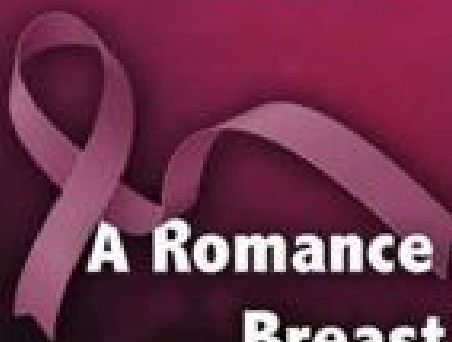


FIGHT

like a girl



**A Romance Anthology To Benefit
Breast Cancer Research**

FIGHT LIKE A GIRL

A ROMANCE CHARITY ANTHOLOGY TO
BENEFIT BREAST CANCER RESEARCH

INTRODUCTION



FIGHT LIKE A GIRL is a romance anthology to benefit Breast Cancer Research in the U.S. and Canada. 100% of the royalties will be split equally and donated to the U.S. Breast Cancer Research Foundation & the Canadian Cancer Society-CIBC Run for the Cure, both charitable organizations dedicated to funding breast cancer research.

Featuring stories from Anna B. Doe, April Moran, Brighton Walsh, C.M. Albert, Crystal St.Clair, Daisy St. James, Dakota Willink, Diana Hicks, E.M. Shue, Ellie Masters, Erin Cristofoli, Heather Slade, Jami Davenport, Kat Mizera, Lydia Michaels, M.L. Broome, Maddy Lowe, Michelle Windsor, Mimi Flood, Patricia D. Eddy, Pepper North, Remy Reigns, Samantha Cole, and Zoe York.

With a heartfelt foreword from author and breast cancer survivor, Cassidy London, and a special poem written by Gabrielle G.

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Contributors:

Foreword by Cassidy London | Fight Like a Girl, a poem by Gabrielle G | Kiss To Heal by Anna B. Doe | His Savage Obsession by April Moran | Happily Ever Afters by Brighton Walsh | The Colors of Her Love by C.M. Albert at Flower Work Press | Sweet On You by Crystal St.Clair | Playboy Rockstar by Daisy St. James | Etched In Stone by Dakota Willink | Heartless Vows by Diana Hicks | Frozen Heart by E.M. Shue | The Perfect Gift by Ellie Masters | Settling For More by Erin Cristofoli | The Butterfly Connection by Heather Slade | Ice Time by Jami Davenport | Slow Motion by Kat Mizera | Tennessee Honey by Lydia Michaels | Wrong Face, Right Heart by M.L. Broome | Storm Damage by Maddy Lowe | Love Growing Wild by Michelle Windsor | Before You by Mimi Flood | Falling for the Princess by Patricia D. Eddy | Flower Power by Pepper North | Don't Kiss and Tell by Remy Reigns | Moving Forward by Samantha Cole | The Breakfast Proposal by Zoe York

Cover Design by: Dakota Willink

Interior Images by: Dakota Willink

Formatting: Cheryl Maddox & Dakota Willink, Dragonfly Ink Publishing

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Thank You For Your Support

FOREWORD FROM CASSIDY LONDON



I am writing this foreword on behalf of myself and all my pink sisters. To all of us who have fought, who are still fighting, and especially to those who have lost their earthly battle. Your strength is forever woven into the fabric of the hearts of those who love you. You have inspired others with your grace and determination, you have shown bravery in the midst of terror, and your stories will never be forgotten.

Cassidy... You. Have. CANCER.

Nothing could have prepared me to hear those words. In an instant, my entire world shattered and only an eerie silence remained. My hands trembled ever so slightly as my body remained frozen still. A perfect smile glued itself to my face as I nodded in agreement with the doctor, as if we had just signed a business deal. Despite the calm and cool exterior I portrayed, a raging inferno had ignited inside me. I'm a planner, and this was not part of my plan. The heaviness of this news was soul crushing, but only for a moment. Thankfully, I don't break easily.

I am a master problem-solver. Hit me with anything and I can come up with multiple creative ways to solve the issue. This was no different. From the moment I

was diagnosed, I knew things had to change. It was a lightbulb moment that screamed TIME! Time is a precious commodity and must be used wisely. No more putting things off for next week or next month. All any of us have is the present. I immediately shifted my mindset away from the darkness of cancer and toward the light. I was going to use my time better, and I was going to make a difference. Now.

Even though the first few days were terrifying, I refused to drown in despair. A friend convinced me to see a private clinic for the testing and I'm so glad she did. On September 27th, 2022, at the age of 43, I had my first ever mammogram, an ultrasound, and a few biopsies. By the end of that appointment, it was confirmed: I had breast cancer.

Time was ticking...

I immediately made plans. Hiking with my daughter, lunch with friends I hadn't seen in ages. The list went on and on. I didn't even know the details of my cancer, yet I was out and about more in that first month than I had been in what felt like years. A driving force in my head kept whispering... Do it all and do it, NOW!

Once I had the details of my cancer, it all became even more official. New phrases and acronyms began making appearances in my life as well: Stage 2, ER+, PR+, HER2-. Armed with this information, a treatment plan dropped into place quickly. My cancer was hormone based, so the first thing my team did was put me into medical menopause. This meant a daily pill and an injection in the abdomen every three months. Fortunately, I already had 2 beautiful children and no desire to continue expanding our family. However, my heart hurt to think of all the younger women with the same diagnosis who hadn't yet had children. I can only imagine how much harder their decisions and additional treatments would be.

Medical menopause is no joke. It combines all the symptoms of typical menopause but is highly

accelerated and much more intense. Added to that was an oral chemo pill they gave me to take daily. This fun little drug came with horrible digestive issues and many other side effects that kept me home most days.

Time was ticking...

I was already focused on living in the present but now, a few months into my diagnosis and treatment, it was time to make a difference. If my medical team was focused on healing me, then I could be focused on the cause. That was when I created this charity anthology.

I'm not a soldier, but this past year I went to war. As this anthology took shape, my health and my treatments went from bad to worse.

Time was ticking...

After seven months of medication, it was surgery time. I opted for a double mastectomy because, although my left side was healthy, I didn't want to worry about the cancer coming back again on the opposite side. It just felt safer to remove it all. They booked my double mastectomy for April 24th, 2023, with the plan to have immediate reconstruction afterwards.

At first, reconstruction seemed to go well... until it didn't. Six weeks after surgery, I was admitted to the ER with sepsis. My body had rejected the temporary implants, and I was hanging on to life by a thread. The emergency surgery team took the implants out and I had a few weeks of recovery. I was on a lot of medication and experienced lengthy hospital stays that really did a number on my mental health.

Finally, they felt it was time to try again. Surgery number three was booked. Unfortunately, I woke up from that surgery with only one reconstructed breast. There was still too much infection inside me to allow the surgeon to put both implants back in. It was becoming clear to me that my body was not going to accept these foreign objects and some harsh decisions were going to have to be made. The infectious disease

doctors were very helpful and recommended removing the implants completely to solve the ongoing infections.

Armed with this information, a fourth surgery was scheduled. I made the tough decision to go flat—to no longer reconstruct—and start over with a brand-new body that was foreign to me.

As hard as it was mentally to accept this new flat chest, I was confident it was the right decision for me. I needed to move on, to live and to be healthy. Implants would never give me that. Breast Implant Illness is a real thing and I truly believe it would only have gotten worse for me if I had continued to try and reconstruct.

Even though I was at peace with my decision, it came with a lot of problems. After having four surgeries in eight weeks and so much infection, my body was wracked with scar tissue and I had a frozen shoulder. That meant six weeks of intense physiotherapy to prepare for radiation.

At the end of July, my range of motion was only 90 degrees with my right arm. I needed to get to 180 degrees to hold the proper position for radiation. I worked so hard, and my physio was amazing. She treated me three, sometimes four, times a week. I was making significant improvements and was excited to start.

Time was still ticking...

My recovery from surgery and prep for radiation gave me a few weeks at home. As this anthology was slowly wrapping up, I focused on staying in the present. I savoured every moment with my family, had friends come to visit, went out as much as I could, and took time to be grateful for my healing. I worked hard with my physio several times a week and began to feel stronger. Friends dropped off food, I spent quality time with my husband and kids, I soaked up the summer sun, and let nature heal my soul. This time was

peaceful and allowed me to rest and be ready for my next battle.

August 24th was the first day of radiation treatment. I went into it confidently and came out a crying mess. I couldn't do it. I couldn't hold my arm above my head for the amount of time needed. It was just too painful. After so much disappointment and difficulty with surgery, I just needed something to go right. That wasn't my day. So I brushed myself off and marched back to physio, even more determined than the first time.

We tried radiation again on September 6th, and finally, it worked! I went into it knowing I'd worked my hardest, but I wasn't attached to the outcome. I couldn't bear to feel that disappointment again. And fortunately, I didn't have to. It was a success, and I was finally on the last step of this journey.

Things really do come full circle. My last day of radiation was September 26th. The following day was the one-year anniversary of my diagnosis. This past year has been both beautiful and brutal. Although my head is still spinning, there's one thing I know for sure. I wouldn't have made it through this past year if not for all who came before me. I am so grateful to the doctors, researchers, fundraisers, and patients. All their hard work and dedication have made my journey a success. In turn, I hope that my experience and what I have done with it will help someone else in the future. Because when it comes down to it, we are all connected, and we are here to love and help one another.

Tomorrow is not promised to anyone.

Time is ticking...

Cancer has taught me to slow down and enjoy the present moment. To revel in the micro moments of life. Too often we are rushing to get to the next big thing and by doing so, we are missing what is happening

right in front of us. This is your reminder to make plans for that vacation, have lunch with the friend you never see, call your grandmother and send her flowers, walk your dog in the forest. Read this book and thousands of others. Dream, plan, strategize, and then go out and do it all!

I'm so grateful to the 24 best-selling and award-winning authors who came on board with this project and gave their time and creativity to help raise funds. Romance authors are experts at crafting storylines that can make you laugh, cry, rage, rejoice, and everything in between. Within the pages of this book, you will find stories of women who are fighting their own battles. Sometimes it's cancer, other times it's bad relationships, past trauma, current trauma, and so much more. But what they all have in common is their drive to survive and thrive. These heroines have strength, intelligence, and wits. They do not need a knight in shining armour to save them because they are strong enough to save themselves. However, when love does find them, it is the truest form of love. A love so deep that it comes to them not in spite of their challenges, but because of the fighting spirit and courage they exude. These are heroes who know how to support their women, fight alongside them, and are always there to catch them when they fall.

The women of romance novels mimic the women that we all are. We are strong, we are fighters, we are lovers, we are mothers, sisters, daughters, and friends. We love hard, play hard, and work hard. We can do hard things and we can do them well. The stories in this anthology will remind you of the powerhouses that live inside us all.

Thank you for buying this book and contributing to the research. The current statistics show that 1 in 8 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer. That means that for each of us, it will hit our personal circle of loved ones and that is a terrifying thought. May this anthology and all other breast cancer fundraisers

surpass their fundraising goals so we can save more
lives today, tomorrow, and in all the years to come.

— *Cassidy London*

Best-Selling Romance Author & Cancer Warrior

www.cassidylondon.com

Fight Like A Girl

A poem for Cassidy.



Words of all hope are bigger than illusion,
And give to the mind the power of embracing aspirations...

A woman's life well lived is not one necessary with two
breasts,

Healthy has no price when cancer is confessed.

Shame has no place is the story of one,

When eight surround her and gather everyone.

Fighting is the first step in all recovery,

Like a girl, make it stronger than any mummery!

And when the pink ribbon is carried with all pride,

Miracles become true and of joy tears are cried.

And for those who lay down under wildflowers uncurled,

We carry our chin up and built a new world.

Hope of a tomorrow being a future cancer free,

Is the mantra we believe as a they, he, or she!

So when whispers of fighting like a girl make us strong,

We join all together and start a revolution!

Gabrielle G.



KISS TO HEAL

by Anna B. Doe

New Adult Romance

Brother's Best Friend College Sports Romance

After the worst year of their lives, Jade and Prescott are still healing and trying to find their way back to each other. They've spent the last few months dating and getting to know one another, but with the summer coming to an end, and Jade's birthday just around the corner, Prescott decides it's time for a getaway, and maybe a surprise or two.

Kiss To Heal is a bonus epilogue for Jade and Prescott. You have to read their duet *Kiss To Shatter (Shattered & Salvaged #1)* and *Kiss To Salvage (Shattered & Salvaged #2)* first in order to enjoy this story.

Duet contains mature and dark themes. For the full list of trigger warnings, please check <http://annabdoe.com/trigger-warnings>.

CHAPTER 1

Jade

“Are you my doctor McDreamy?” I ask, tilting my head back so I can see Prescott’s face through the darkness of the room.

One of his brows quirks upward. “You want me to be?”

“Only if you’ll be my version of McDreamy.”

“I’ll give you something to dream about,” he whispers as he moves closer, his mouth brushing against mine softly. Once. Twice.

I let out a soft sigh, loving the feel of his lips on mine.

My hand sneaks to the back of his neck, fingers slipping into his short hair as I pull him closer to me, deepening the kiss.

Prescott lets out a groan as my nails scratch his nape, his tongue tracing the outline of my lower lip, demanding entrance. I part my lips, welcoming his tongue into my mouth. Hot and wet, it tangles with mine.

Moaning softly, I slide my leg over Prescott’s, straddling his lap. The first point of contact kicks all the air out of my lungs. Because damn, he’s hard. So damn hard. My hips roll, creating a delicious friction that has us both groaning as the pleasure spreads through my body.

I missed this.

I missed him.

The last few weeks have been a teasing game. One that we’ve agreed on, but in times like this, I wish we hadn’t. In times like this, I wished I could rip his clothes from his body and feel all that glorious naked skin pressed against mine, welcoming the burn.

His hands grab my hips, pulling me closer, as his tongue dives deeper into my mouth and twines with mine teasingly.

Sucking and swirling.

My hands grip his shoulders as I try to find some sort of relief.

“Prescott...” Breaking the kiss, I let out a loud sigh and press my forehead against his shoulder, my breathing hard.

“Yes, baby?” he whispers, his mouth finding the sensitive skin of my neck and placing a kiss just over my pulse, making my heart beat even faster.

“I...”

But I don't get to finish because a male voice interrupts us, making me go completely still on Prescott's lap.

“You're acting like a pair of horny teenagers; you do realize that?” Joshua asks, not even trying to hide his smirk.

“Mind your own fucking business, Rookie.” Prescott grabs the pillow from the couch and tosses it at his temporary roommate, but of course, since he's a freaking football player, Joshua catches it with ease. Not surprising, considering the guy's been working out non-stop since the football season ended and has built quite some muscles in the last few months. “What are you even doing here? Weren't you moving out?”

“Not just yet.”

Prescott tilts his head back and lets out a groan. “Of course not, because that's just my fucking luck.”

“As if. Admit it. You're going to miss me once I'm gone.”

“You can only hope. My dick will be relieved to know you won't get in the way.”

It's a lie, though. Apart from some kissing and touching, nothing has happened between Prescott and me.

After getting back together at the gallery exhibition, we've decided we wanted to take things slow and actually date this time around. It was what we both needed mentally and emotionally, at least. On the other hand, my body has been cursing me for weeks now.

I wanted Prescott.

Badly.

I wanted to feel his skin pressing against mine. I wanted to touch him and let him touch me. But a part of me was also worried. It was silly, really. It's not like we didn't have sex since my surgery. We did. I don't know why it felt like this time was going to be different, but it did.

Joshua smirks knowingly. "I'm surprised your dick hasn't fallen off by now."

Another pillow flies in his direction. "Fuck off, Rookie."

"I'm leaving, I'm leaving," he laughs, walking toward the door. "I don't need to be traumatized anymore by you two. I swear I can't wait to move into my own place."

Joshua needed a place to stay once the semester ended since his new lease didn't start until fall, and considering Spencer, Prescott's previous roommate, had just moved out after he was drafted to play in the NHL, Prescott had a room available and let Joshua stay here for the summer.

"That makes the two of us," Prescott mutters, but Josh is already gone.

Laughing, I lean my forehead against Prescott's shoulder. His body is also shaking with suppressed laughter as his hands tighten around my waist. Each little tremor makes me rub against his hardness and my stomach clenches in anticipation.

Biting into my lower lip to stop a moan from coming out, I lift my head only to find Prescott watching me; his pupils dilated, cheeks flushed.

Damn, that man.

His eyes fall to my mouth as I let my lip pop out, a soft groan coming from the back of his neck.

"I should get going."

"I'll walk you home."

I roll my eyes. "It's just the building next door."

"I don't care." He gets up with me in his arms before he slowly lets me slide to my feet, every inch of my body

brushing against every hard inch of him. “I’ll walk you home. You have a problem with that, Doll?”

“No problem. It just feels pointless. You could watch me get inside from your window.”

His fingers lace through mine. “But then I wouldn’t get to hold your hand and kiss you good night at your door, now would I?”

Prescott quirks his brow at me in a silent challenge, and damn, I hate it when he’s right. And sweet.

If anybody described Prescott Wentworth as sweet to me only a year ago, I would have told them they’re deaf and blind because there wasn’t a sweet bone in that man’s body, but he’s been showing me just how wrong I’ve been for the past few months, and each little thing made me only fall more and more for him.

Some days I wondered if there was a limit to how much one can love another person. If there was, I have yet to find the bottom of that well when it comes to loving Prescott because I loved him more with each day. It was terrifying and, some days, even overwhelming, but I wouldn’t change it for the world.

Lifting to the tips of my toes, I wrap my arms around Prescott’s neck and press my mouth against his in a soft kiss. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For being you,” I say simply.

Prescott just smiles, his hand finding mine, fingers intertwined as he pulls me into his side. I lean my head against his chest.

Comfortable silence settles over us as we make our way to my building and climb to my floor.

I start to pull my key out of my pocket, but Prescott tugs me to him.

“I’m not ready to let you go just yet.”

His rough voice sends chills down my spine. Prescott lifts his hand, cupping my cheek before his mouth finds mine once again.

My chest swells as he kisses me gently. I love this side of him. The protective, tender side. I love the fact that he's reluctant to let go as much as I am.

He turns us around, pressing me against the wall as his hand goes to my nape, the rough tips of his fingers playing with my short hair.

I'm not sure how long we stay like that, kissing under the dim light of my hallway before he finally pulls back, leaving me breathless and wanting.

"So?" Prescott skims the back of his hand over my cheek, and I swear I can feel tingles all the way down to my toes. "What are your plans for your birthday?"

"My birthday?"

"Yes, your birthday. It's next weekend, right?"

"I..." I go over the calendar in my head, counting the days. "Yeah, I guess so."

God, where did the time go?

It feels like only yesterday we were finishing last semester, and I watched my brother and boyfriend walk across the podium as they graduated college.

"So, do you have any plans?" Prescott repeats expectantly.

"Not really," I admit.

Plans have been the last thing on my mind this past year. Ever since I found a lump on my breast, I knew I'd been living on borrowed time. I didn't want to make plans that I didn't know if I'd be able to keep. In the last few months, ever since I was officially cancer free, I've been working on getting my life back, but it's been a slow process.

"Good." The corner of Prescott's mouth lifts in a soft smile that has my brows raising.

"Good?"

“Yes, good.” He leans in, his mouth closing over mine.
“Because I have plans for us.”

CHAPTER 2

Prescott

“Did you ask her?” Joshua asks as he lifts a set of weights. This is his third set, but the guy’s barely winded.

“Did I ask her what?” I repeat, keeping my focus on the metal bar. Not that it would be a big shame if it fell on him and smashed his face.

“Oh please, you know what I mean,” he huffs.

“No idea, dude.”

Joshua laughs. “You’re such a wuss, Wentworth. I can’t believe I’ve heard stories about you being some big boss on campus. Your girlfriend has you wrapped around her little finger.”

“I don’t see what’s the problem with that.”

“See? A wuss. Maybe it’s all that suppressed testosterone that’s messing with your head. When was the last time you got laid?”

“Maybe I would get laid if you stopped interrupting me,” I lie easily. “When are you moving out again?”

Joshua places the bar back in place and sits upright. Grabbing the towel, he wipes the sweat off his face before turning to face me. “When you ask your girlfriend to move in with you.”

“Sullivan,” I mutter, irritated by this conversation.

Turning around, I grab a pair of dumbbells and get on the mat, hoping he’ll get the hint, but no such luck.

“What?” Joshua asks, joining me. “I just don’t get you two. You’ve been going out for the last year; what’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that, if you want to be technical about it, we’ve only been dating for the last three months. Before that, we were a ticking time bomb. Between hiding, dealing with my addiction, and Jade fighting cancer, we didn’t really have a normal relationship.”

He winces. “Well, when you put it like that...”

“Exactly. When we got back together, we agreed we’ll be taking things slow...”

“Is that why you guys haven’t done the deed yet?”

“This isn’t about sex!” I let out a frustrated groan. “What part of taking things slow, don’t you understand?”

I didn’t mind not having sex. Did I miss it? Sure. But I actually enjoyed just spending time with Jade and getting to know her. Kiss her. Touch her. Letting the tension build between us. Was it frustrating? Sure, but I knew what my end game was, and that was a future with Jade.

“This thing between us is so much more than physical. I love that woman. She is...” I shake my head, trying to put all these feelings into words. “Everything.”

For her, I didn’t mind waiting.

Hell, if she needed it, I would wait for her forever.

That familiar ache builds in my chest, making it hard to breathe.

“Okay, okay.” Sullivan lifts his hands in defense. “Forget I asked. But...”

“Can we not?”

“You should ask her seriously. Classes are just around the corner.”

“I know that.”

And I have a plan. Now it was all about executing it.

“...**A** party, what do you think?”

I slide into the seat next to Jade just to hear the last bit of what her best friend Grace said.

“What kind of party?” I ask, pressing my mouth against the top of Jade’s head, her short strands tickling me. “Hey, Doll.”

“Hi.” She looks up, a smile spreading over her lips as she pulls me down for a kiss. “Your hair is wet.”

“Gym.”

She takes me in, her eyes stopping on my bicep. I watch as she grazes her teeth over her lip, and I swear I can feel my dick twitch in interest.

Down, boy.

So much for sweating this need for her out of my body.

“I can see that.”

“Gosh, you two should just get on with it,” Grace groans.

“Not you too.”

Jade glances between the two of us. “Too? Who else?”

“You don’t wanna know.” I shake my head and decide to change the subject. “So, who’s having a party?”

“We are. For Jade’s birthday,” Grace claps her hands excitedly.

I quirk my brow. “You haven’t told her?”

Grace’s eyes narrow. “Told me what?”

“I was just about to when you came,” Jade sighs, turning her attention to her friend. “We won’t be here.”

“Why?” Grace looks between the two of us, a look of devastation on her face. You’d think she just saw me kick a puppy or something. “Where will you be?”

“I’m taking her on a trip.” I grab Jade’s cup, taking a sip of her coffee. A mistake because that woman loves to add too much sugar to it.

“A trip?” Grace frowns. “A trip where?”

Jade tilts her head to the side. “I’d love to know too.”

“It’s a surprise.”

Jade pouts, and my eyes fix instantly on her full lips. “You know I hate surprises.”

“You liked my last surprise, didn’t you?”

Forcing myself to lift my gaze, I quirk my brow at her. A soft flush spreads over her cheeks, and a feeling of satisfaction swells in my chest. God, I loved to see her like this. Carefree, young, shy. There were too many times when her gaze was dark, the demons dancing in her blue irises. Not lately, at least not as much as before, and I was enjoying every second of it.

“I did, but...”

I press my finger against her lips, shushing her. “But nothing. Pack summer clothes. And something nice.”

“Something nice?”

“Yeah, something nice. Like a dress or something.”

Jade crosses her arms over her chest. “Why?”

Seriously, I can’t with this woman. You’d think I just told her that she has to put on a clown costume or something equally ridiculous.

“Because I,” I lean closer, brushing my mouth against the tip of her nose, “have some special plans for us, Doll.”

CHAPTER 3

Jade

“Beach?” A knot forms in my throat, my fingers curling around the door handle as I lean through the window. The soft breeze carrying the scent of salt is biting at my cheeks. “You’re taking me to the beach?”

“Yeah, we’re going to the beach.”

I look over my shoulder at a smiling Prescott. He’s sitting relaxed in the driver’s seat, one hand on the steering wheel, the other placed on my thigh, fingers gently laced through mine.

“But I didn’t pack a swimsuit,” I point out.

Since he’s been pretty vague about the destination of this trip, I wasn’t sure what to expect, but this wasn’t it. I return my attention to the window and the vast blueness of the ocean. And I wasn’t sure I was ready for it.

I haven’t been to the beach in forever. Since Hawaii. Being surrounded by my friends and helping my brother plan his wedding kept my mind occupied, but it didn’t take away the ache.

The beach was my mom’s favorite place, and going there without her felt wrong; the ache of losing her was bigger somehow. And I couldn’t deal with that. Losing her was too fresh, the wound too raw.

“I stole it from your wardrobe when I was at your place the last time.”

I turn to him, my mouth falling open at the admission. “You sneaky, little...” I reach for him with my other hand, trying to shove him away, which only makes him laugh.

“Hey now, you don’t want me to run us off the road, do you?”

Settling back in my seat, I narrow my eyes on him. “It would be a shame. This car is really nice.”

Prescott’s hand slides over the wheel affectionately. The way this man loves his car is unlike anything I’ve ever seen. “It is, and it holds some very special memories.”

He looks at me, the fire blazing in those dark irises as his eyes bore into mine. The tension builds between us as the

memories of our time in this car come back to the surface. The feel of his hands roaming my body, his hot breath teasing my skin, the coolness of the metal hood touching my burning skin. The heat pools in my belly, and I can feel the flush rising into my cheeks.

“It does, doesn’t it?”

He lets go of my hand, his fingers gripping my thigh and rubbing at the soft skin. “Very nice memories.”

The corner of my mouth lifts, but I shake my head. “Eyes on the road, Romeo. I’d like to stay alive.”

Prescott laughs but does as I asked as we come to a small coastal town, more little houses coming into view. His hand shifts between the gearshift and my thigh; each time his fingers brush against my limbs, it’s like a little jolt of electricity shoots under my skin. It’s the most enticing torture. Just like these past couple of months have been. We kiss, we touch, we tease, driving each other mad with want but never crossing the line.

A part of me enjoys the waiting, the painfully slow buildup that grows more intense with each touch and kiss, but there is this other part of me, an impatient, needy thing, and she wants to scream in protest and stop this nonsense already and just jump his bones.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Prescott’s low grumble snaps me out of my thoughts.

“Like what?”

His fingers tighten around the steering wheel, the veins on his forearm bulging with the motion. “You know what.”

I squeeze my legs together. Not that it helps because the only thing it does is press his fingers more into my skin, making the wetness pool between my thighs.

“Fine,” I turn to look out the window. “I’m not going to look at you at all. Happy?”

Prescott grumbles something incoherently, and for a while, we drive in companionable silence until he finally pulls in

front of a small cottage.

With one last squeeze, he removes his hand from me, and I feel the loss of him almost instantly. Prescott kills the engine, and we get out of the car, grabbing our things. Well, *he* grabs our things.

“You know I can carry my own bag?” I ask as we climb the stairs to the front door.

“I’ve got the bags, just grab my phone and check the code for the place,” Prescott says.

Rolling my eyes, I pull his phone out of his pocket and find the code, enter it, and push open the door.

The cottage is so small it’s basically one big, open space. There is a little table with flowers by the entrance. On the right, there is a loveseat with a tv hanging on the wall, and behind it, a queen-size bed. On the other side, there is a bathroom, and next to it, a small kitchen separated by the counter, which dubs as an eating space. A glass door on the opposite side of the room leads out to the beach, and big windows let in so much natural light, making the cream color of the walls seem warmer.

I move further into the space, noticing more small details, the big antique full-length mirror standing in the corner, the photos of the sunset and ocean hanging on the wall, and little different colored vases standing on the stand under the tv.

Prescott’s hand sneaks around my waist, pulling me into his chest. A shiver runs through me as his warmth envelopes me, my eyes falling shut for a split second as I cherish the moment.

“You like?”

“It’s beautiful,” I tell him honestly. “Where did you find it?”

“I heard some people in my class mention it, so I looked it up. They actually had a cancellation, which seemed like a sign.” His lips press against the side of my neck. “Wanna go to the beach?”

Hell, no. What I want is to take your fucking clothes off and finally have my way with you. My reaction is instant, and I have to bite back a groan in protest.

As if he can read my mind, Prescott's eyes turn molten. We just stare at one another, and I can feel the ache and need between us growing, almost palpable, like a living, breathing thing.

Chill, Jade, I chastise myself. Jumping him was what got you in this mess the first time. Slow. You guys agreed to take it slow. So what if that agreement is making you sexually frustrated and makes you wanna jump your boyfriend's bones?

"Sure. Let's go to the beach."

Taking a step back, I almost bump into a chair. Prescott chuckles softly. The asshole knows exactly what he's doing to me and finds it entertaining. With a glare, I push him out of my way and go for my suitcase. Rummaging through it, I find my swimsuit, along with a beach dress I packed.

"I'm off to change."

Not waiting for his answer, I slip into the bathroom and close the door behind me, leaning against it for a split second.

You will not jump your boyfriend. You will not jump your boyfriend.

I chant these words like a mantra as I push from the door and place my clothes on the bathroom counter before starting to work the buttons of my shirt, letting it slip off my shoulders.

My gaze falls on my reflection in the mirror. Although it's been months since my surgery, that first glance at my body always surprises me, even now, months later. The wound has healed, but the twin lines crossing over where my breasts used to be are still visible. They're an angry red, standing out against the rest of my pale skin like beacon lights. My doctor recommended some essential oils to help keep the skin elastic, and I did a few weeks of physical therapy to help regain the strength in my arms after the surgery.

Then there was the big question.

To do or not to do the reconstructive surgery.

My doctor brought it up once again during our recent follow-up appointment. She said I'd be a good candidate for one in a few months, once I've been six months post-chemo, and she wanted me to think about it.

But as much as I still wasn't comfortable in this body, I wasn't sure I was ready for the reconstruction either. It meant going to the hospital once again. Surgery. Weeks of recovery. And even then, it won't be the same.

My breasts will never be the same again.

That part of me is gone, and I'll never get it back.

I wasn't sure if I even wanted it back.

Shaking my head to push the dark thoughts out of my head, I grab the top from the counter. Just recently I ordered a new bathing suit. Instead of regular cups for the chest area, this one was more like a sports bra. The dark pink material slides over my head easily, covering most of my scars. Then I quickly change my bottoms, sliding a see-through beach dress over my head.

"I was just about to check in on you." Prescott turns around the moment I open the door, and my mouth goes dry at the sight of him. He also changed into his swim trunks sans tee; his sculpted chest was left out in the open for me to ogle.

His skin is tanned from all the hours spent outside in the sun while he was helping Joshua with his summer training, every muscle on his chest defined to perfection.

Damn, I missed seeing him like this.

"Jade?"

My head snaps up to find an amused expression on his face. His lips curl in a half smile.

He quirks a brow at me. "See something you like?"

"You're missing a shirt."

"We're on the beach. Nobody cares about a shirt."

Oh, how wrong he is.

Not that I can say that out loud. He's smug enough as it is all on his own.

"C'mon, let's get going."

We grab our towels and bags before leaving through the back and locking the door. I tilt my head back, letting the sun warm my skin.

If there was one thing that I've gotten really good at in these past few months, it was this. Enjoying the small things and just... breathing.

Something falls on top of my head, and when I open my eyes, I find Prescott watching me, a shadow falling over my face.

"You know I hate caps," I mutter unhappily. "I look hideous in them."

It didn't help that I was basically forced to wear them for the past few months after my hair fell out due to the chemo, and I was constantly cold. In the past few weeks, just enough of my hair grew back to cover my head. It wasn't much, not even close to what I used to have a year ago, but it was a start.

"You don't look hideous. And tough luck. I'm not letting you get burned."

Grumbling, I let him take my hand in his as we make our way down the wooden steps leading to the beach. The soft breeze is blowing the closer we get to the beach, the waves from the ocean slowly rolling toward the coast.

A wave of nostalgia hits me as I watch the horizon, a knot forming in my throat as the memories from the past come rushing back.

The cold bite of the March wind.

My mom's frail body was wrapped up in a blanket.

The smile on her face as she was in her favorite place for the final time.

Prescott cups my face, his thumb sliding over my cheekbone. “Hey, are you okay?”

“I’m fi—” I start, but he gives me a stern look that makes me sigh. “It’s a lot. The beach was my mom’s favorite place.”

Understanding flashes on his face, and I see regret in his eyes. “Jade, I’m...”

I press my finger against his lips, stopping him from finishing. “It’s not your fault. You didn’t know.” I glance toward the ocean once again, the corner of my mouth lifting before I shift my attention back to him. “She loved it, and there are so many happy memories we have that were on the beach, but after she died, it was just... hard. So, we avoided it. Hawaii was actually the first and only time we went to the beach after her death.”

“If you’d rather not be here...”

I shake my head. “I want to be here. I want to remember the good times. I know that the ache of missing her will never go away, and I don’t want it to, but... I’m ready. I’m ready to build new memories. With you.”

“I want that too.”

He leans down, placing a sweet kiss on my lips. I rise on my tiptoes, my arm slipping around his neck as I nip at his lip, a low moan coming from his chest. His arm slides to the small of my back, his fingers sprawling as he pulls me to him, his hard length pressing into my belly and making me light-headed.

“You’re going to traumatize people, Doctor Wentworth,” I whisper teasingly, breaking the kiss.

“Why do you think I chose this place?”

Pulling back, I look at the beach, noticing it’s mostly quiet. There is a family out in the distance on one side and a few people on the other, both far enough to give us privacy.

The corner of my mouth twitches upward as I look at him. “What kind of plans did you have to bring us here?”

Prescott wiggles his brows playfully. “That’s for me to know and you to find out.”

I poke him playfully in the chest. “And you think you’re the one calling all the shots here, mister?”

Before he can answer, I drop my things and run past him. The sand scratches at my feet as I dash for the ocean, laughing.

Prescott yells something behind me, but I don’t bother looking over my shoulder, wanting to use these few extra seconds I’ve managed to put between us after I surprised him.

I’ve just reached the ocean when Prescott’s arms wrap around my middle, pulling me into his warm chest.

“Gotcha,” he pants. His lips brush against my earlobe as we sway, the waves rushing toward us, the cool water biting at my flesh and making goosebumps appear on my skin. “What are you going to do now, Doll?”

I place my hands over his, looking over my shoulder at him. A few odd gold speckles shine in his brown eyes as he stares at me, a wide smile spreading over his mouth. My heart does a somersault inside my chest, my stomach squeezing with all the love I have for this man that only seems to grow with each day we’re together.

“Maybe I just wanted you to chase after me.”

His hand cups my cheek, his thumb rubbing over my lower lip. “I’ll chase after you to the ends of the earth. You realize that?”

I did know that.

Even in the darkest of times, I never doubted Prescott’s feelings for me. Our love was never in question; everything around us was. But not any longer.

“I’d chase after you to the ends of the earth, too,” I whisper.

A promise.

Turning in Prescott's arms, I slide my palms over his chest and around his neck, pressing my lips against his. He kisses me hard, his hands running down my back all the way to my ass. He squeezes it tightly, pulling me flush against him as his tongue slides into my mouth as we move further into the ocean.

"Fuck," Prescott hisses, breaking the kiss as a bigger wave crashes into us.

A shudder runs through my body at the sudden cold, but I can't help but laugh, too, as I wrap my legs around Prescott's middle, holding onto him like a human buoy.

"You're cold," he mutters, his palms rubbing against my arms.

"I'm fine." I wrap myself tighter around him, his slick skin sliding against mine. "You warm me just fine."

I run my hands through his wet hair, pushing it away from his face. "I like this. Kind of reminds me of Hawaii."

Prescott presses his mouth against the side of my neck. "It was warmer there."

"True. We also had less clothes on."

He pulls back, his gaze darker as he glares at me. "You always liked to tempt me."

"I did. There is just something fun in watching you squirm."

I suck in a sharp breath as his hand slides to the small of my back and pulls me closer, the length of his thick cock pressing into me just right and making my clit throb with need.

"I'm not the only one squirming right now, am I?"

My fingers dig into his shoulders as I try to move my hips, but he's holding me so firmly I can't move a muscle which only makes Prescott chuckle louder.

"If I have to suffer, so do you."

I let out a groan. "Who was the idiot who came up with this idea?"

Prescott gives me a pointed look. “You were.”

“You didn’t have to agree with it.” I jab him. “I’m calling it quits. I’m done waiting.”

I grab his head, ready to kiss him again, when there is a loud splash. Looking up, I see a group of teenagers who had come to the beach when we weren’t paying attention and are currently playing just a few short feet away from us.

“*Dammit,*” I mutter, pressing my forehead against Prescott’s shoulder, only to feel him shaking. “Why are you laughing? This isn’t funny.”

“It’s a little bit funny,” Prescott counters.

“This doesn’t feel the least bit funny to me,” I say, rubbing myself against his hard length. “Does this feel funny to you?”

The heat burns in his gaze as the smile slips from his lips. “Nope, but I’ve been in pain for so long. What’s one more afternoon?” he says, his gaze telling me exactly what he has planned for me.

“One more afternoon, huh?”

“One more afternoon,” he repeats. “And then you’re mine, Jade. Mine.”

CHAPTER 4

Prescott

“**I**s this okay?”

Looking up from my phone, I find Jade standing at the doorway of the bathroom. She entered there the moment we got back from the beach, and I told her we had plans—actual plans, not just me ravishing her body like I would like to.

But I meant what I said earlier. We’ve waited so long as it is. What are a few more hours? Hell, if it were her, I would

have waited for as long as she needed. That's how much I love her.

My eyes scan her body from head to toe and back. She put on makeup and tied a scarf over her head. It's not covering it like it did when she was still bald, but it's twined in some kind of band that's tied neatly at the back of her neck. With it, she paired a knee-length flower dress with thin straps that held it to her shoulders, and some kind of wavy material was going over her chest. Something I've noticed her doing more and more lately, and I knew it had to do with the weird looks she's been getting from people that were making her feel self-conscious. It didn't matter that I told her she looked beautiful and there was nothing to hide.

I knew it was going to take some time for her to come to terms with what had happened. It'll take some time for her to heal. And that was okay. I didn't have anything but time and patience for this woman.

Closing the distance between us, I extend my hand. Her fingers slip through mine, goosebumps rising on my skin from her icy flesh. I rub her hand, hoping to help her warm up a little as I pull her to me, my mouth pressing against her forehead. "You look perfect. Ready for our date?"

"If we really have to."

I let out a small chuckle. "Patience."

"I've never been a patient woman. Especially not when it comes to you."

Her words make my chest squeeze, and the warmth spreads through my belly. For a kid that's never been wanted by his parents, and then losing the only person who did love me, this was like a balm to my soul.

I pull open the door to my Mustang, my gaze meets hers, and I can see the understanding and love flash in her eyes.

"I promise I'll make it worth your while."

"Promises, promises," Jade sing-songs as she walks past me, her body brushing against mine as she slides into the passenger's seat.

My whole body goes tense, a jolt of electricity running down my spine from the touch.

“You should know by now I keep my word, Doll.”

Before she can answer, I close the door and walk around the car. I try to rearrange myself as inconspicuous as possible before I slide into my seat, but Jade gives me a knowing look.

Shaking my head, I start the car and pull out of the driveway.

The atmosphere is quiet as we drive into the town, soft music playing in the background. Every now and then, I glance toward the woman sitting next to me. The sunset illuminates her face as she gazes out of the window. After our afternoon spent at the beach, she seems calmer somehow, more at ease.

It doesn't take us long to get to our destination. I help Jade out of the car and into the building, but instead of going for the traditional seating inside the restaurant, the hostess leads us to the back and through the open door.

“What is this?” Jade asks as the hostess shows us our spot. With a nod of thanks, I wrap my arms around Jade's middle, resting my head against her shoulder as we look at the area.

“Our date. You like?”

When I looked up the restaurants around here to find something for our date, this place came highly recommended. In addition to the traditional setup, they also offered private nooks out on the beach. They're only a few, widely spaced out to give each couple some privacy—a four-poster arch with a canopy falling down it along with some twinkling lights. On the ground, there is a blanket with pillows and a small table in the middle.

“I love it.” She glances over her shoulder, giving me a pointed look. “And you said you're not a romantic.”

I let out a groan. “We're not getting back into *that* discussion. C'mon.” I push her forward to the nook. We take off our shoes before sitting down on the blanket.

“You can hide it all you want, but I know the truth.”

“And what is that?”

She jabs me playfully on my side. “You, Prescott Wentworth, are one big romantic.”

I wrap my fingers around her wrist, lifting her hand so I can press my mouth against her inner wrist, just where I can feel her heartbeat.

It was insane, this constant need to touch her, to feel her, to be with her.

“Only for you,” I murmur, her skin prickling to attention under my warm breath.

Just then, the waiter joins us. We place our drink orders, sodas for both of us and after he hands us the menus, we’re once again alone.

“What do you plan to get?” Jade asks, flipping through her menu with one hand, her lips pursed as she looks over the options.

The strap of her dress slides down, revealing a patch of skin. Although she’s been putting on sunscreen all afternoon, her skin had gotten a light pinkish hue from the bright sun since we spent most of the afternoon in the water, only our shoulders peeking out.

Jade looks up, those crystal blue eyes focusing on me as she tilts her head to the side. “Prescott?”

Shaking my head to clear my mind, I look down at the menu. “Steak, probably. What do you want?”

“The chocolate and strawberry cake sounds delicious,” Jade muses.

“How about you get something to eat first? Then we can talk about dessert.”

“But dessert is the best part!”

My gaze zeros in on her mouth. She put something sparkly on them, making them shine in the soft candlelight.

Jade tugs at my hand. “You know it’s the best part.”

Slowly looking up from her mouth, I flash her a smile. “I know.”

Only my idea of a dessert was completely different than hers.

Jade must realize it too because her teeth sink into her lower lip as we just stare at one another, and for the first time, I wonder if maybe she was right earlier and we should have just stayed home and done this another day. Although I had a feeling that it didn’t matter. Because there is no way I’d ever get enough of this woman.

A throat clears behind us. “Are you ready to order?”

Focus, Wentworth. Focus.

The guy leaves our drinks on the table, and we place our order before we’re alone yet again.

“I can’t believe the summer is almost over. That come midnight, I’ll be one year older.”

A distant look appears on her face. She glances toward the horizon, where the sun is almost set. I give her a moment to compose herself.

No matter how much I tried, I couldn’t know how she felt—everything that she’s been through in this past year. Not the way she knew it. The way she felt it.

I know only my own version of it. Things she would tell me, parts of her she let me see, and the glimpses I caught when she wasn’t looking.

“You’ve made it, Jade,” I whisper, my fingers tightening around hers. “*We’ve* made it. And from now on, it’s only going to get better.”

It was the only outcome I wanted to believe in. The only outcome that I accepted because nothing else was an option. I couldn’t lose her after all the hell we’d been through.

“I want to believe that.” Slowly, she turns to me, a small smile playing on her lips. “But a part of me is still living on

that edge, and some days..." She lets out a sigh. "Some days, I wonder if I'll ever stop questioning it. If I'll ever be normal again, carefree."

"We'll get there," I promise her. Raising my hand, I cup her face, skimming my finger over her cheek. "Together."

There is a moment of silence before she finally nods. "Together."

"No more dark topics tonight, okay? I want to see you happy. You deserve to be happy, Jade."

She covers my hand with hers. "We both do."

Unable to resist it, I lean closer and press my mouth against hers. The kiss is gentle, a promise that no matter what happens, no matter what life throws at us, we'll weather the storm.

Just as I pull back, the waiter brings our meals. The conversation turns lighter as we enjoy our dinner. I listen to Jade tell me excitedly about her upcoming photography classes. Just recently, she's started to take more photos again, and I don't know how or why, but I've become her favorite model. Not that you'd hear me complain because there wasn't anything I wouldn't do to put a smile on that woman's face.

"What do you want to do this year?" she asks, glancing up at me. "I know you've been training with Joshua this summer. Do you..."

There is no missing the note of uncertainty in her voice as she asks that question. I can't even blame her. It was because I was trying to force football that I ended up down the path I did last year, chasing the dream that was never mine to chase.

"This year, I'll be trying to focus on getting through the first year of med school in one piece. And taking you out on as many dates as I can in the meantime."

Jade rolls her eyes. "You know I don't need dates."

"But I want dates for us. I want time where it'll be just the two of us."

“Well, since my favorite idea of a date is staying in, you’ll have to do something about that roomie of yours.”

“Actually...”

Just as I open my mouth, the waiter comes and takes our plates. “Was everything okay?”

“It was great, thanks.”

The guy nods at me before leaving once again.

“Hey...” Jade looks after him before switching her attention to me. “But he didn’t ask about dessert.”

The look of utter devastation on her face makes me want to laugh out loud, but I bite the inside of my cheek. “He must have forgotten.”

“Forgotten? Who forgets the dessert?”

“People who don’t like sweets?” I suggest playfully.

“I don’t think we can...” She starts to shake her head, but then her eyes grow wide, and her mouth forms a little “o” in surprise.

And sure enough, I don’t get to turn around before the waiter places a small chocolate cake in front of Jade, the candles already lit on top of it.

“You already ordered it,” she whispers as she stares at it.

“We can’t have a birthday celebration without a cake, can we?”

“I guess not.” She places her hand over mine on the table, our fingers interlocking. “It’s beautiful, Prescott. Thank you for doing this.”

“Anytime. C’mon. Make a wish.”

Jade grazes her teeth over her lower lip as she thinks for a moment. As her eyes lock on mine, she leans down and blows the candles, a big smile curling her lips.

“You want me to cut it?”

I shake my head. The cake was small, just big enough for the two of us. Besides, I didn’t want cake.

“I guess I can share with you.” Her blue eyes twinkle with mischief as I watch her pick up the fork and grab a piece of cake, bringing it to her lips.

A soft moan comes from her as she eats the cake, and I can feel my dick twitch in response. Then her tongue peeks out and slides over her lower lip, licking the remnants of chocolate still clinging to the corner of her mouth.

She must realize that I haven’t moved a muscle because she looks up. “You don’t want any?”

Leaning over the table, I grab the back of her neck with my hand, pull her to me and press my mouth against hers, tasting the sweetness on her tongue as I explore her mouth slowly, enjoying every lick and nip.

We’re both breathless by the time I break the kiss. Jade blinks her eyes slowly, the blue of her irises so dark they seem almost black.

“Eat your cake, Jade,” I whisper softly against her mouth. “I’ll have my dessert when we get back to the cottage.”

CHAPTER 5

Jade

“*E at your cake, Jade. I’ll have my dessert when we get back to the cottage.*”

Prescott’s words still ring in my head. My brain a mush after that kiss. Hell, after all the kisses, touches, him.

It’s always been just him.

He’d enter the room, and any rational thought I had would leave my mind, and it’s only gotten worse since we got back together.

With Prescott’s eyes intently locked on mine, I had barely managed to finish my dessert.

The door opens, startling me. I've been so lost in my own head that I didn't even realize we got back to the cottage.

Prescott extends his hand to me, and I take it, letting him pull me out of the car. Instead of taking a step back, he tugs me to his chest, his eyes locking on mine. The tension that's been building between us over the last few weeks is so strong it's almost palpable. My heart is beating hard, my blood rushes to my ears, and my palms sweat with nerves.

Prescott lifts his hand, sliding his knuckles over my cheekbone in a gentle caress. "If you're not ready yet, that's..."

Lifting on the tips of my toes, I wrap my arms around his neck and press my mouth against his, effectively shushing him with my lips.

"I'm ready," I whisper against his mouth, my fingers sliding into his hair. "I want this, Prescott. I want you."

He lets out a soft groan as his arms wrap around me and pull me up in the air, pressing me against his firm chest.

"Prescott!" I laugh, tightening my arms around his neck as he walks us toward the cottage.

"There is a key in my back pocket."

I roll my eyes at him playfully. "Of course it is. If you wanted me to grab your ass, all you had to do was ask."

"Keep up that sass. We'll see how long it lasts."

"Promises, promises."

Sliding my hand into his pocket, I pull out the key and slide it into the lock. The moment the door is open, Prescott walks us inside, shutting the door with his foot before turning us around and pressing me against the hardwood.

I suck in a breath, my legs tightening around his waist as his mouth lands on mine, his tongue sliding between my parted lips. My fingers dig into his shoulder as I kiss him back, our tongues sucking and swirling.

A low groan comes from his chest as he presses into me, his hard length nestling between my spread thighs, making the ache inside of me grow more intense.

Sliding my hands over his back, I feel his strong muscles ripple beneath my palms, his heat spreading into me as his scent envelopes me.

“Prescott,” I breathe, breaking the kiss. “I need you.”

“You have me, baby,” he whispers, licking and nipping at the side of my neck.

His hands move to my ass, giving it a firm squeeze as he pulls us from the door and walks us across the room toward the bed, where he lets me slide down. My body brushes over his, my pussy tightening in anticipation.

Lifting my hands, I start to undo the buttons of his shirt, my fingers tremble slightly, so when I’m halfway done, I give up and grab the hem of his dress shirt and pull it over his head. Prescott bends forward, helping me remove the shirt, his mouth capturing mine the moment the garment falls on the floor.

With my mouth on his, I slide my hands down his chest to the buckle of his pants. Blindly, I undo it and push his pants and boxers down his narrow hips.

Prescott’s hands cradle my cheeks as he pushes me back. My knees touch the back of the bed.

“Your turn,” Prescott whispers, grabbing the hem of my dress and pulling it over my head.

My throat bobs as the cool night breeze coming through the windows touches my skin, making me shiver. Or maybe it’s the nerves. After all, it’s been months since he last saw me naked. For all the kissing and touching and fooling around, not once did we lose our clothes like this.

Prescott’s dark eyes hold mine as he tosses my dress on the floor; our heavy breathing and the hum of the waves coming from the coast are the only sounds filling the room.

“Do you remember what I promised you?” he asks, his lips grazing the sensitive skin of my neck as he pulls my arms away.

When did I cover my chest?

The motion was so instinctual I didn't even realize I had done it.

“Prescott...” His name comes out as a sigh, our fingers intertwining together.

“That's not an answer,” chuckling, he pulls back. Letting go of one of my hands, he raises his hand, his finger lifting my chin, rubbing the curve of my lower lip. “What did I promise you that day in the bathroom?”

How could I forget? It was the lowest time in my life—the most vulnerable. I'd just had my surgery. They removed my drains and told me it was okay to shower, but when I finally entered the tub, I realized how weak my arms were. How even though I was allowed to do things myself, I still actually couldn't do them, how I was afraid to even look at the mirror in fear of what I might find reflected back at me.

Enter Prescott.

He came even when I insisted I didn't need him. He took care of me without making me feel weak, and then he helped me face my worst fears head-on.

“That you'll show me just how beautiful you think I am,” I whisper, echoing the words he told me that day.

“That I'll show you just how beautiful you are, period,” he corrects. “I plan to make good on that promise tonight, Jade.”

With one soft kiss to my mouth, he pushes me back until we're both on the bed. For a moment, we just kiss, and I can feel my body relax next to his. Lifting my hand, I run it over his chest and to his nape, pulling him closer to me. Prescott starts peppering kisses down my neck, over my collarbone, and lower until...

“P-Prescott...”

My fingers tighten around his neck when his mouth presses against my left scar.

“You’re beautiful, Jade,” he whispers, and my back arches as his warm breath makes goosebumps appear on my skin. “So fucking beautiful.” Kiss. “Every single part of you.” Kiss. “Every scar.” Kiss. “Every flaw.” Kiss. “Makes you who you are.” Kiss. “And I could never hate it.” Kiss. “I could never hate any part of you that made you the woman you are today.” Kiss. “A survivor.” Kiss. “But more importantly?” Kiss. “*Mine.*”

My breath hitches as he places the tiniest of kisses, tracing the scar in its entirety before shifting to the other side and repeating the process. He makes good on his promise, too good, not missing an inch of skin as he worships my body. Once he’s done memorizing my scars, he licks and nibbles down my stomach, pulling down my panties. I’m so freaking wet that the lace clings to me, refusing to give in.

Prescott mutters softly, and then I hear the familiar sound of the fabric ripping.

“Fuck. I guess I’ll just buy you new ones.”

Before I can say anything, Prescott’s mouth is on my pussy, his tongue sinking into my wetness. My whole body shudders with pleasure, fingers sinking into his hair and pulling him closer to me. Prescott hums against me, his tongue flicking over my clit, teasing the sensitive bud and sending little shockwaves through me as I let out a loud moan, my thighs gripping his head.

“I missed the taste of you,” Prescott whispers, his scruffy cheeks teasing my sensitive flesh as he sinks his fingers into me. First one, then adding another, stretching me. “The feel of you.”

He crooks his fingers, finding that spot inside of me easily that makes a shudder run through my body.

“Prescott. I need you.”

“I want you to come on my fingers first, doll.”

He sinks them deeper, rubbing at the spot. My eyes fall shut, teeth sinking into my lower lip.

“Come for me, Jade,” he repeats, his mouth wrapping around my clit and sucking it into his mouth as his tongue flattens against it.

Trembles spread through my body like a wave as I come, my whole body going rigid as Prescott continues to thrust his fingers into me slowly, letting my body come off the high.

Gently kissing the inside of my thigh, he makes his way up my body until he’s hovering over me. I pull him down for a kiss. Our tongues twine together, and I can taste myself on his mouth.

His hard dick brushes against my belly, so I wrap my legs around his waist, tugging him closer. His thick length settles against my pussy, and we gently rock against each other as I run my hands over his body.

Breaking the kiss, Prescott presses his forehead against mine. “You’re killing me, woman.”

“Just returning the favor.” Brushing his sweaty hair away from his face, I nibble playfully at his lower lip. “I missed this. I missed you.”

There was nothing quite like it. With Prescott, sex was different. He made me feel strong, sexy, cherished, and wanted... It was intense and overwhelming in the best way possible. How did we keep our hands from each other for the past three months; I’ll never understand.

I arch my hips, the tip of his dick rubbing against my clit. Prescott’s eyes darken with need, his cock twitching between our bodies.

“Make love to me, Prescott.”

Prescott lets out an almost pained groan before his mouth crashes over mine, kissing me hard.

“Fuck, we need a condom.”

Pulling back, he gets off the bed and grabs his bag, pulling out a whole box.

“Eager much?” I can’t help but tease as he rips into the box, pulling out one square package before placing the rest on the nightstand.

“Optimistic.”

Prescott grins as he opens the foil package and puts on the condom. I watch as his hand wraps around his cock. His fingers squeeze the hard length, the veins in his forearm popping as he jerks his dick slowly, moving closer and climbing back on the bed, his eyes roaming over my naked body.

I spread my legs, welcoming him back as his body presses into mine, his weight and warmth enveloping me completely.

His free hand finds mine, our fingers interlocking as he guides himself inside me slowly, letting my body adjust to his length.

He pulls back every so often before sinking back inside, deeper with each measured thrust until he’s completely seated, and I can feel that familiar burn. The pleasure and the pain mix together when he’s inside me.

“How can you feel so perfect?”

He brushes my hair out of my face before leaning down to press his mouth against mine.

Slowly we start to move together, our breaths mingling as our bodies brush against one another, as our movements grow faster.

“Harder,” I whisper against his mouth, my leg pulling him closer to me. The slight shift makes him sink deeper, and a shudder goes through my body. “I need...”

“I know what you need.” Prescott’s hand slides between us, rubbing at my clit, as his thrusts become stronger.

I graze my teeth over his neck, sucking at his skin. Our movements become jerky, the pressure inside me building as I meet him thrust for thrust. I feel my walls clenching as the wave of pleasure slams into me.

“*Fuck*,” Prescott hisses shortly after, his body going rigid in my arms as he comes inside me.

Eyes glued together, I disentangle my fingers from his, slowly rubbing his back as his body relaxes, falling into mine.

We lay like that, completely spent, neither of us saying anything.

This.

This was what I’ve been missing. This feeling of connection to the man I love with all my heart in the most vulnerable moment possible.

Snuggling into him, I whisper: “I love you.”

Prescott caresses my cheek with the back of his hand. “Love you more.”

Placing a gentle kiss on my mouth, he pulls back. “I need to take care of the condom.”

Reluctantly, I let him go, watching as he pads naked to the bathroom, disposing of the condom before he returns.

A smile spreads over his mouth as he looks at the wall before he slips back in the bed, pulling me to him.

“Happy birthday, Doll,” Prescott whispers, his mouth brushing against mine.

“What...”

I glance in the direction of the wall, noticing the time.

Just after midnight.

“Thank you. This...” I shake my head, at a loss for words for just how magical tonight was. “Everything about tonight was perfect. This was definitely the best present you could have given me.”

Prescott rolls to his back, pulling me on top of him. “Good. Because I’m just not quite done with you.”

His palms curl around my waist before he slides them up, his fingers teasing my chest.

“Prescott?” I whisper softly as he closes the distance, tracing kisses over my chest again.

“Hmm?”

“What would you say if I told you I don’t want to do the reconstructive surgery?”

He freezes for a moment, blinking his eyes open to look at me. I watch him intently, waiting for some kind of reaction, but his expression doesn’t change.

“If that’s what you want, I’ll support you one hundred percent. I love *you*, Jade. I love your soul, and your sassiness, and your stubbornness. I love your body, just the way it is, with every scar and imperfection. There isn’t anything that could change that. There isn’t anything that could convince me that you’re not the most beautiful woman in the world. And if somebody can’t see that, fuck them.”

Tears gather in my eyes. I try to blink them away, but Prescott is faster, his hand cupping my face as he skims his finger over my cheekbone. “Every single part of you is perfect, Jade. Just the way you are.”

“I love you,” I whisper, sniffing softly. Leaning down, I press my mouth against his.

And then he shows me, again and again and again, just how much he loves me.

And I do the same.

Our soft words, our touch, our kisses... They all put our broken pieces back together and help us heal.

CHAPTER 6

Prescott

The first thing I notice when I wake up is the absence of the warm body curled against mine. My eyes fly open

instantly, and I look around, but sure enough, the bed is empty. I place my hand over the rumpled sheets, expecting to feel the lingering warmth of Jade's body, but the space is cold.

Groaning, I rub my hand over my face as I push upright, the sheets falling into my lap as I stare at the space.

Our clothes are still scattered around the floor where we left them last night.

I get up, grab a pair of basketball shorts from my bag and pull them on as I walk toward the back deck. The dim light is peeking through the window in the door. I push it open, the cool, early morning breeze making goosebumps appear on my skin. I expect to find Jade sitting on the swing, but she's not there. I look at the beach, and that's where I spot a figure sitting in the sand.

Shaking my head, I grab the blanket and walk toward her.

She's sitting on the ground, her camera forgotten by her side. Her legs are pulled to her chest, arms wrapped around them as she stares at the ocean. She's so lost in her world that I'm not even sure if she hears me coming.

"I don't like waking to an empty bed," I say softly so as not to scare her.

She tilts her head back, giving me an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to worry you."

"It's okay." I spread the blanket and place it gently over Jade's shoulders before I sit down on the sand behind her and wrap my arms around her, looking out at the horizon. The waves are rolling slowly toward the surface, the first lights of the sun breaking through the dark sky. "How long have you been awake?"

"A while," she admits, her body relaxing into mine. "I could hear the sound of the waves and couldn't fall back asleep."

"Hmm..." I place my chin on her shoulder.

Neither of us says anything for a moment. It feels nice just sitting here together.

That's why I wanted to bring her here. So we could have this moment with just the two of us. Alone. Classes were due to start soon, and our lives would be turned upside-down once again, but we had this weekend, and I planned to cherish every single moment of it.

"Being on the beach..." Jade stops as if weighing her words. "It always reminds me of her."

I squeeze her tighter to me. "Your mom?"

"Mhmm... She loved the beach. It was her happy place." A small smile works its way to her face, but I don't miss the traces of pain hidden beneath it. "It was the last place we took her before she couldn't go out any longer. She just wanted to go to the beach one last time. It was the place where I took my first photo in close to a year.

"With everything else going on, photography was the last thing on my mind. Besides, I knew there was no way I'd be able to go to college, not if she were still fighting. A part of me always wondered if that was the reason why she gave up so quickly. Because she subconsciously knew..."

"Hey..." My finger slips under her chin, turning her so she's facing me. Tears are glistening in her blue irises. She blinks, trying to chase them away, but one stubborn drop falls down her cheek. "It wasn't your fault."

"I know."

I raise my hand, brushing the tear away. "You told me yourself she was a stage four. There was nothing that could have been done."

"*I know.*" Jade snuffles, leaning her head against mine. "Some days, it's just harder. When I'm happy. And yesterday, I was just so damn happy. But it's just a reminder of what I could lose. After everything I've been through, I can't help but wonder, what if..."

I place my finger over her lips. "No what-ifs," I remind her. "We talked about it. We can't live our lives in what-ifs. We're here now, and we're happy and healthy. We get to live

one more year of our lives together, and I want us to make the best out of it.”

Jade wraps her fingers around my wrist, pulling my hand back and locking our fingers. “We’ll make the best out of it.”

“And I know how I want to start.”

My heart starts beating faster, and my palms turn clammy. I’m not even sure why I’m this nervous. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn’t such a big deal, and yet...

Her brow quirks up. “Oh, do you now?”

“I do.” My tongue darts out, sliding over my lower lip before I blurt out the words. “Moveinwithme.”

Jade’s eyes widen in surprise. “W-What?”

“I want you to move in with me,” I repeat slowly. “I don’t want to sneak around or climb into your room through your window.”

“Well, to be clear, we haven’t been hiding these past few months.”

“True, but you know what I mean. I don’t want to spend any more time apart than is absolutely necessary. If anybody knows how fragile life can be, it’s the two of us. So, no, I don’t want to wait. I want to hold you every day from now and for the rest of our lives. I want to wake up with you. I want us to create our future together and live every day like it might be our last. Because I love you, Jade. I love you so fucking much some days I wonder how the fuck I can breathe when we’re in the same room, and at the same time, it’s not enough.”

“I know. I feel the same way.” Jade presses her forehead against mine and brings our joined hands to her mouth. “Some days, I feel like I’ll burst from how much I love you.”

The corner of my mouth tilts upward. “Is that a yes to moving in?”

She gives me a little shove, but I can see her trying to hide her laughter. “That’s a yes. I’ll move in with you.”

I let out a whoosh of air, my whole body relaxing. “Fuck yeah.”

With that, I lunge at her. Jade chuckles, but not for long, because my fingers sink into her hair as I kiss her with all I have in me, sealing our promise. Her body arcs into me, all those gorgeous curves tempting me with their softness. Sliding my hand down her back, I press my palm against her lower back until our bodies are plastered together, my hard cock rubbing against her lower belly.

Jade lets out a soft moan, which is my undoing. Breaking the kiss, I curse loudly as I pull her to me and get to my feet.

“Prescott!” She laughs, and I swear it’s the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard. “Put me down.”

“No way. I think you owe me, Miss Cole.”

“Owe you?”

“Yes, owe me,” I repeat as I walk back toward the cottage.

“For what exactly?”

“For sneaking out of the bed this morning without saying a word.”

“Is that so?”

“It is very much so. I think we just established that you promised to wake up with me every morning, and that starts with today.”

Opening the door, we enter the cottage, and I kick the door shut with my foot, going straight for the bed. “Besides, I have plans for you.”

“What kind of plans?”

Placing her gently on the bed, my knee digs into the mattress as I smirk at her. “Very wicked plans.”

Her fingers slide down my chest, tracing the curves of my abs. “Give me your worst, Wentworth.”

So I do, and she loves every second of it.

And so do I.

Once we come down off the high, I wrap my arms around her middle, pulling her to my chest as I nuzzle my head in the crook of her neck.

“I love you, Jade.”

“Love you more, Prescott.”

ABOUT ANNA B. DOE

Anna B. Doe is a *USA Today* and international bestselling author of young adult and new adult sports romance. She writes real-life romance that is equal parts sweet and sexy. She's a coffee and chocolate addict. Like her characters, she loves those two things dark, sweet and with a little extra spice.

When she's not working for a living or writing her newest book you can find her reading books, binge-watching TV shows or listening to music while she walks her shi tsu puppy Tina. Originally from Croatia, she is always planning her next trip because wanderlust is in her blood.

She is currently working on various projects. Some more secret than others.

Find more about Anna on her website: www.annabdoe.com

Join Anna's Reader's Group [Anna's Bookmantics](#) on Facebook.



HIS SAVAGE OBSESSION

Prelude to The Savage Duet

By April Moran

Dark Romance

Billionaire/Criminal Underground/Beauty & The Beast

Kingston

She's young. Innocent. Sweet.

My obsession is dangerous, and I watch over Ava Blue
because she needs protection.

But it's not enough. When she's deceived by someone she
trusts, will she fracture into a million pieces or emerge from
the ashes to burn the world down?

Ava

He's older. Broken. Savage.

Kingston Winter is always around when I need protection.

Until the one time he's not. That night should leave me
shattered and broken. But I won't let this betrayal destroy me.

I'll emerge from the darkness and find my own light.

*T/W include substance abuse, non-con scene, bullying, age
gap and s/a (not by MMC). Please read responsibly.*

Dedication:

**Thank you to Linda Hill Kehn, Zara Khalid and Kris
Cantrell for helping name the book!**

CHAPTER 1

So, it begins.

Guard your heart...

“Ava, sweetheart? Can you come here, please?”

Ava sighed, closing the book she'd cracked open only thirty minutes before. Her mother had the uncanny knack of interrupting her at the most inconvenient times.

Glancing out the sunroom's window, she stood, stretching her muscles. The skies were darkening, storm clouds rolling in fast.

“Coming, Mom,” she called back.

Their home's kitchen was down a hallway and around the corner. Ava gathered her hair into a low ponytail as she made her way there. As she came closer, she heard the bright cheerfulness in her mom's voice accompanied by the low rumble of someone unknown.

It wasn't her dad. And it wasn't Carson. Her brother was living at home during his college senior year but spent most of his time staying with friends and partying. He hated the rules their parents placed on him.

And her brother never missed an opportunity to demonstrate how much he despised his little sister for following those rules.

Rounding the corner, Ava saw her mom first.

Jocelyn Blue leaned against the kitchen island. Wearing a sporty white skirt and bright pink polo shirt, her face was flushed from tennis practice. A dazzling smile stretched across her lips.

“Sweetheart, this is Kingston Winter, your dad's newest client.” Mom looped arms with Ava, tugging her closer. “He attends BSU with Carson.”

The man standing in the corner of the kitchen had eyes of deep, cold blue, and while he was around the same age as her brother, that's where the similarities ended.

Carson was the consummate frat boy, with his tousled, dark blonde hair and elitist attitude.

In stark contrast, this man was dark and serious.

Garbed in a pair of pressed slacks with a pristine, white cuffed shirt open at the neck, he exuded confidence. There were no smiles as he stepped closer, and Ava shrunk back against her mom.

He was breathtakingly gorgeous. In a glorious riot of dark waves, his hair tumbled over his forehead in direct contrast to his polished air. Slight scruff adorned the chiseled sharpness of his jaw while a patrician nose screamed of good breeding. He looked like a fairytale prince standing in their sleek kitchen.

His eyes flared as they skimmed Ava's body. A quick glimmer of *something* sizzled before the Artic blue depths shuttered themselves. Any interest in a teenage girl one month shy of her sixteenth birthday was taboo, and this man understood that.

Complete neutrality slipped over Kingston's features. It was a welcome contrast to the barely contained lust of her brother's obnoxious friends. Those animals tormented her while Carson egged them on.

"Kingston, this is my daughter," Mom said. "Ava, your dad is assisting with Kingston's family's estate. Such a tragic situation."

Kingston extended his hand. "Your dad talks a lot about you, Ava." He flashed a grin, and the kitchen was a hundred times brighter because of it.

Dazed, she let Kingston clasp her hand. The instant jolt of electricity was staggering.

She tugged her hand away.

Kingston's mouth curved. "Your mom says you're interested in English literature."

"That's right. All the classics," Mom beamed with pride, smoothing a tendril of Ava's hair back from her forehead. "Ava's nose is always stuck in a book."

