressed against his warm, hard chest.

“Thanks,” I murmured.

“Your comfort is my top priority,” Ingram said, tone light and flirty. How was he perfect all the time?

Taking a deep breath, I grinned over my shoulder at him. He smelled so good, and this close I couldn’t get away from the scent. My dick became a distracting problem as it firmed and took up room in my boxers. Ingram shifted until his strong thighs were snug on either side of me. Was I hallucinating it or was there a lump pressed against my lower back?

He opened his script, so I opened mine, but I was too focused on him to read. I put pressure on him, and he snuck one hand around my middle, his fingers digging into my abs. After a few minutes, Ingram gasped and his arm tightened around me.

“What?” I asked, feeling dazed.

Ingram pointed at a line in his script, and for a moment, my brain didn’t take it in.

*Intimate scene to be coordinated by Arihiro Nakamura.*

“What?” I asked, snagging his script. I glanced down the page, but the only real instructions were:

*Azariah kisses Edwin. An intimate scene takes place. Minor improvisation for lines to connect the shots is okay. Writing team feels penetration simulation would be appropriate here.*

“They said there would be nothing like this until next season! If then!”

Ingram hugged me. “You don’t look happy,” he murmured. “This means they’re planning to do an entire story arc with our characters. This is good.”

I shook my head.

“Just a minute.”

At first, I wasn’t sure what he was doing, but he took out his phone and scrolled, then tapped it. Next thing I knew, the sound of a call connecting filled the room.

“You saw it!” Caroline’s excited, shrill tone made me flinch. “You know what this means, right? I got word that your characters are front and center for the main plot next season! Until the fan interest exploded into view with your extra work, no one seemed to understand the potential there. You two did this! Congratulations!”

“Wonderful,” I whispered, gut churning.

“I can’t wait! This is great,” Ingram said.

“Patrick and Elyssa will be pissy because they’re losing some face time, but I love it. That’s just between you and me. Congrats again, guys! We’ll have a meeting with the intimacy coordinator tomorrow.”

“See you then. What time?” Ingram asked.

“How about eight in the morning? Toodles.” With that, Caroline was gone.

Ingram dropped his phone and hugged me tight. I was frozen and couldn’t say anything. Intimacy was a euphemism for *sex*. In front of people.

“What’s wrong?” Ingram asked, grip softening. He rubbed his hand on my belly.

I let out a noise that was more of a squeak.

“Edwin?” he murmured, breath brushing my ear, and pleasant prickles raced across my skin.

I rested back against his chest again, and he was quick to cuddle me. “I agreed to this when we did our contract,” I said.

Ingram hugged me harder. “We both did.”

I groaned.

For about a minute he rocked me from side to side, but it didn’t do anything to relieve the tension that had sunk into every bone in my body. “It’s okay. We won’t actually be having sex. It isn’t porn.”

My laugh was more of a wheeze. “I know that! I just. . . .” I flashed hot and cold, and tears prickled the corners of my eyes. “I haven’t ever. . . .”

Ingram shook me around lightly. “Onstage is. . . interesting your first time. I had a scene in *Triumph of Tulips* where I was nude in front of a live audience five nights a week for about three months. You’re an incredible actor. You’ll pull it off.”

Nestling back against him, I closed my eyes. “I’m scared. I’ve never done any of this. In front of people or not in front of people.”

Ingram was quiet for a while, but he’d begun to rub a soothing circle on my belly. “I don’t believe that. You’re too cute.”

Shrugging, I squeezed my eyes shut harder until stars danced in my vision.

Warm lips landed on my cheek. “Tomorrow, we ask to keep as many clothes on as possible and make it tasteful.”

I covered my face with my hands. “Is that really what people want? I like to see dirty things in my favorite shows.”

Ingram shrugged. “It’ll give people something to look forward to, and maybe by the time we start filming next season, you’ll be more comfortable.”

“What if me getting cold feet screws us out of next season?” I asked, but the question was nearly a wail.

Ingram growled, and heat skittered through my belly. “I won’t let them shove you into something you aren’t ready for,



and Caroline wouldn't want to do that, either. You've got plenty of people on your side."

My heart soared. "You really do care about me."

"Of course." Another kiss landed on my cheek, and some of my anxiety melted away.

"You're amazing," I whispered.

He shrugged, and I twisted slightly so I could glance at his face. He was a rosy pink that I'd never once seen on him. "No, I'm not, but you make me wish I was a better man."

"Is that a line from the script?" I asked, tugging at the book he'd dropped.

"No," he said with a laugh. "I'm just dramatic. I mean it, though."

Excitement socked me in the gut, and I turned around in his arms. He stared at me, and I couldn't look away.

Our breaths tangled together. My eyes wanted to close, and I let them. His lips touched mine. For a while everything was light, soft caresses, and I floated, feeling as if this was a miracle that would never end. Ingram massaged his hands along my sides, teasing me and making my clothes feel too tight.

My cock got so hard I thought I would die, and then Ingram wrapped his arms around me and tugged me closer. When my clothed cock bumped against his, I yelped between our lips, and he growled, attacking and deepening the kiss until he was stroking his tongue into my mouth.

Then he thrust.

I thought my eyes were going to roll back into my head at the perfect heat that sizzled between us. I rocked my hips against his and couldn't breathe.

He moaned.

The slow torture was beautiful. We bucked against each other for a long time until the urge to come was so strong that my body became nothing more than a tool to make it happen. I

shoved my chest against his because the friction on my nipples from my shirt made my cockhead feel like it was going to pop with each sensual wave that spiraled through me.

“Can I touch you?” Ingram asked between our lips.

I nodded as lightning streaked through my cock at the mere idea of his hand on me. I unbuckled my belt, and the next thing I knew he was slipping his gentle fingers into my boxers and pulling me out. He caressed along my shaft once, twice.

It felt so good, and I was so fucking hard. He flicked his tongue against mine, and my cockhead pulsed. I came, shaking in his arms. My cock spasmed harder than it ever had while I was alone, and my balls emptied fast. The superheated joy slammed through me, good and overwhelming. It all felt so amazing, and when I was done, I was floating while trying to catch my breath.

“I think I love you,” I whispered to him, my eyes still closed.

Ingram hummed. “Of course Edwin loves Azariah.” He sucked on my bottom lip, and I shivered, my dick twitching again already.

“No, I—me, Dean—love you, Ingram.” I forced my eyes open and stared at him.

Ingram grunted. “No,” he murmured.

Hurt tore through my chest and the embarrassment that had disappeared while we were rubbing against each other came roaring back like a forest fire. I tucked my dick away as pain ate at me. “Yes.”

He wiped his hand off on his jeans and frowned down at the script lying open on the bed. “How could we ever really know? You can’t love me. I’ve known for a while I have feelings for you, but—” He grabbed the script and waved it around. “You’re a method actor. What if it’s just Edwin loving Azariah? For me. . . . How would I know if it’s more than Azariah loving Edwin? You’re always Edwin.”

My throat was going to close off, and I scooted to the end of the bed. “I. . . . We shouldn’t have done this, then?” I

wanted to cry and fought it off, holding the red comforter tight in both of my fists.

Ingram slid down the bed and put his arms around me, but my heart was trying to beat out of my chest for a new reason—a bad one. He laid his forehead on my shoulder, and I couldn't help but notice he was still rock hard in his jeans.

“I don't know. I do know I'm on your side, though,” he said.

I was dying as I sat there with his warm arms around me, staring at the hard-on he hadn't asked me to touch. Why had I been so stupid? What had made me lose my mind? I'd known he wouldn't say the words back. “We shouldn't do this again.”

Ingram's face crumpled as if maybe he wanted to cry, too, and he snagged the script. I didn't say anything as he got up, put his shoes on, then walked out of my room.

I didn't try to stop him.

This had been so good, and now it was all messed up. How did Ingram not know what to do? He always knew. He always had a plan. He was the one who said the right things and protected me from horrible questions and made me feel comfortable on set.

Staring at the floor didn't give me any answers. I closed my eyes. I'd been feeling this way for a long time, and I wasn't confused. Edwin loved Azariah, of course, but I loved Ingram. I struggled to take deep breaths. But I was also quiet and shy. Maybe I hadn't shown him enough of how I felt because he was always the one taking care of me? As I thought things through, I began to feel a little better and my chest unclenched.

This wasn't the end of the world. He'd made me feel good, and he'd obviously wanted me, too. If Ingram wasn't sure about this thing between us, it had to be my fault, so I would find a way to fix it.

I would let him know that these feelings were mine, not some mixed-up problem in my head where I was pretending to be Edwin too much.

“Dean, come out here!” Mom called, and she sounded delighted. Clearly, Ingram hadn’t rushed out there to let her know I had a screw loose.

Shoving my script to the floor, I went out into the living room, but Mom wasn’t there. The front door hung open, so I went in that direction. She stood in the driveway beside Ingram, who looked wrecked in more ways than one because his eyes were too wide and his face was pale. I went to him and took his hand, despite everything that had just happened, and he held it tight. His skin was cold—much cooler than standing outside for a couple of minutes in the dark should’ve made him.

“Whose car is this?” I asked as my attention landed on a shiny vehicle.

Mom smirked and handed me a lumpy envelope. I took out the keys and found a note.

*I arranged everything with the dealership. You shouldn't be without your own vehicle. They will contact you about finishing the paperwork, but the money is taken care of. You deserve the best, Edwin. Azariah and a brand-new BMW.*

*-Giordano*

Tension slithered down my spine and turned my shoulders to stone as I stared at the spotless green car. “What?”

“Isn’t that great?” Mom gushed. “Someone gave you a car!”

My stomach twisted. “How did this person know I don’t have my own car? How did they know where we’re staying? Isn’t. . . he the person who sent all those roses?”

Ingram and I shared a look while Mom snapped a photo with her phone. “Well, hell, I think it’s nice,” Mom said. “They probably just want to meet you or something.”

“Then why not knock on the door?” I murmured. “What should I do?”

For the second time this evening, Ingram didn’t seem like he had any clue how I should act in this situation, and my blood ran cold.



## INGRAM



MY AMERICANO WASN'T DOING ITS JOB.

Maybe there wasn't enough coffee in the world for this. I tried not to reach up and scratch my neck. The shirt Marva had given me about an hour ago when I'd first gotten here was extra starchy so it would look good, but that meant it was rough on my skin. I shifted around in the heavy green overcoat and tried not to be irritated with this process.

"Hiro, you're such a gem for getting here so early this morning." Caroline beamed at our intimacy coordinator from her seat on a metal folding chair. We were in a tiny junk room, which was stuffed with extra props. There was also a plastic table that belonged on an outdoor deck where there were normally snacks during long days, and that was what we were gathered around.

The man nodded at her and gave her a small smile, then slurped his coffee from a cardboard takeout cup, which was good because that meant he wasn't doing much better than me. He had short black hair styled to perfection, deep brown eyes, and every bit of his clothing was black. His attention darted around the table.

"My name is Hiro Nakamura, and kids, the word of the day is consent, consent, consent. Say it with me." He made a *gimmie* gesture in our directions.

"Consent," Dean said, then glanced at me accusingly when I didn't repeat the word. He looked adorable today. Marva had

outdone herself. His overcoat was gold swirled on top of pink and it made him seem extra soft and touchable.

Caroline giggled. “Consent!”

“Consent,” I mumbled with an eye roll. “You don’t have to worry about that with us. I’m always looking out for Dean. All he needs to do is let me know he’s uncomfortable.”

Dean flushed and glanced down at his coffee cup.

Regret slammed me. I shouldn’t have let things go so far last night, and of course, I hadn’t talked to him about any of it this morning, just shambled in with my coffee. I’d loved what we’d been doing together physically, and Dean had clearly wanted everything we’d done and more, but then he’d said he *loved* me.

He was sweet and deserved more than me and my bullshit. Plus, he must be channeling Edwin, right? He didn’t actually know much about me. How could he love me? If he knew the things I’d done to get here with him. . . .

Hiro grinned and stood, slamming a cardboard box from the floor onto the table in front of himself. “I have lots of fun things in here.” He shook the box. “We use euphemisms and call these intimate scenes, but let’s call it like it is. You two are going to pretend to have sex. Sex scenes are no joke, and I’ve coordinated hundreds of intimate photoshoots over the years. I work locally with Cedar Lavigne.” He smirked.

I had no idea who that person was, but Dean gasped and sat up straighter in his chair.

Hiro sent Dean an extra warm smile. “Usually the people in my studio know each other fairly well, but sometimes they don’t. We want people to be safe physically and emotionally. It is okay to be embarrassed when you’re doing this, but you’re great actors, so I know the crew probably won’t know it to look at you. It’s normal to have feelings about this process.” He glanced between us, his black eyebrows climbing higher on his forehead. “It’s okay to get hard. No one will be judging you for that. If it happens, you must communicate with your scene partner and make sure they’re still okay.”



Dean's blush lit up his face, bright as a neon sign, and he nodded quickly.

Hiro pulled a peachy silk thong that was pretty close to Dean's skin tone out of the box and eyed him up.

Dean raised his coffee cup, hiding behind it.

"Yeah, this is about right for you. Let me see you." He held the fabric next to Dean's face.

Dean whimpered. "I . . . Well, I was wondering. . . ."

It wasn't much of a decision to take Dean's hand. I had to do it. I couldn't let him flounder alone. Guilt slammed me. I hadn't touched Dean—or really acknowledged him much—yet today. I felt shitty about the way I'd left last night while Dean was fighting with his mother over the BMW. He'd wanted to return it, and she'd been insistent he should keep it because it was a gift. When I'd left, they'd been headed toward the blowup of the century, which wasn't like Dean at all.

Fear slithered through me.

What was I going to do about that? Were the Giordanos planning to blackmail Dean? Were they just fucking with me and reminding me of whose thumb I was under? And if they were attempting to shake me up, why spend so much money? The car had cost more than my last payment to them. It didn't make any sense, and the lack of logic had me even more scared about what might be going on.

And I couldn't tell Dean. I squeezed his hand.

Maybe I should?

He squeezed back and smiled at me.

Hiro's eyebrows danced, then settled low, and he glanced at me.

*Fuck it. Showtime.* "We were discussing the scene last night, and we were hoping we could keep it as clothed as possible. Maybe ease into it. I'm fine with nudity, of course. I did *Triumph of Tulips* live." I flashed around my best smile.

Hiro blinked, and a thinking frown tugged on Caroline's lips. She tossed her head and her red curls crowded into her face, but she didn't move them as her brow furrowed.

Hiro hummed. He shook around his box and stared into its depths. "Oh, okay. I think, since I was brought in, the showrunners must have been hoping for something slightly more risqué, but it's good to have an intimacy coordinator for things that aren't full-blown nudity."

Dean glanced at me.

I nodded at him.

A smile flitted across his lips. "W-we were thinking it would give people something to look forward to next season?" He sent a quick glance at Caroline.

Hiro nodded. "If that's what you're comfortable with, it's fine, and I'm sure we can talk everyone into it. Sex scenes are about displaying emotions visually." He gave Dean a small smile. "It doesn't have to be about rock-hard abs and almost catching a glimpse of the goods."

Dean groaned and covered his face with one hand. "But that's what people want, right? I'm ruining this, aren't I?"

"No!" Caroline patted his shoulder, all at once a flurry of motion as she slapped her cup on the table, then brushed her hair out of her face. "No, you're right! Always leave people wanting more. What if we put Edwin on Azariah's lap, then have Azariah unbutton Edwin's shirt? I'm imagining a nice chair." She closed her eyes and smiled. "We'll go for timid and sensual with Edwin, and barely restrained ferocity from Azariah. We'll tease the audience and really make them want to see the next season."

"Maybe a simulated manual masturbation session?" Hiro asked. "It's easy to make that look real on camera without removing much clothing."

She nodded. "Oh, that would be good! I like it."

"Like, jerking him off?" I asked, just to make sure I was on the same page as everyone else.

Dean coughed and his face went red. He nodded. “Okay.”

“I’m fine with it.”

Hiro turned and waited until Dean was looking directly into his eyes. “Are you comfortable with Ingram opening your pants?”

Dean tightened his grip on my hand until it almost hurt.

“It’s okay if you aren’t,” I murmured, rubbing my thumb along the side of his wrist.

“Yes.” Caroline beamed at him. “We’ll have all next season, so despite what Emily and Collin jammed into the script, I am all for a slow buildup. This isn’t something we can rush.”

“Thank God,” Dean mumbled, then drained his coffee cup like he was doing a shot of vodka, all in one long gulp. He took a deep breath. “I’m fine with anything you want Ingram to do to me.”

My cock twitched at hearing those wonderful words out loud and I cleared my throat. “We’re very comfortable with each other physically.”

Dean gave me a glance that could scald the rubber off a tire, so maybe we weren’t entirely okay after last night. I squeezed his hand, and this time he didn’t do the same back. Dean had never looked at me that way. Fuck, I probably needed to apologize for at least some part of the disaster yesterday. Walking out without saying anything certainly hadn’t been smart. I’d just been confused and worried and . . . shocked that he could say something so nice about me. How could he think he loved me? I was willing to believe that he was very much like Edwin—forthright, true to his word, and doing his best for everyone—but I wasn’t some good guy.

As much as I wanted to be Azariah and tried to play the part, at my core, I was Ingram, the kid from Chicago, who went to acting classes on a scholarship I cheated to get, then did the same thing to get my first big break. I was from a dirt-poor neighborhood where kill or be killed was the unofficial motto.

Fuck, how could I fix this? I'd had friends with benefits, but I'd never had a *partner*, and whether or not Dean and I were romantic, that was exactly what we were to each other.

Hiro grinned. "I'm glad everyone is comfortable. Let's talk hygiene for a second. We don't want to offend each other."

Snorting, I drained the rest of my Americano, then took my empty cup and Dean's over to the trash can near the door to dump them in. "Dean always smells good."

Dean snickered. "Ingram smells great, too. We're fine in that department."

Hiro sighed and fluttered his eyelashes. "Yes, but you need to think about little things that could put off your performance. Before this scene is filmed you want to be conservative with what you eat or follow date rules."

"What do you mean?" Dean asked, a tiny pout taking over his lips.

Hiro smirked. "Either everyone has onion rings or no one does. You get me? You don't want to be fighting through gnarly breath for a kiss or it won't look natural. At the very least, everyone has to have some minty fresh breath and deodorant." He dug around in his box and held up a mini bottle of mouthwash. He used the tiny bottle to point at Caroline. "You were thinking a chair? What chair?"

"TJ! Can you bring us the embroidered wingback from the den?" Caroline spun on her seat and stared at TJ, who had been happily scrolling through his phone in the corner of the room next to a table of prop guns.

"Really?" TJ grumbled without looking up. "You want me to bring the chair here?" He sighed.

"Can we just go there?" Dean asked, sitting up straighter. "It's not a long walk."

She shrugged and grabbed a small camera from the center of the table. "Sure."

Hiro grinned. "I would love to see more of this house. It's an architectural wet dream."

“It’s a manor,” Dean said with a wide smile, and I could see the moment his handsomeness smacked Hiro upside the head. It was a subtle shift. From one second to the next his smile was warmer and most of his focus zeroed in on Dean. Jealousy nipped at me, but I’d seen the same thing happen over and over again, everywhere we went.

“Tell me about it,” he said, tone playful.

“Oh, I’m no expert but okay. I love old buildings.”

As we walked through the ornate corridors to the den, which was really the Smithfield family library, an unexpected round of nerves slammed me. Dean gave me a tiny smile that disappeared almost as quickly as it had arrived, in between rattling off tidbits about the furniture and other decorations that he’d picked up during our time filming. I was shocked he remembered it all because I sure didn’t.

Caroline arrived at the library ahead of us and pushed the heavy wooden door wide open. We went inside and directly over to the embroidered chair in question. A vibrant peacock had been painstakingly sewn into the fabric and the work that had gone into it was unfathomable. It would have taken hundreds of hours.

Hiro spun in a circle, and I knew why. The room was two levels lined in bookcases, and each shelf was stuffed with impressive leather-bound volumes. There was a staircase to the balcony on the second floor that ran the full length of the room, except over the black marble fireplace, which took up a good bit of the wall to our right. Large arched windows let in the morning light and gave everything a dewy golden glow.

“We could get the fire going,” TJ said.

Caroline nodded enthusiastically. “Go turn it on. It’s a gas fireplace.”

TJ waved a hand and went over to do as instructed, and Caroline set her camera on a side table, then hustled around to pull the curtains closed. As the last window was covered, the room was plunged into darkness broken up by the dancing firelight. Excitement squirmed through my belly.

Hiro plopped his box down on the floor beside the door and crossed his arms as he watched Dean and I shuffle over to stand nervously beside the chair.

“Okay, sit Ingram!” Caroline said, excitement putting a bounce in her step. Shrugging, I did as she said. “Dean, if you don’t mind, can you hop on his lap facing him just so I can do some blocking. I want to see what this looks like.”

Dean nodded. He put a knee on the chair on each side of my thighs, then carefully settled onto my lap, not trying to keep any space between us. I wanted to moan when his perfect ass teased my groin.

“Can you take off your overcoat?” Caroline asked.

She was obviously a demon sent to torture me because Dean squirmed as he removed the coat and handed it to someone—all I could focus on was the shyness keeping him from looking me in the eye. He slid closer, and my cock reacted the same way it had last night. I was dealing with wood in no time flat, and he bit his lip. I put my hand on his lower back, and he rested against my front. It was gratifying to feel his semi nudging my belly.

Fuck, it was good that I wasn’t alone with this crazy tension.

“Dean, can you put your hands on Ingram’s shoulders?” Caroline had her phone out, clearly making notes.

He nodded, and I rested both hands on the curve of his back, holding him tight.

Hiro walked over to stand nearby, and I caught his eye. He frowned at me, and I cleared my throat, embarrassment slapping me for the first time today.

“Dean, are you okay with this?” he asked, tone cool. “I didn’t think half a minute of closeness would cause such a huge issue.”

I wanted to crawl under the chair and tilted my head back, closing my eyes. This was fucking delicious, and I’d felt like shit last night as I’d fallen asleep alone in my bed.

Dean wriggled, and when I cracked my eyes open, he was nodding at Hiro. “Maybe you could give us a minute in private to get comfortable?”

Caroline glanced up from her phone. “I’m fine with it! I have a couple of things to take care of. TJ, can you go find a good spot for the cast photoshoot later? Maybe outside? It’s a beautiful day.”

“Sure,” he said with a sigh and clomped out of the room in his heavy cowboy boots.

Hiro nodded and gave me a serious amount of critical attention, so I shrugged at him.

TJ was almost out the door when I called his name.

He rolled his eyes at me.

I took my keys out of my overcoat pocket and tossed them to him, and he easily caught them. “Can you bring me the red cooler from the trunk? I made my own iced lattes so I could have something decent today. I would love it if you could put them in my dressing room. You can have one if you want.”

“Sure,” he said, then headed out.

“Communication in these situations is key,” Hiro stressed, crossing his arms. His intense tone drew my attention fully back to him.

My gut twisted. It was like he was talking to me directly about running away last night, but I knew he couldn’t be. No, he was telling Azariah to treat Edwin nicely—and the funny part about that was he always would. It was me—*Ingram*—who was a fuckup.

“We’re good.” I shrugged again. “We’ll text you in a couple of minutes, Caroline.”

She already had her phone at her ear as she made it to the hallway, and Hiro only shut the door behind himself after Dean waved at him.

The second we were alone, the air weighed seven tons. Dean stared into my eyes, and I ran my hands up his spine. I often liked to think of Dean as Edwin, but today I couldn’t. He

felt good wrapped up in the fabric of his costume, and I loved the way his legs looked in the tight pants that highlighted every one of his delectable curves. Dean had a sensuality that I hadn't fully grasped before last night, and I was having trouble making it fit with Edwin in my head, but maybe that was good. If we were going to stick our toes in the pool and do something that resembled a relationship, I needed to think of him as Dean. And Dean wasn't Edwin. I let out a long breath.

"You're so beautiful," I murmured.

He smiled and settled his ass firmly onto my cock. The pressure was bliss and hell, all wrapped up in one, and I rocked my hips. Dean pressed his hard-on against my abs and nudged there in a short, steady rhythm that had us both gasping. His teeth dug into his full bottom lip, and I wanted to do it for him.

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

"What are you sorry for?" He studied my face so intently that I didn't ever want to let him go.

"Starting something that might hurt you."

Frowning, he leaned closer and dropped a kiss in front of my ear. "Is that why you left last night? I liked what we did together."

"What about what you said?" Anxiety tightened into a knot in my gut. I didn't want to be away from Dean. That was a simple fact. Leaving last night, especially with everything that had gone on with the car, had left me with worry burning in my gut. I'd had trouble falling asleep.

"I care about you." Dean shrugged and the expression on his face was slightly indignant. "No matter what you want to think." He cupped his hands on the sides of my neck. "I'm not confused." Right now, with his tone so firm, he sounded the least like Edwin I'd ever heard.

"Last night you got off with me. People say a lot of things in the heat of the moment." Fear twisted around my heart. "You might've meant it right then, but maybe this morning



things look different.” I tilted my head and my gaze got caught on his pretty lips again.

“They don’t. Not for me. I feel the same.”

“Okay.” I slid my hands down to his hips and jerked him closer. He ground his cock against my abs. “But you’re hard right now.”

Dean huffed and glared at me. “If you’re waiting for some magical moment when I’m near you and I haven’t just gotten off and I’m in no danger of being turned on—” He smirked, and I was shocked as my blood boiled with need. “—you’ll be waiting a long time.”

My stomach flipped, and I wasn’t sure if I felt good or bad, but I did know I wanted Dean. He studied my eyes, and the longer it took me to say something, the tenser he became in my arms until it felt like he was going to snap. I hadn’t jerked off last night and my cock throbbed, close to erupting, as he shifted his weight.

“Oh my God, that’s perfect!” Caroline squealed.

We both flinched.

My painfully hard cock twitched and pleasure simmered in my gut. Dean hid his face against the crook of my neck, and I stared across the room at Caroline. I forced a smile in her direction. “Do you think?”

“Yes! Okay, chair it is! Sorry, I forgot my camera in here. I was just going to sneak in and grab it, but then I saw how amazing you two look.” She picked up her camera from a side table. “I knocked. Would you maybe be interested in filming this scene right now, since Hiro is here to give his input? Most of the crew has arrived already.” She waved her hand at the door.

Dean and I stared at each other.

“I don’t have the lines for the entire script memorized yet,” Dean said softly. “I thought I would have some time to work on it today.” He glanced over his shoulder at her.

“It might take us a while to work on this scene and get it right, and there are no lines in it, unless you improvise something good. I want to do it.” She glanced expectantly between us.

Dean nodded, swallowing hard.

“Sure. I’m game.”

My stomach twisted into a ball of nerves as Dean climbed off me. My cock wasn’t behaving, and I was fast to get up to try to disguise that fact. Dean hid behind the chair and went to cup his face in his hands, then stopped, probably because he’d remembered he was wearing makeup.

Walking to his side, I forced a bright smile. Carefully, I clasped his hand between both of mine. He glanced down my front, and I shrugged at him.

“I wish. . . .” He stepped closer and pressed his lips to my ear. “I wish that you’d gotten off with me last night.”

“Me too,” I mumbled. “Are you okay?”

He nodded. “I’m glad this is with you.”

Elation smacked me, even though guilt still slithered around in my stomach. I kissed the back of his hand, and he smiled up at me like I was his savior. Hell, he’d said he loved me. Right now, more than anything, I wanted to believe him.

Even worse, I wanted to be worthy.

If only I actually were Azariah.



DEAN



THE LIBRARY BUZZED WITH ACTIVITY, AND EVERYONE WHO wasn't us had to stay on the side near the door. Thankfully the room was big because the crew had lights they needed to position, though the glow was subtle, and the bulbs were the same soft hue as the firelight.

Benny had four cameras rolling, and his assistant, whose name I couldn't remember, smiled and waved at me. The thin guy was about my age and taller than Ingram, with long red hair in a braid that almost reached his waist. He was a local, and I felt terrible that I hadn't made any effort to get to know him. Desi, our sound person, had hidden mic pacs on us; although, I wasn't sure why because we didn't have official lines in the scene.

Ingram glanced at me as Desi messed around with the collar of his shirt, making sure the mic was concealed. The smile Ingram flashed had my cock perking right back up, even though it had just died down a bit. *Hell.*

Should I ask Ingram if we were going to be together? Last night it had felt like that was a possibility, but then I'd messed it all up by saying too much. I'd never been with anyone. Did he think I was desperate? I still wasn't quite sure what had happened, but I wouldn't make the same mistake twice. I would let him be the one to suggest we become a couple—if he ever did. Shaking my head at myself, I watched Caroline talking to Benny, who nodded at her while she gestured at the chair about seven hundred times.

*Everyone is going to see me get hard because I'm so stupid over Ingram. Damn it.* The entire world will know I was catching wood during this scene. I had the urge to hide behind one of the huge curtains, but in a weird way I also wanted to scream at everyone that Ingram and I might be together soon. As a real couple.

“Adjust those lights more to the left!” Caroline barked, and I could tell she was getting into work mode because the kindness in her tone had vanished, replaced by a no-nonsense steel. She was still the same sweet person, but this was her job, and I didn't want to get in her way when she was like this. One of the assistants went over and started moving the lights, but she didn't seem as if she knew what she was supposed to be doing.

“Damn it, where's TJ?” Caroline scowled around the room.

“Haven't seen him since earlier,” Benny's assistant piped up unhelpfully. He whirled in Caroline's direction. “TJ was on his way outside and complaining about his allergies. But I don't think he has allergies, he just likes to complain.” The assistant smiled at Caroline.

“That's too much, Tessa. Less left! You'll make them glare!” Caroline called to the woman messing with the lights, then growled. “Yes, there. Polly! Can we have their faces done with better coverage? I don't want to see any glimmer, unless it's their lips or eyes.”

“I'm on it!” Polly rushed up to me with her mobile makeup kit, and I stood very still as she hit me with a powder brush. My nose wrinkled, and I held my breath, counting to ten.

“Don't you do it to me,” she said, pointing at me with the brush.

The inside of my nose burned and twitched. I bit my tongue, and she'd just moved out of the way when I turned and sneezed.

She laughed as she stepped over to Ingram.

“That’s so cute,” Ingram said with a grin. “Don’t you agree, Miss Pollyanna?”

She belted him on the arm. “Do not use that name.”

I waved a hand at Ingram as my belly warmed. Damn it, I was definitely going to humiliate myself because I was three seconds from a full hard-on just speaking with him, and it didn’t seem to matter that there was a small crowd around us.

“Okay, people. I want to get this scene done, and then we won’t need most of the crew for the first kiss outside the library door. I figured I’d go from the most crew to the least today. That way you can arrange the furniture for the big family argument scene with Elyssa and Patrick. They’ll be in the dining room,” Caroline said.

There was a general mumble of agreement from everyone stuffed into the library.

Ingram cleared his throat. “Shouldn’t we do the kiss first?” He glanced at me, and I almost swallowed my tongue. His dark hair was perfect. His hazel eyes were warm and made me want to strip my clothes off right here and now. His mouth quirked, and I wanted it on me. Maybe he was trying to get Caroline to do something he thought would make me less shy—a simple kiss—but I wished I had telepathy. I would tell him all of it, anything we did together, was going to have my face red and my dick hard.

Caroline shook her head. “No, we’re already set up in here with the crew. I don’t want to waste time. We’re on fire today, and I want to keep up that energy.”

My skin heated from the tips of my toes to the top of my head.

Ingram cleared his throat, but when he glanced at me, he smirked, and I didn’t think he could help it.