“I’m not always reading. There’s cheerleading, too.” Ava hated the stammer in her voice. Nerves had her nibbling a fingernail until Mom gently squeezed her waist.

Kingston’s smile remained benign. “My father’s estate owns a collection of first edition Emily Brontë novels you might find interesting.”

Ava perked up. “Really?”

Kingston’s eyes roamed her face. “You’re welcome to look them over once they’re back in my possession.”

“Kingston’s staying for dinner, and Carson will be home soon.” Mom let Ava go so she could check the dish cooking in the oven. “And Marie has a delicious chicken casserole going so I’m going to run upstairs and change out of these clothes. Why don’t you two head into the den? Ava, sweetheart, pour Kingston a drink.” Mom grinned at their guest. “Anything at all from the bar.”

Kingston appeared disturbed by that suggestion. “A glass of water will be fine.”

Ava breathed a sigh of relief. At least she wouldn’t be forced to play bartender for this stranger. Not like when Carson and his friends took over the house. She was pinched and prodded while running beers for them.

Kingston’s dark blue eyes settled on Ava, leaving her squirming with some foreign sense of forbidden attraction. It scared her, the instant connection she felt with this man. And he *was* a man, despite the fact he was barely twenty-one.

What were her parents thinking? Inviting someone like *him* into their home? Alan Winter, Kingston’s father, was a successful businessman and rumored to have his hand in several criminal endeavors. No one knew why his second wife shot him two years ago, but he must have been a real monster for a woman to take such drastic measures.

His son was potentially just as dangerous.

Mom smiled brightly, oblivious to Ava’s silent discomfort. “Make yourself at home, Kingston.”

Kingston's gaze never wavered from Ava's face. "Thank you. I'll certainly do that."

CHAPTER 2

Temptation is a dangerous thing.

Ava stepped behind an impressive wet bar along one entire wall. Rows of glass shelves lined with various liquor bottles glittered against a lighted, mirrored backdrop. Opening the mini fridge, she pulled out a bottle of spring water.

"Would you like it on ice?" Her voice was soft. "Or would you rather have something stronger after all?"

"Water is fine. Over ice, please."

It was a left-over quirk from his previous life, this refusal to drink from anything plastic. Even something as plain as water must be served in glass or crystal. He'd made too many concessions over the last two years. Given up too many luxuries. He refused to concede this last bastion of civility.

"Here you go," Ava said, head tilted as she regarded him. "Water on the rocks."

Kingston smiled at her attempt to joke. She really was a beautiful girl, with her dark blonde hair and big green eyes. Nice figure, too, for her age.

And off limits. Not that he had any interest in teenage girls. Even ones as breathtaking as this one.

Reaching across the bar's granite surface, Kingston took the highball glass just as she pushed it toward him. Their fingers glided against each other, and Ava snatched her hand away as if scorched. It was the second time she'd visibly reacted to his touch.

Embarrassment stained her cheeks a rosy pink.

If Ava Blue wasn't so young and the daughter of the only man capable of setting his world to rights, Kingston might've

had her bent over the sofa by now. Ramming himself inside her like he did with the vapid sorority girls who hounded him.

Ava cleared her throat. “So, you’re friends with my brother? Is that why you hired my dad?”

“I knew of Garrett before I met Carson. But, yes, you could say your brother and I are friends.”

He and Carson were in the same social group, although Kingston kept his own company. With an underground criminal for a father, it was safer that way.

“Oh.” Ava nibbled a fingernail. “And you call Dad by his first name?”

“At his insistence.” Kingston sipped his water. “Does it matter?”

She shook her head, shyly meeting his gaze. “No. Just out of the ordinary. None of my friends call Dad by his first name. Nor do Carson’s. Dad must like you a lot to let you do that.”

Garrett Blue *did* like him. And the attorney really liked the idea of advancing his reputation as the person who could clear the Winter estate’s headaches. There was a hefty payoff for him if things resolved quickly.

Strange thing was, Kingston admired his new attorney and his sweet, generous wife. He even found their teenage daughter to be quite pleasant. But that’s where the family admiration screeched to a halt. Because Carson was nothing like the rest of the Blue family.

The spoiled college senior was a first-class dick. Arrogant. Winey. Always looking to score. When Garrett refused to give him money, his son found funding elsewhere for his drugs, strippers, and gambling.

Carson owed money all over the town of Bitter Springs.

When he had the funds, Kingston lent it, even if it meant going without necessities. His father taught him that once a man was desperate, he could be exploited.

He *wanted* Carson in his debt.

Ava tilted her head. “Is something wrong?”

Kingston shrugged his shoulders. “No.”

“Okay.” She wiped up a few droplets of water with a bar towel, her movements quick and nervous.

Kingston liked the fact he made her uneasy.

But she affected him, too. Despite her youth and innocence, Ava was a breathtaking vision with the face of a seductive angel. A temptation he should resist. One he *must* resist.

A noise in the corridor just outside the den startled her. Dropping her gaze from his, she went from shyly curious to guarded. It was as though a curtain fell over her. Or maybe a mask that could never be removed.

“Aw, shit,” Carson exclaimed, coming through the door with a backpack slung over one shoulder. “Look who made it for dinner. Good to see you, bro.”

“Your father wouldn’t let up. Figured I might as well accept the offer for a home-cooked meal.”

Carson tossed his backpack into one of the leather chairs. “You staying to watch the game? Got a hundred bucks riding on Texas.”

“Depends on what happens after dinner. Your dad and I have some things to discuss.” Kingston couldn’t help but notice Ava attempting to remain invisible behind the bar’s counter.

Carson’s hazel eyes skimmed over his sister. “Grab me a beer, sis. Make sure it’s a cold one, too. From the back of the fridge.”

The man’s tone shifted from affable college boy to hard and cruel in a split second. Kingston knew of Carson’s animosity toward his little sister. Having researched the entire family before trusting Garrett Blue with his father’s estate, he’d learned about their dynamics, their hobbies, and their personal lives. Everything.

Garrett and Jocelyn were genuinely kind, generous people. Their daughter was obedient, intelligent, and sweet. Their son, though, was something of a black sheep. Someone who needed bailing out of trouble on a regular basis. Kingston was determined to remain unattached but found himself gravitating to the older couple, angry when their decency was taken for granted by their son. Carson had no idea how lucky he was to have such caring parents.

Kingston had not experienced the same with his father. All he learned from Alan Winter was death and destruction. How to kill a man while disassociating himself from the deed and concealing evidence. How to punish and fuck a woman while ignoring her tears.

Such a stark contrast between the two worlds Kingston hovered in.

One revolved around college, exams, and home-cooked meals at a friend's house while scraping by as a cash-strapped college student.

The other was as dark and depraved as one might expect in a criminal enterprise. Friends and acquaintances were judged based on their usefulness. It was a decadent world where unpaid debt meant death and women knelt at men's feet. Alan Winter cultivated an underworld with the expectation his son would carry on his wicked deeds while reaping its illicit benefits.

Kingston lately found himself facing the difficulty in straddling these two worlds. Maybe he could be a good man, too. Upstanding and honest. Kind and generous. Sympathetic and compassionate.

"Fucking pop the cap off," Carson snapped, handing the unopened beer back to Ava.

Kingston frowned. *Or maybe not.* At that moment, he wanted nothing more than to break off the neck of that beer bottle and use its jagged edge to slice open Carson's throat.

Ava flushed, grabbing a bottle opener to do as Carson demanded. She did not dare meet Kingston's eyes anymore,

scurrying instead into the bar's corner like a timid little mouse.

Carson chugged the beer and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Be grateful you don't have siblings, Kingston. They're fucking useless."

"I've a half-brother, remember? He's in foster care until I graduate." Kingston fought the urge to snatch Ava up and comfort her while standing in a pool of her brother's blood. "If he can last that long without landing in juvi. He's a bit... troubled. Been in four homes so far since our dad died."

"I forgot about that. Well, better a crazy half-brother than a kiss-ass sister." Carson jerked a thumb in Ava's direction. "This one shits out rainbows and lollipops. The shiny example of a perfect child. Aren't you, Ava?"

"That's not fair, Carson," she replied.

"Neither is our parents' insistence on comparing us. We're fucking nothing alike." Carson's laugh was ugly, and Kingston's fists clenched to keep from punching his "friend" square in the mouth.

"I have good grades and I stay out of trouble," Ava said quietly. "It isn't hard to figure out."

"Shut the fuck up. You might be a brainiac, but I can get good grades when I want. But then I'd be a suck-ass puppet like you. Maybe if Mom and Dad paid me to be a perfect son I'd make more of an effort."

Ava blinked in response, the look on her face saying she'd heard this diatribe many times.

"When does the game start?" Kingston casually asked, willing to feign interest in football if it distracted Carson from verbally abusing his younger sister.

Ava's eyes met Kingston's, a flash of gratitude lighting the forest green depths. Then she looked away as if ashamed someone might see how Carson's words hurt her.

"It's a late game. We can catch the second half." Carson plopped down on the leather sectional while grabbing the TV remote.

Kingston's eyes stayed on Ava. A disturbing wave of protectiveness flooded him when he saw her hands shaking.

How she withstood Carson's bullying was remarkable. A hidden well of inner strength must lie behind those angelic features. Strength that Kingston was dying to explore, if only to see how easily she could be broken.

He pushed those feelings aside, even while his mind raced with all the ways Carson might pay for his cruelty.

"Yeah, that'd be great," Kingston drawled, keeping his tone light and friendly. "Maybe get a little side-bet action going. Give you a chance to double your money."

"Cool, man." Carson flipped through channels. "By the way, thanks for hooking me up with your dad's old bookie. He's fucking awesome."

And Kingston smiled as Ava's expression went from puzzlement to shocked understanding.

Maybe this high school junior truly was brilliant. She'd just figured out Kingston was manipulating Carson into a web of debt.

"You're welcome," Kingston replied. Giving Ava a wink, he then focused on the game as if he really gave a shit. "Glad I could help."

CHAPTER 3

Danger lurks around every corner.

One year later...

"Hi, Dad. You're home early." Ava got up from the lounge chair. Standing on tiptoe, she kissed his cheek.

"Hey, sweetheart." Garrett slipped an arm around Ava's waist. "Big day tomorrow so we knocked off for the afternoon. I called your mom to let her know Kingston's joining us for dinner, but she didn't answer her phone."

Ava leaned past her dad to see Kingston standing on the path leading to the pool area.

“Hey.” She gave him a little wave then casually grabbed the beach towel, wrapping it tight around her body.

Kingston’s eyes burned her flesh for those few seconds she stood exposed in her bathing suit. Shivering despite herself, Ava gave her dad a smile. “Mom’s lying down. A migraine, I think.”

Dad’s face darkened with concern. “Again?”

“She was on the phone with Carson earlier,” Ava replied.

“Well, that explains things.” Dad sighed, scrubbing his chin. “He’s been more difficult than usual.”

Kingston jammed his hands into his trouser pockets. “I’ll call an Uber and head back into town. I’ve still got some packing to do.”

Dad waved his hand in dismissal. “Even if Jocelyn doesn’t join us for dinner, she’ll want you to stay. She’s always worried about you eating a proper meal.”

Kingston’s gaze flickered to Ava, and she quickly looked away. Her insides quivered with confused awareness.

Kingston always watched her when he was at their house. And he hovered close by if Carson and his other friends were around. Ava shuddered at one particular memory of Judd Vanderhoff shoving her into a corner during one of Carson’s wild parties. Hands tight on her arms, alcohol-soaked breath drifting over her cheeks, he ignored her demands to be released. As if conjured from smoke, Kingston appeared.

“Get your hands off her, Judd. Before I rip your fucking arms off.” Kingston was so calm and yet, the dead seriousness of his order was something even Judd could not ignore.

With an ugly sneer, Judd pushed Ava aside. “Didn’t realize you’d staked a claim, King.”

“Don’t need to. She’s off limits.” Kingston swirled the ice in his drink, his expression coldly bland. “Understand?”

“Whatever, dude.” Judd shrugged, grabbing a beer off the counter and sauntering away. Before Ava could thank

Kingston for her rescue, he dismissed her in the same bored tone.

“Go back to your room, Miss Blue. Lock your door.”

When she hesitated, Kingston simply cocked an eyebrow. It was enough to send her running from the den as if he'd cracked a whip in her direction.

She didn't exactly feel safe with Kingston around, but there was an underlying sense of security. As if he kept bad things from happening. The thought of that being true was terrifying.

Because being in Kingston's debt was something Ava wasn't sure she'd survive.

Her parents absolutely adored the young man they'd taken under their wing, which unfortunately infuriated their own son. Kingston was respectful. Serious. Highly intelligent. The perfect model of a college graduate with a model-perfect face and body. Having graduated with honors from the exclusive and private Bitter Springs University, he was waiting for the fall semester at Harvard Business School to begin.

Surviving on periodic allotments from his father's estate, Kingston lived in a dingy apartment on the bad side of town. He'd refused Garrett's offer to move in but frequently stayed over at their house. He dressed impeccably. Dress slacks, button-downs, and an occasional suit were his preferred attire. Ava doubted he even owned a pair of shorts or flip-flops.

The thought of Kingston Vaughn Winter wearing flip-flops caused Ava's lips to twitch with a reluctant smile.

But everything would change after tomorrow. The fate of the Winter estate would be decided, and Kingston would be disgustingly rich.

Ava had the unnerving thought he would also become a very dangerous man.

Dad consulted his watch. “I'll let Marie know Kingston is staying for dinner then check on your mother. The hearing is first thing in the morning so Kingston's staying the night.

Don't want to chance the city bus line getting him to the courthouse late."

Kingston's expression was unreadable, but he managed to smile for Ava's dad.

"Will you be a doll and make sure his room is set up?"

Ava swallowed hard. "Sure, Dad. No problem."

Dad smiled his thanks, slapped Kingston on the back, and disappeared down the pathway leading into the house.

Ava turned away, ignoring the heat of Kingston's gaze on her backside. The towel wrapped around her body seemed insufficient. She quickly pulled on a lacy coverup that reached the middle of her thighs but, beneath it, she felt as bare as though she wore nothing.

Bending, she picked up the bottle of suntan lotion but snapped upright at the strangled noise behind her.

"I hope you don't do that in front of Carson's other friends."

Glancing over her shoulder, she found Kingston glaring at her.

"What do you mean?"

"You know damn well what I mean." Kingston snorted. "And if you don't, you should."

Ava felt a stirring of anger. Clutching the towel and suntan lotion to her chest, she choked, "I've no interest in Carson's friends. They're animals."

Kingston's lips twitched.

Embarrassed heat flushed Ava's cheeks as she realized the insult she'd just delivered. "I didn't mean it like that."

"I know what you meant." Kingston sauntered even closer. "You're right. They *are* animals. We all are."

His elegantly muscled form made her so nervous. She didn't know how to react to the air of brutality clinging to this

man. He wasn't old enough to project this aura of power and ruthlessness, but it was as natural as breathing for him.

She watched in rapt fascination as Kingston lifted a lock of her hair. It curled around his finger.

"You're trembling. Are you scared of me?" Dark amusement laced the question.

"Should I be?" Ava's response was too impulsive. She wished the words back as soon as they left her mouth.

He did not answer, but a muscle ticked in his chiseled jaw. It looked hard as granite, and Ava's fingers tingled with an urge to explore its lines.

She couldn't breathe properly. Not when his delicious cologne teased her nose. It had all the markers of an expensive scent, but Kingston was practically penniless. He couldn't possibly afford cologne that smelled so damn good.

"The way you look, Miss Blue, makes every man a threat," he murmured in a voice husky with annoyance. "You should steer clear of most of us. You shouldn't be bending over like that unless you crave the attention that kind of behavior incites. Once you turn eighteen, you'll become fair game for any man looking for an invitation."

Ava bit her lip. *Fair game? What does that even mean?*

This was the first time he'd touched her since that afternoon a year ago when their fingers accidentally brushed. Now, she grew lightheaded with some nameless emotion. Trembling from anticipation. Swaying toward him like she wanted him to kiss her.

Her few girlfriends certainly did. They swooned and giggled and squealed in delight anytime his name was mentioned. There was endless discussion and speculation on how it would feel to be kissed by the mysteriously dark and tortured Kingston Winter.

Maybe she was curious as well. Would it be so wrong to find out? She was seventeen. A senior in high school now while Kingston was a few months shy of turning twenty-two.

A few of her friends dated college guys. Why couldn't she do the same?

The thought of kissing him did funny things to her insides. Warm, liquid things.

Kingston sucked in a deep breath. In the late afternoon sunlight, the pupils of his eyes darkened and expanded. A flash of tenderness lit their depths and, for a second, his hand tightened around her hair. He leaned forward as if drawn to Ava by some inexplicable force.

Then sanity returned. The realization of how dangerous this was.

The strands of her hair drifted free from his fingertips. "Go inside now, Miss Blue."

When Ava's feet remained cemented to the pool terrace, Kingston cursed under his breath and snapped, "Go. Now. Before we both regret it."

Ava hurried past him, wondering why she instinctively obeyed him. Before entering the house, she couldn't help but glance back.

Facing the pool, his stance wide, the material of Kingston's suit stretched tight across his shoulders. Both hands were jammed into his pant pockets.

There was something a little sad about him standing there so alone. Something... heartbreaking.

He looked like a man with no one in his corner, and he'd long ago accepted that fact.

CHAPTER 4

Her chaos is sweet.

Kingston tilted his head back, staring up at the blue, cloudless sky.

Fuck, this is torture.

Gathering his composure, he scooped up his overnight bag and followed Ava into the house.

He stayed a few steps behind as she ascended the stairs. The guest room was only a few doors away from her own bedroom.

Thirty-two steps, to be precise.

“It’s all ready for you.” Ava stepped aside so he could brush past her. “Of course, you know where the bathroom is and where we keep towels and stuff.”

Throwing his bag on the bed, Kingston deliberately raked her form with a hard stare. “Unless you plan on offering turndown service, you can go now.”

Ava’s lips tightened at his rudeness. “Make yourself at home. Like you usually do.”

She fled down the hall, slamming her bedroom door in an uncharacteristic show of temper.

Kingston grimaced.

If Ava was his, he would haul her back into his room and spank her sweet ass until it was scarlet. If she was his, he would snuff out that surprising display of brattiness by shoving his cock down her throat. He’d relish choking her until she begged for mercy.

He would treat her in the manner he’d been taught by his monstrous father. And that was to crush any rebellion with a show of dominance so brutal a woman feared for her own safety.

But he respected Garrett Blue too much to act on those urges. Her parents would never accept their daughter’s abuse by someone they’d taken under their wing.

The image of forcing Ava to her knees, her soft green eyes staring up at him while he commanded her, made his cock twitch. He tried turning off those damning thoughts, angry that she occupied a sliver of his awareness. He shouldn’t think of her that way. Underage was still underage.

But damn, it was hard as hell ignoring all the ideas of how he could ruin her. His cock swelled with a mind of its own, enthusiastically agreeing with every scenario.

Fucking hell.

Shutting the bedroom door, Kingston clicked the lock and lay on the bed. With an arm cradling his head, his free hand unbuckled the black leather belt and popped open the button of his pants.

Staring at the ceiling, he wrestled his cock free of his silk boxers, palming the hardened length. Despite concerted efforts to keep her out of his head, he jacked off while picturing Ava licking her lips. Hungry for him. Desperate for his kiss and his touch. An angel kneeling at the Devil's feet.

He imagined her touching herself, slender fingers caressing bare flesh, green eyes bright with desire. It was the forbidden lust making this solitary gratification so damned hot. So wrong. So depraved.

When he came a few minutes later, Kingston breathed Ava's name with a sigh of recrimination. He was just like his father. A sick bastard who only cared about his own desires. Right and wrong did not matter in his world. They never had and never would.

Alan Winter taught him that. Beat it into him. Made him believe it. Made him accept it.

Tomorrow, he'd finally have everything his father once promised him. Wealth. Power. Fear.

Tomorrow, he would begin taking control of everything that belonged to him.

And one day, that would include Ava Blue.

“C ongratulations, son.” Garrett pulled Kingston in for a quick embrace. “Once the judge signs the order and the clerk records it, the estate will be released.”

“Thank you, Garrett.” Kingston breathed in relief. It’d been a nerve-wracking year waiting for his kingdom to be placed in his grasp. “It wouldn’t have cleared so quickly without you. I owe you a debt I can never repay.”

Garrett laughed, raking a hand through greying hair. “Just remember that when I send you the final bill.”

Kingston grinned. “Hopefully, you’ll give me some credit for doing a bit of my own legwork on the case.”

Garrett swung open the driver’s side door while Kingston slid into the passenger seat. “Let’s celebrate tonight at Morelli’s. My treat.”

“That would be great.”

“Jocelyn and I will pick you up around seven.” Starting the Mercedes, Garrett laughed. “I just realized you’ll have access to your father’s collection of vehicles. You won’t need the damn bus line anymore. And you can change your address to something much nicer. Hell, maybe even buy a house down the street from us.”

Kingston did not respond. The idea of living that close to Ava was a dangerous temptation. The suggestion of residing on the same street would not be entertained.

Besides, he had to finish grad school before buying a house. There was his stepbrother to consider as well. Arrangements to remove Oliver from the carousel of foster homes could begin now that Kingston possessed the funds to care for the troubled teenager.

He would begin pulling together the support system necessary to take over his father’s empire but promised himself one thing. Finishing grad school was an achievement he would not turn his back on, no matter what. That degree represented something special. It was the only thing separating him from his dad.

It was a tiny island of good in a sea of brutality. Accomplished on his own, without killing, maiming, or blackmailing anyone.

Something to be proud of in his world of ugliness.

CHAPTER 5

Best intentions die the quickest.

Another year later...

“**H**appy Birthday, dear Ava... Happy Birthday to you.”

The restaurant’s waitstaff finished the song in a crescendo. Everyone at the table and the diners around them clapped. The waitress placed a cake studded with eighteen sparkly candles in front of Ava.

She grinned. “You shouldn’t have done this, Mom. You know how hard I’m fighting this freshman fifteen. I swear, I just look at food and gain five pounds.”

Jocelyn affectionately tweaked her daughter’s nose. “You’re gorgeous, no matter what. Now, blow out the candles before all that delicious icing is ruined by melting wax.”

“Those things are going up in flames faster than your mom’s golf score,” Dad added with his usual booming laughter. Extra lines of fatigue etched his features, the result of working himself half to death on Kingston Winter’s behalf over the past two years. He was still cleaning up messes for Kingston.

Whenever Kingston visited their home, his dark blue eyes were shuttered yet piercing. He watched Ava as if considering how he might make use of her. Every time their gazes clashed, Ava looked away first. He scared her now more than ever although she couldn’t place a finger on why. He seemed... *darker* somehow. As if violence and evil had finally caught up to him.

It was probably best he didn’t bother showing up for the party.

Mom gave Dad an exasperated glare tempered by amusement.

“If I had a better instructor, I’d have my pro card by now,” she teased back, referring to their new golfing hobby. “Go ahead and make your wish, Ava.”

Make a wish? For what, precisely?

To the casual observer, Ava had everything. Loving, although distracted parents. A beautiful home. Full-ride scholarship to any college of her choosing. She was young, attractive, and wanted for nothing.

So, why did it feel as though her life might suddenly spiral out of control? Why did it feel like something undefinable was missing? More than once, Ava wondered if choosing Bitter Springs University over Princeton was the right choice. Maybe she should have ignored the urge to stay so close to home.

But moving away didn’t feel right.

Happiness. Wish for that. A sense you belong somewhere. Wish for that, too.

Blowing the candles out, Ava embraced her parents. “I’ll take some of this cake back to the dorm. The girls will enjoy it.”

“Happy Birthday, sis,” Carson said from the other side of the table. His pallid face was bloated but, surprisingly, he wasn’t drunk. During the meal, he’d sipped club soda and was pleasant enough. It was a welcome change from his usual snarky resentment.

“Thanks, Carson,” Ava replied warily. He was being so nice to her. Would things change between them now that she was officially an adult? Maybe he would stop seeing her as the annoying little sister competing for their parents’ attention and affection. “I’m glad you decided to come tonight.”

“Wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” he responded as the waitress set a slice of cake in front of him.

When the meal ended, everyone gathered up their things. Ava carried an armful of gifts and a box containing leftover cake. They walked together as a group to the restaurant’s canopied entrance. It was raining heavily, the sky illuminated by flashes of lightning.

“I’ll bring the car around and we’ll get you back to the dorm, Ava. Unless you want to stay at the house tonight?” Dad jangled his car keys.

“I can run you back to BSU, sis,” Carson interjected. “I’m headed that direction anyway.”

“That’s very thoughtful of you, Carson,” Mom beamed, and Ava shifted nervously. The decision was made before she could even voice an objection to Carson’s surprising generosity.

Dad looked skeptical. He leveled a stern look at Carson. “Drive carefully in this rain, son.”

Carson nodded. “Sure will.” He jogged off then, dodging puddles as he crossed the lot to his parked sports car.

“Call me tomorrow, Ava. We’ll have a spa day at the country club.” Mom held up her hands, examining them with a critical eye. “I could really use a manicure.”

“Sure, Mom. Bye, Dad. Love you both.”

Carson pulled up and, instead of waiting for him to get out and open the door for her, Ava slipped into the passenger seat on her own. Buckling herself in, she glanced at her brother.

“Are you sure about giving me a ride?” She waved at her parents as Carson pulled away from the restaurant.

“Yeah. No problem.”

There was only the sound of windshield wipers swooshing rainwater away, then Carson cleared his throat.

“It’s Saturday night and you just turned eighteen. Wanna hang out for a while? One of the guys is throwing a party. Thought maybe we could stop by for a few minutes.”

The suggestion was so unexpected; Ava couldn’t respond at first. A silly twinge of hope raced through her body. She’d always wanted her older brother to treat her like someone he might enjoy being around. Treat her like a *real* person. She couldn’t help but want to jump at the opportunity to be included in his life.

“Just for half an hour or so,” Carson promised when Ava remained quiet. “Come on. It’ll be fun.”

“Okay,” she agreed softly. “If you think no one will mind.”

Carson snorted, his hands gripping the steering wheel tighter. “They won’t. Trust me.”

The moment they stepped into the house, Ava regretted her decision. The music was loud, thumping with obnoxiously deep bass, and people were everywhere. It was a beautiful home, tastefully decorated and spacious, but beer cans, joints, and sprawling bodies ruined its perfection.

Carson gripped Ava’s elbow, propelling her through the crowd until they reached the kitchen. A staggering display of liquor bottles occupied the island and a keg sat in one corner. A mix of guys and girls gathered around it.

“Whose house is this?” Ava asked Carson, yelling to be heard over the music.

“Don’t worry about it.” Carson jerked his chin in greeting as Judd Vanderhoff slapped him on the back. They engaged in the standard “bro” greeting—clasped hands in the shape of fists and a half-hug/half-chest bump.

“Hey, man, you said there’d be more chicks here than last time,” Carson complained as Judd handed him a beer.

“The night is still young, dude. I see you talked her into coming.” Judd’s eyes traveled Ava’s form and he smirked. “Let’s get the birthday girl a drink. You brave enough to try something stronger than lemonade?”

Ava nearly rolled her eyes in exasperation. They might be college graduates, but Carson and his buddies still shared the immature bully persona.

“Pinot Grigio, if you have it,” she bit out, determined not to be intimidated. She’d have a drink, let Carson mingle for that half hour, then insist he take her home.

“We’ve got some of everything.”

Ava took the red plastic cup Judd handed her and downed most of it. The wine was both sour and sweet. It had none of

the crisp acidity she'd experienced when Mom allowed her the occasional glass.

Obviously, the host of this party couldn't afford the good stuff, although the house and furnishings indicated a higher level of wealth. Was this Judge Vanderhoff's house, Ava wondered.

Judd confirmed it, leaning closer. "Sorry. Cheap wine. My parents would kill me if I touched anything in their personal wine cellar."

Before she could respond, two more of Carson's friends stumbled into the kitchen. Brad and Jeff Turner, their eyes rounded with shock, stared at Ava before they began laughing.

"Dude. I can't believe you got her here. Mad props." Brad punched Carson in the shoulder.

Ava's gaze darted between the twins. Was she expected to attend this party? That didn't make sense. Tendrils of unease ran down her spine. She shouldn't be here. Something wasn't right.

"I'm sorry, Carson, but I really should go." Ava gave her brother an apologetic smile. "I've got a Greek Mythology test on Monday and should be studying."

"Such a little bookworm," Jeff sneered.

"Finish your wine, Ava. You don't want to be rude, do you?" Carson set his empty beer bottle on the counter. Someone handed him another.

Judd moved to Ava's other side, his fingers trailing down her arm. "You look amazing in this dress, Ava. All grown up and hot as hell."

Ava grit her teeth. She'd finish this drink, and if Carson wouldn't take her home, she'd call an Uber. Draining the cup in one gulp, she placed it on the kitchen island.

"Please take me home, Carson. I'm ready to leave now."

"Chill the fuck out, sis," Carson replied, his features twisting with irritation. "We'll go when I'm ready."

“Hey, everyone, be cool. Come on, Ava. Stay just a little longer.” Judd moved closer, turning her into his arms. It was a position reminiscent of a slow dance. “You don’t want to hurt my feelings by leaving before the party really gets started, do you?”

Ava’s head pounded in unison with the blaring music. Dizzily, she wondered when Jeff and Brad had stepped closer. They surrounded her now and she frowned.

Why was Carson letting them get so close? He knew she didn’t like his friends. Even if they were drop-dead gorgeous, they were mean as snakes and just as deadly.

“Hey. Heard you’ve got some action planned for tonight.” Some random guy stumbled into the kitchen, throwing an arm around Carson’s shoulders. A sloppy grin painted his face as he stared at Ava. “What’s the deal?”

“Hundred for a taste—waist up only. No blowjobs.”

Brad slid closer, wrapping an arm around Ava’s waist.

She was effectively pinned, with Judd in front of her, holding her hands, Brad behind her, Jeff on one side, and Carson on the other. A box of male testosterone and alcohol that made Ava’s head swim.

Judd’s face was wavy when she peered up at him.

“Fuck that,” Random Guy laughed, throwing up his hands in mock defeat. “I can see tits for free anytime.”

Carson shrugged. “The offer isn’t open to everyone.”

“Special invite, man.” Jeff laughed, lifting a lock of Ava’s rain-damp hair and inhaling it. “Guessing your name didn’t make the guest list.”

Judd’s gaze darted to Carson. “You know *he* isn’t coming, right?”

Carson huffed in disgust. “Why not?”

Judd smirked. “Told him you called it off. You know if he was here, he’d fucking kick our asses for touching her. He’s obsessed, man.”

“I had my reasons for inviting him.” Carson scowled. “You just screwed me out of a lot of money.”

“Is it worth getting your face bashed in?” Judd’s eyebrow rose. “He’s a fucking psycho. Why even fuck with him?”

“More of her for us, anyway,” Brad said under his breath, running his hands down Ava’s sides until he gripped her hips.

“Don’t get fucking greedy,” Carson snapped.

“That’s rich, coming from you,” Judd drawled. “You’re selling your own sist—”

“Shut the fuck up, Judd,” Carson barked. “Unless you want out of the deal.”

Judd brushed his nose alongside Ava’s, his hands tightening over hers. “Hell no. I’m in all the way.”

“What’s going on?” Ava mumbled. Their words tangled in her mind until none of it made sense. Her legs were wobbly, and the music was fading away. Was the party ending? Could she go home now?

“Come on, Ava.” Carson grabbed her elbow, jerking her away from the three men. When she stumbled, he righted her with hard, hurtful hands.

“Ow,” she complained softly, closing her eyes as a twinge of fear chased the sweetly sour taste of wine in her mouth. She shouldn’t have drunk it so fast. It was messing her up in ways a single glass shouldn’t. “I’m dizzy,” she announced to no one in particular. Everything seemed to be tilting in the kitchen, her equilibrium off-kilter.

Carson half-guided/half-shoved Ava through the crush of people, their faces a frightening blur of eyes and teeth. “Let’s get you someplace quiet, sis. You can lie down for a bit. Then I’ll take you home.”

CHAPTER 6

Sometimes the pain becomes the shield.

Ava drifted.

Then landed.

Someone is holding me down.

Tugging her arms free was a futile endeavor. It was as though thousand-pound stones anchored her wrists.

Hands. Rough and brutal.

“Fuck. She’s already coming out of it.”

“I didn’t want her completely knocked out. It’ll be hard enough getting her out of here if she’s dead weight.”

Ava focused on the second voice. The one she knew. The one belonging to someone who should be protecting her.

Carson.

She opened her eyes as a flash of lightning lit the shadowy bedroom and screamed in terror... a soundless cry that echoed in her head and threatened to explode inside her chest.

“Shh, Ava. Relax and enjoy it,” Judd whispered, laving the tip of her exposed breast with his hot tongue. “Doesn’t this feel good?”

Ava struggled, her gaze zeroing in on her brother. He stood by the door with his back to the bed.

“Carson,” she sobbed. “Carson, help me! Make them stop.”

“Don’t fight them, sis,” Carson advised, glancing over his shoulder at the men holding her captive. They’d pulled her dress apart, ripped away her bra, and left her upper body exposed.

Jeff gripped both of her hands, forcibly rubbing them over the erection in his jeans. While Judd loomed over her midsection, Brad jerked her legs so they remained spread apart. He was the meaner of the twins, and now, he bent over her feet, nipping the thin skin of her ankle until she gasped in pain.

Judd grinned, sucking harder on her nipples, so hard that Ava moaned. His mouth moved from one to the other, his fingers pinching the tips to retain the stimulation level.

Ava arched away, but sparks were flying through her body. It was a twisted, drugged sensation she could not comprehend. What had they given her? Why did she feel this way? It was wrong and horrible, but at the same time, Judd's mouth provoked irrational, frightening responses beyond her control.

A whimper fluttered in her throat.

"I think she's starting to like it," Brad grunted.

"She's gonna make me come in my goddamn jeans." Jeff used Ava's hands to rub his cock harder through the material. "You ready to switch places, Judd?"

"Fuck no." Judd smiled up at Ava. Through cloudy awareness, she watched him roll her nipple between his teeth. "She doesn't want me to stop."

Her body bucked in response, a sob escaping her.

"You've each had a turn." Carson's voice was tight. "I even gave you extra playtime since we're all friends, but we're done."

"Dude. At least let me get a blowjob for my hundred bucks," Jeff argued.

"This is as far as it goes," Carson replied.

"Fucker," Brad muttered under his breath.

Ava turned toward Carson. He held a cell phone discreetly in his left hand, aimed at the bed. A horrifying thought speared her consciousness. It was almost too depraved to believe.

Is Carson recording this?

Carson shoved the phone back into his pocket. "She's gonna start fighting back, and I can't have bruises showing up on her."

"Give her some more juice," Brad said. "She'll be good to go."

“She’s had enough.” Carson’s voice was tense. “Too much and she’ll forget everything. I want her to remember tonight.”

“I’d rather taste her when she knows what’s going on, anyway.” Jeff licked the side of Ava’s face, his tongue dragging up her cheek. “Next time, sweet thing.”

Ava didn’t react. Her brain was shutting down. Carson’s betrayal was so overwhelming it blocked out all sensation and reason.

Judd moved up her body, his mouth hovering over hers. The kiss he forced on her was rough, his tongue shoving down Ava’s throat until she gagged. “I’ll do more than suck your pretty tits next time, Ava. Next time, I’ll take everything. And no one will stop me.” He kissed her again and instinctively, Ava bit down. His grunt of pain thrilled her.

“Little bitch. You’ll pay for that,” Judd snarled, his hand raising to deliver a blow that never came. His bottom lip dripped blood. One drop landed on the swell of her breast.

“I said no bruises. Now, get off her.” Carson abruptly shoved Judd off Ava. “You two... let her go.”

Jeff and Brad grumbled but complied.

“Get dressed,” Carson ordered, averting his eyes when Ava sat up and shakily crossed her arms over her bare chest. Scooping up her bra from the floor, he tossed it into her lap. “Before I let the guys downstairs pay for a turn, too.”

The ride to Ava’s dorm was eerily silent, the interior of the vehicle illuminated by flashes of lightning as the thunderstorm raged on. The windshield wipers swooshed back and forth, the rhythmic sound accented by Ava’s muffled sobs.

“Quit your fucking sniveling.” Carson took a drag of a cigarette before flicking it out the cracked window. “What are you so upset about, anyway? It’s not like they raped you.”

Ava sucked in a deep breath. Although the effect of the drug they'd slipped into her drink was fading, she was still dizzy. However, a surprising spark of internal strength and anger ignited her insides.

"There is something horribly wrong with you. Something evil and broken." Ava shook uncontrollably, tears rolling down her cheeks, but her voice was strong and clear. "I will never forgive you for this, Carson. *Never*. I hope the pathetic amount they paid you was worth it. Save it for bail because I'm reporting you and your friends to the police."

Carson laughed. "Think twice about that, sis. The video doesn't lie. You *liked* it. You even moaned a couple of times."

"You drugged me," Ava cried out.

Carson shrugged, ignoring that fact. "Mom and Dad will be so disappointed to find out their precious daughter's a whore. It'll break their hearts."

"You're blackmailing me?" The realization was not surprising.

"Not just you. Those guys, too. They'll pay to keep that video from going public. Especially Judd. He's on the fast track into politics. Hella awkward if this pops up later."

"Mom and Dad won't ever believe the filth you spew," Ava insisted, but did the video contain a sliver of truth? Guilty, disgusting sensations twinged in her lower belly as she recalled those hazy, confusing moments. Mouths sliding across her body. Sharp teeth and slimy tongues tasting her flesh. Hands restraining her. Forcing submission.

*What if Kingston Winter was the one holding me down?
Would I have fought or kissed him back?*

The answer frightened her so much, she shut down that thread before it completely unraveled her mind.

The truth that she felt *something* during the assault, something caused by the drugs they'd given her, was unavoidable. Figuring it all out in her current state of mind was impossible. The emotions and trauma were too

overwhelming. Coping with the chaos inside her brain meant shoving it all into the deepest recesses of her soul.

Carson's satisfied smile was illuminated by another flash of lightning. Reaching over, he grabbed a hunk of her hair, forcing Ava to look at him. "I really wanted to catch Kingston on video so Dad could see how perverted his protégé really is. No telling how much he might have coughed up to keep this a secret. But the others will pay. You'll pay, too, Ava." He laughed when Ava jerked away, plastering herself against the other side of the car. "Unless you want to be a bigger disappointment than I am, you'll keep this quiet. Happy birthday, little sis. Bet you'll never forget it."

"I feel sorry for you, Carson. You hate me because I'm everything you aren't, and it's pathetic. *You're* pathetic," Ava replied calmly. She might shatter into a million pieces and never be the same again, but in this moment, she knew one thing for certain.

She was stronger than anyone believed her to be.

Including herself.

No one would *ever* do this to her again.

Carson's hands gripped the wheel, but he said nothing more as they hurtled down the rain-soaked highway.

CHAPTER 7

I'll bide my time.

And claim you as my own.

Fifteen months later...

Kingston watched from a distance as Ava approached the two mahogany caskets. She placed single, long-stem yellow roses on both while swiping tears from her cheeks.

Carson murmured something in her ear, but Ava turned away, presenting him with her back.

Kingston's jaw clenched. Since the night Carson took money in exchange for the privilege of molesting his sister, the

two siblings had broken off contact with each other. Ava abandoned all semblance of a social life. Instead, she studied constantly, blazing through classes and adding more when it was allowed.

At the rate she was going, she'd graduate with a bachelor's degree a year earlier than scheduled.

Would the accidental deaths of her parents send her into a tailspin or inspire her to push through?

The details of the fatal crash were murky. Coming home from dinner at their favorite restaurant, Garrett lost control of his Mercedes. Flying over the embankment, the car flipped several times before landing in a crushed heap of metal. The couple died instantly.

Grief choked Kingston before he swallowed it down. He didn't have the luxury of letting their deaths affect him but, fuck, it wasn't fair. Garrett Blue was a good man and Jocelyn was a warm, caring person. The world was a little dimmer since their passing.

When the graveside services ended, Kingston melted into the large crowd. But he wasn't quick enough. Carson lifted his hand in greeting and began heading his way.

Ava saw Kingston as well. When their eyes locked, there was a quick flash of shock.

Then a blank expression stole over her features, drowning the hurt in her eyes.

Not for the first time, Kingston wondered what would have happened if he'd been at the judge's house that dark, rainy night. The night Ava turned eighteen and she became fair game as predicted.

If he was a better man, he *would* have been there. If he was a better man, he might have even tried saving her. He should have gone for no other reason than to determine if Judd told the truth.

One thing kept him away that night.

Resisting a helpless Ava would have been impossible. Seeing her restrained would have ignited the darkest portion of his soul. Without a doubt, he would have slaughtered any man standing in his way and fucked her with ruthless, brutal abandon.

His presence would have damned her—not saved her.

It was rumored a video of the assault existed, but his IT team had not located it. Even after hacking Carson's phone and laptop several times, it remained secreted away. Kingston desperately wanted to find that video—not for the sake of the other men, but for Ava's.

“Decent of you to come.” Carson's forehead was beaded with perspiration, his skin sallow. He was fucking high. “I know you don't do funerals.”

“Your dad was a great man, and your mom will be sorely missed.” Kingston's chest tightened. He couldn't prove anything yet, but there was no shaking the belief that Carson was involved in the couple's deaths.

“Ava is taking it hard. She was always their favorite.” Carson's tone vibrated with resentment, but he quickly turned to other matters. “I need another loan, Kingston. Can you float me until the will is read and insurance settles?”

The deeper Carson dug this hole of debt, the sweeter collection day would be. Kingston wondered how Ava would survive until her own portion of the inheritance was released. She wouldn't receive it until she turned twenty-five, but Carson would get his within a matter of days. He'd already taken over the house, moving some questionable friends into the guest rooms.

“Call my business manager,” Kingston advised. “Now, excuse me. I'd like to say a few words to Ava.”

“Sure thing, *bro*,” Carson smirked. “Hope you're warm enough in that suit. My sister's cold as an iceberg.”

Having a dirtbag for a brother will do that.

Ava had taken refuge behind a huge oak tree, silently watching people depart the cemetery.

“My deepest condolences, Miss Blue.”

She stiffened at the sound of his voice, and Kingston could think of little else but gathering this sad, lost girl into his arms. Would she resist an offer of comfort? Or melt into his embrace?

Ava dabbed her eyes with a bedraggled tissue. “I can’t seem to stop crying.”

Kingston’s fists clenched. The forlorn sorrow in her voice was so different from Carson’s annoyed tone.

“That’s to be expected,” he murmured. “You’ve lost people whom you loved very much. I know you’re heartbroken.”

Ava turned to him, eyes red-rimmed and puffy but still so damned beautiful it nearly took his breath away. “Did you cry when you lost your father and stepmother?”

The blunt question surprised Kingston, dredging up memories of Rebecca and how he both loved and hated her.

Rebecca tricked him into providing the instrument of her death. There could be no forgiveness for that betrayal, nor the fact she was partly responsible for the six-inch scar his father carved over his heart when he was sixteen. “For my stepmother, yes, but my father wasn’t a man anyone would shed tears over.”

He buried thoughts of his stepmother when Ava’s lips trembled. The urge to cover her soft, pink mouth with his own was more than alarming.

“I’m all alone now,” she whispered almost to herself.

“Sometimes, being alone is safer.” Slipping his hand into hers, he squeezed it tight before letting go.

Ava inhaled at his touch, a sharp sound that ignited all of Kingston’s possessive tendencies.

Damn it all.

For a brief flash of insanity, he wanted to be the type of man Garrett Blue expected for his precious daughter. Someone

kind and generous. Someone decent. Upstanding and respectable.

Kingston knew he wasn't that man. He never would be. It wasn't possible when his world revolved around darkness and death and debts. Once he claimed her, he would break her spirit and destroy her heart because *that* was the type of man he was.

Wicked. Cruel. Selfish.

A monster.

A monster unable to bear the sight of this girl's suffering.

Grabbing her by the arms, he pulled her closer.

"Tap into the strength I know is inside you." Kingston's words lashed at her, harsh and firm. "Don't you fucking dare curl up into a ball simply because it's easier. Fight back. Use that sadness, Ava. That grief. That anger and hatred. Use it and become stronger because of it. If you don't, you'll become a plaything for men like your brother and his friends. Men like me." His mouth brushed hers, absorbing her shocked gasp before letting her go. "Ah, Ava. When I kiss you for the first time, it will happen when you least expect it. My first taste of you will be at *my* leisure."

Ava's mouth was a rounded "O" of astonishment. Fear flashed in her eyes. It was as though she'd seen the *real* Kingston through the polished, cool façade and that tiny glimpse of his obsession terrified her.

Then her eyes sparked with pained fury.

"With my parents' deaths there's no one left in this family to use for your advantage. I can't imagine any reason you would remain a part of my life. Or even my brother's." A sob broke her voice but she regained her composure with admirable grace. "Goodbye, Mister Winter." Spinning on her heel, Ava stalked away without a backward glance.

Kingston's lips twisted at her fiery response. His cold heart thumped with damning lust as he considered his options. Should he claim her now or bide his time until the day her brother's debts came due?

*Wait. Be patient and she'll have no choice in the matter.
Her fate is in my hands. Mine, alone.*

His poor little lamb had no idea what was to come.

CHAPTER 8

What doesn't kill you

Is never forgotten.

Four years later...

The air in Savannah was heavier than it was back home.

Sweeter with the last burst of summer's blooms and much warmer than Ava expected. Dashing into the parking garage's elevator lobby, she plucked the tank top away from her skin to cool herself off.

Pride in her accomplishments swelled Ava's heart. Leaving her hometown was a smart decision. With no one's assistance, she'd secured a job with a small, prestigious publishing house and placed a deposit on a tiny garden apartment in the heart of Savannah's historic district. She'd move in next week. Meanwhile, she was staying at a downtown hotel and familiarizing herself with the area.

There were still some loose ends to tie up back home—Drake Cornerstone being one. Ava liked the young lawyer and enjoyed their dates. But his disappointment in her decision to move would not dissuade her. If he was interested, he'd make the effort required of a long-distance relationship.

Not that Ava cared either way. She was perfectly fine being alone.

A man already occupied the elevator. Ava gave him a distracted smile while tucking her purse tighter under her arm. After running errands all morning, she looked forward to venturing back into the city that afternoon to visit some historic sites.

“Which floor?” The man was handsome and not much older than herself.

“Four.” Ava watched as he leaned forward, stabbing a button with a manicured finger. His mouth curved into a charming grin she couldn’t help but return. Giddy with excitement, she wanted to smile at everyone.

She was moving forward and finding her own joy. All the pain and heartache in Bitter Springs was behind her. Even the night terrors she suffered since that awful night were slowly being wrestled under control. Limiting alcohol, especially white wine, helped stave off those frightening episodes.

She was on her own now and headed toward a beautiful life.

It was the first step in a great adventure. A chance to be herself and to find her own way. A chance for the happiness she’d wanted for so long.

It was all hers now.

Ava and Kingston’s story continues in The Savage Duet.

A KING SO SAVAGE (Book I)

<https://geni.us/AKingSoSavage>

A HEART SO SAVAGE (Book II)

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ABOUT APRIL MORAN

April enjoys writing both historical and contemporary/dark romance with a generous splash of heat. When not penning tales of passion, she enjoys traveling with her husband, attending rock concerts with friends, and time spent with family. Brainstorming new storylines is best done while riding her horse or during long walks with her German Shepherd. A tumbler of good whiskey helps tie all the details together and brings her characters to life.

WEBSITE

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Dedication:

For Kelly and Carol who didn't catch it in time, and for my mom who did.

BRADY & LUNA

Defiant Heart

Starlight Cove Series

Luna

I never thought I'd wanted this life—a quiet life as a wife and a mom, my little family of four settled in a sleepy town on the Maine coast—but I couldn't deny how much I loved it.

Couldn't deny, either, how fucking hot my husband looked with our girls or what the sight was doing to me. Brady had always been attractive. Like, burn your retinas and set your panties on fire *hot*. But this...

Jesus.

In the middle of a bustling Starlight Cove festival, he stood there, one hand braced against Wren's back as she sat atop his shoulders, her hands clutching his hair. His other hand covered the entirety of Hazel's back as she rested in the baby carrier he wore strapped to his chest. Aviator sunglasses sat perched on his nose, hiding his shrewd gaze, but I knew from experience he was scanning the area and everyone in it for any possible threat to his girls.

It didn't matter that the entirety of the town milled about at this festival, hundreds of residents surrounding us. Or that I'd been pulled into conversation with half a dozen people who were interested in hiring me for a private yoga retreat—something I definitely should have been paying attention to.

I couldn't tear my eyes away from my husband.

It'd been six months since Hazel had been born, and my libido hadn't quite recovered. Though I guessed having two kids in less than a year would do that to a person. While I still thought Brady was the sexiest man on the face of the earth, I was touched out most days by the time he got home. And the thought of more hands on me—even if they were only to give me pleasure—was just too much.

Because of that, it'd been a while since we'd partaken in some adult fun time.

But right now? Standing here, watching him play Super Dad and look so fucking hot and competent while doing so, was like a lightning strike straight to my lady bits.

Tuning out the conversation around me, I brushed my fingertips back and forth over my lower lip, and a flush worked its way from my cheeks down my chest as I ate up the sight of him taking care of our girls. He'd always been protective, but that trait had increased tenfold since Wren had been born and had multiplied after Hazel had come along.

But he wasn't just protective. He was attentive and patient and so, so loving. Watching him slip effortlessly into fatherhood and become a daddy had made me fall in love with him all over again.

Today wasn't the first time since Hazel had been born that we'd been out as a family. It wasn't the first time he'd given Wren a shoulder ride or donned the baby carrier, so I didn't know what it was about this particular moment on this particular day. All I knew was my nipples were tight, my clit throbbing with a need I hadn't felt in way too long, and there was a burning under my skin for something that didn't even make *sense*.

We were done having kids. Absolutely, one hundred percent *done*. Two was our limit.

So then why the hell did I want him to fuck me like we weren't? Why did I want him to hold me down and come inside me so deep, whispering about all the ways he was going to fuck a baby into me?

The thought alone sent a rush of heat through me, and my panties? There was no saving them.

Wren's fists tightened in Brady's hair, and she leaned down, smacking an open-mouthed, sloppy kiss to the side of his temple. When he responded by turning his head to place a kiss on her knee, his lips moving as he murmured something no doubt ridiculously sweet to her, the tether holding me back snapped. I couldn't wait another second to tell him what I wanted. Couldn't wait to get the hell out of this festival, head home, and get the girls settled in bed. Then, I was going to have my way with my husband.

Mumbling a quick goodbye to the group I'd been chatting with, I extricated myself and made a beeline toward my family, weaving my way through the throngs of people. Even though sunglasses hid Brady's eyes, I could feel them on me, tracking my every movement. Making sure I was okay. That I didn't need anything. That he'd be there to give me whatever it was if I did.

I just hoped that would extend to what I was about to ask for...

Once I was close enough, Wren's face split with a grin when she spotted me. She squealed, yanking hard on Brady's hair as she bounced on his shoulders. "Mama!"

I grinned up at her, pressing a kiss to her ankle. "Hi, birdie." I shot a quick glance down at Hazel, brushing a thumb over her downy cheek as she snoozed away against her dad's chest, despite the cacophony all around us.

Once Wren's attention was averted again to the plethora of passersby, I pressed my body against Brady's. Then I slipped my hand under the hem of his T-shirt, dancing my fingers across his abs just over the waistband of his jeans.

He looked down at me, one brow raised. "You've been staring at me like I'm your next meal. You need something, lawbreaker?"

God, yes. I needed my husband. With a ferocity I hadn't felt in way too long. I needed that insatiability again. Where

we couldn't even wait to get in the door before he was inside me because we were so desperate for each other. I needed him to rip my clothes off and fill me up. Needed him to make my body sing in the ways only he'd ever been able to coax from me.

Biting my lip, I nodded and pushed up on tiptoes. He met me halfway, his hand braced on Wren's back to hold her steady as he tipped his head down toward me.

Against his ear, I murmured, "I know you're shooting blanks, but I need you to fuck me like you aren't. As soon as possible."

Brady's abs tightened under my palm, and I glanced up in time to see his brows shoot up. He stared down at me for half a second before lifting his gaze to scan the crowd. Then he barked, "Mabel!"

The older woman jumped where she stood a dozen feet away from us, talking to her girl gang, and pursed her lips as she glanced in our direction, clearly not impressed with my husband.

He jerked his head, gesturing for her to come over. "I have a proposition for you."

That must've been enough to get her interest piqued because she excused herself, shuffling her way over to us. "What is it, sugar? I was in the middle of a group sale for this month's special. That purple vibrator is always my best seller. You interested?"

"What I'm interested in are the keys to the Smut Shack."

My mouth dropped open, and I shot wide eyes at Brady, but he was focused on Mabel. And, apparently, the task I'd given him.

"*Well...*" She shook her head at my husband, but a smile curved her lips. "Never thought I'd see the day, to tell you the truth. I'm happy for you. I really am. But it's still gonna cost you."

"I'll give you a pass on your next speeding ticket."

“Honey, I wasn’t born yesterday. You’ll give me *five*.”

“Three.”

“Deal.” Without another word, she pulled the key from her pocket and placed it in his hand. “Leave it how you found it. And no using the sample products. Have fun, kids!” Then she sashayed her way back to her group of friends without a backward glance.

“Seriously?” I asked Brady, brows raised. “*Now*? We’re just dropping everything to make that happen?”

“You just whispered the filthiest thing you’ve said to me in months. Have I done something in the past seven years to make you think I *wouldn’t* do everything in my power to make that happen immediately?”

“Well...no.”

He placed a hand on the small of my back, guiding us through the throngs of people. “We just need to find Aiden and Avery. They’ll watch the girls. And then I can give you exactly what you asked for. Repeatedly.”

He was right, of course. As soon as we found my brother-and sister-in-law, they took the girls without question. Though from the look Avery shot me, I had no doubt I’d be getting grilled about it later, and Brady would be getting the same from his brother.

But none of that mattered right now. Not when my husband and I were fumbling our way into Mabel’s she-shed and his hands were everywhere and yet nowhere I needed them to be. He hauled me up against him, and I wrapped my legs around his waist as he palmed my ass. Then he was kissing me with a hunger I hadn’t felt from him in so long.

In *too* long.

“Fuck, I’ve missed you,” he said. He trailed his lips down my neck, his hand squeezing my ass as I ground down against his erection, desperate for him. “Missed this hot little pussy rocking all over my cock too. Can’t wait to be inside you.”

“Then hurry up, sheriff.”

He chuckled under his breath and set me down on the table. It ran along the front wall, directly below a window overlooking the yard, giving us absolutely zero privacy. But Brady didn't seem to mind. He just shoved up my skirt, shifted my panties to the side, and groaned as he slid his fingers through my slit.

“Christ, you're wet. This all for me?”

“It always is,” I managed out through panting breaths, my hips rocking against his questing fingers.

A low, satisfied hum rumbled in his chest, and he dropped his face to my neck, placing a kiss there. Against my ear, he said, “Thinking about me fucking you raw and filling you up made this pussy so sweet for me, didn't it? Gonna slide in so fucking deep. Make sure I get every drop inside.”

“God, yes.” I braced my hands on the table, tipping my head back as he circled my clit before slipping two fingers inside me. I moaned as he filled me, rocking my hips in an attempt to get him deeper. Encourage him to thrust harder. But it still wasn't enough. Wasn't the stretch or fullness he always gave me. “Need you... Need you inside me.”

Groaning into my neck, he continued fingering me even as he unfastened his jeans with his other hand, tugging the fly open just enough to free his cock. Then he slipped his fingers from my pussy and wrapped them around his shaft before giving it a stroke. It was so much like our first time all those years ago that my clit throbbed at the memory, my breath hitching as I watched him jerk himself off with my pleasure.

“This what you want, lawbreaker?”

“You know it is. Quit teasing me.” I wrapped my legs around his waist, digging my heels into his ass and tugging him closer, desperate to be with him in a way we hadn't been together in far too long.

He chuckled against my skin. “But that's the best part.”

“After. You can tease me *after* you fill me up.”

“Jesus,” he said under his breath.

What I said must've made him snap because without another word, he swiped the head of his cock through my slit, gathering my wetness, before he sank inside and stole every ounce of my breath.

"Fuck me," he said through gritted teeth. He pressed his thumb against my clit, his attention focused on where he disappeared inside me.

"*Brady...*" I choked out on a moan as he filled me, his thick cock stretching me in ways no one else had ever come close to. In ways I'd missed far more than I'd thought.

"You feel like heaven, baby. Gonna make this so good for you. Gonna fuck you until you come all over my cock, and then I'm going to fill up this pussy, just like you asked. Gonna come inside until you're dripping with me."

"Oh my *God*." I didn't know why the thought of him stuffing me full of his come...of him dripping out of me... made my pussy pulse with need, but there was no denying it did. My clit throbbed in time to each of his thrusts, shoving me closer and closer to the edge of release.

With his fingers digging into my inner thighs, he spread me wide for him and sank deep. Over and over again, taking up a punishing rhythm he knew would get me off.

"Reach down and play with that pretty little clit, baby. Make yourself come for me. Come all over my cock, and I'll give you what you want."

Without hesitation, I reached down, strumming my clit in tight circles, my pussy throbbing as I sought my peak. I stared up at my husband, unable to look away. This man—this amazing man who loved me more than the world and who was everything to me—was fucking me like he'd never get enough. Like he craved me just as much today, seven years later, as he had that very first time.

His brow was drawn, his mouth set in a firm line, jaw tight as he fought off his own release, waiting for me to get there first. "C'mon, lawbreaker," he said through clenched teeth. "Let me feel that perfect pussy squeeze my cock. Show me

how much you love how I fuck you. Show me how much you want my come filling you up.”

I gasped, my body going taut—tightening...tightening... until all at once, everything burst. I sobbed out a moan as the waves washed over me, pleasure rippling through my body. At the same time, his cock jerked inside me, my orgasm pulling every ounce of his release from him.

As the shockwaves continued pulsing through my body, Brady leaned down, taking my lips in a slow, deep kiss. With his hand cupping my neck, he swept his tongue into my mouth, sliding it against mine as he rocked inside me, slow and gentle. A reprieve from the fast frenzy in which he'd just taken me.

He was still hard, his cock like steel, and I wasn't anywhere near satisfied. But instead of fucking me again, he pulled back, slipping from inside me, and I whimpered at the feeling of loss.

Before I could protest, he gripped his cock, sliding it through the mess we'd just made and gathering the bit of his release that had seeped out. “Can't waste any of it, can we, baby?”

And then he used his cock to push it right back inside me.

“*Brady.*”

He braced his hands on either side of my hips, leaning over me as he filled me with his cock, stuffing his come back inside me.

“I told you I'd give you what you asked for, didn't I?” He sank deep, then rotated his hips in a soft, slow grind. His pelvis brushed against my sensitive clit, and my body thrummed in response. “Gonna stuff you so full of come, you're going to feel me inside you for days.”

“Oh, holy fuck,” I said, my eyes rolling back as he hit that spot inside me that made me lose my mind.

“How many more do you have for me, lawbreaker?”

I glanced up at him, my body a live wire from the pleasure he was coaxing out of me. “How long do you think we have before someone comes looking for us?”

“You think someone’s going to interrupt the sheriff and chance getting on his bad side?” He chuckled low and pressed his thumb against my clit, strumming it in tight circles. “Baby, we’ve got all night.”

PAIGE & ADAM

Paige in Progress

Reluctant Hearts Series

Paige

“All I’m saying is I can’t believe they got away with serving horse shit—probably *literally*—at a gala that cost \$500 per plate to attend,” I say, my focus on the rough trail in front of us.

“And I can’t believe you’re still talking about it,” Adam says, amusement clear in his tone as he keeps pace with me. “Three months later.”

“Well, it was a fucking travesty! I still have nightmares about that tasteless amuse-bouche. More like not-so-amusing bullshit, if you ask me.”

Adam snorts. “You’re right. Everything tasted like cardboard.”

“Like *ass* flavored cardboard,” I grumble.

“But cornering the chef, telling him to give up all aspirations of making a career out of this, and then handing him Cade’s card for when he ‘needed a real chef’ was a little harsh, don’t you think?”

“No. I don’t,” I say firmly. “You wanna know what *was* harsh? Swallowing down that garbage. As if it wasn’t bad enough that I had to get dressed up in formalwear—with

Spanx, mind you—but I also had to suffer through food that I wouldn't even feed the dog.”

Adam laughs outright at that and shakes his head, his eyes dancing as he stares over at me. “Jesus, you're on a roll today, cuddlefluff.” It's been a decade and a half, and the man still manages to come up with the most ridiculous pet names for me at the drop of a hat. “You're being a little bit of a terror, you know that?”

He encroaches on my space, his hand going to my waist as he corrals me off the beaten path until we're in the surrounding brush, my back pressed up against a tree.

“Need me to adjust your attitude?” he asks, dropping his face to my neck as he skims his nose along my jaw. At the same time, he brings his hands to my shorts, deftly unbuttoning them and tugging down the zipper, and I don't even try to stop him.

Why the hell would I?

Even though we came here with Jason, Tessa, Winter, and Cade, Adam and I are—as per usual—easily a hundred yards in front of our friends. I love those idiots, but they are as slow as my kids on school mornings when we're already running late. Add in the fact that this is the one weekend every year where we're all childfree, and the hands... Well, they start to roam.

Last year, Jason and Tess almost got us kicked out of our camping site because they got caught fucking behind some bushes ten yards from a family's tent. The family, obviously, was not pleased.

To be fair, our friends didn't *realize* they were that close to other people. There was a lot of brush separating them. And, well, when the urge strikes, it strikes. But the point is, we're all horny motherfuckers when we get this weekend away.

In fact, it was the only way my husband could get me to agree to go to that stupid gala in the first place. He conned me into it by promising me zip lining and fucking behind a

waterfall on this year's trip. And, well, I'm not stupid. Of course I said yes.

I'm not stupid now, either, because though I know those four nosy assholes could come upon us at any moment, I'm not turning down a chance to have an orgasm at the hands of my husband. After fifteen years, he's become so fucking good at it that he can get me there in thirty seconds if he sets his mind to it.

So, instead of voicing any sort of hesitation, I spread my legs wider, grip his wrist, and shove his hand farther into my shorts.

"God, yes," I say, my eyes fluttering closed at the first brush of his fingers against me. "I need you to adjust the fuck out of me." I drop my head back to the tree trunk when he sinks one digit inside me before pulling it out and stroking his fingertip across my clit.

A shudder rolls through me, but it's not enough. He's giving me gentle and teasing when I need hard and quick.

"Faster," I beg. And, yeah, this man can make me beg. I'm not even ashamed of it anymore.

"How many thousands of times do we have to go over this?" His lips brush against my ear with every word. "Stop acting like I don't know exactly what my wife's pussy needs."

It isn't that he doesn't know. Of *course* he knows. He's given me thousands of orgasms over the years—slow and sweet after the kids are in bed, fast and quick when we escape for ten minutes to do "laundry," and everything in between. And in all that time, he's never once left me hanging. But we're in a time crunch here. Our friends could show up any second and ruin all the—

"Adam! Get your hand out of Paige's pants!" Jason shouts as loud as fucking possible, and the rest of the traitors laugh.

"Fuck off!" I yell, while at the same time tilting my hips to get my husband's fingers deeper inside me.

"You should be ashamed of yourselves!" Jason continues. "There are *families* here."

That's bullshit. We haven't passed a single other person on our two hour hike. He's just being a shithead, as per usual.

Adam breathes out a laugh, dropping his head to my shoulder. And then he pulls his hand from inside my panties, locks his eyes with mine, and licks his fingers clean. I melt back against the tree trunk, so lost in my horny haze that it takes me a minute to realize he's already done up the fly of my shorts.

With a squeeze to my hips, he drops a soft, chaste kiss on my lips. "C'mon, sugarsnap."

I huff out an indignant breath as I stare at him with wide eyes. "Are you kidding me right now?"

Adam raises a brow, then tips his head in the direction of our company. "Did you want an audience?"

The thought of participating in a little nameless, faceless exhibitionism *has* been known to do a little something for me. The thought of my four best friends watching my husband make me come...does not.

"I hate that fucking guy," I grumble, allowing Adam to tug me back to the path and toward our friends.

"I heard that!" Jason calls.

"Good, you were supposed to!" I yell back, then shove him once I'm close enough.

He stumbles with a laugh. "And you do not. You love me."

"I'm not so sure, babe." Tessa gives me a quick once over, no doubt reading everything in that single glance. Namely that I am *not* blissed out thanks to a relaxing orgasm, but that I am, in fact, just the opposite. "I definitely wouldn't look so kindly on someone who stood in the way of an O. Especially when the cockblockers we call children are nowhere near."

"Oh please, like they won't be fucking like bunnies as soon as they zip their tent closed, same as the rest of us. Plus, I know she loves me." Jason shoots me a self-satisfied smirk. "Did anyone else bring you homemade salsa?"

"My homemade salsa," Cade cuts in with an eye roll.

Jase ignores him completely. “No? I rest my case.”

“The only reason you started bringing that in the first place is because Adam asked you to do so *one* time,” I say.

“And I’m not an idiot, so I’m gonna bring that shit every fucking year. Same reason I bring cronuts for Winter and keep the Twizzlers stocked for Tess. When the wives are happy, our lives are happy. And I’d like to *happy wife* my way to a beej —” Jason’s words cut off on a laugh when Cade shoves him hard enough to make him stumble off the path.

“Seriously?” Cade says. “It’s been more than fifteen years, man. When are you going to get it through your thick skull that it’s never going to be okay to talk about the shit you’re doing with my sister?”

Jase grins as he strolls back onto the path, wrapping an arm around Tessa’s shoulders and tugging her into his side. He plants a smacking kiss on her temple, then glances at Cade with raised brows. “I’m pretty sure you know all about it, considering your nieces and nephew running around.”

“Speaking of, has anyone checked in?” Tess asks.

“I did before we started the hike,” Winter says. “They set up a homemade Slip ’N Slide that takes up, like, half the backyard.” She rolls her eyes on a laugh. “I think they’re *all* going to sleep well tonight.”

Being the saints they are, my and Adam’s parents team up and spend a weekend every year taking all the kids—ours, as well as Jason and Tessa’s and Cade and Winter’s. Considering they’re the only grandparents any of our children have ever known, they spoil them all, as if every one of those rugrats is their own. And I love them for it.

I also love this uninterrupted grown up time they gift us every year. Where we don’t have to think about afternoon snacks and activities and fighting to get the kids to stick to their bedtimes.

For forty-eight blissful hours, I’m not Mommy. I’m just Paige. Foul-mouthed, aggressively competitive, sometimes drunk, and perpetually horny for my husband.

Seriously, could life get any better?

MACKENNA & HUDSON

Pact with a Heartbreaker and Captain Heartbreaker

Havenbrook Series

Mac

If there was somewhere in the world that was better than being in Hudson's arms, both of us naked and sated, I hadn't yet found it. When I'd spent so much of the past ten years constantly worried about him, praying for his safe return home, and now to have him here? Forever? There was nothing better than this.

I was curled into his side, resting my head on his chest as he massaged my scalp, making me a puddle next to him in our bed. We were playing one of my favorite games—*what if*. Usually, it devolved into pure silliness, but sometimes it turned downright naughty. Didn't matter, though, because it was with him, and I wanted it all.

He pressed his lips against my forehead, one hand banded around my leg that was hitched across his lap, the other in my hair. "What if I didn't wait to get you home the next time I wanted to fuck you?"

I grinned into his chest as thoughts of what that could mean flashed in my mind. "What if I let you?"

His cock thickened under my thigh, making my smile widen. Stamina was definitely not an issue with Hudson...

"What if we spent all our Wednesdays like this?" he asked.

“If we did that, I think we might get fired.”

“Cheater,” he said, a smile in his voice as he pressed a kiss to my forehead. “That’s not how you’re supposed to play and you know it.”

“Sometimes it needs more than a what if response.”

“Fine, I’ll give you that. But you’re up.”

I inhaled deeply and let it go in a soft, slow exhale. With his body under mine—responsive and ready for me—and his fingers ghosting over my skin, I wasn’t sure I ever wanted to leave this place. “What if we stayed right here in bed for the rest of the day?”