Nearby Polly laughed like we were putting on a comedy routine, and Ingram flipped her off, which had her tittering and holding her side.

“Come along, Edwin,” Ingram said, that light British accent he used for the show taking over his voice.

I shivered and glanced at him, not surprised to see him staring intently at me.

He held out his hand and I took it.

Before, I'd always thought of that focused attention as something Azariah did to Edwin, but I'd seen the same intensity on Ingram's face last night. Maybe he wasn't as far apart from his character as I'd thought. That made sense. He was always on my side and always protecting me.

He was perfect.

"Are we starting the scene with us already in the chair?" Ingram asked, snagging Caroline's attention.

"No!" She waved her hand at the fireplace. "Walk from there to the chair, like maybe you took him to the fire to warm him up, then over to the furniture. Help him onto your lap. Be the reformed rogue that you are, Azariah! We want the audience gushing over how much of a gentleman you are with your true love!"

She snickered, and there was a ruffle of laughter that flew around the room.

Ingram held my hand, and we walked over to the fireplace. He caught my eye and my cheeks burned. With our heavy clothing it was way too hot for a fire, but I cuddled up against his side as if I were naked in a winter snowstorm. I enjoyed the embrace because he felt so good. With a soft smile tugging at his lips, I was able to block everyone else out when his arms were around me.

The room went totally silent.

"How are you feeling, Edwin?" he murmured, and I glanced up into his eyes in surprise.

"Happy." Even though I was nervous as hell, it was true because I was with Ingram.

Several emotions slipped across his face, but he ended up smiling, a warm expression that crinkled the corners of his eyes. He turned me to face him, and I was aware of the dead silence in the room. I assumed we were filming already, and

Caroline was letting us lead the scene. He turned me until I knew we would have a good camera angle and cupped my jaw.

“I’m exhausted with dancing around this,” he whispered, and my heart almost stopped. I swallowed hard.

“Yes, I am as well,” I murmured, and he bent and covered my lips with his.

My head spun for a second and I clung to him. He tilted my chin up farther than was comfortable, but before I could say anything he drove his tongue between my lips. I whimpered at the sizzle of heat that sliced through my stomach and had my cock hardening. He leaned back and smiled down at me, and all I could do was try to catch my breath. I rested my hands on his chest and raised my chin because I wanted more.

“Come sit with me,” he said, and I glanced around.

“There’s only one chair,” I said.

He chuckled, the rich laugh that seemed to only belong to Azariah. “I know.” He raised an eyebrow.

I hesitated as he took a step and tugged on my hand, and that was all me because this was go time. A fresh wave of nerves poured into my belly—a thousand butterflies had all woken up at once in there—while my dick plumped. He bent and kissed my knuckles, then tugged me in the direction we were supposed to go.

I went with him, letting him lead me around the way I did with so many other things, and I loved it.

He sat down, and I climbed onto his lap. I stripped my coat like we’d discussed, but simply let it drop to the floor on our right. Ingram ran his hands down my back to my ass, and I was aware of Caroline coming around on our side with her camera.

“What if we’re caught?” I asked as he leaned up to kiss me again. After a few seconds of relishing his heat against my body, I slid my hands to his shoulders as I remembered I was working.



“Don’t concern yourself with the future. Focus on me. I’ll keep you safe,” he whispered. It was exactly what I needed to hear right now.

Ingram kissed me, and I whimpered, rocking against him. He was hard again, his dick nudging against my ass. Damn it, I wanted him so much.

“Okay, that was as perfect as anything could be,” Caroline said, after about a minute had gone by.

Shocked, I reluctantly leaned back, and Ingram appeared as stunned as I did. There was a ruffle of chatter around the room, as if Caroline speaking had broken some sort of magic spell.

“Sit up,” Hiro said, and I gasped as he came up at our side with a small black piece of padding. Confusion muddled my brain while I rose onto my knees, but he slid the material under me. When I sat back down, I couldn’t feel Ingram as well. This wasn’t an improvement.

Ingram made a face, and I snickered.

“Okay, so I’m going to let you two do whatever you want for a few minutes.” Caroline poked at the screen on the back of her camera. “Benny, get your handheld over here. Guys, just make out. You were already doing great, but we will want a few different angles for editing, so just do your thing and totally ignore me and Benny.” She smiled wide at us.

Heat slammed my gut as Ingram kneaded my asscheeks, and my attention shot to his face. His hazel eyes were wide and innocent as he stared at Caroline. He nodded.

“We can do that,” I murmured.

Ingram only laughed and slid a hand up my back to my neck, then tugged me in.

So, that’s what we did. We kissed, and I was shocked that I could tune in so completely to him and ignore everyone. I never would’ve thought I would be the kind of person able to lose that self-conscious piece of myself. The fact that we were being filmed still screamed in my head, but touching Ingram’s hard body and having his lips tease mine was wonderful.

The sex sparks burning in my belly fried the part of my brain in charge of worrying about everything. All I could focus on was the way my cockhead pulsed and how fucking amazing it was when he bucked against me. I squeezed my asshole. What would it be like to actually have sex with Ingram?

Whimpering, I clutched his shoulders and tried to get closer to him.

“Don’t stop. Dean and Ingram, keep going. Hiro, can we move the barrier? I want a wider shot and I don’t want it in the way.”

“Is everyone comfortable with that?” Hiro asked.

“Yes,” Ingram and I both said between our lips, and he chuckled for a moment before he jammed his tongue back into my mouth. I raised up on my knees a little and someone yanked the barrier away. We both groaned when I sank back down onto him.

“Can you put your hands on Dean’s butt, Ingram?” Caroline asked. “That’s what I wanted to get in the shot.”

Goose bumps rushed across my body as he did what she said, but he kneaded my cheeks, and the sensation seemed to swirl into my core and tease my hole. I ground against him instinctively, then worried it was too much, but I didn’t want to stop.

“Can you unbutton his pants, Ingram?” Caroline asked.

Liquid heat poured through my groin and my face scalded. I wanted his lips on mine, but Ingram put a hand on my throat and moved me away. My nipples were hard points on my chest that I’d never been so aware of in my life as he manhandled me, holding my throat while he undid my pants. I needed him to touch me everywhere. I bit my bottom lip to force myself to stay still, but then disappointment slammed me because he didn’t actually tug me out.

*I am dying. Can’t everyone go away?*

I felt lightheaded as he gave my trapped dick a small, secret caress.

Caroline sighed, and it was the happy sound she made when everything was going right, which oddly sent a new thrill racing through me. “Okay. Go for it, Dean. Ingram is going to simulate—”

“Can we just say pretend?” I asked, feeling weird about the wording, even though I knew what we were about to do.

She laughed, a joyful sound that strangely added to the mood. “Sure, whatever floats your boat. Ingram is going to pretend to give you a handy. Plain enough language?”

“Yes, thanks,” I murmured.

Ingram laughed, the real one that wasn't Azariah, and it made my heart beat harder because after last night. . . I knew the difference.

“We will use the magic of editing, but I need you to give me that wonderful moment for the audience.” Caroline stood about two feet from us and raised her camera. “We're going to do about twenty seconds of Ingram pretending to jerk you off, and then you give us Edwin's orgasm. However you think he would get off. Does he become a dynamo behind closed doors? Is it still sweet and demure? Give us your version of Edwin.” She smiled. “We can see different sides of him next season.”

My brain kicked on and I glanced down at Ingram jerking his fist in thin air over my groin. I tried not to do it, but I snickered.

Caroline groaned. “No, we were doing so well.” Her head dropped back and she sighed.

“It's funny,” I said, catching her eye.

Her lips quirked, and before I knew it, we were all laughing, even the crew. I lost my wood, but when she gestured for us to keep going, I was able to think about last night and how good it had felt with Ingram touching me. I closed my eyes and licked my lips, trying to sink into the memory. I panted, and he leaned forward to slowly kiss my neck on the opposite side to Caroline, and I whimpered for real.

“The moment,” Caroline said.

Awkwardness swamped me. I threw my head back and dropped my mouth open, but it felt forced.

“Try collapsing forward,” Caroline directed. “Edwin needs Azariah to comfort him and protect him. Maybe that would be best.”

I did as she said, and it felt much better and far more natural, especially when he settled his free hand on the back of my neck. I cuddled closer to Ingram, and he kissed my cheek. “You’re so beautiful this way,” he murmured.

Sitting back, I smiled down into his face, feeling shy. “You’re the beautiful one for making me feel this way.” I traced a finger across his cheek.

A few heartbeats passed, and Caroline sighed happily. “You’re so perfect as Edwin. We couldn’t have gotten anyone else to do this character.”

Frowning, I glanced down at Ingram. “Without Azariah, I wouldn’t be able to do it.” I gave him a hug. He ran his hands up and down my sides and gave me an appreciative smile. I realized he must’ve gone down at some point, too, because while he was still firm against my ass, I wasn’t sitting on a log anymore.

Ingram hugged me, and I squeezed him back.

Caroline let out a triumphant shout that tensed every muscle in my body. “I have enough to work with guys. It took much less time than I thought it would. Great job!” She stepped away, smiling down at her camera. “Our views are going to go through the roof.”

“Okay,” Hiro said as he came over to stand near us with his arms crossed. “Is there anything you would prefer the other doesn’t do next time?” He stared between us.

“I’m fine,” I murmured, shoulders slumping. Hiro had that look as if maybe he knew the real deal between us, and I felt like a kid getting caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

“Wonderful here.” Ingram blasted Hiro with a bright smile.

Hiro nodded but didn't say anything.

I was beginning to feel pressured, so I hugged Ingram and buried my face against his neck. My makeup was already ruined, so they would have to redo it no matter what I did right now.

"Thanks for making this not scary," I whispered.

As I sat back, Ingram stared at me. "Get up," he murmured, and I jumped to my feet in an instant. He smiled and held my hand. Glancing around, I saw Caroline in a deep conversation with Benny, and when I peeked at Ingram, he was noting the same thing.

He tugged my hand.

"What are we doing?"

"Come with me for a minute," he said.

I nodded, following him out of the room. We wound our way through the manor until we were in his dressing room with the door closed and locked.

Ingram leaned against the door and swallowed hard. All at once, he wasn't Azariah. There was something different about the way his body moved when he straightened, less self-assured.

"I'm sorry about last night," he said.

My heart soared.

"And the thing I'm most sorry about was leaving. I want to be clear on that."

Not sure what to say, I nodded and tangled my fingers with his. "Thank you."

"What happened with the car?" He tilted his head, and I adjusted his collar.

"I made the dealership take it back. Mom isn't talking to me right now," I grumbled and closed my eyes. "She won't be reasonable. I hate to call her greedy, but she's more than willing to get anything she can out of my fame. She's obsessed with the idea that this might be the only shot I get, and if I

don't take everything I can, I might be left with nothing at all." The words made me feel bitter because it felt a hell of a lot as if she expected me to mess this up.

"Are you okay?"

Warm hands captured mine, and I smiled and opened my eyes. His concerned expression was exactly what I'd needed last night to make that bizarre, crappy situation better, but I was happy to have it now. I stepped closer and hugged him.

"Yeah. A little weirded out but fine," I said.

"I'm also sorry about. . . ."

All at once irked, I stepped back and glared at him. "I meant it. What I said. About you." I poked his chest. "Every word."

"Can I kiss you?" Ingram asked, studying my face so intently it burned.

"Yes," I whispered.

He attacked, sucking my bottom lip, then taking over my mouth. After all the time we'd already spent touching this morning, I was on fire in seconds. My cock pulsed and my body felt like it only existed to help me rub against Ingram. He slipped his hand down between my legs, and I whined when he pressed his palm there, teasing my trapped cockhead. I was stunned when he dropped to his knees so fast that there was a loud *thud*.

"Can I blow you?" he asked, unbuttoning my pants. I had to laugh because it was clear all the directions from Hiro had sunk in.

"Yes, please," I whispered.

He stared up at me, but the second he had my cock out of my pants, his attention dropped. "Oh, you're beautiful here." He smiled at me for a hot second, and I was strangely pleased, as if I'd had anything to do with it.

"Thanks," I whispered. I couldn't look away, and my dick felt bigger than it ever had as he opened his mouth and slipped his lips around my cockhead. My body flashed hot like I'd

stuck my finger in an electric socket. My cockhead throbbed and my shaft swelled absolutely huge. I could barely catch my breath.

“Ingram,” I moaned.

He grunted and slid down my length, taking more of my cock into his mouth. I was going to shake apart as he bobbed on me, every slick, hot sensation the most amazing thing that had ever happened to my dick.

It was a perfect storm of wet heat and a small growl from Ingram. The vibrations had me whining. I shivered and cried out as he backed off to suck on my cockhead, then shoved my hips forward, wanting to be as deep inside him as possible. He held still and used his hands on my hips to urge me close, then back, and I got the idea.

Rocking my hips made it all better. I couldn't say why, but thrusting made me feel like I was going to explode into a thousand happy pieces. I wanted to drive myself all the way into his core. My cockhead hit the back of his mouth and I wanted to keep pushing.

“Sorry,” I whispered, but he moved forward and the sensation of his tight throat squeezing around my cockhead almost had me falling. His hands went to my ass, and he kept me upright as he took over, teasing his lips up my length before sucking me down into his throat again. The sensations combined with the sight of myself disappearing between his lips sent waves of tingles slamming through my gut.

“I'm going to come. Oh my God.” I gasped, then it happened. My groin spasmed with pleasure and I lurched forward as my gut clenched. I whimpered and finished with a loud yell. I wanted to roar because it felt fucking fantastic. “It's so good. You're so good,” I said around my ragged breath.

He pulled off me and shot to his feet, taking over my mouth again. It was strange to taste hints of myself. I was so mellow I was nearly a marshmallow as he held me in his arms, and all I could do was cling to him while my knees tried to decide if they were going to work or not.

He chuckled and tapped my nose. “You’re cute.”

I shrugged and grinned at him, unable to stop staring at his red lips. They were always a dark pink, but the color had deepened from him blowing me, and I was obsessively aware of how they’d gotten that way. I kissed him and wanted to live in this moment forever.

“Can you. . . ?” He glanced down at where his cock strained against his pants.

“I would love to return the favor,” I said with a grin.

Ingram frowned and dragged his vibrating phone out of his overcoat pocket. We weren’t supposed to carry them around during the day when we were filming, but most of the cast did anyway. He blinked at the screen, then furiously tapped out a message before hitting Send.

“Well, fuck,” he snapped.

“What?” I asked, frowning at him. “Are they done and need us already? I’m sorry about leaving you this way again. I promise I’ll—”

He slapped his hand over my mouth.

I scowled at him.

“Our mics are still on,” he said, widening his eyes.

Several heartbeats passed before my entire body went into nuclear meltdown, and I curled forward. “Oh my God.” I cradled my stomach.

“Yep,” he said with a laugh. He gathered me close and rocked me until I was feeling closer to human.

“Who knows about that?” I asked.

“Caroline texted me, but I assume Desi told her.”

“Ugh,” I groaned out. “Sorry everyone,” I muttered.

Ingram helped me find the mic pac where it was strapped to my side, and we switched it off, then I did the same thing for him. He smiled down at me.

“Are you okay?”



I nodded. “Caroline will get more than she bargained for when she’s listening to all that.”

He grinned, then his expression slipped to something grim. “Are you sure you like me?”

“I like the man who worries about me. I like the man I see every day. I like whoever this is in front of me.” I patted his shoulders.

He nodded and smiled. “I like you, too.”

“You just think it’s too soon for the other L-word?”

He massaged my shoulders, and then his eyebrows quirked as he studied my face. “No. I. . . . I feel more than *like* for you, but I want you to know me better before we say anything serious to each other. I want you to be sure. I don’t want you to be confused.”

Smiling, I hugged him. “Then let’s spend time together.”

He held me close, and I loved it when he dragged his fingernails across my scalp on the back of my head. “You’re sure you don’t just love a rich, handsome, cocky man?”

Grinning, I leaned back. “I do, but you know, the one I like is from this century.”

Ingram’s eyes widened, and then he laughed.

There was a knock on the door, and we both winced at each other. “Do you think this is Caroline here to chew us out for, you know?” I whispered.

“If it is, I’ll tell her it was my fault,” Ingram said, mouth firming up into a scowl. He went over and yanked open the door, but on the other side Marva stood with her hands shoved into the back pockets of her jeans, and we both blinked at her in confusion.

“Do you want us to change?”

“Actually, no.” She flipped her brown braid off her shoulder and frowned. “Have you seen TJ? He’s missing and not answering his phone.”

“No.” Ingram shook his head. “Define missing. Is he just not within ten paces of Caroline?”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

She took off her sunglasses and twirled them in her hand. “No one can find him, for real, and Caroline is worried. He was here this morning, as usual. She said he was scouting around the grounds for a place to hold a photoshoot. Come on.” She jerked her head.

“Yeah, he was definitely here. He has my car keys,” Ingram grumped.

We followed her downstairs and real concern ripped through me, chasing away my embarrassment, because everyone was crowded near the front door, and no one was chatting or laughing the way they normally did.

Caroline stood like a safari guide with a clipboard in her hand and a wide beige sun hat plopped on her head. “Listen up! TJ isn’t answering his phone, and that alone makes me worry.”

A light laugh rippled through the gathered crew, but Caroline didn’t smile.

“He was here before we started filming in the den. His car is still here and so are all the other vehicles. I don’t think he left. I want us to search for him.” She flashed a nervous frown.

Elyssa tossed her hair and shook her head, pointing at the silk shoes on her feet. She fluffed out the full skirt of a pink dress that probably cost a thousand dollars if it cost a penny. “And you want us to what? Search for him? It’s been, like, an hour.”

Caroline’s face fell, and I walked up to her and gave her a hug. She gave me a sneaky grin that only hung around for a half a second before it melted into another frown.

“Let’s look for him. You’re right. He always has his phone on him. He would never ignore a call without a reason.” Pushing open the front door, I went out into the sunshine, and I felt pretty good when everyone else ambled into the driveway after me, including Ingram, who offered his elbow.

“Stroll with me, good sir?”

Laughing, I bowed before I took his arm. I hadn't expected this to turn into a huge scavenger hunt, but we began to walk around the edge of the large pond on the property, while other people went into a hedge labyrinth, and yet another group headed toward a copse of willow trees nearby.

“We've never done this,” Ingram said quietly, smiling down at me.

A rock caught my toe, and I stumbled, but he didn't let go, and we barely missed a beat. “Just taking a walk? Yeah, I think you're right.” I goofily leaned my head against his arm, and he snickered.

“The sun is nice in your golden hair,” he murmured, and I shivered as he combed his fingers through it. “Do you like doing this with me?” he asked.

I glanced up at him and was surprised at the thin line of his lips.

“Yes, a lot.” I grinned at him.

He nodded, a cocky Azariah smile taking over his face. I loved it.

Glancing at the pond, I couldn't get over the perfect day. Sunlight glimmered, gold coins across the surface of the water. *This is amazing, and Ingram is amazing and—*

“Oh my God, is that TJ?” I asked, pointing out into the center of the pond. I gasped because he was floating face down, his black cowboy boots bobbing awkwardly, and he wasn't moving.

Ingram rushed in, splashing through water that came up to his knees. He turned and tossed me his phone. “Call for an ambulance,” he yelled.

The phone was odd in my hand, and my palm stung from catching it, but I'd moved on autopilot. Ingram had to scream his directions twice more before I could make my trembling fingers work. I jammed the phone to my ear.

“New Gothenburg Emergency Services, how can I help you?” The perky tone of the guy who answered confused me because something horrible was happening.

“We found TJ and he’s dead,” I said, panicking as Ingram flipped TJ over. There were no signs of life. “What do we do?” My foot hit something hard and it clinked against a rock as it tumbled toward the pond. I frowned as a pretty glass bottle with a cork in the top sparkled in the sunlight while bobbing in the water.

Ingram shook his head.

I burst into tears. “Oh God, he’s dead.”



## INGRAM



DEAN HUDDLED IN MY ARMS, AND I WAS A FOUL VILLAINOUS fiend straight out of a B movie subplot because I *loved* that he was using me as his shield against the world. I finally felt like I was his Azariah in real life.

*Yes, I'm a monster.*

He leaned his blond head against my chest as we stood in the driveway of the manor with the rest of the cast and crew, watching the ambulance take TJ away. Sunshine glinted off the tinted rear windows, blinding me and making my eyes tear up. In the distance thunder rumbled and a cool breeze slapped my face. Off to the west, gray clouds loomed, lit underneath by chaotic forks of lightning. Police officers had used red tape to cordon off a section of the grounds about the size of a football field—apparently the clichéd yellow was beneath them.

Or maybe they'd just run out.

Rather than *CRIME SCENE DO NOT CROSS* this tape had the word *DANGER* printed in bold black letters. A chill ran down my spine.

Patrick sidled up to me and patted my shoulder. He was short, so I bent down when he tugged on my sleeve. He gave me his usual charming smile, but there was a sadness lingering in his eyes I was sure we were all feeling. “I heard one of the EMTs say they thought maybe the issue was some sort of allergic reaction. TJ’s face was all swollen when you pulled him out, and there aren’t many types of things that cause that other than an allergy.”

My gut clenched. I'd told TJ that he could have one of my homemade lattes, but surely if he had a food allergy he would've asked me what I'd used to make them. Right? I swallowed hard. Should I volunteer that information to anyone? What if I'd accidentally killed him off with some whole milk and a Madagascar vanilla bean? Would I get fired over that? I bit the tip of my tongue.

"Listen up, everyone!" Caroline croaked. Someone had given her a white plastic barrette thingy, and it was a skeletal hand clasping her fiery red hair, keeping the strands away from her puffy eyes and splotchy face. Her voice was a mess. She'd been crying silently since I'd pulled TJ out of the pond with his camera still around his neck. She tucked a few flyaway curls behind her ears and stared around at everyone.

"This is horrendous. I've only ever lost one other person on set, and it was Ralph Bingham. Do you remember him?" She glanced at Polly, who nodded. "And he was an old man who died from reaching the end of a very distinguished life. That didn't seem like a tragedy, so much as a finale. This is. . . ." She closed her eyes before forcing a small smile and staring around at the assembled crowd again. "We'll bring a therapist here. I'm sorry, but we're close to crunch time on the show. We must come back tomorrow. We have to film here. Life has to. . . ." She covered her mouth with her hand, and then her shoulders shot back and she cleared her throat. "We will continue on and dedicate this season to TJ's memory. So, we must do our best. Be back here bright and early." She clasped her hands under her chin and bowed, as if she'd just completed the last act in a tragic play, and for some strange reason we all clapped and it felt like the correct thing to do.

She turned and bowed toward the pond, and Patrick sobbed, leaning against my side before Elyssa pulled him away into a hug.

There was a lot of murmuring as the crowd broke apart. No one seemed to want to talk too loud. The strong breeze blew harder, bringing a cold chill with it that was made worse because of my wet clothing.

Dean shivered against my chest. I rested my cheek on the top of his head and rocked gently.

Caroline walked over to us and wrapped her arms around me and Dean, bringing the scent of stale coffee and vanilla with her. She leaned her cheek against my arm and stared forlornly toward the pond. "I'm so sorry you found him. You didn't deserve that."

Everyone else began to drift off to their vehicles or back inside, and I wished I could escape with them, but instead, I draped an arm around Caroline. Dean grunted and did the same so that we were in a huge three-way hug.

"It's okay. It was going to be someone. Might as well have been me. I'm glad it *wasn't* you, Miss Caroline," I said.

She glanced at me sharply, and I realized that, for once, I'd drifted into the Chicago accent I'd grown up using, rather than the smoother one I'd adopted. I cleared my throat.

She sniffed and nodded, then stepped back and frowned down at my legs. "You're damp."

"I was in the pond," I reminded her gently.

Tears leaked out of her eyes.

"Oh, don't cry," Dean said, and he hugged her close. They broke apart sharing sad smiles. "TJ wouldn't want you to cry. He would be off getting you tissues and telling you that you're causing him more work."

She laughed and wiped her face as she took a step back. "You're right, but after we're done filming, I'm going to request a small break before we start the publicity crap. I need a few days with this." She sighed and glared toward the pond this time. "Of all the days to die, TJ," she whispered, but I had the feeling those words weren't meant to be heard by anyone else. "Uh, Desi told me that she cut out the, uh, extra bit of audio we recorded today." This time as she smiled at us her expression was brighter and even a little mischievous. "You two sure had me going. I didn't realize you were dating!" She shoved Dean on the shoulder.

"Shh," Dean said, glancing around.



I chuckled when she ducked her head.

She waved her hands at him. “It’s okay. No one will mind. In a way, it’ll make certain things easier, just don’t break up before the series is over.” She rolled her eyes. “You can’t tamper with people’s emotions that way. Fans would hate it if you two were dating, then broke up, but your characters were still together. There’s too much cognitive dissonance in something like that.” She shivered as if someone had just walked over her grave and rubbed her hands along her arms. Wind whipped along and tugged at her hair, pulling half of it free of her barrette. Cursing, she yanked the barrette loose and let her curls thrash around.

“We’re not official yet.” I gave her hand a squeeze. “We weren’t planning on making any announcements to anyone because we’re still figuring things out.” I glanced at Dean, not wanting to mess things up, and he gave me a warm, encouraging smile. “We’re planning to work together for a long time to come, so we want to ease into this.”

“Oh, sure!” She grinned at us. “I’m glad there was some good news today.” She sighed.

Desi wandered over to us. She was tall and thin with a long gray ponytail high on the back of her head that went with her overalls and Shania Twain T-shirt. “Hey, boys!” She kicked at the ground and gave us a wide smile. “I didn’t want you to worry,” she said, her voice booming much louder than anything else we’d heard in the last twenty minutes. “This isn’t the first time I’ve caught something personal because no one switched off their mics.” She glanced between us. “I’m sorry I didn’t message you sooner. I’m assuming you’re sorry you gave me a free show. We’ll just forget about it, okay?”

“Yes, thanks,” Dean said with a painful smile.

She laughed and waved, walking over to her truck at a fast clip.

Caroline gave us each another hug, and Dean whispered something in her ear that had her tearing up again, but rather than say anything else, she hustled back to the manor.

“What did you say to her?” I’d never seen Dean being so sweet with someone else, and while I felt like an asshole not wanting him to touch Caroline, it ate at me.

He grasped my wrist and gave it a squeeze. “I told her that we’re all here for her. TJ was more than just the guy who ran around carrying heavy boxes. He was her friend.” Dean cocked his head as he looked at me, and I opened my arms. He rushed in and hugged my middle. I hated that he was shaking. “They’re not sure what happened to TJ. They think it was an allergy, but they don’t know. I’m worried that whatever happened to him could happen to someone else. Like, maybe it’s some weird illness or something.”

“I’m right here,” I murmured in his ear. “I doubt that’s true. That isn’t realistic.”

He nodded but didn’t seem convinced. We did work in the land of make believe, which I sometimes thought made it easier for those of us in the business to grasp on to outlandish ideas—both good and bad—then run with them until we went off the rails.

“Other than this mess, are you okay?” I asked.

He shrugged and stared out toward the pond. “I’ve never seen anything like that. TJ’s face was all. . . .” He grimaced. “Not good.”

“Don’t think about it. Why don’t you go home with me? Maybe spend the night at my place? I’ll keep your mind off things.” I massaged his shoulders and glanced at the threatening sky.

It was almost two o’clock. It had taken the emergency services a while to decide what they were doing with TJ, then the police had arrived, and we’d all watched them work. I felt a little guilty because I’d snuck the keys to my Mercedes out of TJ’s pocket before anyone could notice, but I didn’t want to get caught up in an investigation. There were still officers combing the grounds. One man in a uniform nearby bent down and plucked something out of the grass. He dropped whatever he’d found into a plastic baggie.

“I don’t know that I feel very up to anything,” Dean said, cheeks flushing a pretty pink. “I mean, I know you probably thought we would—” He stepped closer. “—have sex, but I’m kind of blah.”

“That isn’t why I want you close.”

Dean leaned against my front. After a short glance around, which wasn’t very thorough if he was really worried about being noticed, he pecked a quick kiss on my lips that left me hungry for more. I massaged his back while he frowned up at me.

“Yes, I would love to spend time with you,” he said.

“Let’s go.” I gave him a tiny shove toward the manor because we needed to change before we could leave. Thunder boomed nearby and we flinched.

By the time we were heading to my apartment a storm had rolled in and thick rain battered the windshield of my Mercedes as I drove. We were both soaked to the skin as we made it into the lobby of my building, and I had a dreary, clammy feeling that penetrated all the way to my bones because I’d also taken the trip into the pond.

I could honestly say this was the first time I’d swum with a corpse, and I didn’t want to repeat it ever again.

We clung together, my dire mood apparently seeping into Dean, and we rode the elevator up to my apartment with him in my arms. After a quick stop to kick off our shoes and wet socks, I took Dean through my bedroom to the bathroom, so he could change out of his wet clothes. My mouth went dry when I came back with a pair of shorts that had a drawstring and the smallest T-shirt I owned. He peeled his shirt off, and I wanted to skim my fingers over his abs and up his chest to pluck his nipples.

Dean gave me a small smile and tossed his wet shirt on the floor. “Do you mind if I shower to get rid of all the product in my hair and makeup? I’m already wet.”

“Uh, go right ahead.” I smiled at him and gestured toward the glass shower. I laid the clothing on the stainless steel

counter next to the sink and slunk out before I could do anything that might pressure him into stuff he wasn't ready for—namely my cock in his ass. Damn, but he was beautiful.

About twenty minutes later, I was leaning against the kitchen counter, staring at the fridge while silence buzzed in my head, when Dean came out and wrapped his arms around me, then rested all his weight against my front. He smelled fresh. His hair was still a little damp when I plopped my chin on his head. My clothes hung off him, but that only made him more adorable. I ran my hand down his back, smoothing wrinkles out of my shirt. His muscles were firm under the fabric, and I wanted to keep touching him. Outside, thunder boomed, and he burrowed the slightest bit closer.

“What would you like for dinner? We sorta skipped lunch.”

Dean tilted his chin to stare up at me and his eyes gleamed as he furrowed his eyebrows. “I'm not hungry.”

“Are you sure?”

He nudged his nose against my chin.

“What are you doing?” I asked with a laugh.

Dean went up on tiptoe and teased his lips against mine.

My cock took an immediate interest in his warm breath and solid body. I devoured his mouth, brushing my tongue against his in a gentle rhythm that he began to imitate with his hips. My groin tightened and my cock tingled, firming up. *Fuck*, he felt good.

Leaning back, I tried to catch my breath. “You said you didn't want me to push.”

“No.” Dean ran his hands up my chest, mapping my muscles. “I said I didn't think I would be up for this.” He pecked a kiss to my lips. “But you make me feel better.” The smile that spread across his face sent a wave of pleasure crashing through me, and my heartbeat thudded like a drum in my ears. There was nothing to do except kiss him again.

Taking my lips away from his wasn't on my to-do list, and I slid his shirt up, barely breaking away for the amount of time necessary to get it off him, and then I was right back to eating his lips. I sucked love bites down his neck and chest before dropping to my knees.

He watched me, transfixed, as I untied the drawstring on the black shorts I'd given him. When I tugged the shorts down, I was in for a surprise because Dean wasn't wearing any underwear. He bit the corner of his mouth and studied me, and I stared right back as I used my lips to explore the area all around his cock. His shaft jutted toward the ceiling and a tremble ran through his body that I felt as I pressed my tongue to his hip bone.

Dean massaged my shoulders, chest heaving as he panted, and I shot to my feet. He gasped when I pressed a kiss to his ear.

"Share my bed, Edwin?" I asked.

For a second, Dean seemed shocked, but then he laughed. "Since you accused me of being confused—" He tilted his head back and kissed me hard. The way he pushed against me and owned my mouth, with the tiniest tease of his tongue, had my cock throbbing. "—what's my real name, Ingram?"

"Dean," I mumbled. "Fuck, Dean, this feels so good."

He closed his eyes and his cheeks went pink. I stared down his flawless body, with slim defined muscles, and he ran his hand from his chest to his abs, then lower until his fingers rested right above his flushed cock. God, he was perfect. I really shouldn't be allowed to touch someone this beautiful. Would he want to be with me if he knew how I'd gotten here at his side? Guilt rose up inside me to claw at this moment.

*Fuck it.* I wanted to make him feel good, and that was what I would do. I dropped to my knees again and opened my mouth wide, taking him in as far as I could, and then I sucked back up to swirl my tongue around his cockhead.

Dean stiffened and his throaty moan made goose bumps prickle across my arms.

“If you’re not careful, this will be my favorite view of you.” The dirty amusement in his tone surprised me. A thrill scrambled through my stomach and my cock throbbed.

“I’m fine with that.” I wrapped my lips around him again and bobbed my head. He whimpered and began to thrust, forcing himself deeper into my mouth until he was battering my throat. Pulling back, I stared up at him, and he watched me with his lips parted as if I was some sort of deity at his feet. I massaged his thighs and kissed his hip. “Bed?”

Dean bit his lip and nodded, then reached down and clasped my hands as I got to my feet. He tugged on my shirt, and I stripped it up and off. I was shocked as he pushed against me, sucking on my bottom lip and knocking me back against the counter. His mouth clung to mine. No one had ever kissed me this way, as if they needed me more than oxygen.

Like the last time, now that he was turned on the shy man had vanished, and I loved this Dean who seemed ready to fuck me right here and now. My heart hammered and I held him as he rubbed his hard-on against my thigh. I could practically smell the testosterone floating in the air. I wanted my pants to be gone so I could feel the hot, silky heat of his cock against my skin.

“Bed,” he growled out.

I nodded, taking him by the hand.

We kissed along the way and stumbled across the apartment toward my room. We were barely past the threshold when he unbuckled my belt. I popped the button on my pants, and he already had the zipper lowered. I moaned when he hooked his thumbs into the waistband of my boxers and jeans and shoved them down. In an awkward shuffle, I kicked away my pants as we struggled toward the bed, unsteady because we wouldn’t let go of each other. I was shocked when he pushed me down onto the thick blue comforter, and I barely had time to scoot back farther before he climbed on top of me.

Dean blinked down at me with his warm brown eyes and grinned, and his smile was better than sunshine breaking through clouds. The loud patter of rain on the windows had us

both glancing that direction, and I leaned up to suck on his earlobe. He hummed and roughly squeezed my shoulders.

“I want to be in you,” I murmured.

“Same,” he whispered.

My heart jerked, and he turned to stare at me, searching my gaze as if looking for a sign that he’d said the wrong thing, but he wouldn’t find it.

“Would you like to fuck me?” I asked. “If you want to do me right now, I’ll get you stretched, carefully, so I won’t hurt you later when you decide you’re ready for me. We don’t have to do everything today. There’s no point in rushing and maybe hurting you. And I don’t need you to take your time with me.”

He nipped my neck, teeth surprisingly sharp, and wriggled his hips. The slide of his thick cock against mine stole my breath. “I figured you would always be the one fucking me,” he whispered.

“If that’s your preference, we can do that. But I want to be with you, and I don’t want you to be with someone else.” I was stunned to hear myself saying those words out loud, but they were true and from the heart. My pulse raced and panic began to prickle through me, but I kept talking. “It feels good to slide into a tight hole. I want you to have that experience, too.”

He let out an adorable little growl that had me laughing and hugging him.

“I want to give you everything.” I pressed a kiss to his temple, and he humped against me. His excitement echoed everything I was feeling. “I want pleasure to be the first thing on your mind when you think of me and how our sex life started, not pain. Your first time with anal won’t be great if you aren’t ready. You’re worth some patience.”

Dean moaned and kissed me. “I know we’re talking about sex, and I never thought of sex as the romantic part of a relationship, but what you just said. . . was sweet.”

Laughing, I glanced away as embarrassment stuck my tongue to the roof of my mouth. Lightning flashed on the other

side of the windows and lit the room in stark relief. I wanted to let out a silent scream to relieve some tension, but I knew he would just stare at me like I was strange if I did that—especially since they were never truly *silent*.

Dean wriggled to the exact best spot he could get into—with his cock lined up against mine—and he rocked his hips. Delicious tension warmed my stomach and tightened the muscles in my hips and groin.

“Yes,” I whispered. “Faster.”

We attacked each other’s mouths with brutal kisses, and I shoved against him, keeping up with his frantic tempo. We kept going until his muscles stiffened and he picked up the pace, and then I hugged him tight and stopped him because I knew he was getting close to coming.

He groaned and smacked my chest. “Why?” With a smile, he pulled back.

“Don’t you want to get off inside me?” I stuck my tongue into my cheek and raised my eyebrows.

Biting his lip, he nodded, and I turned toward the nightstand. He stared as I dragged out a condom and purple tube of lube, and he watched me carefully as I opened the condom.

“Sit up on your knees,” I said.

He did as I asked, and I leaned forward, sliding the condom down the slight curve of his hard cock. His mouth fell open and his head tilted back, as if he could barely stand how good it felt to have me touching him. The anticipation of what would be happening soon made my head feel spacey.

“Let me take care of you.” He tugged the lube from my fingers, and I nodded, lying back. It had been a long time since I’d had a cock in my ass—years. I tensed when he gently ran his finger around my hole. He smiled, glancing up at my face, and I nodded. The pressure from his finger wasn’t enough to let him into my body, so I relaxed, and he slid inside.

“Is that okay?” he asked, eyes wide. “I’ve never done this, so tell me.”



Cupping his cheek, I winked. “Yeah, keep going.”

Hunger gleamed in his eyes as he slid a second and third finger into my hole, and I licked my lips as his nostrils flared. I wouldn't lie—in the past when I'd thought about being with Dean, I'd imagined me fucking him until he screamed my name, but right now, eagerness was a hot coal glowing in my gut. I wanted to give him this pleasure, too, the mindless abandon of thrusting into my body until he unloaded. I moaned, and he smiled at me.

“I'm good. Come on.” I held out a hand to him.

He tugged his fingers from my ass, and I grabbed the lube and squirted more into his palm. He got the idea and slicked up his cock, and then with a grin, he wrapped his lubed fingers around mine. I closed my eyes and enjoyed the squeeze of warm wet heat around my shaft.

“Do you like that?” he asked, his voice a sensual melody in the dim room.

“Yes, fuck.”

He laughed, and I spread my legs, grabbing the back of my thighs. When I opened my eyes, he stared down at me like he'd seen a ghost, mouth hanging open—more stunned and less sex bliss.

“I'm ready for you.”

He nodded and shuffled forward on his knees, and I closed my eyes as he nudged my hole with his cockhead. I knew how to breathe and talk myself into opening up for him.

“Do it. Push firmly,” I said.

Dean followed orders to a T, and as he slid into my ass the most adorable whimper I'd ever heard slipped from between his lips. His thick shaft spread me open and filled me in a satisfying way, and when he was buried to the hilt, he shuddered against me. I wrapped my arms around him.

“Oh my God, can I move? Can I?” he asked, voice ragged. He pressed his damp cheek to mine and his body quivered.

“Yes,” I murmured into his ear, then kissed it.

Dean leaned back, bracing himself on his hands. I couldn't stop watching his perfectly pink lips as he licked them. He stared down at me as if I was a giant from the silver screen, a miracle that he'd never thought he would get to see in real life. A wonderful feeling swelled until it felt like it was going to burst in my chest.

He began to rock his hips, and it was easy to tell he didn't have any experience, but I would change that. I wrapped my legs around his middle and moved my body, grinding against his cock until he smashed my prostate and sent stars bursting in my vision. I closed my eyes and rammed my ass against his groin as another avalanche of pleasure rushed through my body, a tease of the grand finale.

"Oh my God, I love that face you're making. What made that happen? Shit, this feels good," Dean said, and I laughed.

"Hit this spot." I ground against him again and could barely breathe as another spike of joy flashed through me.

"You are so fucking sexy when it happens. Your hole tenses around me. Fuck." He pistoned his hips, and I relaxed back as another wave of pleasure washed over me. "There. Is it there? That's your prostate, right?"

"It's okay. I can jerk off after you're done," I said.

He scowled, and I snickered.

He snorted, smashing against me harder. I closed my eyes and just drifted for a bit, then opened them in time to see him shaking his head with a determined gleam in his gaze. "No. You're not jerking off. I like you more than that."

"Jerking off is fun," I said with a laugh, but it quickly became a moan as he went up a little higher on his knees and nailed my P-spot. He smashed me hard again, and I cried out, all my hard-won composure up in smoke. Things became a blur as he fucked me, a beautiful whirlwind trapped between my legs. Sweat dripped down his temples, darkening his blond hair, and I stopped fucking against him to enjoy the tension that was slowly tightening in my groin.

He did all the work.

“Close,” I said.

He laced his fingers between mine and held tight as he rocked with his teeth bared, and I was stunned. Dean fully committed to everything he did, so I had no idea why I’d thought he would be any different with this. He might be shy, but he gave one hundred percent.

I clung to him as he pounded my prostate just right, and my cock got caught between our abs. The pressure on my throbbing cockhead combined beautifully with the bruising my P-spot was taking. Sparks danced across my skin and pleasure teased me. All I could do was clench my fingers on his as a sharp stab of ecstasy slammed my groin and shot out to light the rest of my body on fire. I tensed and yelled as my balls unloaded between us.

“You’re everything I’ve ever wanted,” Dean whispered, which was an echo of the thoughts that had been floating in my head.

Hugging him close, I sucked on his earlobe. “Fill me up.”

He shuddered and kissed me while unleashing like a man possessed, and then he hammered deep into my body and stayed there, moaning. I could feel him twitching inside me, and I wished for a moment the condom wasn’t there, so I could have a chance to feel the heat of his seed in my body.

He stayed buried in me, and I lay there, slowly coming to my senses.

My ass ached—in a good way. I loved that Dean was connected to me. He leaned back and smiled as if I was someone special. No matter how hard I blinked, tears dangled from the corners of my eyes. I cleared my throat. He brushed his thumbs under my eyes.

“I feel the same way you do,” I murmured. “But I’m not as brave as you are. I can’t say it yet. There’s too much you don’t know about me.”

Dean snorted. “Like what? I’m not brave.”

“You are.” I leaned up and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips.

Dean frowned down at me, and I laughed. I reached between my legs and grasped the condom and the base of his cock.

“Pull out.” I gave him a gentle squeeze.

He nodded, and I held on to the condom, then slid it free and tied it off. He watched me, eyes wide, like he’d never seen anything so interesting. Laughing, I sat up and leaned over, sucking his softening cock so I could get the taste of his cum that I’d been craving ever since I’d had him in my mouth in the kitchen. He gasped, and I loved the burst of flavor.

“Next time, if you don’t want to wear this, I’m fine with that,” I said, glancing up at him. I tossed the condom in the small garbage can beside the bed. “Whatever makes you comfortable. I’ve been tested and I’m negative.”

He nodded and his cheeks pinked up. “The condom let me last longer.” He grinned. “Otherwise, I would’ve been in you two seconds and that would’ve been that.”

“That’s okay. We can fuck all night long. There’s no rule that says you come once and you’re finished.” I popped a kiss onto his cheek.

His eyes widened and he attacked me, pushing me back against the bed as he sealed his lips over mine. Laughing against his mouth, I held him close.

“We can do it again right now!?”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t stop grinning as he peppered kisses all over my face.

*Knock, knock, knock* boomed through the apartment from my front door, and we both froze. *Knock, knock, knock*. The next flurry of sound was even more urgent, and we both jumped out of bed, staring at each other. It would’ve been funny if my heart wasn’t trying to jolt right out of my chest.

“Maybe there’s an emergency and it’s Caroline?” Dean stared at me.

Frowning, I shook my head. “I have a doorman, remember? No one should’ve been able to get up here without

being on the list. I don't have anyone on it yet. Plus, Caroline would call. Get dressed."

He nodded and raced out of the room, and it took me a second to remember I'd stripped him in the kitchen. We dressed and met in the living room.

*Knock, knock, knock, knock.* Whoever was hammering on the door sounded pissed off.

Dean beat me to the door and opened it, and there was a man standing there along with two officers in uniform.

"Detective Agosti." The man in front of me had shaggy brown hair that didn't go with his gray suit. He smiled, showing off some full lips that would definitely get people to look twice, and held up a glass bottle in a plastic bag. I stared at the container in confusion, and he shook it in my direction. "Do you recognize this, Mr. North?"

"Yes, I used it to make iced lattes this morning. I don't like Starbucks that much, and the coffee they serve on set isn't the greatest."

Detective Agosti's eyebrows flew toward his hairline.

"Uh, why are you here asking me about my coffee?"

He waved around the bottle. "Our CSI crew tested this just because it was gathered at the crime scene. Well, that and you're famous, which has everyone working as fast and efficiently as humanly possible. No one at the NGPD wants to look bad with the spotlight on them. Apparently testing liquid is easy and quick in the lab. We're investigating because we didn't know precisely what happened to Mr. Bolla. TJ, everyone called him. Do you know what we found in this bottle?"

"Coffee?"

He blinked at me, and the officer with him held up my red cooler, which had been in the trunk of my car earlier today. I gaped. "Where was that?"

"Inside Smithfield Manor. Do you know what has been added to every single one of those bottles?"

Dean looked at me, eyes wide.

My stomach sank. “Milk, sugar, and vanilla syrup?”

“Ketamine,” Detective Agosti said with a smile. “And I usually work vice, so I can tell you, it’s not too hard to find. A lot of people party with it. Mr. Bolla seems to be one of the unfortunate few who had an allergy to it that was bad enough he went into rapid anaphylactic shock. Of course, this is speculation on my part, but we’ll get evidence to back it up. He might have sat down near the edge of the pond because he was feeling woozy, then slipped on in when he toppled forward. That’s my theory for now, anyway.” He cocked his head and watched me as I had a quiet panic attack.

“But I don’t do drugs.” Of all the problems I’d ever had, thank fuck being a druggie wasn’t something I’d ever wrestled with.

Detective Agosti nodded. “Can I come in?” He gestured behind us with the bottle he held.

“Sure,” I said, stepping aside.

Detective Agosti blinked his eyes like I’d surprised him, then gave Dean a once-over. The detective and officers came into the apartment.

“I don’t have a warrant,” Detective Agosti said with a friendly grin. “And I don’t necessarily think you did anything wrong. Everyone I already talked to from the show told me you don’t do drugs or ever show up to work late or impaired. That leaves me wondering if maybe someone would’ve wanted to hurt you or anyone else you planned to share those drinks with.” He slapped his hand on the top of the cooler.

My stomach churned.

Dean shot to my side and looped his arms around me. “Everyone loves Ingram. No one from our crew would want to hurt him.”

Well, that much was the truth—or I thought so anyway. I nodded. “Whatever you want to look for, you can go ahead. I have nothing to hide.”

Dean wrapped his hands around my arm.

Detective Agosti frowned at me. “Are you sure? This is usually the point where most people rant about getting their lawyer.”

I shrugged. “Yeah.”

Puffing out his cheeks, he gestured toward the couch. “Have a seat. We’ll try not to make a mess. This might take a hot minute.” The cops wandered out toward the kitchen, and Dean stared at me.

“Do you think I did this?” I called after the detective.

Dean cuddled closer.

Detective Agosti laughed and came back to the kitchen doorway, lounging against it with one shoulder. “No or I would’ve surprised you with a warrant.”

The only bright spot in all this was Dean, and I leaned against him. I should tell him, right now, all the problems I’d been having with the Giordanos, but I just couldn’t bring myself to open my mouth. I might be letting the cops search my kitchen, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that they would only make my mob problem worse and, somehow, I would end up in jail.

Dean tightened his grip on me. “This is all a misunderstanding, right? It’ll all be fine. I’m here.”

Like the worm I was, I wallowed in the love and comfort that clearly gleamed in his eyes. I didn’t say a fucking word. Maybe this was just some weird accident? Maybe there was no reason to panic?

Deep in my heart, I knew this was an attack aimed at me, and I wasn’t even sure *why*. Every time money had been demanded, I’d paid. Maybe this was something to scare me into staying quiet? I stared into Dean’s eyes, and he smiled. I should’ve never dragged him into this mess. He kissed my forehead, chasing the scary thoughts out of my mind and only leaving comfort behind.

Maybe everything really would be fine.





DEAN



THE SUNSHINE STRUGGLED TO PEEK THROUGH THE BOILING storm clouds overhead. A beam broke free and glinted in Ingram’s hazel eyes as he parked his car in a space near the front of Smithfield Manor, then the light disappeared again, leaving us with a gray day. He caught me staring, and I smiled at him. His shoulder-length brown hair was snagged in the collar of the purple dress shirt he’d tossed over a yellow Henley. He looked so good that I wouldn’t have been able to hold back letting him know how happy I was if I’d tried. He was completely edible this morning, and last night was the highlight of my entire life.

The whole thing.

I’d never felt happier.

He groaned and rested his forehead against the steering wheel, bringing me crashing back to earth with him. “What are we going to do when rumors of TJ’s death start to circulate among the fans? It will explode.”

Shrugging, I rubbed the back of his neck, digging my fingertips in against his tense muscles. “Tell them the truth? We can’t talk about it while the police are investigating, but it was really sad. People will want to know what happened, and TJ deserves to be remembered for his hard work on the show.”

Ingram grunted as if he wasn’t sure that was a good idea, but I couldn’t imagine what else we could do. Yeah, I was upset about TJ, but Caroline was right yesterday—life goes on.

And I was happy to be here with Ingram. I pressed a kiss to his cheek.

He turned toward me so he could brush his warm lips over mine, which sent a happy little tickle racing through my belly. He sucked on my bottom lip, and the sensation zinged through my chest, throbbed in my nipples, then landed in my cockhead where it pulsed.

Pushing into his hot body had almost made me pass out yesterday. I wasn't sure how it was possible, but I was about a million times more turned on today, after I'd gotten off with him, than I had been from kissing him before we'd gone to bed together. Being naked with him was pure magic. I let out a soft moan that he captured with his mouth.

Part of yesterday and last night had been scary—TJ's death and the police carefully going through Ingram's belongings were things I would gladly forget—but I'd spent at least an hour after Detective Agosti had left luxuriating in Ingram's ass. Touching him was a sharp pleasure that I hadn't fully appreciated before now. He was even more amazing than I'd thought, and I'd already assumed he was one of the most fantastic people alive.

I was obsessed with him, every bit as hooked as the fans.

I tried to lean back but ended up staring at his lips again, then kissing him some more. Falling asleep in his arms was perfect and waking up in them was even better. This morning we'd stopped by my cottage so I could get a change of clothes, and my mother had even said good morning, so that meant she was talking to me again.

Yes, TJ's accident was sad, but everything else was just right.

"It will all be okay," I murmured, smiling at him.

He snorted and rested his forehead against mine. Maybe he wanted to believe me but couldn't.

"Don't be that way. It really will be all right."

He brushed his fingertips through my hair. "Sorry I'm in a bad mood."

“It’s fine.” I hugged him, and he sighed. His breath puffed on my neck, and I smiled at the sweet sensation. “Yesterday was weird. You had it rougher than I did. My mom always said people grieve differently. She cried a lot when my grandmother died, and I just wanted to talk about all the good things she’d done with me that made me happy. However you feel is right.”

“Thank you for staying last night,” he mumbled.

My stomach fluttered. “I won’t leave you alone with your worries.” I was surprised at how serious I sounded, but I meant every word, so it was okay. “I’m here for the good stuff—” I gestured at the manor. “—and the bad stuff,” I whispered, then jerked a thumb in the direction of the pond.

He sat back a bit and his brow furrowed. His jaw clenched and made him seem stern. I didn’t like the sad glint in his eyes, which were normally so vibrant. Today he looked defeated. I kissed his knuckles, and he laughed, then did the same thing to me. I was surprised when I could tell he was forcing the smile on his face.

“What if I’m not quite what I seem? Will you be fine with that?” He sucked in a deep breath and held it while he studied me. I stayed still as he traced a finger along my jaw. What could he have done to make him so worried?

“Are you cheating on me?”

His eyes widened and he shook his head. “Do I look stupid?” he asked with a small grin. “No, never. Azariah is Edwin’s lover until the end of time.” He winked, and happy warmth rushed through my stomach.

“Well, did you actually poison TJ somehow?”

“No.” He bit his bottom lip. “You don’t think I did, do you?”

Huffing, I gave him another big hug, and he knocked his head against mine lightly. I decided maybe he’d done that on purpose, and I bonked him back, which had him chuckling.

“No. I didn’t think you would. I’m worried someone else did, though, but it will be okay. I already know we have a lot

to learn about each other, and I'm fine with that. I want to get to know you." I rubbed my cheek against his.

He leaned back and stared down at his hands. "There are things I should tell you. I grew up poor. Worse off than anyone would think."

My heart hiccupped and I kissed his temple, pressing my lips hard against him. "Then that's something we have in common. It's nothing to be ashamed of," I whispered. "We're not the only people in this business who didn't come from money and voice lessons and Juilliard."

He hung his head and shrugged. "I am embarrassed of where I came from, though. And I feel bad about being that way because you aren't. You tell anyone who asks about your childhood. You're honest to a fault. I hide it. I'm not sure I ever want to tell the world where I came from."

My heart ached as he clearly struggled, emotions rippling across his face that I'd never seen. Uncertainty. Fear. Was this good? He was giving me a glimpse at the man who didn't always know everything, so yes, this had to be good. I rubbed his hands.

"It's okay that we're different." I smiled at him, and he stared as if he was trying to figure out if I was being serious or not. There was pain there I hadn't expected.

He glanced all around me—at the roof, out the window, down at his knees—and when his gaze finally rested on me again, I could practically taste the anxiety bubbling inside him.

"I want to be more like you," he said.

Laughter caught me by surprise. "I always feel the same way. I want to be like you."

He swallowed and dropped his attention to our hands. "There's more."

"It's okay. Just tell me." I pecked a kiss on his lips, and he grinned, some of his usual personality shining through.

A loud knock on my window startled us into glancing at Benny on the other side. He looked horrible, and my heart

gave a pang. Maybe TJ's death had gotten to him worse than the rest of us because, like Caroline, he worked closely with him. He had dark bags under his eyes and rather than the usual nice clothes he wore he was in a simple blue T-shirt. I cracked the door, and he backed away to let me get out.

“Are you okay, Benny?” I asked.

He shook his head and scratched his fingers along his stubble-covered cheeks. “Caroline and I were pretty fucked up yesterday,” he said, voice rough. His British accent was sharp in his words. I blinked because Benny didn't swear—ever. “We went out drinking last night with a few people from the crew. We got pissed and good. You know, we were all feeling bad.”

Ingram reached my side and dropped his arm over my shoulders, holding me close.

“Is she not here yet?” Ingram asked with a wince. “We could get started without her. I'm sure there are a lot of things we could do that don't need her direct oversight.”

Benny grabbed Ingram's arm and clutched him hard enough that Ingram grunted. “You don't understand. She was drunk, and I put her in an Uber because there was no way that she should've been driving. I considered riding home with her, but I thought she would be okay. Someone ran the car off the road.”

My heart almost stopped as Benny widened his eyes at me.

“What?” I asked.

Ingram sucked in a deep breath, and when I glanced at him, he seemed close to crying. I hugged him while my stomach swooped. He was usually full of confidence and cared so much about everyone around him. I really was lucky to be here with him, and I would help him get through this. I'd gotten most of the sadness out of my system yesterday while he'd been strong for me, and now it was my turn.

“She's going to be okay, right?” I asked.

Benny rubbed a hand across his chest and tears spilled down his cheeks. “I don't know. Right now, she's bad. She's in

hospital. The Uber driver is dead. She called me because she knew she would be out of work for a while, and I have her blocking notes and other direction references. The police were there last night. She's not in ICU, but she has head trauma. She might not ever be quite right. Her left side is numb. She can't use her left hand or leg and can't even get up to go to the bathroom. She doesn't know when or whether it will get better."

"Oh God. Was it an accident?" Ingram murmured.

Frowning, I glanced at him. "What else could it be?"

Benny shrugged. "The police are involved because she swears that the car was bumped off the road by another car, which didn't stick around. She thinks it was on purpose, but she was also trashed, so she's not even one-hundred-percent certain of her own memories. Without her on the set and the unfortunate business with TJ yesterday, she's worried the company will suspend production. Maybe indefinitely." He ran his hand through his hair and tugged.

My breakfast threatened to make a reappearance. Mom was right. I would find other work if the show eventually ended up canceled because of this, but I was glad I hadn't burned through my money now.

Ingram growled and stared up at the gray clouds overhead. He straightened and stepped away from me, turning his back. I rested a hand on his shoulder, but he shrugged me off. I was hurt for a second, but when he spun around there was a grim scowl etched onto his face that I recognized from long days filming. It was the expression he wore while whispering, "*Let's just try one more time and get this scene perfect. We can do it, Edwin.*"

"We can't let this show fail. There is too much riding on it for too many people," he said, a desperation in his tone that tugged at my heart. "You said you have her notes?"

Benny nodded, perking up. "Yes, absolutely."

"How many hours of filming are left?" Ingram asked, almost sounding angry.

He shrugged. “Well, I’m not certain. It depends.”

“Guess!”

Benny crossed his arms and frowned. “Twenty? Maybe?”

Ingram waved impatiently at the front door of the manor. “Let’s go. We can’t lose this show. We’ve done too much work for it to go down the drain now.”

“Caroline would fight tooth and nail to save this show,” I said, getting a bright smile from Ingram. “She would want us to finish it for TJ.”

“That’s right. Come on,” Ingram said, dragging me toward the door.

My heart swelled, and for about the millionth time since I’d met Ingram, I felt like the luckiest man alive. Not only did he want to help everyone, he was also going to fix this problem, and that was worth more than a thousand nice words. He shoved open the door and stomped forward, and I rushed to keep up with him.

“What are you thinking?” I asked, breathless.

“I’ve directed stage productions, and I’ve been with Caroline long enough to know her style. I went to acting school, and we had to know how to make things work from the audience perspective before they let us graduate. I know what looks good.” He winked at me.

My heart raced faster, and I was relieved as he reminded me that he had real experience. I’d stumbled into this job because I had a pretty face, and he’d pursued it, working hard. I patted his arm and grinned up at him. “You can do this.”

Benny actually smiled as he reached our side.

Ingram kept marching me forward. He peeked in rooms as we walked, and I realized he was searching for the one that the cast had gathered in.

“They’re probably in the junk room with the snacks,” I said with a laugh, and he nodded.

“Almost everything is in her file,” Benny said, waving around his phone. “I’ll share it with you, if you really think you can help make this happen. TJ should’ve been the one to take over, but—” Benny’s shoulders slumped.

“It’s okay. We’re doing this or else,” Ingram said, and his tone left no room for argument.

It turned out everyone was in the dining room for some reason, lining both sides of the long table with grim expressions. Benny’s redheaded assistant had his face in his hands, slumped in a chair, and he looked absolutely miserable. Some people had gotten into their costumes for the day, others were still in their street clothes, and almost no one was talking. Flora had her head bent forward, flopped bonelessly, and Patrick rubbed her back. Ingram stopped at the head of the table and smacked a hand there, getting everyone’s attention.

“We are finishing this fucking season,” he said, glaring around as if daring anyone to argue with him. “All that’s left is a measly twenty hours of filming and some booth work. We’re doing it! Most of you have been around the block and know what needs to happen. Who is going to help make it work?”

Flora’s head popped up. “Me! I will! Oh my God, I have a mortgage on a house in LA, and I have to get a contract for next season.”

Patrick gave her a hug.

Mr. Goranth, who played my father on the show but rarely spoke—other than to say his lines—stood and bowed at Ingram. “Lead on. I am not surprised that one of us theater veterans would mount an offensive.” He smiled around in a superior way that both endeared him to me and irritated the crap out of me at the same time. “The show must go on.”

There was a general murmur of agreement.

“Everyone who needs clothes, get to wardrobe,” Marva snapped. She slapped a hand to her hip. “I don’t have all day.”

“And everyone already dressed, come see makeup and hair,” Polly was quick to add.

Marva blew her a kiss.



Polly rolled her eyes and sent her blond bangs flying with a puff of breath.

Flora, who had never seemed to like Ingram a ton, surprised me when she rushed up to his side wearing a full purple gown that brushed the floor. “I directed a movie two years ago. How about we do this together?” She raised her eyebrows. “I’ll direct the scenes you need to act in, and you direct the ones I need to act in, and we both follow Caroline’s notes.” She nodded at Benny.

Relief slapped me. “Yes, that would be great! We can get this done together,” I said, then smiled at Ingram. He gave me a full-body hug that had everyone around us laughing as he picked me up off the floor. It took him about a minute to put me back on my feet. “And I’d like to help with postproduction.” I patted Ingram’s shoulders. “I sat with Caroline last season while she was editing. I know I’m not her, but if she’s not back, we can get started. As long as the studio will let us do it, we can make this happen.”

Benny glanced between me, Ingram, and Flora. “Should we start filming the fight on the front lawn? The weather is perfect, and it might get too sunny later.”

We all stared at each other, then rushed off to get started as if someone had fired a starter pistol in the air. Terrified, but happy we had a plan, I was eager to get moving. Ingram snagged my hand and pulled me close.

“Will you help me today?” he whispered in my ear.

I hugged him. “Of course. We can get through anything together.”

He stared at me and swallowed, and my heart flipped happily. “Do you really believe that?”

“Yes,” I answered without hesitation. “Of course.”

He leaned down and brushed a kiss to my ear. “I have a bunch of things to tell you.”

“It’ll be fine,” I whispered.

He hugged me so tight I could barely breathe before setting me down on my feet again. “In case anything happens, you should know how I feel—”

“It won’t,” I said with a grin. “Don’t say it before you’re ready. I don’t want to rush you, even if I do want to hear the words. I love you, okay? Do you believe I’m telling the truth?”

He nodded quickly.

“Do you think I’m confused?”

He shook his head.

“Then that’s enough for now.”

“Let’s go!” Flora called from the hall outside the dining room. “The clock is ticking, and you know they’re going to send someone from the studio. If they don’t get here and see us already taking care of shit, they might try to pull the plug. Let’s stop that from happening!”

“Ladies don’t swear,” Patrick yelled from somewhere farther down the hall.

She flipped him off and marched forward, and Ingram dragged me along to go get changed. This wasn’t the day I’d thought we would have, but we were going to slay it.



## INGRAM



WITHOUT A DOUBT, I COULD NOW CONFIRM THAT ANYONE WHO thought being in charge of a production was an enviable position—was a complete dumbass. The past four days had been a hellish slog, and sharing the workload with Flora hadn't made it much better. The team had pulled together, and we were getting everything done, but it was taking us longer than it should—or at least, longer than it would've taken Caroline. There was nothing we could do about it except keep pushing forward.

Dean had been an angel.

He hadn't left my side through it all, working the same endless hours that I'd put in. We'd been too exhausted each night to do more than fall into bed together; however, I wouldn't trade the time spent in his arms for the world. I was able to ignore the sword dangling over my head with him snuggled up against me, and maybe that was silly, but his presence allowed me to sleep at night. It wasn't like he'd changed the situation by being at my side. I had no idea how he was making everything better, he just did.