He hummed low in his throat before hooking his hand behind my knee and tugging me over so I was lying on top of him. He brushed my hair back from my face, his eyes bouncing between mine, so much love shining in them. “What if…” he started, letting a pause hang in the air before he finally finished with, “we got married instead?”

I huffed out a laugh, resting my chin on the back of my hand as I stared at him, but when he didn’t return my laughter, I froze. Mouth parted in shock, I blinked at him with wide eyes. “Um…what?”

He grinned, tracing his fingertip down the slope of my nose. “Don’t pretend like you didn’t know exactly where this was going.”

“And don’t pretend like this isn’t totally out of the blue. I mean, what the *hell*? We’re laying here playing *what if* after you gave me a mind-blowing orgasm—”

“*Three* mind-blowing orgasms.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s beside the point. You’ve been home a *week*, Hud.”

“*You’re* my home, Kenna. And you have been for damn near thirty years. So this isn’t unexpected or too fast. I’ve been waiting literal years. And now I don’t want to wait even another day.”

I blew out a disbelieving laugh, my eyes darting between his to see if he was joking. He *had* to be joking. Right?

Except...he didn't look like he was joking.

The smile slowly melted off my face. I straddled his hips and sat up, ignoring the feel of him between my legs. And, yeah, it probably wasn't the best idea to bare my breasts and rub all over him while we were having this magnitude of a conversation, but I wasn't exactly thinking clearly. "You're... serious."

He dipped his chin in a nod, his hands settled on the outsides of my thighs as he held my gaze, never once allowing them to dip to the goods on display. And if that didn't show exactly how serious he was, I didn't know what would. "As a heart attack. I'd marry you today if you said yes."

"*Today?* You don't even have a ring!"

His smile started slow, just a quirk of his lips as he reached over to the bedside table. With his eyes still connected with mine, he opened the drawer and blindly reached inside before grabbing whatever he'd been searching for. Then he placed a small velvet box on his chest.

"Kenna," he said, his voice low, eyes sparkling as he stared up at me, and I wasn't even sure I was breathing. "If you think I haven't been waiting for this day for years, then you haven't been paying attention. I've loved you since I was old enough to understand what love was—earlier, probably. There's not a doubt in my mind that I'm gonna love you till the day I die. And then I'll go ahead and keep loving you in the afterlife. Because you're my person. Always have been, always will be. And I'm tired of spending all this time loving you without being able to call you mine."

"You can call me mine all you want," I said, though it came out as more of a whisper than anything else.

"Quit arguing just to argue. You know what I mean." He popped the lid on the box, revealing a simple band—a single row of diamonds encased in white gold. The ring was pretty

but understated. Exactly what I'd want. Exactly what I'd pick out for myself. But of course, Hud knew that.

When it came to me, he knew everything.

"I don't need the fancy reception or the flowers or even watching you walk toward me in a pretty dress," he said. "All I need is you and the vows and the promise of forever. So... what if we didn't take a year to plan a wedding?" He took the ring from its velvet cushion and held it between his thumb and forefinger. "What if we did it right now? Today. In Parkersville, in jeans and T-shirts." He picked up my left hand, placed the ring at the tip, and then slid it down. A perfect fit.

Then he linked our fingers together—another perfect fit—and tugged me down until my face was hovering above his, his expression clearly stating he was waiting for an answer from me.

This was impulsive. But was it? We'd been a team our entire lives. And I couldn't deny I'd dreamed about this very thing since I was a teenager. Not the wedding. Not the dress or the party or the fanfare. But us. Just him and me and a life we built together, the two of us.

I bit my lower lip, my stomach a riot of nerves and uneasiness and...anticipation. Of starting the first day of our forever. Right now. Today.

"What if I said yes?"

Thank you for reading *Happily Ever Afters* and for supporting this important cause that's near and dear to my heart. If you haven't read the full length novels where each of these couples get their HEAs, you can find them in *Defiant Heart*, *The Heartbreaker Collection* which includes *Pact with a Heartbreaker* and *Captain Heartbreaker*, and *Paige in Progress*. To be taken directly to them, [click here](#) or go to geni.us/FLAGbooks.

If you liked these glimpses into the future, you can find bonus epilogues for many of my other books [here](#) or go to geni.us/brightonVIPwelcome.

ABOUT BRIGHTON WALSH

Award-winning *USA Today* and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Brighton Walsh pens contemporary romances featuring strong-willed heroines and the heroes who fall head over heels for them. She lives in the Midwest with her real life hero of a husband, her two teenagers, and her dog who thinks she's a queen. Connect with her online at brightonwalsh.com/quicklinks.



THE COLORS OF HER LOVE

A Love in LA Quartet Novella

by C.M. Albert

Editing: Flower Work Press

Proofreading: Lynn Mullan

Contemporary Romance

**Brother's Best Friend, Hollywood Actor, Rockstar,
Unrequited Childhood Romance**

SUMMER DALTON sees two main things in her life: colors when she hears music, and River Ward—the man she's wanted since she was seven years old. The only problem? He's her brother's best friend, and Ryder's one rule is: *Though shalt not touch thy little sister.*

RIVER WARD has everything his heart *should* desire. But not even an Oscar Award nomination and his band Midnight Lily are enough to settle his restless, lonely heart. Unfortunately, the answer is the one thing he *can't* have—and a constant reminder of what's truly missing from his life.

When fate throws the two together on New Year's Eve, will they honor Ryder's one simple rule? Or will they risk his wrath—and their own hearts—and finally put everything on the line for love?

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Readers,

The Colors of Her Love is a *Love in LA Quartet* novella created especially for you! The first two books, *The Stars in Her Eyes* and *The Fire in His Touch* brought a ton of eagerness for the last two novels: *The Lies in His Head* (Ryder's story) and *The Song of His Heart* (River's story). Don't worry, I am busy finishing up both of those now!

So many of you fell in love with River's swoon-worthy sexiness, romanticism, and intelligence, and he quickly became the underdog of the series with so many River fanatics for #TeamRiver.

When the opportunity came to work with Cassidy London on her amazing *Fight Like a Girl* anthology to help raise money and awareness for breast cancer research, I knew *The Colors of Her Love* was the perfect way for me to give you *exactly* what you needed until River's book comes out—a sweet, sexy, bite-sized teaser of what's to come with this adorable couple's forbidden love story. For those who are familiar with the quartet, this never-before published story takes place the New Year's Eve after Knox Strickland hosts his first "Friendsmas" while Bethany Fox is crashing at his place in the book, *The Fire in His Touch*.

When Summer and River first came to me, I could feel their untold story of childhood friendship, first crushes, unrequited love, secret encounters, off-limits brother's best friend, and of course, star crossed lovers. *The Colors of Her Love* gave me

the chance to give you only Summer's perspective; however, as with all the books in this quartet, you'll be hearing from *both* Summer and River in *The Song of His Heart*.

To give you an idea of what's to come, the tagline for that book is: "*One* man. *One* woman. Sometimes, the biggest *lies* are the ones we tell ourselves." It is not going to be an easy journey for them to find and sustain an everlasting love. I can't wait to bring you their story early next year!

If you're new to this quartet, be warned—the full books are five-star steamy. They are as sexy as the sin and secrets in Hollywood itself. As one blogger said: "It is not safe for work, not safe for your heart, and definitely not safe for your panties!" If you want to start from the beginning, read [*The Stars in Her Eyes*](#) today: "*One* woman. *Three* men. Some things are best kept secret." Then, move on to [*The Fire in His Touch*](#): "*Two* friends. *Three* lies. The truth was bound to happen."

Until then, enjoy this fun novella and introduction to Summer and River!

xoxo,

C.M. Albert

CHAPTER 1

Over My Brother's Dead Body

“**Y**OU KNOW WHAT’S even better than having an older brother with a hot best friend?” Summer asked her BFF while they were live on air. Even though she hadn’t come through for Summer yet, Trista Hollins was a well-respected relationship guru and matchmaker in Hollywood—and the perfect guest for her weekly podcast.

“What’s that, girl?” Trista asked, fluffing her natural brown curls before taking a sip of her organic chai latte.

“Having an older brother with a hot best friend who *also* happens to be a rockstar!”

Trista laughed. “Yeah, but you know what they say about those rockstar bad boys.”

“I do?”

“Rockstars *always* behave like rockstars. But musicians? Now, those are the ones you marry.”

Summer sputtered on her café latte. “Who said anything about marriage? I’m simply talking about washboard abs and a ten-thousand-kilowatt smile that could light up any sold-out stadium.”

Trista arched a dark brown, dramatically shaped eyebrow. “We *are* talking about *your* brother, right? He wouldn’t let a musician *or* rockstar within ten feet of you—best friend or not—if he didn’t have completely honorable intentions.”

Summer folded her arms across her chest and pouted. “Isn’t that the truth?” she harrumphed. “And that, my colorful Seashells, is precisely why I’ll be single forever. But ... it doesn’t mean I can’t dream. Am I right?”

“No harm in looking,” Trista agreed.

“Before we wrap this segment up, what’s one last piece of dating advice for us single ladies? It’s rough sailing on the dating seas these days,” Summer joked half-heartedly. It wasn’t a lie though. Trista had caught Summer’s ex, Reed, in

an uncompromising situation a few months ago. Let's just say it was unfair to typecast rockstars instead of scumbag, low-life, cheating lawyers.

See? I'm not bitter at all.

“Honestly? It's having a sense of commonality with the person. Not just with your hobbies and interests, though those are good, too. But a real connection and understanding with your love language, your values, and the way you want to live your lives. Sometimes, opposites attract. But I've found that the relationships that really stick are the ones where you have some common ground and a sense of peace about how you want to live your shared lives.”

“Huh,” Summer said, genuinely taking in what her bestie was saying. “That explains so much about my ex. He could never understand my passion for music, or the way I connect so deeply with it. Not to mention we had completely different work schedules and values around money.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Trista said knowingly. She *was* the one who'd caught Reed with his pants down and his intern's over-botoxed lips wrapped around his puny little cock like the biggest cliché ever, after all. “Maybe that rockstar is making more and more sense?”

Summer sighed. “Over my brother's dead body.”

They both laughed, because sadly it was true.

Ryder Dalton, famous Hollywood casting director and Summer's older brother, was known for his snarly disposition and no-nonsense approach to work and life. He had razor focus and once he owned a belief, it was hard to sway him in any other direction. If there was one “rule” of his that Summer hated the most, it was: *Thou shalt not date thy younger sister, or thou shalt havest thy balls chopped off.*

That came from the “Book of Ryder,” and it was etched in stone.

“Thanks for being here with us today. I know my mermaids and mermen of sunny California and across the globe appreciate your wisdom, sass, and straight-up dating

truth! This is Summer Dalton, and I'll see you next week on The Summer Sessions—where sunbeams and sand are a way of life.”

Music created by Midnight Lily took listeners out on one last wave of emotion before the podcast ended. Thanks to her synesthesia, Summer saw bright flashes of orange and hot pink as she always did when listening to the custom song clip made just for her show. Ironically, it was recorded by said older brother's said hot best friend who also happened to be the lead singer and cellist for said band.

Her life wasn't complicated at all.

“Ryder doesn't listen to your podcast, does he?” Trista asked, genuinely worried.

Summer laughed. “I'm not even sure he knows it exists. He's so busy these days. Especially after skyrocketing his friends' careers last year. I thought he was in demand before, but now ... it's like he's the famous movie star, and not the other way around.”

“What about River?” Trista asked, as she changed out of her clothes and into a diamond-white bikini that popped against her dark-brown skin.

It had been a sore point with Summer for years. Maybe because her unrequited crush still treated her like a kid sister just because he was one of her brother's best friends. It had been sixteen years since she'd fallen head over heels in love with Ryder's (then) nerdy, book-loving, cello-playing neighborhood friend. River was always on the outskirts of her brother's friend group with his acting career, preferring roles in smaller indie films. It's how they all met—running in the same pack as the other childhood brats of Hollywood's hottest movie stars, producers, and musicians. Eventually, Ryder, Knox, Matías, and River created an unbreakable bond that still held strong and true today—much to Summer's disgust since that meant River was perpetually off-limits.

“He still doesn't seem to know I exist,” she grumbled. “Well, not in *that* way.”

Summer changed into her own bathing suit, a pale yellow, scallop-trimmed, knit bikini that fit her carefree, boho vibes. At least, the ones she shared with the world, anyway. It was just one side of her personality—the public one. Sometimes, her private feelings weren't quite as sunny and carefree as everyone expected them to be. Which was why she'd been taught from an early age to keep those feelings to herself. Only good girls were rewarded with praise and time with their parents.

Somehow, those same rules never applied to Ryder. Even though it wasn't his fault, he quickly learned how to milk the rules that were bent just for him. Not even Acute Lymphoma Leukemia had given Summer a pass during middle school to *carpe diem* as she tried to live her life to its fullest. That's why, as soon as she turned eighteen, she moved out on her own with Trista—breaking the unspoken family rule about attending college or losing her trust fund.

That's what Reed could never understand. For Summer, money came and went. But the friends who had your back during the hard times in your life—even your ugliest, most imperfect ones—those were the ones you kept around.

So maybe Summer *could* understand just a little why Ryder didn't want her to blur the lines with his friends. River was her brother's "Ride or Die," just like Trista was for her. That said, there was another thing they said about rockstars—they *are* chic magnets for a reason. And River was the perfect trifecta: musician, booklover, and dreamy, old soul. How in the world was Summer supposed to resist that now that she was living so close to her brother and his friends again? It was like pouring gasoline on a fire—and they were bound to combust sooner or later.

"Come on," she told Trista, eager to get out on the beach and surf. Other than music, a good dose of sun and sand really was the best way to clear her head and lift her mood.

And she was going to need it—since she planned to find a way around her brother's dead body later that evening.

CHAPTER 2

Happy Birthday to Me

THERE WAS A reason Summer was an *online* social media lifestyle influencer—and that was because she hated crowds. “Hated” was too soft of a word for her enochlophobia, though. It was just another reason why her parents never forgave her. God forbid she was unable to attend a gala or red-carpet event during her youth. Luckily, Ryder not only believed her, but helped manage her fears by getting her and Trista backstage passes to Midnight Lily’s sold-out New Year’s Eve concert at the El Rey Theatre.

Trista was sipping a tall flute of champagne while Summer nursed a bottle of S.Pellegrino since she’d had to take a Xanax just to be there to support their friend and his band.

“Guuurl,” Trista said, grinning wickedly. “I’d forgotten how hot he was. River sure grew up since we all ran around the neighborhood together, didn’t he?”

Summer looked out at her long-standing crush who was lost in a new song about unrequited love and warm summer nights. There was a bluish-purplish-green color that swirled around him—breathtakingly beautiful like the Northern Lights. Like River himself.

It was the color she always saw when he performed.

“I want to wish someone special a very happy birthday tonight,” Summer heard from the stage. She looked out at River in disbelief, and then over at Ryder who was backstage with her and Trista.

Ryder shrugged, returning Trista’s high-five. “I might’ve reminded him.”

River’s dimples flanked his wide, sensual lips as he smiled warmly at her. His dirty blond hair was pulled back into a half knot tonight, allowing the rest to hang down and brush his shoulders. He was sweating lightly from the hot lights and

crowded theatre, but it didn't turn Summer off one bit. Nope. In fact, her birthday wish might've involved his glistening skin and her tongue at just that moment.

“Sing along with me as we wish my best friend's kid sister, Summer, the happiest birthday ever! Let's make it a night she'll never forget.”

Midnight Lily's guitarist strummed a few cords, and the entire crowd sang along as he serenaded her. She was grateful to be hidden from the crowd—especially since she was certain her face was now as bright red as the heavy, velvet curtains that protected her.

Two words that she wished she could erase stood out to her: kid sister. *Jesus. Does he still think of me like that?*

River's eyes sparkled like mossy green crystals under the bright lights, focused on her and her alone as if she were the only woman in the room. “Happy Birthday, dear Summer,” he sang, “Happy Birthday to yooou!”

The crowd erupted into cheers and whistles. Summer's cheeks were warmer now, and she suddenly realized the energy of the crowd was starting to close in around her. She needed to leave, ASAP.

“Thank you,” she mouthed across the stage to River.

The last thing she saw was him winking at her before he began the official New Year's Eve countdown with the rest of his band. The noise from the roaring crowd created a dark gray veil that quickly slid over her vision. Summer knew what was next, but she couldn't get the words out to warn Ryder before she collapsed to the cold, unforgiving floor.

“**S**UMMER? SUMMER! SHE'S coming to. Grab me some water,” Ryder called out.

When she opened her eyes, Summer didn't know where she was. She blinked, looking around as olive-green walls came into view. There was a makeup vanity surrounded by

round bulbs—only half of them working. An aged sofa supported her, while Trista sat across from her in one of the worn-in, leather armchairs.

The last thing she remembered was River's green eyes and saucy wink. *Oh, shit!* Summer tried to sit up, embarrassment flooding over her as she realized she must have fainted. Had River seen her go down? Did she ruin the rest of his show?

No ... she could faintly hear the melody of their regular closing song—the one about a pretty girl and having one last glass before they parted ways. He was singing acapella, and the crowd sang the haunting melody word for word with him.

“You gave us quite a scare,” Trista said, leaning over to wipe Summer's forehead with a washcloth. Summer took over, holding the cool material against her skin gratefully.

Ryder grabbed a bottle of water from his friend Knox who had been in the main crowd with their other friends during the concert.

Oh hell. They're all here.

“I'm fine, Ryder. You guys don't need to make this kind of a fuss over me.” She hated it when people did. It stemmed from her tween years when she was always being watched over like a fragile doll when she had cancer. She'd had to put a smile on her face then, too, to convince her parental units that she was fine just so they'd leave her alone.

She said it again when Ryder looked at her dubiously. “I swear. I'm fine.”

He was the quintessential over-protective big brother. Sometimes, she loved it. But sometimes—like when she had her sights set on his best friend—she wished he would back off and trust her a little more. She'd been on her own for six years, only returning to Los Angeles about a year ago when Trista moved back. Ryder had no clue about all the things she'd been through and the woman she was now. To him, she would always be his “little sister.”

“Happy New Year's, by the way,” she said sheepishly, looking around the dressing room at some of Ryder's best

friends and their significant others.

Right then, the door opened and in poured all six band members of Midnight Lily—including River. He glanced around the room confused, before his eyes eventually found Summer's. Concern laced his gaze as he assessed her body from head to toe. "Everything okay in here?"

"Summer fainted, but she's all right now," Ryder answered.

"It was just the hot lights," she insisted. "I probably haven't had enough water tonight." She took a sip from the bottle Ryder gave her, proving she could be a good little patient. "Great show by the way. Thanks for the birthday song. At least I got to hear it before I passed out," she said, trying to lighten the mood.

"It's okay." River grinned back at her. "I'm used to women passing out when I sing to them."

Matiás shoved his friend playfully from the sidelines, then lopped his arm around his fiancée Creslyn's shoulder. "Only in your dreams they do."

River laughed good naturedly and sat beside Summer on the sofa. "Some birthday this turned out to be, huh?"

She shrugged, her body tingling from the close contact as their knees brushed. "I've had better. But I've never been serenaded by a rockstar before, so thank you."

"A rockstar?" River laughed. "Hardly."

"Okay, or an Oscar-nominated actor," Summer said, reminding him of his other, more prominent career.

He rolled his eyes. "How about just your brother's best friend?"

"How about just *my* friend," Summer suggested. "We were friends once, too. When we were little," she reminded him.

River cocked his head, his blond hair brushing past his shoulders as his eyes dragged over her face, then made their way down her body. "Yeah," he said, gruffly. "But you're certainly not that scrawny little girl anymore."

Something in the sensuality of his tone made Summer's heart ache, wishing they were alone. As if her best friend could read her mind, Trista said to the group, "Hey, are we still headed over to Bootsy Bellows for the after party, or what?" When everyone agreed, she added, "I'll bring Summer home and meet you guys there."

Ryder leaned down to check on his sister one last time. "Are you *positive* you're okay enough to be alone for a few hours?"

"I'm fine. I promise."

"I can take her home, if you want," River said, surprising her.

"You aren't coming out?" Ryder asked, disappointed. "You have to! It's practically The Brotherhood's New Year's Eve tradition."

"I'm really beat," River admitted. "I wasn't going to play too many gigs after the year we've had traveling for the film, but the gang really wanted to since I missed last year's show. I don't think I have anything left in me tonight."

Summer blushed. What sprung to her sexually deprived mind was, *I bet you would if I got my hands on you.*

"All right then. Summer, do you mind? Trista, you can ride with me then, I guess."

"Sure thing," Trista agreed, a little too quickly. She hugged Summer goodbye and whispered in her ear, "This is your birthday wish come true. Don't you dare blow it."

Summer didn't plan to. *Happy Birthday to me.*

CHAPTER 3

I'm All Yours

RIVER AND THE rest of the band showered, changed clothes, and gathered up their things. "Have fun, guys," he

said, as they made their way out of the dressing room. Summer had laid back down while they were cleaning up, and she found herself dozing in and out from all the stressful energy of the evening and being around such a large crowd. Maybe she *was* a little more tired than she thought.

“Hey, Sleeping Beauty,” River said, lightly touching her arm. His deep, warm voice washed over her like the salty waves she loved so much. “Are you ready to get out of here?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She sat up, wiping the corner of her eyes. “What time is it?”

River checked his phone. “Two.”

“Sorry I ruined your New Year’s fun.”

He reached a hand down for her, and she glanced up at his long, strong fingers. They weren’t actor’s fingers, they were the rugged, calloused ones of a musician. Summer shivered at the sheer longing to feel the rough traces of those fingertips over every inch of her body.

Why does Ryder have to be such a damn cockblocker all the time?

“You cold?” River asked, shrugging out of his denim jacket and wrapping it around her shoulders.

“Thank you,” Summer said, glancing up at him. She knew if she touched those fingers or took his hand while they were alone, she’d be skating on thin ice. Even though he publicly acted like she was nothing more than “like a kid sister,” she’d felt the heat and frustration of his gaze many times over the past year or so since she moved back. It had given her hope during her darkest moments.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s get you home.”

With that, all hope deflated.

“Or,” he said, drawing out the word, “I have somewhere else we could go for a few hours if you’d like to sit and talk for a bit? Catch up.”

It was like a fuse was lit, bringing every synapse back to life. “I’d like that. As long as it’s not around another crowd.”

“You don’t like crowds?”

She took his hand then, and the moment their fingers brushed they both gasped. It felt like the oldest cliché in the book, but her hand trembled in his, her knees almost too weak to stand.

River’s hand was warm and strong as he helped pull her to her feet. “Well then,” he said, grinning sheepishly. “That was a surprise.”

“You felt it, too?” she asked quietly, feeling slightly embarrassed that she’d found the courage to do so. What if River was just being kind, like he always was?

“Summer...” His melodic voice was deep and low. He reached out with his other hand and brushed a hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. His hand lingered as their eyes locked in a battle of unsaid feelings and forbidden words. They both knew nothing good would come from acknowledging the heat that was so obviously present. But heat didn’t equal love—and Summer knew River would run as fast as the wind if he ever found out how she really felt.

She nodded in understanding. “Let’s get going. I hope whatever you have in mind involves food. And lots of it.”

River laughed, linking fingers with hers instead of letting her hand go as they left the concert venue out the back door. Summer wasn’t sure what to expect since she’d never gone to any of his shows—especially not since his latest movie, cast by Ryder, became a blockbuster hit that had catapulted his career.

She groaned when four security guards met them at the back door, ushering them quickly to a waiting SUV with blacked-out windows. A blockade was set up several yards away and once Summer was safely inside, River took a few minutes to sign concert T-shirts and movie posters, before taking a few selfies with his fans. When he joined Summer in the back of the SUV, he rolled up the partition, leaving them in blessed solitude.

“Wow! I had no idea you had to go through stuff like that,” she said. “Doesn’t that get old pretty quick?”

River pulled his half knot down, then lifted his long hair and secured it into a messy man bun. He leaned back against the soft leather seats and closed his eyes, sighing. “I understand and appreciate the fans. I wouldn’t have a career without them. But yeah, it gets old sometimes. I miss the good old days of obscurity,” he said, laughing ruefully.

“Maybe going out on New Year’s Eve isn’t exactly the best idea then?” she said, wishing she could ease some of River’s tension. She knew one way she could, but they were not on *those* kinds of terms. *Yet*.

“Don’t worry, we’ll have privacy where we’re going. And no, it’s not back to Knox’s house, I promise.”

Summer nodded. River was supposed to be taking her right home. Even though Knox was out with the others at Bootsy Bellows, they’d probably all wind up back at his Bel Air mansion sooner or later. The house was bachelor pad central—even if he did seem to be catching feelings lately for Creslyn’s agent, Bethany Fox.

“Want me to work that tension out for you?” she asked as they drove away from the El Rey Theatre.

River’s eyes popped open, and his brows furrowed in confusion. He stammered, something Summer had never heard him do. “Do I want you to...to do what?” His Adam’s apple bobbed as his eyes traversed her body. She was wearing a flowing white boho skirt with a matching white crop top, its sleeves off the shoulder and a little flouncy. She’d paired it with leather sandals and her fringe bag, which she now realized she’d left in the dressing room.

“Fuck,” she cursed. Then she realized her mistake and covered her mouth with her hand in embarrassment. “I didn’t mean I wanted to fuck. I meant—I just realized I left my purse back in your dressing room.”

River laughed. “I was about to say, that was quite the bold offer.”

“Yeah, I’m usually more subtle than that. I meant your shoulders. You look tense after the concert, and I give a mean neck massage. But then I realized I left my purse and—”

“Hence, the fuck.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “Any chance your team can grab it for me?”

His phone was already out, and he was texting someone. “They’ll bring it to Bootsie Bellows and give it to Trista. Your phone was there too. Want me to text her so she doesn’t worry?”

If Summer’s heart wasn’t already smitten, it would’ve been with his thoughtfulness. What kind of rockstar took care of someone else when they were so clearly exhausted themselves?

“Yes, thank you,” she said. She recited Trista’s number and watched as River texted her best friend for her. His full, pink lips lifted into a smirk when he was done, pocketing the phone quickly.

“Do I dare ask?”

River’s eyes grew dark and sensual as they pinned Summer to her seat, humor the only thing warring with the lust she saw there. “She said I could keep you out as late as I wanted and gave me permission to have my dirty way with you.”

“She did what?” Summer squeaked.

“I told her not to worry. We’re headed to the beach. If not dirty, you may at least get a little sandy.”

Summer let out the breath she was holding. Could a man really get any better than this? No. No, he could not. She grinned back at River, her fingers aching to touch him. “How about that tension release, then? At least until we get there?”

“I’m all yours.”

Those three words were the best answer to her birthday wish ever.

CHAPTER 4

Just For One Night

BY THE TIME they reached a private gate, leading to a house overlooking the Pacific Ocean, River was definitely more relaxed. Unfortunately, Summer was much more tense—her insides on fire from kneading the thick, sinewy muscles of his shoulders while trying her hardest not to lean over and kiss that sweaty neck of his.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“This is our producer’s house. He lives part time in Greece and part time in Los Angeles. He’s away for the holidays and gives us unlimited access to his home and private beach while he’s gone, since we all love to surf so much.”

“Wait, you surf?”

River nodded as he entered the security code to get into the bungalow-styled home. Everything inside was teakwood and leather, white countertops and rattan lighting. It looked like a spread in *Architectural Digest*. The entryway, living room, kitchen, and dining room were one massive space divided by strategically placed furniture—all angled toward what must be a breathtaking view during the day.

“I would kill to live in a home like this one day,” Summer sighed. “Other than music, surfing is my life.”

“Yeah, I know.” River tossed the contents of his pocket onto the entry table. “Come on,” he said, taking her hand and leading her to one of the sliding glass doors.

He grabbed a large, rolled up blanket off the massive back porch and Summer’s entire body relaxed the moment she heard the rushing of waves and smelled the salty air from the soft breeze licking at her bare arms. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, she kicked off her sandals, her toes sinking into the soft, warm sand. River eased out of his boots and rolled up his jeans before joining her at the water’s edge.

She looked around at the miles of empty beach in both directions. “I’m so jealous of this view, and of this property.” She smiled wistfully. “How did you know I loved the beach so much?”

“Why don’t we sit down and talk?” River spread out the blanket, which was large enough for them both to lay on. She folded her arms behind her head and looked up at the stars. There was much less light pollution being so far from the city. She was glad she’d come with River tonight. The sound of the ocean waves crashing against the shore already calmed her nervous system after being around so many people earlier.

“So, tell me about why you don’t like crowds,” River asked, laying on his side to face Summer.

“Tell me how you knew that I loved the beach first,” she countered.

“Lucky guess?”

She side-eyed him, knowing that wasn’t the whole truth. She’d get it out of him before the night was through. Who knows, maybe Ryder told him at some point. She wasn’t sure why it was so important to her, but it felt big. Like a thread she wanted to pull. River *knew* she hated crowds and loved the ocean, so he brought her here to make the night better for her. *That* seemed significant.

Summer rolled onto her side, supporting her head with her hand like River was doing. They weren’t far apart, and she thought she could smell the faint remnants of champagne and a breath mint. The thought made her smile.

“I have something called enochlophobia. It’s basically a fear of crowds, especially when people are all smooshed in together. My anxiety is off the charts when I think of being in large gatherings, so I avoid them. I usually end up with a panic attack at the least. I’ve only fainted a handful of times. I think the heat of the lights and not being hydrated enough just got to me,” she admitted.

“Hang on then,” he said, hopping off the blanket before she could stop him. A few minutes later he returned with two

bottles of water and handed her one. “Drink.”

She grinned. No one had ever been so thoughtful of her needs. And he hadn’t even made fun of her “irrational fear” as her ex had called it.

“So, you hate crowds with a passion, but you still came out to see us play? Why?”

Summer sat up and took a sip of her water, then capped it and set it to the side. She folded her arms over her bent knees and stared off into the ocean. It was now or never. They could make small talk all night, he’d take her home, and they’d go on as they always had—her being his best friend’s little sister and all. Or ... she could do the scariest thing of her life and tell him how she felt. It was something she wasn’t so good at. Especially when it came to River. What if he didn’t feel the same way? She would be mortified.

Summer took a deep breath, drawing on the waves for comfort and support. “I wanted to see you perform. It’s been a long time since I heard you play the cello—since before you went off to Juilliard when I was still in high school.”

“You heard me play the cello in high school?”

Summer nodded. Despite her fear of crowds, she’d gone to every “at home” school concert he performed in. She loved the way she saw colors when he played—rich, vibrant hues of blue, purple, and emerald green. She’d seen colors with music ever since she was little. They’d called her a “musical prodigy,” which was why her parents disowned her when she refused to go to college straight after high school. They thought she was wasting her life and the gifts she’d been given from God—especially after she was cured of her cancer in middle school. It never once occurred to them to ask Summer what *she* wanted. All she knew was she’d been tired of constantly having to be “the good girl.” At least she hadn’t run away to join the circus. That had to count for something, right?

“Yeah, I did,” Summer answered, truthfully. “I love music. Next to surfing, it’s my life. I didn’t go to a four-year college to study it like you did. And I could never be a singer

because...well, crowds. I eventually graduated from community college with my associate degree after moving away with Trista after high school. But I'd like to finish my four-year degree and be able to teach. I want to counsel children with music therapy."

She'd never felt confident enough to share those dreams with Trista or Ryder yet, but for some reason, she felt close enough to share them with River.

"That's amazing! Is that what you're going to do now that you're back in LA?"

Summer traced circles in the sand with her toes and sighed. "I'm not a hundred percent sure what I'm going to do. Tuition is expensive, and I'm scared, to be honest. College means crowds. I wish my fear wasn't so strong, but it really is."

"But you came to a sold-out concert tonight," he said in awe. When he sat up, their knees touched, and Summer felt as if a grand orchestra were coming to a crescendo. "Why?"

Feelings from her childhood rushed back in. The nights she watched River play on their high school stage were the only times before tonight that she saw those three colors together. She liked to think of them as *his* colors. The ones she felt with her entire soul when she thought about how deeply she'd loved him for so long. Maybe it didn't need to be quite so one-sided anymore.

"I wanted to see *you* play, River. Not Midnight Lily. *You*."

He turned to face her. "Ask me again how I know that you love to surf."

Summer was lost in River's dreamy eyes. "How did you know I loved surfing?" she asked, her voice shaky.

"Because I've listened to every single one of your podcasts, Summer," he admitted. "I'm not *just* your brother's hot best friend, you know."

"Oh, my gawd," she said, suddenly mortified.

But then River lifted his warm, calloused hand and cupped her cheek. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to sink into

her truest, hidden feelings. She was lost in River's scent, his kind heart, and the truth of his admission.

"Summer, look at me." He inched closer so his legs bracketed both sides of her body. He was so close she could feel the warmth radiating off his skin. She glanced up at him, her heart blown wide open.

Fuck fear. And fuck Ryder, too.

"I'm not just your friend's kid sister, River. I'm a grown-ass woman now. I have my own life. My own feelings. My own autonomy."

"Your own podcast..."

Summer blushed. There were *so many* times she'd brought up her brother's best friend on air, not by name of course. "How do you know I wasn't talking about Knox? Or Matías?"

"Because I felt the same way when our hands touched back in the dressing room. Because I felt like an absolute perv in high school for noticing my best friend's younger sister, like *that*. Because I was so glad to hear that you moved back to town. Then you started coming around to events with Ryder... and I knew I was in trouble."

Oh.

"I've noticed how much you've grown up over the years, Summer."

"Yeah, but I'm always just going to be your best friend's little sister, aren't I? That's the problem."

"No. You're not *just* my best friend's little sister. You're a beautiful, intelligent, kind-hearted woman who intrigues the hell out of me. Who loves to do the same things I do. We have so much in common. It's almost scary."

Commonality. That's exactly what Trista mentioned earlier on her podcast.

"But there's still Ryder. And you know his damn rules."

"Fuck his rules," he said, surprising her. "Just for one night, can't we leave him out of the equation and have it be

just you and me? Just give me this one night, Sunshine.”

Sunshine. It’s what her favorite grandfather used to call her when she was a kid. No one else ever had. Something in her broke then, and she felt as if she couldn’t hold back the flood of emotions washing over her if she tried.

“One night,” she whispered.

At least it was *finally* a place to start.

CHAPTER 5

I Want You Forever

RIVER SURPRISED SUMMER when he leaned in, letting their noses touch. He was so close, their breaths mingled. Despite still wearing his jacket and the night’s warm air, goose bumps raced along Summer’s arms with the anticipation of what was coming.

“I want to kiss you so badly,” he whispered. His hand found its way to her hair, and Summer moaned when his strong hand cupped the back of her head.

“Then kiss me,” she said, shifting her body to face him. His knees were still on both sides of her, so she stretched her legs out under his, inching even closer. When he groaned, her insides did a little happy dance knowing that she was affecting him the same way he was impacting her. Summer parted her lips, releasing a sigh. What was he waiting for? The anticipation was absolutely killing her. She dug her fingers into his outer thighs in longing.

Finally, he softly brushed his lips against hers. It was so soft and brief Summer was afraid it hadn’t really happened. Until he kissed her again, letting his mouth explore hers a little more as he tasted her soft lips.

“More,” she whispered. She didn’t want to be soft gloved when it came to River. She wanted to be manhandled, pushed back against the beach blanket, and destroyed.

Summer groaned as River ran his tongue across the seam of her lips. His grip on her hair tightened, and he was finally kissing her like he meant it. Their lips met hungrily as they both enjoyed their first, forbidden taste of one another.

Summer let her hands wander, roaming up and down River's legs when his tongue finally pressed past the seam of her lips and met her tongue full on. Fireworks of a million brilliant hues exploded inside Summer's head, as if they were creating their own music and all the colors in the world were not enough to capture the feelings washing over her. She was too warm now, so she shrugged out of River's denim jacket. His hands reached out to cup both sides of her face, deepening their kiss. Summer sank into the dance as their tongues explored, tasted, and conceded to one another, switching back and forth with who was leading.

By the time they finally slowed, Summer's heart was beating erratically like an oversized kettledrum in an orchestra. It was thumping loud and deep, just like a timpani reverberating against her chest. She didn't want his kisses or this night to ever end. She reached up for the collar of his shirt and pulled him down as she lay back against the blanket.

Summer looked up at him, a dangerous gleam filling her eyes. "If it's just for one night, make me remember it forever."

She pulled his head down for a kiss, wrapping her fingers around the back of his head. This time, he didn't hold back; he pressed his lips harder, demanding a deeper taste. He took, took, and took, leaving Summer panting as she parted her legs so he could settle his body more firmly against hers. River groaned when their cores finally came into contact. Summer reached up to remove the rubber band holding his hair back, letting it cascade around the sides of her face as it mixed with her own white-blond hair. River never stopped kissing her, leaving her lips swollen and her body aching for more.

"What do you want this to be, Summer? I don't want to hurt you," he said next to her ear. He pressed more kisses along her jawline and to her throat, drawing in the skin and making her insides ache. If she was hurt when this was over, then so be it. But she'd wanted River for sixteen long years.

When she lost her virginity in high school, it was River's face she imagined. She couldn't get him inside her quickly enough, if truth be told. Consequences be damned. She'd deal with those later.

"I want every part of you."

River groaned at being given the green light, and from the feel of Summer's fingers as she tugged at his black T-shirt, pulling it over his head. River stood, unbuttoning his jeans as he looked hungrily at Summer watching him. She nearly swooned when he dropped his jeans to the sandy ground, not a care in the world as he kicked them aside and stood before her naked. Her eyes wandered, tracing along River's flat stomach and ten-pack abs. His ropey hip muscles made a V that led toward his groin, along with a trail of light brown hair she wanted to run her fingers through. He was even more perfect than she imagined.

River's eyes flared when Summer slowly removed her own blouse and he saw she wasn't wearing a bra beneath it. He dropped to his knees at her feet, and she half expected him to lay back down on top of her and show her girls some love. But not River.

His hands moved antagonizingly slow as he lifted her billowy skirt up her thighs. Goose bumps raced along her legs as her breath hitched. It was one thing to bare her chest to him, but another all together to be laying back, completely exposed, as he lifted her skirt up her bare thighs. He bunched the material at her waist and groaned when he looked down at her. He gently slid her panties down her thighs, tossing them to the side.

"You don't know how long I've wanted to do this," she thought she heard him say. But then she couldn't think, because he was parting her legs, slowly kissing up the soft fleshy part of her inner thighs. The evening breeze traced across her skin, and she surrendered to River's warm tongue as it explored and worshipped every bit of skin as he made his way to the apex of her legs. "Perfection," he groaned, before lowering his head.

Summer wasn't prepared for the heat of his tongue when he flattened it along her opening, dragging it up the center of her legs. He took his time exploring her, tracing up one side, then down the other. Her insides were pooling with desire by the time he latched onto her sensitive bud, gently drawing her clitoris in and wrapping his lips around it—sucking, lapping, and savoring the taste of her as if it were his last meal.

Summer groaned loudly, not caring at all that they were out in the open. There were no other houses in view, so she released her inhibitions and focused on the explosive tingles spreading through her stomach as River made love to her with his tongue. His fingers deftly kneaded her thighs with each pass of his tongue, but eventually, they sought out her sticky, wet center so they could part her folds. He nipped at her clit as he slowly slid two fingers deep inside her. She could hardly bear the slow pace and the teasing suckles, and almost wept with relief when his fingers were finally lodged as far as they could go. Her insides constricted when he began to move them back and forth, arching them in just the right spots and putting just the right amount of pressure on the outside of her mons at the same time.

“God, yes,” she moaned, her hands finding his long, wavy hair. She clutched at it, her thighs beginning to shake. It was impossible for her body to remain still under his deft fingers and skilled tongue, and it didn't take long before she was close to soaring over the edge.

“That's it, baby,” he whispered. “Come for me.”

Then his tongue was doing something delicious at her entrance while his fingers drove deep inside her, and every inhibition Summer felt crumbled away. Her back arched and she pressed forward as far as she could, feeling the palm of his hand as he worked her over the edge and into a mind-blowing orgasm.

“Fuuuck,” she cried out, her body shaking around him. She could hear his satisfied chuckle as he slowed the strokes of his tongue. But he never stopped licking and kissing her swollen, aroused bud until she was done riding down the waves of her pleasure.

Then, he made his way up her body, leaving a trail of kisses along her stomach and between the soft mounds of her breasts. He leaned on his elbows on both sides of her body and bent down to take her mouth in his for a scorching hot kiss. It was so fucking hot and dirty, tasting herself on his lips.

Summer wanted more.

She sucked in his tongue, nursing it as if it were something else she wanted in her mouth. River's hard length pressed against her stomach, pulsing between their bodies as they continued to kiss—even longer, harder, and deeper than before. It was as if their foreplay had flung open a door and now there was no going back. She wanted to feel what it would be like to have him inside her.

“I want you, River. I *need* every part of you, tonight.”

She wasn't ready yet to say what was really in her heart. Which was: *I need every part of you, forever.*

CHAPTER 6

Bareback Worthy

RIVER'S MOSSY GREEN eyes held Summer's as he positioned his hips between her thighs. They were strong and solid against hers, and she couldn't help but reach around and grab his bare ass. Surfers had the best tushies in the world, and she'd fight anyone who said differently.

“Are you one hundred percent sure, Summer? We can't go back once we do this.”

“I wouldn't want to,” she said softly. She was *not* talking about that cockblocking brother of hers when she was finally, *finally*, having all her dreams come true in River's arms.

“Then say it, baby.” He lined the thick tip of his cock up at her slick entrance. “Tell me what you want.”

She lifted her head and cupped the sides of River's face, kissing him hard. She began rolling her hips against him,

rubbing her pleasure all over his crown and using it to massage her clit as it slid back and forth between her swollen lips below.

“You’re going to kill me, Sunshine. You know that, right?”

“Death by sunshine?” Summer chuckled.

“I could think of worse ways to go.” River nipped at her lower lip, tugging it in and making her insides clench with desire as he suckled on it. “Please tell me you’re on the pill.”

“It’s your lucky day.”

“When was the last time you were with someone?” he asked, teasing her as he lightly pressed the tip of his cock inside her, before pulling it back out. “It’s been a few years for me, but I get tested regularly and I’m clean.”

“Well, you know my ex cheated on me. So, I definitely got tested after that. I’ve gotten a clean bill of health here, too. Though I have to admit, I’ve never let anyone go bareback with me before.”

“We don’t have to,” he said, gruffly, as if the thought of not being able to be inside of her without a condom pained him. “We can stop.”

“Don’t you dare,” she said, when he started to pull back. She gripped his ass tighter. If there was anyone who was bareback worthy, it was River. “I want you to fuck me, River. I don’t want to think of anyone or anything else. It’s my birthday, and I can’t think of a better way to ring in my new year than this. I want *you*, River.” His groan was so loud as he began to press inside her, inch by delicious inch, that she doubted he heard her when she added, “I always have.”

River was thick and wide. Despite how wet Summer already was from his mouth and fingers, he had to move forward slowly. His hips performed a delicate dance of back and forth until she was stretched widely enough for him to edge his way in the last few inches. “Jesus Christ, baby. You’re so fucking tight.”

“Or maybe you’re just huge?”

He looked down at her and grinned, nipping her nose. “Have I told you that I’m now in love with you for saying that?” he teased. His chest puffed out as he gyrated those sexy-ass hips of his, sliding back and forth to make every inch of her wet and accessible now.

Her breath caught in her throat at his words. They were said in jest, but it was as if her entire world exploded with River’s colors. She never wanted to forget this night. She needed to see him, to sear the image of their bodies coming together in complete harmony so she could tuck the memory away and pull it out when she needed to. Because one night was never going to be enough, she knew that now. But she also accepted the impossibility of the situation they were in with her overprotective brother.

She wrapped her legs around his and started to roll her body over, letting him know she wanted to get him onto his back. He grabbed her hips to help flip her over and gain her balance as she settled on top of him.

“God damn, you’re beautiful.”

She loved the way his voice sounded, sparking the colors to dance before her eyes as he pushed up, burying himself all the way inside her. She pressed her hands to her own belly, feeling the bulge of his thick shaft through her skin. Damn, that was hot.

River groaned, reaching up to cup her soft breasts. “Ride me, Sunshine. Take whatever you need.”

It was as if he read her mind and knew how afraid she was that this would be their one and only chance to be together. Summer placed her hands on River’s flat stomach, his muscles contracting as she lifted and lowered her hips above him. She closed her eyes, lost in the sensation of how much he filled her and how naturally they fit together. He was big—far larger than her ex. But somehow, she managed to fit every inch of him inside her, her lips hugging his shaft as she took control of her pleasure. *Their* pleasure.

She sat her bottom all the way down against his stomach, then gently shifted her hips back and forth while River

continued to knead her breast. With his other hand, he reached between them and rubbed her clit with his thumb as she pressed down against him with every pass of her hips. Her body began to shake, and she knew another orgasm was imminent.

River gripped her hips then and hoisted himself into a seated position, holding Summer against his chest. His arms wrapped around her back, hugging her so she was pressed flush against his body. It was much more intimate this way, and she almost couldn't breathe from the proximity of their bodies and the feelings that flooded her heart. Every nerve ending was alive with their bodies connected so emotionally and physically close together. It had *never* been like this with her ex. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd orgasmed once in a night, let alone twice. And she was on the brink again now.

She was panting, their bodies perspiring when River decided to take full control. He gripped her waist as he worked her body up and down over his cock, setting a faster, more aggressive pace. Summer leaned forward, finally getting the chance to kiss River's neck and taste the salty, sensual flavor of his skin. Her insides constricted from the sheer sexiness of it. She trailed her tongue up and down his neck, savoring his taste. She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her face in his hair, panting all kinds of obscenities as he fucked the living hell out of her.

River's thrusts grew more intense, her body bucking with each pounding of his hips. "Kiss me," he murmured, turning his head toward hers. "I want to taste you when I come."

Summer moaned, turned on even more by his filthy words. "Come for me," she said, before capturing his lips. Their tongues met, hungry and possessive. He growled against her mouth, making animalistic noises as he thrust up hard and fast inside her a few final times. She could feel the moment he came, his warmth flooding her as his cock pulsed deep inside her belly. Her body shook from the intensity of his orgasm. Summer was so aroused, it pushed her over the edge too, and she came even harder and more intensely than she had before.

While they waited for their breathing to even out, they sat with their sweaty, satiated limbs molded together for the longest time. River's arms were still protectively wrapped around her back and Summer never wanted the night to end.

"Jesus. That was—" But River didn't finish his sentence. His phone started ringing from the pocket of his jeans which were discarded somewhere behind them on the beach. "Come on. Let's go in and shower off."

"Aren't you going to answer that?"

"Nah, I'm sure it can wait. There's nothing I want more right now than to shower with you. Then I'll cook us up some late-night breakfast. Sound good?"

"Sounds like *my* lucky day."

"It is. Happy Birthday, Sunshine."

"Thank you," she said, blushing as she stood. She let her skirt fall back down around her legs as she searched for her underwear and blouse. It was pitch-black outside, so she didn't worry about putting them back on. Instead, she clutched them to her breasts and followed River as they made their way up the stairs and inside the cozy beach house.

They found the guest bedroom and showered together. Summer eagerly returned the favor River gifted her with on the beach, dropping to her knees under the warm spray of the rainfall showerhead. They didn't even make it down to the kitchen to eat, tumbling instead into the guest bed where River helped Summer discover a favorite new position. Two hours later, and finally famished for food, they got up.

"I have nothing to wear home, and my clothes are a hot mess," she told River. She didn't want the night to end, but they were both starving, and she didn't want Trista or Ryder to worry about her.

River found some sweatpants and a T-shirt in the closet and tossed them to her. "What did you wish for tonight? For your birthday?"

"If I tell you, it won't come true."

“Want to know what my New Year’s wish is?” he asked as he watched her get dressed, his eyes still greedy with lust.

“I’m sure you’re about to tell me,” she teased. “But a girl might need a little break and some food first. I’m a little rusty.”

He grabbed onto her waist and pulled her in close for a kiss. “You’re anything but rusty, Sunshine. You just need the right motivation.”

“Let me guess? You’re it?”

He angled his head, considering something. “What if I was?”

She wasn’t sure what they were talking about anymore, but the air was thick, and Summer’s heart was beating wildly. Maybe all her birthday wishes *would* come true.

But then, just as River was about to answer her, his phone rang again. He sighed, pulling away. “I’d better check and see who this is. Make sure no one got arrested.”

Summer laughed as River stood, pulling her in for one last hug. Then he looked deeply into her eyes and lowered his mouth, branding her with a kiss she’d never forget. His phone was still ringing as he tugged his jeans over his firm backside and got dressed.

Then, when he answered the phone—all hopes of her birthday wishes coming true died with that single call.

CHAPTER 7

When Fate Was on Their Side

“DON’T WORRY,” SHE said, “I’ve got you.” Summer pushed the wheelchair up the new ramp leading to Trista’s front door.

“I can wheel myself, you know,” her friend snapped.

“I know. I just wanted to help you the first time you came home, in case it was too difficult to navigate. The guys all pitched in while you were in the hospital and made a few adjustments to the house. I hope you don’t mind, but we knew it would be hard to get around the same way for a while.”

Trista sighed, trying to push herself over the bump leading into the house. “Fine. Help me in,” she muttered.

It had been a few weeks since the motorcycle accident, and Trista was lucky to be alive. Summer still felt guilty, because if she hadn’t been so excited to be alone with River on New Year’s Eve, Trista would’ve taken her home—instead of winding up at the club where she met a handsome friend of a friend whom she wanted to go home with.

Summer was Trista’s emergency contact, and River’s team had delivered her purse and phone to Bootsy Bellows after Summer remembered where she’d left it. But since Trista was going home with motorcycle boy, Summer learned that Ryder agreed to take the purse home to his sister. On his drive home, Summer’s phone started ringing off the hook, so he pulled over to see who the hell was calling nonstop. He worried it might be Reed calling to grovel and ask for Summer back. But no...it had been a police officer, looking for Trista’s “In Case of Emergency” contact. Only Summer couldn’t be reached, because she was too busy making love to her brother’s best friend.

While Ryder never discovered the full truth, he was mad as hell that River hadn’t brought her straight home like he’d promised. When they finally showed up to the hospital, and Ryder saw Summer in a stranger’s clothes, a look passed between them that let her know she’d have a lot to answer for after everything died down.

But no excuses in the world could erase the guilt and shame Summer felt that night and every night since. She was grateful that Trista was alive, and that her internal injuries had healed. Her legs would recover and grow stronger once the casts came off. The doctors sounded hopeful that she’d not only be able to walk again after a lot of TLC and physical

therapy, but eventually, she'd even be able to get back on a surfboard.

Summer wheeled Trista to the small kitchen table she and Ryder had moved closer to the window so she could look out at the ocean while she ate. She made her best friend's favorite chai latte and joined her at the table. She'd used her friend's branded matchmaking mug that read, *Once you find the right person, you'll see how much love is actually supposed to be easy.*

It was anything *but* easy with River. If Summer thought it was hard before, it was torture now. They hadn't seen each other since the night of the accident. Ryder was watching them both like a hawk because he didn't seem to fully buy their story. When he'd gotten to the hospital, first responders had given Ryder Trista's phone and he'd seen some of the texts between River and her best friend.

T – It's River. Summer's fine, she's with me. She left her purse at the venue. My guy Tony will bring it to the club. Can you bring it home for her? Oh & she said: Don't wait up for me!
☺ I promise to bring her home in one piece.

It was a little hard to explain that one, let alone the reply text when Trista gave River permission to have his dirty way with Summer.

"You never told me what happened on New Year's after you left with River," Trista said, sounding a little more like her old self.

"There's not much to tell," Summer said, feeling bad for withholding so much from her best friend. But she felt so guilty about the whole thing, she could hardly live with it. "We went and hung out at a beach house that belongs to the band's producer. Then Ryder got in touch with me through River, since I left my purse at the theatre. The cops gave him your phone when he got to the hospital. I guess that's when he realized I was still with River. Sorry it took me so long to get there."

"It's fine, girl. I don't even remember the first two days I was there, anyway. I'm just grateful I'll be able to walk

again.”

“I’m so sorry, Trista. I never should’ve gone home with River. I should’ve been there for you. If I had, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Summer, I would’ve beat your ass if you didn’t go home with him. Besides, it was my choice to go home with Jamison that night. I just wish I’d had a chance to tap that before we crashed around that damn blind curve.”

“You’re lucky to be alive, Trista. I’m so sorry. Can you forgive me?”

Her friend set her tea down and took Summer’s hands in hers. “There’s nothing to forgive. Except for the fact that I *know* you’re not telling me the whole truth about what went down with River. I can *see* a difference in you. Any fool could.”

“That’s why we’ve decided to keep our distance for a while. Till things settle down. Ryder looked murderous when he found out that we’d been hanging out at River’s producer’s house instead of him taking me straight home. So...there won’t be any ‘River and me’ yet. I guess it just isn’t our time.”

“I call bullshit. I know you’re too stubborn to stand up to your brother or to admit how much that man matters to you. But, girl, you are in love. Capital L-O-V-E, love. It’s written all over your face. And it’s not just that derpy, high school, puppy dog love you’ve had for him for years. This is different. This is the real thing. If you don’t find the balls to go after him—to go after what you *actually* deserve—then I’ll never forgive you.”

“Ouch,” Summer said, laughing. “How do you really feel about it?”

When Trista gave her the “I’m dead serious” glare, Summer held up both hands in surrender. “Okay, okay. I hear you.”

Trista rolled her eyes. “I need a nap. Help me to my room?”

“Sure thing.”

After Summer got her best friend settled in, Trista reached out and grabbed her hand. “Thank you for moving in with me for a while to take care of me. I don’t know what I’d do without you right now. But, Summer, I won’t need you forever, and you have your whole life ahead of you. Reed really did a number on you. But River is nothing like that. Reed’s like a rockstar who can’t keep his tiny dick in his pants because his ego is bigger than his cock. But River? He’s that real musician I told you about. The kind you marry. Don’t make him wait too long.”

With that, she rolled over, falling to sleep quickly from her pain meds.

Summer closed the door and went out onto the beach. It was hard to see the sand and waves now and not think of her night with River. She sat down, looking out at the waves and letting the sinking sun wash warmly over her face. When her phone rang, she looked at the caller ID immediately. She always would now, after Trista’s accident. You never knew how quickly life could change in the blink of an eye.

She smiled when she saw it was River. “Hey,” she said, answering on the second ring.

“Hey, yourself. How’s Trista? I heard she was released today.”

“She was. I’m moving in with her for the next few months. At least until she can get out of her casts.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“Am I though?” she asked. They hadn’t seen each other since the accident, but they’d talked and texted quite a few times. He knew the guilt she carried.

“Yes, you are. You did nothing wrong, Summer. *We* did nothing wrong.”

“Trista and Ryder might not agree with that.”

“I’m not sure I give a fuck what anyone else thinks anymore,” he said, quietly.

“You don’t mean that, River. He’s been your best friend since you were kids. He isn’t going to forgive either of us if he finds out.”

“We’re grown-ass adults, Summer. And if he’s truly my best friend, he’ll come around. He wants the best for both of us.”

“Yeah, I’m just not sure that he wants the best for both of us if it means being *together*. Besides, we agreed, just one night. Right?”

River was quiet for a long time before answering. “What if I changed my mind?”

Summer didn’t know how to answer. That had been her birthday wish, after all. For her and River to find their way to one another for good. Trista was right. What she’d felt before *was* puppy love. What she felt now...this was real.

It was as real as the electric blues, greens, and royal purples she still saw every time she watched the video that she’d recorded the night Midnight Lily played at the El Rey Theatre. It was the song about unrequited love and warm summer nights. They were the colors of her love for River, and she knew they’d never fade or disappear. Her night with him had cemented that in every fiber of her heart and soul. But even if they had both changed their minds and wanted something more, there were still too many obstacles in their way.

“Hey, River. Promise me one thing. Think of me the next time you sing ‘What Should Have Been.’ It reminds me of our night together on the beach now. It’s something I’ll never forget. Thank you for that.”

River remained quiet, and Summer started to worry. But before they hung up, he said, “Sunshine, that song was written *for* you. I think of you *every* damn time I sing it.”

Then, he was gone, and Summer was alone on the beach again, lost in her thoughts. She looked out over the waves at the setting sun. Bright oranges and hot pinks lit the sky up—the same ones she saw every time she did her podcast and

listened to the opening and closing song written by Midnight Lily.

There wasn't one part of her life that River wasn't a part of anymore.

Maybe the timing was wrong—for now. Trista's recovery was a priority, and Summer's next steps with her education and career were still up in the air. Not only that, but Ryder's machismo ego was *still* trying to cockblock her.

Despite all that, Summer had a feeling their love story wasn't over yet. In fact, it inspired her to write a new song for the first time in years. Maybe a good orgasm or five did that for a girl.

Summer smiled as she watched the sun set. Without even realizing it, she'd started humming about the colors of her love, and a future with the man who inspired them. Maybe one day, when fate *was* on their side, she'd share it with River and let him sing it just to her.

Then, her birthday wish would finally come true.

The End ... *for now!*

ABOUT C.M. ALBERT

USA Today bestselling author C.M. Albert writes heartwarming romances that are “sexy and flirty, sweet and dirty!” Her writing infuses a healthy blend of humor, high-heat romance, and most of all—hope. When not writing, or kid-wrangling with her handsome hubby, she’s either meditating, kayaking, reading, hugging a tree, or asleep. But first, coffee.

#TonyStarkForever

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SWEET ON YOU

by Crystal St. Clair

Contemporary Romantic Comedy

Small Town Romance, Soul Mates, Secret Identities, New Love, Widow, Unexpected Love, Pen pals, Matchmaker, Friends to Lovers, Office Affair

After leaving her old life behind, Karli is determined to create a new beginning in the isolated countryside of Byron, Ontario.

With the recent death of her mother, Karli decided to appreciate life better and experience the rustic scenery her mother always told stories about. To Karli's disappointment, Byron quickly joined the big city. As her new home isn't as isolated as she imagined, Karli sees perspective in life as the cup-half-full and looks forward to savoring what's left of Byron's small-town charm.

While Karli lives closer to her grandmother and now cares for her, they continue their traditional coffee date each morning, where Nan loves to complete her favorite crossword puzzles and devour the most delicious pastries.

Karli orders lattes, tea, and honey crullers, and Nan flirts with the gentlemen.

When Nan can no longer finish the puzzles, Karli notices that the puzzle blocks are neatly filled with flirty riddles. Intrigued, Karli plays along and is eager to find out who's the secret admirer hiding behind the pages.

Unexpected love happens for Karli at the Mocha Bean Cafe,
offering Karli the adventure she didn't know she needed.

Will the sweet stranger who stole Karli's heart through sweetly
written words be her perfect fit, or will she be left with a cup-
half-empty perspective and the secret admirer left
undiscovered?

CHAPTER 1

The cold air hit Karli's face like a brick wall when she and Nan entered the cafe from being in the hot sun with dreadful humidity. The tingling from the instant air conditioning made Karli's fingers numb. It disappeared after moments of standing in line as she quickly became used to the cold temperature. Karli unchained her arm from Nan's light hold and reached for her brown leather wallet in Michael Koor's black purse. She scavaged through her purse for an elastic to throw her long black hair up into a bun, but she must've taken the elastic out.

Vanilla intensified in the air as the baker pulled out a tray of freshly baked doughnuts. Nan licked her lips. Karli laughed, trying not to lick her lips, but it was contagious like a yawn.

Karli spotted Nan's favorite honey-cruller doughnuts. The balded chef in a white uniform took the doughnuts out of the oven and placed the tray into the cool-down tray area. With the level of air conditioning in this place, the baked goods should be ready to eat in no time.

"May I have one of those, Sir, before you put them away," Nan asked eagerly.

The chef happily stopped in his tracks. He smiled big, the crinkling in his cheeks reaching his eyes like Santa, making him look older than Karli expected him to be.

"Of course, young lady," the chef answered Nan politely and carefully placed the doughnut onto a small plate.

Nan and Karli always attended their Sunday brunch at the Mocha Bean Cafe. They hadn't seen this chef before, but he looked familiar, like everyone in the small town of Byron, Ontario. Everyone in Byron was friendly and were usually elderly folks.

"My, you have handsome hazel eyes, young man!" Nan giggled like she was flirting her way for extra doughnuts. "Two honey crullers, please!"

“And your usual tea, Delores?” A woman called out, dodging another staff member who just poured a bowl of hot soup, walking towards the drive-thru, and the manager yelled order numbers at the window.

The manager’s voice was so loud that Karli barely recognized the woman’s voice belonging to their usual barista, Johanna.

Johanna swiped the thick red curls from her face, then waved the chef to release him from the counter area.

“Yes, the usuals, please,” Karli hurried. “Busier today than usual?”

“Oh, you know,” She said as if Karli could read her mind.

Karli nodded.

“Tomorrow is Cookie Mania Day supporting Cancer Research for kids,” Johanna announced to Karli and Nan.

“Oh, yes! I’ll take a dozen of those, Johanna,” Nan ordered gleefully, the change at the bottom of her purple purse clinking as she lightly jumped like a little kid in a candy store.

Nan was a kid in a doughnut shop.

Karli’s stomach rumbled. If she didn’t eat something soon, it would only be a matter of time before she was hangry. She watched Johanna neatly place twelve honey-crullers into a box to go. She had to check herself to make sure she wasn’t drooling all over her clean navy jumpsuit before her business meeting with Dr. Chase.

“Those are *my* favorite,” Karli said, pointing to the Cookie Mania display. “The soft pink icing ribbons make the chocolate chunk cookies even better!” She added, pointing to the colorful display of chocolate chunk cookies decorated with icing. “It’s a shame the delicious cookies are sold only thrice yearly. I’d love to buy them all year round and raise funds for the Cookie Mania kids charity.”

Johanna’s face brightened. “I drew them myself!” She said proudly. “Our newly hired chef, Ramsey Derrick, escaped the

big city like you, Karli, and joined us here in Byron. I see you've finally met. He's easygoing and catches on fast."

Karli took a whiff. "The doughnuts have always been fresh here at the cafe, but it smells even better now!"

If Nan could eat with her eyes, her honey cruller would already be in her stomach.

Johanna finally filled their coffee cups, picked up the cups, and carried them to the other side of the counter.

"Karli, you and Ramsey have much in common-"

"Thanks again, Johanna! Nan is anxious to eat her dessert. We'll be back to order brunch another day for a longer social call," Karli interrupted her.

Johanna sighed in defeat. "Of course!" She called out after Karli, then led the way with their coffees, hurrying after Nan, who had already chosen a window seat.

Johanna placed the coffee cups on the table. She perked up when a new customer entered the cafe doors. She smiled at Karli and Nan, then hurried behind the counter.

"Johanna means well, the sweet girl," Nan assured.

"Speaking of sweet, take it easy on your cruller, Nan!" Karli exclaimed, watching Nan take a considerable bite.

Nan ate with her eyes, sort of speaking. She took a more significant bite than she anticipated. Karli's hand caught hers as she tried to save the curled dough from falling from her mouth and onto the floor.

They laughed.

Nan's soft and delicate hand reminded Karli that time is of the essence and silly memories are important to cherish. She would allow Nan to devour all the sweet pastries she wanted but with smaller bites.

"How did your doctor's appointment go yesterday, Nan? Sorry, I couldn't take you; work and all that not-so-fun stuff." Karli asked, stirring her coffee with a spoon anxiously.

“George was happy to take me. He has a cute, successful grandson, you know”. Her eyes didn’t leave her sweet pastry to see Karli roll her eyes. “You do remember Grayson, don’t you, Karli?”

“I’m thankful for George! He positively influences his grandson, who should earn his own money instead of depending on inheritance,” Karli mocked, remembering how rebellious wanna-be thug she knew when they were teens.

“Yes, George gave you your first job. What was the store called again?”

“It was some gas station store. I sold slushies outside to help bring in customers. I made a whole fifty bucks! That was a lot back then.”

Karli and Nan giggled.

“Yes, you bought your first bike with those shiny, colorful ribbons hanging off the handles and glow-in-the-dark plastic pieces that made your bike so loud.”

“Those plastic clips were the best in the ’90s! All the cool kids had them, and I upsold slushies like a maniac to get that pink and white bike! Beating Grayson at his lemonade stand sales was the other highlight of that afternoon,” Karlie said proudly with a smirk.

“Grayson was a lengthy blond boy with classes and the silent type,” Nan added. “He grew up handsomely like his grandfather.”

“Sadly, it was easy for others to bully him,” Karli said. “If you can’t beat them, join them.” She shrugged.

“You’ve known each other forever, like George and I. You should see him again. He’s grown into a respectable man now. Far from mean,” Nan assured her.

Karli knew Nan was sentimental about the old days. George was no young bird anymore, either. George was still driving an old Cadillac he called ‘the boat’ and living in the same house on his own as he had for years since his wife passed away eight years ago. Grayson grew up in the same place as his grandfather since his parents always worked long

hours. When Karli and Grayson grew into teens, Grayson skipped out of town with her new friends and left Karli behind.

“And miss out on the best dates ever with my Nan? No way,” Karli protested with a smile, hoping to cheer her up. “We’re besties.”

“He’s marriage material,” Nan debated.

Karli couldn’t imagine Grayson as anything other than the punk-ass kid she once knew.

“So is George,” Karli argued.

She watched Nan’s eyes glisten, and it wasn’t over the honey cruller this time.

“George isn’t the strong roofer he once was in his prime age, Nan. However, his health is well enough to care for himself and you. He can give you the love you deserve.”

Nan blushed. “And the man still drives at eighty years old!”

George kept Nan’s fondest memories alive. Their friendship was something Karli was what she missed about Grayson.

“As Economic Assessments & Diagnostics CEO, I could be on call anytime,” Karli reminded Nan. “My social life consists of lunch meetings with lawyers and doctors. The boring stuff. So how did your appointment go?”

“Make sure to take time for yourself, my Dear,” Nan encouraged. “The cancer is benign, which leaves time for better days,”

“Fabulous news! As for my busy schedule, if I can help by matching medical professionals with patients to obtain the medical funding they deserve for the care they need, without such long wait lists as hospitals, I can go home and feel like my career has meaning. I can change someone’s life for the better after all they’ve been through.”

Karli placed her hand gently on Nan’s. Without Karli’s dedication to her work, she wouldn’t have found Nan the

tremendous medical care she deserved.

“You did well suggesting the Ebony Kane for George. He loves the sturdiness and style,” Nan praised before devouring the rest of her cruller.

She grabbed the handle of her cup and frowned as she swirled the last bit of coffee around before drinking it.

“Only the best for George. A great recommendation from my patients.”

The light whispers set a calm in the cafe since the afternoon rush finished. Saturdays were always their busiest day, but it would pick up a few hours closer to supper. Karli turned to look at Johanna, facing their direction, who was filling the coffee machine and switching pots into different burners.

“Perfect timing!” Johanna called out and quickly made eye contact as if she could feel Karli’s stare or knew Nan’s coffee run routine.

Karli nodded at Johanna.

Johanna filled Nan’s glass with an entire pot of fresh coffee. Nan pulled out a handful of change and slid some toonies across the table.

Johanna peered to the side at Karli without breaking smooth movement to accept the tip. Johanna knew better than to decline Nan’s generous offer, and Karli wouldn’t dare take away from Nan’s pride in paying her tip.

“Thank you, Delores!” Johanna nodded. “That’s so generous of you,” She said, wiping the thick red curls from her face again before picking up the tip.

The change nearly filled one of her green apron’s pockets.

Nan’s widened smile said all that Karli needed to know. She was grateful for Johanna taking the time to serve them at their table.

“Why don’t I get you a kane, too, Nan?”

Johanna filled Karli's cup and topped a small dish with cream, milk, and sugar she pulled out of one of the small pockets of her green apron. Karli slid a couple of bills on the table toward her.

"I simply couldn't," Johanna said, kindly declining Karli's large tip.

"Donate the money to the Kids Camp then, please," Karli insisted, plucking the bills from the table and placing them in Johanna's hand.

"Oh, Dear," Johanna said, laying her hand on her chest and dropping her face as if she had just seen the cutest animal. "You donate plenty every time. Trust me, your help goes a long way!"