We were twelve hours into our day trapped in a run-down, dinky sound studio—the only one in New Gothenburg—and Dean was on his third take recording the lines for a scene where he'd been playing piano. The black padded walls had been looming around me all day, and the way they absorbed sound made me aware of my heartbeat. The lack of little noises was unsettling.

“We’re more than friends, aren’t we?” Azariah said to Edwin on the screen across the room from the sound booth. It wasn’t necessary to view the scene in order to record, but we did it because it made it easier to sync the words. Someone had done some quick subtitles so Dean would have the cues of my lines up there for his recording.

My heart squeezed at his gentle, genuine “yes” in reply to Azariah’s question, and Dean glanced at me where I leaned against the wall outside his glassed-in recording booth. He didn’t need to record anymore because the rest of the scene had been filmed without the piano being played, so he removed his headphones after Desi gave him a thumbs-up from her workstation across the room. She grinned at me, and my face heated.

Did I look like a fool smitten with Dean? If I didn’t, I probably should.

He left the recording booth with a smile on his face and shot directly into my arms. He was only wearing a pink T-shirt and jeans, and I enjoyed being able to feel his warm muscles under the thin fabric.

I hugged him. “Good job. That was perfect.”

“Thanks,” he said as Flora took over the booth. Once everything was ready for her, Desi gave her a thumbs-up, and she started recording her lines.

My heart stumbled when the padded door opened to my right, and a man I knew by sight but had barely spoken to walked in. Okam Pasha scanned the room, and when his gaze landed on me, he beamed. The lilac suit he wore was unusual for New Gothenburg but wouldn’t have stood out much in Los Angeles, where he normally sat in an office at the production company deciding the fate of shows like ours. I’d met him once with Martin at a five-martini lunch celebrating the wrap-up of contract negotiations.

Gently moving Dean to my side, I offered my hand as Okam strode toward me with his out, and we had a hearty handshake that didn’t do much to quell the nerves that sprang to life in my stomach.

“To what do we owe the honor of your visit?” I asked.

He watched Flora in the booth with interest, and she waved her hands around as she talked, mimicking what she’d been doing on set at the time when we initially recorded her scene.

Okam grinned and knocked an elbow against my arm. “Well, Wyndinham Hollow has done better than anyone ever thought it would, and now that Caroline is in the hospital, Fred asked me to come see how things were going. It looks like everything is moving along.” He nodded with a smile, and my heart dropped out of my throat.

“Fred, as in Frederick Reinsel? The president of the company?”

He winked. “Yep.”

Dean elbowed me hard on the side, and I gestured at Okam. “Mr. Pasha will decide whether or not we’re doomed.”

Dean’s mouth dropped open.

Okam stifled a small laugh. “It isn’t quite like that. We’re trying to decide if we want to push back production on next season a little to give Caroline time to recover or if we want to assign a new director.” He chewed on his nail and stared at the recording on the screen that rolled as Flora worked, and it took me a few seconds to realize he was caught up in the action.

“You don’t really want to be spoiled for this season, do you?” I asked.

He smirked, shaking his head.

“You’re a fan?” Dean asked.

Okam’s attention fell on him, and my stomach flipped at the warmth that immediately entered Okam’s eyes.

“Edwin,” I said, using my best Azariah tone. “Why don’t you fill Mr. Pasha in on what we’ve been doing to finish up the season? Take him outside so we don’t disturb Flora.”

Dean’s eyes widened, but Okam’s smile grew, and even though jealousy twisted in my gut, I figured with how he seemed to like the show and the interest he had in Dean, there

was no way he was going to do anything terrible that would break Dean's heart. Who would want to put a frown on his face? Okam held the door for Dean, who was quietly talking in that steady, shy way he had as they went.

*Fuck.* I trusted Dean, but what if he accidentally said the wrong thing? I ground my teeth while I waited for Flora to finish recording because she was the final person—and hers was the last of the postproduction material we needed.

When Flora stepped out of the booth, she took one look at me and rushed over with her hand on her heart. “Did something happen to Caroline?” she asked, glancing across the room at Desi, who was still hard at work.

“No, worse,” I mumbled. “Okam Pasha is here.”

She nearly melted to the floor but straightened last second, then tugged nervously at the skirt of her yellow sundress. “Here to do what?”

“Investigate whether or not we're falling apart without Caroline, I suspect.”

She sucked in a deep breath. “Well, where is he?”

“Talking to Dean.”

She stared up at me and grimaced. “Oh, well. . . . Dean's not so good talking to people, is he? Was that smart?”

I shrugged. “Okam seemed *enamored*.”

At that news, she nodded and got a calculating look I understood only too well. “You did the right thing, I think.”

“Here's hoping,” I grumbled as we left the recording studio.

When we made it out into the parking lot, the first thing I heard was Okam's amused laughter, and the next thing I saw had me wanting to punch out his lights. Okam had his arm slung around Dean's shoulders, and he was gesturing with his right hand as he said something. Dean nodded along; although, he appeared relieved when he noticed me and waved. Okam turned and was nothing but smiles as we approached.

“I’m thrilled, just thrilled to hear that you’ve wrapped production. I was expecting to walk into a week’s worth of work.” He caught my hand again and almost shook it off my shoulder, which made it much harder to hate him. His brown eyes sparkled as he glanced at Dean again.

“The stage calls,” Flora said in a good imitation of pompous actors everywhere, and we all had another chuckle, but then Okam fixed his attention on me.

“Dean says you and Flora took over?”

We both nodded. If I was going to be ripped apart, this was it. I held my breath.

“Well, I think it’s best that I get to deliver this news in person.” He gave Dean a squeeze. “The show’s budget is safe. It’s done so well that even a delay isn’t projected to cause a loss of overall revenue.” He grinned, and relief smacked me because, at the end of the day, money talked.

“Phenomenal,” I said, giving him my best smile.

“We’re going to push back the next filming schedule by three months to give Caroline time to recover or decide she needs to pass on the torch. Whichever. She is a director who is very involved in edits, so we want her to be working on postproduction. The way the footage is cut can be almost as important as the acting itself. She’s a key part of the editing team.”

My heart almost stopped. “Does that mean that the implementation of our new contracts will be delayed by three months?” Visions of bartending or worse floated through my head. I would be royally fucked if I had to wait that long for cash. I could always try to find a couple of small jobs, but unless I could spin the things I was doing with Dean into some real money—fast—I had no idea how I would keep paying the Giordanos when they contacted me again. It would be when, not if they demanded more money. I was living on borrowed time.

Okam nodded as if it was no big deal.

“What can we do to make it happen faster?” I asked.



Dean raised his eyebrows at me and so did Okam.

“It’s just that, it seems so silly, with everything already finished, to push it back that much.” I rubbed my neck and had trouble dragging in a breath.

Flora touched my shoulder, and I realized I’d been nearly shouting.

Dean smiled and took my hand, yanking it away from my throat. “Ingram has put a lot of his heart and soul into this. We all have. We want to get our work out there.” He gave Okam one of his sweetest smiles, and I didn’t think he was acting—he was just being his normal, helpful self.

I couldn’t catch my breath, though, as my worry turned into an anxiety dragon in my brain and swooped around in there setting all my plans to dig out from under this debt with the mob on fire. I could almost smell the smoke. With the way we’d basically been working, then dropping into bed at night, I hadn’t found the courage again to try to tell Dean what was going on.

*Fuck.*

I should’ve spilled my guts before we started working so closely together.

“With all the other issues surrounding production, you know, Caroline’s accident and TJ’s death, we thought it was best to also allow some time for the police to investigate those matters,” Okam said, his tone drifting toward that of a stern businessman. He smoothed a hand down his tie. “We know that it will all be cleared up, and we want to give things a chance to air out and get discussed and dragged through the mud before we start promoting the show again.” He shrugged. “We know there will be some fan chatter about the tragedy, but we’re doing our best to keep the news positive and focused on Caroline’s recovery and the fact that TJ’s death was a horrible accident.”

“When did that news break?” Flora asked, frowning.

“Two days ago.”

“I guess we were too busy to notice,” Dean said, rubbing a hand along my arm. I used his gentle touch to ground myself in the moment instead of getting lost in my head.

“Is there anything we can do to make the studio reconsider this delayed schedule?” I asked, perfectly aware of how desperate I sounded.

Dean’s hand tightened on my bicep.

“I’m afraid not,” Okam said, but he patted my shoulder. “I know how much this means to the crew, though, and if Caroline is up to starting sooner, I’ll give the go-ahead on putting things closer to the original schedule.” He winked at me. “Dean, it was wonderful to meet you,” he gushed, and I sighed internally as he spent about five minutes praising Dean’s performance in the show while Dean’s face blazed a brilliant pink.

A stone lodged in my gut and didn’t go away as we waved at Okam while he pulled out of the parking lot in a red Mustang that he must’ve rented.

“Do you want to have dinner with me?” Flora asked, trying to force a bright tone, but I knew she had cash flow issues as well. She was doing her best to keep up a perky facade that would likely crack the second she was alone. Maybe I was projecting too much. I felt physically ill with the bomb that had been dumped on us.

“Listen, it could’ve been worse,” Dean said, glancing between us. Sometimes I didn’t think he was paying much attention to what was going on around him, but he must’ve caught on to the shift in mood.

“Yeah, you’re right,” she said, then ruffled his hair.

He laughed and flicked her long hair into her face, and I grabbed them both and dragged them against my sides. We’d all gotten closer in the last few days, and I wouldn’t have tried to do anything like this with Flora in the past. It was weird. I’d spent so long as an iceberg, drifting along alone, and I was starting to feel as if I had people around me who I cared about again.

How did I get rid of this fucking sword ready to slice off my head so I could enjoy my life? I glanced down at Dean, and he smiled up at me, then at Flora. She smirked, nodding at Dean.

“Why don’t you take your boyfriend home and make him dinner?” She wrinkled her nose in my direction and it was cute.

Dean gasped.

I laughed. “How could you tell we’re dating?”

She rolled her eyes. “Everyone knows, especially since he’s been giving you hugs and back rubs and has been glued to your side.”

Dean shrugged and an arrogant expression crossed his face. “That’s fine. Everyone should know I’m with Ingram. He’s mine.”

She tittered, covering her mouth.

He frowned at her before chuckling.

A light warmth filled my chest that I’d never experienced. He grinned up at me, and while happiness burned inside me, fear poked holes in it. By the time we were in my car with it aimed toward my apartment, I’d fallen back into a miserable mood again.

It was already after eight o’clock before dinner was on the table, a simple meal of broiled chicken that Dean had watched me prepare from his seat on the counter. After we finished and loaded the dishwasher, he stood leaning against the counter giving me long, worried glances.

“Are you really okay?” he finally asked.

I shrugged. “Yeah.”

*Fuck it.* I had a beautiful man in front of me, and he liked me for now. I stomped over until I was in front of him, then leaned down and kissed him. He opened his lips for the sweep of my tongue and rested his weight against me. Electricity bounced around in my belly.

“Do you know what would make me feel a lot better?” I smiled at him.

“Tell me?” His playful tone clued me in on the fact that he knew damned well what I was implying.

“Relaxing in the bathtub.” I nipped his bottom lip.

He moaned and nodded.

We stripped as we meandered toward the stainless steel tub in my bathroom. And my mouth watered as he shoved down his briefs while walking ahead of me, revealing the pale skin of his ass. He glanced over his shoulder and smiled, and my cock strained toward the ceiling, leading the way to the spot where it wanted to live. The cool tiles made me shiver as I stepped barefoot into the bathroom.

The tub was massive with jets in it, which would be a perfect way to end the day. I started the water running the second we walked into the room. Dean and I traded nervous smiles, and I grasped his hand, giving the steaming water a few minutes to warm up the bottom of the tub.

“Are you going to get in first?” he asked, cocking his head to look at me.

Nodding, I stepped over the lip, then slid down to the bottom. The warm water eased the tension in my muscles almost immediately but didn't do a damned thing to make my cock go down. Dean sighed happily as he stepped into the water and settled between my spread legs, using me as a backrest. The pressure against my aching cock drove me wild and teased me into rolling my hips, but I refused to rush this.

The temptation to touch Dean was too much. I ran my hands along his slick abs, then up his chest. He leaned all his weight against me, closing his eyes with a bashful smile on his face that did unholy things to me. A streak of white-hot lust zipped directly to my balls. It didn't take me long to trace my hands downward, and he licked his lips, spreading his legs to give me room to touch any part of him I pleased.

“Is this okay?” I asked, teasing my fingers around his cock.

He nodded and tilted his head back so I could attack his pretty pink lips.

We kissed as I closed my hand around his shaft and began to slowly jerk him off. At some point, he started to wriggle his hips, urging me to move my hand faster. The water crept up our chests, and I had to stop to shut it off. As I resettled, he turned around and pressed himself against me, our cocks teasing each other.

Excitement scrabbled through me, and I held him close as he bucked his hips. He pulled back to smile at me. I traced a wet finger around his pouty lips, which made them glisten. I leaned in and licked the droplets off, and he moaned.

“Can we try to come together?” Dean ran his hands along my shoulders, a slick caress that sent sparks to dance in my stomach.

“Oh, hell yes,” I murmured.

He laughed, shaking his head at me, but then leaned in to devour my mouth in a kiss that curled my toes.

Dean wrapped his arms around me, and I held him close while he twisted his hips in a sensual, soft dance that made my head spin and the tip of my cock pulse. I wasn't a stranger to sex, but I'd never taken my time like this with someone. Dean made me feel lucky to be alive. Minutes drifted along.

Soon we were close to blasting off, and my muscles were tense. I strained against him, nearly sloshing water out of the tub. He sank his teeth into my neck and ground his cock against mine, making the cutest little noises, as if he was a wild creature who wanted to eat me whole.

He gasped, and that tiny sound coupled with the way he stiffened let me know he was coming. Bliss swept through my body. The knowledge that this man I liked—*okay, yes, loved*—was feeling good in my arms sent me spinning over the edge. Pleasure rushed along my shaft. I clenched him close while I pumped cum into the water between us. Tingles attacked my body, even swirling through the muscles on my face, which was a rush.

Dean's lips found mine, and I kissed him as if I was going off to battle and might never see him again. He clung to me, soft and pliant and exactly the Dean I'd always imagined having in my bed. The way he curled his body against mine made me want to sink my fingers in his ass and spread him open for my cock. I sucked on his tongue, and he groaned.

"Can we go to bed? I want to spend some time opening you up so I can fuck you," I growled into his ear.

He nodded, and with a laugh, I hit the button for the drain. The sound of the water leaving the tub was a strange, real-world noise that drew me out of the sex haze we'd created.

He chuckled. "We never turned on the jets."

"Yet I still got a massage," I said, waggling my eyebrows at him.

He snorted and grinned.

A few minutes later, we hit my bed with damp towels wrapped around our waists, and we were both quick to toss them on the floor. Dean was delicious spread out on the comforter. His creamy skin was slightly pink from the warm water and his nipples stood up against the small, firm muscles of his pecs. His cock lay plump and ready against his thigh, not quite hard but not fully soft, either.

And the way he stared at me.

His gaze roved my body, and as I watched him his cock twitched and filled. Soon his shaft was long and hard, stretching up toward his belly button.

Licking my lips, I delved into my nightstand and pulled out the tube of lube.

"You want to play with my asshole?" he asked, grinning. The dirty words from him had my dick already plumping up again.

"Yes. Are you okay with that?"

He nodded. "I liked being inside you. I want to know how it feels to have you inside me, too."

Moaning, I crawled down the bed and started with the arch of his foot. I placed a kiss there and slowly worked my way up his body, worshiping him the way he deserved. His calves were lavished with attention. The erogenous spot on the back of his knee made me linger because it was soft against my tongue. The insides of his thighs were solid with muscle, and I loved the way the small amount of hair there dragged against my tongue. By the time I planted kisses around his cock he was shifting restlessly and tugging on my hair, trying to direct me to where he wanted my mouth.

Smirking at him, I shook my head, and he groaned, flopping back against the bed. I grabbed a pillow and tucked it under his lower back to put him in the perfect spot.

“Let me know if you don’t like this,” I said, raising my eyebrows at him.

He chuckled and didn’t say anything as I spread his asscheeks and delved between them, licking his hole. His musk hit my senses, and I pushed my hips against the bed, chasing after a small rush of pleasure that wasn’t going to get me off, despite how good it felt. He tasted fresh and slightly earthy, and I ate him for all I was worth. I needed him to want me, and when I pulled back for air, his cock was pink and dripping precum. An expression slid across his face that was nearly indistinguishable from pain.

“I’m so hard,” he whispered, massaging his fingers against my scalp. He arched his back and pushed his hips toward me, but I didn’t open my mouth for his dick.

“Can I stretch you?” I asked.

His eyes shut and he nodded.

This was going to be good. I coated my fingers with lube, and the heat and pressure when I slid them into his hole had me shoving my hips rhythmically against the bed. I wanted to fuck him so bad. I stretched him carefully, working his hole open, then found his P-spot and began to rub it. He gasped and rocked his hips, cock swaying. I kissed the vee of his groin and along his heavy balls.

Not long later, he was making a sharp sound each time I pressed on his prostate. My mouth watered because I wanted to go after his cock, but instead, I tortured us both. I made myself wait and tease him. Eventually it happened—his cock erupted with thick ropes of cum, and he cried out, thrashing on the bed. I kept up my massage of that spot in his ass until he stopped moving around, panting with a hand over his heart. Reluctantly, I eased my fingers out and slid up the bed, my cock neglected and needy. I wanted so fucking much to be in him already.

I didn't feel like I should take what I craved with the sword dangling over me—over us.

But he was so beautiful spread out with his arms and legs everywhere and sweat glistening on his forehead. I jerked off while I stared at his blissed-out face, and he surprised me when he sat up and pushed my hand aside, locking his lips over my cockhead. All it took was one light suck from him, and I exploded into his mouth, doubling over to hold him closer while my balls emptied in a violent pulse of joy that left me wrung out and exhausted.

With one last lick to my slit, Dean sat up and grinned, then dragged me down into his arms. For a while all we did was stare at each other.

“Are you feeling better?” He ran a finger under my right eye, then the left one.

“Physically, yes,” I murmured, because over the last few days I'd been trying out telling the truth to Dean, whenever possible. The extra guilt on top of what I was already feeling wasn't worth it, and he deserved better from me.

Dean frowned and tilted his head, but he didn't let me go, shove me away, or yell at me for not saying I was fine. I burrowed closer.

“Tell me what's wrong,” he whispered. He tickled his fingers along my side.

I froze because there was so much to fucking say, but finally my tongue loosened, and I reasoned with myself that he



was talking about right now and not all the shit that I should share with him.

“I can’t wait three months,” I said, and my body sagged with relief at having the words out there. “I’m really overextended. I didn’t make smart decisions with my cash the way you did.” And in part, that was true. I would’ve been fine if I wasn’t handing piles of money off to the mob, but I’d still spent too much.

Dean gave me a squeeze. “Is that all? I could help. Lend you money. It’s not a problem. You could always pay me back later.”

My heart almost jumped out of my chest. Dean was the embodiment of Edwin. Of course he would help anyone who was having trouble, especially me. How closely were the Giordanos watching us? Was this the reason they had sent the car? Maybe it was a message they were going to start using me to bleed Dean dry, too? Fuck, I was so confused, and I just didn’t know the answers to any of this shit anymore.

“Please never offer me money again.”

“Every guy has his pride. I get it.” Dean pressed a kiss to my temple. “Maybe you could stay with me and Mom and save some cash? This apartment is pretty expensive. Plus, we can do more of the events that we talked about. That will help. If we plan it right, we could be working a few days each week during our break. It won’t be a vacation, but who needs those, huh?” He smiled at me, bright and beautiful, and I wanted to fucking cry.

“Are you sure you would want me around all the time? You wouldn’t have anywhere to go to get away from me,” I whispered.

“Why would I want to do that?” Dean leaned in and brushed his lips over mine.

Fuck, I was a bastard because I already knew I was going to take him up on his offer. I shouldn’t, for his safety, but how could I talk myself into staying away from him?

“Thank you.” I nuzzled my face against his neck. “I have more things I should tell you before we do that.”

“Don’t worry so much,” he said around a yawn, giving me a tired smile. “I know you have some stuff in your past you’re afraid to share with me, but I grew up poor, too. It’s not a big deal. I won’t judge you. Life is too short for that.”

Nodding, I rested my head on the pillow and stared into his brown eyes. He looked right back. Hope was slowly winning the battle against fear inside me. If anyone could understand me without hating me, I was beginning to think maybe Dean was the one.

“Go to sleep. You’re tired,” he said, leaning up to press kisses on my eyelids, which forced me to close them. I’d never felt this good.

“Dean?”

“Yeah?”

“You know that thing I didn’t say?”

“Yes,” he whispered, but I could hear a smile in his voice.

“I . . . Do you want to hear it before you let me move in with you?”

He stroked my hair back from my forehead. “No. You don’t owe me that to get my help.”

An emotion I wasn’t familiar with overwhelmed me, and I held him close, cuddling up in his arms while he hugged me right back. I didn’t deserve anyone who made me feel this good, but I was selfish enough to hold on tight with both hands.



DEAN



MOM GLARED AT ME. THE AFTERNOON LIGHT GLINTED OFF THE purple sunglasses perched on the top of her head, which matched her velour tracksuit.

The green, white, and red striped moving van with Zavaglia Movers slapped across the side in bold orange letters backed up to the front door of our cottage. Almost everything Ingram owned had gone into a storage unit I was paying for. All that was left were a few things, mostly electronics, which would end up stacked in my room until we needed them, along with an extra dresser.

“You know, hon,” she said, shoving back her glasses on her hair until they bumped her ponytail. I’d never seen her trying to hold in her irritation this way, but her face was pink and her cheeks puffed out. “I get that you like Ingram, and I do, too, sweetie, but don’t you think this is a little fast?” She frowned at me, lips twitching. “You can’t just move him in here,” she whispered, leaning closer.

“I’ve had feelings for him for a long while,” I said, exasperated.

There wasn’t a chance in hell I would pull the *I’m paying for this house* card—because I wasn’t that rude, loved my mother, and didn’t want to die today—but part of me wanted to say it. I was starting to feel stifled in a way I never had by her living with me. I bit my lip and glanced toward the driveway because Ingram should be here any minute, and I didn’t want to have this conversation in front of him.

The movers got out of the truck and opened the door at the back.

She shook her head, and to my horror, her eyes were shiny with tears.

“Mom—”

“Listen to me.” She held up a hand. “Do you think I ended up in that trailer park on the ass end of nowhere because I wanted to be there?” she whispered, but since it was Mom, her words were more of a shout.

I flinched and stepped back from her. “What does this have to do with Ingram moving in for a few months?” Really, I didn’t plan for him to ever live anywhere else except with me, but I’d told her it was just an issue with his lease. . . which had led to her calling me out about liking him.

“I made bad decisions because I was in love.” She snatched her sunglasses off her head and stared down at them like they were a view into the past, one she didn’t enjoy. “You’re going to ruin your working relationship with him.”

“Mom,” I hissed, stepping closer to her.

She shuffled back and crossed her arms.

“It’s done, okay? Please try not to focus on the worst side of everything? And, just so you can get it all out of your system now, we’re dating. We’re sleeping together.” My face burned.

She slapped her hands to her cheeks. Her sunglasses clattered to the porch and skidded away. “No, you’re not doing that.”

“Yes, I am! I like him, Mom. You’re right. But it’s more than *like*. And he. . . . I think he feels the same. We’re going to be together.”

She bit her lip and shook her head. “Your daddy was a handsome man. I understand the appeal, son. It’s where you get your good looks from. But this is a bad move.”

My heart crumpled a little. This wasn’t a topic I wanted to get into. “He left you high and dry while you were pregnant. I

know. I get it. But I'm not you, Mom. You've done your best by me, and we're okay. I'm working. Everything is fine." I stepped forward to grasp her shoulders. I wanted to beg her to let me have this thing that made me happy—minus the lectures about a horrible past.

"He was awful." Her bottom lip trembled, and I hugged her. Thankfully, she didn't shove me away, and I gave her an extra hard squeeze.

"So, what do you want me to do? Be single forever?"

"Men are just such bastards." She bumped her head against mine. "I'm sorry you have to deal with them."

Chuckling, I stepped back. "I'm one, too."

She cupped my cheeks. "Yeah, but you're my baby. You're one of the good ones." She made a face as if she would fight anyone who said different.

"Ingram is a good guy. I promise," I whispered to her.

She nodded and finally a small smile broke free on her face.

Ingram pulled his car into the driveway, and my gut swooped as I noticed the vehicle he was driving wasn't the fancy one I'd been in the other day, but instead what I thought might be a Kia. The green paint glittered in the sunshine, and it was nice, but not *showing off* nice, which he might worry about. My heart skipped a beat as I watched him check his reflection in the rearview mirror. He didn't need to worry. He always looked good.

"What about all those nasty Hollywood breakups?" Mom shook her head. "Even if he's a halfway decent guy, you'll be all over the internet with everything. You won't be able to have a normal fight while you're out without everyone deciding whose fault it was."

I rolled my eyes. "It doesn't matter who I'm dating, that would still happen."

She blew out a long breath and nodded. "I suppose you're right. Well, how much do you like him?" She grasped the

shoulders of my shirt and rearranged it, the way she used to do when I'd first started modeling and she wanted to make sure I looked perfect before I stepped in front of a camera.

Ingram came walking up and bent to grab her sunglasses. He stared at them with a perplexed furrow on his brow.

"I'm all in on this, Mom. I love him."

Ingram's mouth dropped open and he glanced at the car he'd arrived in. Maybe he was thinking of running back to it and locking the doors.

Mom turned and snagged his hand before he could get away, and I fully understood why he might consider fleeing in terror because he knew how Mom could be. She snatched her sunglasses from him and put them on but didn't let go of his hand.

"What do you have to say for yourself, Ingram? Do you love my boy, too?" she asked.

My heart twisted because he actually wavered on his feet like he might pass out.

"I . . . Uh. So, you told her?" Ingram asked, giving me a small smile.

"We're sharing a room. I didn't think there would be a way around it."

He nodded and a deep furrow settled onto his brow.

"Now I'm your mom, too." Mom tweaked his cheek and laughed. "Welcome to the family. I would apologize, but you chose your own fate."

Ingram stared at her. Maybe being part of my family had never occurred to him? A wide smile split his face. "Thank you, Miss Ford. That is your real name, isn't it?"

She giggled. "You can call me Mom or Shirley."

One of the moving men, a big burly guy, cleared his throat, and we all shuffled to the side as he and his buddy took a dresser into the living room. "Where's this going?" he asked with a bright smile.

I rushed ahead to point out the spot in my room.

Less than twenty minutes later, all the stuff that hadn't gone into a storage unit was in its new home in my house, and Ingram and I were staring at each other a little awkwardly in the living room while Mom went outside to flirt with the moving men. She might think all men were bastards, but those muscled guys had caught her attention, and since she was holding their tip hostage in her hand, I figured they'd let her talk to them for a while longer.

"So," Ingram said, glancing around the cottage. He swung his arms and clapped his hands while blowing out a long breath. "This will be intimate."

I snorted. "It's small, I know. We call it cozy. I liked your apartment, but it was a lot for one person." I rested my hand on his chest, and he stared down at me. "Plus, you get to sleep with me."

He stepped in and hugged me.

I honestly couldn't wait to have all the time in the world sharing a bed with him. I got that he didn't want to rush things with me and hurt me—that was very Azariah of him—but I was so ready for him to hold me down and fuck me. I was getting hard just inhaling his cologne and rubbing my cheek against his shoulder. He glanced down at me and smirked.

"I'm excited. I've never lived with anyone." He pressed his lips to my forehead, and warmth glowed in my chest.

"Never?"

He shrugged. "Nope. I haven't gotten close enough to anyone." He cupped my cheek, and my skin tingled as he leaned down to brush his lips over mine.

"Oh my stars, so I guess you are dating," Mom said with a laugh.

The front door closed with a small *bang* and jolted me out of the moment. Ingram gave me a big hug, and I loved being pressed against his muscled chest.



“How did you get out of your lease?” Mom asked him, strolling over to plop on the couch.

“I was month to month because I wasn’t sure how long we would be filming here,” Ingram said with a shrug. “That’s part of the reason it was so expensive.”

Mom made an irritating clicking sound with her tongue. “Those real estate bastards will drain you for every drop they can.”

Ingram sucked in a deep breath and glanced between us. “Benny called and said Caroline was awake and wouldn’t mind visitors.” A shudder rocked him, and I squeezed his hand tight. His smile was perfect, though. How often was he acting happy when he wasn’t okay on the inside? I cuddled closer, and he gave me a soft grin that I was starting to recognize as one of his real ones.

“We should go, then,” I said.

“Yeah, Benny thought we would want to visit her.”

Mom swiped her purse off the floor beside the couch where she had a tendency to set it down. “I’ll go with you boys, if you want to give us a ride, Ingram?”

“Why not?” he said.

When we went outside no one mentioned the Kia, though Mom gave the new, less expensive car a scowl. She frowned at me, and I refused to acknowledge anything she might be thinking. Ingram’s money troubles weren’t her business, and he’d even told me himself he didn’t want me to give him cash, so she couldn’t say he was trying to pull a fast one.

“This is nice,” I said.

Ingram didn’t say anything, merely nodded stiffly.

We got in the car without any more talk about it. I wanted to sit with Ingram, but instead of making things weird, I took the back seat, and Mom sat beside him up front.

“Well, tell me about the travel plans now that the season is wrapped up,” Mom said, smiling at Ingram. I could tell by the bright tone of her voice she was doing anything possible to

distract herself from the fact that we were heading into the city to visit Caroline. Ingram backed the car out of the driveway, and I reached up to rub his shoulder for a second.

“Oh, we’ve got a publicity tour planned across the entire country. Will you be able to go with us everywhere?” he asked, and the overexcited tone he had let me know he was maybe doing the same thing as Mom.

“Not the whole thing, but as much as possible!”

I liked Caroline, and I was sad that she was hurt, but I couldn’t pretend everything was fine. I’d never been good at hiding my real emotions. They chatted the entire way into downtown New Gothenburg while my gut churned.

We stopped at a flower shop, then found a parking spot in a garage and went into the big hospital, Walnut Creek, that took up a lot of real estate. Ingram carried the vase of sunflowers we’d picked out cradled in his elbow, and I held his other hand. He squeezed so tightly it almost hurt as we rode the elevator up to the floor where Caroline was staying.

Benny shocked us by being right outside the elevator doors as they opened. He wasn’t looking great and still wasn’t wearing the more formal clothes that were his usual style. The scent of stale cigarette smoke wafting from him had me wrinkling my nose a bit to keep from sneezing. His T-shirt was rumpled—maybe he’d slept in it—and his jeans had a big stain on the right knee. The only usual thing about him was the camera propped on his shoulder.

“And here are Azariah and Edwin,” he said in a soft voice. A small smile curved his lips, and when he leaned away so that I could see more of his face, he had dark smudges under his eyes. “Caroline is doing a bit better.” He walked backward, and I got the impression that what he was doing was her idea, so I waved.

“That’s good,” I murmured.

“You two look great,” Benny said with a satisfied grin that didn’t belong in this situation, but maybe everyone else who’d come to visit hadn’t.

“They look like they belong together,” Mom said, and I wanted to groan as she patted both our heads from behind, then walked around us. “Don’t you think?”

“Absolutely,” Benny said, flashing her a brilliant smile.

My heart began to hammer as we reached the door to the hospital room, and Benny disappeared backward inside.

Ingram and I glanced at each other, but neither one of us moved.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake,” Mom said with a sad smile. She patted my cheek, then Ingram’s, and went in ahead of us.

Finally, I started forward and dragged Ingram along until he was walking normally. The hospital room was bigger than I’d expected. The air was strange and stale. There was no holding in my gasp when I spotted Caroline. Her red hair was everywhere, but they’d had to shave part of her head and there was stubble on one half. A bandage stuck out along part of the bare spot, and her face was purple and blue with deep bruises. Only her chin seemed fine. She sat on the edge of the bed and there was a pink walker in front of her. Normally she was vibrant and never stood still, so even seeing her sitting was awful, let alone this way.

“Caroline,” I moaned out and rushed toward her.

She laughed, but she didn’t sound like her usual, bright self. Only part of her face was moving—the other half was droopy. Tears seared my eyes and I did everything possible not to let them fall.

“Believe it or not, I’m already better than I was,” she said, words slightly slurred.

“Can I hug you without hurting you?”

She smiled and nodded, and I carefully wrapped my arms around her. Her right arm was strong as she hugged me back, but her left one barely touched me. Tears slipped out and I felt awful about it. I was here to cheer her up, not cry all over her.

“What’s wrong? Can they fix it?” I leaned back.

She touched the injured side of her head and took a deep breath as her eyebrows dipped. “My brain swelled, and they think that it made stuff squish in weird places against my skull. They say I have some brain damage, but that doesn’t mean I won’t be able to be myself again. I’m already able to move more, and they think as the swelling goes down I should regain mobility, but it’s scary,” she said, voice rough.

I nodded and hugged her again. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks,” she whispered.

“Did they catch the asshole who did this?” Ingram asked, sounding pissed. I glanced over my shoulder at him, and the expression on his face was new. An odd thrill bounced through me. I didn’t think I’d ever seen him angry.

I turned to look at him, and his fist was squeezed tight at his side.

Caroline held up her good arm toward Ingram, and he stepped in and gently hugged her, as if she were made of delicate crystal.

“No,” Benny said, still filming. “The police have been in contact today, but so far they have no information.”

“What’s this?” Ingram asked, frowning in Benny’s direction. “Why are you filming?”

“Might as well document it. People are going to be curious,” Caroline said in her serious work tone while she shrugged. “It might be all I’m capable of for a while.”

“Please don’t say that.” Ingram went down on his knees. “You’re going to be back. I have no idea how you direct all the time. It’s a ton of work.”

She gave him a twisted smile that flashed some of her usual pragmatic personality. “I have a headache that hasn’t stopped since I woke up. My plan is to start working as soon as possible, but I need the pain to go away. It’s keeping me from thinking in a straight line. My mind bounces all over the place.”

“Is it better at all? For real?” I wiped a tear away from the corner of my eye.

“Yes, it is. Like I said, I’m able to do a lot more than when I first woke up, but eh.” She shrugged a shoulder, and I realized maybe she’d meant to move both of them.

Ingram got up and paced around the room while I sat beside Caroline on the bed.

“Anything new? Thanks for saving the end of filming,” she said to Ingram, who flashed her a smile and nodded.

“Ingram and I moved in together,” I said.

Benny stepped closer with the camera, and my face heated. Shit, maybe I shouldn’t have said that in front of him.

Caroline smiled and leaned her shoulder hard against me. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all day!”

“Oh, your flowers,” Ingram said, and he held them up.

She laughed and pointed to a small tray table near the end of the bed, and he set the vase there.

“Honey, do you need anything?” Mom asked, squinting at Caroline. “You did not deserve any of this.” She went to the other side of the bed and started fussing with the blankets.

“Anything chocolate,” Caroline said with a sigh, and Mom practically twisted an ankle trying to get out of the room to go get it for her.

“Ingram, fill me in,” Caroline barked as soon as we were alone.

His head whipped up. “Yeah?”

She shrugged. “I might forget half of it, but I’m starting to go crazy already. I’m planning to talk someone into bringing me my laptop this weekend. We’ll see. I need to know, you know? Am I going to be able to do this? I would rather pass the project to someone else than screw it up.”

Ingram grinned and came over.

“Well, you won’t believe this, but Okam Pasha was pleased with us.”

She gasped, and I started laughing.

For a half hour, things were almost normal. Mom came back with her goodies from the gift shop, and Caroline was delighted. Eventually we were interrupted by a knock on the door.

A guy in blue scrubs peeked inside. He had a wide smile, shaved head, and a dimple in his chin. When he walked over, I had to crane my neck because he was half the size of a tree. He smiled at Benny, apparently already used to the filming. “Hi, I’m here to take Caroline to PT. If you’re up for it?”

“You go ahead home,” Caroline said with a sigh before she grasped the walker. “This isn’t pretty, and I’m always tired afterward.”

Ingram and I both hugged her, and I felt bad for Benny. He was stuck here while we got to go somewhere else and recharge. I swerved around the camera and gave him a hug, and his eyes widened until I thought they were going to pop out of his head. My heart hurt because he’d always been thin, but I could feel his bones poking out of his skin. I patted his back.

“Thank you for taking care of Caroline. I know this must be very hard on you. Please remember to take care of yourself and eat.”

He made a small sound, then smiled. “You’re really Edwin. I knew it.”

Frowning at him, I laughed, because I had no idea what else to do with that. “Yeah, I guess I am. Azariah and I have to go.” I winked at him.

He turned the camera toward us as we left.

Ingram took my hand, then leaned down and pressed his lips to my ear. “That was strange, right? It wasn’t just me?” He didn’t have to say anything more. I knew what he was talking about.

Shrugging, I glanced up at him. “Benny has been stuck in this hospital for days going out of his mind. I would be weird, too.”

Ingram grunted and nodded.

“I’m ready for a good dinner. What do you boys say I bake some corn bread and take chili out of the freezer?” Mom asked with a huge smile, again doing her best to chase away the bad mood with her version of love—food.

Ingram flashed a fake grin back.

I let them pretend everything was okay.

I couldn’t quite do that. I held on tight to Ingram’s hand, though, and hoped his good mood would somehow flow over to me because I needed something huge to lift me out of the funk I’d drifted into.

He hugged me as we boarded the elevator, and I remembered he would be sleeping with me tonight, and maybe every night after this. Some of my bad mood evaporated. How could I be down when someone as amazing as Ingram was at my side?





## INGRAM



THE FOOD WE ATE FOR DINNER WAS GOOD BUT HIGH CALORIE, so I made myself scarce afterward by taking a jog around my new neighborhood. The area was idyllic, with other cottages that resembled Dean's interspersed between trees and a community garden. I made my way past a patch of wildflowers that had a sign out front designating them as a Pollinator Preserve. I couldn't imagine the type of person who took the time out of their day to grow plants for bees. They were better people than me, that was for sure.

This community was so far away from what I'd grown up with that I worried someone would walk out their front door and scream at me for being near their property. *Get away from here, you rotten kid!*

Of course, when a man walking his basset hound did spot me, he only waved and smiled. Guilt bubbled like a vat of toxic acid in my stomach, eating away at the tranquility of the world around me.

Caroline's poor head and face.

Why would anyone hurt her?

I forced my feet to keep moving, straining my body, while the awful memories flooded through my mind. She'd been so hurt—nearly killed—and as much as I didn't get close to people, I genuinely cared about her.

*Did this happen because of me?*

I couldn't let go of the question and it looped through my mind endlessly while my feet pounded the pavement. Too many bad things had happened all at once, and while they could be a coincidence and completely unrelated to the mob bullshit hanging on to the edges of my life, I had trouble believing it. But how on earth could disrupting the production of the show help the mob? What would they have to gain? They couldn't demand my money if I wasn't making any.

What did it all mean?

The fact that I couldn't find a single string of logic in the circumstances terrified me. As I made a circle of the neighborhood, jogging back toward Dean's house—our house—I did the same thing in my mind.

*Does this actually have anything to do with me?*

*Or am I drawing too many strings together to make a knot?*

When I reached the cottage, I wasn't any closer to solving the riddle.

Dean was sprawled across the couch on his front in black shorts and a white tank top, a delicious view I didn't normally get of him, with a book in his hand. He had a grip on his own throat and gasped, dropping the book to stare at me with big brown eyes.

"What happened?" I asked, smiling.

"The detective's wife was the murderer!"

Snorting, I closed the door and kicked off my running shoes. "That's a little cliché, isn't it?"

Shrugging, he grinned. "Yeah, but you know." He licked his lips and stared at me, and I glanced down at the sweat-soaked pink T-shirt that had glued itself to my chest.

"See something you like?" I asked, smirking at him.

He nodded, then got up and came over to me. I was surprised Dean didn't seem to care about the sweat as he ran his fingers over my pecs, then gripped my shoulders. He tilted his chin toward me. I crumbled—instantly.

I'd meant to talk to him when I got back.

Kissing Dean was a billion times better than tearing myself apart in my head. I wrapped my arms around him and dragged him firmly against my body as I devoured his pretty lips. My cock went from interested to a railroad spike in almost no time, and I loved the way his lips were soft under mine. He opened his mouth without hesitation as I pressed my tongue inside, and I growled as he hopped up and wrapped his strong legs around me.

"Dean." I nipped rough kisses along his jaw, and he craned his head to give me more room to work. "What are we doing?"

He flushed and smiled. "I know you have more experience, but I'm sick of waiting. I want you the way I always thought about having you. I'm yours."

His response was so perfectly Edwin that I ended up snickering. "And how is that?"

He leaned up and pressed his lips to my ear. His warm breath had my cock pushing against his in a way that sent a rush of tingling heat careening through my limbs.

"I want you to take charge and fuck me. Tell me what to do. I trust you more than anyone else in the world. I want this with you." He leaned back to smile at me, and my heart melted.

How could I do anything else?

Fuck, I should tell him what was going on first, though.

Indecision gripped me, and while my mind spun out of control, a pout popped out Dean's lower lip. He leaned forward, using his plush mouth on mine to make all the panic fade away. He sucked on my tongue, and my cock pulsed while I rocked against him. God, this was good. He squeezed his legs around me, and I loved the sensation of his body begging for more.

It sucked to walk to Dean's bedroom because I wanted to put him on the floor and not wait. Once we were inside with the door shut, I tossed Dean on the bed. There was music playing over a small speaker on his nightstand, something

vaguely medieval with a beat that was perfect for a steady fuck.

“What’s with that music?” I asked, pointing at the small black speaker, and then I stripped off my shirt.

Dean shrugged and pink took over his cheeks, which was always beautiful. I stared at the bulge in his shorts that he didn’t bother trying to hide. He spread his legs and lay back on the bed like he was waiting for me to ravish him. My perfect sixteenth century virgin. Not really, but he was so shy right now with his hands resting on his abs and his feet shifting against the bed. Adrenaline clawed through my body and tried to turn me into a beast who simply took everything I wanted.

“I like it,” he murmured, then bit his thumb as he eyed me up from head to toe. I shoved off my shorts and pounced. I pulled down the collar of his tank top and sucked on his left nipple, and he gasped, hands flying to the back of my neck to hold me in place. There was something sensual about doing this while he was still dressed, and I slid my hand down his abs to grip his hard cock through his shorts. He tossed his head back and let out the sweetest moan, shoving his hips up against my palm.

For a few minutes, I leaned back and stared at his beautiful face as I teased his cock. When he opened his eyes and gave me a pitiful frown, I laughed and dragged his shorts down his legs. He nodded, and it was my turn to be stunned once I had his shorts off and tossed to the side. He was perfectly formed in every way. His cock was flushed the same pretty pink as his cheeks, and I wanted to put my mouth on every inch of him.

“Over,” I growled out, and he smiled and turned onto his belly. “Get your knees under you.”

“Yes,” he whispered, and then he dragged his pillow down to cradle it in his arms as he juttied his beautiful ass into the air for me. I spread his curvy cheeks and dove in, lapping my tongue into that pink hole my cock had never touched. I couldn’t deny it was satisfying on a basic level knowing I was the only man who’d done this, scouted this territory—conquered this sweet man.

Dean was all mine.

I fucked my tongue into his ass, going deep. As I eased him open, my cock pulsed all the way from the root to the tip. I obsessed over the idea of being inside him and did all I could to devour him, show him I would treat him right.

“Ingram. You’re making me too hard,” he gasped out.

I couldn’t stop the dirty chuckle that escaped me, and I slid my hands over the inside of his thighs, then up to tease my fingertips along his shaft. He cried out and writhed against me, and I grabbed his solid thighs to keep him in place as I tortured us both by continuing to eat his ass. His muscles tensed and trembled, and I eased back, feeling drunk.

Without a word, I grasped his hips and shoved him to the side, then muscled him around until he was on his back underneath me. His bottom lip was swollen. Did he bite it while I was rimming him?

I moaned and stared into his pretty eyes.

They were so trusting.

Guilt almost strangled me for a moment, but Dean beat off the sensation by reaching for me, and I leaned down to suck kisses on his lips.

“Don’t,” he whispered.

“What?” I asked, frowning.

“Whatever keeps holding you back when we get to this point, don’t let it win. Remember that thing we aren’t saying to each other?” He smiled and my heart almost ripped itself to shreds at that innocent expression.

“Yes.” *There are so many things I’m not saying.*

He tickled his fingers along my shoulders, then gripped the sides of my neck. “I want this. I want you. I *love* you.” He leaned up and there was no way I could do anything except give him what he needed. For a few minutes we kissed and teased our bodies together, but I was so far gone it was as much torture as pleasure.

“Where is the lube?” I couldn’t take this anymore. I needed him, and with the way he bit his lip, I knew he was feeling the same way.

He nodded at his nightstand, and I leaned up to snatch the tube out of the top drawer. I popped open the lid and wasted no time getting to work. Sliding my fingers into his body was an epic tease for both of us, and he pulled one knee up to his chest to give me room to work.

“I’ve heard you should ride me for your first time,” I said with a smile. “It’ll make things easier.”

He shook his head, and my cock twitched hard, stealing my breath. “I want you on top of me, Ingram. I want to feel your muscles holding me down. I want you to. . .” He stared at me with a frustrated little pout, and I didn’t need him to finish the sentence.

“Condom, yes or no?” I asked, voice gravelly.

“No. I want to feel you bare in me.” He took the lube and slicked up my cock, then wrapped his leg around my waist as I slid in closer. Soon he had his other leg around me, and I laughed as he tugged me against his chest.

“I didn’t realize you would be this eager, Edwin,” I teased.

He groaned. “Not right now. I need *you*, Ingram, not Azariah. Just do it.”

Hearing him say my name like I was Superman stripped away my willpower. I was hard and so close to where I’d dreamed of being for too long. I nudged against his hole, and he nodded, grasping my hips. He tugged on me, and I fell forward, catching myself, but that was it. I eased into his body.

It was such a shock. His heat surrounded me, and he was so tight. I gasped and my cock throbbed. My toes curled into the bedding, and I pushed until we were locked together with his arms and legs securely around me.

Our gazes clashed, and I was flying.

Then, he tilted his chin, and I couldn’t have stopped kissing him if my life depended on it. I wanted to be a good

guy and give him time to get used to me in his ass, but with his mouth under mine and his tight body surrounding me, I couldn't stay still. I rocked, and his brow furrowed as he clung to me.

“Too much?” My heart lurched. I'd never worried this much about a partner, but I wanted everything to be perfect for Dean.

“Just right,” he murmured.

Groaning, I kissed him and thrust for real. He sucked hard on my tongue as I moved out and back in again, and I couldn't think as pleasure pulsed on my cockhead. He rolled his hips and instinct took over. I unleashed, pounding our bodies together, and he buried his face against my neck, whimpering every time his ass squeezed tight around my cock as I filled him.

“Am I hurting you?” I asked between rough breaths, but he shook his head and held me closer.

It felt so good to surrender to the need that had been dancing on the edges of every interaction we'd had. If I was honest, I'd felt this way since shortly after we'd met. It was heaven to be surrounded by his body, but I wanted this to be good for him, too, so I gritted my teeth and slid my hands down underneath his ass. I lifted him against me to go searching for the perfect angle. After about a minute, he whined and his teeth clamped down on my neck.

The sizzle of heat that punched my gut drove me wild. I fucked him hard while he stifled a yell against my skin. I bit the tip of my tongue to try to stave off the inevitable. I felt equal parts proud and relieved when he quivered in my arms, then threw his head back against the pillows. His mouth fell open and his hole clenched around me.

“Yes.” I groaned as scalding dots of his cum splashed on my abs. I glanced down between us in time to see the beautiful sight of a final blast of thick white cream dripping from his cock.

I attacked his mouth and drove my tongue between his lips as I finally let go completely and fucked. I pulled almost all the way out so the ring of his hole massaged my cockhead, then settled in as deeply as I could while my orgasm smashed through my groin and out into the rest of my body—taking me apart. I pumped cum as deeply into Dean as I could, then wished I had a bigger cock so I could shoot it deeper. I wanted to fall into him and never escape.

“You’re. . . . You are. . . .” I murmured the half-finished thought against his lips, and he gave me a sleepy, sweet smile.

My heart raced as the flawlessness of this moment settled over me. I might never have another time that was better than this. Fear swamped me. What if I lost him now? It would’ve hurt before, but now I wasn’t sure I would survive it. Fuck, I should’ve waited until we talked.

“We have to be up early to leave town tomorrow,” Dean said with a little growly noise, then flexed his arms around me, making it clear he didn’t want me to move. “Let’s just go to sleep.”

I glanced toward the darkening window and settled down on top of him. “We can’t sleep this way.”

“Stay here for a while,” he murmured in my ear, then kissed it.

Better men than me wouldn’t be able to deny that type of request.

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The crowd in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was shockingly huge. The noise in the wide room was so loud that I could barely hear myself think. Dean slid his metal folding chair closer to mine as we stared out at the sea of excited faces waiting for the security team to allow the first person to our table to get a signed photograph.

We’d already done photo shoots with a much smaller number of people just a bit after seven this morning. I was



more than a tad overwhelmed.

Shauna strode toward me, her white suit spotless and her curly brown hair bouncing around her face. Benny's redheaded assistant hurried behind her in jeans and a T-shirt, dragging a handcart stacked with boxes.

"What's all that, Miss Valbuena?" I asked, nodding at the boxes.

Shauna grinned at me, but her exhaustion with the day was already clear in the tightness of her smile. "Martin owes me for skipping out on this. You make sure he gets the memo. *That* is the one thousand four hundred and twelve photographs you and Dean will be autographing." She tapped one of the boxes. "We sold out the Monroeville Convention Center, and some of the employees requested a chance to be able to meet you." She winked. "Between the ticket sales to enter, the personal photos, the price of an in-person signed autograph, and the merchandise that is flying off the shelves. . . . Well, you were right. This was worth it." She came over and patted my shoulder.

Dean smiled. "Good job, Ingram," he murmured. He was pale this morning, and I thought he wasn't loving the crowd.

Shauna hummed. "I had a nightmare that this would be a bust. I'm sorry I doubted you." She moved her hand to the top of my head, and I forced a smile. After a second, Shauna sighed and tugged on the queue at the nape of my neck, straightening it on the high collar of my shirt.

"I believe in this show and Dean, that's all," I said.

"They're going to start." She gestured at the security men to lift the red velvet rope in front of the first person. "You're stuck here for now, but we can get you water, coffee, anything you need, and you have a five-minute break scheduled every two hours."

"Okay," Dean said, nodding frantically.

He was barely breathing as the first person, a girl with big round silver glasses and a pretty rainbow dress, stepped forward. She seemed like maybe she was still in high school,

and she barely looked at me as I grabbed a photograph from the stack at my side and signed it, then slid it over to Dean. He sat up straighter in his chair and did a good job holding eye contact, which was more than I'd expected from him.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“May Petrone!” she said, then danced on her toes. “Can you write *with love to May* on it? Can you do that?” I thought the poor girl was going to shake apart at the seams when he smiled and nodded, then carefully wrote the words on the photograph with a heart next to her name.

“I want Dean to write the same thing on mine,” the girl behind her said, loudly enough that half the line must’ve heard it. “If he wrote *with love* on hers, I get it on mine!” The next girl stepped forward, and I’d underestimated her age a bit because it seemed she was a woman of about forty, and I doubted that a younger person would’ve been so rude.

“Of course, my lady. And what is your lovely name?” I asked, trying to brush off the situation, but I was regretting the request to write even more on the photographs about two hours later when my fingers began cramping. Everyone in line had caught on to the fact that we’d done more than simply sign our names, and they all had something special they wanted us to write when they reached our table.

I’d noticed Dean’s hand shaking the last time I’d really looked at him, and the line seemed to be never-ending.

“This is why we don’t do personalized signings,” Shauna whispered in my ear as she dropped off a cup of coffee that I probably wouldn’t have a chance to drink before it was cold. “It’s making the line take longer. Keep it moving.”

“I’m sorry,” Dean said as a beautiful woman with dyed pink hair in a matching dress leaned across the table toward him. A corset cinched her waist tight enough that I was certain I could touch my hands around it. “But we have to keep signing. If there’s time at the end, I could answer a few questions.”

“Edwin,” I whispered to him, shaking my head, and the girl—Lindie, I recalled as I glanced at the photograph she had in her hand—beamed at him.

“I’ll wait!” She skipped off to the side of the line.

I let out a long breath. In seconds, I lost sight of her.

Somewhere deep into hour three we had to take a ten-minute break to stretch our legs and rest our signing hands, and a loud groan went up from the line.

After hour five, we were munching on granola bars in between signing.

“Why can’t we break for lunch?” I asked Shauna.

She smiled and raised her eyebrows. “Because all those fans have been standing as long as you’ve been sitting here, and there might be bloodshed if they see you wandering off.”

I was rethinking my sanity around the eighth hour of scribbling my name, and my right hand was screaming from the pain of holding a marker. The line was still going strong, though, so I switched to my left hand. Dean was doing slightly better than me. He smiled at every single person who came through the line.

Around hour ten Dean’s eyes started to look like he wanted to cry, but I almost shouted with joy because I’d finally spotted the end of the line. After I pointed out the last person, he perked up and gave me a brilliant grin. The people still in line began to whisper and laugh as they turned to see what he was staring at.

“I can’t believe you made it to the end,” Shauna said, flopping into a chair on Dean’s right as we watched the final person wander off with a smile on her face and a photograph clutched in her hands. “I thought we were going to have to send some people away with refunds, but you two are heroes.”

“Was this worth it?” I asked her. “For real? Tell me it was worth it. I need to hear it.”

She laughed and it was more of a giggle.

I stretched out my hands and my knuckles were visibly swollen.

Dean held out his hand at Shauna, and she dug around in her purse, then plopped ibuprofen in his palm.

“Thanks,” he said with a laugh.

“Share the good candy,” I said, reaching for her with both hands. “Please. Please. Please.”

She smirked and put an ibuprofen in each of my palms, and then I chased the pills down with ice cold, ancient coffee.

“What time is it?” Dean asked, glancing around. There were no windows in the bland beige room our table had been set up in. Someone had taken the time to decorate all the support pillars so they looked like Corinthian columns, but other than that, we’d been the main attraction.

Shauna checked her dainty pearl watch. “It’s a little after nine o’clock. You survived the day.”

“I’m starving,” Dean declared and grinned around. “And we did it.”

“Are you okay?” I asked.

He stared at the ceiling for a while, then nodded. “Only having tiny chunks of time with each person made it okay. All I was doing was asking their name and signing stuff.” He shrugged. “My hands aren’t used to this, though.” He held them toward me, and Shauna made a small sound when I kissed his knuckles.

“Ugh, you taste like permanent marker,” I said, and he laughed.

“Hi!” a feminine voice called.

We all stiffened, then glanced at someone crossing the room toward us at a fast pace. It was a girl in a vibrant pink dress with a corset. She seemed vaguely familiar. I’d seen so many people today and I didn’t recognize her, but Dean winced.

“I told her I would answer questions when we were done,” he said with a sigh.

Finally, I remembered her. “That was this morning. I didn’t think anyone would hang out this long.”

“Lucky you,” Shauna said, standing. “You can tell her to get lost or not, but I need my beauty sleep and dinner.” She smiled at Dean, then nodded at me. The security men who’d been hanging around looking at their phones followed after her, probably to make sure she got to her vehicle okay.

The girl reached us in a swirl of perfume that reminded me of peaches. Dean’s nose wrinkled and he sneezed, and she clapped her hands and smiled at him as if he were a puppy who’d done a cute trick. She had a white box under her arm. What was she doing?

“I was wondering, since you’re here so late and I know you didn’t move most of the day. . . . Would you have dinner with me?” She beamed at us.

I stood, grabbing Dean’s hand. “Sorry, but we already have plans.”

“Did you have a question for me?” Dean asked with a small smile. “I do remember I told you that I would answer a few questions. I’m sorry you waited so long.”

She frowned. “That was the question. I wanted to ask you to lunch, actually, but you were here a super long time.” She pouted, and she was very pretty, so she was probably used to getting her way.

“Oh,” Dean said, glancing at me.

I shook my head slightly.

“Uh, I’m sorry, but we can’t. We have a prior obligation.” He stumbled over the words, and I wanted to groan. To me it was clear he was lying, but maybe she didn’t think so because her eyes glossed over with tears.

“Well, I waited a long time and the bus isn’t running anymore,” she said, and now she didn’t sound nice. “Could you maybe give me a lift?”

“No,” I said before Dean could get us into any trouble. “I’m sorry. We really do have plans.”

I began to pull him away, but I’d barely made it a few steps past her when I was shoved from behind.

“You’re so awful, just like on the show!” she screeched. “You’re the worst! Edwin should leave you.”

Dean glanced at me with wide eyes, and without talking about it, we both backed away from her, then spun around and started walking fast.

The sound of her sobbing didn’t do much for me, but Dean’s face crumpled, and I squeezed his hand.

“Stay strong,” I said.

“We could’ve just—”

“No.”

He sighed as we cut through the lobby of the building and pushed through the glass-and-steel doors. Once we were outside, he took a deep breath and stared up at the stars. The parking lot was almost empty, and I felt a tiny bit bad as I spotted the Bus Stop sign about twenty feet on our right. There was no one there, so she’d probably been telling the truth.

“That was weird,” I said with a small laugh.

“Right?” He glanced at me.

“Wait!”

We whirled around, and the girl had the box raised over her head in both hands as she raced after us. For a second, I was certain she was going to end up being dangerous, but she dropped the box and pulled out a quilt that was as pink as her dress. She tossed it at Dean, who caught it, and then she took off running barefoot across the parking lot. *Where did her shoes go?*

“What was that?” Dean asked, glancing down at the quilt. He frowned at it. “What just happened?”

I let out a long whistle. “We should have security walk out with us from now on.”

He nodded as I led him toward my car.

“Maybe you should leave the quilt,” I said.

He glared at me. “She might’ve been a little odd, but I won’t. She obviously took a lot of time with this. I’ll take a photo with it and thank her like I would anyone.”

“This business is going to eat you alive.”

He huffed. “I would rather let it than hurt her feelings.”

I wrapped my arm around his shoulders, and he leaned hard against me. We probably should’ve brought clothes to change, but we’d been in a rush this morning and hadn’t. I absolutely wasn’t going to wait to eat, so we would have to risk the expensive duds. We could leave our jackets in the car.

I was trying to recall the restaurants we’d passed this morning as we neared my Kia, when my pocket vibrated. I was so tired it took me a second to realize the annoyance was my phone, and I tugged it out and checked the screen, not paying much attention.

Giordano Family Fuckhead: We need fifteen thousand tonight.

My heart flopped around like a fish on land. On autopilot I texted back.

Ingram: I don’t have it. You bled me dry. Now what?

“What’s going on?” Dean asked, and his confused tone pulled my attention his direction.

“Nothing,” I muttered, shoving my phone back into my pocket. Despite not eating a real meal all day, my appetite had disappeared.

“Okay,” Dean said, dragging out the word. He got into the passenger side, and I dropped behind the wheel. “I don’t care where we go, I’m dying,” he said with a laugh, and those words chilled my blood.

I nodded, heading left out of the parking lot toward our hotel because I was pretty sure there was a Red Robin in that direction, and Dean liked burgers.

I'd just turned the Kia into the parking lot of the restaurant when Dean frowned and dug his phone out of his pocket. I pulled the car into a parking spot, and he stared at his phone screen.

"What's wrong?" I asked, still stunned from getting yet another blackmail text.

"Someone says that if I don't give them money, they're going to kill you." He laughed, but it didn't sound right, then turned the screen toward me.

My gut cramped. Well, that was exactly what the message had said, short and sweet. I pulled my phone out and checked the number, then glanced at his screen. I dropped my head back against the seat and closed my eyes.

"Ingram! What were you doing?"

I gasped when Dean snatched my phone out of my hand, and after about half a second, I stopped trying to get it back because he sank his elbow into my gut and looked ready to murder me.

"What the fuck?" he snapped, scrolling back up through the messages on my phone. "What the fucking fuck?"

"You don't talk like that."

"I do right now!" He glared.

I should've tried harder to stop him, but I felt so defeated.

"We have to call the police." Dean sounded terrified.

I opened my car door and retched; although, there wasn't anything in my stomach to lose. I sat there panting and staring at a faded yellow line on the asphalt.

"It's okay. We'll report this. I'm sure it's just someone like that girl," he said faintly. "But they've texted you a lot and you didn't say anything to anyone. What is going on? Some of these messages were from months ago. And last year. . . ."



When I glanced over, he was still reading messages, his frown getting deeper as he glanced from my phone to me.

“Ingram, what is this? Did you give these people money?” he whispered.

My stomach churned more, but after a few deep breaths I closed the door. This was it. He was going to hate me. I rubbed my face with my hands. Some part of me had known he would find out eventually.

“I was going to tell you, but I didn’t know how,” I muttered.

“Tell me what?” He shook my arm. “Ingram, this is scary! What were you thinking keeping this a secret? You could’ve gotten hurt!” His eyes were huge as he shook his head.

“They helped me cheat to get into the acting school I wanted to attend.” I ran my thumb along the steering wheel.

“What?” he asked, and he sounded so confused I glanced at him. He blinked adorably, and I wanted to pull him into my arms.

“That’s how it started. I had a 1.3 GPA in high school, but the college with the acting classes I wanted would let me go there if I tested in. I could get scholarships for being dirt poor. Well—” I gave him my best charming smile but felt like shit on the inside. “—I can memorize nearly anything, but do math? Grammar? Maybe if I’d bothered paying attention in school, but half the time I hadn’t even been there. I’d been too busy scraping by.” Sighing, I closed my eyes. “So, I stole some shit and made enough money to pay a guy named Enzie to take the test for me. Usually he took the SATs for rich kids who had more money than brains, but he made an exception for me. Enzie worked for the Giordano crime family. Small potatoes, but he would give them kickbacks from his gig. They would drive off competition. He told me a bit about it, since we were from the same neighborhood.” I shrugged.

“I don’t understand,” Dean said with a frown.

“I cheated,” I muttered.

He rolled his eyes and rested his hand on my arm. “I get what you’re telling me, but how does cheating on some school test lead to this?” He raised my phone, blond eyebrows darting toward his hairline.

I forced myself to look at him. “So, what they don’t tell you is that learning to be an actor isn’t enough. A lot of the best parts go to people who already have connections or whose parents are actors or directors or whatever. I got the cash together to go to London because I wanted to work on a real stage with classically trained actors. It was almost impossible to break into Broadway, but there was a part for an American in *Triumph of Tulips* waiting for me to win it at the Royal Thespian Theater.”

His eyes widened. “Okay.”