Karli didn't want recognition; she only wanted to help. "I'll take a dozen ribbon cookies once they come in."

Johanna nodded, pulled a few napkins from her other apron pocket, and cleaned up a few drops of coffee on the table that Karli hadn't noticed. Karli felt embarrassed, wondering if she made the mess herself. She didn't want to feel like a slop in a well-cleaned cafe. For this reason, she refrained from wearing white and stuck to her navy jumpsuit. The notched neckline and butterfly-sleeved belted outfit were the perfect light attire for the office, not so much for eating sticky doughnuts.

"Hmm..." Nan thought out loud, tapping a pen on the squares of a puzzle on the page in front of her.

Karli was so busy speaking with Johanna that she didn't realize Nan already snagged her favorite newspaper.

Nan put down the pen to struggle with her thoughts as she tore open two sugar packets over her steamy cup and nearly dropped them into the hot liquid.

Karli and Johanna jumped, reaching for Nan's hand and the sugar packets. Johanna caught the sugar packets just in time and carefully poured them into Nan's coffee. She stirred the coffee, opened two milk packs, and poured them in before

mixing again, then laid the spoon down onto a napkin on the table.

“An Ebony Kane would be nice, by the way, but I don’t think I need one just yet,” Nan said, breaking the awkward silence.

She picked up the spoon and put it into her cup to stir it quickly until the liquid spun independently, and then she eagerly filled in the empty puzzle blanks.

“Kane! Got it,” Nan cheered before noticing a few drops of spilled coffee on the table. She looked up at Karli and Johanna. “My goodness, I should pay more attention. My apologies, Dears. These puzzles are always so fun, and my brain isn’t working the same.”

“A purple Kane would be beautiful indeed, Delores,” Johanna agreed.

She knew Nan purple was Nan’s favorite color.

“Purple *is* your color, Delores!” Johanna exclaimed, placing the pot of coffee on the table next to the other table condiments near the window. “It would match your purse and your floral shirt.”

Nan looked down at her shirt and black pants. “Oh, yes! You’re right; purple is bright and can easily catch someone eye,” She said, winking at Karli.

Karli lifted her cup and took a slow sip to hide that she was rolling her eyes. She watched a tall, dark-haired man wearing a slightly sweaty grey sleeveless shirt and sweatpants with perfectly formed muscles enter the cafe.

“I have a craving for some rump roast for dinner tonight,” Johanna squealed as they watched the sexy stranger walk toward the counter.

Karli nearly spat out her drink. She’d seen plenty of sexy suited men she made sweat, but none so much when they dressed down and their casual selves. She loved seeing men outside of the office. Nobody to impress, just raw and sexy.

Johanna laughed loud enough for anyone in the cafe to notice them except the well-formed man with a perfectly round ass.

Johanna turned to walk back to the counter to greet him. She stopped just before the kitchen entrance and turned her head back towards Karli.

“Speaking of a perfectly round ass...” She muttered quietly.

A floral ashwood whiffed over the scent of fresh honey crullers and double chocolate doughnut rounds Ramsey had just taken out of the ovens.

The sexy stranger waved in Karli’s direction. She turned in her seat and saw the door open behind him. Another tall man with light hair and a suit walked into the cafe.

“Is this a season of Bachelorz at the Mocha Bean Cafe or something?” Karli joked.

The sexy jogger waved in Nan’s direction. Karli thought it was odd for Nan to flirt with men who looked slightly younger than Karli. Something was off. What was she missing?

“Nan!” The man called over.

“I’ll be right back, Nan,” Karli said.

She pushed out her chair and walked to the counter where Ramsey was standing with a doughnut box on the counter.

“Nan’s special treats, fresh and ready to go!” Ramsey exclaimed.

“Thanks! You’re awesome,” Karli said, then returned to her chair.

As Karli walked past the sexy jogger, his blue eyes seemed to brighten with familiarity.

Karli noticed Ramsey watching her as she walked away and returned to the table. Johanna was too focused on the handsome mystery men in line to realize she was pouring coffee only halfway into a cup and some spilling over the sides into the sink.

She refrained from smiling like a fool, but not without difficulty. Johanna was smiling enough for them that Karli feared her face would stay like that.

He didn't seem to notice Karli anyway. She couldn't blame him. From the heavy breathing and the sweat over his muscled chest, it was evident that he needed to cool down from a run in the summer heat. How could he concentrate on anything else? It was odd he was ordering coffee in his condition. He kept looking at his black watch around his right wrist, one she'd only seen the wealthiest lawyers wear. After meetings, they verbally compared watch boxes and brands, bragging about which to buy next. Karli could hear them in her mind, so she shook her head to force the silence.

Karli didn't know whether feeling invisible was a good thing or if there just wasn't anything noticeable about her. Perhaps the men she encountered boosted her ego, or she wanted to start her day confidently. Either way, it wasn't like she was looking for a relationship.

Karli turned back to face Nan and finished her cup of coffee. It was for the best. She didn't need validation; she just felt a little flirty. The only men that usually come into the cafe are older gentlemen like George.

“Want me to stay until George arrives to take you to your next appointment?” Karli asked, wanting to spend more time with Nan but also finding any excuse to stare at the sexy jogger longer.

“Oh, I'd love you to stay, but I know you have a day full of important work things to do. Grayson will drive me today, then drop me off to meet George at the park for a wonderful Sunday afternoon walk.”

Karli opened her mouth, then immediately closed it. She thought carefully about what she would say next. Karli was an adult and had to act like one, but George wasn't there, so it was just her and Nan.

“Did that little thug ever grow up?” Karli sneered, standing up from her chair and gathering garbage from the table.

“I’d say that thug grew up,” a deep voice said behind her.

A gentle wind of fresh sandalwood filled the air.

“Wouldn’t you agree, Nan?” The deep voice asked.

The deep aroma strengthened enough for her to know the man was closer to her now.

He walked over to the table closest to them, pulled the chair to the space between Karli and Nan, and sat in the chair. He placed a fresh pot of coffee on the table. Karli watched him grab her cup and nod as if to ask her for permission before filling her cup enough to leave room for condiments. Karli couldn’t take her eyes off of him. She couldn’t comprehend this tall, muscular man, slightly sweaty but sexy nonetheless, could be the arrogant, thug teenager she knew. Karli never noticed how bright his eyes were under the oversized fitted hat tilted halfway over his face. His hair was much darker than she remembered, but she, too, has changed since then.

She kept losing herself in the gentleman’s familiar presence. Karli didn’t realize how lost she was until she snapped out of it and noticed he already stopped filling her cup.

“I was just leaving,” Karli sneered, hoping she didn’t sound too rude.

“Sorry, I just assumed,” Grayson interrupted, sliding the dish of condiments on the table over to Karli.

Nan lifted her eyes off the page in front of her, stopping momentarily before finding the answer she was searching for, then quickly filling in the five-letter word on the horizon line three.

”*Peace!*” Nan cheered out loud like she just won a round of bingo.

“Now,” Nan continued, looking toward Karli. “I know you’re very busy, but Grayson here just arrived. Can’t you stay a little longer?” Nan pleaded innocently.

“It’s been a while, Kar.” He smiled, examining her jumpsuit. “I’d love to catch up later if now isn’t a good time.”

A bit annoyed, Karli looked at the time on her watch inside her purse and sighed. "I have ten minutes to spare, I suppose."

Karli watched Grayson's smile widen with hope. It made her stomach flutter. She always had a crush on him since they were kids, but the last time he called her Kar, they said their goodbyes when her mother picked her up from his grandpa's house for the last time. As Karli drove away, she watched a group of thugs drive up. A young blond girl in a mini shirt and tank top with big tits just about jumped out of her shirt as she leaped from the van into Grayson's arms. Karli was, and still is, far from the girls that Grayson let put their lips and grubby hands all over him. She saw his potential, but he'd never see her as anything more than a friend.

Karli had a successful career, wealthy businessmen falling to her feet, and she wanted nothing worth a commitment except the occasional business deal. A fuck buddy here and there, hell, yes. A family? No time, and Karli had zero intentions of taking things further than a one-night stand or occasional trip to pound town. After all these years, Grayson wanted to spend time with her.

"Thank you," She said, stirring two sugars and two milks into her coffee. "You look healthy, Grayson."

He looked different on the outside, but people never entirely changed on the inside. If anything, Karli would give Grayson one night he'd never forget to show him what he missed out on, and then she'd move him along and wake up living her life without him again, this time for good.

"Recovery suits me well," he grinned, showing off the innocent dimples Karli remembered. "I hear you're running your own business and doing well for yourself. Nan and George speak highly of you all the time. I'm proud of you, Kar!"

This sweet Grayson was making it difficult for Karli to hold a grudge. After that last day, she swore she'd never want to see him again. She didn't know how far he fell into bad habits, but she heard rumors from her parents about it.

“Thank you. I help connect patients to the medical professionals who give them the quality care they need quickly, without too long of a waitlist. Where Nan would have to wait six months or more to begin cancer treatment with high costs, depending on urgency and availability, she only had to wait one month and received many cost benefits.” Karli said, proudly pitching her business better than a commercial ever did.

Grayson seemed genuinely interested. “I’m very proud of you, Kar. I am. Glad to see you’re doing so well and taking care of yourself, too, like you always did.”

“George is a wonderful help with Nan,” Karli said, changing the subject away from herself.

Karli saw Nan blush without taking her eyes off her puzzles.

“That’s good to hear. I know Nan means a lot to Grandpa George,” Grayson added. “She means a lot to me, too.”

“So, what have you been up to today?” Karli asked, changing the subject again.

She wanted to learn more about this *possibly* new and improved Grayson. She wasn’t getting her hopes up. After all, fifteen years is too much time passed, so they couldn’t start where they left off. She’d consider starting over where they are now.

“I’ve been here and there, no specific career. I go where the money is and invest in business worth investing into.”

Grayson’s answer was what Karli expected from him. Vague.

“That’s wonderful,” Karli cheered. She sounded happier than she anticipated. “I did hope the best for you. Family, any kids?”

“Naw,” he answered, almost disappointed. “One day, but I’m so busy. It’s been ten years since I started recovery, but I work on myself daily. Jogging helps keep me healthy and motivated.”

He blew on his coffee before testing the temperature of the hot liquid with his lips, then gulping half of it down. “Decafinated.” He chuckled. “You’ll have to excuse me,” He said, pulling his shirt away from his chest exposing a small peek of chest hair and muscle. “I was on the run... jogging, not from the cops,” he joked, but he was the only one who chuckled.

Nan searched the page, deep in thought into her puzzles. Karli caught her sneaking a peek from her page and a smile occasionally.

Karli chuckled so as not to embarrass him.

“... I was training for a marathon when Grandpa George called and couldn’t make it. He had an unexpected call from his boss at the post office and asked me to take Nan to her appointment. Of course, I couldn’t say no,”

Gayson peered at his watch again, then chugged the rest of his coffee. “Nan, I’m afraid it’s time to leave before we’re late, and you know how Dr. Frazer can get a little grouchy if he’s late for his lunch,” He said, laughing as he stood to help Nan out of her chair.

Karli stood from her chair to hold onto Nan’s other hand, lifting her in sync with Grayson. He knew if Nan sat too long, she’d have difficulty standing up.

Karli looked at Grayson, this time his eyes not leaving her.

“How long have you been helping George take Nan to her appointments?” She asked him.

“We know you’re busy, Kar, so please don’t take offense,” Grayson answered. “I’ve been in Byron for about five years, caring for Grandpa George. Started my own business from home and help out where I can.”

“Hm,” Karli breathed out. “I’m not offended. Just thought you would’ve said hello, or Nan would have at least mentioned you.”

“I did, Dear. But you didn’t wa-” Nan chimed in, but Karli interrupted her with a kiss.

“Thank you for helping, Grayson. Maybe I will take you up on the offer some time to catch up.”

Karli couldn't help but feel a bit jealous. Over what? Nan? Grayson? She felt childish and didn't like it. She was a grown woman, dammit. She didn't *do* jealousy! Karlie needed to know more about the new Grayson and be sure he didn't return to take advantage of George and Nan as the old Grayson would've.

Karli wrote her number on the clean napkin on the table. She took his cup from his hand and the other empty dishes from the table and placed them on the tray over the garbage. She wrote down her phone number on the clean napkin, then handed it to Grays, his back to Johanna, who had her hand under her cheek as she watched in awe.

Johannah waved her hands at Karli as if she was pushing wind towards her. She looked funny doing it, but Karli knew that was Joahanna's way of telling her to *go on, do it!*

“Call me, or text me.”

Grayson grabbed the napkin, their hands touching as he pulled it away. She felt him for the first time in fifteen years, giving her butterflies. Karli didn't want to give in and show him how he made her blush. She was always bad at hiding it, though.

“And for good luck?” He grinned.

Whenever they would write notes to each other, she'd close the letter and seal it with a kiss of her lipstick. They joked that it was good luck and no icky girls would bully him. As they grew older, the charm wore off, and Grayson stopped reading her letters. He'd just put them in his pocket, probably threw them out as he stopped getting bullied and started dating.

Karlie hesitated. She went deep into the memories that broke her heart. “Maybe another time.”

Grayson nodded.

They helped Nan to the door of the cafe. Grayson kindly opened the door and closed it behind them. The heat hit them

in the face like a wall, unexpectedly pushing Nan backward. A black limo pulled into the parking lot. Grayson waved over the limo, and it drove up to the curb next to them. The driver walked out of the car and over to the side door.

“Sir,” the driver greeted.

Grayson nodded and opened the door. “Quickly, the nasty heat wave won’t do Nan any good.”

“Yes, of course,” Karlie agreed.

She hurried Nan and gently helped her inside. The brisk air cooled Karli for a moment. She wanted to hop inside with Nan and make sure she was okay.

“I’ll see that she gets to the doctor safely and call you once we arrive,” Grayson assured Karli and shut Nan’s car door.

He stepped closer to Karli and held her hand. “She will be okay. The heat is just getting to her, I’m sure. She seems healthy for her age.”

“She has cancer, Grayson. We don’t know what kind yet, and her blood pressure gets high. The heat doesn’t help. Crullers are her guilty pleasure, and I couldn’t say no.”

“Damm, crullers, they are my favorite too!”

Grayson chuckled and walked backward, careful not to trip over the curb and to the passenger door on the other side.

“I’m taking you up on that offer, Kar!” He pointed at her. “I *will* call you.” He promised.

Karli walked back into the cafe to order a coffee to go. She met in twenty minutes with Dr. Braxton Chase of Chase Para Ltd.

“Large dark roast, double-double.”

Johanna nodded.

“Meeting with Dr. Chase again?”

She winked.

“Yes. Dr. Chase has the best doctors to add to our roster and is a brilliant doctor himself.”

“And handsome,” Johanna squealed excitedly.

Karli rolled her eyes and laughed.

“Grayson, though. I mean, come on, *Kar*,” Johannah said teasingly, mocking Grayson.

“Yeah. We will see if Grayson has anything to add to the roster. Keep it strictly business-related is easy.”

“Or, is it?” Johanna stooped herself. “I took Delores’ newspaper to save for next time since she didn’t finish her puzzle this time.”

Johanna tapped on the paper on the counter and then made the coffee Karli ordered.

Karli took a pen out of her black purse. She read the riddle, line eight down. Karli read out loud, “What is something not understood or beyond understanding: seven letter word? *Secret* fit the number of letters and the letter *t* across.”

“A secret could work, but people can understand a secret or why someone held the secret in the first place,” Johannah answered.

She pushed a lid on the coffee cup and gently slid it across the counter.

“Mystery!” Karli thought out loud as she filled in the blank. “Grayson seems to be a mystery now.”

“You need a break,” Johannah said. “You overthink. Take a day off.”

“I wish, Johanna. Thank you for the coffee again. You deserve a night off!”

She smiled and waved behind her as she walked out of the cafe and drove off in her white BMW to meet *the* Dr. Braxton Chase.

CHAPTER 2

“Dr. Chase,” his blonde secretary spoke into the phone.

Blondes were Dr. Chase’s preference, but Karli was an exception. There wasn’t a loud truth to this, but it was hard not to notice.

The secretary smelled of solid roses. Pretty, but cheap perfume. It was too strong.

“Ms. K is here to see you at your scheduled appointment.”

Karli always disliked the formal Ms. Richardson. She much preferred Ms. K. It still had some formality and a sexy ring to her name.

“Bring her in. There’s no need to keep Ms. K waiting,” He ordered.

“Dr. Chase will see you now,” the secretary said as she hung up the phone.

Karli nodded and read her name tag.

“Thank you, Shelby,” She said, walking past the desk to the wooden bay office doors behind it.

Chase Para Ltd. was hard to miss on the wall above the doors, and Dr. Braxton Chase’s name tag stared at her as Shelby opened the doors.

“Dr. Chase, how are you?” Karli greeted him.

The doors closed behind her.

“Kay? Call me Braxton,” He said, raising his brow. “You know better.”

He sat in his black leather chair like a mob boss, fitting for his aggressive businessman type.

“Do we have to go through this again?” He grumbled.

Karli giggled inside. She was determined to remain professional, but she knew how much he didn’t like it when she called him Dr. Chase behind closed doors. That’s when all formality dropped, and sometimes their clothes. Long-time

business partner and occasional fuck-buddy, like a mullet, but sexy and dirty blonde; emphasize the dirty as in naughty.

“Yes, Sir.”

Karli watched his raised brow shift as she walked around the desk and stood beside him, staring at an empty screen on his laptop.

He looked up at her, wiggled the mouse, and pointed at the charts on the screen.

“Accounting?” Karli asked, intrigued at the money calculation numbers increasing.

She dropped her purse lightly on the floor and leaned over the desk.

Karli knew accounting basics, and reading charts was elementary school knowledge, but she left most of that to employees who were far more skilled with accounting matters.

“Not just accounting, Kay,” He said excitedly. “This is the growth of Chase Para Ltd.: shares we’ve invested in, more money coming in than going out, which also means growth for Economic Assessments & Diagnostics!”

His hand slid smoothly over the curve of her ass. Karli slightly turned her head and watched him lean back in his chair to examine her navy jumpsuit, closely fitted in all the right places. She arched her back to push her ass. She bit her lip at the seductive view.

Karli loved watching Braxton soak in the sight of her. Knowing she made him hard because he could not resist her in the same room as him turned her on.

He stood from his chair. His hands slid over Karli’s ass and up her curved waist as he reached his feet. He grabbed a fist full of her long dark hair, tugged it into a knot around his fingers, and gently tilted her head back against him. His breath sent a chill down her spine.

“Fuck, Kay. I’m already hard, and you haven’t been in my office more than five minutes.” He groaned.

She could hear the hunger in his voice whenever he spoke to her.

“Look what you do to me,” He said, caressing her hand over the soft fabric on his cock.

His hand fell as he held her hair with his other hand. He moaned deeply, then untied the belt attached to her waist. He slid her butterfly sleeves down past her shoulders and his fingers along the seams then smoothed over the hump of her breasts pushed together by her bra.

She pushed herself closer until her ass rested against her hand, caressing his hard bulge. She felt her hair tighten. Her clothing material was thin enough to feel his cock throb against her.

Whether their time together was short or not as fantastic as the last, Braxton had the thickest cock she'd ever seen, and he always made sure she orgasmed twice. There was a reason why she always returned to his office, and it wasn't just business.

She stroked harder over his bulge, teasing the head of his cock, and imagining his length inside her. She arched her back a little more, pushing her ass further into him, her panties sliding between her lips. She rocked her hips, her clit swelling against the wet material. She couldn't wait for Braxton to rip her clothes off.

A knock sounded at the door, faint enough that they could easily ignore it.

He reached down her notched neckline and cupped her breast perfectly into his palm under her bra. He pinched her nipple as his hand left her breast.

She closed her eyes and bit her lip, soaking in the pleasure. She wiggled her shoulders to loosen the top until it rested under her breasts.

He roughly pulled down the top half of her clothing, let go of her long black hair, and spun her around by her hips until she faced him. He cupped her ass and lifted her onto his desk.

Karli pushed the laptop back and let her legs widen with his touch against her skin. His hands trailed up her thighs until he wrapped them around him. Her ankles folded, her black heel digging between his round, muscled ass for a surprised peek of pleasure.

“I’m going to fuck you so good these beautiful legs will tremble leaving my office. I’ll have to carry you to your next meeting and fuck you again on the board table,” Braxton promised, excited the exhibitionist within her.

“Yes, Dr,” Karli said teasingly, knowing damn well the brattiness would drive Braxton wild.

He grunted and tugged the rest of her suit down enough so he could pull her panties to the side. The pad of his thumb firmly circled her clit. Her thighs quaked under his touch, making her squeal and tighten her legs around him. He slapped the round of her ass, lifting her off the wooden surface as she jolted at his claim. He had to hold her from sliding off his desk.

“What did I tell you?” Braxton grumbled.

There was another knock at the door. Karli moaned louder, her voice echoing in the large room, and drowned out the interruption. She didn’t care to keep quiet; letting the blonde doll outside the office doors listen to her whimpers would be her bragging right.

“Braxton, I need you inside me *now!*” She begged and whimpered with the added pressure as he pressed his thumb harder against her clit.

His caress slowed and edged her. Then, he opened a small drawer and pulled out a small package.

Karli’s ankles locked tighter, and her hips swayed in sync with the orbit around her clit.

He carefully tore the package open with his teeth. “I’m going to cum inside my little office slut, but first-”

The doors swung open. Karli tilted her head back and saw the dolled secretary standing at the door with a short, heavy

older and bald gentleman behind her. She quickly shut the doors to shield the man from their raw intimacy.

Braxton didn't stop playing Karli as she squirmed on his desk. The hunger in Braxton's green eyes grew.

The man called out, "Dr. Chase, I-" The doors slammed, cutting him off mid-sentence.

Braxton stroked his finger deep inside her, thrusting with the wave of her body while his other hand stroked his cock.

Karli lifted her head enough to watch him edge to the sight of her.

"Cum for me, my little slut," He ordered.

"Yes, Braxton," She cried out to him, relieved to finally release.

He edged her again. She couldn't hold back this time, even if he wanted her to.

Her legs quivered as she released into orgasm, almost tossing the laptop off the desk. She screamed until her orgasm left her body still. They laid on the hard surface until while her clit pulsed, trying to catch her breath.

He slid his hand under the back of her head, gripping her black hair into his fist and gently lifting her until she sat up on the desk. He stepped back and stroked himself faster as he watched her sit there half naked.

Karli slid off the table and rubbed her thumb up and down his taint, carefully massaging his balls over the arch between her thumb and forefinger. His balls lifted and tightened so she knew he was going to cum soon. She knelt and rested on her heels, finally putting his warm cock in her mouth. He was quick to release in her mouth.

She stood and lifted her suit back up over her shoulders. She smoothed down the wrinkles and bent over to adjust the straps on her shoes.

He slapped her ass, and this time it was loud enough to know it stung.

Her purse vibrated on the floor. She picked it up and unbuckled the button to the large pocket. She reached into her purse and felt her phone ringing. She never kept sex toys in her purse, but the buzzing gave her the idea. A phone number she didn't recognize flashed on the screen. She was reluctant to pick it up, but she suddenly felt a little uneasy. It wasn't just the head rush from the intense orgasm.

She slid over the green call button on her screen. "Good afternoon, Ms. K of Economic Assessments & Diagnostics CEO. How may I help you?"

Karli kept poise as she watched Braxton re-organize the stuff on his desk. She turned to walk out the door and waved behind her. Shelby, the blonde-dolled secretary, stared at Karli blankly.

Karli winked.

"Hello?" She asked, realizing she hadn't heard a voice on the other end.

"Kar, it's Grayson," He said in a calm, deep voice that sent butterflies to Karli's stomach.

CHAPTER 3

"Grayson? How'd you get my phone number?" Karli demanded, walking onto the main street toward her white BMW parked at a paid meter.

She unlocked her BMW with a fob. Another car crept up until it stopped beside the other parked car behind her. She reached into her black purse and grabbed a loonie to put inside the parking meter as a goodwill gesture to the other car. She smiled at them and got into her BMW.

"I hope you don't mind. Nan is admitted into the hospital. Don't worry, George is with her. He gave me your number," Grayson said softly.

Karli's heart sank as she took in Grayson's voice. The last time she heard those words, her mother had passed. Surviving grief is not something that most people would consider as a triumph, yet everybody can relate in one way or another. It's not trying to survive an abusive relationship, eating disorder, or disease; you're fighting and surviving. You'll never be who you were before a life-changing event.

"I know how this must bring back memories for you. I'm here for you, Kar and Nan."

She grieved over the thought of losing Grayson's friendship; she lost him for fifteen years. Then, she lost her mother.

"Thank you, but I can handle this," She insisted confidently.

"You run your own business and take care of Nan alone. She has George, but that's different. You and I both know that," Grayson exclaimed. "Grief is depression's ugly cousin; believe me, I've experienced enough of it. It's why I got out of bad habits, Kar. And because of you."

Karly lived her life best and worked for everything she had:

"I built a business from the ground up into an empire. I appreciate you being there for Nan, but believe me when I say I'm fine," She tried to assure him.

Who was Karli kidding? Grayson knew her better than that, at least, he used to.

"You don't have to fight your own battles anymore, Kar. I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

She's been through enough to know that actions speak louder than words and when to hold her breath. She wouldn't argue with Grayson or give him the satisfaction of pouring his heart out when he broke hers. However, she hoped he would prove her wrong. Karli was unsure what Grayson's return meant to her and any part of their friendship that could be saved, but she was glad that George and Grayson were there for Nan when Carly wasn't.

“I suppose you could keep my phone number for now,” Karli teased, trying to break the awkward silence.

“I hoped you’d ask for mine, but we can argue about that later over a date,” He said, laughing.

“In all seriousness, Nan is on the mend now. I’m unsure exactly what happened, except George said something about a fall.”

“Okay. I’m on my way!” Karly exclaimed. “I’ll see you in about ten minutes,” She added, then hung up the phone and put it into her black purse.

Karli carefully parked in the underground parking area at the hospital. When she finally found Nan’s room, her stomach sank as she watched Nan hooked up to what seemed like so many machines. As the CEO of a successful company with an exquisite medical roster, she ensured she never had to see a hospital like this again since her mother died. She connected patients to medical professionals and assisted in the transfer of documents, that is all. Simple.

She tried not to envision what all of the wires and tubes that Nan was hooked up to were for, as this would add fuel to her anxiety.

“This can’t possibly be your last moment, Nan. You’re too strong,” Karly said quietly.

The curtains screeched open behind her. George slowly walked out from behind the curtains and cracked a light smile.

“It’s good to see you, Karli,” George said, then looked at Nan. “Delores was awake just before I left for the cafeteria.”

“Thank you, George. Come on in,” Karli encouraged him.

“I’m not intruding, am I? Your time with her is important, too,” He ensured softly.

“It’s okay. We’re all here for her,” Karli said.

George fully emerged from behind the curtains and opened his arms. Karli stepped closer and allowed him to pull her in for a hug. George was a giant teddy bear, and his grandfather-like presence was warming.

“She refused anything if it wasn’t from the Mocha Bean Cafe,” George said, chuckling as he let go of her.

Tears fell onto Karli’s cheeks. She checked herself, unsure if they were hers or George’s. They were hers. The instant chill in the room, the smell of the hospital, the softness of the hospital sheets, and the constant beeping outside the room were too familiar. Nan was covered in layers of a sheet and a couple of blankets to keep her warm.

“She is okay, Karli: a small fall, but no head trauma. Just tired,” George insisted.

Karli wanted to run out of the room and arrive home as quickly as possible to jump into her bed and do nothing except fall asleep so she didn’t have to think. Sleeping was the only way to turn her brain off, but she didn’t want to give in to the temptation and subject herself back to the unhealthy routine of becoming inactive, which would only set back all of the progress she had achieved with living her life since her mother died.

Nan’s eyes opened lazily. “Dear!” She called out for Karli.

“Nan!” Karli exclaimed and leaped over to the bedside.

She held Nan’s hand, gently rubbed her thumb over Nan’s fragile skin, and brushed her hair with her fingers.

“You gave us quite the scare!” Karly said and glimpsed over at George.

George nodded.

“Oh, don’t mind my hair, Dear,” Nan exclaimed,

“Nonsense, you’re as beautiful as ever,” George assured her.

They exchanged smiles, and, of course, Nan blushed.

Karli envied their friendship, which she had the privilege of watching bloom. She could watch George make Nan blush all day, but Karli needed to know what happened to Nan. They deserved happiness.

“I’m grateful you and Grayson were there when Nan fell,” Karli told George.

“What exactly happened, Nan?” She said, scrambling to put the pieces of events together. “Do you remember anything?”

“I had a little fall, is all,” Nan answered, stumbling over her words. “George, he was there, and I was making tea.”

George added, “I stayed for a while after Grayson brought Delores directly home from her Doctor’s appointment. Delores insisted on making tea and went to reach for a cup in the cupboard.”

“I must’ve blacked out and fell,” Nan cried out.

George nodded. “Yes, you did, but I caught you and called for Grayson, who was still in the driveway. He called the ambulance,” George held her other hand with his.

Nan calmed and smiled with his soothing touch.

A tall Asian man entered the room wearing a warm smile, turquoise scrubs, and a stethoscope. A petite woman with red hair and freckles to match, wearing black scrubs, followed him.

“My name is Dr. Chan,” He claimed, reaching his hand out as he walked further into the room with his clipboard in his other hand.

Karli reached out and shook his hand.

“Good news?” Karli asked, not entirely convinced by his cheerful greeting.

“Your grandmother is going to be just fine. She had a fall. No broken hip and no surgery at this time. Although, she isn’t quite eating enough. The hospital food can’t be that bad, is it Delores?” He teased Nan as she broke into another smile.

“She keeps requesting her favorite coffee from the Mocha Bean Cafe. I can’t say that I blame her, though.”

The red-haired nurse chimed in softly. “Especially the honey-crullers, eh Delores?”

“Whatever you need, I will get it for you, Nan. In moderation, of course.”

Karli turned toward the doctor and the nurse. She finally found a name tag for the nurse - Joy. Nurse Joy suited her kind, porcelain face.

“If that’s okay with you, Dr. Chan?” Karli added, watching him write on his clipboard.

“Of course,” He answered. “In moderation.”

Karli continued to gently caress Nan’s hand, cherishing the moment so she wouldn’t forget her touch.

“How long will Nan be in the hospital?”

Dr. Chan looked up from his clipboard.

“Depending on progress, your grandmother will remain emitted for at least a few days,” Dr. Chan informed. “You can certainly bring her favorite goodies if that makes her feel comfortable.”

“Depending on progress?” Karli loudly exclaimed. “I thought you said she was going to be just fine?”

“Has your grandmother discussed treatment options with you that she may have with her family doctor in case of emergencies?” Dr Chan asked Karli.

George stepped away from Nan’s bedside and closer toward the curtains.

“It’s okay, George,” Karli told him. “You’re part of Nan’s care plan, especially now. Please stay,” she pleaded before turning back to Dr. Chan. “Yes, Nan and I have discussed her plan. We can certainly discuss it when the time is needed. You told me the good news. Now what’s the bad news?”

She hadn’t heard much about Dr. Chan through her line of work to decide whether or not he was good enough to treat Nan. Regardless, Nan was where she needed to be, and Karli had to trust Dr. Chan.

“As you know, your grandmother does have cancer. With medication and special treatment, she will live a longer life. If

she needs surgery, we will have to look into and discuss, the process to ensure the surgery is safe. For now, let's focus on the positive as she works on improving her health," Dr. Chan encouraged with a smile. "She is on the waitlist for radiation -"

Karli interrupted, "I am the CEO of a long list of well-educated and knowledgeable doctors who offer a very short waitlist, if any. There won't be waiting for Nan."

Dr. Chan stared at Karly blankly, then turned to Nan as if looking for answers. "We have the knowledgeable doctors here, as well. I assure you that your grandmother is in the best care we can provide."

George held Nan's other hand, keeping her occupied deep in conversation. She would search for anything she needed to know about Dr. Chan later. Braxton would be more than happy to dig up some dirt on him if there was any since he has close ties with the hospital as a VIP sponsor. Karli was sure Braxton, or any of her fuck-buddy business partners, played golf or something with someone who also had connections.

Karli decided the best thing for everyone was for her not to poke the bear and make Nan or George uncomfortable.

"Thank you, Dr. Chan. We appreciate your help getting Nan better."

"Do you have any further questions?" Dr. Chan asked, gazing over the room.

Karli and George shook their heads. Nan stared deeply at George. He tapped her arm to grab her attention to everyone else looking at her.

Nan laughed. "Oh, no questions right now. I trust Dr. Chan and his team will work their magic so I can hurry home so George and I can get back to tea time."

This time, Nan made George blush.

"Alright, if you need me Delores, you have that emergency button right there," Dr. Chan said, pointing to a red button attached to a handle plugged into the wall. "Joy here will come

check on you later,” he added, then left the room with Nurse Joy following closely behind him.

Karli huffed. She was relieved to have answers about what happened to Nan and that she’d be okay, but she had some digging to do.

Karli texted Johanna to inform her that Nan was in the hospital. After all, Johanna wasn’t just a barista they met every Sunday; she became a good friend to Nan. Karli took a liking to her, too. She went out of her way to wait on them which was definitely outside of her job description. She wasn’t a waitress, and went out of her way to be helpful, such as waiting on them directly at their table so they didn’t have to keep walking to the counter just to order their next rounds of beverages. Johanna also held onto the newspapers Nan used to write the puzzles until she completed them because she knew Nan had to finish that week’s puzzles before moving on to the next like not skipping through half-read chapters of a novel. It just didn’t make sense to her.

Karli’s phone beeped. Her text message to Johanna bounced back.

“I’m going to get some coffee. What would you like, George? My treat!”

“Oh, I wouldn’t mind another coffee. It’s going to be a long night. I’d like to spend more time with Delores for a while longer,” He said.

“I noticed Grayson isn’t here but he called me to let me know Nan was in the hospital. Will he be back?” Karli asked, looking at her phone for any missed calls. There wasn’t any.

“Grayson was called into work. He wanted to stay but he was already late. His client was more than understanding and agreed to push their meeting.” George explained.

The softness in his voice assured her that Grayson had put Nan’s health above himself. George was convinced that Nan meant a lot to Grayson as well.

Karli knew what happened at most of her meetings, and she still didn’t know what Grayson did for work.

“He may be back shortly tonight, or maybe he will stop by tomorrow.”

Karli couldn't understand that Grayson seemed so close to Nan, yet she hadn't seen him in 15 years. Why would he come back now? She had so many questions she needed to ask him, but she didn't want to get her hopes up. Could Grayson have changed? Karli needed to find out.

CHAPTER 4

Carly arrived at the Mocha Bean Cafe, excited to see Johanna's friendly face. The smell of their baked goods was the presence of a familiar place that felt like home.

Johanna ran from the back room to the counter where Karli stood waiting to make her order.

“Oh, my God. Is Delores okay, Karli?” Johanna asked eagerly.

“How did you hear the news so quickly? I didn't think my text went through to you,” Karli told Johanna.

“I did receive, perhaps once you left the hospital. They have poor cell service and they don't mind making you wait forever without it” Johanna exclaimed.

“Nan is doing good according to the doctor,” Karli assured her. “She had a fall and will be in the hospital for at least a few days. Luckily, George and Grayson were there.”

“Oh? Luckily!” Johanna exclaimed, her eyes widening and she looked less gloomy.

“Crullers already, Karli?” Ramsey asked teasingly as he walked by with a tray of the fresh doughnuts.

“Make it five, please! Nan will have an extra one for later,” She happily ordered.

“Coming right up!” Ramsey said.

He moved around some cooling trays on the shelves before wearing oven gloves to pull out a tray from the large oven filled with honey crullers.

‘I’ll just sit over in mine and Nan’s usual spot and wait.’

“Will you be okay, Karli?” Joanna asked. “I remember how dark you and Nan mentioned things were for you, and understandably.’

“I just need some time to sit and relax,” She assured Johanna.

Karli walked over and sat in the chair Nan sat in earlier that day when she first saw Grayson at the cafe after all these years and Johanna couldn’t take her eyes off him. Karli couldn’t either.

It took a moment, she wasn’t sure exactly, for Karli’s emotions had to stop jumping around and come to terms with what happened to Nan. Nan was going to be okay!

She didn’t want to go down the grieving road again and get sucked into that deep, dark black hole she had to crawl out of. Karli buried herself in her work when her mom died. Yes, she was successful, but at what cost? She didn’t know how many days had passed, and time paused while the world around her continued to move on without her. She had no choice. After two years Karli could finally live, taking each day at a time. There was progress from her past, so maybe there was for Grayson, too.

Johanna placed a pot of coffee on the table and a cup, snapping Karli out of deep thought.

“It won’t be too much longer. Ramsey is hurrying,’ Johanna said, filling a small bowl with fresh condiments such as packets of milk that just came out of the fridge with condensation on them.

‘No rush,’ Karli assured with a smile. “Hey, Johanna?”

“Yeah?”

“I’d like to help Nan with her puzzle,” Karli insisted, smiling.

“Of course,” Johanna said and brought over the newspaper with Nan’s unfinished puzzles.

There were new words that weren’t there before.

“Johanna!” Karli called out, waving for her attention.

“What’s wrong?” Johanna asked.

“I thought you grabbed this newspaper before we left the other day?”

“I did,” Johanna confirmed. “Sometimes, when I’m putting stuff away, I put papers elsewhere, like on a table or counter so I don’t spill anything on them.”

Karli noticed two words in particular that had nothing to do with the answers, but they fit. Line nine across should be the word *hello*; the answer to the riddle - *a universal greeting*. Line 23 down, read the word *beautiful* to the riddle - *someone you just met*. The answer should’ve been *strangers*.

On the side of the page was a note that read, *Next Sunday?*

“What the heck is going on here?” Karli said as she decided she had enough surprises for one day.

This had to be a message for Nan since it was her puzzle. She thought for a moment about how Nan would answer the secret admirer. *If you can find me, handsome*. No, they already found her! Perhaps something about a round roast ass since Nan and Johanna loved to say that.

She took her pen out of her purse and answered, *Maybe*. Something simple, but to lead on the mystery. The secret messages were a fun distraction, but she couldn’t think well with Nan still in the hospital. Karli then completed a couple of spaces with the wrong answers, but they fit.

Karli recited the three words out loud as she wrote them. “Handsome, coffee, date.”

“Who’s handsome and coming for a coffee date? Grayson is still here?” Johanna asked unexpectedly, nearly making Karli jump out of her chair.

“Maybe,” Karlie said, catching her breath.

Ramsey slid a box across the counter. “Freshly baked!” He said, gesturing a nod toward Karli.

“It was nice seeing you again, Johanna. I wanted to stay longer, but the Mocha Bean Cafe is Nan’s only request. Doctor’s orders!” Karli exclaimed, grabbing the box of doughnuts.

When Karli arrived at the hospital Nan was sleeping in the bed. From what Karli could tell, the monitor stats looked promising. George slept in a chair next to Nan’s bed. Karli placed George’s coffee and the box of crullers on the side table used for Nan’s hospital meals and wheeled it over towards the wall so it wouldn’t get knocked over. Nan kicked off one of her blankets and shooed Karli away without waking up when she tried to cover it over Nan. Karli took the blanket and tucked in George who was snoring. She found an extra pillow in a nearby closet. One of the minimal perks of having a private room! Karli slipped the pillow behind George’s neck and gently moved his head off the back of the chair and part of his shoulder onto the pillow. He didn’t even move and his snoring got louder like a hibernating bear. Karli giggled then left the room and drove home.

Karli opened her laptop and caught up with some work projects until she fell asleep in her computer chair or couch. That’s how Karli ended her nights for the next week. Nan’s health progress plateaued when she caught a viral infection so Dr. Chan wanted to keep Nan hospitalized to be sure she was clear of any infection. She buried herself in a schedule and hospital visits. George was usually by Nan’s side but Karli never crossed paths with Grayson. George said they somehow seemed to miss each other by moments.

Days passed, but Karli lost count. She managed to shower, do laundry, use the dishwasher, and switch between different clean jumpsuits because they were easy to slip on and slip off. She mainly threw her hair up into a messy bun and didn’t bother with make-up. Braxton nor his large cock hadn’t crossed her mind. She took care of personal business herself. Braxton emailed, but Karli wrote minimal responses and kept things strictly business between them. She appreciated

Braxton's business partnership and made sure she delivered appropriate responses and made contact via email with other important people such as shareholders. All meetings were rescheduled for at least another week due to a family emergency.

Grayson left voicemails and texts. Joy left the occasional text. Everyone was left unanswered as Karli focused on work and Nan. Occasionally, she wondered who the secret admirer behind the puzzles was, but there weren't enough clues. Ramsey worked at the Mocha Bean Cafe, but Karli never saw him away from the kitchen. He was a new team member so he probably didn't know about Nan's puzzle obsession, yet. Karli only saw Grayson once at the Mocha Bean Cafe and the rest of the time he worked.

Karli's phone rang. She couldn't bother to get up from her computer desk to answer her phone lying on the kitchen counter.

The phone wouldn't stop ringing! Karli finally walked over to her phone and checked her notifications.

Grayson left another voicemail. "Hello Kar, I know you're going through a lot, but you're not alone. When you're ready, please give me a call. I'm making a coffee run for George and Nan at the Mocha Bean Cafe tonight if you want to meet me there. I meant what I said: I'm here for you, Kar."

It was late, but Karli could've used some caffeine to keep her energy up and finish up some small loose ends of her roster before going to bed.

She entered the cafe doors and stood in line as two gentlemen ordered from Johanna. The tall suited man was nicely built with familiar dirty blonde hair. Karli watched Johanna practically drool on herself. Next to the suited man was a short bald suited man. Next to each other, their heights were distinctively different like two differently shaped blocks she'd play with in kindergarten because that's all that was left after the other kids built their perfectly symmetric block houses. Karli was left with a crooked house and she was forced to make the best out of it.

The men stepped aside and the tall blonde picked up a newspaper and flipped the pages. Karlie saw enough to know he liked the puzzles too! He turned around and his green eyes were a dead giveaway.

“Kay?” He said, then looked down at the short man who turned around.

He cleared his throat.

“Ms. K?”

Karli’s stomach sunk. Her hair was thrown into a messy bun, no make-up, and Dr. Chase was standing in front of her sexy as fuck!

She swiped a black strand of hair from her face and tucked it behind her hair nervously. “Good evening, Brax-” She paused, looking at the short man who also looked oddly familiar, “Dr. Chase,” She finished formally.

Johanna’s eyes widened and Karli swore she almost fainted watching his ass walk towards Karli.

He pulled out the black strand of hair from behind her ear, his finger gently sliding down her cheek as he let the strand hang. “I love this version of you, Beautiful.” He grinned.

Beautiful rolled off his tongue with a sexy weight to it like the way he calls her *Kay*.

The door opened behind her letting in a hot breeze from the summer evening.

“Kar?” Grayson’s voice called out to her.

ABOUT CRYSTAL ST. CLAIR

Crystal St. Clair is a busy mom who lives in the multicultural country of Canada. She does not live in an igloo, but would love to own a pet beaver who loves maple syrup and pancakes!

Crystal graduated as a Law Clerk but would love to one day become an Author full time, writing novels for adults and younger generations.

She can often be found playing soccer with her children while their dog steals the spotlight! She loves making others laugh, writing poetry and other inspiring stories. Once upon a time, Crystal played Momma Bear in a Middle School production of *The Berenstain Bears* and wrote her first A-grade children's story that sparked her creative writing interest.

Aside from fulfilling her long time dream and calling as an author, Crystal enjoys helping her community as a volunteer for charitable organizations such as, *Canine Connect A Care Rescue*, *Boys' and Girls' Club of London Ontario*, and many more. She was also a proud sponsor member of *Plan Canada – I Am A Girl Foundation*, helping empower girls to break the cycle of poverty for themselves and their communities. Through anthologies and individual stories, Crystal's inspiring words have spread awareness and raised money for causes such as human trafficking and Alzheimer's.

As one of the leading founders of the Ignite Your Soul Author Event, Crystal has helped lead a team to raise proceeds for *Bereaved Families of Southwestern Ontario*, *Wounded Warriors Canada*, and *National Service Dogs*.

For more information about inspiring stories by Crystal St. Clair, upcoming events, and to sign up for the *InspireMe Newsletter*, check out her official website: <http://authorcrystalstcla.wixsite.com/inspireme>



PLAYBOY ROCKSTAR

by Daisy St. James

Contemporary Romance

**Rockstar, Marriage of Convenience, Forced Proximity,
Second Chance**

Rosa

David, the hottest Latin music star soaring to superstardom with his wild antics, is now my responsibility. But this bad boy is a force to be reckoned with, defying all attempts at reining him in. Strangely, though, there's something about him that beckons to me, sending shivers down my spine. My past has been riddled with challenges, and I've fought tooth and nail to rise from the ashes. My job defines me, and nothing will deter me, not even a young rockstar with a devil-may-care attitude.

Yet, against my better judgement, David's allure draws me in, and I find myself entangled in forbidden desires.

David

Rock'n'roll pulses through my veins, but the beauty of women has always been my kryptonite. When Rosa walks in, everything takes a dramatic turn. She embodies every man's fantasy - strong, enigmatic, and fiercely guarded. My life was spiralling out of control before she stepped in, but now she's my anchor, keeping me steady. Yet, it's more than that; I crave her in a way that defies reason. I see the pain she hides behind

those walls... Now, I'm determined to break through her walls
and strengthen her heart with our fiery connection.

*Playboy Rockstar features a beloved character
from Dirty Professor, book one in the Daddy Issues Duet.*

Rosa

When Estrella Management, the company I'd been with for ten years, asked me to work with David de Lucia, *the* talk of the Latin music scene, how could I have said no? You don't let the chance to work with one of the fastest rising stars in the industry to slip through your fingers, you just don't.

His controversial win on a popular Spanish reality talent show has kept his name in the public spotlight, with tabloids buzzing about his every move. My job is more difficult because of this, but I relish the challenge it brings. People can never say that I, Rosa Vidal, ever back away from a challenge. Even one as gorgeous and distracting as my new client. A true Latin Lover who leaves a trail of broken hearts behind him wherever he goes.

That's usually where I come in.

Like the mess I have to clean up tonight, before the biggest concert of his international career. This *cabrón* decided to have a whirlwind romance with not one, but two members of a certain girl band currently sitting at the top of the charts, and then broke up with them within a week of each other. A girl band he just so happens to be touring with because they are—well, *were*—literally opening the show for him.

“You've fucked us,” I chastise, pacing back and forth in his dressing room as he lounges, dangerously relaxed, on the leather sofa, watching me with those devilish bedroom eyes. Meanwhile, I wear a small trench of worry into the floor, and try my best to keep my gaze from straying towards the low slung faded blue jeans that hug his toned hips. If my mother could see me now, she would roll over in her grave. *Mamá, por favor, perdóname por mis pecados*. As if my scandalous divorce from the narcissist I married far too young wasn't enough to ruin me in the eyes of my traditional old school family. Now I have to contend with *this* scoundrel. *Papá* must be so disappointed in me.

I make the sign of the cross over my chest and round on David with a scowl. “You listen to me, *Don Juan*. As your manager, I must insist you re-evaluate the way you utilise your

free time. As it stands, Harmony United wants nothing more to do with us because of what went down between you, Monique, and Kiki. It seems to me like you are hell-bent on destroying your chances of an international career before it's even happened!"

A raspy, seductive chuckle leaves his disarmingly perfect lips as his dangerous, thickly fringed lashes pull down low over cognac colored eyes. "Rosa—"

He says my name like it's the most precious thing in the world and my heart skips a beat.

Damn him.

"*Qué linda estás hoy, bomboncita,*" David purrs out the compliment, letting his eyes travel my body from head to toe—the absolute lecher.

I hold my hand up to stop him before he embarrasses us any further. "Calm yourself, *cabrón*. I'm not your *sweetie* and your inappropriate come ons are becoming a bit much now."

Hitting on a woman my age! *¡Qué coño!* Nevermind that I love his 'inappropriate come ons,' but I can't tell him that.

"*Cariño,*" he cajoles, sliding from his chair like a snake and slithering toward me, his ab muscles rippling and glistening. "If you would just accept my *come ons*, as you call them, I wouldn't have to pursue these children in your place."

Monique and Kiki are not children, being well above the legal age of consent in *all* countries. But this dance is nothing new between David and I. Since the moment I began working for him seven impossible long months ago, when I booked his first North American gig in Vancouver, an intimate *wedding* he insisted he *had* to play, he'd been sniffing under my skirt trying to get into my panties. Being ten years his senior, I, of course, decline every chance I get.

However—

And that's a *big* however... I find it more and more difficult to deny the irrefutable chemistry that samba's between us. It's the furthest thing from professional, but when he looks at me like he is right now, as though he wants to

devour me whole in one bite without leaving a single crumb behind, I can't help but wonder about the *what ifs*.

What if I never went through what I had in the past with my ex? What if I had never been mentally and physically abused? What if David is exactly what I need in my life? Of course, ten years ago, David would have been nineteen.

Jesus, why am I even doing the math!

Inside, I pout from my lofty seat upon my moral high horse, deciding to quash this fantasy before it goes too far.

“Put it away, de Lucia.” I roll my eyes, shaking my long black curls over my shoulder and giving him my back. “Sorry to burst your bubble, but if you're thinking there's some kind of romantic spark between us, you're living in an 80s *telenovela*. Save it for your *abuela*. Our relationship is strictly business.”

The slow spread of his full lips into the sexy smirk that drives his fans crazy makes my thighs melt, but I turn my nose up and hold my head high. The Latina in me won't give in to this cocky bastard's advances. Half the time, I don't even know if he's serious or not.

“Come on, Rosa,” he chides, arms open as he approaches me, his shirtless chest still gleaming with droplets of sweat from tonight's performance. I can't help the tiny smile that tugs at my lips as I try to brush him off before he wraps me up in his strong, tanned arms.

“I'm being serious!” I laugh, because honest to god, this guy is so fucking charming it is hard not to fall in love with him. It's the reason his fans adore him so much.

Every woman fantasizes about him because of his drop-dead gorgeous looks with his deep, tawny eyes, body like it has been chiseled from rich Italian marble and a thick mop of golden curls atop his head. Nonetheless, that isn't what gets his fans. No, it's his beguiling charm. It's the deep dimple in his cheek when he smiles. It's the passion with which he takes to the stage every night and preforms like it's the last time, every time. He's the entire package, but he's my client, and

I'm much older. He's also the tabloids favorite plaything, and my heart can't handle another train wreck of a relationship.

After being with my ex-husband, the man who abused me physically and emotionally for almost five long years, the last thing I want is to get involved with another narcissist. Let's face it, most musicians are. They kind of have to be in this industry. But I fought so hard for so long to erase the memory of the pain my ex caused me, that I don't need, want, or deserve a replay of those events. Not ever again.

Shrugging David off with a sigh, I turn around and arch a brow at him. "Okay, *lover boy*, enough flirting with the help. Get out there for your encore and then saddle up because we leave for Mexico tonight. Show Argentina what you're made of!"

He smiles, flashing blinding white teeth at me before tipping his head in acknowledgement and turning around to take the underground passageway to the stage one last time. I know the exact moment he's out there because the stadium roars with excitement, making the ground tremble and my body shake.

David de Lucia is a star, a rockstar, and he's gearing up to show the world he's here to stay.

David

This has been a long time coming. The ground is shaking beneath my feet from the thousands of people in the audience cheering for my third and final encore of the night, a dream come true after five years of arduous work. Their faces, so alive and electric beneath the stadium lights as they chant my name, the rhythm pulsing through my body as, on instinct, I move my feet.

Turning to face my lead guitarist as he plays the rock riff intro to my newest release, *Mi Torera Valiente*, I stomp my feet to the beat, chest lifted and shoulders back. I take strong, deliberate steps, my movements sharp and powerful. And

before I know it, I'm dancing a wild paso doble, sweat dripping down my face as my arms and legs move furiously to the music until I stop with one last heavy stamp, placing me in front of the microphone. I toss my head back, throwing my wet curls out of my eyes, panting from exertion as the audience goes wild with applause, whistles, and the faint screams of '*¡Te amo, David!*'

Covered in perspiration, I glance over to find Rosa, my too-gorgeous-for-words manager, watching me from off stage, bobbing her head to the music. Her round, luscious hips encased in form fitting, black leather pants sway back and forth. Wild sable curls tumble down her back and around her bare, brown shoulders, one of the thin spaghetti straps of her silk tank top slipping off her shoulder to hug her slender upper arm. Her lovely breasts are enhanced by the barely there material that clings to it. She reciprocates my breathless smile and offers me a thumbs up.

Without hesitation, I slide into the song; the lyrics rasping from my throat, full of emotion. The heavy rock and roll beat and dirty electric guitar vibrate through the air and the crowd loses their minds.

"Ella es mi torera valiente, que conquista mi corazón. Con su mirada ardiente, me hace sentir como un toro en acción."

My song tells the story of a man entranced by his lover, his brave bullfighter, who conquers his heart with her fiery gaze. The chorus, a beautiful litany of coming together in a wild dance of love, using the paso doble as a metaphor. *In our arena of love, we dance a passionate Paso Doble. With her grace and my courage, together we overcome any temptation.* I wrote this song the day Caroline Morone left Spain with her now husband, Manuel Santobello.

Though my initial attraction to her might have been purely physical, in the end, it was her heart that won me over. Even though Caroline never judged me and I learned a lot from her, we were not meant to be together. To this day we remain the best of friends, which is why I convinced my manager, Rosa, to book me for Caroline & Manuel's wedding last summer as the first stop on our international tour.

Romantic of me, maybe even selfish, considering our second stop on the first leg of the tour was Germany and a world away from Canada where the wedding took place, but for Caroline, no distance is too far.

Lately, I see her as the woman that got away. The only one who could see me for the man I am, and not what the tabloids proclaim me to be. The son of a criminal mastermind, my father, Javier de Lucia, head of an international drug syndicate in Andalusia. Myself, once a boy who refused a climb to wealth on the backs of those who abused their fellow countrymen for profit, destroying families, I turned to music instead.

I wanted to make something beautiful in this world, not to tear beauty down.

The song crescendos into a violent tempest of drums, deep bass, and a magical guitar solo before quieting down to something more subdued and soft. Grasping the microphone in my fist, I inhale sharply and delicately croon the last heart-wrenching lyrics.

“Ella es mi torera valiente, mi compañera para siempre. Y juntos bailamos el paso doble, de un amor que nunca se rinde.”

The crowd erupts in deafening cheers, screams, and whistles, the vast energy of everyone present jolting through me. People throw stuffed animals and flowers on the stage. Some women are so bold as to toss their underwear at my feet. I smile and wave, thanking them for being an outstanding audience and promise to see them all again soon.

With my body vibrating like someone has plugged me into an outlet. I turn away from the audience and hone in on Rosa, who is smiling from ear to ear, cheering with them. The only other woman that calls to my soul since leaving Caroline behind. A woman who refuses me at every turn, despite the attraction I see in her eyes.

Do I blame her? Not at all. I’m a bit of a whore, there’s no doubt. But for the right woman...

My eyes fixate on her pert breasts as they jiggle and bounce with every jump, sending a snarl of need to my lips. As I prowl in her direction, my dick growing hard in my pants from the excitement, I stop abruptly in front of her, slide my arm around her tiny waist and pull her flush against me until we're nose to nose.

Rosa gasps, her amber eyes searching mine questioningly.

I almost moan at the sensation of her body so pliant in my arms. Instead I grit my teeth. "Did I show Argentina what I'm made of, *cariño*?"

She stutters for an answer, her body warm and fluid pressed against mine. I can feel her nipples harden beneath the silk, spearing my chest with their hot little points. Rosa nods slowly, her eyes roving my face as if seeing it for the first time in seven months.

With her warm, sweet breath batting my face, I touch the tip of my finger to the delicate point of her nose and wink. "Good. Now let's get ready to fly."

Releasing her hastily, I slide past her, ignoring the stupefied look on her face, and throw one arm in the air. Without looking back, I shout over the roar of the crowd, "*¡Andale señorita, Vidal!* Our mistress Mexico awaits!"

Rosa

What the hell just happened?

One minute I'm watching David give the performance of a lifetime, leaving an indelible mark on Latin music, and the next he is holding me so close to his body that I can feel the impressive size and shape of his hard cock pushing into me. An insistent nudging at my belly that made my breasts quiver and my thighs quake. Just thinking of his manly smell, cologne and sweat mixed with the excitement of performing for thousands of fans makes me weak in the knees.

I'm aroused, angered, and frightened all at once.

It's been thirteen years since I allowed a man to touch me like David has tonight, and seven years of being alone after my divorce before I allowed myself to be intimate with someone of the opposite sex. Even then, I'd sometimes choose a female partner instead because I couldn't bear the thought of a man touching me sexually. It's been two years since I've shared a bed with anyone at all.

My heart won't allow me to get close to anyone for fear of the constant manipulation, gaslighting, emotional and physical abuse that I endured. It left me feeling deeply wounded and mistrustful of others, and it seems nearly impossible to be vulnerable with someone else again. The memories bring back the terror of being exposed to the same type of mistreatment I faced from Alejandro. While I long for connection and companionship, the scars that remain from those days make it difficult for me to open up and trust another person intimately.

I've been living in a drought for months, lacking the love and affection I crave. But, I would rather feel nothing, as if I were in a barren desert, instead of exposing myself to the potential of pain that comes from being vulnerable with someone. My abuser left scars on me both physical and emotional from which it took a great deal of effort to recover. It would be foolish of me to risk all that progress by having a fling with a notorious playboy rockstar whose escapades are forever splashed across the tabloids.

Case in point, Monique and Kiki of Harmony United. The opening act that *aggressively* tore up their contract in front of us right before tonight's concert because my client couldn't keep his dick in his pants.

Bravo.

I've been unable to make eye contact with David since we got on the private jet for Mexico. The fear of being intimate with someone new is overwhelming, only I can't help imagining what David could do to me in the bedroom. My sex starved libido is constantly screaming to just let him fuck me like a beast. The man is, after all, sex on a stick. He oozes it. Every movement he makes, the way he walks, struts on the stage, even when he's lounging, is a cat call to every woman

who sees him. And the raspy, irresistible voice that's rocketed him to stardom; it's like a carefully orchestrated seduction every time he speaks.

My eyes find him now, head leaning back against the headrest of the plush seat, hooded eyes watching me intently. Always watching me. It's unnerving. The slow rise and fall of his chest, the smooth, hard planes exposed by the dress shirt, opened three buttons down, tempts me to crawl over on my hands and knees and lick every exposed inch. Shocked at my own thoughts, I quickly brush the wild curls from my face and turn away to gaze out the window at the lights down below.

I'll chalk up my excitement to the fact that I haven't felt human touch in far too long. But as we take off, my nerves are already jangling together like Christmas ornaments with each bump and jolt of the plane. I hate flying. Even before Alejandro left me stranded in Florida one year after a hurricane hit and I had to find my way home on a plane that almost nosedived into the ocean and killed me. All because he didn't like the blouse I'd worn to dinner the night before. A man at the bar had hit on me and, as punishment, Alejandro left me there in the middle of a deadly storm as punishment for 'dressing like a whore for other men's eyes.'

I suppose I should be grateful he didn't beat me to death. Somehow the idea of going down over the ocean was less daunting.

He did it to exert control over me, I know that now. Stranding me in a vulnerable and potentially dangerous situation to make me think I needed him. When that plane almost crashed and I nearly died, I knew then and there that I had to leave him. I didn't *need* a man who would put me in such a potentially dangerous situation just because he didn't like the attention other men gave me.

It took everything in me to pack my bags and go back home to my mother's house. The irony of it all was that they blamed me for everything because Alejandro made sure he had planted seeds about my 'unfaithfulness' over the years. All lies, of course, but my family bought every word because he

was as sly as a fox in a hen house and as charming as a crowned prince.

Even after they saw the bruises, and often times, broken bones, they still took his word over mine. That's just how convincing he was.

All of that to say, that aside from my confusing attraction to my much younger, charismatic client, there's no way in hell I'm going to let him get too close.

Suddenly, there's a loud banging noise, and the plane judders, shaking violently. Gasping, a flash of that trip home from Florida blinding me from the inside. I grip onto the armrests, my heart racing with fear. David sits up a little straighter, his expression serious but eerily controlled.

The pilot says something over the loudspeaker, but the roaring in my ears from the sheer panic swirling inside won't allow me to hear it. Ignoring his own seatbelt while I try to buckle mine with trembling fingers, David slips from his seat and walks to me on his knees, never breaking eye contact. Brushing the hair from my face with steady, gentle fingers, he then drops them into my lap and deftly buckles me in.

"Keep looking at me, *querida*?" he whispers, securing the strap tightly across my lap and then moving to take the seat beside me instead of going back to his own. Grasping my icy fingers in the heat of his, he squeezes. "We're going to have to make an emergency landing in Cartagena. I'm here, Rosa. You're not alone."

I barely hear the words coming out of his mouth. My panic is so strong, and my mind races as we descend towards the airport. I turn my head, eyes glazed and wide. "We're supposed to be in Mexico in just a few hours. What's going to happen to the concert? The fans will be so disappointed."

David shakes his head and chuckles. "Only you would think about work at a time like this. Fuck the fans, Rosa. They can wait. We can refund the tickets. I honestly don't care. What's more important is that you remain calm. Just keep looking at me, okay?"

Our eyes lock, his liquid pools of cognac drawing me in until all I can see is him. He takes a deep breath, motioning for me to do the same, and I do. We breathe together through the rocking and shaking until I'm feeling calmer and more secure. Mouthing the words 'thank you', David smiles, patting my hand and then his shoulder, which I take as an invitation to lay my head upon.

As the plane finally touches down safely on the runway, my heart is no longer pounding in my chest. We've made it to the ground in one piece, and the only thing that held me together as I fell apart was David. He turns to me, his eyes softening with concern, the strength in them only moments before replaced by some tender emotion.

"Are you okay?" he asks gently.

I nod, trying to keep my voice steady. "I'm fine, but I have to make some calls. I have to contact the promoter and the vendor. We have to reschedule Mexico and—"

David's normally laid-back disposition is gone. His face, a mask of deep concentration as he proceeds to make a number of phone calls, essentially doing my job, trying to arrange for another mode of transportation to get us to Mexico in time for the show. I should be insulted, but I'm grateful because I'm still shaken up by what just happened. Despite the chaos, his calm attitude is more than making up for the uncontrollable shaking in my body, preventing me from thinking straight.

As he slips his cell phone in the back pocket of his jeans, he undoes my belt buckle, helps me to stand, and then gently takes my arm to help me up. "Everything is fine. Come, let's get off the plane and get you something to eat."

"Something to eat?!" I stutter, eyes as wide as saucers. "How can you think of food at a time like this? We almost died."

"But we didn't," he smiles, that dimple peaking ever so slightly at me as he walks me onto the tarmac and to a taxi, the rest of the band trailing behind us. Quietly, he opens the door to the taxi and helps me in before squatting down to my eye level. "We're alive, Rosa. And I for one cannot think of a

better way to celebrate that than by getting some hot, spicy Colombian food, don't you think?"

He's insane.

Nodding slowly, not sure *what* to think, I wait patiently in the cab while he talks to the other bandmates and then joins me. As the taxi pulls away from the airport, he takes my hand and squeezes it reassuringly.

"I know it was scary," he whispers. "But we made it. And now we can enjoy the rest of the night before we take off in the morning for Mexico. We'll have more than enough time before the concert, I promise."

My nerves are still jangled, but I can't help the smile that spreads across my face. David's optimism is infectious. The near-miss we had feels like a lifetime ago. As we sit quietly together, I can feel my fear receding in the rear view mirror. The present moment is all that matters now and with David by my side, it feels like anything is possible.

David

When you've stared into the eyes of death as many times as I have in my life—famine, beatings, caught in the crossfire of gunfights between rival gangs—when it comes for you again, you take it with a grain of salt. However, when someone who has never seen the somber countenance of mortality is about to lose all control from sheer panic, you take that grain of salt and turn it into a pillar of strength for them to lean on.

It's not that I don't feel fear or uncertainty in the face of death; it's that I've learned to manage those emotions in order to keep a level head and do what needs to be done to survive. And when someone else is struggling to find that same inner reserve, I give them my courage and offer a hand to hold or a calm voice to guide them through the storm. Because in the end, we're all just grains of salt, trying to stand upright in the face of the wind and the waves.

Therefore, I chose the life of a musician instead of that of a drug overlord, much to my father's immense disappointment.

Sure, the allure of power and unimaginable wealth is tempting, but it's a dangerous game that inevitably ends in ruin. Half my family can attest to that. The ones that are still alive to speak of it, anyway.

Music, on the other hand, has the power to heal, inspire. To bring people together and bridge cultural divides. Something magical happens when creating art that speaks to people's hearts and souls, that moves them to dance, to make love, to sing, to laugh, and to cry. It's a privilege to share my music with the world, to connect with audiences across borders and languages, and to use my voice to spread messages of hope, love, and unity instead of violence.

I sigh wearily, my memories taking me back to a different time. Glimpsing out the window of the yellow taxi, I watch the scenery that blurs past my eyes. I've never been to Columbia before and it's breathtaking. Cartagena itself is a magical place, especially at night. The old walled city is illuminated with an enchanting orange glow, creating an atmosphere of romance that is awe-inspiring. The cobblestone streets are filled with people dancing to the beat of rhythmic salsa music, making me want to move my body and my feet.

Locals mingle in the vibrant plazas and enjoy the warm sea breeze that wafts through the air. Just the architecture alone is a sight to behold, with ornate balconies and bright pastel-colored buildings lining the streets. The energy is infectious, with a festive vibe that permeates every corner of the city. The aroma of fresh seafood and local delicacies tantalizes the senses, inviting me to indulge. It's a place where you can fall in love with life all over again, surrounded by the beauty and magic of its history.

Of the lovely exquisiteness of a warm, beautiful woman.

An incredible woman like Rosa.

My heart races when I recall how petrified she was on the plane because most days, Rosa Vidal is a powerhouse. Her vision and uncompromising attitude have been the driving

force behind this tour since the day we set out seven months ago. Every musician on board knows that with Rosa in charge, they can expect nothing short of excellence. But seeing the look of fear in her eyes, how her body shook with shock as the aircraft rumbled beneath us, it humbled her in my eyes. It reminded me that while she is confident and capable; she is also human and vulnerable.

In our moment of uncertainty, I wanted nothing more than to take her into my arms and kiss away her fear until all she knew was my lips, my tongue. To distract her from her terror with my body and make her feel the hot, pulsing need of passion instead of dread. All I could think about was never being able to look into her beautiful amber eyes again should something fatal have happened to us. Eyes so full of life, so dazzlingly bright with fire, that the idea of never seeing them again was devastating.

It takes a lot of strength to battle our fears and continue onward. Although I wished to get to know her better, this evening I gained even more admiration for Rosa as she worked through her anxieties head-on. In that moment, I felt honored to be part of her journey and to have her in my life as both a friend and teammate.

“We’re here,” I announce as the taxi pulls up in front of the restaurant the driver recommended, *El Arsenal*, commonly known as The Rum Box.

I pay the driver on credit, thanking him with a generous tip before helping a now much more relaxed Rosa out of the back seat.

“I really don’t think now is the time to be eating,” she fusses, glancing at her watch, a simple and understated piece that is not too flashy.

Again, humble.

Gently guiding her forward with my hand pressed against her lower back, the dip just above the swell of her lovely, rounded ass, I walk with her ahead of me. “*Cálmate*, Rosa. We don’t have anywhere to be before tomorrow morning. I have

arranged everything. We've more than earned a hot meal and some time to just relax, don't you think?"

I love when she gives me side-eye. It's sexy as hell.

Her face speaks louder than words, and I chuckle at her expression. "Come now. We deserve to have some fun, no?"

The hostess beckons us to follow her to a table where I pull out Rosa's seat and tuck her in before moving to sit opposite her.

El Arsenal is a festival for the eyes. Colorful and teeming with life. When the waitress arrives to take our order, she offers us the option to try something called a rum flight, which would allow us to sample a selection of rums from different regions and producers here in Cartagena.

"David," Rosa hisses, leaning toward me just enough to accentuate the perfect, sun-kissed cleavage beneath her silk tank above the table-top. I try to keep my eyes to myself and brace for the tongue lashing I'm undoubtedly about to get from my manager. "We cannot drink all that rum!"

"Speak for yourself," I counter, nodding at the waitress, suggesting she should bring enough for the both of us. As she walks away, I turn to admire the bemused expression on my manager's annoyed face. "Rosa, after tonight, accept that you only live once. Why not live it to the fullest, eh?"

She leans back, my eyes drawn to the tight peaks straining against the silk before making a slow, lingering slide back up to her face. Straightening her back, her long black hair falling alluringly over one shoulder, she eyes me suspiciously.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?" She accuses.

With a simple shrug, I say, "Drunk is better than dead."

Rosa

I 'm drunk.

Peering with bleary eyes into the bottom of my sixth rum, a rich and full-bodied liquor with notes of caramel, toffee, vanilla, and spice, I realize that by definition, I should have been *tasting* the rum, not *shooting* them back like a sorority girl. Savoring the last few drops on my lips, I set the ornate glass back on the table and grab my fork to dive into my food.

Maybe if I get enough sustenance in me, it will soak up some of the alcohol I've ingested and bring back my common sense because right now, David de Lucia is looking like an absolute snack.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asks, that raspy voice sending shivers up my arms and straight to my sorely neglected breasts, making them buzz.

Flushed from drinking, I glance up and force a smile to my lips. "The rum is delicious. I like it a lot."

"I can tell," he chuckles beneath his breath, his gaze locked on my breasts.

Glancing down, I curse at the sharp points of my hard little nipples poking through the silk. It's as if they're screaming, 'Here we are! Come lick us please!' If I'm not careful, I might do something reckless—like fuck my client. I cut aggressively into my grilled chicken and shove a bite big enough to gag a horse into my mouth to avoid saying something I might regret.

"Impressive," David purrs, arching a brow at me suggestively and I almost choke from the sheer panic it induces, coughing loudly.

"Excuse me?" I stutter, reaching for the water beside my plate, the chicken suddenly like sawdust in my mouth.

"The quality of the food," he clarifies with a smirk, cutting into his tenderloin slowly and bringing a small delicate bite to his generous lips. His eyes twinkle with amusement. "It's impressive."

I nod, not believing him for a single moment, and painfully aware that for the first time in two years, I want a man to touch me—very, *very* badly. But I'm a hot, drunken mess. My mind

is foggy and my movements sluggish. It's like the room is moving in slow motion while the rest of the world is spinning at its normal pace. I try to take control of my actions by taking small bites and slowing down my drinking; otherwise, I don't know what I'll do.

When the waitress comes to the table with the next rum, I politely decline. "No, thank you. I've overdone it already."

The alcohol has already won the battle, though. Its effects coursing through my veins, making me warm and fuzzy—and oh, so needy.

"Rosa... "

There he goes again. My name rolls off his tongue like a Sunday prayer, with a voice that is warm, delicious and gravelly. It makes me wonder how it would feel whispered against my skin. Would the scratchy quality send heavenly vibrations throughout my body? Would the warmth of his breath make me shiver?

Finally, I meet his eyes and the ardent passion swimming in their depths turns me to mush. I'm overthinking this. Maybe I should just go with it, throw caution to the wind and take what I want.

I desire him, and he desires me. We're both adults, despite the glaring age difference between us. Which shouldn't even be an issue, but—How many men fawn over and marry women almost twenty years their junior? Why is *that* acceptable and not *this*? David is twenty-nine years old, *Madre de Dios*. He's far from a child!

The thought of jeopardizing my career for a single evening of bliss terrifies me, but something about the way this man looks at me... It's so—I don't quite know how to describe it—primitive. All I know is despite all the cons stacked against us, and my list of them is half a mile long; I'm enthralled by him. I have been since the very first moment I laid eyes on him. And here we are, stranded in one of *the* most romantic cities in Columbia, with only time to spare.

What's one night?

My heart flip-flops in my chest. Having this much to drink was not a great decision, and I am unable to stop what I say next.

“David, do you think I’m—beautiful?”

You crazy woman, have you lost your fucking mind?!

“You know I do, Rosa.” He speaks without hesitation. Not a speck.

Our eyes lock. For some reason, I’m panting so hard I can barely catch my breath. This is usually the way my panic attacks start, but this time, there’s no anxiety to be had. Instead, I’m breathless because I can’t stop thinking about David de Lucia’s hot, seductive mouth doing filthy, unspeakable things to me.

Before I can process what’s taking place, David has taken care of the bill, tipped the waitress, and is ushering me out of the restaurant with a possessive palm against my lower back. The night air is thick with humidity, seductive salsa music, and I can hear the Caribbean waves crashing against the shore. Instead of hailing a taxi like we did from the airport, David holds out his hand to me and I slip mine into the calloused warmth, feeling a shiver of ecstasy sail up the length of my arm.

As he leads me through the unfamiliar city, his eyes search for something unknown to me while gently pulling me along, and I find myself doing the same. We weave through the streets, an unspoken urgency propelling our feet forward. I’m still light-headed from the rum and the heat is making my skin glow with a thin sheen of perspiration. David comes to a sudden standstill in front of a deserted alleyway and turns to face me, his eyes blazing with something that I can’t quite place. The moon is high above us, casting a soft glow between the colorful buildings and illuminating his gorgeous features.

He grips my arms like a vise, his gaze burning into mine with wild flames, and our lips crash together, a force of nature that unleashes a firestorm in my veins. His urgent hands move through my hair, pulling me closer as our tongues meet and entwine in an electric dance. His fingers tangle around the

strands of my hair, cradling the back of my head like he never wants to let go. God help me, I don't want him to. The moment his lips make contact with my own, he pushes me back until there is only the wall behind me and the intensity of his body against mine. His kiss is strong and passionate as it lingers. His hard, powerful body presses into me as if it's trying to break down all my barriers and reach some unknown place inside me. Everything about him overwhelms me—like an electric current pulsing through my veins—more alive than anything I've ever encountered before.

Dios mio, he smells amazing.

My mind swims, half drunk, half anticipatory when one of his strong, lean thighs slips between mine and suddenly, my mind is conjuring up images of him shirtless in his dressing room, taunting me with his glistening, hard chest. The front of his shirt is in my hands before I know it, and I pull it hard, breaking the buttons off and sending them ricocheting off the surrounding walls.

“Rosa,” he growls, sending hot shivers down my neck as he attacks the tender skin there with his teeth and tongue. His fingers roam my body above my clothing, as if he can't get enough of me.

Hitching my thigh up around his hip, I arch my aching breasts into him as a tattered moan escapes my lips.

“Don't stop touching me,” I plead, the alcohol coursing through my veins making all the decisions for me.

The ragged moan that leaves him is music to my ears, making my body sing and my hips move against him like they can't help the call to movement. I feel like a marionette on a short string, ready to dance to whatever he commands. I am powerless to his advances, yet I feel so alive.

Grabbing his left shoulder with my right hand, the other still tangled tight in his hair as I try to get closer, I move my mouth frantically beneath his. His powerful hand grips my jaw, fingers pressing into the flesh as his mouth parts my lips again and his tongue sweeps inside. It's hot, wet, and narcotic.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, Rosa,” David answers my question from earlier gruffly, with the words, his breath beating against my lips.

I think back to the tumultuous years spent with Alejandro and how he never once said those words to me, and if anyone else ever did, he punished me for it. Brutally. He trained me with beatings and abusive words, taught me to remain meek and muted, to become invisible. I lower my eyes from David’s, suddenly ashamed of myself. The past tainting the moment.

“Please don’t say that,” I whisper, licking my lips nervously.

No part of me wants this to end. I’m not ready for the booze to wear off and sanity to set in, but I can feel the reality of this situation creeping in to the passion of the moment, preparing to ruin it like it always does. Years of heartless, never-ending abuse. No matter how hard I’ve worked to overcome it, Alejandro still has control of me.

Grasping my cheeks between his palms, David forces me to meet his eyes. Eyes that are as kind as they are deep and fiery.

“Shut up,” he murmurs through a small laugh, his hands infinitely tender as he drags me closer. “I’ll say whatever I damn well want to, because you, Rosa Vidal, are the most beautiful woman I have ever laid eyes on.”

And that’s how he wins me, forcing all intrusive past thoughts from my mind. Alejandro, a bleak shadow in the rear-view of my life.

“We should probably get a room,” my voice is insistent and charged with need.

He presses his forehead to mine, our breath heavy and ragged against the still night air, and I wish this moment could last forever. His lips brush over mine one last time before we reluctantly pull apart.

“Come,” he whispers, taking my hand in his and tugging me gently behind him. “Let’s go.”

David

My father raised me to view women as livestock, good only for breeding and feeding us men. My mother taught me to adore women in all their glory, every shape, every hue. But when I left home, I unknowingly built a life of deception and manipulation of women's desires in order to fill the gaping hole in my chest.

Every woman I encountered in the past year was just another item to be collected, like valuable trinkets. Then Rosa walked into my world, and something happened to me. The faint memory of the lessons my mother taught me came back.

The moment Estrella Management presented Rosa Vidal to me in their office, I knew I was in trouble, even though love hadn't quite taken hold yet.

I didn't know her much then, but being around her was like finding a missing piece of the puzzle, and the sense of inner peace replaced the emptiness of leaving home so young. Rosa's presence is a constant reminder of my journey to overcome my father's harsh treatment and find my own capacity for kindness.

The moment Rosa entered my life, I knew she was the woman I had been yearning for. Despite the loneliness that propelled me headlong into one poor decision after another and the reckless transgressions that could very well put my future in peril, Rosa's presence alone calmed me.

We are both intoxicated beyond belief and about to ruin our professional relationship, but I'm not thinking that far ahead. Kissing her could be the most colossal mistake of my life, but maybe it's one worth making. With my pulsing cock choked in these ridiculously tight jeans, I pull Rosa behind me, her high heels scrapping the misshapen cobblestones beneath our feet as I search with a lethal focus for the closest hotel. This is Cartagena. It shouldn't be difficult, and the memory of

Rosa's hot, compliant body beneath my hands and her guttural moans every time I touched her is propelling me forward.

At last, the *Alfiz* reveals itself to us, a 300-year-old house restored into an exquisite hotel and boutique that looks like it has fallen straight from heaven. I take this as a sign what we are planning to do isn't as bad as my conscience suggests, but rather that it serendipity.

The guest services representative spends the better part of what seems like forever explaining the history behind the *Alfiz* before she looks up to meet my desperate eyes. For a moment, it appears she is struggling to place my face in her memory before she relinquishes the idea, shakes her head, and smiles.

"Here is your key," she says. Her gentle smile, while practiced, is no less genuine. "The only room available for the night is The Conquest. You're quite lucky to have even found us. Usually we're booked soli—"

The Conquest, how appropriate.

"Thank you!" I vocalize enthusiastically, snatching the key from her surprised fingers and pulling a feebly protesting Rosa behind me.

I stop at the bottom of the steps and turn to take Rosa's face between my palms and close my lips over her moving ones, feeling any resistance leave her body.

"Rosa, *mi corazon*," I murmur as I pepper soft kisses across her eyes and the bridge of her freckled nose. "I know we've both had too much rum. The romance of Cartagena may have even bewitched us both, but I know, as you do too, that none of this is a mistake. Tell me you feel it."

She closes the distance between us. A possessive bite on my lower lip and a groan punctuates my last words as I feel her soft tongue teasing me to kiss her again. It's as if all the alcohol has left her body and suddenly *she's* walking *me* backward up the whitewashed steps to our room, our lips still taking from one another. My hands plunge into her sable hair, not wanting to break our kiss, needing more.

I open the door of our room, Rosa still wrapped around me like a second skin. It's difficult not to notice that we lucked out in the hospitality department. The room is an extensive suite with high, white, popcorn stucco ceilings, furnished in rich wood and old-world charm. The bed, a plush California king with soft sheets and fluffy pillows in cream and gold. An oversized Persian rug in the middle of the room conjures visions of Rosa stretched naked upon it, and a balcony door opens out to the city below, letting the pulsing music of Cartagena's nightlife thrum through our veins.

Growling, I kick the door closed behind us, a deep low rumble in my chest making me feel like a wild animal. When I turn to face Rosa, I see her amber eyes are wide, her cheeks flushed with a fresh glow of desire.

"I've been aching to ravish you since the second I laid eyes on you," I confess roughly, taking her mouth again in a hard, almost punishing kiss. A kiss she welcomes with a ferocity of her own.

My hands travel over her heated skin, finally cupping her breasts, squeezing and pinching the taut nipples beneath the thin silk. Her soft little gasps, the most beautiful music to my ears.

"You are mine, Rosa," I growl, shocking myself at the possessiveness of my own words. But in my heart, I know they are true. "Say it, say you're mine. *Dime*."

"I'm yours," she breathes, her body undulating like a wave against mine.

"Tell me how much you want this," I push, desperate to hear the words, to pull them from her lips. I need to know that this is happening, that I'm not dreaming.

"I want this," she breathes. "I want you so much. Please, David."

I tear at her clothing like a man possessed. First her leather pants, exposing a pair of lethal legs she normally does not flaunt in my presence. A fucking shame, though. They're perfection. I'm not careful when I pull her silk tank top up and

over her head, revealing her naked breasts to my starving eyes. The material rips a little, and she gasps.

“I’ll buy you twenty new ones,” I grunt, urgently undressing her until she is finally naked before me.

A beautiful work of art. Her warm olive skin illuminated in the soft light of the vintage lamps. She’s even more beautiful than I imagined, with a perfect hourglass figure, her waist so small in contrast to those tempting round hips I could wrap my hands around it and my fingers might touch.

My hand travels down her flat stomach, past her soft mound, to her hot center, which is already slick with desire. She whimpers, shaking as I slip my fingers between to find her, slipping against her and then into her body, relishing in the delicious sounds she makes as I play with her. I can feel her inner walls throb, her hips bucking against my hand, frantic for more.

I grasp my throbbing cock through my jeans, groaning at the tightness before I rip the fly open and pull my shaft out, shoving the material just past my hips. Rosa gasps, her eyes flying to mine and then back to my arousal before wetting her swollen lips with her quivering tongue.

Reaching down between us, she circles her soft, warm fingers around me, and I’m pretty sure she’s trying to kill me because I ascend to another plane of existence from the pleasure.

Unable to control myself any longer, I slip my fingers from her dripping sex, my hands moving to squeeze the soft globes of her perfect ass, lifting her until her legs wrap around my waist. I smirk at her dazed expression, my thick cock pressing against her slick opening.

Turning, I walk her, wrapped around my hips, toward the door until her back is flush against it and I enter her in one quick thrust. No fanfare, no flowery words, they can wait. This has been a long time coming. Rosa cries out, burying her face in my shoulder as I reach up to cover her mouth. It would do no good for all of Columbia to hear us. Her flesh is so tight

around me, I swear I feel her squeezing me as though she's trying to draw me into her soul.

My body stills, struggling to regain control when all I want is to drive into her cunt like a madman. Waiting out the discomfort, I groan into her hair. She convulses around me, the warm juices of her arousal coating me as I slide my hand between us again, stroking her clit while feeling her shudder in my arms.

The more Rosa moves against me, the harder it becomes to maintain my self-control. Her hips undulating, her fingers kneading into my shoulders as if trying to press herself closer. Exquisite agony grips me as she drags her teeth along my jaw, and the scent of her sweet breath hangs in the air between us. Her hair spills around our bodies, tickling my neck with its softness while her lips leave trails of warmth along my jaw. Our eyes meet, and I capture her mouth in a passionate kiss. My body pulses with heat, my muscles tensing and flexing as I move against her. Driving deep inside her, every nerve ending in my body is a live wire. Sweat beads on my forehead as I push deeper and revel in the tightness of her pussy clutching me, refusing to let go. My entire world narrows down to these small moments of pleasure as my own climax builds.

“Rosa, I’m going to come... I can’t... I can’t...”

Relentlessly, she quickens her movement, her hips bucking wildly against me, matching my rhythm, matching my desire for release.

“I’m coming. Fuck, you’re so tight,” I growl, feeling my orgasm build, taking over my body.

“Yes, come inside me,” she pants, her voice a throaty moan of need, but it is her words that send me over the edge.

My muscles strain and sweat beads my chest as I increase my pace, pistoning into her again and again. Her soft moans fill the air as I drive deeper and deeper, feeling myself come undone with each thrust. She arches her back wantonly, and I grab a fistful of her silken hair to anchor myself against the onslaught of ecstasy that is rapidly overtaking me. My body

trembles and my legs wobble as I pour my essence into her, our cries mingling in the air.

We stand like that for a long time, my hands buried in her hair and holding her to my body, her head resting weakly on my shoulder. It's not until my cock stops twitching and softens inside her tender flesh that I finally allow myself to breathe.

This is it. This is the end of my playboy days. I know it, and the knowledge weighs on me as I look into the eyes of the woman who single-handedly has made me a one woman man in just one night.

Rosa

I want to climb his body like a tree.

Again.

Whatever just transpired between us is not enough. I want his hands stroking me, his magical cock stretching me again, his lips moving against mine with passionate fervor.

In the words of Britney bitch, gimme, gimme more!

Arching my back, I mewl softly, pressing my aching breasts against his perfectly toned and muscular chest. David de Lucia is a fucking treat for the eyes, that much is certain.

“David,” I whimper, the rum still running hot through my veins, making me bolder, wilder. *“Tócame, por favor.”*

A string of unintelligible Spanish words tumble from his lips, that thick, gravelly Andalusian accent of his rippling over me as they fall against the side of my neck. Shivers erupt across the surface of my skin, making me shiver with delight.

“You drive me crazy, Rosa,” he growls, gripping my bottom with both of his powerful hands and hefting me up. Smiling, I lock my arms around his neck, my hair cascading over us as he walks me toward the pristine bed with the cream and gold linens.

“You drive me crazy, too,” I admit, much to my own shock.

It’s a fact. Since Estrella brought me into David de Lucia’s life, he has driven me crazy with his antics and his undeniable charm. And despite all of my misgivings about him, with all of my heart, I trust this man.

The irony.

I always told myself after Alejandro that I would never, ever allow a man this charming to entice me the way he had. It ruined me for far too long. But here I am with David, a man with ten times the amount of charm and guts that Alejandro had, and I’m about to let him take me for the second time in less than twenty minutes.

As if reading my mind, David lays me down on the bed and says, “I promise there will be no rush this time. I want to savor you.”

Savor me? Dios mio, this man and his words!

Every single inch of my body craves his touch. I long for his lips, his tongue, and his teeth to explore and caress me all over. I want to feel his thick cock fill and penetrate me until I’m shaking from the intensity. My desires are not one-sided; I want to please him too.

“Please,” I whimper, as he tumbles with me to the soft mattress, positioning himself between my welcoming legs. “Please, David.”

Reaching up, I plunge my hands into his golden curls, messing them up. And instantly, all the lust, desire, and primal urges I’ve been having toward David over the past year have returned with a vengeance. This feeling of raw passion is uncontrollable, and it makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end.

David yanks my hair, angling my head to the side. He lowers those sinfully pouty lips to my neck and ravishes the skin there, marking me, nipping at my tender flesh, leaving me panting and breathless.

“I want you to scream my name,” he growls against me, sending tingling shocks through my body, rippling down my spine. “This time when I take you, I want my name in your mouth so loud that all of Cartagena will hear it and wonder what woman is being so thoroughly fucked.”

My breath hitches in my throat, my head spinning from his words and the rum. Reaching down between us, my hands find his thick arousal and circle it, stroking it between my fingers as he poises himself at my entrance.

“You’ll remember this night forever, Rosa,” his promise makes me quiver, my sex slick and ready for him, and he nudges his way inside. “You’ll look back on tonight and never want to be without me again.”

“Fuck me,” I whisper, the words so foreign on my lips, but sounding so right as I guide him inside of me. “Make me never forget.”

He thrusts into me then, his cock sliding back into my slick core with ease. I cry out as his length fills me again, the sensation of him moving against my sensitive pussy making my toes curl and my mouth drop open.

“Ahhh, you feel so fucking good,” he croons into my ear, a wicked grin sliding across his lips. “*Si*, Rosa, yes. Like that.”

All I can do is moan in response. Locking his eyes on mine, David moves within me, his girth stretching me, his powerful thrusts rocking me to my core.

“You like that, don’t you,” it’s more of a statement than a question, his voice so low that it is nothing more than a strained whisper.

I can only nod my head in response, my eyes fluttering closed from the sheer pleasure of feeling him move inside of me.

“Yes,” I breathe, his tongue licking the shell of my ear.

“You like it when my cock fucks you, Rosa?” he asks, his hands moving to my knees, pulling them up higher so his thrusts go deeper, harder.

“I do,” I whine, my voice so desperate I should feel embarrassed, but I’m not. Not even close.

I’m so shameless in this moment, rocking my hips in time with his, gripping his broad shoulders and tearing my nails down his back, needing more. As he moves within me, I feel my body winding up, my toes curling and my muscles tensing as I get closer to my climax.

“Tell me how much you fucking *love* this,” he growls, his words hot against my ear as he thrusts deeper inside of me. He lifts my hips and angles himself, sending his cock even deeper into my depths. I cry out at the sensation of being so filled, my body assaulted by bliss.

“Oh my God, I’m going to come,” I cry out, unable to control anything that is happening to my body anymore.

His hips continue to move in a circular motion, and I feel his hard member finding its way to my sweet spot, sending waves of pleasure coursing through my body.

“David!” I scream, my nails digging into his flesh.

“Fuck, Rosa!” he growls in response, his hand snapping hard against my bottom, urging me with him, and I know he’s close to bringing us both over the edge.

“Come on my cock,” he commands, grabbing my hips roughly, pulling me to him. “I want to feel you come around me, Rosa. *Ahora!*”

His words are my undoing, sending me over the edge and into a mind-numbing orgasm that is so powerful my vision blurs and I see nothing but white for a moment. I’ve never come like this before. It’s new, invasive and feels far too easy, but I welcome it with open—everything.

“Fuck, fuck, *fuck*,” David growls, his body tensing, his strokes coming even deeper as he fucks me through my climax, making me see the universe behind my eyelids.

Pulsing inside of me, his cock still full and aching, I can’t help but drag him against me, rolling him onto his back and straddling him. Smiling down at him from my newly

established throne, I undulate my hips forcefully over him and grin.

“Again,” I demand.

David

I ‘m staring at the ceiling.

Rosa is staring at the ceiling.

Neither of us has said a word.

Time stood still for three mind bending hours as a maelstrom of passion swept us away, a chaotic and frenzied tempest of lust that overwhelmed us both with its power. Every touch, every caress, felt more urgent than the last as we explored one another’s bodies with the unbridled curiosity of two lovers, seeing one another naked for the first time. Every kiss fell with purpose. Every moan, growl, cry of ecstasy was a song in its purest form. But now that it’s over, though I long to say something, some invisible force is holding me back from admitting what just happened between us.

The deafening silence is almost palpable. So much so that I can hear the clock on the bedside table ticking like a time bomb. The music of Cartagena has long since died down, leaving nothing but the ghost of our passionate whimpers, cries of rapture and heavy breaths filling the air as we indulged in unimaginable pleasure. Unspeakable acts. I’m almost blushing from the memory. Me. The playboy rockstar.

To break the stillness that fills the room, I express myself in the only way I know how to in the moment. “That was... wow.”

When I say the words, I can’t help but grimace in response to its lack of complexity. Rosa deserves Shakespearian sonnets, love letters hand written with a quill and ink, not a simple *wow*. The songwriter in me is asleep at the wheel, so thoroughly sated that he can only speak in rudimentary terms.

Qué idiota.

“It was,” she whispers, surprising me. She turns her head towards me and offers me a small smile, her stunning eyes glittering like amber jewels.

I scan every detail of her face, observing her as I try to decipher the various emotions that flit across her expression, but they change so suddenly. One moment she smiles and the next her brows furrow in contemplation. It appears so much is going through both of our heads, but I don't know if either of us knows where to start. I have this urge to say something of significance or attempt to create something that carries a deeper meaning, like a song, yet I am at a loss. Our conversation hangs in the air, full of unspoken words.

“I don't think I've ever experienced that before,” she admits, and my breath catches. Rosa is not one to yield her secrets, and I know well that she has a good number of them. But her voice is a mere whisper, and my heart clenches in my chest that she trusts me enough to share her feelings.

“I feel the same,” I answer in agreement, wanting to echo her truth with one of my own and feeling a strange sense of vulnerability fill me. An openness no one else has ever been privy to.

We lie there for a few more moments, each lost in our own thoughts. The weight of the silence becomes almost unbearable, compelling me to break it before I do something foolish, like confess my undying love for her. She holds such immense significance in my life. Everything about her draws me in, holds me captive, but her true beauty lies in the graceful way she navigates through life. The simple act of being present with me, without feeling the need to fill the space between us with idle conversation, is perfection. I prop myself up on my elbow, allowing me to gaze upon her more intently. My eyes devour her smooth tanned skin in contrast to the white sheets, and my heart lurches in my chest.

“What happens now?” I ask, knowing it's a loaded question. Rosa hesitates before answering.

“I don’t know,” she says, biting her full bottom lip. “I wasn’t expecting this to happen, David.”

A pang of disappointment stings my chest. It unfurls in the centre, releasing a pent up anger I can’t hold back any longer. Anger that I’m destined to traipse from woman to woman with no one to cherish of my own because the one woman I want *doesn’t know*.

“So, what?” I ask, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice. “We just go back to being ‘professionals’?”

“I don’t *know*,” she repeats.

Evidently, the rum has worn off.

I sit up; the sheets slipping off my nude body as I run a hand through my now tangled, unruly curls. I can’t believe that we’re back to square one after all of this. Rosa sits up beside me, pulling the sheets up to cover her breasts. I almost laugh at the demureness of the act when only a few short moments ago she was riding me like I was a wild bull in a pen.

“I don’t think we can go back to the way things were,” I bite out, pinning her with my eyes. “How can we just pretend like this never happened?”

“*I don’t know*,” she repeats, and I can hear the frustration in her tone.

In an effort to keep my emotions in check, I take a deep breath. Now is my moment. I need to tell her how I truly feel about her or lose the chance forever.

“I don’t want to go back to the way things were,” I say firmly. “I want to explore this... whatever *this* is between us.”

She stares at me, her expression teeming with trepidation, and I recognize the Rosa I’ve come to only just understand over the past seven months. My teeth snap together and the muscle in my jaw ticks.

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea,” she says finally, her voice hesitant.

“Why not?” I ask, feeling the spark of hope in my chest fizzle out.

“Because we work together,” she says, her voice wavering. “Because if this goes wrong, it could ruin everything. Because—I have trust issues that I’m not done dealing with and, forgive me for being so bold, but you’re a *womanizer*.”

“I want you,” I insist, snatching her hand in my own. “I want *only* you, Rosa. I have for a very long time. And as for us working together, I’m willing to take the risk. Are you? I don’t know what you’ve been through in your life. Judging by how I witnessed you during the plane malfunction, whatever it was has left its scars, but I am a man with a level head and a big heart. Give me a chance to show you I can be everything you need. There is no other woman for me now but you.”

Rosa looks down at our intertwined hands, uncertainty still etched on her face.

“I need time to think,” she whispers.

As disappointment pierces through me, I respond with a curt nod, understanding her decision. I recognize that no words from me can alter her stance, and I’ve grown weary of trying to persuade her otherwise. If this is what she truly desires, she will let me know when she’s ready. Until then, all I can do is await her answer. What kind of man would I be if I pressed the issue further when, clearly, she’s not ready?

“Okay,” I say, letting go of her hand. “Take all the time you need.”

Standing now, acutely aware of her eyes on my ass as I slip my underwear back on, I move to the open balcony doors to gaze out at the sun rising in the distance. Neither of us slept very much, and it’s already time to get ourselves back to the airport. I pull on my shirt and it hangs open because the buttons are gone, thanks to Rosa. Sighing, I turn to face her.

“I meant what I said, *cariño*,” I say, my voice low. “I want to explore this. But only if you do, too.”

“I’ll think about it,” she says, avoiding my gaze, giving me little hope that I’ll get what I want in the end.

Rosa

The ride back to the airport in the taxi is so tense, I can cut the air with a knife. David hunkers into a corner of the yellow cab, his elbow on his knee, his fist beneath his delicious cleft chin, brooding out the window at a bleak Cartagena this morning.

Last night was the most erotic, intense, sexually gratifying night of my life. Hands down. The way our bodies just fit, like a key to a lock. And his key? Yeah, it's fucking perfect. I'd always imagined what it looked like, but seeing it in person—*Ay mama, que hermoso!* My cheeks burn from the memory and my body quivers in places I've kept dormant for far too long.

Still, it doesn't change the fact that David de Lucia is my client and everything about last night was wrong, no matter how right it felt.

Stopped at a light, I glance out the window to see a borage of young women huddled around a kiosk squawking and squeaking over something in the tabloids, no doubt. Oh, to be young again. What I wouldn't give to have not a care in the world. To not have been ruined by men like Alejandro. To not be afraid to live.

My cell phone goes off, but I choose to ignore it. I'm not in the mood for idle chatter and the last thing I need is to use my brain in any capacity at all this morning. I'm still feeling the effects of that rum. As soon as the phone stops ringing, it promptly picks back up again and David slides his gaze curiously to the phone between us on the leather seat.

"You should probably get that," he muses, brows knit together as he meets my eyes. "Look at the number. It's Estrella's head office."

¡Coño!

What the hell did I do wrong now? My body is still buzzing remembering that crazy landing last night from our dizzy flight, then the rum, then—all of *that*. What could the managers expect from me today? We're leaving Cartagena and on our way to Mexico as we speak.

With reluctance, I pick up the phone, fiddling with it in my hands. I can already feel the metaphorical axe looming over my head.

“Rosa,” Juan Martinez, head of Estrella Management, states coldly on the other line. “Would you like to explain to me what I’m looking at right now?”

Sputtering, I listen to him ramble on about some tabloid and my heart sinks in my chest like a rock in water.

Banging on the back of the driver’s seat for the taxi to stop, I open the door and stumble out while it’s still moving and run back toward the kiosk. Grabbing one tabloid out of the young woman’s hands, I draw it up to eye level and gasp.

Someone took pictures of David and I being intimate... *really* intimate.

So this is how it ends.

Juan continues to curse me for being unprofessional and sleeping with their most lucrative client and how now it has to be fixed. *I have to fix it. I’ve embarrassed them and put them in an awkward position.*

Them?! What about me? I can’t believe what I’ve done, and while I want to defend myself, what can I even say? That I was so starved for touch that a tiny bit of rum and my knees parted like the red sea? Even if that’s true, it doesn’t change the fact that David is still off-limits, no matter how much chemistry there lies between us or how much money he brings into the company.

“Juan, I am *so* sorry,” I start, but he cuts me off.

“Sorry will not be enough,” he bellows. “Come up with a solution to keep our reputation as a professional company intact.”

“Rosa,” David interjects, bringing me out of my trance, the phone still limp in my hands. “You don’t have to apologize for anything. This isn’t your fault.”

I turn to him, eyes wide with surprise and embarrassment. “What do you mean? Of course it is! I should have never let this happen with you! You and all your *charm*. Ugh, what was I thinking? I let my guard down and now look at the mess we’re in!”

David reaches over and takes my free hand in his, giving a gentle squeeze. “No, it’s not your fault that someone took pictures of us and put them in the tabloids. It’s mine. The tabloids feed off me and have for years. But what I can do is try to make it right.” He pauses in thought before continuing. “We could get married.”

Shock surges through me, and I’m utterly astonished by his offer.

“That’s not a bad idea!” Juan says pensively, completely forgetting he was still on the phone.

After a few moments of silence between us, I finally find my voice. “Get married?! No way! That’s absurd!”

He nods, an amused smirk playing on his lips as he continues, “Maybe, but it’s not as absurd as the alternative, Rosa. If we get married, it will show that our intimacy was not just some random fling... again, but a serious commitment between two people in love. We could even spin it as a wedding that was planned all along. It would get the media off our backs and save your reputation and the reputation of Estrella Management.”

I stare at him in shock, trying to wrap my head around the idea of *marrying* David de Lucia. In the background, Juan is jabbering through the cell phone that’s not even pressed to my ear anymore.

“I know it sounds crazy, but think about it,” David murmurs, tucking strands of my loose hair behind my ears. “We could make a public announcement, say that we fell in love on this tour, and then the scandal dies down. The tabloids

will eat it up and our reputations will remain intact. Not that there is much of mine left, anyway, but yours will remain unblemished.”

The idea of marrying anyone again sends my heart straight into my throat and it feels like the walls of the cab are closing in on me. Alejandro ruined that notion for me long ago. And it’s not that I don’t like David, I do. Obviously, or I wouldn’t have slept with him in the first place. But the idea of a marriage that starts off as a business transaction makes me uneasy.

Then again, what other choice do I have? If I don’t agree with this plan, I’ll be out of a job and my reputation destroyed. And if I’m being honest with myself, the idea of being married to David doesn’t sound half bad. It will be a marriage of convenience. But can I do it? Can I marry a man just to save face for my company?

David must sense my hesitation because he leans closer to me, his voice low and husky. “I’ll make it worth your while, Rosa. I’ll take care of you. You won’t have to worry about anything.”

I look into his deep brown eyes, and I know that he’s serious. Although the sentiment is sweet, I don’t want someone to take care of me. I can do that all on my own. David couldn’t give a shit about protecting his reputation, but he’s willing to do it for me. And while I know it’s not the most romantic proposition, there’s something in the way he’s looking at me that makes me feel wanted. Makes me feel like he’s not just doing this to save face for Estrella Management, but because he really cares about me.

I take a deep breath, squaring my shoulders as I make my decision. “Okay, let’s do it.”

Oh my god, have you lost your fucking mind, Rosa?

David grins, pulling me into a tight embrace as he kisses the top of my head. “Don’t worry. We’ll make it work. I promise, the tabloids will never touch your good name again. Who knows, maybe something more will come of it.”

I wish I could laugh, or feel the weight of the decision lift off my shoulders. Instead, I feel as if my ankles have been weighed down with blocks. Something more? I can't even fathom it.

Shaking my head, I push him back to his side of the taxi, trying to separate my anxiety from his Golden Retriever energy. "Let's just focus on getting through this scandal, okay?"

Juan's voice crackles through the phone, reminding us we still have work to do. "Alright, we'll start working on a plan. You two just stay out of the tabloids until then."

David

Rosa and I are married the day after my concert in Mexico in an intimate ceremony on the beach at a private resort that caters to celebrities like myself.

The small ceremony is beautiful. Everyone says we look like the perfect couple, even though there is an unspoken understanding between us that this union will not be based on love but on convenience. On the surface, our marriage has all the trappings of being a loving relationship: smiles, laughter, and warm embraces. But deep down, I can sense Rosa's nervousness and I can feel her apprehension in my bones.

It's a blow to my confidence, wedding a woman for 'convenience,' especially this woman, but a part of me is thrilled. Eager to start my life with Rosa, no matter how big the lie.

Our families are not let in on the ruse, of course. They can never know that this marriage is a sham. No one can. As far as everyone is concerned, we fell in love during our time working together with Estrella Management and took it to the next level.

My own mother scowls at us when we are officially pronounced husband and wife. She is no one's fool. I know I'll

hear more about it when the time comes.

Rosa tries to hide her feelings throughout the evening as we celebrate with friends and family who are eager to send us off with best wishes for our future together. But as the night wears on, the weight of our decision becomes too much for her to bear. I can see it in the way her eyes dart around the room and the way her smile falters when people congratulate us.

It's like watching a flower wilt before my eyes.

We excuse ourselves from the party and go for a walk on the beach under the stars. The sound of the waves crashing against the shore is soothing, and the cool ocean breeze is refreshing.

I grip her hand, tugging her near, staring deeply into her eyes.

“Rosa,” I whisper, “I know that this is not the ideal situation, but we can make it work. We can make a life together and help each other achieve our goals. I promise to always be there for you, no matter what.”

She gapes at me, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

“This isn't a forever thing, David,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “Estrella agreed to one year, remember? After that, we go our separate ways.”

“Wait—”

Yes, we agreed to one year. It was Juan's minimum requirement, but I did not think we would adhere to it. What is she saying? My heart is squeezing the inside of my chest and I'm finding it difficult to breathe.

“I know,” I say, my voice shaking, “But Rosa, listen to me, please. I understand that this is not what we had planned, but I never thought that I would fall for you.”

“You don't know what you're talking about,” she mutters.

Reaching out to cup her face in my hands, I stop her flow of words. “I love you, Rosa. I know you wish it weren't so, but I do. I want to make this work. I want to be with you.”

Rosa looks at me, her eyes filled with doubt and uncertainty, “David, you’re reckless and wild, and you don’t have to do this. You don’t have to say these things to make me feel better. I know what this is.”

I shake my head. “No, Rosa, you don’t understand. I mean it. I *want* you.”

I lunge in and press my lips firmly against hers, feeling a jolt of electricity shoot through us, a tangible reminder that physically, we more than work together.

For a moment, Rosa responds to my kiss, her arms wrapping around my neck, our tongues tangling. Immediately, my cock grows in response, but before I can take any more liberties, she pulls away. She’s gasping, breathless and beautiful with the wind whipping her sable hair. It’s clear that she’s still hesitant about our situation, and my heart sinks.

“We can take it slow,” I say, trying to reassure her. “There’s no rush. We’ll get to know each other better and see where this goes.”

Rosa nods tentatively, still unsure.

“Okay,” she breathes, but I know she’s not convinced, not entirely. She smiles up into my eyes. “Let’s see where this goes.”

We continue our walk along the beach, talking about everything and nothing. It’s comfortable and easy, like we’ve known each other for years instead of just a few months. As we walk, I can feel the warm sand between my toes and the cool ocean water lapping at our feet. It’s like we’re in our own little world, and I can’t help but feel hopeful about the future.

And that’s when it happens.

“I need my phone,” I say insistently.

Rosa’s brows furrow together before she rummages around in the small white pouch linked around her wrist and produces my cellular for me. I frantically tap at the screen of my note taking app, humming beneath my breath.

“What are you doing?” She asks, trying to peek over my shoulder.

The music is pulsing through my veins and inside my head. Words and notes coming together. I lift my head, knowing my eyes must look crazed, but I smile at her breathlessly.

“I think I just wrote my next hit,” I say, dragging her close to me, pressing her body against mine.

My mouth crashes down on hers, taking instead of inquiring like our last kiss, and Rosa responds as she did in Cartagena.

Passion flares between us, the sound of the waves now drowned out by the sound of our breathing. Her body moves against mine in a fluid dance, her touch too intoxicating to resist. A low moan wells up from my chest; I am helpless to fight the fire that’s spread through my veins.

Double-checking that no one is watching, I spin her around and pull her back against me, grinding my erection into her supple ass. Relishing in the feeling of her curves against me, I attack her exposed neck with my teeth and tongue.

The chemistry between us is undeniable, and it’s like nothing else in the world matters but this moment. My hand trails down across her side and then her stomach; she gasps as I hold her tight, urging her away from the beach into the privacy of the palms and fragrant plumeria.

Spinning her around, I attack her mouth once more, open and stealing breath. My hands are greedy, pulling at the straps of her simple white dress, exposing her tanned shoulders. As we break apart, gasping for air, I can see the fire in her eyes.

She kisses me again, forcing me back against the thick trunk of a palm tree, her body and hips grinding into me. My god, how has she gone this long without another man making her his?

As I push the material of her dress aside, exposing her breasts, Rosa gasps, and arches her back, her hands reaching down and freeing my cock from my linen pants.

“Rosa,” I groan as she grips me firmly in her smooth hand. “Fuck.”

As I yank up her skirt along the way, I slide my fingers into her wetness and Rosa closes her eyes, whimpering. Her hips moving with purpose against my seeking touch.

“Mmmm,” she moans, letting her head fall back. “Don’t stop, David.”

I don’t stop, can’t stop. I fuck her with my fingers, hitting her g-spot over and over again. Leaning in, I capture her mouth with my own and bite at her lips, my teeth dragging across her flesh. Rosa moans, giving me the confidence to move my mouth down to her neck.

Ripping off her panties, I move to my knees and bury my face between her thighs, lost in her essence.

“Oh! David!” Rosa cries out as my tongue swirls around her clit and she bucks her hips against my face, grinding herself into me. Her hands bury themselves in my hair, holding me in place as I continue to touch her. My mouth is hot and wet and it’s bringing her closer to the edge.

“I’m going to come,” she gasps out between breaths. I probe into her wetness with my fingers, her body tightening against me.

“Oh, God,” Rosa cries out, her whole body shaking against me, her pussy contracting tightly around my fingers. “Fuck. Don’t stop.”

Pulling my hand from between her thighs, I yank her down onto the sand on our knees, pulling her body over mine. She is sitting astride me and I smack her ass, the firm flesh rippling. “*Andale.*”

Rosa looks at me, her eyes wide, her cheeks are flushed and her lips are wet and swollen. My cock is throbbing beneath her, eager to feel her weight. And all she does is look at me and smile, reaching down to position herself over my length, sliding down onto me with ease.

I moan and grab her hips, trying to control her movement. It feels too good to watch her. But Rosa won’t be still. She lifts

and falls again, harder and faster than before. The feeling of her tight walls pulsing around me is almost too much to bear.

“Rosa,” I groan, “Fuck, I’m going to come.”

Rosa’s eyes go wide and she reaches down between her legs, rubbing herself as she rides me faster and harder, desperate to bring herself to the edge again before I do.

Biting down on my bottom lip, I try to hold back, but the feeling of her against me is too much. My whole body tenses, ready to break beneath her. I can feel her tense as well, and I know she’s close, too.

“Fuck, Rosa!” I cry out, my hands bruising her hips.

As I spasm beneath her, Rosa cries out, her head thrown back as her body shudders and bucks against me, her walls tightening and pulsing against my cock.

She cries out and collapses against my chest.

We lie together on the sand, both of us trying to catch our breath. At this moment, I know I want to be with her. I want to take her home and make her mine. To keep her in bed forever and never let go.

Rosa breaks the silence. “That was amazing.”

“*Si, mi amor, perfecto.*” I say, kissing her on the neck.

Rosa looks deeply into my eyes. “So, what do we do now?”

“We live, *mi vida,*” I whisper, as for the first time in a very long time, I feel I am exactly where I need to be in this wide world. “We live.”

ABOUT DAISY ST. JAMES

Multi-genre romance author Daisy St. James is the mother of three wildlings and wife to one patient, amazing, and supportive man. Her husband is the love of her life, and you'll find a little of him in every hero she writes. Most of her heroines have a bit of her in them as well. In doing so, she's made their love immortal.

Creating engaging, heartfelt stories for her readers is her passion, and she LIVES to write steamy romances with strong female leads and sexy bad boys.

She currently lives in Montreal, Canada, where she drinks too much coffee, listens to really loud music, and makes magic happen with words.

www.daisystjames.com

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ETCHED IN STONE

by Dakota Willink

Contemporary Romance, Billionaire

A lot can happen on a remote island when nobody is looking...

Alexander promised me a dream honeymoon.

He gave me that and so much more.

We escaped to a secluded, untouched island far from the bustling world. Surrounded by white sand, turquoise waters, and lush palms, we embarked on a journey of love and unbridled discovery.

My enigmatic husband was as ruthless as he was tender. He had complete control, making my skin burn and my body ache.

On the last night at our tropical paradise, the atmosphere was charged with anticipation. I was at the mercy of his every whim, and his obsession knew no bounds.

I belonged to him.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Readers,

There are four words no woman ever wants to hear: You have breast cancer.

It's a terrifying, life-changing diagnosis that can unearth all kinds of emotions. If you're in our shared [reader Facebook group](#), you might already know that Cassidy London and I are more than just colleagues. We are friends.

As her friend, my heart breaks for all she's had to endure, but I'm also awe-inspired by her strength. Her resilience and ability to smile even during the most challenging moments in life make her one of the most admirable people I know.

When she announced that she would put together an anthology supporting breast cancer research, of course, I agreed to do all I could to help. Research has shown that people with cancer need support from friends, and that support can make a big difference in their life.

When authors are invited to write for an anthology, more often than not, many story ideas come to mind. That is precisely what happened to me when Cassidy first approached me about *Fight Like A Girl*.

However, I didn't want to write just any story. This one had to be a story that would most entice my readers to buy. Ensuring the success of this charity anthology for my dear friend was of utmost importance to me.

So, I put it to my newsletter subscribers to vote on the type of story I should craft. The results? Readers wanted a super steamy short about Alexander and Krystina from *The Stone Series*. The dirtier, the better.

Easy-peasy.

Those characters light up the sheets regularly, and I decided to give them a honeymoon in *Etched In Stone*. This is a brand new, never-been-released, extended epilogue to *Set In Stone*, book 3 in *The Stone Series*. While this five-book series should be read in order, new to series readers can enjoy this steamy short without knowing the backstory.

Thank you for choosing *Fight Like A Girl*, A Romance Anthology to Benefit Breast Cancer Research. YOU are making a difference, and your support is immeasurable.

— Dakota Willink

USA Today Bestselling Author

CHAPTER 1

Krystina

Alexander and I walked along the Caribbean shoreline's powdery, soft white sand. It stretched for miles, beckoning me to sink my toes into its warmth. Palm trees swayed lazily in the salty sea breeze, their slender trunks and canopy of vibrant green fronds reaching forward. The water gently lapped against the shore, producing a soothing melody that harmonized with the rustling of palms and the distant calls of seagulls.

"It's so beautiful here. It makes me not want to go home," I murmured. The stunning landscape seemed to be plucked right from a postcard. Alexander had said the island was named Enchanted Isle for its hypnotizing beauty. I couldn't help but wonder how he had discovered the remote location for our honeymoon spot. "You never told me. How did you find this place?"

"I can't give away all my secrets, angel. That would spoil things for the future," Alexander replied and flashed me an enigmatic smile. My new husband's sapphire eyes seemed impossibly bluer against the reflection of the crystal turquoise waters.

We continued to walk silently, both content to enjoy the island's serenity. Throughout our trip, we had made the rounds to a few more populated islands, such as Grand Cayman and the lush volcanic island of St. Lucia. However, we always returned to the peacefulness only Enchanted Isle could offer. There wasn't a soul in sight, nor did we expect there to be since nobody lived here. This little romantic haven was too small to be developed. The rocky outcrop and coral formations added diversity to the scenery, but it made docking any sizable boat close to the shoreline near impossible.

I looked past the colorful reefs to see *The Lucy* proudly floating on the glimmering surface of the water. The dinghy

we took to shore was just ahead, nestled in the sand. Today was our last day here, and once we pushed the little boat into the water and made our way back to the grandeur of *The Lucy*, it would signal the end of our honeymoon.

We had taken the long way, traveling all the way from Montauk Marina to the Caribbean. Unfortunately, our jobs didn't allow for a lengthy trip back home. The return would be much shorter. Once we pulled up anchor, we'd go north to Fort Lauderdale. From there, Alexander and I would catch a private plane back to New York and leave the hired crew to navigate *The Lucy* back to Lake Montauk.

Even though I knew our life in New York awaited us, I wasn't ready to go back. It had been three weeks of bliss with my new husband. Our trusted crew members had navigated the boat, sticking mainly to the control room and their private quarters, ensuring our paths would only cross if one went looking for the other. This allowed Alexander and me privacy aboard the expansive yacht. Explosive, lust-filled nights with me bound and at the mercy of Alexander's every desire were followed by seemingly endless days on shore.

"Let's stay on the beach a little longer," I suggested. "Maybe we can catch the sunset from the beach."

"I don't want to tender back to *The Lucy* in the dark, Krystina. It's not safe. We can stay for a bit but can't be on the beach when it dips below the horizon. You'll have to see the sunset from the main deck."

"Fair enough. I'm just not in a hurry for this to end. I couldn't have imagined a more perfect honeymoon. Thank you, Alex."

He didn't respond, but his longing expression shared my sentiments. He didn't want our time here to end, either.

Determined to make the most of our last evening on the beach, I increased my pace to close the distance to the dinghy. Once at the small boat, I reached inside and pulled out the beach blanket I had tucked into one of the small storage compartments.

“Alex, can you grab the cooler? I packed it while it was inside the boat, and the weight of the ice might be too heavy for me to lift. I thought we might have a little celebration on our last night here. I grabbed a Bluetooth speaker as well in case we wanted music.”

When he didn't respond, I glanced over my shoulder to see him staring at me with one eyebrow raised. The lid to the cooler was already open, and in his hands were the two fluted glasses and the bottle of champagne I'd packed earlier that morning.

“Planned ahead, did you?” His tone was severe, ensuring I'd note his displeasure. Still, when I looked past the firm set to his jaw, there was no denying the dark desire brewing in his eyes.

“Perhaps,” I replied coyly and turned my back to him to spread the blanket over the sand. I planned to strip out of my coverup until I was wearing nothing but my black thong bikini, but my intentions were interrupted when I felt Alexander's arm snake around my waist. He pulled me roughly to him, and my back pressed against his solid torso as his lips moved to my ear.

“Did you forget that I'm in charge? That I'm the one who plans and makes the decisions for you?” he said with a certain level of gruffness that was only heard when he used his dominant voice.

There was a time in our relationship when I would have challenged his stern reminder, but I was a fast learner. This was all part of the game—and the reward for playing was always worth it.

“I haven't forgotten,” I said quietly, waiting for his lead.

He pushed his hips slightly forward until I could feel his hardening length.

“You want to celebrate, do you? Don't move.”

He stepped away, leaving me with a delicious tightening in my core. Alexander had set only one rule for our honeymoon. He was to be in complete control at all times, and that included

any sort of planning. I'd broken his rule by putting together this romantic interlude on the beach without his knowledge. I was in trouble.

Serious trouble.

And I couldn't wait to be punished.

Like the good submissive I had promised to be on our honeymoon, I lowered my head. My toes curled in the silky white sand as I anxiously waited for what would come next. I heard a cork popping from behind me, followed by the sound of pouring liquid. Alexander didn't speak but simply moved around to the front of me. His unbuttoned white linen shirt billowed in the tropical breeze, giving me a full view of his bronzed chest. I ached to touch him, but I remained still.

Reaching up with one hand, he cupped my neck and brushed his thumb along my cheek. His other hand brought a champagne-filled flute to my lips.

"Drink," he ordered. He tilted it slowly, allowing me time to swallow the bubbly liquid until the glass was empty. When he pulled it away, I languidly swiped my tongue over my bottom lip in a deliberate show of seduction.

"Are you planning to get me drunk so you can take advantage of me?" I whispered teasingly.

Alexander's eyes darkened, and he tossed the flute onto the sand.

"It's not taking advantage when the person in question is already mine for the taking. And make no mistake, Mrs. Stone. You *are* mine."

Slipping a finger under the thin strap of my coverup, he slid it down my arms until it pooled at my feet. After a few quick tugs on the strings at my neck, back, and hips, the scraps of material that made up my bathing suit fell to the blanket. Desire thundered through my veins. The uninhibited feeling of standing naked outdoors was unparalleled. My body flushed, and wetness gathered at the apex of my thighs, wondering what he would do next.

Would he take me right here on the beach? On the blanket, perhaps. Or maybe from behind, with me bent over the boat's edge.

The idea caused the devil on my shoulder to twirl in a happy dance.

Alexander's hands went down to my ass, kneading my bare cheeks as he pulled me closer to him. His erection pressed hard against my belly, nearly stabbing a hole through his shorts. His need was hot. So hot. I wanted to slip my hands inside his waistband and give him pleasure, but he held me tight, and there wasn't room for me to maneuver a hand between us.

Instead, I reached up and laced my fingers into his dark waves. He lowered his head to mine, coaxing my lips apart until our tongues danced in perfect harmony.

"I need to punish you for disobeying me, angel," he growled into my mouth.

"Hmmm..."

"I want you bent over the edge of the boat." He stepped back, and I moved into the vulnerable position without hesitation. I shivered when I felt his hand skim up my thigh. My breath quickened, and despite the balmy air, goosebumps prickled over my skin when he spoke again. "Hang on tight to the side of the boat and spread your legs. I'll be giving you five strikes. The first will be for disobeying my orders and planning something without my consent."

I sucked in a breath and braced myself. We'd been here before, and I knew it would only be a matter of seconds before I felt the sting of his palm.

He gripped my hip securely with one hand and widened his stance. Then he let his hand fly. The crashing of the ocean waves drowned out the sound of the slap, but it was no less felt. My body vibrated, humming in the most exquisite way as I awaited my remaining spankings.

"Three more, one for each of the fluted glasses and the bottle of champagne." Alexander fired off the next three

smacks in rapid succession, alternating cheeks and making each slap harder than the last. Then he leaned close to my ear and whispered, “The fifth spanking is just for my pleasure. I love seeing your ass red from my palm.”

But the fifth didn’t come—at least not right away.

I released a quiet hiss when I felt his finger trace the seam of my ass. Endorphins, arousal, and adrenaline created a heady feeling that was all-encompassing. He lingered over my tightest hole for a moment before continuing his exploration, stopping only to cup my mound and feel how wet I was for him. He growled his approval.

“You never disappoint me, angel.”

Without warning, he shoved two fingers inside me while delivering the final smack to my ass. I hadn’t been ready for it, and my body lurched forward. I quickly widened my stance to keep from toppling into the boat.

Using my new position to his advantage, Alexander plunged his fingers in further, and I cried out from the pleasure. He played my body like a fiddle until I thought my strings would snap from the tension. His treatment was rough, demanding, and unyielding.

And I loved it.

He leaned forward until his mouth was close to my ear.

“You want to come?”

“Yes,” I breathed.

I expected him to intensify his motions, but he abruptly pulled out of me instead. All the air released from my lungs in a frustrated *whoosh*.

“Later, angel,” he informed coolly. “And only if you follow my every instruction.”

Shit.

I hated when he refused me an orgasm, but I knew I’d follow his every command until I got my release. I might not get what I wanted now, but he wouldn’t deny me forever.

“Okay,” I whispered, desperately ignoring the ache between my legs.

“Okay, what?” he demanded.

“Okay, sir.” My breath hitched as the breeze skittered over my bare nipples.

“Very good. Now, we need to start heading back to *The Lucy*. It will be dark before long,” Alexander said matter-of-factly. It was as if he were oblivious to my desperate panting.

The bastard.

I looked past him to see our world had transformed into a mesmerizing canvas of vibrant colors. The sun had dipped closer to the horizon, painting the sky with a breathtaking spectacle of orange, pink, and purple. The lower the sun got, the deeper the shades would become.

“You’re right,” I agreed reluctantly, my voice throaty and breathless.

Alexander lifted my naked body, cradling me to his chest by hooking his arms behind my back and knees, and lowered me into the dinghy. Releasing me, he turned to collect my discarded bathing suit and coverup.

“Put this back on,” he said and handed me the bits of material. “It will be off again soon enough, but the crew on *The Lucy* doesn’t deserve a show in the meantime.”

“How soon will I get to take it off again?” I teased as I tied the bathing suit strings at my neck.

Alexander’s heated sapphire blues narrowed on me as he dug his feet into the sand and pushed the boat into the water.

“Not soon enough.”

CHAPTER 2

Alexander

The salty breeze tugged at my hair as I carefully secured the sleek dinghy to the side of *The Lucy*. I fastened a sturdy painter line to the bow, ensuring it was taught enough to accommodate the sea's ever-changing moods. In a sense, the rope was a lifeline connecting the small vessel to its mothership. It was a ritual I'd performed countless times but never gave it less care than the last. Knots were my forte after all—as Krystina could attest—and I tied each one with the finesse of an artist.

Once I felt satisfied the small craft was secure, I turned and offered my hand to Krystina. The sun was low in the sky, its red streaks blazing across the horizon and basking my wife in an orange glow as she stepped onto *The Lucy's* polished deck.

My wife.

I wondered if I would ever get used to that.

My angel was officially mine.

Now and forever. And while that may sound infinite, no measure of time with Krystina would ever be enough.

Leaning down, I pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “I need to talk to the crew for a moment, and then I'm going to see about getting us something to eat.”

“I hadn't even realized we skipped dinner, Alex. If you'll give me a minute to get some proper clothes on, I can—”

“Clothes won't be necessary,” I interjected. “Just head down to our bedroom. I'll get a light dinner together and bring it there. And angel—I want you naked and kneeling when I get there.”

“But—”

I raised a hand to silence her and shook my head ever so slightly. I didn't need to say anything. My expression was enough for her to know I would not be challenged. The protest fell from her lips as understanding settled over her.

I raised my hand to lightly brush her cheek with the backs of my fingers, skimming my thumb along her jawline.

“Your trust is intoxicating. Go and wait for me. I won’t be long, angel.”

Without another word, I turned to walk toward the helm with a confident stride, crossing the main deck to where I expected the crew to be. When they came into view, Isaac Davis, the crew captain, looked up when he heard my approach.

“Mr. Stone,” he said with a short nod.

“Good evening, Isaac. Are you prepared to pull up anchor?”

“Yes, sir. Rough seas are forecasted for the overnight, and I didn’t know if you wanted to try to navigate that. Just waiting on your orders.”

I pressed my lips together into a tight line. The ocean waters in this part of the world were always unpredictable this time of year.

“Hurricane?”

“No, sir. Just a small tropical storm to the north that will bring considerable chop.”

“I’d like to avoid that. Let’s bring her around to the island’s south side and anchor there for the night. Hopefully, the land will provide a bit of protection from the harshest of the waves. We can begin the trip back to port in the morning when your crew is ready.”

“Very well, Mr. Stone.” Turning toward the other two crew members, Isaac addressed them in a firm and authoritative voice. “Start the engines!”

Each subsequent command was spoken with precision and clarity. I was pleased to see their movements well-coordinated and synchronized, a testament to their experience and training. After starting the powerful engines that lay hidden beneath the sleek exterior deck, *The Lucy* began to move with the refined elegance the luxury yacht was known for.

“Steer to starboard,” Isaac directed. The helmsman adjusted the wheel, and the yacht responded gracefully. I nodded my approval, trusting Krystina and I would be in good hands on the overnight.

Leaving them to it, I walked across the large open deck. Away from the harsh city lights, the stars shone brightly, illuminating the sky like shimmering diamonds. They reflected on the large double glass doors that led to the salon. After sliding the door closed behind me, I moved to the small galley kitchen and opened the modest refrigerator. I was pleased to see Isaac had restocked everything precisely as I’d requested, making it easy for me to assemble a quick, no-cook meal.

I arranged tomatoes, red onion, olives, green peppers, and cucumbers on a platter. I topped it with cubed feta and a seasoned oil and vinegar dressing to complete the traditional Greek salad. Once that was finished, I prepared another opulent platter of cheese, nuts, and a medley of fruits. Hearty crackers paired with velvety hummus and creamy tzatziki completed the simple meal. Even Vivian, my invaluable housekeeper and cook, would be impressed. It may not have been one of her seven-course spreads, but it would suffice.

I placed both platters on a serving tray, grabbed two glasses and a chilled bottle of Louis Jadot Le Montrachet Grand Cru 2016, and went to the master suite.

When I opened the doors to the bedroom, my breath immediately caught in my throat. I froze, completely mesmerized by the stunning woman kneeling near the foot of the bed. With her arms behind her back and her knees apart, she defined the meaning of perfection. Desire gripped me, and I suppressed a groan.

She glanced up at me curiously, then quickly lowered her head in submission. In the brief moment that our eyes met, I saw the silent invitation. She knew her body belonged to me.

Tearing my eyes away from her delicate and creamy skin, I set the tray of food down on the small dinette in the corner and lit the candles already strategically placed around the room.

The candlelight cast shadows that seemed to amplify the silent passion in the air, whispering promises of what would come.

Walking over to the settee, I picked up a coil of black nylon rope that draped over the back. Tonight, on the last night of our honeymoon, Krystina would be rendered helpless. I would own her, demanding her submission until every one of my desires was satiated.

I took off my shirt and moved to stand behind her. My eyes ran down the length of her flawless spine and settled on the curvature of her impeccable ass. A vision of those luscious hips opened to me flooded my brain.

Not yet.

I was nothing if not patient, and I knew the reward would be worth the wait. Squatting down behind her, I looped the rope around her wrist and went to work.

In the dimly lit room, sexual tension hung heavy in the air. The sensation of Krystina's wrists in my grip, the feeling of her vulnerability and trust, was intoxicating. It fueled the primal desire that coursed through my veins. I watched as her hands, delicate and graceful, succumbed to my binding. As my fingers brushed against her skin, a shiver coursed through her body, a thrilling response to the impending restraint. There was a moment of resistance, a flicker of uncertainty, before she willingly yielded to the erotic tension enveloping us.

It was a dance of dominance and submission, a sensual interplay of power and trust that left us both breathless. I gripped her neck and angled her head back to look at me. Her eyes filled with a mix of anticipation and surrender. She held my gaze, and at that moment, we were bound not just by restraints but by an unspoken understanding of the exquisite pleasure that lay ahead.

Once her bindings were secure, I stood and moved to the table and retrieved the tray of food and drink.

I selected a succulent, ripe strawberry, bringing the bright crimson to her lips. With deliberate slowness, she parted her

lips to accept the offering. Her teeth grazed it delicately with a hint of a knowing smile playing on her mouth.

This went on for the next thirty minutes. Each morsel I offered her, each shared bite, became an intimate exchange of desire and pleasure until I thought I might combust. I wanted her more than I ever wanted her before. It was an unexplainable need of epic proportions. I was desperate to be inside her. To feel her velvet heat.

Pushing the tray of food to the side, I reached up with both hands and brushed the pads of my thumbs over her nipples. My touch caused them to harden into erect peaks instantly. She sucked in a tiny breath, followed by an exhale of desperation. I pinched, twisting each nipple between my thumbs and forefingers, relishing the weight of her bare breasts in my hands. When she moaned, any willpower I had to put things off any longer was thrown to the wayside.

I lowered my head and took a ridged peak into my mouth. She gasped in pleasure as I sucked and rolled her around my tongue. She tilted her head back, inviting me to take more, and I silently thanked all that was divine for gifting me this woman.

Moving up to claim her mouth, I pushed my tongue past her waiting lips and devoured her. She moaned, the vibration of her lips sending an electric shock straight to my groin. Our kiss was a dance of passion, conveying emotions that went beyond any spoken words. It was a revelation of our deepest desires.

I worked my way down her neck, savoring the feel of her pulse hammering beneath her skin as I breathed in her scent. She smelled like coconut-kissed vanilla.

“God, Krystina. The things you make me want to do to you...”

I nipped up her neck to her earlobe. She lolled her head to the side and allowed me better access. I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her body tighter against me. She sighed her appreciation, and I crushed my mouth against hers again.

Lifting her, I wrapped those glorious legs around my waist. The heat of her sex pressed against the ridges of my abdomen. She pushed forward, grinding against me, telling me her need was hot. I could have buried my cock in her right then—to drive into her like the wild animal she made me. But she deserved more than that tonight. My wife merited worshipping.

I set her down on the edge of the bed covered in silver and blue satin. I kissed down her body, over her shoulders, breasts, and thighs, savoring the delicious taste of her skin.

I spread her legs apart and pressed my cheek against her inner thigh. Her exposed lips were lush, pink, and inviting.

“Oh, angel.”

My face hovered over her glistening sex, and I blew softly until she began to pant. I couldn't wait any longer. I had to taste her. I swiped my tongue over her clit. Her breath hitched, and she cried out. It was all the encouragement I needed to bury my face in her soaking wet heat.

I reached up and took hold of her breasts, gratified to feel her nipples still pebbled from arousal. I twisted and pulled at the taut peaks. The pulsing in her clit signaled she was already near release, but I kept her on edge and didn't allow her to come. Her back arched as I circled and teased, deliberately driving her to madness.

Her breath was ragged when she looked down at me, eyes wild and full of passion. Her cheeks were flushed, and her gaze was desperate.

I pushed her backward onto the bed. Her bound hands forced her back into an arch, elevating her breasts. I shoved her legs up roughly and spread her wide. Then I devoured her like a starving man who would never get his fill.

It wasn't long before she cried out. Her juices, the sweetest of all nectars, coated my tongue and lips as I suckled every drop of her release. I felt a tremble course down her legs and smiled in satisfaction.

“I've only just begun, angel.”

Taking advantage of her lithe state, I removed the rest of my clothing. My cock sprung free, happy to be released. Climbing back onto the bed, I flipped her onto her stomach and straddled her hips. With experienced fingers, I quickly untied the rope binding her arms together. Once completely unraveled, I slid off the bed and fashioned new knots. These would be to secure her ankles to the bed posts.

Once she was secure, I looked to see if she showed any level of discomfort. Her head was angled to the side with her lips parted slightly. But her eyes—those pools of chocolate brown—were dark with want. She knew how defenseless she was in this position. Lying face down, her ass and pussy were vulnerable to my every desire.

“I’m going to bury my cock inside you. Deep. You’ll feel every inch of me.” I paused and slid a finger over her puckered rear. “Everywhere.”

Her response was a carnal moan that was music to my ears. I skimmed my hand down to part her wet slit. One finger. Two fingers. I slowly and deliberately stretched her, preparing her for my invasion. She was more than ready for me.

I positioned myself at her waiting entrance. Gripping her hips, I speared her opening, easily sliding to the hilt. Her breath caught, and her mouth went slack as she absorbed each stab of pleasure. I moved hard and fast, in and out, working her into a desperate frenzy.

“Alex, make me come. Please! I need to come around you!”

I loved when she begged. Something about the way the word please sounded on her lips made me wild with lust.

I kissed the back of her neck and shoulders, then pulled up her hips until she was on her hands and knees. With her ankles still secured to the bed posts, her thighs were forced further apart. Every intimate part of her was open and more exposed to me than ever. She exhaled and closed her eyes. I groaned and pushed forward until the tip of my cock was pressing against her very core.

“Oh!” she gasped in shock.

I knew how much she liked it this way—deep from behind, with my cock hitting every internal pleasure point. White-hot pleasure rocketed through my veins as the walls of her vagina constricted to adjust to me. She wrapped me in heat, pulsing with desire.

“Come for me, Krystina.”

I pulled back slowly, then drove home again. And again.

“Alex!” she screamed out. Her body writhed with pleasure, her climax vibrating around my cock. But I didn’t stop. I wanted more—to take and give all I could.

She was like a goddess with her head thrown back in passion—her opulent chestnut curls a wild mane around her head and her lush breasts bouncing as I thrust into her. I gave her bottom a light smack.

“Yes!” she screamed out. “Again!”

Holy fuck. This woman.

“My angel likes it rough. You need to be dominated. You crave it.”

I smacked her again, this time harder than the last. I pounded into her, spanking her repeatedly until her ass was bright red and my palm stung. Krystina clawed at the sheets, rocking and moaning as I possessed her. She was wild with need, and I knew she’d take anything I had to offer.

Without breaking our connection, I reached over to the nightstand and retrieved a butt plug and bottle of lube. Krystina watched me, her eyes wide with trepidation. However, we’d been here before, and she trusted me. The ultimate pleasure was only a breath away as long as she relaxed her body enough to accept it.

And that she did.

With ample lube, the plug slid in without a hint of resistance until all I could see was the jeweled end. Once it was in place, her pussy clenched impossibly tighter around my cock.

“Fuuuuck,” I moaned.

Then I began to move again. I pounded into her with a savagery like never before—dominating her. Owning her. She was mine, and I was hers.

For all of eternity.

I took us higher and higher until I felt her stiffen. Reaching under her, I pinched her clit just hard enough to heighten her orgasm. When her climax rocketed through her body, she screamed.

“Ahhh, Alex!”

Her sex tightened like a vice around me, and I knew I would soon follow her.

I gripped her hips and slammed into her.

“Krystina, I’m right there!” I hissed through clenched teeth.

“Let me feel it deep. Please, Alex!”

Please.

Her spectacular cry was enough to send me over the edge. My mind went blank before a bright awareness spread through me. I plunged deep and held the position, allowing my seed to erupt into the intimate recesses of her body.

My connection to the extraordinary woman beneath me was complete.

CHAPTER 3

Krystina

I lay there staring out the portside window, waiting to catch my breath. The moon cast a silvery glow on the water. The

gentle waves seem to serenade us, their melody so enchanting I could easily drift off. Every inch of me was splendidly numb, languid, and sexually satiated.