I bit my knuckles for a few seconds, but he already knew things were happening, and if I didn’t tell him, he would call the police. Hell, he might anyway.

“Ingram! How does that lead to this!” He shook his phone at me.

I groaned. “Well, I went to the casting director and asked him what I could do for him to make sure I got the part. I let him know I was willing to do anything. Smart, right?”

He sighed and I hated the sad twist of his lips.

“The guy had been giving me some looks.” I shrugged. “I wasn’t beyond putting out to get what I wanted.”

Dean let out a growly little noise that made me feel slightly better.

“Well, he thought I was cute, right? But what he really needed was thirty grand. He was in the middle of a messy divorce and short on funds.”

Dean sucked in a deep breath. “That’s a lot of money.”

“Fuck, yeah it was. Especially then.”

He grunted.

I realized I'd slipped into the accent I'd grown up using, but I was too deep into my story, along with everything else, to care. "So, I called my buddy Enzie, who knew the Giordanos. They're a big name where I grew up in Chicago, just fuckin' huge. And he passed me up the chain of command until I talked to someone willing to do a favor for a jerk from the neighborhood that might be famous one day. There was a catch. There always is with criminals. I would owe him sixty grand, not thirty. He was actually a pretty nice guy," I said with a sigh, rolling my eyes.

"Mobsters aren't nice guys!" Dean shouted, and I winced at his tone.

"To me they were! They were giving me a chance when I didn't have any connections or fucking money to smooth my way," I snarled. "I had nothing, and they helped."

He leaned closer to his door and my heart hurt. "You could've gotten in on talent," Dean said coldly. "You're a great actor."

My heart lurched. "Yeah, maybe I am, but the casting director had also worked on about thirty productions with my biggest competitor's father, so he was going to get the part if I didn't pony up the cash."

"Well?" Dean asked, frowning at me. He had a hand on his cheek and both our phones were dark on his lap.

I shrugged. "Well, I'm here with you, aren't I? I did it. The cash came in. I paid the man. I got the part. Then I got more parts. Then I landed commercials on TV. Then I lucked my way into a couple of smaller roles on shows that no one fucking cares about, and then *finally* I had my big break. I'd already paid off the Giordanos and thought they were satisfied with doubling their money, but about the time season one of Wyndinham Hollow started filming, I began getting texts asking for more cash." My heart twisted. "I don't know what happened, but it seemed like I'd hit their radar again by being so well known, and they wanted to cash in."

"This is too much," Dean said, glaring at me. "You really didn't think that you could've gotten this far on your talent?"

You're better than me! I'm not even an actor. I'm just a pretty face and an idiot who can't stop blushing. And I'm here. You're—" He bared his teeth and shook his head.

"I'm some fuckup from Chicago," I said with a laugh I wasn't feeling.

Dean tossed my phone at me, and I caught it. "You're more than that to me. I can't fucking believe you." He growled, then got out of the car and slammed the door. I watched him stalk away and almost stopped breathing. Was it safe for him to wander off alone? Hell, it was probably safer than here with me.

"Fuck." I dropped my head to the steering wheel. How could I ever fix this? And even if I did, I'd probably just lost Dean. I punched the dashboard, then hissed at the pain in my hand.

What was I going to do now?



DEAN



“WHAT WAS THAT. . . THAT. . . . DAMN IT. WHAT WAS INGRAM thinking?” I muttered for the ten thousandth time as I slammed the door of the Uber. Cool air bit my cheeks, and the wind blew and snagged my clothing. Part of me wished I could bring myself to call Ingram names, but I just couldn’t.

That almost made this worse.

I loved him so damned much.

I rubbed my hand over my heart. This was such a shock. If someone had told me Ingram would lie to me—about anything—I never would’ve believed them. How could he hide this?

Glancing over my shoulder, I sighed. The elderly woman behind the steering wheel of the red Impala stared after me with wide eyes. Feeling bad, I gave her an apologetic smile, then opened the app to send her a big tip and a quick note saying thanks. I hadn’t even been able to pretend to make small talk with her. When that was finished, I was right back to seething.

*Ingram, why didn’t you trust me?*

He didn’t need to cheat. He was one of the best actors I’d ever seen perform anywhere in the world. I’d been intimidated by him when we’d started on the show together.

Sure, I was mad, but worst of all, my mother had sort of been right. Not exactly, and I didn’t think Ingram would’ve ever made this money problem my business—*Damn it. Why didn’t he talk to me about it?*—but she hadn’t been completely

wrong. Ingram wasn't a bad guy, but he wasn't exactly a good guy, either. I didn't want to tell her about this if I could help it. I would be getting *I told you so* side-eye from her forever.

I stared up at the cheerfully glowing, boxy beige DoubleTree hotel and began counting windows automatically. I'd always heard places like this didn't admit to having thirteenth floors, which had made me determined to spot them my whole life. I snickered when I realized the most expensive suites at the top were number thirteen. Some of my anger bled away, but it came roaring back as I stalked inside. I was going to head to my room, but instead I detoured away from the elevators and down the hall to my left. Tonight getting shit-faced sounded good. With my phone held tightly in my hand, I stomped along until I entered the dimly lit bar.

Everything in here looked like a hotel. The bricks behind the bar were one-hundred-percent fake. The dim, sodium-yellow mood lighting was too over the top. To my left the black marble tables were full of people in suits drinking, as if maybe there'd been some sort of accounting convention held here today. At the gleaming wooden bar, I found an open stool as a couple left while kissing.

“What can I get ya?”

I glanced at the bartender, a man about twice my age with no hair on the top of his head and a toothy grin. “I'm angry and I want something that doesn't taste bad. I like cherries,” I muttered.

He winked at me and patted the bar. “Settle in. I'll take care of you, okay, kid?”

Puffing out a long breath, I stared at my phone, then checked my bank account. I could easily pay the blackmail money. Closing my eyes, I sighed.

The bartender brought me my drink and flashed a smile. “Anything else?”

“Not unless you have a cure for stupidity somewhere back there.”

“No cures, only causes,” he said with a hearty laugh, then hustled off to refill someone else’s drink.

Growling, I sent a text.

Dean: How can I pay you?

I quickly changed the name of the contact so I wouldn’t lose track of the number.

Blackmailer: Venmo.

Glaring, I shook my head. That seemed dumb, but I doubted catching this person would be as easy as turning over the account to the police. Anyone going to this much trouble probably had their trail well hidden.

It didn’t take me long to make the decision. What else could I really do? I was worried about me, but I couldn’t stand the idea of something happening to Ingram. I slugged back some of the purple drink on the bar in front of me, then blinked at the sweet cherry flavor. I sucked down half the booze. When my cheeks started to warm from the alcohol, I sent the cash.

Blackmailer: Good job. I knew you would protect Azariah. You passed the test. You’re safe.

A creeping sensation had me frowning. That was strange. But what did I know about blackmailing mobsters? Maybe they told everyone good job?

“Dean!”

Startled, I glanced around and was surprised to see Benny sitting at a table with Okam Pasha. Grabbing my drink, I got up and went over. Benny slid his phone into his pocket as I arrived, smiling at me, and Okam held out his hand with a warm grin. His dark purple shirt pulled across his chest muscles and he’d rolled the sleeves to his elbows. I beamed back at him as we shook hands because he’d always been nice, and I knew he was in charge of our futures.

“How are you?” he asked, leaning toward me.



“Ugh.” I pulled out a chair and sat down.

Benny smiled and patted my shoulder. He was his old self—suspenders, neatly ironed khakis with a crease, and shoes shined within an inch of their lives.

“You’re looking good,” I said. The last time I’d seen him he’d been falling apart at the hospital.

Benny’s face flushed and his smile widened. “Thanks. I was just here to meet Mr. Pasha and get some footage of you on the road. I was so good I don’t think you noticed me filming that long line today. All waiting to see you, Edwin.”

“Oh, that’s so nice of you,” I said, trying to dredge up some energy because Okam was staring right at me.

Okam raised his drink, and I clinked my glass against his, feeling awkward. “What do you think about Benny being the new director?” he asked.

The bottom fell out of my world, and I stared at Benny. His smile nearly broke his face.

“Oh, what about Caroline—”

“She fully supports it. She wants the show to go on,” Benny said, leaning closer to me. “You’ll be brilliant for my vision. You’ll have as much screen time as possible.” His knee bumped mine, and I sat back. He frowned a little.

Glancing at Okam, I bit my bottom lip.

“What’s wrong, Dean?” Okam asked, tilting his head.

To give myself a moment to think, I gulped the rest of my drink and heat from the alcohol settled into my belly. “What about Ingram and Flora? They took over when they were needed. They’re the ones who finished last season. Shouldn’t they get a shot at the director’s slot if they want it?” I tapped my fingers against the cool table, and I was right. It felt like plastic. Fake, like so much of my life.

Benny’s face flushed red and he sat back hard in his seat. “Don’t you respect me, Dean?” he asked, eyes flashing with hurt.

“Of course, but—”

“Caroline has to formally resign from the project first. I was here to see how the publicity tour was going. We were discussing this now, though, to save time.” Okam raised his hand and glanced toward the bar. The bartender came over with another drink for me. I’d never had such speedy service in my life, but Okam passed the bartender two twenties and said, “Keep the change,” so that probably had something to do with it.

“Thank you,” I murmured because I wasn’t sure what else I could do.

“How is the tour going?” Okam asked.

Shrugging, I sipped the drink, barely tasting it. “Good. It just started, but today we sold out the convention center.”

Okam leaned closer to me. “There’s always at least one good story per day. What happened?”

Laughing, I stared down into my drink. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Hold that thought. I gotta hit the head.” Okam stood abruptly and wobbled off toward the restrooms. Maybe he’d been here drinking for a while.

Benny leaned toward me with a scowl that surprised me. “You should go back to your room. You’ll hurt Azariah’s feelings if he finds you here talking to Mr. Pasha. He’s a handsome man, and he clearly likes you.”

I shrugged, still angry with all things Ingram related. “Okam is a colleague, and I’m not going to stop having conversations with people because I’m in a relationship.”

Benny’s lips curled in a sneer. “I thought you would be better than this.”

Exasperated, I slammed down my drink and some of the purple alcohol sloshed onto the table. “I’m not doing anything. I’m having a drink. You’re sitting here, too. This isn’t a date.”

“Well, I can’t stay here and watch this,” Benny snapped. He stood, and unlike Okam, he was steady on his feet as he

stormed out of the bar.

Okam watched Benny rush off as he returned to the table. “What an intense man,” he said with a grin. “Creative types.” He shook his head.

“Yeah, I didn’t realize.” I frowned after Benny. “He thinks you’re hitting on me.” It occurred to me that I probably shouldn’t have said that out loud, but Okam only laughed.

“You don’t look happy. Are you okay?” He rested his chin on his palm.

I sighed.

He huffed and grinned. “That’s an answer.”

“I just had a fight with someone I care about,” I grumbled, although that barely began to cover the shitstorm that was brewing. Why did Ingram hide this for so long, and why did I pay those people? I stared at the ceiling. “A real fight.”

“Ingram?”

Sitting up straight, I stared at Okam.

He laughed. “News travels fast. I’m happy for you guys.”

“It’s not Instagram official, so keep it to yourself,” I said in a rush.

He hummed. “You fought, huh? First time?”

Reluctantly, I nodded while my face went supernova. This was awful. My stomach twisted. I didn’t want to be fighting with Ingram, but this was super serious.

“Have you talked it out?” Okam gave me an indulgent smile that reminded me weirdly of my mother.

“It’s kind of a big problem,” I muttered.

He sipped his drink and tapped the table. “Listen, I’ve been married four times.”

I gaped at him, and he snickered.

“Hollywood relationships get strangled from lack of air. There are always people around. It’s easy to try to drink or

drug or fuck your problems away.” He flashed me a crooked grin.

“I’ve seen it happen to models at my last job.” I sipped my drink, but my stomach began to churn. I should’ve stayed with Ingram. What if he was in danger and I wasn’t even there?

Okam nodded. “Talk to him. Don’t sit here with me getting drunk and pissed off. Take my advice. It cost me twenty grand in therapy to realize talking and listening could’ve probably saved every relationship I’ve been in.” He pouted, and I had to laugh because he was cute. I could see where he might have the problem of too many “opportunities.”

“What if he’s in real trouble and I can’t fix it?”

Okam blinked and sat up straighter. “Something the studio should know?”

Panic overwhelmed me for a second and I shook my head.

Okam lifted his drink and stared at it from the side as if mesmerized by the amber color. “Then he needs someone to help him out.” He tapped the top of my head.

“Ingram just always knows it all,” I mumbled.

Okam chuckled, a deep rich sound that had other people turning our way. “Sweetheart, he’s an actor. If you’re seeing his messes, Ingram must really trust you.” He winked and finished his drink in one long swallow.

Some of the tightness in my chest relaxed and I was able to take a deep breath. “You just made me feel better. Thank you.”

Okam nodded. “You’re welcome. Is that guy over there checking out you or me?” he asked.

Turning around, I noticed a tall man at the bar, with blond hair and a chest that could move mountains, staring in our direction. Spinning back around, I smiled at Okam. “Definitely you.”

He squared his shoulders and shoved to his feet. “Wish me luck.”

“Good luck,” I said with a laugh. “I’m heading back to my room.”

He nodded but didn’t seem to hear me as he carefully made his way over to the man who’d been eating him alive with his eyes.

I felt too hot as I left the bar and slid off the expensive jacket I’d almost forgotten I was wearing. I looped it over my arm as I walked. Once I was in front of the elevator, it took me a second to drag my key card out of my wallet, and I stared at it with a frown. I hit the Call button and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Finally, I glanced up and glared. Neither elevator appeared to be moving. With a sigh, I spotted the entrance to the stairs on my right and went over. I opened the door and frowned because the stairwell was dark above me. Was a power outage on one of the floors to blame for the elevators? With a shrug, I tapped on the flashlight on my phone and made my way up the stairs.

I turned the corner into the darkness above me and froze when the beam of light landed on a shiny pair of shoes. Something was shoved over my head, and then I couldn’t see anything. I struggled but felt sluggish after my drinks, and someone wrapped their arm around my neck and squeezed. My head spun.

Something was jammed hard against my side. I gasped as all my muscles locked up and hurt. There was a loud sound like sticks crackling in a bonfire. The pain went on forever, and I was knocked to my knees. My side ached, an awful fire. I began to struggle, but there was a *crackle* near my ear.

“Walk or I tase you again,” a low male voice said, and I was so dazed, all I could do was nod.



## INGRAM



WHEN I OPENED THE DOOR OF OUR HOTEL ROOM AND DEAN wasn't curled under the blankets, my heart disintegrated into a thousand tiny pieces. I closed the door and walked toward our bed, smoothing my hand over the soft purple comforter.

Were we finished?

We'd barely started.

I'd sat outside the restaurant for a long time convincing myself that everything would be okay because this was *Dean* I was dealing with, and he was sweet and caring and kind. But. . . even saints had their limits.

"Hello?" I called.

My gut swooped as I checked the bathroom, but of course, he wasn't in there. I glanced at his luggage next to the wall and paused, frowning. I stopped to tap my fingers on the top of his suitcase while I stared at my shoes. If he'd gotten his own room because he was planning to never talk to me again, wouldn't he have taken his things with him? I rushed out into the hallway and wasn't sure what to do. I ran over to the stairwell because when I'd gotten here there'd been a repairman working on the elevators, and I hurried downstairs, not sure what I should do.

Where could he be?

I tried to call Dean, but his phone went directly to voicemail and he didn't pick up. Growling, I shoved my phone into my pocket and walked around all the spots that he might

decide to stop—the gym, the pool—and finally headed toward the bar on the first floor.

Public drunkenness wasn't his speed, but who knew? When I walked into the bar, my stomach swooped because I spotted Okam Pasha on a stool, and he was deep in a conversation with a man, arm draped over his shoulder. He had the intensity only someone a half a drink away from their limit could pull off. I attempted to call Dean again, and when that didn't work, I took the plunge.

“Okam, have you seen Dean?”

He glanced up at me and sat straighter on his stool, wavering on the spot. The man with him turned to glance at me, clearly annoyed at the interruption, but fuck him. This was important.

“Oh, Ingram!” Okam's grin split his handsome face. “Did he find you? I told him to just talk it out, man. I was there for you.” He gave me a thumbs-up. “Create space for each other.”

My stomach crumpled as I listened to him spew psychobabble that I was sure someone had made him memorize at one point. What the hell did Dean tell Okam? Well, it couldn't have been too bad or he wouldn't be smiling at me.

“I can't *find* Dean to listen to him. He's not in our room, and he's not answering his phone.” I gestured around the bar. “He's not here, either.”

Okam frowned and took out his phone. He tugged on the collar of his shirt and undid the first button at the top, and the man with him sighed and rested a hand on his knee. Yeah, I was definitely persona non grata at this party, but oh *fucking* well.

“Number?” Okam shot me a glance. “Maybe he's just not talking to you right now. He was upset earlier.” Okam shook his head, and guilt swamped me. He poked drunkenly at his phone screen after I texted him Dean's number, but he only shrugged as he held it to his ear. “He's not answering for me, either. Maybe he's just sleeping somewhere.”



“Fuck,” I snapped.

He frowned. “I take it this isn’t like Dean?” He lowered his phone to the bar and I could see him struggling to sober up.

I tossed my hands into the air. “No, not at all. Dean doesn’t disappear. It’s the total opposite of anything he would ever do.”

“You didn’t tell him you cheated, did you? People do a lot of unusual things when you lay that on them.” Okam cringed. “Don’t ever do that while you’re driving.”

“No,” I said, beyond exasperated. “I’m going to call his mom. She’s the only other person I can think of who might know what’s up with him.”

He nodded as if he thought that was the best idea in the world.

“Hell,” I grumbled and hit her number while leaning against the wall to the left of the door, but she didn’t answer. Swearing, I was about to put my phone in my pocket when she called back. Okam had wandered away from his date to pace near me. The man seemed to be frustrated as he disappeared out the door, but Okam only stood in front of me with a small frown and his hands shoved into his pockets. It was nice that he genuinely gave a shit about Dean. That was unusual for the studio guys.

“Hello? Shirley?” I answered while Okam stared at me. Nerves twisted in my gut.

“Hey, Ingram. What’s up, sweetie?” she asked around a yawn. “I was just getting ready to turn in.”

“Has. . . uh . . . .” Fuck, how did I ask this question? She was going to hate me. “Dean and I got separated earlier, and he isn’t in the hotel room. Have you talked to him?”

“Well, hell, just call him, hon,” she said with a laugh.

“I did and he’s not answering. I’m worried.”

She gasped, and I wasn’t sure if it was because of my words—or the fact that I’d chosen that moment to sniffle because I was losing my goddamned mind. All I could think

about was some mobster stealing Dean off the side of the road while he walked back to the hotel.

“No, I haven’t talked to him, but I’ll call him.” She ended the call without another word, and I stared at the phone.

Okam’s brow was furrowed with concern as he stepped closer to me. “How long has it been since you saw him?”

“About an hour and a half, but his stuff is still in our room. He didn’t just get a different room because he’s mad at me or his things would be gone.”

“Shit.” Okam scowled and started calling people.

Before I knew it, everyone who had worked with us today was at the hotel, including Shauna, with the express mission of finding Dean. The staff was alerted and told to search high and low. They’d all been texted publicity shots from the show, and I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. Okam was good enough not to tell everyone Dean and I’d had a fight—even though he obviously knew about it.

“What if he just went somewhere outside of the hotel?” Shauna asked, glaring at her phone as she tapped her fingernails against a table we’d taken over in the bar. Even though it was after closing, no one was chasing us out. “He always answers for me.” There was some fear in her tone and I didn’t like it.

The guys in boring gray suits who’d worked security at the convention center came over to the table, and Okam leaned toward them because the tallest man, I hadn’t caught his name, stopped in front of him as if he wanted nothing more than to salute. Instead, the man adjusted his tie and frowned in our direction. His square jaw was tight and his flinty gray eyes didn’t reveal much about what he was thinking.

“We asked the hotel to check their security footage to locate Mr. Thorne.”

“That’s great, where is he?” I asked.

Shauna rested her hand on my forearm, and I wanted to shake her off.

There was silence, then the man turned his cell phone toward us. A clip of a hallway, clearly somewhere in the hotel, played on the screen. Frowning, I watched, then groaned as a man with a bag over his head came into view, along with the shoulder of someone else, and then it was only a boring hallway again.

“What just happened?” Okam asked, voice loud enough to get the attention of the bartender, who was still cleaning up.

“We think maybe someone was taken from the stairwell to the right of the elevators. They were out of commission earlier. The camera in that direction was damaged, but a second one picked this up. An emergency door at the end of that hall leads out into the parking lot.” The man’s Adam’s apple spasmed. “It was our job to keep him safe, but we thought he would be fine after the event.”

We all stared around at each other.

My heart took off racing. “We don’t know that was him, but someone is definitely having a bad night.”

“We’re all thinking the same thing, though, right?” Shauna asked, glaring at me.

“This isn’t the plot of a bad action movie. No one kidnapped Dean,” Okam said with a laugh. “Maybe someone has a kink.” He cleared his throat and his eyebrows climbed on his forehead. “A violent kink.”

Shauna glared at me as if she wanted me to be the voice of reason.

“We can’t find Dean, and someone got dragged out of here with a bag over their head. Let me see that,” I demanded, snagging the security guy’s phone. He grunted but didn’t stop me. I backed up the clip, and we all watched again. I paused the screen and covered my mouth. It had been such a quick flash the first time, but I pointed at the unmistakable elaborate jacket just visible at the corner of the screen.

Shauna gasped, and Okam and the security guy leaned forward.

“Oh, no.” Shauna slapped my arm. “That’s what Dean was wearing at the signing.”

“Contact the police,” Okam said, and the security guy nodded before taking his phone back.

I stared at the table, unable to think. Ten minutes passed while the gears in my brain wouldn’t turn, then it was pure chaos. Cops arrived, and they asked everyone a ton of questions. They looked at all the security cameras in the entire building and kicked me out of my hotel room. Even though I was offered a different suite, all I could do was pace around while barely able to breathe.

I knew if I turned on the TV Dean’s disappearance would be all over the news—this was too juicy for the hotel staff to keep their mouths shut—but I couldn’t help but worry the cops wouldn’t find him. Why would the Giordanos hurt him? Why would they take him?

It made no fucking sense.

Anger got the better of me and I took out my phone. I tried to call the number the blackmail texts always came from, but no dice. Staring at the ceiling, I sucked in a deep breath, then scrolled down my list of numbers. I still had one I probably should’ve deleted a long time ago, but making good choices wasn’t really my thing.

I hit the number.

“Enzie, here,” came a bored tone. In the background, slot machines were ringing and there was loud laughter nearby. “I don’t sell MDMA anymore.”

“I’m not calling about drugs. It’s Ingram.” I wanted to snarl at him but doubted that would get me very far.

There was a pause, then a loud laugh. “Hey, you! The fancy history show guy, right? What can I do you for? You know, I got a hell of a boost for bringing you around. I’m doing all right because of you.”

Rage pelted through me. “Are you the one who has been blackmailing me? Where’s Dean?”

There was silence from Enzie, and a loud cheer from somewhere in the background made me clench my hand into a fist.

“Whoa, whoa, hold your horses, what? Tell me what’s going on!”

He sounded sincere enough, and I was already fucked, so I gave him the abbreviated version of the story.

He let out a long whistle. “You know, I don’t think anyone would do that. I’m not saying anyone I know is a good guy, but they don’t want to get shot in the head, and that’s one way to make that happen. Rake someone over the coals forever and you’re gonna die. Jesus Christ, buddy.”

“Well, if you didn’t do it, do you think the guy who loaned me the money did it?” I picked at a thread on my jacket but made myself stop the nervous tic.

“Doubtful.”

“Why?”

“Well, he has much better shit to do,” Enzie said with a warm laugh. “He took over the operation in these parts a while back. Hold on for a minute,” he said, then the phone went dead. I gasped and tried to call Enzie back, then paced the room as my stomach roiled.

Not long later my phone rang in my hand, and I growled. “Hello?”

“I just heard an interesting story,” the man on the other end said in a weirdly friendly tone, and he sounded familiar.

“You’re Carmine.” The name popped into my memory, turning up like a bad penny. “I’ve been jerked around and that’s okay. I get that I did shit I shouldn’t have, but my boyfriend’s missing now because of this shit, and I swear to fucking Christ, I would rather come clean about everything than have anything happen to him. If you hurt him, I’m going to run my mouth, and I’m a celebrity. Everyone will know about your dirty operation.” I dragged in a ragged breath. “You’ve bankrupted me, and I can live with that. I grew up fucking poor. I can’t live without my boyfriend.”

There was a low hum on the other end of the line. “When I make a promise, I follow through, and as far as I know you did, too. We had our deal and it was finished. All good. No one here has been blackmailing you.”

There was silence.

“Then who?” I asked, feeling broken. My mind spun. “The name they used was Giordano.”

He let out a long breath that turned into a snort. “Maybe one of my men is trying to make extra cash on the side.” He sounded like that person wouldn’t be long for this world, and I relaxed a bit. “That’s real interesting.”

“My boyfriend is *missing*,” I said, feeling ragged in every way possible. “Abducted.”

He made a deep thinking sound. “I’ll look into this on my end. Let me tell you something and let me make myself clear. I don’t fucking like this, and I get why you’re pissed off. But, are you fucking listening? If you bring cops to my door for any reason, I will find you, and I will make you regret ever breathing oxygen. Unless I learn otherwise, this is your problem, not mine.”

“Yes, sir,” I murmured, but I wanted to punch out a window.

“Take care of yourself,” Carmine said cheerfully, his tone at complete odds with the words he’d just spoken. He ended the call.

I stared at my phone, then saved the number—just in case.

Not long later, I got a text.

Carmine: I have nothing yet. Assume it is someone on your end. Next time don’t be dumb enough to hand over money without a face-to-face conversation.

My heart almost stopped. *What? Someone here? But how?* Whoever had done this had to know about the fact that I’d been in with the mob in the first place. If I had to start suspecting people close to us, I was even more confused. Who

would want to hurt Dean? He was literally everyone's favorite person.





## DEAN



THE SILKY SLEEP MASK COVERING MY EYES WAS DRIVING ME crazy, but it was probably better than a bag over my head. I was lying uncomfortably on the back seat floor of a car with my knees curled forward, and cramps kept teasing at my thigh muscles, making me grit my teeth. I couldn't stretch or do anything to make the pain let up.

The car swayed as it turned. I was pretty sure that was what was happening, anyway. It wasn't like I could see anything. The smell of cigarette smoke drifted in the air, and the window cracked, making that horrible sound that happened when a car was going fast and none of the other windows were open.

The need to see what was happening was driving me insane. I had trouble sucking in air from the panic bubbling in my chest. I rubbed my face against the floor until the mask slipped up a bit, but then sighed because my hands were still stuck in cuffs and somehow hooked to the ones around my ankles. I couldn't move much. I got a glimpse of a small chain strung around the one between the cuffs.

*Shit. What am I going to do? Oh my God, this can't be real.*

It was still dark out, so I'd been in this car a lot less time than I'd thought. My heart hammered. It felt like I'd been trapped for seventy years. I tried to lean up because I needed to see who the fuck was driving—and ruining my life—but the car lurched. I gasped, lying back down.

“Why are you doing this?” I rasped out.

The lack of an answer was more terrifying than anything I could’ve heard. There was a long sigh from the driver’s seat.

My skin crawled with the need to hear something. Anything.

“Who are you?” I asked louder.

No response.

I had trouble catching my breath and felt lightheaded. Nothing happened. No one spoke. The silence dragged out. . . . Well, you can only panic for so long, I guess. But my heart rushed triple speed as the car stopped and the engine shut off.

I tried to struggle, but there was no going anywhere. A bright flashlight shined in my face from the front seat, and the mask was adjusted down over my eyes again.

“Fuck,” I snarled.

There was a small hum and the tone sounded masculine. My body went on full alert as the driver’s side door opened, but then I was hauled halfway out so that my feet rested on the ground.

The taser crackled. I jolted and twitched as it was shoved into my side for the second time tonight. My body convulsed and the pain stole my breath, even as the jabs of agony began to fade as if it had never happened. I was yanked the rest of the way out of the car, and the cuffs on my feet were unlocked.

“Walk,” a low voice growled. That was definitely a man’s voice.

I stumbled forward and there was the sound of a large door opening. Strong hands on my back shoved me, and I staggered onward. I took a deep breath and the scent of wood polish hit my nose. It almost smelled like. . . . This couldn’t be Smithfield Manor. We’d been in Pennsylvania, not New York. Ugh, but I could be literally anywhere in the tristate area with the amount of time I’d been in the car.

*This is a nightmare.*

I was dragged along in several different directions, then down a flight of stairs. I gasped as my foot caught and I tumbled forward. No one tried to catch me, and I rolled, knocking my jaw and the side of my head against the steps. When I lay dazed on the floor at the bottom, I was hefted upright once again.

Another shove, and I got the idea to walk.

I was horrified as my wrists were secured to what felt like a wooden pole. Something touched my ankle, and I froze. The sharp sound of scissors cutting cloth was loud in the dead quiet. The subtle dampness of a basement assaulted my nose as my pants were methodically shredded.

“What are you doing?” I asked, but I knew better than to move. I didn’t want to be cut. My attacker kept going until I was standing, shivering in my boxers. Then the mask was removed, but I whimpered because it didn’t help.

Wherever I was, it was pitch dark.

“What’s going on? Where am I?” I shouted.

Footsteps echoed as they padded away from me, and I could hear them going up the stairs. A door closed.

“Help!” Once I started yelling, I couldn’t stop, and I kept going until I could barely speak.

No one came.

Panting and alone, I started to cry. This couldn’t fucking be happening. I yanked on my wrists but couldn’t see anything, and all I did was make my arms hurt.

“I hope you’re okay, Ingram,” I mumbled, going to my knees. I wanted to be mad at him because this had to be connected to that money, but really, I just hoped he was safe back at the hotel. I loved the jackass, and I wouldn’t wish this on him for a minute.



## INGRAM



MY EMPTY BED VICIOUSLY REMINDED ME OF THE FACT THAT Dean wasn't in it, so I went to one of the bland, boring conference rooms in the hotel with a Styrofoam cup of awful coffee and plopped down in the seat at the middle of one side. I stared at the wall. My brain wanted nothingness.

Void.

To shut down.

Never had I missed home more—which was a strange feeling for me.

*Home.*

Home hadn't been good when I was younger—I'd actively avoided it.

Then "home" had become a fancy apartment I'd used to show off, to prove how much better I was than how I'd started.

Most recently, the only place I wanted to be had been in Dean's arms, sleeping in his bed, with him pressing kisses against my cheek. No, I didn't miss some arbitrary place where my stuff was stored. I missed Dean, and we had no goddamned idea where to find him.

The police were fucking useless. Of course, they didn't have all the facts.

Sighing, I set the cup on the table and stared at the shimmering black liquid.

A police officer stood awkwardly in the doorway of the room having a whispered conversation with someone directly outside. When did he show up? Why was he there? To keep an eye on me? I ran my fingers through my hair, the beginnings of paranoia tangling in my heart.

It would only be a matter of time before the news and the keepers of the fandom caught wind of this. I cringed. The *fandom*. It would be hell if something happened to Dean. They would never fucking forgive me. They thought of me as Edwin's protector. I owed them all a lot for putting us on the map, and it was weird that I felt so scared of an amorphous mass of people who loved Dean possibly as much as I did. Yeah, Dean was sweet and innocent—Edwin.

This would all be my fault.

And they might be right.

I pulled out my phone and stared at it.

I needed *help* and couldn't handle this alone.

My finger hovered over the contact labeled *Shirley*, but I couldn't bring myself to call. Instead, I sent a text to Shauna, which had my phone immediately ringing, and then I was talking. It felt like I babbled for seven hours. I called each person in the cast and on the crew, one after the other—even Caroline, who was stuck in her hospital room and couldn't think of anything that might help. Benny was the only person I had trouble getting in touch with, but eventually he texted me back a bunch of shocked-faced emojis, and I figured he'd talked to someone else already.

And then people started arriving.

Okam and Shauna rushed into the conference room first, which made sense because they were already in the hotel.

"The police will take care of this," Okam said, patting my shoulder. He was in the same rumpled shirt he'd been in the last time we'd talked. Then Patrick and Elyssa and Flora arrived. They swarmed and hugged me, while Shauna tapped angrily on her phone.

My agent, Martin, bustled into the room with a scowl. He was the same solid man he'd always been. He made me feel better because his beard was gray and there was always a stern confidence thinning his lips and making his square jaw hard.

"We're using this somehow," he blurted, and while everyone gave him shitty looks, no one contradicted him because, well, that was the business. Make lemonade out of shit.

Shirley showed up in a tizzy with Benny hot on her heels, and I was terrified as she rushed toward me, blond hair in a messy ponytail and face red. Her eyes were overflowing with tears, but rather than yell at me for losing Dean, she just clung to me and cried. I ended up standing so that I could give her more support.

My heart swelled as I watched everyone. There had been no real conversation about my request for their presence. Everyone had simply shown up because I needed help—or rather, Dean did. One of us was missing, so everyone had turned up to—what? Wait together? People were talking in low tones.

Desi arrived along with Polly and Marva and half their respective crews. Benny's assistant spilled into the room last with a carafe of coffee he'd gotten God only knew where and a stack of paper cups. His long red hair was a wavy mess that floated around in his wake.

Gradually everyone got more comfortable, which meant their volume began to climb steadily. My knees jiggled and I rubbed my chest because my heart was going to hammer through my ribs. The room was a dull roar by the time I was able to make myself think, with people talking over each other and Shauna trying to flag down one of the cops out in the hallway to ask for the thousandth time if there were any updates.

My head started to pound as Shirley finally backed away from me with a smile that wobbled.

What should I do? I stared around at everyone, the people who had come together to save our series from the issues that

could've gotten it canceled. Okam, who was giving me a sad frown. Dean's mom—Shirley.

Sweat dripped from my temples and I felt sick to my stomach. I slowly walked over and closed the door. There was a lock and I turned it. The room went quiet as I stumbled back to the table.

“I have something to tell you all, and I'm sure you won't like it,” I said.

I glanced up and my face burned. My heart thudded as if I was standing in the middle of a stage and had forgotten my lines. I glanced around, but there was no one to give me a cue, no one to get me on the right path or get me started again. No fans in the crowd to impress. Just me and the truth, standing here exposed.

“Go ahead,” Martin said.

I stared around the room. “So, this started when Wyndinham Hollow began ramping up advertising for the first season.” I told them about the blackmail. Not *everything*. Not the *beginning*. But I told them all about the money I'd paid and how I was so stupid that it might not have even been to a mobster. There were gasps as I rambled and wide eyes and furious scowls. Had I thought I didn't have an audience? I did, and it was awful because they all knew me, and their judgment counted, unlike the thoughts of strangers. As I finished speaking, my knees felt weak.

I looked down at my hands.

“Oh my God, sweetheart!” Shirley was loud, as usual, and when I glanced up, I cringed back because I was afraid that she might come after me with the anger that twisted her face. She shot up from her chair and started toward me. “You should've told someone about this! Of all the nerve someone had, doing this to you!”

“I—”

“You were just giving someone money?” Flora asked, shaking her head at me. Her long orange dress brushed the floor as she paced nearby with her arms wrapped around her



tiny waist. She had a small furrow on her brow as if she was thinking overtime.

“Well—”

Shirley came toward me with her hand raised, and I dodged back.

Desi grabbed her. “Nope, we’re not turning on each other,” she stated in that earnest way she had, and Shirley shrieked wordlessly, waving her hand at me. Desi shook her head and her gray ponytail bounced as she held on to Shirley.

When I took stock of the room, I was being stared at by every single person. Did they all think I was awful? Fuck, they weren’t wrong. “I’m sorry. I know you all hate me—”

“Hate you?” Flora interrupted. “We’re pissed off that you didn’t come to us sooner!” She tossed her hands into the air. “With everything you told us, someone close to you had to have done this. If it wasn’t that Giordano guy, then it had to be someone!”

“TJ is dead,” Patrick said quietly.

My gut sank. With everything that had gone on, I’d totally forgotten about TJ, which just made me feel worse.

“Oh hell,” Shirley said, rushing toward me. I braced myself, but she only hugged me, and I was stunned that she didn’t take the opportunity to slap me the way I’d thought she’d wanted to do before Desi grabbed her.

“We have to tell the cops,” Shauna said with a serious frown. “They need to know about this.”

When I made eye contact with Martin, he nodded.

Okam shrugged at me, probably because he didn’t care what happened as long as it didn’t look bad for the studio.

“But won’t I get into trouble? The Giordanos will kill me, and maybe Dean, too, just for mentioning their name to the police. I don’t know who was blackmailing me for sure or why they’re interested in Dean. I’m not sure how I can tell them anything without making *everything* worse.”

Martin blew out a long breath. “I don’t think you’ll get into any real trouble with the police. You were scared. You were doing what you thought you needed to do. You gave money to bad people. Hell, people get scammed out of money every day. You’re a statistic, not a criminal.”

My gut twisted. “Great, I’m just stupid.”

He shrugged, ever the realist.

Patrick grunted, leaning forward and resting his arms on the table. “This happened because you and Dean are a pair. The police are going to want your phone,” he said, and everyone stared at him. “What? I played a CSI for a couple of seasons on *Criminal Legions*. Cops always take your phone.”

Grimacing, I pulled my phone out of my pocket to stare at it, then quickly deleted my newly acquired number for Carmine Giordano, along with the calls and texts I’d had. I did the same for Enzie. I changed the name of the contact for the *Giordano Family Fuckhead* to a simple *Motherfucker*. Hopefully, that would be enough. The police could see the blackmail texts and the number they were coming from, and if I was lucky, they wouldn’t dig much deeper than that.

“But the Giordanos might come back on me if the cops go after them,” I whispered, feeling awful that I was still considering keeping quiet.

“Someone has Dean right now.” Shirley pointed at me. “I know you care about that.”

Patrick hummed. “The cops are searching here for Dean, right? Doesn’t it make sense that since this blackmail has been going on so long that whoever did this might’ve been watching you for a while? Maybe they’re in New Gothenburg and we should look there.” He glanced around with a perky grin. Elyssa patted his shoulder as if to tell him he was doing a good job.

Marva came to the table and knocked on it, glaring around at everyone. “Listen. Are we all forgetting about TJ? This has to be tied together.” She glanced over her shoulder at Polly, who smiled at her. “Whoever did this, I want to say this isn’t

their first strike against the crew.” She stared at me. “We owe it to TJ to try to figure this out. Plus, I don’t want to be dead, you know? It’s a bad look.”

There was a rumble of agreement.

“This person probably was also the one who hurt Caroline,” Benny said with a sour scowl.

Sighing, I ran a hand over my face.

“Also, to be fair, I don’t think anyone meant to kill TJ. No one could have predicted he was allergic to ketamine.” Benny shrugged.

“Benny!” Polly shook her head at him. “That’s insensitive.”

Frowning, I stared at him, but just the mention of TJ and how he’d died had everyone else looking like they’d just come from his funeral with long faces and glossy eyes.

“That’s why he died?” Flora asked, voice climbing into dog whistle territory.

“Yeah, that’s what Detective Agosti told me,” I said. Hell, I hadn’t realized the police had spoken to anyone else about TJ. “I don’t want Dean to be next.” I rubbed my chest. “Fuck. Those were my drinks that were drugged.”

Everyone stared around at each other.

“What?” Shauna asked, blinking at me.

“You didn’t know?”

Everyone shook their heads, except Benny.

“TJ was grabbing stuff out of my car for me, and I told him he could have an iced coffee that I’d made. I used to make drinks before my career took off.” I shrugged.

“Okay, you have to talk to the police,” Shirley said, sounding exasperated. “They meant to knock out you and Dean that day! Don’t you think?”

My heart twisted. “What if they go back to finish off Caroline? There’s no way to know who is in danger.”

Benny grunted, and I glanced at him. “If they were gonna do that, they probably would’ve by now. Caroline has been in the same hospital room all this time.”

Shauna shook her head. “Some of us should go to the hospital to make sure she’s okay.” She glanced at Elyssa and Patrick.

There was a big argument about who should go and who should stay, and in the end, Shirley ended up putting her hand in the air. “I’ll stay to see if they find Dean here. The rest of you, go.” She waved her hands like she was shooing a dog off a chair. “You go talk to the police.” She grabbed my wrist and squeezed it.

Everyone scrambled out to their vehicles, and I slunk off to find the police officer who had been standing in the hallway.

“Sir?” I said, tapping his shoulder.

He glanced at me looking bored. His blue eyes were as tired as I felt, and his baby face had deeper lines than it had earlier, so maybe he’d been working since last night. “Yes?”

“I have some information that might help the search for Dean.”

A few hours later, after I’d answered and avoided endless questions, I walked outside into the late morning sunlight and blinked up at the sky. I didn’t really think that Dean was around here for some reason. I couldn’t explain the gut feeling, but there was nothing in this area except businesses and hotels—it wasn’t a spot you could hide someone easily. I got into my car and started the drive back to New Gothenburg because I wanted to check on Caroline along with everyone else.

When I reached the hospital, my head was fuzzy from lack of sleep, but I managed to park in the garage without getting into a wreck, then went inside and up to Caroline’s room. Immediately, I felt like it was a mistake to visit her because she was sitting on her bed crying while Flora hugged her, and I wasn’t sure if the tears were because Dean was missing or from the shock of being told something so upsetting that it

reminded her of TJ, which was a fresh wound. Or hell, maybe she just didn't feel good.

Sighing, I backed out of the room.

No, I couldn't do this.

Instead of doing anything reasonable, I drove around aimlessly for a while, and finally ended up back at the cottage. I went inside and flopped on Dean's bed, staring at the ceiling. Eventually I closed my eyes because I just couldn't keep them open.

"Fuck," I mumbled, sitting up.

I had no idea what I should be doing, but sleeping wasn't one of those things. We needed to find Dean. I went out into the kitchen, then opened the fridge, staring at all the food. One of those premade iced coffees in a glass bottle sat on the top shelf. I didn't remember seeing any of those before today. Scowling, I pulled the bottle out and popped the top. It was already open, but I was dead on my feet. The last thing I cared about was some germs. I guzzled the bottle and decided that I would drive back down to Monroeville to wait for more from the police in Pennsylvania, when my head swam.

I stared at the bottle and began to laugh, and somewhere I heard the front door open.

"Hello?" I called, but my words were slurred.

I sat down on my ass on the floor, the fridge door hanging open. I batted at the door to close it as my head began to get fuzzy, and the next thing I knew I flopped backward. The glass bottle tinkled as it rolled away from me. My eyes shut all on their own and I couldn't open them.

Someone grabbed my hands and began to drag me across the kitchen floor, but I couldn't do a damned thing about it. I couldn't do anything at all.



DEAN



THE DARKNESS WAS DRIVING ME BONKERS. I'D STARTED imagining I was seeing things, but I knew nothing was out there. Or at least, I hoped that was the case.

My knees ached from slouching with my arms around the wooden pole for so long, and my mouth was the type of dry that only a gallon of water could fix. I let out a shaky breath. For a while I'd tried to escape, but the cuffs around my wrists wouldn't budge, no matter how hard I pulled on them. I'd quickly run out of steam. I was also close to making a mess. I had to piss so bad that every thought that wasn't about how to get free was stuck on convincing myself not to just let the stream go. I had no idea how long I would have to stay in my wet boxers if I did that.

My stomach ached.

The overhead lights flashed on.

I shivered, trying to look around as my eyes burned and refused to let me see. I might as well have walked into the middle of the sun. It took a long time for my eyes to adjust and bring a sealed gray cement floor into focus first. Nearby were a few old wooden wine racks with dusty bottles dotted here and there.

The sound of something heavy thumping on the wooden stairs drew my attention in that direction. The jacket I'd worn to the event was lying in the right corner of the bottom step. Someone must've kicked it aside.

My fingers and toes twitched as Benny came into view dragging Ingram by his arms. The sound that had caught my attention was Ingram's feet thudding off each step, but I guess that was better than his skull. Benny should've been funny because he was so skinny that it was like a scarecrow hauling around a real person. I would've laughed if this wasn't so fucked up. I sucked in a deep breath because Ingram's head flopped in a horrible way.

My chest ached.

*Benny?*

*Seriously?*

*He's the one doing this?*

*He seemed so nice!*

I stared, on the verge of hyperventilating and trying to understand what I was seeing. Benny looked three steps away from death and had a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth. He was still in the same clothes he'd been in the last time I'd seen him, and huge dark circles smudged the skin under his eyes. My heart almost exploded in a million pieces when he glanced in my direction and our gazes clashed. My mouth was a desert as I tried to swallow.

I'd seen that same awful vibe on a neighbor's dog once when I was twelve years old. Bucky had gotten rabies—which I hadn't known at the time. His owner hadn't been able to afford vaccines for him. Mouth foaming, Bucky had chased me all the way to the front door of our trailer. I'd barely gotten inside without getting mauled.

Besides the deranged glint in Benny's eyes, there was one other new thing on Benny—a hip holster. The hilt of a gleaming black gun stuck out the end and was strapped into place with a thin strip of leather that was flapping around. He was ready to shoot us. A long shuddery breath left me, but then something bright green in the corner of my vision had me swinging around.

There was a heavy wooden four-poster bed that belonged on the set of Wyndinham Hollow, and it was set up in front of



and on top of nylon green-screen material. I felt stupid as I stared at it. The bedding was perfect for filming, a light blue swirled with golden flowers, and the fabric definitely looked like it should be part of the show. The hair on my arms prickled up, but I decided to ignore the fucked-up implications of my newest discovery as Benny stopped a few feet away from me and let Ingram fall to the floor. I winced as his head bounced.

That wasn't good.

"Benny," I rasped, then cleared my throat. "What did you do to him?" I nodded at Ingram. What I really wanted to do was call him an asshole, but I didn't figure that would help us any. A bizarre calm settled over me.

Benny hummed and didn't say a word, staring down at Ingram with his hands on his hips as if he was irritated. He inhaled, taking a drag from the cigarette. The smoke billowed around him when he exhaled.

"Is Ingram okay?" I wasn't sure why I asked because he obviously fucking *wasn't*.

An expression I'd never seen on Benny crossed his face—on someone else I would say they were furious, but like a tornado twisting onto a new path, a smile curved his lips. The shift was a strange jolt and made me wish I could back away from him. "Of course. Edwin would be worried about Azariah. You're such a caring boyfriend. You're really the star of your couple, did you know?"

I blinked at him, and a terrible, creeping sensation scrabbled over me. He seemed to be waiting for a response. "Thank you," I murmured.

Benny crossed his arms, still smiling at me. He used his tongue to knock his cigarette into the corner of his mouth, then puffed on it. "Am I going to have any trouble if I let you loose?" He nodded at my hands still stuck in the cuffs, then darted a nervous glance toward the stairs. He must be worried I was going to make a run for it. That sounded pretty good to me.

Instinctively, I strained against the metal cuffs.

Benny casually lifted the gun from the holster, and I felt woozy as the overhead light winked on the metal.

“Uh,” I mumbled.

That wasn’t a real answer, but Benny came toward me anyway and used a small key to open the cuffs. I let out a sigh of relief that I was no longer stuck in one spot, in theory anyway. I eyed up the gun as I rubbed my aching wrists.

Without a word, Benny grabbed my arm and hauled me toward the bed. He wasn’t shy about jamming the cool metal of the gun against my side, and I hissed at the pain that radiated from the spot.

“Are you going to shoot me?” I asked, breathless.

“I don’t want to hurt you. I want to *direct* you, Edwin.” His sick smile was giving me the biggest creeps I’d ever had. My gut ran cold. I held my breath as some of the smoke from his cigarette got stuck in my nose, then lost the battle and sneezed.

“You know it’s Dean, right?” I asked.

He drew his hand back, and I was still feeling weird from being tased and trapped because I didn’t realize what he was planning to do until my cheek was on fire from his slap. My head spun from the force of the blow. I sat down hard on the bed, and even though the blankets looked nice, they were scratchy and awful under my hands and naked thighs—all for show.

“What’s your name?” he growled at me, jamming the gun into my cheek, which was still thumping with pain.

My head throbbed. “Dean.”

The *crack* that echoed around the space hit my ears almost before the new agony registered in my on-edge body. My other cheek was on fire. I slipped a hand up to hold it.

“What’s your name?” he shouted.

“Edwin?”

Benny's hand, which had already been raised, flopped down against his side. "Good boy," he murmured, then gestured toward Ingram with the gun. "Get him on the bed."

My stomach rolled. "I get that you probably want something from me—" I glared at Benny. "—but I need the bathroom. Do you want a mess on this nice set?" I asked, appealing to the one soft spot he might have. "Your green-screen cloth will be fucked if I piss on it."

His lips pursed and he grunted, glancing at the stairs with his brow furrowed.

"It's an emergency," I said, and it was the truth. My back teeth were practically floating.

"Okay," Benny said with a sigh, gesturing toward the stairs. Apparently his planning hadn't gone far enough to include having an option for relieving ourselves in the basement. I wasn't sure if that was good or bad. Did he not account for that because he was expecting us to die soon? Simple oversight? Some other terrible option I hadn't dreamed up yet? My mind went into overdrive as I started up the stairs ahead of Benny.

*I could try to run away.*

When we broke into a familiar hallway at the top of the stairs, I wanted to swear. We were at the manor. I hadn't been sure. As I headed toward a half bath on the first floor, Benny was directly behind me almost stepping on my heels. When I tried to go in and shut the door, he frowned and held the gun higher, holding it open. So, I went into the small bathroom decorated in pastel pink and pissed in the spotless white porcelain bowl because I did need to go. What else was I going to do?

*Fuck.*

Should I try to run away? What if I tried and he shot me? What if I got away and he killed Ingram because he was pissed off and clearly unhinged? I finished up and straightened my clothes as much as I could, considering I was in boxers. Glancing at Benny, I stopped to wash my hands and give

myself a few more seconds to think. He didn't say anything about me taking too long, thankfully.

"Why here?" I dried off my hands on a small towel embroidered with roses and tried not to stare at him.

"Where else would you be? Azariah and Edwin belong here," he fired back. I wasn't sure why, but the simple answer made my insides cold.

Despite my heart trying to beat out of my chest, I ended up going back downstairs to the basement in front of Benny because Ingram was there. Unconscious. Vulnerable. I had no choice. I couldn't just leave him. What kind of asshole would I be if I abandoned him? Hell, leaving him because I was angry was half the reason we were in this mess. Maybe if I'd just stayed and talked to him. . . . No, I couldn't think that way. I had to find a way for both of us to get the fuck out of here.

"Comfort Azariah," Benny said, raising the gun toward me.

I scowled at Benny because the light tone was the same one Caroline used when she was giving us some ambiguous direction, just to see what we came up with on our own.

An awful, horrific emotion clawed at my gut. How dare he? It was like invoking a ghost to have something that reminded me of Caroline echoing around this space. Beyond the green-screen area things were dim, as if maybe Benny had set up the lighting especially for this. Benny watched as I dragged Ingram to the large bed and struggled to get him lifted high enough to roll him onto it. I crawled beside Ingram and pulled his head onto my lap.

Damn it, but he wasn't looking great. His mouth was parted and beneath his eyelids his eyes were rolling back and forth like he was having the most awful nightmare. His face twisted up and he whimpered. I brushed my thumb over his pale cheek.

Benny ignored me after I was on the bed, and I considered my options as he moved around the space arranging three cameras that he brought out from behind the stairs. He didn't

seem too worried about me trying to get away, and I wasn't sure if I should be relieved or insulted. My gut swooped as he angled the cameras toward us, then stared directly into my face for far too long without blinking as much as he should.

Yikes, what the hell was going through his head?

Benny crossed his arms, and I couldn't take it anymore.

"What's your plan?" I asked.

He grinned. "Happy you enquired."

I bit the tip of my tongue to stop the flow of swear words that would get me shot.

"I want to record your lives." He spread his hands and raised his eyebrows, sounding like every studio executive I'd ever heard talk about a project. He was definitely selling something, and I didn't want to buy it. "Every second. Every joy. Every heartbreak." His smile dimmed until it was almost the usual soft one he wore as he followed around Caroline. How had we not noticed this shark?

"Like a reality show?" I asked, shocked into blurting out a real question.

He sniffed and looked as if he'd swallowed a lemon whole. "No, something with more discernment. More direction." He tapped his chest.

Ingram shifted in my lap, and I wanted to groan. *No*. As long as he was still asleep, we couldn't participate in Benny's sick game. But I also hated that he was knocked out from who knew what, so I rubbed my thumb along his jaw and bent down to give him half a hug.

"Dean?" he mumbled. "What happened? Am I . . . ?" He smacked his lips and huffed. "Am I in the hospital?"

"Lots of things are going on," I murmured, cupping his cheek. "Benny has stuff for us to do, Azariah." I wanted to warn him not to use my real name again because Benny's eyes flashed with hatred and his lips twisted down into a snarl. I could tell even though Ingram's eyes blinked open he wasn't

with it yet. “Give us a couple of minutes, here?” I asked Benny. “We need to prepare for our roles.”

Benny blinked at me and squared his shoulders, giving me a single nod.

Ingram slowly woke up. He dopedily ran his hands along my arms and the motion smoothed out into something sweet and unhurried. The second his gaze landed on the ceiling his body stiffened. Cautiously, he sat up and took in his surroundings, his attention landing on Benny last of all.

“What the fuck?” he mumbled, running a hand down his face. “Did we do speedballs or something? Christ, this is a hangover.”

“Great!” Benny clapped his hands and smiled, glancing around as if the crew were with us. His gaze lingered like he was seeing people gather to watch a cold run. “We’re all here! I want to start filming with the sex scene you decided you were too shy to do at the end of the season. It’s just us. No need for that, Edwin.” Benny flashed all his teeth in a parody of a smile. “If you’d done it then, none of this would’ve been necessary.”

Ingram blinked between me and Benny, and I could tell what was going to come out of his mouth would get us shot, tased, or who the hell knew what else, so I slapped my hand over his lips.

“I’ll think of something,” I whispered into his ear.

He scowled—I could feel it beneath my palm—and pulled my hand down. “Just so we’re all clear, he cracked,” Ingram said under his breath.

“Mm-hmm,” I said with my best smile, but I wasn’t really an actor the way Ingram was. I knew my expression was wobbly and all wrong.

“Fuck, I’m sorry about before,” Ingram said.

Benny frowned.

“Not now,” I growled back.

“But I want you to know,” he said, staring uneasily around the room the same way I probably had when the lights had gone on. “In case he goes all serial killer on us, I don’t want to stay quiet.”

“I . . . I love you, Azariah,” I said.

Benny hummed, stepping back to go to the nearest camera. He did something to it, probably hit Record, then pulled a stool over so he could sit behind it.

Ingram turned and burrowed against my chest, hugging me. The gesture was slow and lazy, and I could tell he wasn’t entirely over whatever had been used to put him under.

“Let’s just do it,” he said. The vibrations of his words against my throat were ticklish, and I shivered.

No, I didn’t want to share this part of our lives with anyone. I turned and nipped his ear. “Then what? He shoots us?”

Ingram shrugged and moved slowly as he sat back. “I’d rather get off with you one last time. He’ll definitely put a bullet in us after going to all this trouble if we don’t do it.” That was Ingram, practical to a fucking fault.

I sighed.

Benny grunted. “This whispering is cute and all, but Edwin, I want you to lean back and look at Azariah like you can’t wait for him to bend you in half.” Benny wriggled on his stool.

Ingram kissed me and his lips were hard against mine. “Just focus on me,” he said between our mouths.

I wanted to ask him *how*. How could he wake up from a dead sleep and just roll with this? As he brushed his lips over mine again, I kind of got it. We woke up and kissed and touched all the time. I fell into our usual pattern. Light caresses building up to frantic ones.

“That’s great. I want a full-frontal shot of Edwin. We can edit it later so we don’t scare the censors,” Benny said, his delight with the situation clear in his happy tone.

Everything was perfectly fine, except I was worried and panicking and scared of getting shot, so while Ingram did get hard as he pressed me flat onto the bed—*holy shit*—I didn't. Ingram snaked his hand down my front and gave me a squeeze. He backed up onto his knees and kissed the tip of my nose.

“Don't think that's going to work out for you,” Ingram said to Benny, who leaned back and scowled.

“Why?” He gestured at the gun in its holster at his side.

My entire body flushed as I swallowed and stared at him. “Maybe getting tased a few times had something to do with it, but my dick isn't into this.” *Or maybe it's you watching, asshole!* I wanted to scream.

Benny frowned, then his face contorted in rage as he hopped to his feet. He kicked the stool and narrowly avoided taking out one of his cameras. My stomach dove. How messed up was it that I actually didn't want the camera to take a hit? It was expensive. Benny came over and pulled the gun free of the holster, the veins on the back of his hand standing out and catching my attention. He waved the weapon far too close to my face.

“I'm the director now!” he shouted and slapped his chest. “Me! And there won't be any of this shit where you're coddled and you get to do whatever you want because you bat your eyelashes at Caroline. She's too nice for her own fucking good and our views. This is what I want to see. I'm a real fan, not the people on the fucking street. I deserve this! I worked hard to get to see this!” He took a deep breath to keep ranting. The gun wobbled to the side, almost as if he was going to drop it because he wasn't paying attention. He stared around at the cameras.

“Hello? What's all the yelling?” a light feminine voice called, and the distinct sound of the door at the top of the stairs opening startled all of us. “Who's down there?”

*Flora!* My heart stuttered as Benny swung in that direction and aimed the gun.



Ingram rolled toward the edge of the bed, clearly intent on trying to do something, but Benny shifted toward us again and backed up a step.

“Run, Flora!” Ingram yelled, slapping a hand on the bed. “Get help!”

There was a light laugh. “What are you talking about?” I groaned as her boots clacked on the wooden stairs and her feet came into view quickly followed by the hem of her dress and the rest of her. She stared around, and then her attention landed on Benny.

“What are you doing?” she asked, voice breathy and cheeks flushing red.

“I . . . I wanted. . . .”

She frowned and stepped closer, and my heart hammered. Was she going to try to reason with Benny? Her eyes widened as she looked around the room at all the cameras, and then a furious scowl settled onto her face.

“Flora, do you have your phone?” Ingram asked calmly.

Benny raised his gun toward Ingram.

Sweat broke out on my body. I was going to be sick.

“I do have my phone,” she said softly, almost like she was trying not to draw Benny’s attention, as if he was a predator who wouldn’t leap unless we startled him. Hell, maybe that was true. I didn’t know. She focused on Benny and crossed her arms, lips pursed. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she asked him.

He took a big step back from us and swung the gun lazily around, finally holding it at his side. “Something for myself,” he snapped at her.

“Flora, go back upstairs,” Ingram said softly, eyeing the distance between us and Benny.

She snorted and shook her head, and my gut dropped as she strolled toward Benny. “Do you know what this is?” she asked, gesturing around the room.

Benny blinked at her. “Yes, I’m going to get the scene I wanted.”

She rolled her eyes. “Evidence, you bumbling British idiot. You don’t want to leave evidence!”

My head swam, and I gripped Ingram’s arm tight. “Flora, no, you’re helping him?” I asked, even though I hadn’t meant to say anything at all.

She turned toward Benny. “Shut those fucking cameras off!” Her voice was shrill in the otherwise quiet basement.

Benny shook his head.

“What do you mean, no?”

“Why did you do this to us?” Ingram asked, carefully getting off the bed.

Flora scowled and pointed at Ingram.

Benny aimed the gun in our direction.

“I was supposed to come here to find you finished,” she said coldly.

Stunned, I sat back on my knees on the bed. “What did we ever do to you?”

She rolled her eyes and settled her hands on her hips. “Really? You’re taking my screen time, for one, with your side characters no one gives a shit about.” There was bitterness in her tone that had Ingram shaking his head. “Then this genius here wouldn’t back off and let me take over the direction of the final episode.” She waved a hand at Ingram.

“We all pulled together to do that as a team!” I said, shocked that she would act this way. “That episode was a combined effort from everyone!”

“That was *my* hard work,” she snapped in my direction.

“You’re as delusional as Benny,” Ingram said, his snide tone not doing us any favors, if the rage that crossed her face was any indication.

“I might’ve let this all go, but Benny told me about how you’re mixed up with the mob,” she said.

Ingram shifted his attention to Benny. “How did you find out about that?”

Benny shook his head. “You know I did the sound and lights on *Triumph of Tulips*. It was one of my projects while I was finishing up my final classes. Everyone knew you’d paid off Jennings, the casting director, and I went through your phone one night while you were onstage.” There was zero guilt in his tone.

Ingram grunted. “I started locking it after that. I remember that night. I knew someone had been on my phone because it wasn’t where I’d left it, but one of the girls had used it to make a phone call, and I thought that was all it was.”

Flora sighed heavily and rolled her eyes. “Enough of this shit. You were going to sink us from the fucking beginning with your stupidity, and my career is too important to go down the drain because of someone like you,” she said, pointing at Ingram. “The money Benny split with me almost made things worth it. But then you just told everyone today!” She tossed up her hands. “So, the cops are going to find your corpses floating in the fucking pond, just the same as TJ, and it’s all going to get chalked up to the mob. The show will go on, because your characters don’t even fucking matter, and everything will be fine! Jesus, can you just shoot them?” she shouted at Benny.

Time seemed to slow down as I crawled off the bed to cling to Ingram’s hand. If this was going to be it, I wanted to go at his side. He was tense, like he was still going to try to take Benny down. He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. Well, if he wanted to fight his way out, I would, too.

“No! I’m sick of listening to everyone else tell me what to do. No, I want this. I’m keeping them.” Benny swung the gun toward Flora.

Her eyes widened and she raised her hands. “What are you doing?” She stomped her foot. “Shoot them.”

He shook his head. “No, they’re mine. I’m going to keep them.”

“What, like fucking Dalmatian puppies? They’re people. You can’t. They will escape.” She enunciated each word as if she thought he was stupid, which maybe wasn’t far off the mark. “We have to stick to our plan!”

“I didn’t bloody well want that plan, but you always talk over me,” he growled. “You’re not going to be the director, I am.”

“For the record, I hate the plan,” Ingram said with a charming smile directed at Benny. “Don’t you want to see Azariah make love to Edwin? You won’t get that if you kill us.”

I nodded quickly.

Benny’s arm drifted more firmly toward Flora. I wasn’t ready for it when a horrible loud noise exploded in the quiet space. She stumbled backward and slapped a hand to her shoulder as she went down heavily onto the floor. Blood streamed between her fingers and spilled down the front of her dress.

Benny stood there looking at the gun like he’d never seen it before in his entire life.

“Fuck!” Ingram shouted.

I didn’t think—I lunged. Adrenaline warped everything around me and all I could see was the gun. I didn’t want to watch Ingram’s blood drain out.