“Oh no, Mrs. Stone. I’m not done with you yet,” Alexander murmured into my ear. His body lay sprawled over my backside, with most of his weight balancing on his right side so he didn’t crush me. “But first, you need to eat more. I got distracted before we could finish our meal.”

As if on cue, my stomach gave a little rumble. That hour-long sex-a-thon had clearly worked off what I had eaten just a short time ago.

He shifted down my body, trailing light kisses over every inch of heated skin until he came to a stop at my ankles. Deft fingers released my bound ankles before moving back up. He tapped me on the hip, signaling I should flip over. Once I was flat on my back, he repeated his handiwork. This time, he bound my wrists to the headboard.

“I can’t eat if my hands are tied up,” I pointed out.

“I will feed you.”

Of course, he would. How silly of me.

I felt the corners of my mouth tilt up in a knowing smile, anxious to find out what else my husband had in store for me.

After my wrists were anchored to the posts, he shifted my body until I was propped upright against the pillows, allowing a bit of slack in the rope so I was more comfortable. Then, his hands were on my face, angling my head so he could crash his mouth onto mine.

I liquefied beneath the demand of his warm lips. The kiss was hard, hungry, hot, and lethal as his tongue danced to an erotic tune.

Almost abruptly, he pulled away, climbed from the bed, and returned with the food tray. Setting it to one side, he positioned himself before me, lifting my legs until they draped over his thighs and disappeared behind his back. I glanced down to see his heavy cock resting on the bed between us. I

swallowed the burn in my throat, the need to feel him on my tongue overwhelming.

Alexander plucked a seedless green olive from the tray and brought it to my lips. His sapphire blue eyes darkened as he pushed the briny tree fruit into my mouth. While I chewed, his free hand traveled down my throat, traced a path between my breasts, and stopped only after reaching my drenched sex. He slid a finger along the slit. My walls pulsated in anticipation, the clenching adding pressure to the butt plug that was still in place.

He continued to tease various pleasure points on my body while feeding me an assortment of olives, cheeses, and tomatoes. His fingers were magic, sparking heightened awareness everywhere he touched. He caressed and explored until my body was quaking with unparalleled need.

But he wouldn't give in to my pleas for release. I began to lose track of time. At some point, he fashioned clamps to my nipples. The hard points protruded through the tiny vises, vulnerable and sensitive to the slightest touch. When he leaned forward to flick his tongue over an erect peak, I nearly bucked off the bed.

“Alex, please!”

I felt the curve of his smile on the side of my breast, and I wanted to scream. My need and desire were so hot it was near agony. So when he finally curled his fingers inside me, my orgasm was instantaneous.

“That's it, angel. Come for me,” Alexander demanded in a gravelly tone.

Air stole from my lungs, freezing me in place as the intense swell surged through me. It rose faster and hotter until I thought I was going to explode. Stars dotted my vision when Alexander plunged a third finger inside me, flexing mercilessly to prolong my orgasm. Wave after wave of pleasure rocketed through me.

“Oh, God.” I could barely breathe the words as I rocked my hips, milking his fingers until the tremors began to

subside. A delicious tingling extended to the tips of my every extremity.

Once I'd come down from the intense high, he removed his fingers from my body and shifted closer until we were mere inches apart. He brought his gaze to my lips, then raised his hand to place the fingers that were slick with my juices to my lips.

“Lick them clean,” he ordered.

Meeting his eyes, a magnetic pull intensified our connection as I parted my lips enough for him to push his fingers into my mouth. My tangy flavor, combined with his salty release from earlier, coated my tongue, reminding me of the intensity of our connection.

Oh, shit. This is hot.

I swiped over and around each digit in a sensual dance, eager to please him. He stared intently at me while I suckled as if he were memorizing my every move. Sometimes, his eyes would fix on mine, only to shift down to stare at my breasts a moment later. I loved how he looked at me. His gaze said he appreciated what he saw and that my body pleased him—that I pleased him. The low growl that emanated from him was only a confirmation of what I could see plainly in his heated stare.

When he seemed satisfied, he removed his fingers from my mouth and replaced them with his tongue. His kiss was gentle yet commanding, pulling me closer and shifting me down until my back was flat against the mattress. My arms pulled deliciously tight against the restraints.

His body pressed down on mine, his defined edges and contracting muscles sharply opposing my soft curves. Our breaths mingled, creating a shared rhythm that mirrored the beat of our hearts. When he entered me, the world around us faded into a dreamy cosmos, leaving only the intensity of the moment.

CHAPTER 4

Alexander

As the gentle rays of the morning sun filtered through the curtains of *The Lucy's* luxurious master suite, I stirred and glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It was almost seven. I usually woke before sunrise, but my body clock had been thrown off these past few weeks. Going back to work would surely be an adjustment I wasn't looking forward to. I'd grown used to waking up and enjoying lazy mornings with Krystina.

I turned my head to look at the extraordinary woman lying next to me. My wife's tousled curls spilled over the pillow in a halo. The soft morning light accentuated the delicate features of her face, and a gentle smile played at the corners of her lips. She looked as if she were relishing a pleasant dream.

I watched her sleep, her chest rising and falling in a slow, peaceful rhythm. As it happened so many mornings since our wedding, I found myself mesmerized by her beauty. The fact that she was now my partner for life filled me with a profound sense of satisfaction. My solitary days were over. She filled a void in my life that I'd unknowingly endured for far too long.

With great care, I shifted my position to avoid disturbing Krystina's slumber and went to take a shower. She'd wake soon, and I wanted breakfast ready on the main deck before we pulled up anchor. We'd sat on the polished wood deck of *The Lucy* when we first arrived at Enchanted Isle, her white sand, mysterious cliffs, and shady palms greeting us upon arrival. It seemed fitting that we also be on deck to bid her farewell.

After I showered and dressed, I stepped back into the main cabin to see Krystina sitting up in bed. She held the sheet up, barely covering her breasts, as she stared at me with wide, excited eyes.

"Are we still anchored?" she asked hurriedly.

“Yes, why?”

She let out a relieved breath with an audible *whoosh*.

“Oh, good. I was afraid we were already underway. We need to go back to the island.”

“Go back? I’ve already given the crew instructions—”

“This will be quick. I promise,” she interrupted, throwing the sheet and blankets off her. She strode naked to the closet, pulled out undergarments and a light blue sundress, and began to dress. My eyes ran up the length of her flawless legs and settled on the curvature of her impeccable ass. A vision of those limbs wrapped around me flooded my brain.

Without a second thought, I closed the distance between us in three short strides, grabbed her around the waist, and pulled her back against my chest. The thin dress she was about to slip over her head fluttered to the ground.

“Alex!”

“I need to feel you,” I growled, kissing my way down her neck.

“You are insatiable!” She laughed and pushed at my shoulders. “You can have me—later. Many times, if you want. It’s a long trip back to the mainland. I just need to do this one thing first.”

Reluctantly, I pulled back and allowed her enough room to recover her dress. I pressed my lips together in disappointment when her gorgeous body disappeared under the cotton blend.

“I think you’ve forgotten the rules again, Krystina. I’m in charge, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah,” she waved off, rushing to the bathroom to run a brush through her hair. After splashing some water on her face, she returned to the bedroom. “But technically, Mr. Bossy Pants, the rules ended last night since that was the last day of our honeymoon.”

With my tongue in cheek, I tried to mask my amusement.

“Mr. Bossy Pants, huh?”

“I need tools,” she announced without skipping a beat.

“Tools. What sort of tools?” I asked, trying to figure out where I’d failed to keep up. I was genuinely perplexed.

Her brow furrowed in concentration as she pressed a finger to her chin.

“I don’t know,” she eventually said with a shrug. “I’ll know what I need when I see it. Is there a toolbox on board?”

“Of course. There’s a large chest bolted down behind the helm.”

“Perfect!”

And with that, she was off like a shot.

I followed her up to the main deck, my curiosity piqued. The sun had fully risen, casting a golden glow across the endless expanse of the open sea. I took a deep breath, inhaling the fresh ocean air as I watched my wife hustle over to a surprised-looking Isaac.

Krystina’s arms waved about, and she pointed to the island. Her animated gestures reminded me of an artist painting with enthusiastic, vivid strokes. I didn’t know what she was saying to the hired crew captain, but it was no matter. I was perfectly content to watch from a distance. When my wife became overly excited about something, it was usually quite entertaining to watch.

Her laughter bubbled up, a joyful symphony that resonated through the air. Then, she returned to me with a small canvas bag. I could hear metal clanking inside.

“What’s in the bag?” I asked.

She winked and replied, “You’ll see.”

Her eyes glimmered, and her lips curled into a mischievous grin. Her excitement was infectious and almost impossible to contain. The energy around her seemed to hum with anticipation, and I couldn’t help but laugh as I followed her to the dinghy that would shuttle us to shore.

When we arrived on the beach, the water gave way to the soft, powdery sand that stretched endlessly before us. The salty breeze tousled Krystina's hair as I took her hand and helped her out of the small boat.

"Now, tell me what this is all about," I demanded, but my words carried no heat. She had my complete attention now.

"Do you remember the first day you brought me to this island?"

"Of course."

"We arrived in the morning and had a picnic breakfast of pastries and fruit—which we never finished because you decided a nearby boulder was the perfect place for a spanking. I need to find that big rock again."

I raised my eyebrows and flashed her a devilish grin.

"Itching for spanking, Mrs. Stone?"

She laughed. "No! It's just the place we christened the island, so to speak. The problem is, I can't remember where the boulder was. Do you recall the location?"

"I do. It's this way."

With her hand firmly clasped in mine, I led her down the shore toward the secluded area she was referring to.

"Look, there it is!" The energy in her voice matched the sparkle in her eyes. It was as if a well-guarded treasure chest had opened, and the contents spilled out, illuminating her entire being with an effervescent glow. Her excitement was contagious, and I couldn't help but be drawn into her world of anticipation and wonder.

I followed her gaze and saw the massive boulder standing sentinel on the beach, bathed in the shadows of the surrounding palm trees. I'd picked this location deliberately, far out of sight from any crew member on *The Lucy*, knowing I'd strip Krystina bare and fuck her into oblivion.

And that was exactly what I'd done.

If I concentrated hard enough, I could still feel the stinging in my palm after I'd reddened her ass. That wasn't the only time I'd taken her on Enchanted Isle. I'd fucked my wife more times than I could count, owning her body in every way imaginable whenever an opportunity presented itself. Memories of our many beach escapades over the past few weeks rushed in. My cock jerked, and my dominant side itched to be unleashed.

“Yes, Krystina. That's the rock where we picnicked. Now, I've been patient with this unexpected excursion so far. It's time for you to tell me why you dragged us back here,” I told her, this time my voice laced with authority. If she held out much longer, she would be getting that spanking whether she wanted it or not.

She closed the remaining distance to the boulder, her steps purposeful and leaving indelible marks in the sand. Seagulls glided overhead, their calls submitting to the distant crash of waves.

“I wanted to do something that would leave our mark here forever,” she began. She pulled her hand from mine and reached inside her canvas bag.

When she procured chiseling tools, I raised a curious brow.

“Do I dare ask what those are for?”

She didn't answer but instead turned away from me and brought the chisel and hammer to the stone. My gaze fixated on her as she wielded the tools with precision. She moved with a captivating blend of grace and resolve, every chisel strike against the massive stone boulder radiating with purpose.

Her brow furrowed in concentration, positioning the chisel carefully until I could see her intentions. She was etching our initials into the hard surface.

I brought my attention back to her face, a slight smile forming when I saw the determination set in her jaw. Her movements were deliberate, the metallic clang of metal on metal ringing out like a passionate declaration. The stone

seemed to surrender willingly to her presence as if it recognized her intent.

A profound sense of admiration and intense longing washed over me as I watched her. At that moment, I yearned to be closer to her, to somehow share in this intimate act of creation. She was a vision, a woman who commanded both admiration and desire, not only for her physical beauty but also for the depth of her character. The grace with which she etched our love made my heart constrict.

“You are incredible, angel. Do you know that?”

She paused her chiseling, frowning as she studied the carving thus far.

“Incredible isn’t how I would describe this. I’m just hoping for legible,” Krystina said with a laugh.

“I’m not talking about your artistic abilities, but for everything you are. You’ve made my life richer and more beautiful than I ever could have imagined.”

She looked away from her work, her eyes meeting mine.

“You’re the love of my life, Alex. This etching is more than just our initials. It’s a symbol of our love, something that will endure the test of time—just like us. Now, anyone who comes here after us may see this. Evidence of our love will be etched in stone forever.”

Her words carried a sense of intimacy, as if she were creating a sacred space where only a chosen few were allowed.

I pulled her into my arms, and a tender smile graced her lips. It was a smile that held a thousand unspoken words—a smile that spoke of shared memories, trials, and triumphs.

“Forever, you say?”

“Forever,” she confirmed. Pressing up on her toes, she brushed her lips softly over mine. “Because forever we will be.”

As the sun rose on the horizon, bringing the dawn of a new day, I felt her words in the very depths of my soul. We shared a moment of silent reflection, basking in the memories that

this place held for us. Our honeymoon might be at an end, but it was merely the foundation for our journey. Forever with my new bride had only just begun.

THE END

Thank you for reading ETCHED IN STONE! I hope you enjoyed Krystina and Alexander's honeymoon. Read their entire provocative and suspenseful journey by starting with HEART OF STONE, book 1 in THE STONE SERIES.

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ABOUT DAKOTA WILLINK

Dakota Willink is an award-winning *USA Today* Bestselling Author from New York. She loves writing about damaged heroes who fall in love with sassy and independent females. Her books are character-driven, emotional, and sexy, yet written with a flare that keeps them real. With a wide range of publications,

Dakota's imagination is constantly spinning new ideas. Her work has been translated into [five languages](#) and she has sold over 1 million books worldwide.

Dakota often says she survived her first publishing with coffee and wine. She's an unabashed *Star Wars* fanatic and still dreams of getting her letter from Hogwarts one day. Her daily routines usually include rocking Lululemon yoga pants, putting on lipstick, and obsessing over Excel spreadsheets. Two spoiled Cavaliers are her furry writing companions who bring her regular smiles. She enjoys traveling with her husband and debating social and economic issues with her politically savvy Generation Z son and daughter.

Dakota's favorite book genres include contemporary or dark romance, political & psychological thrillers, and autobiographies.

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HEARTLESS VOW

by Diana A. Hicks

New Adult Contemporary Romance

Mafia Romance

Vittoria Salvatore is no one of consequence. Her life is simple. Until she falls for the wrong guy, Giovanni Valentino, the one they call the Lion, her friend, and the current Don of the Valentino family. The girlish crush she harbored well into adulthood can never be.

Giovanni knows the rules that bind their world and follows them to the letter—the five original crime families can never fraternize.

But rules were meant to be broken. When Vittoria receives the news that would turn her life upside down, she decides to send it all to hell and claim the Lion for herself.

CHAPTER 1

Things We Couldn't Have

“We’re doing everything we can.” Rex’s piercing blue gaze met mine.

For a whole minute, I got lost in its serenity. Even when his words were laced with anger and worry for my niece Donata, he still managed to keep his composure. His calm was contagious. He reminded me so much of his father, the late Don Giovanni Valentino.

Rex was now the king of our secret enclave, the Society. But there was a time when Giovanni and I ran things our way.

“We’re going to get her back,” he continued, “that’s a promise.”

“I believe you.” I exhaled. “Donata has been gone for a week. God only knows what the Brotherhood is doing to her right now.”

My stomach rolled at the idea of Donata going through any amount of pain. When tears pooled in my eyes, I strolled to the window and focused on the garden overlooking the city. I couldn’t stand the idea of losing one more person to our mafia world. Jesus, when did I get so old? At fifty-five, I should be looking forward to retirement. But as it were, when your life belonged to the Society, like mine did, a normal life, love, a family, none of those things were possible.

Rex shuffled through some papers on my desk while he gave me a play by play of where they planned to look for Donata next. They searched Little Odessa with no luck. Now they were canvassing all of Jersey.

I pictured Donata’s bright smile, big blue eyes, her blonde hair, and her pink cheeks. She was so much like her father, full of plans and life.

‘How come you never married, Aunt Vittoria?’ Donata’s words echoed in my head.

Just last week, we were across the hallway having breakfast. How was I supposed to know she wasn’t going to

come home that night. I should've told her the truth when I had the chance.

"Sit down, Rex." I cut Rex off in the middle of his elaborate plan to save Donata.

His head snapped up at me in surprise. "We're still looking for Luca Gallo. It's like the Earth opened up and swallowed them both."

"I know you're doing everything you can." I gestured toward the maps on the desk. "There's something you need to know. I should've told Donata a long time ago, but I was too scared."

"You? Don Salvatore scared?" He glanced toward the door, then pointed a finger toward the dining room across the way. "Should we get the others?"

"No, the other Dons don't need to know. Not yet anyway." I strode to the door and shut it. When I glanced up at Rex again, I focused only on the features that reminded me of his father.

"I see." He sat down slowly, furrowing his brows. "Go on then."

"It all started thirty years ago. I had just turned twenty-five and thought I had my life all planned out. It wasn't perfect. Despite our social status and wealth, there were things I couldn't have..."

CHAPTER 2

Don Valentino, The Lion

"**T**here's my bomboloni." Dad beamed at me from the Plaza Hotel lobby. We were still a good fifty feet away from each other, but he opened his arms and loudly followed with, "Give your old man a hug."

Dad's term of endearment for me was little doughnut hole. Most days, I didn't mind it. But given how today was my first

day at work at his investment firm and we were meeting with potential clients for drinks, the name didn't have the same effect as it did at home.

The tittering behind me made it even worse. I took the time to kiss Dad on the cheek before I turned to face my brother, Pavlo, and his best friend, Michael Alfera, sitting at the cluster of club chairs in the corner.

“Grow up,” I sneered at them.

‘You first,’ Michael mouthed to me.

“Why are they here?” I turned to Dad, who still had stars in his eyes from seeing me in a suit and ready to work.

“I’m hoping your brother finally takes interest in the family business.” He placed his arm around me and whispered, “The Society’s confidence in my progeny is weaning.”

The Society was a secret enclave that controlled all criminal activity in New York City. It was the reason why Dad’s other businesses were so lucrative. Dad never lost a deal because he had most of Manhattan in his mobster pocket.

Our family, the Salvatores, were one of the original founders, which made Dad one of the five Dons. My brother, Pavlo, was expected to step in and take over for Dad someday. But Pavlo only cared about his friends and their stupid drag races. At thirty-years-old, he was expected to marry and settle down, not waste his time on cars and booze.

“You’re going to be around for a long time, Dad.” I smiled at him, then scanned the lobby. “Looks like we’re early.”

“So it seems.” He reached for a lock of stray hair and placed it behind my ear. “You cut your hair.”

“Oh yeah.” I ran my hand through my short bob. This had been my attempt to move from Daddy’s little girl to college graduate status. “I was going for more of a grown-up look,” I confessed, only because I’d never been able to lie to Dad.

“Well, you look beautiful, my bomboloni. Like a young Elizabeth Taylor.” He winked.

“Who?”

“You know, the actress?” He furrowed his brows. When I didn’t react, he waved his hand in dismissal. “She was famous when I was your age.”

“Okay.” I laughed. “I’ll take it.”

I was still basking in Dad’s compliment when a dark suit by the entrance caught my attention. The moment I turned, the world around me froze, sending my heart into overdrive. I stood a little straighter as my gaze followed Don Valentino, the Lion, stride across the lobby to meet my brother and his friend.

The dark three-piece suit made his blond hair stand out. He’d cut it since the last time I saw him. It was still long enough to frame his straight nose, chiseled jaw, and bright blue eyes to perfection. The man oozed confidence and danger. It was a sort of magnetism that was so hard to resist. More than that, I was addicted to his energy and the way I felt so alive when he was near.

Giovanni Valentino was more than a childhood crush. In all the years we were in school together, he was my friend—until junior year when he decided we couldn’t hang out anymore. That was almost nine years ago. Truth be told, I never got over him. And it hurt to see how he couldn’t even look at me. Every time we happened to be in the same space, he would look right through me. Sometimes I wondered if he even remembered we were friends once.

These days, he was more than out of my league. He was the new Don Valentino. His ascension was confirmed six months ago, hours after his father passed away. Now he was in search of a wife as all Dons were required to have. Problem was, other than the fact that he seemed to have forgotten I existed, he couldn’t choose me. Marriage between the five original families was forbidden by the Society by-laws.

I found most of our by-laws to be bullshit. Though I had to admit, most of them were meant to ensure the longevity of our secret enclave, and by extension, our family. It all boiled down to one infallible fact— I couldn’t have the one thing I wanted. The Lion would never be mine.

Like a good girl, I stood there and watched Giovanni exchange pleasantries with my brother and his friend. When he turned to face us, his gaze brushed right over me and landed on Dad's form.

"Don Salvatore." He offered Dad a curt smile before shaking his hand. "I was told I could find you here."

"And so you have. You remember my daughter." Dad gestured toward me.

"Yes, I believe we've met." His deep voice shattered something inside my chest.

Really? We went to the same school for twelve fucking years. "Briefly." I nodded, doing my best impression of his curt smile. "Giovanni, is it?"

"Nice to see you again, Vittoria."

My name on his lips sounded like a forgotten promise. I sucked in a quiet breath. Somehow, my hand met his as his intense blue gaze met mine. Why was I touching him? And why couldn't I stop staring at him? My heart pumped so hard, I was sure Dad could hear it. The thumping in my chest went on for a very long minute before I realized I had to break the connection. I had to stop imagining things that weren't there. Things I couldn't have.

"You too." I yanked my arm away, furrowing my brows at him.

His gaze cut to Dad as if nothing had happened, as if he hadn't just stared into my soul. "Don Salvatore, I'd like a word."

"I figured you might." Dad crossed his arms over his chest.

He looked so menacing when he did that, but Giovanni didn't seem to notice. "It's been six months since my father was murdered. How is it possible that his killer is still at large?"

"We'll catch the bastard. You have my word."

“I’ve decided to lead the investigation myself.” Giovanni stuffed his hands in the pockets of his trousers. “I’m relieving you of your position. Effective immediately.”

Dad turned a few shades of purple. For one, because he wasn’t used to people talking to him in this manner. Giovanni might be a Don, but he was still in his mid-twenties. Dad had more than age on his side, he had connections and power. As he’d said once, ‘stepping into the shoes of a Don didn’t make you a Don. You had to earn that privilege.’

Giovanni had a long way to go. Though he didn’t seem to think so as he stared my father down. “I have put together a group of men I trust. They will investigate and report directly to me.”

Dad’s jaw clenched. “Are you accusing me of something, boy?”

“Not yet.” Giovanni rubbed the stubble on his cheek.

My gaze darted between the two men. Before my brain could fully piece together a sentence, my lips were already moving. “You have some nerve. Dad only stepped in to lead the investigation to help you. Wearing your father’s ring doesn’t make you a Don.” I pointed at his ring with his family crest on it. The lion head carved on the onyx stone stood out to me. “How dare you!”

“It’s okay, Bomboloni.” Dad put his arm around me protectively. “Giovanni is still in mourning. He gets a pass this time.”

“I’m assuming you have collected data in the last six months. I’d like a copy of everything you’ve been able to gather thus far.” Giovanni really had a death wish tonight.

“Call my office in the morning, my assistant will schedule an appointment for you.” Dad dropped his hand from my shoulder to properly glare at Giovanni.

“I will see you bright and early.” Giovanni nodded once, then headed out the door with long strides.

“I think losing his father took a toll on him.” I braced a hand on Dad’s chest.

“I think you’re right.” He offered me a kind smile. “Our client is here. Let’s not keep them waiting.”

I followed Dad to meet our new investor. The whole night, my mind was reeling with Giovanni’s unannounced visit—his hostility toward Dad, and the soul piercing gaze he gave me—right before he accused Dad of covering up evidence in a murder investigation. Did Dad have something to do with the late Don Valentino’s murder? I found that hard to believe. Dad would never do that to one of his own. Killing a Don was punishable by death.

Giovanni was reaching because he was in pain. I knew if I were in his shoes, if I had lost Dad after losing Mom, I’d be devastated.

An hour into our meeting, I excused myself and headed for the privacy of the restroom to send a text to Dad’s assistant. If there was a murder file, I wanted to see it for myself. I needed to know my dad didn’t kill Giovanni’s dad.

CHAPTER 3

The Silent Promise in His Eyes

The next morning, I left our Fifth Avenue penthouse before Dad was even up. Though the hustle and bustle of the city’s morning commute was already in full swing. By the time I strolled into the Salvatore office building, Gemma Stewart, Dad’s assistant, was already at her desk fielding calls. I met Gem last year at our company’s holiday party. We hit it off right away.

“Good morning.” I leaned over and slowly set a venti macchiato with oat milk in front of her.

‘Good morning.’ She mouthed as she pointed at her headset. ‘Thank you.’

“My pleasure.” I shuffled a few papers out of the way to park my butt on her desk.

I wasn't leaving her side until she let me peek inside Dad's office. Last night, while I lay awake in my bed, I convinced myself I was meddling in the Society affairs to help Dad, and also Giovanni. His pain hurt me too. Even if his way of showing it pissed me off.

Five minutes later, Gem hung up and beamed at me. "How much is this miracle in a cup going to cost me?"

"Nothing." I shrugged.

"You have three messages waiting for you on your desk, and this phone won't stop ringing this morning. It's going to be a busy day for both of us." She waved her hand in the air in a come-here motion. "So let's hear it. What do you want?"

"What?" I scoffed, glancing behind me. "Okay, I need to get into Dad's office before he comes in."

"Whyyyy?" She let the y in her question linger for three syllables.

"Because." I met her gaze. "I need something from his desk."

"You know I can't let you in there, girl." She shook her head. "Are you trying to get me fired? I have strict orders to keep his office locked when he's not here."

"Oh, come on. I wouldn't ask if it weren't for a really, really good reason."

"I'm sorry." She patted my cheek. "Is this why you wanted to know your dad's schedule for today? I knew your text last night was a bit fishy."

Gem was a good friend. But what would happen if I told her there was a murder investigation underway—and that because we were all mobsters and part of a secret society, we couldn't call the cops. So instead, we were investigating the whole thing ourselves. Problem was, it looked like Dad was withholding evidence needed for the trial to be held by the Society board members, which was something that was making the other Dons pretty suspicious. Well, mostly just Giovanni for now.

Of course, I couldn't say any of that because Gem didn't know what or who the Salvatores really were.

"It's important." I gave her a pout that usually worked wonders on Dad.

"Not happening, sweetie. Get to work." She pointed toward my office then picked up the phone again. "Salvatore Mergers and Acquisitions. You've reached the executive office of Mr. Pavlo Salvatore, Senior. How may I direct your call?"

"How do people not hang up on you?" I chuckled.

'Go.' She mouthed, waving her hand in dismissal.

"Fine." I turned on my heel and headed for my office.

I wasn't giving up on this. Sooner or later, both Gem and Dad would have to take a break or go out to lunch. I had all day to sneak into Dad's office and rummage through his desk and computer.

With a smile on my face, I let myself indulge in a fantasy sequence where I threw a key piece of evidence at Giovanni's feet and demanded he apologize to Dad for being an asshole to him yesterday. As it always happened in my dreams, Giovanni's usual scowl turned into a lustful one. He took two long strides and claimed my mouth in a heated kiss.

"Vittoria." My name on the intercom brought me back with a jolt.

"Yes." I leaned forward to speak to Gem. "What is it?"

"You have a call. They say it's important but won't give me details. Should I send them to voicemail?"

"No, I got it. Thanks." I picked up the receiver and answered. "This is Vittoria Salvatore."

"Ms. Salvatore, this is Lisa Parker. I conducted your annual mammogram last week. Your results are in. I'd like to discuss them with you if you have a minute."

"Yes, of course." I grabbed a pen and paper to take notes.

"The mammogram confirmed the presence of abnormal cells." Static filled the air.

The only reason I agreed to these annual mammograms was because Mom died from breast cancer when I was little. My doctor insisted I do the stupid exams regularly. At twenty-five, I didn't think I needed to worry about that yet.

“What? I feel fine.”

“Yes, I understand. Before we confirm if the cancerous cells are malignant...”

“Cancer? Are you fucking kidding me?”

“I'm afraid not. We would like to have you come in for a biopsy.” She went on her monologue for a whole minute—something about the risks of doing nothing and how routine the biopsy was.

I stopped listening halfway through because this conversation was surreal. Cancer couldn't strike my family twice. That wasn't fair. I was six when Mom was diagnosed. I quickly did the math in my head. She was thirty-one when it happened to her.

“Ms. Salvatore?”

“Yes, I'm still here. I'll call and schedule the appointment. What's the number again?” I scribbled the numbers on my pad, then wrote in smaller letters—*schedule biopsy appt.*

I couldn't tell Dad. He would be crushed. I was too young to remember Mom's cancer battle, but over the years, I'd seen how much it pained Dad to see her go through it all. One time, I found a set of pictures he kept of her when she was sick. Even to this day, he'd sit in his library and go through them with unshed tears in his eyes. No idea why he'd do that to himself. Maybe as a reminder of how short life was.

Wasn't that why he asked me to move back home after I finished college? Why I worked fifty steps away from his office? Why I would forever be his bomboloni?

“Fuck.” I dropped my head in my hands. “Now what?”

“Everything okay, sweetie?” Gem shut the door behind her. “Are you crying?”

I wiped the wet off my cheeks. “I guess I am.”

“What happened?” She brushed a lock of hair away from my cheek, while furtively reading the note on my desk. “Is this?” She let the question linger in the air.

“They think it might be breast cancer.” I swallowed.

“I’m so sorry.” She bent down to hug me. “Let me handle the scheduling for you, yeah?”

“Okay,” I nodded, “but don’t tell Dad.”

“Of course. Let me see what dates they have. I’ll take a day off and go with you, okay?”

I nodded again, feeling numb as pictures of Mom during her chemo treatments flitted through my mind. The movie reel playing in my head switched between her hairless head and Dad’s teary eyes. I had never thought of an expiration date when it came to my life. This was literally my first week at work. I still felt like a college student, aimless, unsure of the future. Now here was a diagnosis telling me exactly what my future held.

“How about we go get a pastry or something? Come on.” Gem pulled me up, then wrapped her arm gently around my waist. “Let’s not borrow misery from the future. Hmmm?”

“What does that even mean?” I let out a small chuckle.

“Let’s not worry about something that hasn’t happened yet.” She smiled at me.

As soon as we reached her desk, she froze with her gaze trained on Dad’s office’s floor-to-ceiling glass panel. On the other side Dad was in a heated argument with Giovanni. I swore that man got hotter every time I saw him. Even with his usual broody face on, his handsome features had a calming effect on me.

“Who’s the hottie?” Gem snapped out of her trance, then started going through the pages on her agenda. “He didn’t have an appointment. Shit. What is he doing in there?”

“It’s alright. He’s a family friend.”

A friend. The great Don Valentino and I used to be friends. What happened to us? He went from calling me at night to ask

about homework assignments to completely cutting me off. Despite his cold shoulder, I always dreamed we'd had some kind of future together. Even if it was impossible for us to be romantically involved, I never lost hope. Until now. Not only was Giovanni out of reach for me, so was the rest of my life.

“Don't borrow misery from the future.” I repeated Gem's philosophical words.

“What's that?” Gem glanced up from her notes, looking a little frazzled.

“Nothing.” I beamed at her. “I'll let you get back to work.”

I headed for the break room to get a sweet treat. The whole way there, I let my mind race toward a plan that was more of a feeling than a plan at this point. I should've told Giovanni how I felt about him when I had a chance—to hell with the Society by-laws. I thought of all the times Giovanni and I crossed paths since our junior year, when he decided we couldn't be friends anymore.

Mostly, he saw right through me like I didn't exist. But every now and then, he'd meet my gaze. What I saw there every time shocked me to my core. I squeezed my hand to feel his touch again. Last night, he shook my hand. It should've been an innocent gesture, but he let it linger for far too long. His eyes, I was sure he was trying to tell me something. What did he not say?

Fuck the Society.

They can't tell us who to love.

I'm sorry I let you go.

Yeah, fuck the Society. Giovanni and I deserved a chance at something good, like love. Our world was filled with chaos and death. Why couldn't we have this one thing?

By the time I strolled into the empty break room, I had already made up my mind. I was going to seduce Don Valentino. Well, first I had to figure out exactly how to do that. The pressure that settled in my chest since I got my

mammogram results earlier lifted, taking the numbness along with it.

If like Mom, I only had a year to live, I wanted to spend that time living my life and falling in love with the only boy I ever cared about.

With a smile, I reached for one of the donut holes in the pastry basket near the espresso machine. I bit into it and indulged in the creamy sweetness. When I turned to head back, I ran into a fairly wide chest clad in an expensive dark suit. I glanced up to meet Giovanni's blue gaze and winced. The Italian pastry cream on my fingers was now all over his front. I opened my mouth to apologize, but he beat me to it.

"Watch where you're going, *Bomboloni*?" He wrapped his long fingers around my wrist.

"Me?" I glanced behind me. "I was here first. How about you don't sneak about, giving unsuspecting women a heart attack? What are you doing here anyway, *Don Valentino*?" I mimicked his tone when he called me bomboloni.

My heart raced a million miles an hour. I couldn't be sure if it was because I was annoyed at him or because he rubbed his thumb along the inside of my wrist. The spark at my core was instant. There it was again, the silent promise in his eyes. What was he not saying?

"I came to see your father. As I suspected, he's dragging his feet with the investigation. I'm calling for an extraordinary meeting with the Board members."

The board members being the five Dons.

"Why?"

"Because I can tell he has something to hide. Whatever it is, I'm going to find out. If he's guilty..."

"He's not." I yanked my arm free, then shot him a nasty glare for good measure. "I'll prove it to you."

He raised one eyebrow as his gaze swept up and down my body, before it settled on the soggy pastry in my hand. "The

sweet bomboloni is coming to Daddy's rescue." He chuckled. "Go on then." He stepped aside.

I had so much more I wanted to say to him, but his dismissal hurt my feelings. It was like junior year all over again. Pursing my lips, I made my way out of the break room. I didn't even have the satisfaction of storming out with long strides because of the tight pencil skirt I decided to wear this morning along with the four-inch pumps.

It didn't matter though, because I had already made up my mind. I was going to prove to Giovanni that Dad had nothing to do with his father's murder. Then, he would have to see we were meant to be together.

CHAPTER 4

I Never Forgot About You

Giovanni once called me impulsive and stubborn. He wasn't wrong. When I decided to do something, I couldn't stop until it was finished. Which was why I found myself in the middle of the night, sneaking back into the Salvatore building. I had to know what Dad was hiding.

Earlier tonight, after dinner and after I made sure Dad was in bed, I quickly changed into a pair of denim shorts and a tank top. Hardly the best breaking-and-entering ensemble, but that was all I could muster with the time I had. The bright idea to break into Dad's office had come to me during dessert.

My pulse spiked a bit when I reached Dad's corner office and came face to face with the only thing standing between me and that alleged murder file—his locked door. I sat on my haunches and dug through my pocket to get the hook and pick set I found in the kitchen drawer.

I stuck the two pins into the keyhole and closed my eyes to feel my way around the lock. I poked and pushed, but nothing happened. Every time I thought I had it, the lock would fall back into place.

“Fuck.” I was wasting time.

The security guard downstairs didn't see me sneak in, but he was bound to do a floor walk-through at some point. I wasn't sure if that was a thing, but I had to assume I didn't have all night. While I could easily make up an excuse for being in the building, burglarizing Dad's office would be harder to explain.

I rose to my feet and scanned the reception area. Over the credenza next to Gem's desk, a ventilation vent hummed quietly. I had no clue if the shaft led to Dad's office, but I had to try. Before I second-guessed myself, I toed off my shoes and climbed on top of the credenza. I popped the cover off and poked my head in. About two feet in, the air vent duct cut to the right, toward Dad's office. The printer served as my step stool as I planted my barefoot on top, then hoisted myself up.

As soon as I landed inside, a call came in. Pursing my lips, I fished my phone from my back pocket and glanced at it. Gem was calling. If I didn't answer, she would keep calling. “Hi,” I whispered.

“I left you several messages.” She exhaled into the mobile. “Your biopsy is scheduled for Monday, two weeks from now. They need to do bloodwork at least three days prior. Did you see that on your calendar? They need the results before they clear you for the procedure.”

I glanced down at my watch. It was almost midnight. I felt like such an asshole for not getting back to her when I saw the calendar invite. “Yeah. I did. I'm sorry.” I covered my mouth and speaker so I could muffle my voice. “I promise I will be there. Thank you for setting it up.”

“Of course. I just wanted to make sure you were all set.”

“All set here.” I wiped a cobweb off my arm, then stopped when sighed. “I'm sorry, Gem. I didn't mean to worry you.”

“It's fine. Have a good weekend.” She hung up.

“Yeah.” I lifted my gaze toward the deep and dark tunnel ahead of me. What the hell was I doing? “This is a bad idea. Such a bad idea.”

But I was already here. *Impulsive and stubborn.* Giovanni's words echoed in my mind. Somehow, that was the push I needed. I army-crawled across the cold surface then made a right. From there, a long narrow corridor sprawled in front of me. I decided that if the next vent opening wasn't Dad's office, I would give up on this crazy-ass idea. I pressed on, then kicked the panel. It gave out easily and fell to the floor with a big thud.

"Jesus." I grimaced.

When the quiet humming of the airflow replaced the ruckus the vent cover had made, I flipped on my belly and shimmied my way through the small opening, feet first. Wiggling my butt, I shoved off and slowly slid off the ventilation shaft. Blindly, I stretched my foot to feel around for Dad's credenza.

I hit nothing but air, until a pair of hands zipped my legs together and yanked me off the hole in the wall. In a single motion, he flipped me around then let me drop until his arms were tightly wrapped around my waist. Even in the dark, I recognized Giovanni's intense gaze.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" His voice rumbled against my chest.

"I should be asking you that question." I sucked in a breath, but it was too late. I had already taken in a big gulp of his signature woody scent, mixed with sweat and danger. "Let me go." I braced both hands on his shoulders and jostled to get away from him.

To my surprise, he held me tighter until our noses were touching. "Vittoria," he exhaled.

"You're here for the supposed evidence Dad has," I blurted out. If he didn't let me go now, I was going to make a fool of myself. I was going to tell him how much I'd missed him, how much I'd fantasized about being in his arms like this.

"Evidence he refused to hand over earlier today. Without an explanation." He released me.

"He didn't kill your dad." I pleaded.

“I know he didn’t.” He panted a breath. “But he knows who did, and he’s protecting that coward. I saw it in his eyes today, Vittoria.”

“For Dad, there’s only the Society. He swore to abide by their code. He would never hurt any of the Dons. Or cover for anyone.” I met his gaze and got lost in the blue lagoons I found there.

“For his sake, I hope you’re right.” He brushed the back of his fingers across my cheek. “Because if he did, I’d have no choice but to make him pay. I would use all my power, my influence, to end him. I don’t care if you get caught in the middle.” His jaw clenched.

“Care? You haven’t cared about me for years.” I slapped his hand away from my face.

“I haven’t?” He furrowed his brows at me. “Is that what you think?”

“It’s what I know.” I swallowed back tears. “We used to be friends. Remember?” I scoffed. “Of course you don’t. You said goodbye to me junior year and never looked back. Did you ever think that maybe I...”

“You what?” He stepped closer. “Say it.”

“I needed you. I needed my friend.”

“I couldn’t be your friend. You know that.” He cradled my neck.

My eyes fluttered closed at his touch. I was already under his spell. “No, I don’t. Explain it to me. Why did you forget about me?”

“I never did. Don’t you get it? I left because I loved you. Because I knew that if I ever kissed you, I’d never be able to let you go. I had to let you go.” He exhaled loudly. “I never forgot about you.”

Time froze as if I were in some kind of dream. The syncopated sighing of our breaths sounded so far away. I didn’t know if I moved in first or if he did. Or if maybe an invisible force swept us off toward the deep end. Suddenly, we

were lost in our kiss. At that moment, Giovanni showed me how much he'd longed for me, how much he still loved me, how much he regretted the years we'd lost, trying to do the right thing for the Society.

"I never forgot about you." I tasted my own tears on his lips.

Dad's office, in the middle of the night, wasn't the place or the time for love confessions or for making up for lost time, but I didn't care. When he moved his hands from my face to my waist, I took the opportunity to undo his shirt. If a few hours were all we had, I didn't want to waste a single moment of it.

"Are you sure?" he asked, laboring to catch his breath.

"This is all I ever wanted." I shoved his suit jacket off his shoulders. His dress shirt followed along with his undershirt. "Just you."

I ran my hands over his muscled chest and his abs. Was I dreaming? I pressed my mouth right over his heart and reveled in his body heat. That was the only pause he allowed, the only chance for me to say no.

With a wide smile, he captured my lips again in a heated kiss while he removed my top and my shorts. When my bare back touched the cold window panel that faced Gem's desk, I was absolutely naked and so was he. He sucked on my breasts, switching from one to the other, as if they were the most beautiful things he'd ever seen.

"Fuck," he murmured on my neck. "Do you know how many times I fantasized about doing that? Seeing you like this? Naked just for me."

"Tell me."

"Every." He gripped my ass, then slid his hand down to my thigh to hook my leg over his waist. "Goddamn." He plunged into me. "Day." He released a breath then eased farther in.

His strong body impaled me against the cool wall. All I could do was open for him and beg for more. We were always meant to end up here, like this. We fit so perfectly. After

several thrusts, he found a pace that was enough to fan my desire into a frenzy, but not enough to send me over the precipice. I had never wanted anyone as much as I wanted him right now.

I was at his mercy, for him to do with my body whatever he chose. Giovanni knew exactly how to claim me. He did it with lustful kisses and the undulating rhythm of his hips. With every pass, he teased my G-spot until a spark ignited deep inside me. I held on to it, held on to the moment. But Giovanni was a force of nature. He fucked me relentlessly, until I lost control of it all.

My orgasm exploded and expired inside five seconds. But then, it picked up again, threatening to swallow me whole. I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Don’t stop.” My head tapped the glass behind me, and then I was gone—free-falling into an abyss of desire, pleasure, and all the things we shouldn’t want.

When I came down from my high, Giovanni was there to catch me, spent from his own climax, and looking at me like I was the last woman on Earth.

“Jesus.” He nuzzled my neck. “I knew sex with you would be unforgettable, that it would change my life forever. How am I supposed to let you go now?”

“Don’t.” I cupped his cheek. “We don’t have to live by their rules. We can make our own.”

“Vittoria.” He bent down to kiss my forehead. “If I could, I would.”

He released me, scanning the room for his clothes. When he reached for his pants, I blocked him with my body. His eyebrows shot up as his gaze shifted from my legs up to my sex, then the rest of me.

“Not yet.”

“Not yet.” He cupped my breast, then froze. “Shit. Someone is coming.”

With lightning speed, he picked up my clothes, shoved them into my arms, then draped his suit jacket over my

shoulders. He pulled me toward a dark corner of the office and caged me with his body.

“Shh.”

A single beam of light skipped across the hallway, aiming at the glass panel, Dad’s desk, and then Gem’s area. My heart drummed so fast because if we were caught, Dad would find out about Giovanni and me. And I wasn’t ready to let him go.

I wrapped my arms around his waist, brushing my breasts all over his torso. His tensed muscles gave way as he slowly melted into me. When his erection rubbed against my pussy, I let out a sigh.

“Shh.” He plunged his tongue past my lips to hush me.

As the security guard continued with his walk-through of the floor, Giovanni reached between us to press his shaft to my entrance. Butterflies fluttered at my core at the anticipation of having him inside me again.

“Hmm.” He thrust into me. “Forever.”

CHAPTER 5

No Man is Worth My Tears

My one night with Giovanni was something I would never forget. We stayed in Dad’s office until the sun came up. I finally understood why he had put distance between us all those years ago. His father made him see that falling in love with me—someone he couldn’t have—would be a mistake.

“It’s better if you never know love.” Those were his father’s words. “Can you imagine being married to someone while loving another? It would be hell.”

That right there was the entire reason why Giovanni said goodbye. He didn’t want to love me, knowing he would have to eventually choose a wife that would benefit the Society. I could never be that person for him. The problem was, we were

both already deeply in love by the time his father decided to impart his wisdom on loveless marriages.

As soon as the first ray of sunlight filtered through the window, Giovanni released me from his arms and got dressed. I did the same. I wanted to ask him if our one night changed anything. I wanted to know if he wanted to try. But I was too much of a coward. I'd felt his rejection for so many years, I didn't want to hear it one more time. So instead of telling him how I felt, I kissed him hard. Then simply walked away.

The first few days, I told myself I had done the right thing. I had no right to mess with his head like that. He had a duty to fulfill with the Society—he had to get married and produce an heir. It sounded so archaic, but if we all forgot about the rules and started doing whatever the hell we wanted, the Society would crumble. Those were Dad's words to me. He never said it. I was sure he knew how I felt about Giovanni.

Now, a whole two weeks had gone by, and I still hadn't heard from him. Not knowing what he was planning to do was driving me insane. I paced the length of my bedroom. The mere thought of not seeing him ever again made me nauseous. After a few more rounds of back and forth across the carpeted floor and in my head, I decided to put an end to my misery. I had to see him.

As I rushed down the stairs, doubts began to sprout in my mind, even before I made it to the front door. The fear of getting rejected again froze me in place. What would I say? *I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Marry me instead.* The nausea returned. I swallowed and sent all those thoughts away. What I needed was an excuse to see him.

I smiled at the thought of our night together and how we had gone through Dad's entire office in between rounds of sex. We found nothing. Maybe Dad brought his work home.

"Why do I get the feeling you're sneaking about?" Dad chuckled from the bottom of the steps.

"What?" I spun around. "Me. No."

“What’s wrong?” Dad closed the space between us. “You’ve been moping around the house for weeks.”

“I’m fine.” I ran a hand through my hair, then opted for the truth. “It’s just that I feel for Giovanni and all the stuff with his dad, you know.”

“It’s terrible.” He nodded.

“Why won’t you help him?”

“I am helping him.”

“You know what I mean. If you’ve been investigating the murder of the late Don Valentino, you must have something. I know you, Dad. You’re very good at what you do. I know you know what happened. Who are you protecting?”

“I’m protecting my friend.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “It would be best if you dropped it, Bomboloni.”

“I can’t.” I placed my hand on his arm. “Giovanni deserves the truth. If I were in his shoes, I would want to know the truth. Please, give him what he wants.”

Dad stared at me for the longest time. Was he trying to decide if I was right about this? I was sure I was. Giovanni was an intelligent and rational man. Whatever the circumstances, I knew he would understand.

“Did you shoot him?”

He released a long breath, before he lifted his head to meet my gaze. “I did.”

“What?” I placed a hand over my mouth. “Dad. No. Why? You know the Society will come after you. They will kill you for killing a Don. Why would you do that? He was your friend.”

“That’s exactly why I did it. He asked me to.” His eyes watered for a moment. He cleared his throat and nodded once. “I did what I had to do. And now Giovanni needs to do the same.”

“Why would he want to die?”

“Terminal illness. Doctors said he had six months at best. He wanted to go out on his own terms—a dignified death. Not surrounded by doctors and nurses having to wipe his ass.”

“Omigod.” Tears streamed down my cheeks. “Giovanni needs to know. He won’t have peace until he knows the truth.”

“It’s what his father wanted.”

“Who cares, Dad?” I raised my voice. “You can’t expect Giovanni to spend the rest of his life chasing a ghost. It’s not fair. And for what? To protect your friend’s image? I get that’s no one’s business. But Giovanni needs to know.” I headed for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To tell him the truth. Are you going to stop me?”

He shook his head then gestured for me to go on.

On my way to Giovanni’s home, my heart raced something fierce. For one, because I had really bad news for him, but also, because I was nervous to see him again. As soon as the taxi pulled over, the doorman rushed in to open the door for me.

“I’m here to see Giovanni Valentino. Is he home?” On a Saturday morning, he could be anywhere.

“He’s right there.” He pointed down the block at a very sweaty and tired Giovanni.

Of course he looked delicious in a pair of joggers and a sleeveless tee that hugged his torso in all the right places. He stopped to wipe his face with his shirt, then stopped in his tracks. I smiled, and to my delight, he returned the gesture.

“I need to talk to you,” I offered when he was within earshot.

He glanced up then across the street, as if trying to decide if it was safe to take me upstairs. After a few seconds, he nodded. “Come in.”

I followed him through the lobby and impatiently waited for the elevator car to come down. I was a wreck. All I wanted

to do was kiss him. When the doors finally slid open, he gestured for me to go on. I did, standing as far away from him as possible.

Though the distance between us didn't matter. The minute the elevator doors shut, he took a single stride and captured my mouth in a desperate kiss. I took the chance to touch him all over. His warmth against my body was like coming home.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"You disappeared again."

"Vittoria." He braced both hands on either side of my head. "I'm engaged. I can't do this."

"Engaged?" I puffed out a breath. "Were you engaged two weeks ago? When we fucked all night?"

"We did more than fucking and you know that." He buried his nose in my hair and took in a breath. "I missed you."

"I get it." I shoved at him. "You have a duty to fulfill. I'm nothing. I'm no one."

"That's not true. You're the woman I love." His eyes watered. "But the Society is putting pressure on me to marry the senator's daughter. I have no choice. It's an important match."

His words cut me deep. I wanted to hurt him for stringing me along. Who the hell was I kidding? I knew exactly what would happen if I ever got involved with Giovanni. I knew he could never be mine.

"I think your dad knows about us." He leaned against the glass panel, lifting his gaze to look at the ascending numbers over the elevator door. "He's the one pushing for my marriage. He even brokered the marriage contract."

"He didn't say anything to me."

"And risk you getting mad at him? His *bomboloni*? This is what he does, Vittoria. Everything with him is a slide of hands."

“This isn’t on him, *Don Valentino*.” I braced for what I had to say next. “My dad shot your dad.”

His gaze cut to me in a split second. “What?”

“Your dad asked him to. He was sick. He only had a few months to live. He chose to go out on his own terms. Everything Dad has done has been to protect you.”

“You mean the lies? He lied to protect me? From what? My own father?” He glared at me with so much anger in his eyes. “I was an idiot for thinking that you and I could have a future. Your father is a coward.”

“He did exactly what your dad asked him to do.”

He scoffed.

“None of this is my fault.” I wiped the tears off my cheeks. “You’re just afraid. You’ve been afraid for years. Do you even love me?”

He fixed his gaze on a spot on the floor. His chest rose and fell with every breath he took. Nothing made sense. Was he breaking up with me because he had a new fiancée or because his own father chose to trust someone else over him. Either way, the outcome was the same. Giovanni and I were done—done before we even got started.

The elevator beeped, announcing we had arrived at the penthouse.

“No man is worth my tears.” I steeled myself and swallowed the lump in my throat. “Goodbye, Giovanni.” I pointed at the wide-open doors. “Go. Go marry your political princess.”

He pushed off the wall. Without another glance my way, he stormed out. I stood there until he disappeared down the hallway, then pressed the call button to return to the lobby. Giovanni was out of my life for good.

CHAPTER 6

Forever Yours

The following Monday, after crying my eyes out over Giovanni's cowardliness, I dragged my butt out of bed, got dressed, then took a taxi to the private clinic where Gem scheduled my biopsy. I hated to go through the procedure alone. As much as they were calling it a routine thing, it still sounded scary as shit.

I sat in the back seat and watched the city go by. One day, this ache in my chest over losing Giovanni would go away. For now, it seemed, it was here to stay. When we arrived at the clinic, I took my time to pay the driver, then strolled the length of the corridor to the registration desk.

"Ms. Salvatore." The nurse behind the desk beamed at me. "It will be just a minute, please take a seat." She gestured toward the barista station and the tables scattered around it.

The thing about this clinic was that this was where Mom got treated years ago. At the time, Dad had donated a considerable amount of money, thinking the gift might save Mom. It didn't. But to this day, the hospital administrators have not forgotten the Salvatore name.

"Thanks." I plopped myself down on one of the chairs and stared at the double doors that led to what I assumed was the surgery area.

What if I died? The question popped into my head. Suddenly, I had the strong urge to call Giovanni and tell him we didn't have time to waste. But that wouldn't be fair. He'd made his choice. I had to respect that. As angry as I was at him, I could still admit that if we were out of time, it was because I let him walk away first.

I dropped my head in my hands, feeling sick to my stomach again.

"Ms. Salvatore, are you okay?" The nurse tapped my shoulder. "Let me help you to the bathroom." She hooked her arm under my elbow and hoisted me to my feet.

The minute I saw the bathroom sink, my entire breakfast decided to make an appearance. "I never get sick." I panted a

breath while I splashed water on my face and rinsed my mouth with the mouthwash the nurse offered me. “I didn’t realize I was so nervous.” I smiled at the nurse’s reflection in the mirror.

“Well, the first trimester is always rough. Don’t worry. For most women, it gets better around week twelve.”

“The fuck?” I blurted out and spun around. In the process, I swallowed the wrong way and started coughing all over the place. “I’m not pregnant.”

“Oh, I left you a message.” She grabbed a towel off the basket and ran it under the cool water before she placed it in my hand. “Your blood results from Friday confirmed you were pregnant. You mentioned you’d been a bit nauseous. The doctor wanted to make sure.”

“How can that be? It was only two weeks ago.” Two weeks since Giovanni and I had sex. “How can you even tell?”

“The blood tests are more accurate than the over-the-counter tests and can detect hormonal changes early on. Based on your last period, you’re about a little over four weeks pregnant.” Her tone was soothing as if she was telling me to just breathe instead of dropping this huge bomb on me.

“Omigod.” I placed the wet towel on my forehead while I quickly did the math. I had my period a month ago. I had sex with Giovanni two weeks ago. Unprotected sex. “What does this mean? Do I need to reschedule the biopsy?”

“Not at all. The doctor will use a local anesthesia to numb the area. There’s almost no risk to the fetus.”

“Almost? Fetus?”

“Oh sweetie, do you want me to call your dad?”

“No!” My voice went up a few octaves. “I’m okay. I don’t need him here. Can I have a minute?”

“Of course. Take your time.”

The door shut, and I practically collapsed on the floor. My legs hadn’t given out. I needed to feel grounded, to know that the floor wasn’t going to give out from under me. In the past

few weeks, my life had gone from boring and on track, to absolute chaos and uncertainty. How could I be expecting a baby while also waiting to find out if I have the bad kind of cancer?

I placed my hands on the cold tile and rested my forehead on them.

I'm going to have Giovanni's baby.

The idea both thrilled me and terrified me. Just because I was a planner, I considered a few options. If the baby survived this procedure, I couldn't stay in the country. No one could know about her. Maybe I could fly to Canada or Switzerland, like families did back in the day to hide their daughters' indiscretions. Except for me, it wouldn't be about shame. It would be to keep my baby safe.

If the Society found out Giovanni and I had a child together, who knew what they would do to her? Would Dad offer her his protection? Or agree with the other Dons that this baby couldn't survive.

"Fuck." I sat up. "Fuck."

Okay, one thing at a time. I had a few months to figure things out. First, I had to get this biopsy out of the way. I turned to face the mirror and wiped off the mascara smudges from under my eyes. When I felt like a human again, I headed out.

"I'm sorry. I'm not authorized to give you that information." The nurse smiled politely at Giovanni.

What the hell was he doing here?

I stood there like an idiot, until he turned toward me. The relief I saw in his face disarmed me, but I couldn't let him hurt me again. Life had done a hundred and eighty degree turn since the last time we spoke.

"This is not the time." I turned back and darted toward the bathroom.

"Vittoria." He chased after me, then grabbed my elbow to make me look at him.

“How did you even find me?”

“Gem said you’d be here.”

“There’s no way she told you.” I had asked Gem not to tell anyone, not even Dad.

“Well, she didn’t exactly say it. It was on her agenda. I peeked at it when she went to fetch me a coffee.” He put up his hands in surrender. “I needed to see you.”

“Not now.”

“Then when?” He pulled me toward him. “I waited for the right time before and only managed to waste ten years of our lives.”

“What?”

“You were right. I was afraid.” His chest lifted with every breath. “Dad died so suddenly. Or at least it felt that way. If I had paid attention, I would’ve noticed he’d been getting ready to die for weeks.” He ran a hand through his hair, taking in a big gulp of air. “I knew I was to be Don one day, but that’s not something you’re ever ready for.”

“Do you believe Dad was only helping?”

“Yes. I spoke to him earlier today. He showed me Dad’s medical records. I understand why he did it.”

“Good for you.” I side-stepped him. “Have a nice life, Giovanni.”

“Vittoria, stop.”

I made to take another step and couldn’t. “What?” I faced him, hoping my eyes showed all the contempt I felt for him right now.

“Forgive me.” He took a tentative step. When I didn’t move, he went down on one knee.

“What?” I squinted at him. In my wildest dreams, I would never have imagined this. Was he about to propose? “You can’t be serious. I know you’re not serious.”

“I am. They can’t tell us how to live our lives.” He beamed up at me. “Marry me.”

“They’ll kill us.”

“They can’t.” He squeezed my hand. “I’m all they’ve got. If they touch you, they would have to answer to Don Salvatore and me. No one wants to bring that kind of bloodshed to their doorstep.”

“Things have changed, Giovanni. I can’t just run away with you.”

“We’re not running away.”

He had not thought this through. There wasn’t a version of our world where he and I could be together. Not as husband and wife anyway. He had a duty to uphold. “I can’t let you do this. Love and duty do not mix.”

“I’m doing it.” He gestured to his knee on the floor, then pulled out a ring box. “I’m not afraid. Anything is better than losing you.”

I pulled my hand away from his, then paced up and down the distance from the bathroom to the edge of the hallway. Giovanni was willing to fight for us this time. Years ago, he let me go because his father asked him to. But now, he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“You’re not afraid anymore, is that right?”

“That’s right.” He braced an arm on his knee, not trying to get up. “I want to marry you. I already broke off the engagement. The senator settled for a substantial donation to his upcoming campaign.”

“I have cancer.” I pointed at the room in general. “That’s why I’m here. To do a biopsy and find out how bad it really is.”

“Vittoria.” He rose to his feet and pulled me into his arms. Safe, it was what I felt when I was with him. This whole cancer-slash-baby situation wasn’t so scary now that I was in his arms again. The possibility of a future together didn’t seem

so unattainable. “I’m also pregnant,” I whispered into his chest.

“What?” He gripped my shoulders and held me at arm’s length. “That’s.”

“Scary?”

“No, amazing news. We’re having a baby.” He kissed me on the lips. A quick peck then a deeper, longer kiss that made my toes curl. “Will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

“We can do this.” He bent down for another searing kiss. “I was right.” He slid his fingers down my cheek and to my lips. “I always knew that if I ever touched you, I’d be irrevocably yours. I love you so damn much.”

“Me too.”

EPILOGUE

Until Forever Falls Apart

Thirty-six weeks later...

The lump in my breast turned out to be benign. Giovanni never left my side after the procedure was done. He refused to spend any more time away from me, away from his family. As soon as I recovered, we got married in secret and moved to Rascafria, a sleepy village a couple of hours outside of Madrid, Spain. It was our own piece of heaven on Earth.

Giovanni had to travel for work occasionally because he couldn't quit his job as Don. One of the perks of being in charge of everything was that he had no one to answer to, especially after Dad backed down with his idea that all Dons needed to marry and produce an heir immediately.

As for me, I told Dad I needed time off to decide what I really wanted to do with my life, and he agreed.

'My bomboloni. Don't forget about this old man, heh? Come and see me soon.' He hugged me tight for a solid minute. *'I will always love you, no matter what.'*

I got the sense Dad knew exactly what was going on—with the cancer scare, Giovanni and the baby. My heart ached for him. He loved me enough to let me go and live my life outside of the Society and his home. I hated that he might never meet his granddaughter.

"She has your eyes." I touched my newborn's soft cheek, feeling exhausted, happy beyond belief, and weepy. Damn hormones.

The delivery had been an easy one. Or so I was told. Eight hours of delivery didn't feel that easy. But none of that mattered now. She was here. Our daughter was finally here, and she was as perfect as her father.

"She's beautiful." Giovanni kissed the baby's head. "Just like you." His lips brushed mine. "Did you think of a name?"

We had been going back and forth on names. He wanted Marie for his mom. And I wanted Donata for mine. "I have.

What do you think of Donata Marie.”

“I think it’s perfect.” He laughed with so much love in his eyes.

I knew in that moment; Don Valentino would do anything to protect his daughter. We had our happily ever after...

Thank you so much for reading HEARTLESS VOW. The next installment in the Crime Society series continues with the WICKED KNIGHT DUET, a new adult romance featuring Donata Salvatore and Luca Gallo.

[Download Wicked Knight \(Knight Duet, #1\)](#)

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Sinfully gorgeous Professor Luca Gallo has zero tolerance for the remarkably spoiled Donata Salvatore. The last time their paths crossed, she almost ruined his life with her lies. Now she’s in his classroom asking for favors and an easy grade. Professor Gallo has a lesson for Donata. One he’ll make sure she never forgets.

ABOUT DIANA A. HICKS

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Diana A. Hicks is an award-winning author of steamy contemporary romance with a heavy dose of suspense.

When Diana is not writing, she enjoys kickboxing, hot yoga, traveling, and indulging in the simple joys of life like wine and chocolate. She lives in Atlanta and loves spending time with her two children and husband.

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FROZEN HEART: Tattoos & Sin

by E.M. Shue

Romantic Suspense

Mafia, Military, BDSM, Single Parent, Billionaire

I was raised as the Las Vegas Bratva printsessa, but I fought that.

After joining the military and becoming an elite secret soldier, I thought my life was perfect, until it all came crashing down on me in a muddy alley.

It left me shattered to pieces.

My heart frozen to everyone, even my family.

A man wants to fix me and thaw my heart, but I'm scared.

Leif is willing to put me back together one lash at a time.

Will my heart always be frozen?

CHAPTER 1

Ridley

I slink further into the shadows, using the darkness as cover, as I keep my eye on my new sister-in-law. My brother Gray entrusted me with his wife's protection while he dealt with shit in Las Vegas. In typical Vegas fashion, Gray got married and didn't tell any of us. That little omission caused our *babushka* to send Erika packing. Now I'm watching over her in Eastport, Rhode Island. As luck would have it, I was already in town. Eastport is currently where I've made my home.

My eyes stray toward her brother, Leif. The man has been taking over my thoughts for months now. No one knows that we have a relationship. Well, that may be pushing it a bit. Leif and I have a standing appointment every week at his BDSM club. He has helped me with some of my PTSD issues, like hating people touching me. He's also helping me to accept my body. I'm muscular for a girl, not overly so, but that's not my issue. No, it's the scars that line the majority of my body that I can't face. Some of which I got when I was in the military, and I've accepted those. It's the ones I received from my last mission that I hate. Leif is kind and patient with me. At our last session, I finally allowed him to touch me with something other than a whip. The slash of the leather across my skin sends me into subspace. It's the only way I allow my body to lose control. I haven't been able to have sex in five years. Being whipped is how I find my release. Whipping, and fighting.

It takes every fiber of my being to look away from Leif and keep my focus on Erika. I made it a point to meet her in person yesterday. I like her. She's the perfect woman for Gray. She's sweet, kind, sexy, tattooed, and doesn't put up with shit. She's going to keep my brother on his toes, and I like that.

To say I was shocked when Gray called to tell me he got married is an understatement. I knew it could happen someday, but I just didn't expect it. He was always focused on his casino. He even called it his mistress. My brother worked his way out of the bratva to own his own casino in Las Vegas. He

still has some ties to the *bratva*. To be honest, we all do. My other brother, Andrei, took over our father's position as the head of the *bratva* in Vegas. But Gray keeps his nose clean, and I stayed out of the "family" business.

For the first six years of my life, I was raised to hate my father. My mother was a one-night stand, and I was an accident. After my mother died from a drug overdose, I went to live with *Babushka*, my grandmother. My father, Vladimir, tried to have a relationship with me, but by then I already knew I was nothing more than a pawn to him. So I shut him out. For the next twelve years, I did everything I could to escape what he had in store. I learned to fight like my brothers and their friends. I ran the streets and became a runner for a bookie until my father and *Babushka* found out. I was thrown out of numerous private schools. It took sending me to a military school for me to find my path. As soon as I turned eighteen, I ran away, changed my name, and joined the military. I excelled there too. I became a part of an elite special force's unit. I pushed myself to prove that I was better than the men. I'd hoped that maybe my father would finally see my value as something more than to marry off in exchange for power.

My father was a serial cheater. Andrei's mother was the only woman he married. She left him and Andrei when my brother was four years old. My father never loved any of the women he's been with, which is probably why *Babushka* always told my brothers and me we were destined for great loves. I laughed and still do because I doubt I'll ever find love. To love someone, you have to trust them, and I can't trust. My life is too complicated, and I've been through too much. I'm broken.

My attention moves to the door as Gray storms into the tattoo parlor Erika co-owns with her brother. She's currently engulfed in a hug by a large, old biker. I called Gray and told him to get his sorry ass here after Erika ended up in the ER yesterday. She collapsed from dehydration, and I'm pretty sure she's pregnant. Ilya, my brother's bodyguard, moves closer in anticipation of what is about to unfold. I watch it play out in front of me like a silent film. My brother lays claim to the

woman he loves. Then he turns to Leif, his new brother-in-law, and they face off. Erika moves between them. Foreseeing what's going to happen next, I move across the street as fast as I can. Gray hired me to protect Erika, and that's what I will do. I can't let her get hurt.

I burst through the door, not caring if it breaks or not. I assess the situation and work out the best scenario to protect my sister-in-law and her unborn baby. I don't focus on anyone but her. My eyes drift to her barely blossoming abdomen, and suddenly my mind shifts. I slip back to a time I hate. A moment when I wasn't strong enough to save myself. I'm right back there in that alley with the rotten food and rats. Rain pelts down onto my body. I'm outnumbered. They circle me, and I attack as best as I can.

I blink and react to the present situation. I don't even have to think. It's all muscle memory, which is good because I'm more trained now than I was back then. I thought I was undefeatable before. Now I know I can be beaten, and I won't let that happen again. I spin into the mix of bodies, avoiding Gray and surprising Leif. I throw out my arm and hook Leif's. I pin him to the floor with my body on top of his. I have his arm twisted up and around, and my free hand is fisted at his throat, ready to crush his windpipe.

I don't see Leif. I don't hear the voices yelling at me to stop. I'm back in that fucking alley again. I only focus on the pain. The memories flooding my mind. The smell overwhelms me, making me want to gag. My vision is blurred with pain and hate.

"Ley, come back," Gray snaps.

Hearing my nickname breaks through the fog. I shake my head and realize what I'm doing. The men who attacked me knew me by a different name. I was a different person. A machine built and trained by the military and my unit. A machine that was destroyed in that alley by the contractors I was loaned out to.

I jump up and move away from Leif. I try not to bow my head, but I can't stop the motion. It's then I hear the shuffling

of feet and people around me. My brother can't know about this side of me, so I raise my chin defiantly. In this moment I applaud my *babushka* for teaching me how a bratva princess should act.

"I'm sorry, but I was stopping you from hurting your sister further. Or attacking my brother." I point between Leif and Gray.

"He's your brother?" both Leif and Jas, who is working at the counter, say at the same time.

I know Jas because of her husband, Ryan. He hired me last year to protect her. He's also an old friend who helped me when I was at my lowest. He's the one who got me interested in BDSM.

I turn to look at Leif. He only knows me as Ley, the broken woman from our sessions. He doesn't know who I really am. I take him in. His hair is longer on top and hangs over his forehead. The sides are trimmed close. The dark color is a deep brown, almost black. He has a dark scruff of beard he keeps neatly trimmed. My focus shifts to his eyes. I always get lost in their deep chocolate depths. They calm me. I lock my body tight to stop myself from going to him. I can't show weakness. Princesses are weak, and I'm no princess. I'm a warrior. I see the questions in his stare as his pierced dark brow rises. Just for him to see, I slowly drop my eyes. He's the only man I've ever shown submission to.

But never again.

"Yes," I say softly and raise my eyes again. It's not that I lied to him, because I didn't. I made him sign a nondisclosure agreement on top of our other contract. That second contract states I won't share any parts of my personal or business life with him. He was meant for one thing and one thing only.