Ingram swore behind me as I fell on top of Benny. The gun went off, and Ingram cursed. My ears rang and the heavy scent of gunpowder filled my nose. I could hear Ingram’s footsteps behind me somewhere, but I was too busy straining every muscle in my body, trying to get Benny to drop the gun by beating his arm off the floor. He struggled against me, using his left arm to try to pull his other one up, then went slack.

Stunned, I glanced toward his face in time to take a sucker punch to the mouth.

“Fuck,” I snarled, then twisted Benny’s wrist.

“You shot me!” Flora shouted. “You fucking shot me!” She began to sob and the sound pierced my brain.

Benny let out a high-pitched wail and tried to punch me again, still holding the fucking gun, but Ingram was there, grabbing his arm. Ingram shoved his hand down on Benny’s shoulder, and I started to get onto my knees so I could see what the fuck was happening with the gun, when there was another loud blast that tore through the room.

I gasped as pain ripped through the outside of my left calf. Fire licked in a line along my skin. I punched Benny and pushed his arm farther out to the side, and by the third time my fist connected with his nose, he dropped the gun.

Ingram scrambled around me to take the weapon, and I wasn’t sure where he went with it. I kept punching and felt like I was floating above the ground while I did it. Ingram dragged me off Benny, who groaned and slapped a hand to his squashed, bleeding nose. He looked at his palm and the blood glittered in the light.

“I’m the director.” He sounded baffled.

“We’re fucking people,” I screamed at him and tried to point with my right hand, but my knuckles ached too much. I cradled my fist against my chest.

Ingram swore and dropped to his knees next to me. “You’re shot!”

I glanced at the blood on my leg and shrugged, even though there was a scarlet stream running down to the floor. “It isn’t a big hole or anything. What do they call that? A graze?” I felt high, like none of this mattered or maybe it was happening to someone else. I glanced over at Flora, who was in an orange-and-red heap, a pile of wilted flowers dumped on the floor. “She needs an ambulance.”

“Fuck her,” was Ingram’s only response.

Benny flipped over and started crawling toward the stairs. I had no idea what to do with him, but for all I knew he had an

entire arsenal down here, so I went over and stomped on his back, thumping him to the floor.

A crackling noise nearby made me jump, and I slapped a hand to my chest. Ingram stood nearby and grinned while he pushed the button on the taser again and it sparked.

“Step back,” he said.

“Where did you find that?”

“On the floor beside a camera. He was probably going to use it on us.”

“He did use it on me earlier!” I scowled. “Twice! It fucking hurts.”

Ingram’s eyes narrowed.

Normally, I wouldn’t want anyone to suffer, but I just crossed my arms as Ingram bent and tased Benny, who twitched and screamed. Ingram blasted Benny with electricity again, and I didn’t say a word about it.

“We can’t leave him down here. It doesn’t keep you out for long.”

“Damn it,” Ingram grumped, but he had an expression on his face like he was resigned to doing whatever we needed to do.

We dragged Benny’s limp body upstairs together, my left leg aching the whole way. My head spun like a Tilt-A-Whirl, and whether it was from the situation, the blood slowly draining out of me, or any other of the hundreds of things wrong right now, I wasn’t sure.

“Don’t want to be in here anymore,” I muttered, staring around at the beautiful building. “This manor is cursed.”

Ingram frowned down at Benny as we slung him onto the floor in the front entryway. “He must have a phone, right?”

I shrugged and leaned against a wall, sliding down it. “We need to get help for Flora.”

Ingram made a small noise that sounded excited, and the next thing I knew, I heard him on the phone with what was

probably the police. My eyes fluttered shut and I let out a long sigh.

“Hey.” Ingram’s sturdy voice was in my ear.

I flinched and stared up at him. I hadn’t heard him move to come to my side.

“I’m sorry. I never wanted you to get hurt,” he said.

I gripped his hand as hard as I could, which wasn’t saying much, and he kissed the back of it. “Just stay here with me,” I mumbled.

My eyes closed. I didn’t remember much after that, except the sound of the taser going off again. I was just so fucking tired. The blare of sirens coming toward the manor had me shifting around, but as I did, I sniffed and forced my eyes open.

Ingram was pacing near Benny, glaring at him, and Benny was sneering at Ingram, as if he wished he’d actually followed Flora’s orders to shoot us.

Sniffing again, I sat up and glanced in the direction of the basement door.

“Do you smell that?” I asked, crawling toward the awful reek before I could convince my feet to move.

“Smell what?” Ingram asked.

I stood and started running toward the basement door, but the second I opened it, smoke poured out. The sound of fire *whooshing* was loud, and the heat was enough to make me jump aside.

Flora was crawling up the stairs.

“What did you do?” I asked, horrified. The whole place was going to go up in flames. The orangey glow behind Flora made it look like she was clawing her way out of hell.

“I’m not going to jail for this,” she said, tone low and determined. But she wasn’t moving very fast and the heat was getting to me just standing here. It had to be burning her.

“Get up here and I’ll help you,” I called down to her, turning away to cough.

She went silent and still on the stairs.

“What are you doing?” Ingram shouted as I darted down and grabbed her shoulders, dragging her up the steps. The heat was overwhelming, but I got her to the first floor. It took me and Ingram working as a team to get Flora and Benny out of the house and across the yard away from the manor. By the time we dropped Flora on the ground, fire was licking out of the windows on the first floor. It was horrifying how fast the old building went up, and my heart dropped as we stood there together.

“So much for the show,” Ingram said, then moaned. “We could’ve replaced Flora or the writers could’ve done something, but this.” He shook his head and looked ready to cry.

I stared at him and held his hand as the police roared to a stop near us.

“It’ll be okay,” I promised, and I wasn’t sure why, but I really believed that. “We’ll figure it out.”





## INGRAM



A BUILDING BURNING WASN'T THE SAME AS A WOOD FIRE.

I couldn't get over the acrid stench that swirled around us. Dean and I stood there staring, and even Benny, who was starting to come around more, watched on in horror. I think he would've rather killed us than destroy the manor. Flora had passed out, and I wasn't sure what to do for her, so we sort of just waited for someone to show up who would know better.

Okay, I didn't try very hard to help her, either, but I wasn't feeling guilty about it, and Dean wasn't even looking at her. In the chaos of the manor burning, the police had finally gotten out of their vehicles, and I was confused because cops in uniform rushed toward me, drawing their sidearms.

"The gun! Drop the gun!" Dean said, waving his hands at me.

"Oh!" I set the weapon on the ground and raised my hands. Then, I remembered the taser in my back pocket and tossed it down, too.

Detective Agosti was with the men in uniform, who were still tense and aiming their guns at me. His black suit made his smug smile seem even more blinding, but his shaggy hair was still everywhere, as if he didn't think it was worth doing anything with it.

"I knew I'd get to talk to you again!" he said, shaking a finger at me. "I could feel it. You have this bad penny aura." He shook his head and sort of framed me with his hands as he stepped back and squinted.

Dean huffed and rolled his eyes. “No, he doesn’t.”

“Well, I kinda do,” I said with a grin.

Detective Agosti pointed at Dean’s leg. “Is that blood?” He frowned. An ambulance pulled in behind the cop cars, and in the distance more shrill sirens filled the air. With a long whistle, he stared at the burning manor. “You better come talk to me, Ingram. This isn’t looking good for you, buddy.”

“He didn’t do anything,” Dean said, and the grit in his tone startled me. He sounded as if he was ready to tear Detective Agosti apart. When I glanced his way, his fists were curled at his sides. “These two did it all. Benny dragged me from the hotel with a fucking bag over my head!”

“I’m pretty sure he drugged me, then did the same thing to me.” I shrugged.

Dean blinked at me with wide eyes. “Why aren’t you angrier?”

“Well,” I scratched the back of my head. “I don’t know. I guess I felt like I kind of—”

“You did not fucking deserve this,” he said, scowling, which was so unusual that I nodded.

One of the cops bent to examine Flora and felt around for a pulse, but he didn’t seem to be in any sort of hurry. The next thing I knew, the ambulance crew was swarming us, taking Dean, Flora, and Benny away. It was the loneliest feeling in the world to let them snatch Dean from me, but I didn’t have any choice, since I had no idea how long I would be talking to the police.

“Stick with all of them,” Detective Agosti said to a few of the officers.

With nods, they meandered toward the ambulances.

Another cop car pulled in with its lights and sirens going, and my head began to throb. I didn’t like the look of Detective Agosti today, even though the last time I’d seen him I hadn’t particularly gotten bad vibes from him. He walked a tight circle around me while staring at the pond where TJ had died.

“We didn’t do anything. Dean and me.” I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair, grunting when my fingertips slid over a sore spot on the back of my head. “Can I go with Dean?” I let out a sigh of relief when the first fire truck ran out a hose and started blasting the manor with water, though I wasn’t sure why. It was going to be a total fucking loss. The show was screwed. I ran my hands through my hair again and winced because there was definitely a lump there. I had no memory of how I’d gotten the injury, which made me supremely fucking uneasy.

“No, you’d better not.” Detective Agosti came over to stand beside me, and we watched the fire crew work in a bizarre silence that stretched out for minutes that felt like hours. “You better tell me what’s been going on. I got a drive-by update from some state troopers in Pennsylvania. They were telling me that Dean Thorne, *the Dean Thorne*, was missing, yet I saw him here with my own two eyes. And there was some talk of mob involvement?” He raised his eyebrows at me. “I’ll tell you, I’m intrigued.”

“Well, there was no mob anything. Benny and Flora were behind everything, as far as I know.” Sweat slid down my temples, and I felt even guiltier than I probably looked.

He pouted at me but nodded. “You better start at the beginning of this bullshit.”

Grinning, I felt a little more like myself because, even though this was all a nightmare, I knew where Dean was and that he was safe, *and* I didn’t have to give anyone money anymore. “Well, I was born on a Saturday.”

Detective Agosti sighed and took out his phone. “My grandfather has better jokes. You mind if I record this? I don’t really have to ask in New York, but I thought I’d be polite. Plus, I want better audio than I can get in my pocket.” He held up his phone toward me.

“Okay.” I shrugged, then started talking. I rambled for a long time, telling him how I’d met Benny in England, but conveniently leaving out how I’d gotten the role in *Triumph of*

*Tulips*. I didn't hold back much, though, and when I was done, Detective Agosti was nodding.

"You think Benny killed your friend TJ and hurt your friend Caroline? Even though he worked so closely with her? That's fucking cold."

I shrugged. "I think he did it, but I don't think he meant to kill TJ. Flora might've wanted Caroline out of the way, and she might've been the one behind that. She wanted someone who would focus more on her character and less on everyone else because after editing there are only forty-five minutes in an episode. The director isn't the writer, but Caroline works very closely with Collin and Emily Rees. She had a lot of sway on what made it into the final drafts and cuts."

Detective Agosti nodded again. "Well, that's all pretty fucked up. A man is dead over some fantasyland garbage."

My heart crumpled because the show seemed serious to me—to all of us who worked on it—but when you stacked it up next to death. . . .

He gave me a cheerful smile and stopped the recording. Raising his phone toward me as if it were a champagne glass he was using in a toast, he flashed a grin. "I'm going to need you to talk to me again along with Dean Thorne, and we'll need you to testify, most likely. This is going to be good." He shook his head. "The last time we had a media circus at a New Gothenburg station it was because a big rock star, Mace Woelin, was sitting in a holding cell."

"You don't sound upset." I studied his face, and it was possible he was a better actor than me because all I could see was precisely what he wanted to show me—a cheerful demeanor.

"Nah, it's a hoot," he said with a chuckle. "Lets people know that no one is above the law, not even chucklefucks they see on their TV." He shrugged.

"Can I get out of here?" I asked, glancing around. My heart raced so hard my chest hurt. The ambulances were gone. I wanted Dean, and I needed to see that he was doing okay.

Fuck, I wanted to set up twenty-four seven security around him. I rubbed my temples.

“Eh, yeah.” Detective Agosti tucked his phone into his pocket. “Can you do me a favor and not leave the country or anything for a bit? That’s not an order, I just hate inconveniences.” He smirked. “Although, if you want to head somewhere tropical, maybe you could, and I’ll think up a few questions I have to ask you in person.”

A man in a New Gothenburg CSI windbreaker came over and bent near his foot, picking up the gun I’d been holding with his gloved hand.

“That was Benny’s. I touched it, though.”

The CSI guy nodded and tugged a permanent marker out of his pocket. With a flourish, he labeled the plastic bag he’d stuck the gun in *Benny*, the same way I might’ve sloppily written my name on a sandwich in the break room fridge.

“Need a lift into town?” Detective Agosti asked, eyeing me up with interest.

“Yeah, I guess. I didn’t drive here, like I told you.”

He let out an interested hum and nodded. “Come on,” he said, wandering away.

With a huff, I followed him, and I was surprised when he gestured for me to climb into a red Jeep Wrangler. We made good time getting into the city, and I barely saw the picturesque countryside that surrounded what was left of the smoldering Smithfield Manor. When we hit downtown, I groaned. The streets around Walnut Creek Hospital—a series of connected brick buildings that took up nearly a city block—were a mess of police cars, news vans, and traffic.

“There’s no way you’re getting near that place without a police escort,” Detective Agosti said as he parked in a fire lane near the edge of the crowd cutting off the main entrance. I opened my mouth to point out that what he was doing was illegal, but then thought better of it.

“Fuck, then how will I get in to see Dean?” I glared at the wall of people in front of the hospital doors. What were they

doing here?

Detective Agosti gave me a grin and popped a badge out of his pocket. “You’re in luck. I just happen to be the police.”

“Why are you being nice?” I hated that I sounded so small and weak.

He shrugged and some of that happy-go-lucky persona slipped. “You’ve clearly been through some shit, and you should probably get checked out yourself. I also want you to get your blood drawn while you’re here. You said you were drugged. I wanna see if that’s true.”

Sighing, I nodded.

When he hopped out, I followed him around the edge of the crowd. A few people had noticed me and snapped photos, but he grabbed my elbow and dragged me toward an ambulance bay along the side of the building while my pulse pounded in my ears. He flashed his badge and pouted at the doors, and then they *whooshed* open.

“That’s a cool trick,” I said.

He shrugged and wiggled the badge around. “Better than keys to the city around here.” He snickered as if he’d told a good joke, then led me through a maze of hallways to a small waiting room with a reception window on the right. “You sit down. I’m gonna get someone to draw your blood, and then you can go upstairs.”

“I should have a lawyer or something,” I mumbled, sinking heavily into an uncomfortable old chair with cracked vinyl on the back.

He frowned at me. “Did you do this shit?”

“No.”

“Then let me do my job and don’t be an asshole.” He pointed at me but winked.

In the end, I did what he wanted because I couldn’t think of a good reason why I shouldn’t, and I knew Martin would tell me off for it later, but oh well. As soon as I was done,

Detective Agosti let me escape upstairs through a service entrance.

I already knew where Caroline's room was located, assuming they hadn't moved her, so I went there first. I was relieved to see her hunched over her laptop on her bed. She had on a pair of glasses I'd never seen, and her fingers were moving smoothly, if slowly, across the keyboard.

"Oh my God, your hands are both working!"

She glanced up and did a double take. With a happy squeal she set aside her computer and turned around to grab at her walker. Before she could do something to hurt herself, I rushed over to the bed and gave her a gentle hug.

"They brought Dean in! He's across the hall. No one could tell me anything about you, and Flora and Benny are hurt. What the hell happened?" She leaned back to study me, and I was relieved because she seemed more like her usual self, despite the injuries.

"You're close with the writers, right?" I asked.

She stared at me, eyes moving rapidly as they searched across my face. I had no real idea what she was seeing, but I was probably covered in soot and I felt bruised and beaten down.

"We can have this conversation, but then you're going to tell me everything else." She poked my cheek with a finger, right where I knew I had a dimple.

"Yes. Smithfield Manor is on *fire* right now. Like, literal flames burning it down."

Her eyes went wide.

"I had an idea on the way here. Could we get Collin and Emily on the phone and ask them if we can open next season with a fire? It's the only way to justify a new location," I said.

It only took her three seconds to nod and fumble for her phone on a table beside the bed. I handed it to her, then sat beside her for a tense conversation that lasted all of five minutes—"Yes, the manor is actually on fire. We need



something about it in the scripts.”—and then we were staring at each other.

The much more serious disaster tumbled out of my mouth in fits and starts, but eventually I was speaking at a steady pace. I talked until my throat was scratchy and raw and I couldn't go on, but it didn't matter because I'd already said everything important.

“Benny or Flora might've done this to me?” she whispered, touching her head, then frowned at the floor. Her eyes welled with tears. “What the fuck?”

“Yeah,” I said gruffly.

She let out a long breath, leaning her shoulder against me. We sat in silence, and I spaced out for a bit. I felt like the floor was falling away from my feet, even though we were sitting still.

“Well, I'll just call Collin back and we'll write that bitch Flora out of the whole show,” she said, her lips in a firm line. “That'll show her.”

A hysterical laugh slipped out of me.

She gave me a half smile.

“Who will direct?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I was being pressured to give it to someone else, at least for a season, but if you'll help?” She raised her eyebrows at me and dragged her laptop closer. “I'm going over the edits that the team is doing, and I'm happy with everything you were in charge of filming.”

“Yes, I'll help! Stay!” My heart swelled. It had been so long since I'd felt really good about something I'd done. I was okay at acting, but this was a different kind of job I'd always wanted to try, and someone who knew what they were doing thought that I was on the right track. I was ready to float away. I wanted to tell Dean. . . .

I glanced at the door.

Caroline smirked. “Like I said before, he's across the hall.”

“How did you know—”

“Come on, you two are joined at the hip. The cops want us all in one place.” She rolled her eyes. “That makes us sound like a bunch of troublemakers.”

“We are.” I shot to my feet. “He’s right across the hall?” I stared at the door and couldn’t make myself move.

“Why are you standing here?” She shooed at me.

I swallowed hard. “What if he hates me? A lot of this does look like my fault.” I tugged at the collar of my ruined shirt.

She leaned back and crossed her arms, huffing. “I would hate you, if you were my boyfriend and I was rushed to the hospital after a whole hell of a lot of shit went down and you didn’t come see me.” She shook her head carefully, radiating disapproval.

Benny’s assistant popped his head into the room with a camera rolling, and my gut dropped to my toes.

“No,” I said to him, my voice a croaky mess. “Not today. I can’t take being filmed today.”

With a small frown, he lowered the camera.

“Come in here,” Caroline called to him. I didn’t stick around to see what job she had for him, but the little I heard sounded as if he was getting a promotion.

Dean’s door was cracked, and when I peeked in my stomach turned. The room was crammed full of people. Shirley, Shauna, Desi, Polly, and a few crew members were standing around his bed while he talked softly, probably doing the same thing with them that I had with Caroline. There was a shriek, and Polly covered her mouth with her hands. I half wanted to hear him because Dean was a good storyteller, but instead I leaned back against the wall and slunk down to sit on my ass.

I was so fucking tired.

Later, someone shook my shoulder, and I blinked my eyes open to stare up into Shirley’s face.

“Hey, there. I hear I have you to thank for my son coming home safe.” She smiled at me.

“I don’t know about that. He got shot. Er. . . grazed? If I’d used my head maybe none of this would’ve happened.” I scratched my jaw. I should pretend I was fine, but it was too much work right now.

She frowned and crouched in front of me, dragging her little pink purse against her side. “People don’t always make the best decisions, but they make the ones they think they can live with. And the way Dean tells it, you were trying to protect him.”

I held my breath. “He was trying to help me.”

She nodded, and I was shocked when she gave me a tight squeeze. “He’s in there missing you.”

*Shit, better move.* I was unsteady as I got to my feet, and I grabbed my head, but the wave of dizziness passed quickly.

“You all right, sweetie?” she asked, staring up into my face.

I shrugged. “Yeah. Thanks.”

She patted my arm as I walked over, then knocked on Dean’s door.

“Come in,” he called.

I pushed the door open and found Dean alone. The second he laid eyes on me he crossed his arms and a frown took over his pretty lips. I went to his side and tugged on his blankets, straightening them out. A pink hospital gown slipped off his right shoulder. I couldn’t help but think he was cute.

“I’m sorry you got shot.”

He huffed. “I need you right now.” He held out a hand to me.

After a few long seconds, I laced our fingers together. “I’m sorry I lied to you,” I said, feeling gutted. I wished I’d come clean at the beginning of us getting together. I had so many regrets.

“I don’t care about that right now,” he said, squeezing my hand, but I got the idea we would eventually have a long talk that would feel like having my fingernails and toenails ripped out, especially when he scowled. I hated that expression on his face.

Leaning down, I kissed the back of his hand. A smile tugged on his lips, so I did it again.

“How can you not care?” I mumbled. “How can you just let this go?”

His throat bobbed. “I love you.” He glared directly into my eyes. “I’ve never been so scared and alone as I was in a dark basement waiting for a psychopath to come and kill me. And I can only imagine how awful you felt because you were going through all that alone for so long.” He rubbed his prickly cheek against our joined hands. “You matter more to me than anything else.”

“Oh.” I flopped onto his bed beside him.

He burrowed into my arms.

How was I this fucking lucky? My chest squeezed and I couldn’t breathe for a second. “You’re not mad?” I whispered against his ear.

“Oh, I’m fucking furious that you kept this all to yourself.” He gave me a brittle smile but pressed a kiss to the corner of my lips. I turned and nudged our mouths firmly together. My heart soared as he let out a teeny sigh and melted against me.

“I love—”

“Don’t you dare say it now.” He nipped my bottom lip so hard it hurt.

Swallowing, I leaned back to stare into his gleaming brown eyes. “When can I say it?”

He shrugged. “You’ll figure it out. Now, tell me everything that happened with the police. Everyone else is worried about upsetting me with too much information, but you’re the person who is *never* supposed to lie to me.” He stared directly into my eyes, and my belly squirmed.

“You’re giving me a second chance?”

He nodded. “One. And you better not waste it.”

Smiling, I pressed a kiss to the tip of his nose. “I promise, I’m an open book for as long as you’ll have me.”

“Mm, then the rest of your life,” he said, glancing away as his cheeks went pink.

“That was cheesy, Edwin.”

He sighed and leaned his head on my shoulder. “I meant it, Azariah.” His nose wrinkled. “You smell like sweat and smoke.”

Snorting, I kissed the top of his head. “So do you.”

He grunted, and I held on tight.

“So, do I start groveling now or later?” I asked.

“Later,” he said around a yawn. “I’m tired right now.”

# EPILOGUE

## DEAN



I GLANCED TO MY LEFT AT INGRAM. WE WERE SITTING OUTSIDE on a bench—one of the few things rescued from Smithfield Manor—under a sprawling oak tree with our knees touching. It was supposed to be fall in Wyndinham Hollow, and thankfully the weather outside matched our wardrobe or I would be melting right about now. I ran my fingers along the thick red cloak around Ingram’s shoulders, and he glanced up from the script he was reading to smile, but then his gaze darted down to the page.

I held my breath. He’d been reading this off and on for days. The sunlight caught in his hazel eyes and the gold fleck in his left one glinted. My heart flipped.

Would I ever get over his looks?

Probably not because we’d been together for a few months, and every time I was close to him my heart pounded.

Across a small meadow from us Patrick and Kitty—she was new to the crew—were filming. Flora’s character had tragically died in the manor fire that the editing team was going to CGI into existence for the opening scene of season three.

A morbid part of me couldn’t wait to see what they did, since I actually knew how the place looked up in flames.

Behind Patrick and Kitty, the new manor we were filming at sat like a small gray-brick castle and it was the perfect backdrop. Caroline had all of us help search for a replacement while she was getting better, and we hadn’t been able to find a

place as sprawling as Smithfield Manor, so Edwin's family's diminished estate had become part of the script as well. I was shocked at how quickly the team had pivoted to keep everything going and alive. I was happy to be part of their work.

Ingram sucked in a deep breath and held it.

I bit the inside of my cheek.

A red oak leaf drifted down onto the script, and I picked it up before Ingram could brush it away, then used it to tickle his ear. He snorted and grinned at me.

“What do you think? Caroline loves it. She said she would help us make it happen. When we sell it, you can put the cash into savings and it can make up for everything you lost,” I said.

He turned his head just enough to stare at me, and I could see his mind was moving a mile a minute. I'd gotten to know Ingram a lot better, and while he often had a calm smile, his emotions lived in his eyes, so that was where I looked. He blinked a few times, then shot a glance down at the script. Anticipation drove me crazy as he rubbed a thumb down the crease between the pages.

“Well. . . it's close to what happened to us.” He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “Only the mob family name was changed, really. I think most people will read between the lines with it and realize it's autobiographical.”

I shrugged. “Yeah, but I did some research, and the Giordanos have already been in the news because someone tried to turn on them. It was a whole thing. How angry could they be at us, especially if we never mention them by name? It's our story. We have a right to it.” I wasn't sure why I wanted to do this so much, but a part of me hated lying.

In the end, Flora and Benny had both been able to make plea deals. They probably wouldn't serve more than a decade in prison each, despite their twenty-year sentences. Benny hadn't meant to kill TJ, and ketamine allergies are pretty rare.



Very few details had gone public, and the story of what had happened to Ingram and me was all so mysterious.

The fans were begging for it.

This script, no matter what it turned into, was one way to tell them. I stared at the title— *Fear Behind the Scenes*. I thought maybe I liked *Fan Service* better, but I would leave that up to whoever might buy the story. Caroline told me marketing departments always changed titles.

Ingram laid aside the script and turned toward me, sliding his arm along the back of the bench. “You’re right. It is our story. I’ll do whatever you want with this.” He gave me a killer smile. “I’ve been seeing that therapist Shauna found,” he mumbled and his cheeks flushed.

“That’s good.” I rested my hand on his knee and squeezed.

“I’m trying to be as honest as possible with everyone.” He glanced out at Lake Ontario, which was a beautiful grayish blue in the distance. He pursed his lips. “I’ve had a lot of years of keeping myself locked up inside.”

“But you think we should change more details in the script?”

He nodded. “Not everything is for the public. Some things are only ours.”

I slid over and snuggled against his side, and he hugged me. “That’s fine. We can do whatever we want with it because it is our story.”

He pressed a kiss to my temple, despite the makeup and everything else. Polly was going to yell at him if he smudged me. I hid a grin in his collar.

“I like the new location,” I said, fighting back a yawn. We’d been filming since early this morning. “It’s pretty.”

“Me too,” he said softly.

We drifted for a bit, and I sat up straighter as I saw the scene that Patrick was doing with Kitty winding down.

My heart picked up its pace and I bit the inside of my lip to fight back a smile. “How much do you like it?”

Ingram gave me a confused look, which wasn’t something he would’ve allowed me to see even a few weeks ago—his therapist must be doing a good job. “A lot.”

I grinned when I noticed Caroline had gotten Gage, formerly Benny’s assistant and now his replacement, to turn the camera around facing us. This was exactly what I’d planned with her earlier. Most of the crew had gathered, even the people who should be off doing other things, so she must’ve told them what was going on.

Ingram let out a long breath and hadn’t noticed that we’d become the center of attention.

“Uh, we’ve been together for a few months now, crammed into that small place with Mom,” I said.

Ingram smiled and it was brighter than I would’ve imagined. “We have. And it’s been really good.” He pressed a kiss to my cheek.

From the corner of my eye, I noticed the crew inching closer to us, hands over mouths to hold in giggles.

Ingram got a very serious expression on his face, and my stomach trembled. He looked so good today.

“You told me not to say the L-word until I figured myself out more,” he said, snagging my cloak between two fingers to rub the material. Now that he wasn’t hiding as much of himself from me, I’d noticed he had a lot of nervous tics, but I didn’t mind. I snagged his hand in mine and gave it a squeeze.

“I did say that.”

He let out a long breath. “Well, I’m trying to be honest about. . . everything. If I don’t say this, it would be one more thing I’m lying about.”

My chest was full of sunlight. “Go on.”

He leaned close and pressed his lips to my ear. “I love you, Dean.”

Laughing, I hugged him. “I know. I love you, too.”

Ingram sat back and pulled out a small black velvet box from the inner pocket of his cloak, and I noticed Caroline creeping closer. Her hair was short—she’d cut it all down so it could grow in at the same length—and her head was wreathed in a fiery halo of curls.

“What is that?” I asked.

“I love you, and I want you to know it’s serious and that it’s. . . real,” he mumbled, flipping open the lid on the box. Inside was a simple gold band with a diamond embedded in the middle. The gem didn’t stick out and it was very sleek and modern. Ingram had found something to his exacting tastes and wanted to put it on me. My heart fluttered. My vision went watery and I couldn’t stop it. “I want to make a home for you,” Ingram said quietly.

Caroline’s smile was nearly manic, and I realized she must’ve known this was coming. I started laughing as I fumbled a folded square of paper out of my pocket and handed it to Ingram. No wonder she’d looked so smug when I’d cornered her and asked her to film this earlier.

Ingram, still holding the ring, frowned down at the paper. He seemed worried as he unfolded the sheet, still holding the box and the beautiful ring in his hand. He stared at the information for a minute, then at me as his eyebrows marched upward.

I gestured at the manor. “I bought this place. For us. I figured after filming was over, we could remodel or do whatever we wanted to the inside. This way you never have to worry about where you belong. You never have to worry about being screwed and without even a roof over your head. You’ll always have—”

“A home,” he said, sounding choked. I wasn’t ready for Ingram to lunge, but his warm lips taking control of mine were perfect. I opened up for his tongue as he kissed me like he was trying to crawl inside my body to live there. While my eyes were closed, I felt the ring slip onto my finger.

He didn't have to ask for an answer, he just knew I wanted him, and that was perfect. We'd always been in sync, even when we had no idea what the other was thinking.

Caroline squealed and leaped forward to hug us. When she backed off, she grinned. "So, Azariah, are you going to marry Edwin?"

Laughing, I shook my head. "No, Ingram is marrying *me* and that's even better."

Ingram bopped me on the nose with the piece of paper detailing the sale of our home, then swooped in for another kiss. "I love you," he said against my mouth.

There was applause around us, and it made me happy because these were the people who cared about us and worked with us and had gone out to personally search for us when we were in trouble.

"Hey, I asked catering to bring us a cake," Caroline called to everyone, and there was a small cheer.

Ingram smirked and raised my hand over our heads, flashing the ring, and he looked beyond excited.

He really was happy.

This wasn't an act.

And I knew all that because these days he told me what was going on in his head. We really were a couple in every way. I kissed his cheek, and he leaned his forehead against mine as I wrapped him up in a hug, and he held me.

More leaves drifted down around us and the sound of our friends celebrating filled the air.

This was perfect and I wouldn't trade it for anything else in the world.

"Between the script, if someone takes it, and our engagement, we're not going to be able to go anywhere without a million questions," Ingram said, but he didn't sound hungry for the attention the way he used to. It was just a fact of our shared life.

“That’s good because I can’t wait to show off my fiancé.”

He leaned back to raise his eyebrows at me. “Where did my shy Edwin go?”

I shrugged, feeling lazy as the sun warmed my face. “I think keeping Azariah out of trouble made him grow up a little.” I stood and yanked on his hand, and he followed me across the lawn toward the manor where everyone else was headed. I started to run, and he kept up with me.

“What are we doing?” he asked with a laugh.

“Getting the first slice of cake!”

“Not a single drop of icing on those cloaks!” Marva yelled after us.

We only laughed. While I knew it wouldn’t, I hoped the show ran for a hundred years because, despite all the problems, this was the best moment of my entire life, and it was all thanks to Wyndinham Hollow.

And some mobsters.

And a few lies.

Ingram caught me looking at him and smiled.

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