To whip me.

"I wouldn't hurt my sister," Leif says in a deep voice. It's not the voice I normally hear him use, but it's just as commanding and brooks no argument.

“You pushed her.” I defend my actions, but I know I lost it. I need to get away from them all before the panic really sets in. “If she falls just right, she could lose the baby. I didn’t want that to happen.” Another memory floods my mind and I’m almost taken back to that day. A day that changed my mission in life and led to that alley where I died. I shake myself free of the thoughts and try to lighten the mood. “Now, are you calm, or do I need to take you down again?” I smirk at Leif. That beautiful dark eyebrow lifts again as he takes me in. I’ve never joked with him in our previous interactions, but it feels so right.

“That was good. You should train my sister,” Leif says. He starts to reach for me but catches himself. It’s in that moment I realize he and I could have had more, but now we’ll never know. Not only did I disrespect our relationship by assaulting him, but I also don’t ever want to explain to him why I lost it.

“Why?” I wave my hand toward the door, indicating that Erika not only has my brother for protection but Ilya too. Mentioning Ilya spurs a brief conversation between the newlyweds, which then refocuses Leif’s attention on Gray.

“I don’t want you with my sister,” Leif says.

I’m about to step back into the mix when Erika addresses her brother. She soothes his ruffled feathers and promises to call him tomorrow. Leif moves closer and kisses his sister on her forehead.

“I’ll be here if you need me.” He steps back.

After Jas offers to close up the parlor with Leif, Erika grabs her things and we head out. My phone buzzes when I step outside onto the sidewalk. I retrieve it from my pocket and open the text.

F: I’m coming home this weekend.

Me: Everything okay?

F: I just want to come home.

This message stream is exactly why I must let Leif go. I have more secrets and reasons to keep myself hidden. I hit the button on my phone to delete the texts, then I click on the app

that will search and scrub my face from any camera feeds I might have missed. For her safety and mine, I have to make sure neither of us is caught on any of the many cameras out there. From street cameras to storefront security, surveillance is everywhere, and easily accessible if you know the right people.

I take one more look at Leif through the shop window before I head to my SUV and make my escape. I have only one focus in my life, and she's everything.

Leif

I watch them move out of the shop and observe Ley as she pauses for a moment. She stares at me through the large plate glass window. Her long mahogany waves are up in a bun at the back of her head. She's in a long-sleeved black compression shirt topped by a thick vest. Black cargo military slacks and boots cover her lower half. Her peaches and cream complexion is fresh-faced instead of covered in makeup. Her hazel eyes stand out without the dark liner around them. This is the complete opposite of the sexy dresses and negligees I'm used to seeing her in when we meet for her appointments. She's more beautiful now and takes my breath away. This is the woman I want to get to know.

I reflect on our last session just a few days ago. Her strict contract doesn't allow for me to comfort her while she is coming out of subspace. I've watched her lie against that cross so many times, but this last time I couldn't take it. I moved to her body. The Dom in me didn't like leaving her alone. Didn't like that I couldn't provide proper aftercare for her. Still complying with her wishes, I left her strapped to the cross as I gently applied cream to her welted skin. I brushed her hair that fell from its messy bun away from her face and looked deep into her golden hazel eyes. She looked back at me and nodded slightly. I took the cue and released her arms from the St. Andrews cross, letting her gently fall into my arms. She looked up at me as I held her.

In that long look I saw so much. I saw the pain she tries to hide. I saw that she has secrets. But what I mostly saw was her need. Her body was slack against mine, but she trembled as I brushed my lips against her forehead. I'm not letting her get away from me. She thinks she's going to run, but I'm not going to allow it. I'm her Master, and I will have her completely. She's ready now.

I saw it. I felt it.

I'll give her a few days. She won't be able to run from me for long. She craves my whip as much as I crave watching her skin flush from it. Ever since the first moment I saw her, I wanted her. I wanted her submission. I want her body under my own as I take her.

But right now, I need to deal with my sister and her new husband. I can't believe she got married without me. We've always been close. We had to be. Our parents didn't want us and shipped us off here to stay with our meemaw. They only wanted the money they knew we'd inherit. But I made sure to send them away after our meemaw passed. My sister doesn't know it, but I paid them off to go away permanently. Erika and I are not only siblings, but we are also business partners in two highly successful operations. We own this tattoo parlor and a BDSM club.

I did notice that for the first time in a very long time my sister submitted to someone. She's a switch but primarily a Domme. However, tonight I watched her be submissive to her husband, Ley's brother. I mean, Ridley, as I heard my sister call her. The name fits her. She's strong even when she submits to my whip.

I turn and look at Jas, who's still standing at the counter in shock.

"Come on, let's close early. Your hubby would like that." I grab the cleaning wipes and start wiping down mine and Rika's chairs and equipment. I've called my sister Rika since she was born.

"Ryan would like that." Jas laughs and cleans up her area and then the lobby. "I can't believe that woman is Gray's

sister. She came to help me when I was kidnapped last year.” Jas rattles off and I turn to look at her. She still dresses like my sister in sexy grunge outfits, but now they accommodate her pregnant belly. She is due in a little over a month, and I’m pretty sure that’s a big baby in there because Ryan isn’t a small guy.

“She works for a security company?” Now her outfit makes more sense.

I look out the window when I hear an engine rev and see a large blacked-out SUV drive by. I know it’s Ley, and I know she’s watching me. I stare at the driver’s side window, hoping it will lower and let me see her.

“I can ask Ryan. He’d know. I think they’re friends. He doesn’t talk about her much, but I’ve heard some things.” Jas breaks me from my staring contest as the vehicle goes by.

“No, it’s okay.” I don’t need Jas’s husband looking into Ley’s past. Her NDA has my hands tied enough.

We finish cleaning up and close out the till for the day. I lock up and walk Jas to her car. I then head to my silver 1972 Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme. The roar of the engine calms some of my nerves. I drive the couple of blocks to the warehouse I converted into a home. My passion, besides tattooing, is buying up most of the abandoned warehouses in the area and refurbishing them into new and modern places. I’ve sold a couple afterward or rented them out. Both the tattoo parlor and the BDSM club are in warehouses. I didn’t want to build something new. I wanted to take the old and modernize it. I like the look of the heavy brick walls.

The door slowly rises for my underground garage. I pull in and park amongst my motorcycle, truck, and an SUV similar to the one Ley was driving. I make my way upstairs to the ground level and main floor, where Di Vinci, my Rottweiler, greets me. I pat his head as I walk to the bar to pour myself a shot of whiskey. Da Vinci leans into me, his big body almost knocking me over.

“Stand back, dude.” I push on him, and he lowers his head, giving me those puppy-dog eyes. “You’re such a baby.” I

laugh at him as he moves back toward me with his tongue lolling out of his big jowls.

I move across the room to my recliner and sit down. Di Vinci puts his body between my legs, and I continue to pet him with one hand as I rub my other across my scruffy chin, contemplating how long I'm going to let Ley run from me.

CHAPTER 2

Ridley

I t's been four days since I last saw Leif and a week since his whip was used on me. I no showed for my appointment with him today. I could have called and canceled, but I knew he'd talk me into going. All week I've had erotic dreams of him instead of my normal nightmares.

I hit the punching bag hard and pain shoots up my arm from my sprained wrist. I wrapped it well with tape before I slipped my gloves on, hoping I could get a good workout in. I push through the pain like I've learned to do and continue to hit the bag. Loud rock music plays throughout the gym as I work my body into a good sweat.

My tablet on the bench alerts me to someone ringing my doorbell. I shake out my arms and remove a glove.

"Just a sec, Gray," I say after tapping the face to see who's at the door. "I'm in the gym." I disengage the alarm and lock.

This warehouse is next to the one my offices are in. I didn't want to be far from my work, and I got a decent deal on the two buildings. The main floor is partially my gym, garage, and personal armory. I hit the treadmill, leaving the music playing so I don't hear my brother give me shit for using my wrist.

I hurt my wrist Tuesday saving his wife from a murderous enemy of his. I totaled one of my company SUVs T-boning the other vehicle. My wrist smacked into the steering wheel before the airbag deployed.

“Don’t you relax?” Gray growls behind me. I meet his stare in the mirror in front of me and watch him pet Murtaugh’s head. My big Bouvier des Flandres is the brother to his dog, Riggs. I had both trained professionally.

“This is relaxing.” I laugh as I hit the mode for my cool down. “I’ll be done here in a bit, and we can go upstairs. What’s up? Why aren’t you with your wife?”

“She’s working late because her brother leaves early on Fridays.” It takes a lot for me not to trip. I know why he takes off early. “Erika was wondering if we could get together for dinner this weekend. She’s going to invite Ryan and Jasmin too, along with Leif.”

“I can’t. I have plans.” The cycle stops, and I jump off and grab a towel. I look at my watch. I don’t know when she’ll be arriving, but I need to get my brother out of here before she does. Only my *babushka* knows about her.

I move away and he follows along. We step into the vintage freight elevator. Gray grabs the wooden gate and pulls it down before I hit the up button.

“Let your wife know I can make time during the week, but my weekends are busy right now.” I need to hurry this visit along and get him out of here. “I’m going to get in the shower. You can let yourself out.”

As I walk by the open kitchen with the long bar, I see that the slow cooker is on the keep warm setting. I try to make home-cooked meals when she’s home from college. I continue through to my bedroom, sure that Gray will leave.

After a quick shower, I’m dressed in a pair of yoga pants, a loose tank top, and a large cardigan. The second entrance to my closet exits into a laundry room off the side of the kitchen. I round the corner and sitting at the bar with a rocks glass of vodka is my brother.

“What are you still doing here?” I look down at my smart watch. I received a text from the team that she’s almost here. I try to give her the benefit of being a young adult, but I will

always have a team on her for her safety. It's a necessity with her history.

"Why are you in a hurry to get rid of me? You got a hot date?" Gray chuckles deeply, and I notice he's made himself at home. His jacket is hanging over a chair and his shirt cuffs are rolled up, displaying his tattoos on his forearms. Most of his tattoos he earned working for our father. I notice the new tattoo on his ring finger of a dark band.

"No, but—"

"Mom, I'm home," is yelled before I can finish.

I drop my head as my brother whips around to take in my adopted daughter. She doesn't call me Mom unless she's playing around or trying to get a reaction out of me.

"Franci." I huff.

"Daughter?" Gray looks between the two of us, and I can see him doing the math in his head. She's eighteen, and I'm thirty-one. It doesn't add up and he knows it.

Franci is standing there looking between Gray and me. She's only met *Babushka*, but she's seen pictures of my brothers. They are around our home, along with pictures of her. I'm surprised Gray hasn't asked me about her pictures.

"You're Gray," she says in a soft, sweet voice. She and I worked hard to help her gain an American accent, but it's not perfect. You can still hear her Gheg Albanian tongue from time to time.

"I am." Gray looks at me. I know he has questions. Lots of them.

"Gray, meet my adopted daughter, Franclynn, or Franci for short." I wave between the two of them.

"Franci." Gray moves toward her and takes her in his arms. "Welcome to the family."

"*Babushka* said you were in town. I was hoping Ley would let me finally meet you," she says, and my throat constricts. I should have known she craved family being that she came from a large one.

“Franci, go get comfy while I talk to Gray,” I say when she comes around the bar and hugs me. “Love you, kiddo.” I kiss the top of her head. I’m five inches taller than her five foot two.

“Yummy. Stuffed peppers. What’s the occasion?” She laughs when she peeks into the slow cooker.

“My kiddo is coming home for the weekend.” I tip my head to the side and smile at her.

Franci has been my focus for so long, protecting her and keeping her secret. I worry that if my father or his men find out about her, they will expose her, which would allow the men we hide from to find us. They found me in Chicago, but I won’t let that happen again.

When she leaves the room, I turn to my brother. “Gray, I adopted her six years ago. She is the only survivor of a brutal attack.” I don’t give him all the details. “For her safety, I’ve kept her a secret.” I move around the bar until I’m standing next to him. “Only *Babushka* knew. She found out because I needed her help.” Again, I don’t give him more. He doesn’t need to know what happened. He and Andre would paint the streets with the blood of the men who attacked me if they knew.

My brother pulls me into his arms and holds me for a moment. “We’ll see you both for dinner tomorrow night.”

“No.” I shake my head against his chest.

“Yes. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.” His arms flex as he holds me tighter to him. My thoughts flash to Leif for a brief moment. If it weren’t for him, I wouldn’t be able to endure a hug from my own brother.

“Gray, I have special training going on tomorrow and won’t be done until at least five. I’m sure Franci has studying to do.”

“No, I don’t.” Franci returns to the kitchen, and I turn to look at her. “I’m all caught up. I thought we could hang out,” she says as she steps closer to us.

I move from Gray to her. “Franci, I’m sorry. I had this set up before you told me you were coming home. It was the only time I could get all the team together to do this specialized training. I promise you can come next door and hang out while I’m working.”

“Or she can come hang out with Erika and me,” Gray offers.

Gray doesn’t know about Franci’s security issues. But when she looks at me with hope in her eyes and her hands folded together in prayer, I give in.

“Okay. On one condition.” I hold up my finger. “You’ll have a team.”

“Thought you had the guys doing training.” She smirks at me.

“I’ll call in a favor.” I raise my brow, challenging her.

“Fine.”

“What do I need to know?” Gray asks with concern written all over his face.

“We’ll talk about it tomorrow. Now get out of here so Franci and I can have some dinner and girl talk.” I chuckle and move to my cell on the counter to send a message.

Me: Rogue here. Can you please send a team to follow that package I have tomorrow?

Gambit: 3?

Me: Yeah. I’ll text the address it will be going to later.

Gambit: K

When I look up from my phone, I find only Franci standing there. I serve up our plates and spend the evening with her.

CHAPTER 3

Leif

I knew Ley was going to run, and I figured she would no-show. But I'm not going to let her get away from me. After some research and demanding questions, I got what I needed from Jas's husband. I found out the location of her office. The funny thing is that they're in one of my old warehouses. I sold them the property. I wonder if she owns the security company instead of working for it.

I pull into the warehouse parking lot and park my truck among several other vehicles here. I approach a couple of men standing with their gazes fixed upward. I look up and am about to ask what they're looking at when two individuals come off the roof. One of them rappels down the building facing the ground in a standing position similar to what the military does. The second person is flying through the air away from the building but also facing the ground. It looks like an uncontrolled jump. I continue to watch, and with perfect precision, the person clenches their hand and flips around to go through the window they're passing. The first person enters the window next to it but at a slower pace. It's amazing to watch. A beautiful aerial dance like Cirque du Soleil.

"Can we help you?" one of the men finally asks me. His face is painted black like the first guy who jumped off the building, and he's dressed in all black gear, including a tactical vest like the one Ley wore the other day.

"Yeah, I'm looking for Ridley," I say as I look up again, wondering what they are training for. Obviously, it's some kind of tactical building entry.

"Go through that door and up the stairs to the fifth floor." He pauses and looks up again. "Nope. Make that the roof." He and the other guy start chuckling. "Looks like there is another challenge going on." He points up, and I focus on the lines being pulled up.

I follow their directions and I'm stopped by another guy before I get to the roof. He tells me to follow him to the fifth floor, where I can see the two open windows that the

rappellers came through a short time ago. I'm directed to stand off to the side, facing the windows. The floorspace is mostly open except for dividers separating the two windows, making it seem like it's two rooms. I'm about to turn away when movement catches my eye. I watch as two bodies rappel into the room. One is wearing a mask with a skull painted on it and black around their eyes. From the height and build, this is the same person who rappelled down the building at a fast speed. This person is also Ley. I'd know her figure anywhere. She comes through the window first with her gun up and pointed to clear the area. The second person is not far behind and also in a skull mask.

The men start laughing, and she pulls up her mask. "You almost had me there, Thomson. Nice technique."

"You still got me, boss," the guy who rappelled into the room with her says.

The guy who directed me to where I'm currently standing says something to her. I watch as her body stiffens. She turns to look at me, and I see her body slightly relax. She thought I was someone else. She doesn't say anything but starts to move toward me. She stops midway and turns back to the guys. More men have come into the room, including the two I encountered outside.

"Clean up. We'll meet on Monday for assignments. Don't forget to relax tomorrow. You all did good. Maybe next time someone will beat me. Next month we'll practice controlled team entry from outside the building."

Well, that answers my question. She is the boss. I watch her as she moves toward me again. "Follow me," she says. She waves me to the large industrial elevator, and we head down to the second floor.

"I wanted—"

She holds a hand up, cutting me off. I guess the elevator isn't private enough for her to yell at me for breaking her rules.

"Not here," she bites out.

I move in close behind her. Under the smell of gun oil and sweat is Ley's intoxicating scent of citrus. I can't smell it without getting hard. I take a deep breath, trying to inhale as much of it as I can. She's had me on edge all week worrying that she was going to run.

"What are you doing?" She steps away from me, but I move closer and wrap a hand around her waist. She doesn't stop me. Her body tightens up, but then she relaxes ever so slightly.

"I missed you," I confess. "I can wait until we are alone." I squeeze my fingers on her waist.

The elevator comes to a stop, and she pulls away from me. I reach over her and lift the doors, but she helps me. She won't give me a chance to take care of her or help her.

I follow her off the elevator. We walk past several doors and glass enclosed rooms. I look over the railing on the other side of us down to the garage area below. Several SUV and large military type vehicles are down there. I turn back to watch her hips sway slightly, but she isn't trying to shake them. Her long legs that I've thought about wrapped around my hips move smoothly. She stops at an office, and I watch as she uses a palm scanner to open the door.

"Stay there." She points inside the entrance.

As the door closes behind me, I let her direct me. She won't give me her submission here. She demands these men follow her, so she won't show any weakness, or what she thinks will lose their respect. But being a submissive isn't weak at all. She's the one with all the control here. She has to know that, and if she doesn't, I will make sure she does.

She pushes a few buttons on her computer, and all the glass fogs over so no one can look in at us. I turn around and lock the door. When I turn back, she's dropped the mask to her desk. I take in her face, noting the black around her eyes looks like bruises and not paint. I'm in motion toward her.

"Stop. What are you doing here?" Her voice shakes slightly. I see the tremble in her hands, and I stop.

I rub a hand along the scruff on my chin and take her all in. I know how I want to play this, but I also know deep down that she could kick my ass if I don't proceed with caution.

"You missed our date." I don't call it an appointment or meeting, because it is a date.

She removes her vest and drops it in the chair. She's dressed exactly as she was when she dropped my ass earlier this week.

"It's..." She pauses and shakes her head. "It wasn't a date. How did you find me?"

"I sold you this building." I wave my hand around, and she looks around her.

"I should've known." She remains behind her desk, putting the large piece between us. "You can't just show up in my life. I don't want to continue our contract."

That isn't fucking happening.

"Knees," I command in a tone she usually doesn't ignore.

Her whole body trembles, and her breathing increases. She moves, albeit slowly, around the desk. When she drops to a perfect submissive pose, I take a deep breath. I was worried she wasn't going to at first. I move toward her and drag a finger along her neck. Her eyes are dropped, but I feel the deep breath leave her body.

"Look at me," I order. When her wide eyes look up at me, I see her pupils are dilated, making the golden hue of her irises stand out more. "We aren't done. I'm changing our contract."

Her eyes flare, and I know she's going to fight me.

"But, Sir," she says, and I put a finger to her lips to stop her. This is the most I've touched her, and I'm loving that she's letting me.

"No. Don't argue this. You and I both know you want this as much as I do. Tonight, my private room. You can use the side entrance and not the main one." That's the entrance she usually enters through because she arrives before opening hours.

“I can’t.” Her eyes drop for a moment before they focus on me again. “I can’t be with you because it’s too much. Plus, we have dinner with your sister and my brother tonight,” she reminds me. I focus on the first part.

“It’s never too much. You feel with me?”

“Yes,” she sighs, and I know that was a lot for her to admit.

“Then let’s explore that. No one has to know about us yet.” I hate giving that to her because I want every man outside this room to know she’s mine. That this beautiful, strong woman wants me.

I glance around her office, stopping on the entrance to an adjoining bathroom suite. An idea sparks in my head.

“Is there a shower in there?” I point to the room, and she looks over.

“Yes.”

I reach down and hold out my hand to her. I can show her what I want to do for her. Her palm slides against mine, causing something to settle deep inside of me.

“You are the strongest woman I know.” I lead her to stand in the middle of the bathroom. “I like that. When you give me your submission, it’s sexy and alluring. I want more of that. I want all of it. Your submission isn’t weakness, it’s strength. You control me. You decide,” I tell her as I move behind her. I pull the pins from her low bun and let her thick hair fall around her shoulders in waves. The scent of citrus is so strong, I lean in and bury my nose in her hair. “I love how you smell.”

“I stink right now,” she says, and I look over her head to the mirror and see the smile on her face. Her dimples popping out. Dimples that called to my tongue the first time I saw them. I need to taste them. I move in front of her and lift her chin up.

“Use your safe words,” I say before I lean down slowly. So slowly she can stop me.

Ridley

Everything in me wants to run and flee, but I stand here in my bathroom and watch as his head descends. His pierced tongue comes out. The piercing slides along my cheek to my dimple, then it's replaced with the tip of his tongue. I moan at the feeling.

Leif is touching me.

I squeeze my hands into fists to keep from pulling him to me. I want more. I need it. I close my eyes and then his warm lips press against mine. My eyes snap open and he's looking down at me. He didn't close his eyes when he kissed me. He deepens the kiss, and I can't stop the warm feeling from spreading through my body. I close my eyes and drift away to the feelings.

Before today I haven't let a man touch me like this because of the memories of what happened in that alley. Leif must sense that I'm drifting because he pulls back. His hands slide along my cheeks and then into my hair, where he pulls it slightly. My eyes open again.

"Stay with me, Ley." His gruff tone and the look in his eyes bring me back. "Don't go there. I don't know where it is, and someday maybe you'll tell me, but right now watch me and feel. I want to show you what I can do for you."

"Yes, Sir." My words are so soft, I almost don't think I said them out loud. But I watch his melted dark chocolate eyes soften. I wish I could tell him about my past, but I need to protect everyone, mostly Franci. They can come back, and they will if they find us.

"Look at me." He lowers his head again, faster this time. When his lips touch mine, he presses his tongue against them and I open. As soon as his tongue slides against my own, it's like I've been jolted by a live wire. I can't keep my eyes open. My hands go to his waist, and I realize I still have my gloves on. He deepens the kiss and my knees tremble. Just when I

think I can't take anymore, he sucks my tongue into his mouth, and I moan with need. A need that is building. He pulls completely away with a groan and lifts my hand. He pulls my gloves off, first one and then the other. He watches me as I press my hands back to his waist. I slide my fingers under his shirt so I can finally touch his skin. A contact I need.

Leif smirks and his pierced eyebrow slightly rises. He reaches to the back of his neck and pulls his shirt over his head and drops it to the floor. I take him all in. I've seen him shirtless, but I've never touched him. I trace the swirling colors of his tattoos along his defined pecs and down his abdomen to his happy trail. I slide my hands back up to the silver barbells piercing his nipples.

"Pull on them, love." His voice is gruff.

I do as he says, and his head falls back on his shoulders as he moans long and deep. I watch his Adam's apple bounce, and I can't stop myself. I lean forward and lick his nipple. He sets me back and my eyes flash to his.

"This is about you."

"But I want to take you all in," I beg.

He shakes his head. "Me first."

With those words, Leif unbuckles my tactical belt and pulls my shirt up and off. I watch as he takes me in up close. I start to cover myself, but he grabs my arms and holds them back.

"You are breathtaking. Every scar shows how strong you really are." He looks me deep in the eyes, and for the first time, I don't hide my emotions.

He leans back in to kiss me deeply. His arms wrap around me, and he unhooks my bra. He releases my lips and steps back to drag my bra down my arms. He flicks my nipple piercings and then looks down the expanse of my skin to my belly button with a matching piercing through it.

"I love your unmarked skin. I can't wait to draw on it." His calloused fingers slide along my skin, and I arch into his touch. I crave it.

He pulls the belt from my pants and then kneels in front of me. I brace myself on his shoulders and look down at him. I slide my fingers through his hair, and he tips his head toward my hand. Leif craves my touch as much as I crave his. It's like an aphrodisiac to my senses.

He proceeds to unfasten my boots and pull them from my feet. He looks up at me, and I get lost in his eyes as he works on my cargo pants. He rises and steps back after sliding my pants down my legs. His eyes feast on me, and I feel them as if they are a caress. I try not to look over my shoulder at him when he moves behind me. I hold still while he takes me all in up close and personal.

When we have sessions, he's dressed in silky button-down shirts and slacks. I'm in sexy, little black dresses with lingerie underneath. He'll whip me, and until the last time I wouldn't let him touch me. I knew I would want more if he did, and here's proof. I can't wait for him to touch me. A crack against my ass cheek has me shuddering in desire. I know how wet I am for him. How much I want him. He moves back around to my front, and when he kisses me this time, it's aggressive and consuming. He pulls me into his body. The feel of his warm skin against my breasts has me moaning. His hand on my ass cheek is possessive and rough. I wrap my hands over his shoulders and hold him tight to me. He lifts me up by my ass and I wrap around him. I pull away from the kiss at the feel of his rough jeans at my core. I moan as I rock on him. I want this.

I need him.

He moves us next to the shower, where he strips out of his remaining clothes while I just watch. I've never seen him this naked, and I want to touch all of him. When his boxer briefs fall, I see the Jacob's ladder piercing adorning his erect cock. I'm concerned now. I've never been with a guy with one of those.

"Don't worry, you'll love it. It will feel good to both of us." He reaches in and starts the large shower.

I made sure that my office had all the amenities close by even though I live next door. A rough day I need to clean up from is better here than at home. I'm in my head again when I feel his hands at the straps of my thong. I look down and find him on his knees in front of me. He kisses my pussy when it's exposed, and I jump, gripping his head. His tongue slides through my folds and I buck against him. It's been so long since I've felt tenderness like this. He wraps his tongue around my clit, and I open my legs more for him. He shoots to his feet and takes my mouth. I taste my essence on his tongue, and it sets me off. I climb him and wrap around his body.

"I didn't want this to be about me. But now that I've had a small taste, I'm going to need more and need you on my cock. I don't have a condom, but I know you're clean and you know I am."

"I'm on the shot." I moan, needing him just as much.

Before I know it, I'm on the seat in the shower and he's on his knees in front of me. He opens me up and the hot water splashes around us as he leans in and devours me. He's not gentle. He eats me as if I'm his last meal. I hold his head to me and ride out the desire until I'm screaming long and loud. He stands and pulls me up with him.

I get another taste of myself as he kisses me long and deep. He hikes up my leg and slides into me in a long thrust. I slam my head against the wall and cry out at the intrusion. As each part of his piercings enter me, I feel them along my walls.

"Leif..." I don't know what I want. "I need..."

"I know, my love." His thick voice is strained. "You're so fucking tight."

When he's completely seated inside me, he holds still, and I take in the feeling of fullness. Of being touched in this way again. I start to feel myself slipping, but he grips my chin and focuses my eyes back on his as he starts to move.

"Stay with me, my love," he says, and the fog dissipates to just him and me. His hips are moving. I start to move too. Riding him as he thrusts in deeper. We stare at each other, both

of us open. I see his need for contact. I see his desire for me. I even see things I'm not sure I want to see yet. And I let him really see me. The broken woman and all.

Leif doesn't stop. He keeps thrusting over and over. My body is climbing, and he's right, the piercings feel so good massaging my insides as he thrusts in and out. I'm focused on his eyes when one of his hands moves from the wall he has me plastered against. I feel the pull in my nipple as he tugs on the piercing, and it sets me off. I come screaming his name and lose focus on him for only a moment. I watch as he goes over too, groaning my name.

I cling to him. My face is buried in his neck as he holds me with the water beating on my back. His cock flexes inside me and I moan at the feeling.

"I want you again, but we have to get ready to go to my sister's."

I look up at him.

"Are you sure we should continue this?" I hate asking it because I want this now that I've had a taste of it.

He presses me into the wall again. Leif flexes his hips, pushing in deep. "You're the first woman I've taken in a very long time. I'm not letting you go."

I guess now's the time to tell him about Franci before he finds out for himself. But instead of telling him, I lean forward and kiss him. I will take as much of him as I can until my past catches up to me.

I really appreciate you reading Frozen Heart. Please don't forget to leave a review. To continue reading more from Ridley and Leif, preorder their book coming in March 2024, Frozen Heart. Also check out the other books in the Tattoos & Sin series.

Frozen Heart - <https://books2read.com/TSFrozenHeart>

Tattoos & Sin - <https://www.authoremshue.com/tattoos-sin>

ABOUT E.M. SHUE

E.M. Shue is an Alaskan award-winning romance author. She writes in many different sub-genres but always features badass heroines in gritty situations. As the mother to three grown daughters and two granddaughters she wants readers to be able to see that tough girls can have happy endings too. She is married to the love of her life of over twenty years who she married within months of starting to date, instalove is real.

She published her first book in 2017 after having a dream that later became the Beverley Award winning, Sniper's Kiss. Since her debut, she has gone on to win this award three more times with different books and has published over forty titles.

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THE PERFECT GIFT

by Ellie Masters

Romantic Suspense, Contemporary Romance

Found Family

As head of the Guardian Hostage Rescue Specialists' Technical Team, Mitzy is no stranger to waging war against ruthless enemies. But when an unexpected health crisis arises during her pregnancy, she finds herself in a battle on two fronts unlike any she's faced before—a fight for her own life and that of her unborn child. With her husband, Noodles, unwavering support, Mitzy confronts harrowing medical decisions and grueling treatments, refusing to surrender hope. She wages war for her family's future through fierce love and determination.

CHAPTER 1

A maze of crates provides hiding spots in the dimly lit warehouse, the perfect training ground for my Robotic Ultra Functional Utility Specialists, aka RUFUS...

Aka, autonomous robotic dogs.

The Guardians murdered my word for the dog-like robots. It's a RUFUS, and when we're talking about more than one, it should be RUFUSes, but the Guardians call them Ruffi, and I'm done with trying to correct them.

Anticipation flares within me, but it's not just the thrill of the upcoming exercise that's got my stomach doing flips. I've been feeling nauseous and dizzy for a while now.

I know what it could mean, and I'm not ready to face it.

Not yet.

We're using the Ruffi more and more during our hostage rescue missions. It allows greater adaptability and enhances the Guardians' capabilities in the field. With a few taps on my tablet, I dispatch the Ruffi into the hidden corners of the mocked-up maze. Their sleek black bodies trot with quiet efficiency as they slink into the shadows.

"Assets in position. Heat sensors online. Prepare to engage." I let the Guardians participating in this training exercise know we're about ready to begin the scenario.

The Guardians, their faces set with stern concentration, flex their fingers over their weapons, anticipation fizzing in the air.

"Remember, non-lethal force only. The goal is hostage extraction, not a body count." I flash a small, proud smile.

These Guardians are former special forces, the cream of the crop, and my task is to ensure they remain so. Today, we pit Charlie team against Delta team.

Charlie plays the role of hostage rescue.

Delta gets to be the bad guy.

The first feed from the Ruffi pops up on my screen, granting me a bird's eye view of the warehouse, like looking through the eyes of a hawk soaring above its hunting ground.

"Hostiles approaching from the northeast corner," I announce at the beginning of the training simulation, my voice steady. "Go, go, go!"

At my command, the Guardians explode into action.

Charlie team disperses, dodging behind crates and leaping atop stacks, their bodies coiling and uncoiling with the fluidity of seasoned warriors. Every move is honed to lethal precision, a deadly dance choreographed in real time.

I guide them with the Ruffi's intel, providing live updates of potential threats and unmarked routes that feed directly into their visors' Heads Up Display, or HUDs.

In the blink of an eye, the warehouse transforms into a battleground. Ethan Blackwood, Charlie One and leader of that team, swings out from behind a crate, his rubber bullets zing through the air and slam into the first hostile, Mac, Delta-Two. The impact sends him sprawling backward, his weapon skitters away.

Hank, Charlie Two, pounces next, leaping from the heights with aerial grace. He lands behind Jenny, Delta-One, delivering a swift strike to her legs, sending her crashing to the cold concrete floor. Hank discharges his weapon, taking Jenny out before she can react.

The rest of the team executes similar tactics, each movement expertly honed, reflecting years of training. It's a lethal ballet, choreographed to neutralize and disarm, not to kill.

Charlie team's efficiency in eliminating the threat is a sight to behold. It's a testament to their training, their commitment, and the invaluable support provided by the Ruffi. Not that Delta team isn't a force of nature themselves. They just didn't have Ruffi on their side. This is what we're testing. What happens when we take the might of Guardian Hostage Rescue Specialists and integrate it with the Ruffi.

I can tell you what they become.

They become unstoppable.

Delta team doesn't stand a chance against the combined force of Charlie team and the Ruffi. Within minutes, they're disabled and neutralized.

"Hostiles disabled. Hostage secured," Ethan reports, his words echoing through the now silent warehouse. Both teams regroup, their breaths heavy but their spirits high.

The Ruffi whirl as they return to their crates. Their mission is complete, but the technical team, my team, will spend hours going over the robots' performance. I can't help but swell with pride. My technical is top-notch, and this proves it.

"Great work, Charlie team. That's a wrap for today. Meet back here in an hour for debrief." I'm already moving into debrief mode, thinking about what I'll say and what we can improve on for next time. This exercise is a win for Guardian HRS as a whole.

Charlie and Delta teams emerge from the warehouse, all smiles and high fives, and I head out to meet them. Suddenly, a wave of dizziness hits me, and I stagger. Nausea bubbles up again, stronger this time. It's getting harder to deny the truth.

"Whoa, boss, you all right?" One of my techies catches my arm.

I wave him off with a smile and steady myself against a crate. "Low blood sugar, that's all. I'll grab something to eat before the debrief." Something I'll eat and throw up with the next bout of nausea.

He eyes me doubtfully but says nothing more. I tell myself it's nothing, just stress and lack of sleep catching up to me, but I can't ignore the signs. For now, however, there's a job to do. I paste on a smile and congratulate the Guardians.

CHAPTER 2

Later that day, no longer able to ignore intractable nausea and vomiting, I head to the clinic, where I pull Skye Summers, my best friend and lead of Guardian HRS's medical branch, to the side. My fingers twist along the seam of my jeans. I'm more nervous than I want to admit.

"Do you have a moment?" My voice lacks its usual high-spirited energy.

Skye looks at me, her bright eyes crinkling with concern. "Of course. What's going on?" She immediately ushers me toward an exam room.

"I think I might be—you know." I can't say the word and swallow it down instead.

"Pregnant?" Her impeccable bedside manner takes the edge off my unease.

"Yes." I'm equally terrified and overjoyed.

"Is your period late?" Skye's professional persona takes over.

"No." I shake my head.

"Then why do you think you're pregnant?" Her brows furrow in confusion.

"I got dizzy after today's exercise. And nauseous. I'm never dizzy or nauseous. The only time I was was when..." My voice trails off as I reflect on the last time I felt this way. "...when I was pregnant with Kai."

Her eyes soften, the clinical detachment melting away for a moment. "Let's start with the basics. Standard pee on the stick method." Skye rummages around in a cart of medical supplies and hands me a pregnancy test. "The bathroom's over there."

Taking the stick from Skye, I can't suppress a grimace. "I hate these things. They make me feel like a terrified teenager, waiting for my fate to be determined by two tiny lines."

"Are you worried about being pregnant again?" Her voice is soft yet probing. She's always been good at reading me.

“We wanted to wait until Kai was older.” There it is, my fear laid bare.

“There’s never a perfect time to have kids. You just have to ride out the messy, beautiful chaos.”

“Beautiful Chaos?” A laugh bubbles up in my throat. “That sounds very Zen. Are you channeling my husband?”

“Does Noodles know about your suspicions?”

“Hell, I don’t even know yet.”

“Best pee on the stick then.” She gestures toward the bathroom, giving me the privacy to take the test. “We’ll follow up with bloodwork, but it’ll give you an immediate answer now.”

I excuse myself, pee on the stick, then gather my courage and hand over the plastic stick. I can’t look at it. I’m too nervous.

She peers at the result, and a faint frown creases her forehead. “It’s not definitive, but you might be pregnant.”

“Might?”

Skye breaks the heavy silence, her voice calm despite the chaos spinning inside me. “We’ll do a blood test to confirm.” She readies the needle and supplies with practiced hands. “I should have results by the end of the day. Want me to call you?” Her clinical efficiency is a comfort, distracting me from the pinch of the needle as she draws my blood.

I shake my head, already dreading the wave of emotion her call will bring. I want to be pregnant, but I also don’t want to be pregnant.

“You can text.” The words come out more like a plea. “I don’t think I’d be able to keep my voice steady in a conversation.”

“No problem.” She gives me a warm, supportive hug. Then, with a playful glint in her eyes, she adds, “You know, another kid would be fun to have running around *Insanity*.”

She refers to the group home we both live in. *Insanity* is the throbbing heart of Angel Fire, one of the all-time top hard rock bands on the planet. Ash, Bash, Bent, Spike, and Noodles—my soulmate—all moved in together, their shared creative energy pulsing through the walls. They find inspiration in the chaos, writing, and recording on the grounds of *Insanity*.

Over the years, their hearts found their matches.

Skye fell for Ash, causing a tsunami of change for the band. Bent found balance in Piper, an exceptionally gifted physical therapist who helped him navigate a career-threatening injury. Then there was the whirlwind romance of Bash and Holly, a rhythm so synchronized it's better left unsaid.

The zany, vibrant me found peace in Noodles, Angel Fire's tranquil keyboardist. We're a strange harmony, but somehow, we make beautiful music. Spike, the final piece of the band's puzzle, fell in love with Angel. That romance shook Angel Fire's foundations to their very core.

In addition to the band, there's the undeniable presence of Forest Summers. Alongside Skye, he breathed life into Guardian Hostage Rescue Specialists. A self-made billionaire with a heart as vast as his wealth, he's passionate about uplifting those less fortunate.

His love story is a chord of three notes—Sara, his former executive assistant, and Paul, Piper's brother.

Forest and Paul share a delicate dance of power and trust. While Forest and Sara are more traditional in their love. The three of them fashioned their unusual relationship into something that works. Sara's journey to motherhood was turbulent, but she brought forth twins, Delia and Sebastian, rays of sunshine in our crazy family.

Now, *Insanity* is more than a home; it's our haven. Each couple has their private corner, and we're one growing family as kids are added into the mix.

Zach, the eldest, a mini Ash in the making, is five. Sonnet, the newest addition to Ash and Skye's nest, is part of the

toddler brigade. Skye, Piper, Holy, Sara, and I shared our journeys to motherhood—all pregnant around the same time—which means our kids are all around the same age. They're all growing up together.

Kai, my ray of sunshine, shares his age with Finn, Bash and Holly's bundle of joy, and Arwen, Piper and Bent's little angel. I count off in my head—Angel's newborn makes eight and if I'm pregnant, this will be child number nine for the crazy crew of *Insanity*. It's cool that we're raising our kids together—like instant siblings. But we each have our tiny nucleus of a family.

Best of both worlds, in my opinion.

As I step away from Skye's office, my heart feels full and heavy at the same time. Is it possible to be both excited and terrified?

I've got a potential life growing inside me, my second child and the questions keep coming.

Can I balance my work life with a second child?

Noodles is the best dad. He's basically taken over as the primary parent. When called away for a mission, I never worry about who's taking care of the Kai. If Noodles has something with the band, we've got built-in babysitters with the Angel Fire Chick Brigade.

That's what we wives affectionately call ourselves. We tossed around sister-wives for a bit, but the optics of that were problematic for the band and their public image.

Two hours later, I get a text on my phone from Skye full of congratulations and confirmation that I am indeed pregnant.

CHAPTER 3

With my news bubbling inside of me, I go home and head directly to one of the many recording studios at *Insanity*. The guys are working on a new album, and Noodles is usually

early, setting up his keyboards and running sound checks before the rest of the band arrives for practice.

There—in the far corner, headphones on, lost in the music, is my man. I sneak up behind him and slip my arms around his waist, leaning my cheek against his back. He jumps, then relaxes into my embrace with a smile. Pulling off his headphones, he turns to face me.

“There’s my girl.” His eyes crinkle at the corners. “How did training go today?”

“Successful, as always. The new Ruff performed perfectly.”

“That’s great.” He strokes a hand over my pixie hair, rainbow strands slipping through his fingers. “You work too hard, you know that don’t you?”

I swat his arm. “And you don’t work hard enough, rock star. When are you going to write me another song?”

“When inspiration strikes.” He taps the side of his nose with a wink. “Can’t be rushed, these things.”

“Mm-hmm.” I eye his keyboard, temptation rising, and he laughs.

“No, you don’t get to hack my equipment again. I still haven’t recovered from the dubstep incident.”

“You loved it and you know it.” I stick out my tongue, and he kisses the tip of it, making me giggle.

“Come on, let me make dinner before practice starts.” He laces our fingers together, and we leave the recording studio and head to the kitchen.

“Where’s Kai?” Our two-year-old is nowhere in sight.

“Holly and Angel took the kids down to the beach.”

“Just the two of them?” The beach below the towering cliffs of *Insanity* is rocky and full of cool tide pools, but they’re also incredibly dangerous when the tide rolls in.

“No.” He laughs. “Spike and Bash are down there with them.”

“If Spike and Bash are down there, I take it practice didn’t go well?”

“We weren’t feeling it, and as for dinner, Ash is making spaghetti. We may want to *oversee* his efforts.”

As we approach the kitchen, the comforting aroma of garlic and spices fill the air. My stomach growls, earning a tender squeeze from Noodles.

“Someone’s hungry.” His gaze falls on my belly with a knowing smile.

My cheeks flush as memories of our first pregnancy announcement flutter through my mind.

It was Christmas Eve. Skye, Piper, Holly, Sara, and I were all pregnant at the same time. Since Skye is our personal physician, she convinced all of us to keep our pregnancies secret until Christmas Eve. We made the announcement as a group.

Best gift ever.

Placing a hand on my belly, I yearn for that familiar flutter heralding the very first kick of the new life inside of me.

“Mitzy.” Noodles laces his tone with a casualness that belies the gravity of his next words. “When were you going to tell me we’re expecting another baby?”

“How-how did you know?” I sputter, taken aback.

“Your boobs are bigger. More sensitive.” He winks and his gaze drops to my boobs, then he leans in close to whisper in my ear. “You’re also hornier than normal.” He grins like a fool, but his tone turns serious when I don’t laugh. “I’m sensing a weird vibe. Aren’t you excited?” Noodles notices everything.

“It’s not a good time.”

“There’s never a good time, and Kai’s going to be so thrilled to have a little brother, or sister, he can terrorize.”

Kai can be a handful. No denying that.

“You’re right, I’m just being silly.”

“We’ve got this.” He pulls me close and wraps his arms around me, giving me one of his minute-long hugs that I love. Then he kisses the top of my head, my forehead, the tip of my nose, then finally my lips, slow and sweet

Before I know it, my worries fade.

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, I wake to sunlight streaming through the blinds and the familiar weight of Noodles’s arm draped over my waist. He stirs beside me, his fingers curling around my hip.

“Morning, beautiful. How are you feeling?”

“I’m good. Just thinking about the baby.”

“Our little peanut.” He kisses my forehead, his smile soft with wonder. “The luckiest baby in the whole world.”

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, the familiar tone signaling an alert from Guardian Headquarters. I grab it with a sigh, scanning the details of a new hostage situation unfolding.

We specialize in the rescue of human-trafficking victims, but sometimes the FBI calls us in to assist with domestic hostage rescue situations. Delta team is our go-to expert for such missions and it looks like we’re spinning them up.

“I have to go in.” I give him an apologetic look. “I’m really sorry. Duty calls.”

He just smiles, pulling me in for another kiss. “Go save the day. I’m thinking I’ll take Kai surfing.”

Noodles is an avid surfer and a powerful swimmer. It’s how we met, actually. He saved me from the surf that swept me off the rocks and into the ocean. I would’ve drowned if not for him. Because of the dangerous surf, he had to take me out past the breakwater before paddling us down the beach until it was safe to head in.

I got to meet Old Joe during that rescue and let's just say, I'm not a fan of swimming with great white sharks. Noodles, however, was totally Zen about it.

When he needs to think, he heads out beyond the break to talk to his watery friend.

Talk about first impressions.

"He loves that, just promise no communing with Old Joe."

I wish I could go with them. A day spent playing in the surf sounds divine, but I have a job to do, and lives depend on me. The rest will have to wait.

"I love you," I say fiercely.

"I love you too. Now go save lives." He shoos me off the bed, and I scramble to get ready, clinging to the memory of his smile.

Today is going to be a good day.

It has to be.

I burst into Guardian Headquarters, scanning the room. I'm the last to arrive. Everyone else is ready to go, reviewing the details of the situation.

"There you are." My boss, Sam, waves me over to the monitors, where live footage shows a bank robbery in progress. He's the lead of Guardian HRS, kind of like a CEO, or General.

CJ, the lead for the Guardian teams is with him. He's Guardian HRS's version of a full bird colonel. "We have a dozen hostages at a bank; the gunmen are demanding a helicopter and safe passage out of the country."

"They're armed and volatile," CJ says grimly. "This is going to be a tech-heavy op. They want to deploy the drones."

"Do they have eyes on the hostages?" I glance at Sam.

"No. All interior cameras are disarmed."

"I'll get the drones prepped. We'll send in the bumblebees. It's the best way to get eyes in there."

My team springs into action, preparing to deploy our high-tech arsenal of autonomous drones. Over the years, we've created several variants, each performing unique functions. From bumblebees to dragonflies, to the Ruffi, along with *Smaug*, a high-altitude drone, our capabilities continue to expand.

The bumblebees are perfect for covert surveillance. Not only can they crawl through the smallest of openings, people tend to ignore insects. Outfitted with high-tech cameras, with wide-angle views, they're perfect for covert surveillance. They'll get us the information we need without alerting the gunmen. It'll make rescuing the hostages that much easier.

I roll up my sleeves and dig in.

CHAPTER 5

A few months later, Noodles joins me at an appointment with our obstetrician. I'm smack dab in the middle of the second trimester at nineteen weeks and already showing. I pull up the hem of my loose floral top and an odd sense of unease prickles at my senses.

Dr. Johnson squeezes a blob of gel onto my stomach and gently moves a wand over my skin.

My baby is a beautiful gray and white blob on the screen; head, arms, and legs all forming. He or she gives a little kick. We listen to the steady *thump-thump-thump* of the heartbeat, a rhythmic symphony of life that fills me with joy.

A flutter of joy rises in my chest at the steady beat.

That's our baby. A new life.

"Everything sounds good. The baby's heart is strong and healthy." Dr. Johnson smiles, her kind eyes crinkling behind her wire-rimmed glasses.

I breathe a sigh of relief. At four and a half months along, the baby is the size of an avocado, according to my pregnancy

app. Still tiny, but with fingers and toes and a little nose. A whole new life growing inside me.

Tears prick my eyes as I grip Noodles's hand. He squeezes back, equally mesmerized by the sight of our child.

Dr. Johnson clicks off the machine and cleans the gel off my belly. "Everything looks great. We'll finish with a breast exam and call it a day. Are your breasts tender?"

"Yes." I'm not well-endowed when it comes to boobs and barely fill an A-cup bra.

When I was pregnant with Kai, I wasn't prepared for the near doubling in size that happened. Not that my breasts got huge, but for the first time in my life, I fit into a B-cup. The only bad thing about the whole thing is the tenderness and increased sensitivity.

Dr. Johnson begins the exam with my right breast. Her brows furrow, however, during the exam of my left breast. She goes back to a prior spot, running her fingers over that one area again and again.

Something's wrong. I know it.

"Have you noticed a lump here before?"

"A lump?"

"Do you feel that?" She takes my hand and places my fingers over the area she's concerned about.

I'm not great with self-breast exams. Since my breasts aren't much to write home about, I admit I've never checked for lumps before.

"I don't feel anything." I look at her with concern.

"It could be nothing, but we'll need to run some tests."

"Tests?" Noodles asks. "What kind of tests?"

"Mammogram. Ultrasound. A needle biopsy, depending on what the results of the mammogram and ultrasound show."

"Biopsy?" My attention shifts to Noodles in alarm.

He squeezes my hand, then leans down to press his lips lightly against my forehead.

“In most cases, it’s nothing more than the fibrous framework of the breast tissue enlarging during pregnancy due to your hormones.” My doctor tries to keep me from freaking out, but I’m freaked out. “With your pregnancy and the changes in your breasts, we might simply be better able to feel the normal dense fibrous tissue, but I’d like to be certain.” Dr. Johnson keeps her words steady and soothing.

Unfortunately, it does nothing to calm the racing of my pulse.

“So—it’s normal, right?”

Please be normal.

“Perhaps, but I’d like to be certain,” Dr. Johnson concludes, her calm, practiced voice a stark contrast to the chaotic tumble of my thoughts.

I swallow hard against the lump in my throat. She hasn’t said the C-word, but I know what she’s thinking.

Cancer.

Tears spill down my cheeks. The flutter of joy from seeing my unborn child is gone. All I feel is a leaden weight in the pit of my stomach and fear. Lots of fear.

My baby is healthy. I try to focus on the positive, but it’s hard. A riot of emotions swirls through me. Fear for my baby. Fear for myself. Anger at my body for betraying me like this. Grief at losing the joy in this pregnancy.

Dr. Johnson outlines the next steps: a mammogram, ultrasound, and biopsy if required. Her words are a complete blur. Fortunately, I have Noodles. He asks all the questions I can’t. I wish I had his strength. We set dates for the mammogram, ultrasound, and biopsy—if required.

A week? How can I wait, knowing there might be a time bomb ticking away inside me? I want to do something now. If there’s cancer inside of me, I want it gone. Cut it out and get it as far away from my unborn baby as possible.

CHAPTER 6

A week later, we sit with Dr. Johnson to review my biopsy results. They confirm our worst fears.

She sits beside me, her kind eyes brimming with compassion. “I know this is a shock, but we caught this early. That’s good news.”

Cancer. Cancer. Cancer.

Cancer. Cancer. Cancer.

Cancer. Cancer. Cancer.

Cancer. Cancer. Cancer.

My thoughts race, refusing to accept the news.

“What about the baby?” Noodles shifts in his seat. He draws his hands inward, fingers clasped, and *rocks back and forth*.

“There are treatment options.” Dr. Johnson tries to explain. “Many women go on to have healthy pregnancies after breast cancer.”

When she outlines the treatment plan, all I hear are terrifying words—*Surgery. Chemotherapy. Radiation*. Each word is a separate blow, stealing my breath to leave me gasping. I clutch my rounded belly, the reality of the situation sinking in. I’m not just fighting for my life but for the life growing inside me.

Cancer is an insidious beast. It will not simply go away because it’s inconvenient. It does not rest or sleep. Even now, malignant cells are spreading through my body, invading healthy tissue, destroying everything in their path.

Harming my baby?

Noodles takes my hand and kisses my knuckles.

“What do we do?” His voice is hoarse but steady.

“We’ll schedule surgery as soon as possible and go from there.” Dr. Johnson’s grim smile is hard to take and I don’t dare try to read her expression.

We’re not the first people to face this under her care. I want to ask her how those other patients did, but also terrified of what she’ll say.

“When?” I have too much to fight for to let fear drive me. My baby, Noodles, Kai, and myself deserve a shot at the future. “When do we start?”

“It’ll take a week or more to schedule the surgery.” Dr. Johnson does her best to remain calm, but what does she have to worry about?

She doesn’t have cancer.

As we leave the hospital, I rest my head on Noodles’s shoulder, the image of our baby waving on the ultrasound screen etched in my mind. My baby is innocent and helpless. He or she needs me to stay strong.

This is what I’m fighting for. A future where I hold our newborn child in my arms, watch Kai develop into a man, and grow old with Noodles.

I’m going to fight—Fight like a girl—and I’m going to win.

CHAPTER 7

Two weeks—not one—pass before my scheduled surgery date.

A few days before surgery, I stand in the nursery. A soft lullaby fills the space with joy. The faint smell of paint still lingers. The room is filled with love poured into every brushstroke.

I pick up a small box and trace my fingers over the intricate design etched onto the lid. It’s a memory box, something I thought long and hard about.

Over the past two weeks, I filled it with letters, each one written with a love so profound it aches. I wrote about the day I found out I was pregnant, about my dreams for the tiny life growing inside me. I wrote several other notes and birthday cards to be opened if I'm not there. There are small mementos as well—the first ultrasound and a pressed flower from the day we announced the pregnancy to our unique family at *Insanity*.

Each item tells a story I hope my child will cherish.

Tears blur my vision as I write another letter. The words are pieces of my heart inked onto the paper. I don't know what the future holds, but my love will always be with my child, even if I'm not here.

No need to guess where Noodles is. He's in the study, and the laptop's glow illuminates his face. He scans information on the screen and occasionally jots down notes. Always a man of action, he believes in knowledge and preparation. In the past week, he's become an expert on mastectomies, breast cancer, and how to be a supportive spouse.

But it's taking a toll on him—fear of losing me, feeling helpless despite all his research, and the worst one of all, feeling powerless to protect me.

It breaks my heart to see him preparing to fight.

This isn't my battle.

It's ours.

The next day, we sit opposite Dr. Samuel for the pre-op appointment to sign consent and learn about what she's going to do during the surgery. Her office is designed to be welcoming. Soft music floats through the air. The chairs are comfortable. There's plenty to read.

But I'm terrified.

Sitting across from Dr. Samuel, I hold Noodles's hand as she explains the procedure. Diagrams, percentages, risks—it's an onslaught of information. Unreal and too much to process.

“During the mastectomy,” she begins, her voice steady, “we'll remove the entire breast tissue to ensure we've gotten

rid of all the cancerous cells.”

Those words hang in the air, cold and clinical.

Cancer. Cancer. Cancer. Cancer.

Cancer. Cancer. Cancer. Cancer.

Cancer. Cancer. Cancer. Cancer.

My heart thuds painfully as she explains the possible complications and risks of the procedure.

Part of me wants to scream, to run away from all of this, but I need to understand what I’m facing. For myself. For Noodles. For our family.

This isn’t a routine medical procedure. We ask all manner of questions. Noodles is amazing. He’s done so much to learn what to ask. I can barely string one sentence together.

Later that night, Noodles and I put Kai down to bed. Bedtime is a simple ritual, something we’ve done hundreds of times. Something I look forward to every night. One of us reads Kai a bedtime story, teaching him the letters and the sounds they make. How they turn into words and describe the pictures on the page. After story time, we tuck him in with a gentle kiss on his forehead.

Will I still be able to do this after the surgery? Or will Noodles be alone and have to do this all by himself? I brush away tears and take a deep, shaky breath. After putting Kai down, Noodles and I retreat to our bedroom.

It’s late, but sleep won’t come for either of us. I curl under the covers, my fingers twisting and untwisting as anxiety rushes through me. Noodles drapes his arm over my belly, providing support, but he clearly struggles with his thoughts.

“Talk to me. Tell me what you’re thinking.” I break the silence, my voice barely a whisper.

“I’m scared.” He confesses his fears, his voice rough. “I’m scared of surgery tomorrow. I’m scared of losing you. I’m scared of what this is doing to you. I’m scared of what this could mean for our baby.”

His honesty unravels something within me. It makes me stronger. My hand finds him in the dark. His fingers intertwine with mine, holding on tight. I appreciate his honesty. I'd rather know his fears than have him lie to me.

"I'm scared too." My voice trembles, mirroring the shaking of my hands.

Noodles rubs circles over my knuckles. "We're going to fight this, and we're going to win." He pulls me into the warmth of his embrace.

This isn't a conversation that provides answers. It's not meant to be that. But it's honest. It's raw. And it's real. It's a shared moment of facing our fears and standing together.

The next morning, I take a long, hot shower. The bathroom fills with the soothing sound of rushing water, and the special soap they told me to use before the surgery smells funny. Steam fogs the mirror as I let the water wash away my fear.

It can't, but I pretend it is.

I trace the familiar curves and planes of my body with my fingertips, taking in every freckle, every scar, and every part of me that makes me who I am. The warm water trickles down my belly, rounded with new life. My hand slides higher, ghosting over my breasts.

They're round and full, growing with my pregnancy. I stare at the tiles, the patterns blurring together as I let my mind wander. This body has seen me through every stage of life, every triumph, every setback. It has carried me, protected me, and betrayed me.

But now it's about to change.

Drastically.

I cup my left breast, my thumb caressing the soft skin. I think of the lump hidden underneath, an invader in my body. It's hard to comprehend that I'll wake from surgery in just a few hours with a part of me missing.

My mind fills with fears. What will I look like after the surgery? Will Noodles still desire me? Love me? Will I still

feel like a woman? Or will I feel... less?

What about breastfeeding my baby?

I can't afford to be weak like this. Not now. I can't let fear hold me captive.

But that's a very hard thing to do.

The water rinses off the suds on my skin. I wish it could wash away my fears as well. I whisper a silent farewell to my body as I know it. The reflection in the mirror might change, but I won't. I will still be *Me*.

As I step out of the shower, I make a promise—I'm stronger than this cancer.

CHAPTER 8

My eyelids flutter open, and pain hits me like a Mac truck, sudden and everywhere all at once. I suck in a sharp breath, my heart pounding. There's a moment of disorientation, but it all comes back to me.

I'm in the hospital, in the PACU, post-op.

The fluorescent lights above me buzz and flicker. They're too bright. Too annoying. I turn my head, and my gaze falls on Noodles.

"Hey." I force a weak smile onto my face, trying to reassure him.

"Hey yourself," he responds, trying to keep his voice steady. "How do you feel?"

"How did it go?" I try to shake off the effects of anesthesia, but I can barely think because of the pain.

I try to sit up in the bed, but the world spins. A wave of nausea washes over me.

"No, you don't." He tries to get me to lean back. "You should rest."

I shift my gaze downwards, my heart pounding as I brace myself for the first look. There's a *flatness* where my left breast used to be. An emptiness. A void. A testament to what I lost to the scalpel.

My breast, part of what defines me as a woman, is gone. Taken by cancer.

Tears prick my eyes, but I blink them back, refusing to let them fall.

"I love you so much." Noodles leans over and kisses my forehead. "I will love you to the end of time." He squeezes my hand as my mind tries to settle.

I'm not alone.

Noodles is here. He's always by my side.

"The Chick Brigade is here," he says. "Congregated in the waiting room, waiting for you to get out of recovery. Even the guys are here, and guess what?"

"What?" My mouth feels like cotton. An after-effect of anesthesia?

"We're working on a special tour to donate all proceeds to breast cancer research."

"You don't have to do that."

Now that the guys are married, with a passel of kids to keep all of us on our toes, tours are getting harder and harder."

"That's what I said, and they voted me down. It's going to be epic."

"That's wonderful." Yet again, they astound me. Angel Fire started as a band of five men: Ash, Bent, Bash, Spike, and Noodles. They took their brotherhood and added wives: Skye, Piper, Holly, Angel, and me. We're all one huge, massive, crazy family, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Days blur into nights and nights into days. Hours become indistinguishable as pain, rest, medication, and more pain become the revolving door of my existence. Noodles never leaves my side, his hand forever entwined with mine. Between

the band and the Chick Brigade, there's always someone by my side.

I'm lucky to have so much support. Each day, despite the pain and shocking emptiness on my chest, I regain my strength. Recover. After discharge from the hospital, time warps strangely.

I'm back at the doctor's office. It feels like I woke up in recovery only yesterday, disfigured for life. Yet here I am, weeks later, in the comforting familiarity of my OB's office, listening to the soft echo of my baby's heartbeat. Each thump is a sweet reassurance and a small victory amidst my personal turmoil.

With her calming presence, Dr. Johnson moves the transducer gently over my belly, her eyes locked on the screen. "Your baby's doing well. The heartbeat is strong, and growth is on track."

"That's good news." My health, and my baby's safety, are entwined. We expect news any day about biopsy results from the lymph nodes they took when I lost my left breast.

Fingers crossed, the nodes are clean, and I'm cancer free.

That night, nestled against Noodles, my hand rests on the mound of my belly, feeling the rhythmic pulse of life within. The small thumps of our child's vigorous kicks bring joy and trepidation.

I'm out on an operation with the Guardians the morning after the OB appointment. Sam told me to take time off, but I'm tired of sitting at home. It's great to spend time with Kai, he deserves more mommy time, but it's challenging to recuperate with all the kids wanting my attention.

Work provides a much-needed distraction. The day is long, grueling, and I'm worn to the bone when I return home. I find Noodles sitting in the kitchen with a mug in his hands. His back is hunched, his gaze fixed on the mug, a faraway look in his eyes. A heavy silence in the room, something that's never there when he's around.

"Noodles? What's wrong?"

He looks up, meets my gaze and forces a tight smile. He takes a deep breath, clutching the coffee mug tightly as though it's a lifeline.

"The oncologist called." His voice cracks, and he closes his eyes.

A chill runs down my spine. Noodles has permission to receive medical updates when I'm not around, a necessity considering my work with the Guardians. I swallow hard, bracing myself for what's to come.

"It's in the lymph nodes." His voice is a hollow echo. When he lifts his mug, his hand shakes, and a droplet of coffee spills onto the table. "They say it's aggressive."

Icy fingers creep up my spine, and tears sting the back of my eyes.

"They want to start chemo—and radiation. As soon as possible." His voice shakes as he tries to explain. "They both carry risks for the baby."

The world around me slows down, every sound fades into the background as his words sink in.

Aggressive. Spread. Chemo. Radiation.

Silence fills the room, pushing against the walls, pressing down on me. My mind races, thoughts spiraling, whirling, crashing into each other as I try to wrap my mind around this news.

My chest feels heavy. The air is too thick. Without thinking, my hand drifts to my belly, my fingers brushing against the fabric of my shirt. Beneath it, a tiny life stirs, oblivious to the cancer that threatens his, or hers, life.

The following days are a blur.

Each day a struggle.

Everything *feels* wrong.

Looks wrong.

Even *Insanity* feels off. I get great support from everyone, but no one knows what I need. I don't know how they can help

me. We're all frustrated and feel helpless.

But we are together.

When I struggle with my altered self-image, the Chick Brigade is there for hugs. We're tight, and they rally around me, doing what they can to help me through moments of despair and moments when tears seem my only solace. When I feel a tiny flutter from my belly, it's silent encouragement from my unborn child. It gives me strength and inspires me to continue fighting, not just for me but for my family.

The numbers on the calendar change relentlessly, edging closer to the due date. It's too far away. Giving the cancer within me yet another day to grow. Another day to threaten the unborn child within me.

I look down at my swelling belly, tracing the curve with a trembling hand. I'm in a race against time and a battle against my own body.

Our days are spent in a whirlwind of doctor visits, lab tests, and therapy sessions. Dr. Johnson explains my worsening condition with a measured calmness, detailing possible scenarios and interventions. There's talk of inducing labor early, of maximizing both mine and my baby's chances of survival. The thought of bringing my baby into the world prematurely is a terrifying prospect.

But the alternatives are just as grim. The cancer's aggressive, and we can't wait.

Noodles and I weigh the options and consider the choices that could spell life or death for me and our unborn child. His hand, warm and steady, holds mine, offering silent reassurance. Skye is a lifeline, helping us navigate the complex medical landscape, breaking it down into language we understand. The guys help by taking Kai off our hands, ensuring he doesn't feel neglected. Despite the whole cancer thing, I'm lucky to have such a supportive family.

I'm torn between wanting to protect my baby from an early birth and needing to preserve my own life if I want to be there for my baby after delivery.

Each decision feels heavier than the last, each choice laden with an unbearable weight.

Distance creeps between Noodles and myself. It's as silent, and as invasive, as the cancer in my body. Noodles is still there, still holding my hand, still bringing me breakfast in bed. Still helping me with my physical therapy, but there's a strain in his smile, a weariness in his eyes that wasn't there before.

Our nights are no longer filled with soft whispers and shared dreams. Instead, there's a quiet tension neither of us can ignore.

We hold hands, but we don't kiss.

We no longer have sex.

I lay awake in the early hours of the morning, listening to the rhythm of his breathing, worrying about the toll this is taking on him. Our relationship is being tested in ways we never imagined. I just hope our love is strong enough to survive. My body may be the battleground, but this war against cancer is being waged on our relationship too.

CHAPTER 9

My oncologist, Dr. Sharp, is a harbinger of bad news. Noodles and I sit side by side, our fingers laced together in his clinically sterile office. There's no hint of color to break up the monotony of whites and grays.

"I'll get straight to the point." Dr. Sharp doesn't waste time with frivolous conversation.

I don't know if I like that. Not that it matters. He's the best, and that's what we need.

"We can't afford to delay chemotherapy any longer."

Noodles tenses beside me.

"But—the baby? I'm only twenty-eight weeks. It's too early."

“I consulted with your obstetrician, and the medical consensus is that early delivery is the best course of action. It allows us to begin treatment immediately.”

I look at Noodles. His gaze meets mine, and though he tries to put on a brave front, there’s a flicker of fear in his eyes. I glance at my swollen belly and cradle it protectively.

“I know this is hard—it’s far from ideal—but the reality is, if we delay chemotherapy much longer, I’m afraid the prognosis isn’t good.” Dr. Sharp certainly cuts straight to the point.

The tears I’ve been fighting finally spill over.

Dr. Sharp continues his explanation. “There are things your OB can do to hasten lung maturity in your baby.”

“Things?” Noodles asks.

“A steroid injection, clinically proven to decrease Respiratory Distress Syndrome in premature infants. It may be helpful to sit down with a neonatologist before deciding. They’ll be able to explain what it means to deliver a baby at twenty-eight weeks. I’m not an expert, but I understand survival is greater than ninety-five percent, and the conditions associated with extreme prematurity are much lower than they once were. I know this isn’t what you wanted to hear, but there’s still reason to hope.” Dr. Sharp places a hand on my arm. “Our neonatal specialists are exceptional. We can get you in today for a consultation.”

It’s impossible to speak with the lump in my throat and the tears spilling down my cheeks. Fortunately, Noodles is here to speak for me.

“Yes. We’d like to talk to a neonatologist.”

CHAPTER 10

Less than an hour later, we sit across from Dr. Patel, a neonatologist, for a frank conversation about what to

expect with preterm birth.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Dr. Patel gestures to a couch in her office. “Dr. Sharp explained the urgency to begin chemotherapy, and I’ve had a chance to look over your medical record. Before I begin, what is your most pressing question?”

“Will our baby survive?” I jump right in. That’s my first, most pressing thought.

“The short answer is yes,” she says. “Survival at this gestational age has steadily increased over the past several decades. Nearly all of our babies delivered at twenty-eight weeks survive, and less than five percent will have long-term disabilities due to being born prematurely.”

I like her voice. It’s soothing and calm. Already, the pounding in my chest is less than before.

“This is a stressful situation. I like to acknowledge that upfront, but I’ll do my best to help you understand what might happen if your baby is born at twenty-nine weeks.”

“Dr. Sharp said twenty-eight weeks.”

“He’s anxious to begin chemotherapy, but the first thing we want is to accelerate lung maturity. Your OB will give you two shots over two days, and we’ll deliver after that. Looking at your dates, that will put your baby right at twenty-nine weeks. At this point in development, every day matters.”

I swallow, nodding. Her kindness is a balm against my fear.

“Now, let me tell you a bit about what to expect. Your baby will be small and need a special incubator.”

I blink, trying to picture my baby, so tiny and vulnerable.

“Lung maturity is the most immediate challenge. At twenty-nine weeks, the lungs aren’t fully developed. The steroid injection helps, but your baby may still need assistance.” She goes on to explain a host of things to consider. Dr. Patel is frank and straightforward, answering all our questions.

Tears prick at my eyes, but I force them back.

“Your baby will need to stay in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, or NICU, until he or she is strong enough to go home.”

There’s more. Dr. Patel tells us about an increased risk of infection, feeding problems, and vision and hearing loss—but she explains it all with such care, such empathy that it’s bearable.

Finally, she reaches out to squeeze my hand. “I know this is a lot to process, but while it’s important to understand potential risks, it’s equally important to remember many babies born at this gestational age do very well. Medicine has come a long way.”

Her words are a lifeline, and I cling to them. “Thank you, Dr. Patel,” I whisper, steeling myself for the path ahead. “I want to do what’s best for my baby.” I turn to Noodles, needing his input.

“We appreciate you taking the time to speak with us, and have a much better understanding of what to expect.” He turns to me. “What do you think?”

“I’m scared, but not nearly as much as before.” I turn to Dr. Patel. “What do we do now?”

“I’ll speak to Dr. Johnson. She’ll arrange for you to come in for the steroid injections and arrange for an early delivery. My team will be right there.”

We spend another twenty minutes asking questions. I feel a little more in control, knowing what to expect. As for delivering early, we make the decision to proceed.

CHAPTER 11

Back at home, Noodles and I sit on the couch, stunned by the events of the day. Our silence echoes through the room.

A chilling sense of dread replaces the calm energy that once filled our home.

Slowly, we're visited by our friends. They come in, two-by-two, trying not to overwhelm us but seeing if they can do anything to help. Angel makes brownies, and I devour those. Holly brings in a movie, and we plan to watch it later that night. Bent and Bash swarm in, chasing Zach and Kai, who escaped daycare and run wild through *Insanity*.

Their escape brings a smile to my face.

It's the little things that matter the most.

During one of the times we're alone, I lean against Noodles and sigh.

"I'm sorry." I'm supposed to protect our baby, but now I'm putting him, or her, in harm's way with an early delivery.

"None of this is your fault." Noodles turns to look at me. "None of it."

"I can't help but feel responsible. My cancer is forcing our baby into this world too soon." And it's not just about the baby. My health affects Kai as well, preventing me from being there for him. "I-I'm scared."

"I'm scared too." He pulls me into his arms, his embrace warm and comforting. Sometimes it's hard for me to remember how this affects him.

I lay my hand on my swollen belly, feeling the soft flutters of our unborn child. I trace gentle circles on my belly, and a fresh wave of guilt crashes over me. Our little one, so innocent and vulnerable, caught up in a battle he, or she, didn't ask to fight. The unfairness of it stings.

My heart aches, not just for our unborn baby, but for Kai too. Our little boy, so full of energy and laughter, is unaware of what's happening with his mother. The thought of not being there for him, of missing his milestones and laughter, sends a cold shiver down my spine.

CHAPTER 12

After two days and two injections, my body feels like it's buzzing. Dr. Patel says the steroids will kickstart my baby girl's lung development. It's strange to have already done something important for her well-being when she's still a part of me.

We know she's a girl now, and Noodles is over the moon beside himself at the thought of being a daddy to a little girl.

I'm taken to a chilly, sterile operating room for a cesarian section. Nurses bustle around, helping me into a hospital gown, putting on a hair net, and arranging my body on the cold operating table. The entire *Insanity* crew waits outside for the birth, eager to meet the newest addition to our growing family.

The anesthesiologist introduces himself as Dr. Hill. His voice is calming, his manner gentle as he explains the process of the spinal block. I barely feel the needle's prick, but soon a warm numbness spreads across my lower body. I can't feel anything below my chest, and somehow, that's the most terrifying part.

The final barrier between me and the procedure is a blue curtain that springs up around my chest. It transforms me into a disembodied entity—my pregnant belly, the focus of everyone's attention, is on one side.

I'm on the other side.

My arms are splayed out, crucifix-style, IV lines snaking out like lifelines to the various machines surrounding me. Noodles is directed to sit on a stool and to stay behind the blue wall. His hand slips into mine, his grip reassuring and iron-strong. The fear in his eyes mirrors my own.

But there's excitement. The anticipation of meeting our little girl.

“Are you ready?” Dr. Johnson peeks over the blue curtain. Her eyes crinkle at the corners with a soft and gentle smile. They’re the only visible part of her face, the rest is hidden behind a surgical mask, and there’s a blue cap on her head.

“Ready as I’ll ever be.” I try to sound braver than I feel. But really? My part in all of this is done. All I have to do is lie here while Dr. Johnson takes our little girl out of my body.

Easy, right?

The procedure itself is a bizarre experience. The sensation is less pain, more of a strange, detached pressure and tugging—like an alien prodding my insides. I clutch onto Noodles’s hand, anchoring myself to the solidness of his grip, and focus on his face. His comforting presence grounds me. And then...

A high, wavering cry cuts through the tension.

The sound of life.

“Congratulations! She’s here.” While I can’t see Dr. Johnson, her voice carries so much joy.

There’s a flurry of activity as my OB team transfers the baby to the NICU team, who whisks her away. Torn between staying with me and going with our daughter, I smile at my husband and father of our brand new baby girl.

“Go with her.”

“Don’t you want me to stay with you?” He looks terrified and excited. Excited to see his daughter but terrified of leaving his wife on an operating table.

“I’m in the best hands. Go with Tabitha.”

“Tabitha? Is that her name?”

The one thing we haven’t discussed is what to name our baby. This cancer thing threw us for a loop. We’ve been so focused on my health that names kind of got pushed to the back burner.

“If that’s okay with you?”

“It’s perfect.” He leans over to kiss my forehead, then follows a technician out of the room to meet our perfect little

girl.

CHAPTER 13

After three days of recovery after my cesarean section, I receive the first round of chemotherapy. When they said we needed to start soon, I never realized *how soon* we had to begin.

Or that I wouldn't leave the hospital.

I basically move from the maternity suite to the Heme/Onc service to begin aggressive chemotherapy. Which means I don't get to see Tabitha.

Noodles keeps me updated, shows me pictures of our tiny daughter, and tells me how Tabitha's fighting. The steroid shots worked because she never needed a breathing tube or a ventilator. She's strong. A fighter. And looks so tiny in her incubator.

There's always someone by my side. Whether it's Noodles, Skye, Piper, Holly, or Angel, I'm never left alone with my thoughts, or my fear.

My fight is a different kind of struggle. Chemo slams into me with all the subtlety of a freight train, draining the energy out of me, leaving me with a persistent nausea and intractable vomiting, which hurts like a bitch after the c-section. My vibrant psychedelic hair, my signature flair, falls out in clumps.

Finally, when I'm well enough, they let me see Tabitha. The sight of my baby in the NICU, surrounded by machines and monitors, overwhelms me, but the nurses and doctors tell me she's doing well. She's so tiny, so fragile, her skin a mottled pink against the white hospital sheets. Tubes and wires snake around her little body, a stark reminder of the battle she's fighting.

But she is fighting. She's fighting like a girl and winning at life.

As I reach into the incubator to touch her, my hand trembles. In a macabre sense, a weight lifts from my shoulders. No matter what happens to me, Tabitha is safely delivered into this world, and she's thriving.

This is all I ever wanted.

CHAPTER 14

Every day, I grapple with the duality of my existence—the paradox of being simultaneously the strongest and the weakest I've ever felt. My body is an ever-changing landscape, shaped by the dual forces of cancer and the chemicals employed to kill it.

Noodles is my anchor. My strength. He shares the milestones—our daughter's first open-eyed gaze, her first squeeze of his finger.

One afternoon, between rounds of chemotherapy, Noodles arrives with a surprise—tiny footprints stamped in ink—a testament to our little girl's fight. I trace them with my finger, their tiny size a reminder of the delicate life we brought into the world.

The first time I'm able to hold her, the experience is surreal. The weight of her tiny body against my chest is both the heaviest and lightest burden I've ever borne. As I cradle her, the noise from the monitors fades into the background, giving way to the gentle lullaby of her heartbeat and mine.

Time blurs. Days blend into weeks. Chemotherapy becomes the rhythm of my existence.

Months later, my final round of chemotherapy comes to an end, leaving me weak and tired but also filled with hope. A few weeks later, after more testing, I walk into my oncologist's office, ready to hear how the battle's going.

Or, not going.

Doctor Sharp smiles. His voice is imbued with a warmth that seeps into my frayed mind. He gives me the best news possible.

“You’re cancer-free.”

The words reverberate with a joy so potent it’s almost palpable.

Cancer free.

FREE!

“Close follow-up over the next five years is critical, but we’re optimistic,” Doctor Sharp continues, his professional tone tempered by the twinkle in his eyes. “You’re a fighter.”

I am at that. I’m a fighter.

I let the words sink in, carving them into the core of my being.

With chemotherapy done, it’s time to schedule breast reconstruction, a physical reclaiming of what cancer stole.

A few days later, Dr. Patel gives us good news too.

“Your baby girl will go home by the end of the week.”

The words, so casually spoken, carry the weight of a thousand unspoken prayers. Tabitha, our baby, our tiny warrior who also fought like a girl, will finally leave the NICU and come home.

Tears of joy blur my vision as I look at Noodles. His eyes mirror the depth of my emotions. We survived the unimaginable, weathered the storm, and came out stronger than before.

Together.

As a family.

The magnitude of our journey hits me.

In the end, it’s not the storm that defines us. It’s how we navigate our way through it.

No matter what life throws our way, Noodles and I will always find our way together.

ABOUT ELLIE MASTERS

USA Today Bestselling author, Amazon All-Star, and Amazon Top 15 Bestselling Author, Ellie Masters writes Angsty, Steamy, Heart-Stopping, Pulse-Pounding, Can't-Stop-Reading Romantic Suspense filled with Passionate, Protective, and Swoon-worthy Alpha men. Her writing will tug at your heartstrings and leave your heart racing.

Ellie is a wife, military mom, doctor, retired Air Force Colonel, and former rocket scientist who writes poignant stories of courage, sacrifice, and unwavering love in the face of unrelenting adversity told through heart-wrenching yet uplifting tales about finding hope in the darkest of times and the unbreakable bonds of family...

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SETTLING FOR MORE

by Erin Cristofoli

Contemporary Romance

I thought I knew where my life was going – marriage; a family one day. But when my fiancé didn't show up for a romantic dinner date, I knew something was wrong. What I didn't know was my concern for him would cause my world to come crashing down.

Blinded by tears that rivalled the rain as it fell from the sky upon me, all that mattered was getting away. The sound of screeching tires and a bright light trained on me froze me in my tracks.

In the quiet that followed, the voice of the man I had often day-dreamed about filled my ears, pulling me from my broken-hearted daze. Rhys Butler. My boss.

When he offered to take me on a work trip to escape my reality for a while, I took the chance. What I didn't expect was what would happen next.

Dedication: For Cassidy

CHAPTER 1

I sat in the restaurant with a glass of wine, all done up in a new sexy black lace dress... and no fiancé. It wasn't like Bryan to not show up for a date, so I called his office and cell. Both went unanswered, and I began to worry. Had something happened to him? I paid for my wine, pulled on my jacket as I left the restaurant, and hopped in a cab to his condo. It would be mine, too, in less than a year. The thought made me smile despite my worry.

Bryan and I had always had an on-and-off relationship. After the first break-up, I'd expected it to fizzle out. But when he'd surprised me with a ring not long after we had gotten back together the countless time, I realized maybe I had been completely wrong.

The concierge let me into the building, complimenting me on my dress as I hurried past him. Upstairs, I opened Bryan's front door and called out. Nothing. But then, I could faintly hear a sound coming from the bedroom. The noise grew as I stepped further into the living room. Was he watching porn? I scrunched my nose up at the sound. Whoever was on the TV was squeaking. I called out his name again as I pushed my hand against the door and it swung open. In that split second, it was as if the floor had fallen from beneath me, setting me off kilter. Staggering, I leaned against the wall, the light above them coming to life as I pressed against the switch while the pain ripping through my chest came out of me in a soul-wrenching scream.

I could not take my eyes off them and could see the startled looks on the faces of my fiancé and his slutty ex-girlfriend.

"Oh fuck," Bryan muttered.

He climbed off the bed and took a step towards me. "It's not what it looks like. Baby, please."

"Don't come any closer to me, you asshole."

The first tear rolled down my cheek.

“Your dick is still wet, and you want to tell me it’s not what it looks like? And no condom, I see. God, you are such a pig.”

He shrugged. Yes, he shrugged, like the words I’d said meant nothing.

“The thing is, you’ve been kind of letting yourself go over the last few months. On top of that is the fact I’ve always had a terrible time looking at your body with all the scars. It’s been pretty rough for me. I was going to discuss it with you tonight at dinner, but Mary popped by. Maeve, you must understand that I have to like what I see. And, well, she looked sexy and was begging for it. How could I resist?”

“Hey!” the slut protested. “I never beg.”

I felt like I had been punched in the gut. My body disgusted him?

“Don’t you dare put any of this on me. God, I need to get out of here.”

I looked down at my finger and pulled the ring from it. With all the strength I could muster, I chucked it at him. It struck him just under his right eye.

“Oi! You could have blinded me! What is wrong with you?”

I turned and ran down the hall towards the front door. “Come back here, Maeve!”

I could hear the slut calling for Bryan to come back to her. I couldn’t take another second. The elevators closed as Bryan, still naked, stepped into the hallway.

The damn holding back most of my tears disintegrated, and they began to pour down my face. How could I have been so stupid to think he was the one? Wrapping my jacket tight around my body, I rushed past the concierge and onto the sidewalk. The skies had opened up while I was in the building, and the rain fell steadily down upon me. Mother Nature was crying with me.

Before long, I didn't know where I was. The only thing I knew was that I needed to get away and never come back. The tears practically blinded me, but I didn't care. I needed to keep moving. I hurried off a curb. Suddenly, bright lights and a loud horn pulled me from my pained daze.

I staggered back from the approaching lights. The screech of tires turned my stomach.

Oh shit!

CHAPTER 2

I stood there with my hands on the car's hood, too stunned to move.

“Maeve?”

Was my mind playing tricks on me? I wiped my eyes in time to see the man I had often daydreamed about striding toward me—my boss, Rhys Butler.

“Are you all right?” When I nodded, he continued. “What are you doing running into the road like that?”

Reality came rushing back, and tears began to fall once more.

“I'm sorry. But I'm okay. I, uh, I have to go. I'm sorry to have troubled you.”

I took maybe two steps.

“Maeve, STOP.”

With everything that had happened to me, the authority in his voice should not have sent a delicious shiver down my spine. It was enough to make me pause.

“Look, we're getting soaked. Get in the car.”

I held up my hands. “No, thank you. I'll wa—”

“I wasn't asking. Get in.”

He raised an eyebrow, challenging me to defy his order. With a sigh, I followed him to the back door and climbed in. A few moments later, the car roared to life.

“Same destination, Sir?” the driver asked.

“Yes, please,” Rhys replied, turning his attention to me. “Now tell me, what happened to you tonight? When you left the office, everything seemed fine.”

“I don’t really want—.”

“Maeve,” he growled.

I took a shuddering breath. “I just caught my fiancé screwing someone else.”

Dropping my face to my hands, the tears began falling again.

I felt him shift on the seat.

“Here.” I looked up to find him holding out his pocket square while his other arm reached out and wrapped around my shoulders, pulling me close.

Once I’d managed to collect myself, Rhys backed away and busied himself by straightening his tie.

I looked out the window to find the car slowing down in front of a swanky-looking, black-painted, brick building.

“Rhys, where are we?” I asked quietly.

“We’re going to go get us a nice stiff drink. I think after the days we’ve had, we could both use one, and I make a habit of never drinking alone.”

“I hardly think I am in a state to be seen in public.”

Rhys frowned. “First, there is absolutely nothing wrong with you. Second, no one will be looking at you once we get to our table aside from me. Come on.”

CHAPTER 3

Rhys stepped out of the car with such ease, turning back with his hand held out for me. The moment I placed my hand

in his, it was as if a warm buzz of electricity danced from our connection through my body.

Once on the sidewalk, I tried to pull my hand from his, but his grip tightened.

“Follow me.”

Rhys led me through the front of the establishment and down a long hallway.

“The lady’s room is right here,” he said, pausing. “I can meet you at our booth if you need a moment. I’ll be at the end of the hallway.”

“Thanks. I’ll only be a minute.”

I watched him stride away with an air of confidence that he always seemed to exude. Blowing out a breath, I headed in to see how bad I looked. I frowned at myself in the mirror—I looked like a wreck. I peeled the wet jacket from my body and readjusted my dress. I wiped smudged makeup from under my eyes and ran my fingers through my hair. It would have to do.

Heading down the hall, I noticed arched doorways all along the left wall. I hadn’t had the chance before to peek with Rhys being by my side. But now alone, I took a moment and was stunned by what I saw. Oh lordy; I was in a burlesque-styled strip club. Crimson curtains hung from the tall ceilings, and gold décor and lights made everything look like I was in the middle of the Moulin Rouge. There were smaller stages around the room, with a large stage at one end of the room where a woman was spinning around a pole.

I hurried down the hall and found Rhys sitting in a dimly lit booth with a low table in front of him. When he saw me, his eyes traveled slowly down my body before letting out a low whistle.

“It’s a damn good thing you weren’t wearing that dress at work today. I wouldn’t have been able to focus on work.”

I could feel my cheeks heat. “Thank you. You don’t have to say those things.”

Rhys held up his hand. “You need to learn to take a compliment. You look sexy as hell, and you should know it.”

A waitress dressed in nothing but sexy lingerie approached the table with drinks, but Rhys’ eyes stayed on me.

“I hope it’s alright; I took the liberty of ordering for you.”

“Thank you.” I was about to pick up my glass when my phone buzzed in my purse. I pulled it out. Bryan. I pressed ignore and placed my phone in my lap. It quickly buzzed again.

“Is it him?” Rhys asked.

I nodded. “Yes, I’m sorry.”

He slid closer to me in the booth and took the phone from my lap. I watched as he powered it off.

“You deserve better,” he murmured as he leaned in closer, “than this grovelling prick.”

His proximity set off a chain reaction through my nerves, each coming to life. Picking up my drink, I took a big sip. He raised an eyebrow at me. Pulling my gaze from his, I looked out around the club.

“Why did you bring me here? It’s not exactly a professional setting.”

“I didn’t think you should be left alone under the circumstances. This place is private and I happened to be headed here anyway.”

My surprise had my eyes locked with his once more.

“You frequent the strip club?”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I clapped my hand over my mouth. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. I mean, I didn’t figure you would need to. Ugh, that is not any better.”

He chuckled. “It’s been a long, stressful day. I wanted a little distraction. And I certainly found that.”

He raised his hand and motioned to the waitress.

“Let me get you another drink, and then I’ll take you home.”

“Thank you, Rhys.”

Leaning back in the booth, I watched the beautiful woman working the pole on the main stage while others were in varying stages of peeling off their clothes for avid watchers. Beside us, a woman was dancing for a man on top of a table like ours.

“Would you two like a dance?” our waitress asked when she brought us new drinks.

Rhys looked at me and his eyes darkened before he handed her what I could tell was quite an impressive tip.

“Thank you, but I have everything I need tonight.”

CHAPTER 4

With a groan, I turned away from the light streaming through my bedroom window. It took a moment for my brain to realize something was wrong. I shot straight up in bed, making my head spin. A glance at the clock told me I’d forgotten to set my alarm and was going to be late for work.

With my head foggy from the drinks I’d consumed, I still managed to get ready in record time. Stepping out of my building, I was surprised to find the exact car and driver waiting outside that had nearly hit me the night before.

“Mr. Butler asked for me to pick you up, Miss. Would you like to stop for coffee on the way?” the driver asked.

“Yes, please.”

I cringed at the time when I arrived at the office. I hurried to my desk to drop off my purse before heading into Rhys’ office with the coffee I had bought for him.

I knocked lightly on his open door.

“Good morning, Maeve, come in. How are you feeling?”

I watched as he stood and strode around his desk before leaning against it. He was the epitome of the perfect man—fitted suit accentuating his deliciously toned body, a confidence about him, and a gleam in his eye that would make any woman weak in the knees for him – me included.

“I, uh, feel a bit like I have been hit by a bus. Those drinks were pretty potent. I’m very sorry that I was so late.”

Rhys waved a hand. “Think nothing of it.”

“And I’m sorry for disrupting your evening,” I continued.

“You didn’t. I was happy for the company.”

“You enjoyed having company at the strip club?” I barely whispered. Pushing off his desk with his hands, he stalked towards me, forcing me to step back.

“I haven’t been able to get last night out of my mind,” Rhys admitted. And just like that, things began to change, sending me off kilter. The air around us was charged, and the closer we stood, the more the licks of desire flicked against my skin.

My phone buzzed in my hand, and just as quickly as the feelings between us began, it was like a gust of wind had blown out the flames. Rhys’ features darkened.

“Is that him again?”

Without needing to look, I knew. I nodded.

“Don’t settle for anything less than someone who will worship your body, mind, and soul. That’s my two cents worth, anyway.”

“I should let you get back to work,” I whispered.

With a nod, he stepped back and raised his cup. “Thanks again for the coffee.”

I managed a half smile before spinning on my heel and hurrying from Rhys’s office.

CHAPTER 5

When I got home from work that night, I quickly realized things had escalated. On top of my phone buzzing incessantly for hours, I found a single red rose lying on my kitchen table. Immediately, I called the building manager to change the locks. I then waited, curled up on my couch, contemplating if I should leave my apartment. Only once the locksmith had come and gone was I able to relax.

I decided to text the asshole.

Don't come over here again, Bryan. We are done.

My hope was that he would take the not-so-subtle hint. Instead, I came to regret my decision when the texts amped back up again.

By morning, I'd only managed a couple of hours of sleep and woke feeling completely exhausted. A look in the mirror told me I looked as bad as I felt—my eyes were puffy and bloodshot, my skin pale. Giving up on trying to pull myself together, I quickly dressed for work and headed out the door. The day needed to be over.

No sooner had I sat down at my desk when I noticed Rhys standing at his office door watching me. He beckoned me with his hand, a frown marring his handsome features. As soon as I was inside, he closed the door behind me.

“What has the asshole done now?”

“Nothing.”

He lifted my chin until my eyes met his. Rhys sure could be a pushy pain in the ass.

“He was in my apartment yesterday. I found a rose.”

His frown turned animalistic, his teeth clenched.

“What? That is breaking and entering.”

I wrapped my arms around myself. “I took care of it. I got the locks changed. I texted to tell him to piss off, but it only fuelled his efforts. I'm tired.”

“Why don’t we sit for a moment. I have a proposal for you.”

He led me to a chair in front of his desk, and I sat while he leaned against the edge.

“What kind of proposal?” I asked, my curiosity piqued.

“You know the conference that I am signed up for?”

I nodded.

“Well, I could use someone to go with me. I have some meetings with potential clients on top of the conference, and your assistance with these meetings, as well as keeping me organized, would really help.”

He looked sincere in his offer, and I’d never been asked to attend one before because they were mainly for people a level or two beyond me.

“I’m not going to lie,” he continued. “Most of the conference is dry as hell. But there will be downtime, too. Do you think you would be interested in going with me?”

I nodded slowly. “Sure, I ah, suppose that would be fine if you need me.”

“Oh, I most definitely need you,” he stated seriously, intensity flickering behind his eyes.

What is it about him that makes me want to do anything he says?

I gave myself a slight shake to pull me from those enticing thoughts.

“Okay, sure.”

Rhys held up a finger to pause me.

“There is just one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You leave that damn phone at home.”

I laughed lightly. “That will be no problem.”

With a clap of his hands, he stood tall. “Good. I will pick you up in the morning.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yep. Can you think of a better time to get away for a while?”

I shook my head. No. This was the perfect time.

“I will see you in the morning.”

CHAPTER 6

When Rhys pulled up the following morning, I was already waiting in the lobby.

“Where’s the dreaded phone?”

I smiled. “I left it on my bedside table.”

He took my bag from me and placed it in the trunk of his fancy teal convertible. I wasn’t a car person, but even I knew this one was special.

“Do you feel lighter?” he asked with a smirk as he walked over and opened the door for me.

“Yes, I actually do,” I giggled.

“Good. Let’s head out. We have a bit of a drive ahead.”

We drove with the top down, the warm wind blowing my hair around wildly, and I couldn’t have cared less. As we cleared the city, I leaned my head back and let the breeze wash over me. It was as if each whip of air pulled more and more stress from me.

When I opened my eyes, I found Rhys was watching me.

“What?”

“You looked so peaceful.”

I could feel my cheeks warm. “You should be watching the road.”

He shrugged. "I couldn't help it."

We drove in a comfortable silence for a while before Rhys spoke again.

"After we spoke in my office, I got to thinking and decided that the next few days should be all about you."

"Uh, what are you talking about?" I asked, my eyebrows pulling together in confusion.

"We obviously have to attend the conference, like I said, but in all honesty, I could have done that myself. You needed a break, and I thought this might be a good opportunity to show you he didn't deserve you. Maybe you need to see what it's like to be treated well by a man. I'd like to be able to do that if you'll let me."

"Really. And how do you plan to do that?"

He glanced over and winked. "You'll have to wait and see."

When we pulled up to the hotel, windblown and smiling, Rhys grabbed both our bags, tossed the key to the valet, and headed inside to the front desk to check in.

Rhys swung open the hotel room door and waved me inside. My mouth dropped open at the sight before me. The suite was stunning, warm, and cozy while still modern.

"All of this is for us?" I breathed.

He nodded. "Your room will be through those doors; mine is over there. Why don't you freshen up, and I will sort out our dinner plans."

I brought my bag with me as I entered the double doors. The bed before me was huge, with excessive amounts of pillows, all in pure white. It looked like heaven.

Once I had freshened up, I changed into a pretty navy dress with a tiny frill at the knee and joined Rhys back in the

living room. His eyes roamed my body as I walked towards him.

“You look beautiful, Maeve. I hope it’s all right that I’ve made us a reservation at a restaurant down the street. Are you ready to go?”

“I just want to put on a sweater, and then we can go.”

Rhys was quick to start putting his plan of showing me what it was like to be treated well into effect. He was the perfect gentleman. He held every door open and kept his hand on the small of my back as we walked through the restaurant to our table.

After receiving our entrées, we seemed to settle into a nice flow of conversation. Rhys told me all about how he got into the marketing business because of his father and how his mom’s apple pie was his favourite food ever. But whenever he talked, a strange thing happened: with each word spoken, I found myself focused more and more on the movement of Rhys’ lips and not the actual words.

“Maeve, are you all right?”

Looking up, I could see a sly smirk playing on his lips.

He knew his effect on women, and I was quite easily falling into his charms.

“I’m fine, thanks. So, what do I need to know about the conference?”

He laughed. “Uh-uh. We are not talking about work tonight. I’ve monopolized most of the conversation. I’d like to hear more about you.”

“I really don’t mind. There isn’t anything too exciting about me.”

He shook his head. “You sure aren’t making getting to know you easy, but I don’t give up that easily. Are you just about ready to head back to the room? Or would you like dessert?”

The way his voice dipped when he said dessert sounded downright sinful.

“I’m ready.” It was all I could manage to say.

“Good, because I have a surprise for you.”

As we left the restaurant, an uneven patch of pavement threatened to topple me in my heels, but Rhys didn’t miss a beat. He held out his arm for me. As we walked like that for a few moments, he murmured, “If you wanted to get close to me, all you had to do was say so.”

I feigned offense and tried to pull my hand away, but he pulled my arm tightly to his side, trapping me where I was. Gently, he put his hand over mine.

“Just kidding. This is nice.”

We walked back to the hotel together, and he only let go to let us in the room. Striding over to the mini bar on one side of the room, he pulled out two glasses and a bottle of scotch. “Will you have a drink with me?”

“I’d love one.”

After handing me a glass, he picked up his own and the bottle and headed over to the curtain-covered windows, which I soon realized was hiding a door to a terrace. It was a beautiful space with mini lights and lush plants, making it our own little oasis. Much to my surprise, off on one side was a hot tub lit with a dim blue glow.

“Let’s get in. There’s no better way to relax.”

“Oh, uh, I don’t have my bathing suit with me,” I stammered.

He shrugged, raising an eyebrow at me as I watched, fixated as he slowly unbuttoned his shirt, exposing a drool-worthy chiselled torso.

“Underwear is just as good as a bathing suit.”

My jaw dropped as he slid his dress pants to the floor, leaving little to the imagination in his crimson boxer briefs. He stepped into the hot tub before turning to look at me expectantly.

Nerves coursed through my body. Getting half naked in front of my boss? Insecurity rushed through my body. He would get a firsthand and unexpected look at all my scars on display. I wasn't sure if I could. What if he was disgusted like Bryan had been?

"Is everything okay?" Rhys asked, watching me intently. *Don't be a chicken*, I told myself.

With a heavy breath, I tossed back my drink and placed the glass on the ledge beside the water. I pulled my sweater from my shoulders. My fingers slipped the thin straps of my dress down my arms, and the material slid down my body, revealing a strapless white lace bra and matching panties.

Rhys closed his eyes, tilted his head back and groaned.

"Glad I got in first," he mumbled.

Embarrassed, I slipped into the hot tub and helped myself to another shot of scotch.

Seeing his skin glistening in the water, his eyes on me, I tried to push past the knots in my stomach. Closing my eyes, I leaned back and let the alcohol warm my insides. It wasn't long before I was good and tipsy.

"Do you want another drink, Maeve?" Rhys' voice sounded gruff. When I opened my eyes, his were raking over my body.

"Mmm, I'm feeling pretty good already. Maybe a tiny bit."

I took a sip of the sweet, burning liquid. "I've been thinking about my situation a lot. Like a lot of thought. I mean, maybe I need to go out and get laid."

Did he just growl?

"Maybe that would help me feel better. Maybe if someone found me irresistible, then I would know for sure it had nothing to do with my body or any of those other horrible things he said."

What was I thinking, spilling my thoughts out like that? I blamed the liquor. Whatever. What was the saying? What is said in the hot tub stays there, right? I giggled at myself.

I looked over to Rhys. “You know, you’re a hot guy. Maybe we should fuck.”

It took a moment for me to realize what I had just said. I slapped a hand over my mouth.

“Oh wow, I should not have said that. I’m sorry. It seems I have no filter around you when alcohol is involved. Okay, I am going to go die a thousand deaths now.”

His hand on my thigh stilled me. Rhys slid closer.

“You’re wrong. You don’t need a man to prove anything. But if *you* want something, that’s different. All you have to do is say so.”

He leaned closer and pressed his lips to mine. OMG, Rhys was kissing me. It was like a rush of desire coursed through my veins. I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him closer and deepening our kiss. His hand slid further up my thigh, his thumb grazing the material between my legs.

“Ah! Yes, please,” I gasped against his lips.

Rhys moved the fabric in a heartbeat and slid his fingers inside me. He worked my body as if he’d known it forever, and it wasn’t long before I couldn’t take it anymore. I cried out as wave after wave of the most exhilarating orgasm I’d ever had washed over me. Rhys held me close as I came back down, kissing my neck and jaw, gently moving his fingers to give me every last bit of sensation.

When he backed away, it surprised me. He was breathing heavily as if he’d been right there with me himself, but I hadn’t even had the chance to touch him.

I glided closer to him, wanting to make him feel like I did. He watched me as I leaned in. The kiss was messy and hot as fucking hell, and I didn’t want it to end. Who knew if he would wake in the morning and regret what we were doing. Reaching down, I wrapped my fingers around his impressive length. His hand covered mine and guided me up and down, slowly, teasingly—until he pulled my hand away.

“What are you doing?”

“Tonight is not about my needs and wants. It is about you, and I want to keep it that way,” he replied. The look on his face looked conflicted until he continued. “When you’re ready, I will be here, more than willing, as you could clearly tell.”

He kissed me again, but it was light and sweet.

“I think we should probably get to bed. We have a long day ahead of us in the morning.”

We climbed from the hot tub, and he walked me to my room, pulling me close and kissing me again.

“Goodnight, Maeve. Sweet dreams.”

CHAPTER 7

After an early morning breakfast seminar, Rhys had a meeting with a potential business connection in one of the hotel boardrooms. Sitting around an oval table, I could not concentrate on anything other than the events of the night before. My body hummed at the memory of being touched by him. Shifting in my chair, I chanced a glance up to Rhys and found him watching me, his intense gaze making my cheeks heat. I bit my lips nervously.

“Gentlemen, I’d like to thank you for your presentation. It was very well done. If you wouldn’t mind maybe giving me five minutes to give a few things some thought?”

The men were all too eager to appease Rhys, leaving the two of us in the room alone. As the door clicked closed, Rhys stood and walked around the table. I also got to my feet, even though the closer he got, the shakier my legs felt.

“Maeve,” he practically purred. “Are you feeling okay? You look a little flushed.”

“Uh, yes. I, uh, just have ha-have some things on my mind.”

“Funny, so do I—like watching you come last night.”

My eyes widened, and I turned to ensure the door was closed. “You can’t just go around saying stuff like that.”

“Like what? Things that will make you wet and me hard? I’m already there,” he stated, taking my hand and pressing it against the prominent bulge in his pants. “I’ll bet you are, too.”

The door behind us swung open, and Rhys strode confidently back to his space at the table and sat down, so calm and collected you would have no idea I had just touched him so intimately.

When the meeting was finally over and Rhys led me to the next seminar, he leaned close.

“I’m sorry to say I have to meet a client for dinner tonight and it’s going to be long and boring. I will be late returning to the suite, so you have the night all to yourself.”

I couldn’t help feeling slightly disappointed, but a night of movie-watching and room service did sound pretty good.

“Okay. I hope it goes well.”

He laughed. “I’m entertaining the man because he was a friend of my father’s. I would rather spend the evening with you.”

Turned out that a movie night in a fancy hotel was not as fun alone as when you have someone to share it with. After a long, hot shower, I dozed off during the second movie, and when I woke, it was after one in the morning. In desperate need of a drink of water, I peeked out my bedroom door and found the living room dimly lit with a tiny lamp.

He must be back and have gone to bed already.

I took the chance and stepped from my room in my underwear and headed to the kitchen. When I turned the corner, Rhys stood with his back to me, dressed in only a pair

of dress pants. Nerves took over, and I stepped back, but he turned and caught me there.

“Maeve.”

“Sorry, I just came for some water. I thought you’d gone to bed. I should go put something on.”

“Fuck that. You are a goddess,” he stated, leaning back against the counter, his eyes roaming my body.

“Rhys, you really don’t have to...”

“What? Speak the truth? You are sexy as fuck. If you were mine, you wouldn’t feel like you needed to hide. Having you walk around like that all the time would be a fantasy come true.”

“Why didn’t you want to do anything else last night?” I blurted, my insecurity flaring up.

“Oh, I did, and I do.”

I took a tentative step closer, reaching out to the belt on his pants, undoing it and the button behind it. He kept his hands firmly on the counter as my hands roamed his body. I pushed his pants to the floor and pressed against his body as I leaned in and kissed him. Rhys grabbed my ass and pulled me tightly to him, only breaking the desperate kiss for a moment.

“Tell me what you want.”

“I need you inside me,” I whispered.

Rhys did not hesitate. In a second, I was in his arms and headed to his room. He placed me on the bed, reached into his bedside table, and produced a condom before climbing on the bed and covering my body with his.

“We don’t have to if you aren’t ready,” he murmured, his face sincere.

“Please.” If this weekend was a fantasy come true, I needed to know what it felt like with Rhys.

Moving down my body, he settled between my legs.

He paused momentarily, his fingers sliding up my legs until they reached my thighs. The moment he touched my scars, it was as if a shock of energy rushed through me.

I ran my fingers through his hair, tugging lightly until he looked up at me.

“I need you inside me now,” I insisted.

He smirked. “Your wish is my command, you sexy, demanding minx.”

I discarded my underwear as I watched him sheath himself.

The feel of him sliding inside me wasn't something I could describe aside from being the best damn feeling I'd had in a long time. Lifting my legs high, he changed the angle. Pumping into me slowly, torturing me, he pushed me closer and closer until I couldn't take anymore. My body shook and I cried out. Only then did he pick up speed, groaning when he plunged deeply into me one last time as he came.

He pressed down on top of me and kissed me intensely.

After a few moments to come down from our highs, he climbed out of bed. I watched as he headed to the bathroom to dispose of the condom, his deliciously naked ass disappearing through the door. As I lay there, I began to feel awkward. What should I do? Was this kind of like a booty call? Should I go back to my room? I looked around for my underwear. For a split second, I considered ditching the underwear and sprinting for my room.

“What are you doing?” he asked, startling me.

“Oh, uh, I was going to go back to my room.”

“I have a better idea.”

He climbed back into bed and pulled me closer until my whole body was curled up with his.

“I'm not going to kick you out of this bed the second things end. It's a shitty thing to do. It cheapens what we just shared, and you deserve better than that. I'd like you to stay. Will you?”

I nodded and snuggled closer to him, feeling my body relax. It wasn't long before I drifted off to sleep in his arms.

CHAPTER 8

When I woke in his bed the following morning, Rhys was gone. Grabbing his shirt from the end of the bed, I pulled it on and headed over to my room, feeling a bit dejected, wishing he would have woken me to tell me he was going.

After freshening up, I remembered I needed to retrieve my lingerie from Rhys' room. As I stepped back into his room, the bathroom door opened, and there he stood—naked and dripping wet. *Good lord*. He was the epitome of perfection, unapologetically bold and confident, every muscle glistening, a sexy smile on his lips—and his goods on display.

“Good morning,” he stated.

I don't know what it was about him standing there like that, but it emboldened me. I let my eyes roam freely over him, my body aching to be touched by him.

“The way you are looking at me is dangerous, Maeve,” he practically growled.

“Why?”

“Because that is a ‘stay in bed and fuck like rabbits all day’ look.”

I could see him getting hard before my eyes. I had to do something.

“We don't have time with the meeting you have shortly. But maybe...” I whispered.

“What do you have in mind?”

I stepped closer. “Maybe we have time for this.”

I sank to my knees before him and wrapped my hand around the base of his cock, taking his length into my mouth and earning me a loud groan.

“Holy fuck, woman, you are going to make me a 2-minute, man if you keep that up.”

He tried to lift me, but I swatted his hands away, all the more determined in my efforts.

“Uh, fuck, Maeve, I’m going to come.”

A wave of pride that I could unglue him so quickly washed over me.

Once he’d had a moment for his senses to return, he helped me get to my feet.

“We have to get going or you’ll be late.” With a smile, I turned and headed out to the living room.

“Maeve, hang on. I want—”

“I know. But this is how I wanted it.”

Rhys grabbed his shirt between my breasts and pulled me closer.

“Don’t you want anything else?”

His fingers grazed my thighs until he slipped them between my legs.

A gasp escaped my lips. “I do.”

“Tell me.”

“I want to continue what we started last night.”

Rhys guided me over to the couch where he sat.

“So, take control. Ride me. Show me what you want.”

I didn’t need any more encouragement. Straddling him, I sank down on him. My fingers curled into his hair and pulled his head back so I could kiss him. It wasn’t a sweet kiss; there was some animalistic urgency in that kiss, and Rhys was right there with me for it.

He grabbed my hips and held on firmly as I rocked back and forth. His thumb found my clit, giving me what I needed to send my body into a fevered frenzy.

“I’m right there with you. Fuuuck yes,” he groaned as he found his release.

His arms enveloped me and held me there for a moment before my mind focused back on reality.

“We really do have to go,” I told him as I forced myself to pull away from him.

“I know, but this was worth more than any meeting.”

CHAPTER 9

As soon as all of Rhys’ obligations were completed for the morning, he insisted we grab lunch at a nearby restaurant instead of the buffet at the conference.

Once we had settled in, I had the overwhelming urge to know something.

“I just can’t understand why a guy like you would still be single.”

He shrugged. “I haven’t found the right one, I guess. Too many want to see what I can give them instead of discovering who I am. And speaking of not understanding things, why did you end up with the douchebag?”

I played with the napkin in my lap. “We met in university and dated on and off for a while. It’s always taken me a long time to let someone in. When he proposed, I was just happy to be asked. I should have known better.”

“Don’t do that to yourself,” he said with a frown. “He’s a moron for not seeing what he had with you. Do you mind if I ask you something personal?”

“Sure.”

“What happened to your legs?”

And there it is.

“Maeve.” His voice was kind and soft. He extended his hand across the table to take my hand.

“I did not ask because it bothers me. I asked because it is a part of you, and I want to know more about you.”

“I was in a terrible car accident with my aunt when I was young. A drunk driver speeding through a red light t-boned us. My aunt was paralysed due to her injuries, and I needed multiple surgeries to fix mine. The trauma of all of that is long gone. I don’t even remember the accident, but the scars remain, you know?”

Rhys rubbed the top of my hand. “I’m so sorry you had to endure that.”

I nodded. “I appreciate that. Kids were brutal. It changed me and made me more cautious about letting people in. I didn’t know Bryan was bothered by my body.”

He frowned. “He’s an asshole who was using whatever he could to make excuses and turn it into your fault. None of his choices had anything to do with your body. Take it from me, your body is perfect just the way it is. I have wanted to touch it constantly since we got here.”

“I know I deserve better than Bryan by a mile—you helped me see that. As much as I dread it, I will take care of things once and for all when we get back.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Thank you for bringing me along. I needed this.”

“You’re welcome.”

Too soon, lunch was over, and it was time to head back to the conference. As we stepped outside, Rhys took my hand in his. We walked in a comfortable silence for a while before Rhys raised up our linked hands.

“It’s the little things like this that I miss about dating.”

I smiled up at him. “What are you looking for in your perfect match?”

“Hmm, well, she has to have a good heart and be someone who wants to experience life with me. And, of course, the sex has to be really incredible.”

We both laughed, and he bumped into me lightly in jest. This light-hearted Rhys set off a swarm of butterflies in my stomach.

“You’re a great man, Rhys. Thank you for everything.”

He looked down at me, his eyebrows pulled together. “Are you going somewhere or something?”

I shook my head. As we got closer to the hotel, the idea of returning to reality the next day made me a little emotional, but that wasn’t something Rhys needed to know.

After the last seminar for the evening ran late, we were quite content to stay in our room and relax. Rhys ordered us the best burgers I had ever had in my life, and we curled up together in his bed to watch a movie.

As the movie was coming to an end, I made the decision to tell him how I felt.

“Rhys,” I started softly. “I like you... a lot. I just wanted you to hear it because I know tomorrow, things will probably go back to the way they were. I need you to know I have had such a wonderful time on this trip, and I appreciate all you did for me. Not to mention I had the best sex I have ever had by far. I wish this weekend didn’t have to end.”

Wow, that was strangely liberating.

I waited for Rhys to respond, but when he didn’t, I propped myself on my elbow and found him fast asleep, his handsome face peaceful. I brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. He was such a handsome man, but he was more than that. Leaning closer, I gave him a chaste kiss before snuggling back in his arms. There would be another opportunity to share my feelings with him. As his warmth surrounded me, I closed my eyes and slowly drifted off to sleep.

CHAPTER 10

The mood between us was different the next morning; quiet and sombre. It felt like the magic I'd experienced was slowly dissipating.

As we neared the city limits, the skies opened up and began to pour down on us. The steady thud of the drops hit the roof of the car Rhys had been wise to put up.

Pulling up to my apartment, there was a heavy silence.

"Are you okay?" Rhys asked quietly, staring out the front window.

I nodded slowly. "Yeah. Have you ever felt like wishing things could last forever?"

He turned to look at me and smiled. "Yeah, I know what you mean. I feel it, too."

We continued to sit like that for a while. I shifted in my seat.

"Well, I guess—"

"Yeah, you'd better get inside," he quickly replied.

We both climbed out of the car and met at the trunk, where he helped me get my bag.

I couldn't make myself move.

Rhys laughed lightly. "We're getting soaked out here."

"Do you want to come up?" I blurted.

Rhys frowned. "I'd better not. I have a ton of work to look at. It's going to take me all weekend to catch up."

My gaze fell to my shoes. "Okay."

"Hey," he said, stepping closer to me. His finger lifted my chin until I was looking up at him.

“It’s not that I don’t want to. I do.” He paused a moment, looking deeply at me. “What are you thinking?”

I shifted uncomfortably. “I am worried you might end up regretting things.”

He leaned in and kissed me gently. “This was an incredible trip. That could not be further from how I feel. I worry I will complicate your life further when you have enough to deal with because of your ex. I don’t want to do that to you. When you are ready, I will still be here, and I’d like to discuss this again. Okay?”

Rhys kissed me again, wrapping his arms around me. My body began to tingle all over, as if he had breathed some life into me.

“We’re getting soaked,” he murmured. “Get inside.”

I walked slowly to the door, my feet heavy. I turned at the door, and he was still standing in the rain, watching me. With a small wave, I headed inside.

After stripping out of my soaked clothes, I flopped down on the bed. My feelings for Rhys swirled around, the memories of our time away filling my mind.

The ding of my phone pulled me from those wonderful thoughts. With a sigh, I picked it up, dreading what I would find. What I found was worse than I expected. Fifty texts and voicemails, all from Bryan. Groaning loudly, I deleted the messages without entertaining even one and blocked his number altogether. This was nuts. Muting my phone, I got up and headed to the bathroom for a hot shower. I’d had enough bullshit from him, especially after the feelings Rhys had been making me feel.

Rhys.

All the negativity fell away. I couldn’t wait to see him on Monday. I didn’t know what to expect, but I knew there was promise in the words he’d said outside. He wasn’t going anywhere, and that was enough.

CHAPTER 11

Monday morning, I walked into the office bright and early. I dressed up in a pretty pencil skirt and royal blue blouse for Rhys' benefit, my body buzzing in anticipation of seeing him.

I wished Sara, the secretary, a good morning as I walked through the door.

"Uh, Maeve," she said, making me pause. "These came for you."

The huge bouquet of flowers she pointed at shocked me. They were garish and overwhelming gaudy. Immediately, a sick feeling washed over me. I knew who they were from.

"Uh, I think I'll leave them here. Thanks, Sara."

I hurried to my desk, but as I neared it, I was stopped in my tracks. Bryan was sitting in my chair. He jumped to his feet when he saw me.

"Baby! I've missed you." His voice was sickly sweet, making my stomach turn. He tried to step closer, his arms outstretched for a hug, but I jumped back.

"You cannot be here. You need to go," I said as quietly as possible, the malice in my voice palpable.

His showy exterior began to crack. "I'm not going anywhere until you talk to me."

Movement behind Bryan caught my eye. Rhys stood in his office doorway, his face like stone, his eyes fierce.

"Why don't you both come into my office," he stated.

Bryan grinned like the asshole thought he'd won.

The moment the doors closed behind us, I turned to Rhys.

"I am so sorry. I didn't know this was going to happen. Bryan, you have to go. Now."

“Why are you apologizing to him?” Bryan sneered. “Like I said, I’m not leaving until you speak with me. It was all a misunderstanding.”

He pointed towards Rhys. “You can go now.”

Rhys laughed humourlessly. “I’m not going anywhere.” My eyes locked briefly with Rhys, and a sense of comfort and strength settled over me.

Bryan was such an ass. “Look, pal, I’m not afraid of kicking your ass. Wait a sec- you got the hots for my girl or something?”

Anger bubbled up fiercely and finally overflowed.

“WILL YOU STOP!” I shouted.

Bryan’s eyes shot to me, his mouth open. Good, I’d shocked him.

“Just shut up and listen to me. It is over. It has been over since I caught you screwing someone else. It has been over since I gave back the ring. I have no doubt it wasn’t the first time you cheated. I was ready to spend my life with you, and you want to try and make me believe it was a *misunderstanding*? I think not. You wanted to make me feel like shit, like it was my fault in some way. There is NOTHING wrong with my body. The problem lies with you. Don’t worry; you have your little plaything to lick your wounds for you. I suggest you go to her.

“I deserve way better, and I want you out of my life, now. Do not call, text, or show up randomly anymore. That’s it. End of story. There is nothing more to say. Now please leave.”

Bryan sputtered. “A man has needs, and you should have done more. You should have enticed me. A woman must keep her man satisfied.”

Rhys marched over, grabbed the front of Bryan’s shirt, and shoved him against the wall.

“Scum like you have no fucking clue how to speak to a lady. You have your chauvinistic pig head shoved so far up your ass you can’t see what you had, and because she finally

saw the real you, now you try to pin the problems on her. You are the problem, asshole. And problems need to be fixed.”

I gasped as Rhys punched Bryan in the gut, causing him to fall to his knees with a thud.

“Here is what you are going to do. You are going to get the fuck out of my office. You’re going to take the pathetic excuse of an apology at the front desk with you. And if you come here again, I will call the cops.”

Bryan grunted and nodded his understanding.

“Good. And the same thing goes for Maeve’s phone and apartment. If you bug her anymore, I will make sure you regret it, and there will be no cops needed for that lesson. Am I clear?”

Bryan nodded.

“Glad we understand each other.” Rhys grabbed Bryan by his cheap suit and lifted him to his feet. “Let me walk you out,” he stated between clenched teeth.

I stood there stunned as they walked from the room. The quiet that followed was uncomfortable. I returned to my desk, needing to escape what had happened.

“Maeve.”

Rhys’ voice startled me, making me jump.

“Can you come to my office for a minute?”

The look on his face was cold. Dread settled in the pit of my stomach. *I’m going to get fired.* I walked into his office, and the first tear rolled down my cheek as I closed the door behind me.

“I’m really sorry, Rhys. I’ll get my stuff collected,” I stated flatly.

“What?” He marched over to me and wrapped his arms around me. “I’m not firing you, Maeve. I’m sorry if I gave you that impression. I’m just so angry about that douchebag. I could have killed him. I’m not mad at you. I just wanted to

make sure you were okay. You were incredible dealing with him the way you did.”

I relaxed in his arms, closing my eyes. The sound of his heartbeat pounding in his chest brought me calm. When I opened my eyes, I remembered we were in the office.

“Uh, Rhys, we probably shouldn’t be doing this. Someone is liable to come in and see us.”

I could feel his body shift as he shrugged. “I’m not worried. We’ve done far worse if you are worried about our ethics.”

“It was a memorable weekend.” I tried to push away from him, but his grip tightened.

“I think there is something you should know,” he began. “I didn’t ask you to come on that trip to get in your pants, though I regret nothing. Even if you were to decide the trip was a one-time thing, it was important to know that not everyone will hurt you. I know you just broke up, and you probably need more time, but I will not let another moment pass without making sure you know how I feel. I have been crazy about you for a long time. I’ll be here if you want to see where this goes.”

His words worked their way straight to my heart. “I wasn’t expecting to feel what I do after everything that’s happened. It felt too easy to be near you, to let you in. I’m not the kind of woman to up and sleep with a man. But you made me feel safe. I need more of you in my life. I’d like to see where things go.”

“It was the hot sex, right?” Rhys grinned down at me brightly.

I laughed lightly. “It was when you held me close and didn’t need anything else from me. For the first time, I feel I am not settling for less than I deserve. I am settling for more.”

ABOUT ERIN CRISTOFOLI

Erin Cristofoli resides in Ontario, Canada with her busy little family. She loves to write stories that depict down-to-Earth people and passionate love stories. Her publishing career began with her debut novel, *Starting Over*. She loves the thrill of making characters come to life and diving into each new world. When Erin is not writing, she thrives on many creative ventures, including photography, painting, and crocheting.

Connect with Erin:

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THE BUTTERFLY CONNECTION

by Heather Slade

Romantic Suspense

**Best friend's brother, fake relationship, friends to lovers,
second chance**

I spent five years in prison, paying for crimes I committed. Now, someone's giving me the opportunity to lead an entirely different life. As long as I help bring down a ring of art forgers, I'll remain free. Their latest victim, Penelope Ramsey, is my sister's best friend and the woman who's captivated me from the moment we met. When I discover Pen is facing a battle threatening her family's legacy, eclipsing the millions she's been defrauded by the forgers, I vow to make sure she prevails.

CHAPTER 1

Penelope

“Hello, Butterfly.”

I raised my head. Even if I hadn't recognized the man who walked into my gallery, or his voice, I would've known who he was. Only Brando Ripa had ever called me by the nickname. I blinked more than once, stood, and walked toward him. “Brand? Is it really you?”

“It hasn't been *that* long,” he said, winking.

My eyes scrunched as we embraced and cheek-kissed. “I thought you were in prison.”

He stepped back but still held both my hands in his. “Out on good behavior.”

I raised a brow, pulling far enough away so we no longer touched. “Somehow, I doubt that was the reason.” While I winked and smiled, I wasn't being facetious. The man hadn't *behaved* a day in his life, as far as I remembered.

His eyes softened. “How are you, Butterfly?”

“Penelope—or Pen. And fine.”

“Are you? Truly?”

I retreated to the desk where I'd been sitting when he walked in. I leaned against it and looked everywhere but at him. His physical beauty had always been my undoing. Spending time in prison hadn't diminished it in the slightest. “Why wouldn't I be?”

“May I?” he asked, pointing to a chair.

“Of course.” As I looked into his gray-green eyes, he reached up, unintentionally flexing the powerful muscles in his upper arm. He ran his hand through his sandy-brown hair that was longer than I'd ever seen it, which likely meant he'd been out of prison for some time. I wondered how long.

When his leg brushed mine as he took his seat, I straightened and walked around the desk but remained

standing.

He cleared his throat. “One of the conditions of my release was agreeing to work for Doc Butler.”

I recognized the name. Doc—or Kade, as I knew him—was Quinn’s father. Quinn, along with three of our other friends, referred to ourselves as the “Tribe of Five.” We’d been best buddies since we were seven years old, and were also business partners.

Kade was a former Marine Raider who had worked for the CIA after he left active duty and now owned a private intelligence firm called K19 Security Solutions.

“What an interesting turn of events,” I commented.

He raised a brow and smirked. “As you know, my expertise lies in art forgery.”

I gripped the back of my chair and plopped down as much as sat, realizing Tara—another member of the tribe and Brand’s sister—must’ve contacted Kade about the meeting we had last week with detectives from the New York City Police Department.

She’d been here, painting in her studio on the second floor of the building, when the call asking if I could come over to the 13th Precinct came in. The man I spoke with said it was regarding a matter concerning the gallery.

Since it was only a seven-minute walk, we didn’t bother with a cab.

“Thank you for coming down to the precinct,” the detective had said when he greeted us in the lobby, then led us to an interrogation room.

“Are we in some kind of trouble?” I asked.

“Please, have a seat.” The man motioned to a chair when a second detective entered the room and closed the door behind him.

I shook my head. “Not until you tell us why we’re here.”

“We’d like to talk to you about the alleged sale of forged artwork,” said the first one, who’d introduced himself as Detective McWhinn.

Thirty minutes later, Tara and I left, equally stunned by what we had been told. The idea that I’d unwittingly sold anything not of impeccable provenance was unfathomable to me, let alone the number of pieces in question.

“I’m here to help, Butterfly.” Brand smirked a second time when I glared at him. “Sorry—Penelope.”

I didn’t necessarily hate the nickname he’d bestowed on me; it was more the memory of the last time I heard him speak it, which was also the last time I’d seen him before today, that unsettled me.

He’d put his hand on the back of my neck that afternoon, whispering, “Butterfly,” before we’d shared our first and only kiss.

It was nothing like the ones on the cheek we’d exchanged earlier. No, it was a lover’s kiss, hotter than any I’d had before or since.

It started off tentatively, a quick brush of his mouth on mine before Brand coaxed my lips apart. His tongue sought mine with an urgency—a possession—I’d spent many hours dreaming about.

I’d gone limp that day, wishing we were alone somewhere where we could strip each other from our clothing and I could feel his naked body against mine. Instead, we were standing near a busy Midtown Manhattan intersection while hundreds of cars, and more people, passed us by.

All too soon, he’d ended the kiss, dropped his hand, turned, and walked away without uttering another word. At the time, I told myself it was ridiculous to think I was in love with him. It was nothing more than lust. However, no one else had

made my heart pound the way Brand did back then. Or now, if I was being honest.

I'd looked away, but met his gaze when he sighed. "I think about it all the time too, Butterfly."

My spine stiffened, and I folded my hands in front of me on the desk, refusing to acknowledge how dead-on he was in reading my thoughts. "You said you're here to help."

His hooded eyes opened wider, and he sat up straighter, as if my doing so had jarred him out of the memory. "That's right. The Catarina Benedetto Gallery wasn't the only one affected. There are four more in Midtown alone."

"I see." I shuffled papers around on my desk. "What is it you need from me?" When his gaze lingered but he didn't speak, I regretted phrasing my question the way I had. "I've given my statement to the detectives and forwarded the documentation they requested. Unfortunately, the pieces in question were secured through various brokers, not just one. Some of the work was purchased through the most reputable auction houses in the world."

Brand nodded. "You aren't alone in that. The other galleries I alluded to said much the same thing. However, the number of pieces in question is far greater."

"I'm relieved to hear it," I muttered under my breath.

"Sorry. I meant your gallery."

"It isn't mine alone. I mean, you know that, and it really isn't relevant." I was rambling, once again stunned. I took a deep breath. "How many more?"

"Twice as many." Brand leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Collectively."

"Collectively?" I was nauseated. Once word got out about this—and it was likely it would soon—we'd be out of business. Even if we weren't, I had to answer to my four business partners for it. The one thing each of the numerous pieces in question had in common was I had been the one to make their acquisition.

My cell vibrated with a message, and out of habit, I glanced over at it.

“What is it?” Brand asked when my eyes scrunched.

I swiped the screen and read the message from my dad.

“Fuck,” I muttered, again under my breath, rubbing my eyes and rolling my shoulders.

“Penelope?”

“Yes?”

“What was the message?”

“It’s nothing.”

Brand raised a brow.

“It’s from my dad. He’s pestering me to meet his latest love interest—which I have zero interest in doing. The last one didn’t last a year once she got him to marry her. Or maybe it was vice versa. Either way, his relationships never last.” Another message popped up. This one said he’d had a change of plans and wanted to talk to me about the property on Fire Island.

“That fucking asshole,” I muttered.

Brand got up, walked around the desk, and stood next to me.

I looked up at him. “What?”

He turned my chair, put a hand on each of the armrests, and bent at the waist. His face was close enough that if I leaned forward, I could kiss him. And right now, I wanted to more than anything. “There’s more to this than you’re saying.”

“It’s just...” I shook my head.

“I’ve known you a long time, and rarely have I heard you curse.”

I tried to turn my chair, but he tightened his grip. “I swear all the time, Brand,” I snapped. “It isn’t like you’ve been around the last four years—longer, really—to know what I do and don’t do.”

“Why is this upsetting you? Were you close to his last wife?”

I laughed out loud. “I don’t even remember her name.”

“I’m not letting you get away with this. I’ll keep you trapped in your chair all night if I have to.”

I sighed and looked into his eyes. He wasn’t bluffing. He was going to keep after me until I told him.

“Meeting his girlfriend isn’t what upset me. It was the second half of the message. He said he also wants to talk to me about the property on Fire Island.”

Brand raised a brow. “What about it?”

It wasn’t him I was mad at; it was my dad, but when I jerked the chair harder, he let go. Maybe he did because he saw my eyes fill with tears, mortifying me. When I stood and looked out the window, he put his hand on my shoulder.

“He’s supposed to be giving it to me. When he told me he was going to sell it, I begged him to let me buy it. Instead, he offered to quitclaim it. Now, he says there’s been a change of plans.” I brushed away my tears and turned around. “It’s just really bad timing. If he wants me to buy it, like I originally offered, I doubt I’ll be able to come up with the money.”

“Because of the forged art? Doesn’t your gallery have insurance that covers that kind of thing?”

“We do, but they don’t hand the money over immediately. They’ll conduct their own investigation. It could be months. Even years. In the meantime, we have to refund our clients right away. I can’t ask my partners to pony up for this. I’m the one who handled the acquisitions. I’m the one who purchased the forgeries. It’s my responsibility.”

I looked up at the ceiling. Why was I telling him this? Brand was no different than a stranger walking in off the street. Except that we’d kissed. Still, I hadn’t seen him in years. I barely knew him.

So why, when he spun me around and pulled me into his arms, did I feel so much better?

CHAPTER 2

Brand

Penelope Ramsey was the strongest, most independent, and most stubborn woman I'd ever met. That was saying something, considering Tara, my half sister, was almost as bad. As were Quinn, Ava, and Aine, the other three women who made up their tight-knit circle of friends. The very ones she was insisting shouldn't have to cover the cost of the refunds.

The five met at boarding school when they were still in single digits—maybe seven or eight? I couldn't recall exactly since I hadn't known Tara existed at the time.

Each of them came from broken homes. In Pen's case, her father was on his fourth marriage when he divorced her mother. Last I knew, he was up to seven. Divorces, that was. I wasn't sure if Penelope was aware, but the new girlfriend was a well-known actress, famous enough for one of the online entertainment magazines to write about the engagement to her dad.

Normally, I wouldn't pay attention to shit like society gossip, but prison was damned boring. I shook my head. Actually, gossip of any kind held zero interest for me, no matter how bored I was. *Butterfly*, on the other hand, consumed my thoughts almost constantly. She had since the first day we met.

Penelope was sixteen; I was eighteen and happened to be having lunch with my mother the day she and Tara stopped by her father's office. He was my father, too, although I didn't know it at the time.

I remembered every detail about the moment I first laid eyes on her. Long hair, the color of sable, and chestnut eyes, with a body far more developed than Tara's. Pen at sixteen was a woman. Tara looked ten years younger.

I couldn't recall exactly what she said when we were introduced, but the way I felt had stayed with me. Her voice had swirled around me like a warm breeze or a song that married the perfect melody and lyrics. Its tone had soothed the angst inside my eighteen-year-old body but lit my libido on fire.

Her eyes had bored into mine, and she smirked as if she'd picked up on my attraction and was challenging me to act on it. When I smiled, her eyes trailed down the length of my body. I would've done the same to her if my mother's voice hadn't ripped me back into reality.

"Your dad is in a meeting. Is there something I can assist with?" she'd said. I didn't catch Tara's response, but the next thing I knew, my mother suggested I escort the ladies downstairs and hail a cab for them. While I did as my mother asked, as I'd anticipated, the two were far more adept at securing a ride than I was.

"I'm okay," Penelope said, wriggling out of my arms, bringing me back to the present. "It's just a piece of land, right?" She squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and put her hands on her hips. "So, what else do you need from me in terms of the investigation? I doubt there's much beyond what I've already given to the police."

It was an abrupt change of subject, but I'd go along with it if she was done talking about her dad—for now, at least. I cleared my throat. "I'm familiar enough with how the game is played to know the forgers are buried deep under layers of middlemen. Ultimately, there is a single person or organization the 'artists' work for. That's who we need to find."

She nodded. "I wish you the best of luck, and I mean that sincerely. Insurance or not, once this hits the media, the gallery's reputation will be left in tatters. It won't matter if we have evidence the forgeries of the certificates of authenticity and provenance were just as good as the artwork." She

groaned and turned her head in the opposite direction. “God, this is so fucked up. We’ve worked so hard to build up a respectable client base—Tara especially. We should probably just close now. I’ll figure out a way to pay her, Aine, Ava, and Quinn back for their investment. You know, after I refund our clients.”

I doubted her friends would agree to what Penelope was suggesting, but she didn’t need to hear that from me. Regardless, I had something more proactive in mind.

I’d been a small player in the world of fake art, focusing my efforts solely in Italy. I’d also had an agenda unrelated to making money—I’d wanted to ruin the life of my business partner, who just so happened to be my biological father. I shook my head. That was in the past, and my focus was on the future. I’d been given a chance to lead a life entirely different from the one I had been, and I’d be an idiot not to take it.

Identifying the forgery ring, taking it down, and bringing those involved to justice was a way to prove myself.

If Penelope and I did it together, no collector would see her as the woman who’d sold the forgeries. She’d be known instead for fighting against the people who’d defrauded her and so many others. She’d be a hero in the art world.

“I have a proposal for you.” When she raised a brow, I chuckled. “Something that will help us both.”

“Let’s hear it.”

I’d always admired Penelope’s direct approach. There was no beating around the bush, no tiptoeing around a subject, and no bullshit. “We buy more art.”

“We?”

“Yes.”

She shook her head. “No way.”

“No? Just like that? You don’t even want to hear my idea?”

“I did hear it, and first of all, weren’t you listening? I don’t have money to invest in art. Second, whoever is behind the forgeries must know the authorities are onto them. No one will

take a meeting with me. As far as you're concerned, who is going to deal with a forger who just got out of prison?"

"First, we wouldn't be using your money. Second, they aren't aware we're onto them, and third, no one knows I exist."

"You don't live in a vacuum, Brand. You've got a record. You're more notorious than you think."

"You forget who I work for."

"Admittedly, I have a hard time believing a quarter of what I've heard about Kade Butler, but while I don't doubt what he's capable of, making your record or even your reputation disappear seems more than a little far-fetched."

I raised a brow, excited she'd challenged me. "Do a search."

"What are you talking about?"

"Search for me on the internet."

"This is ridiculous," she muttered as I watched her open her laptop. A few seconds later, she closed it. "That proves nothing."

"I don't exist, Butterfly, and neither does this investigation."

She raised the lid again, pounded out something on the keyboard, then turned the screen toward me. "I *do* exist, Brand." Her cheeks pinkened at what I guessed was the exact moment she realized she *should* still exist. There was no reason for her not to.

"How do I explain who you are?"

I couldn't mask my grin. I was going to love this. Her, maybe not so much. "Your fiancé."

Penelope rolled her eyes. "No one will believe that in a million years. I haven't been dating, and yet suddenly, I'm engaged?"

"The only people who will question it, will be looped in."

“My *dad*?”

I raised a brow. “If you’re asking whether your father will be apprised of the true nature of our engagement, the answer is no.”

“Right. It probably won’t surprise him at all,” she mumbled.

I wanted to pull Penelope into my arms and assure her that even though both her parents were narcissistic assholes, she had other people who cared about her—loved her—and I was one of them. However, I thought better of it. She and I needed to spend the kind of time together we’d never been able to before.

First, I’d left the States and made my home in Italy. Then, for the last five years, my *home* was a prison cell. If she agreed to my proposal to work together to identify this forgery ring, we’d have time to really get to know each other. From there, maybe she’d see the new me, a man worthy of her.

“I have to think about this, Brand.”

“Understood.”

“So, um, if there’s nothing else, I should call my dad.”

“I’ll take a look around while you do. I’ve kept up with Tara’s work on the gallery’s website, but this will be the first time I see any of it in person.”

Penelope cocked her head but didn’t say anything. I’m sure she expected me to leave, but I had no intention of doing so. I hoped she’d agree to have dinner with me tonight. Even if it was under the guise of planning our “engagement strategy,” I’d gladly accept any time I got to spend with her.

I wanted more than a shot at a professional life. I’d do everything in my power to convince the woman I called Butterfly to give me a shot at love too.

CHAPTER 3

Penelope

I would've preferred to wait until Brand left to make my call. However, if I didn't do it now, I might talk myself out of contacting my father at all.

After engaging the lock on the front door from under my desk, I went upstairs to Tara's studio. His cell rang several times before he answered.

"Hey, sweetheart. How are you?"

"I'm okay, Dad." I wouldn't bother telling him about the forgeries. If what Brand said was true and Kade had somehow kept this out of the press, there was no reason to forewarn my father about something that wouldn't matter to him, anyway.

"I'd like you to meet Hailey."

My dad always wanted me to meet any woman he was about to propose to. For two of his three wives after my mother, it was the only time I saw them. That's how quickly the marriages ended.

"I was thinking you could—"

"Hold on. What did your message about a change of plans regarding the house on Fire Island mean?"

"That's one of the reasons I want you to meet Hailey. She wants to keep it. Maybe even tear it down and build something more modern."

"More *modern*?"

"Or fix it up and flip it."

"Dad, you can't be serious."

"Listen, I don't want to do this over the phone. Let's get together for dinner. You girls can meet, and Hail will tell you her plans."

Hail? Her plans? Who the fuck was this *girl*, as he'd referred to her, and why would my dad do anything she suggested? Had they even been dating a month?

"You said you were going to give me the house."

“I said I’d think about it.”

That wasn’t what he said at all, but I could tell by the tone of his voice this call was about to end, anyway. “When do you want this meet and greet to take place?”

“Funny you put it that way. Hailey and I are in LA. She’s wrapping up a movie. Before you interrupted me, I was going to suggest you fly out here—”

“No. I’m not flying out there to meet someone whose name I won’t remember a year from now.”

“I don’t appreciate your tone, Penelope.”

“And I don’t appreciate you changing your mind about giving me a piece of property that means *nothing* to you and *everything* to me.” I ended the call. Since I knew he wouldn’t change his mind a second time, there was no point in continuing the conversation.

I walked over to the window seat, sat down, and wrapped my arms around my legs. I’d tell my father it would be over my dead body that the house—actually, houses—my great-grandparents had built would be torn down or modernized, except that wouldn’t phase him. Once Harold Ramsey made up his mind about something, he went full-steam ahead, with no consideration for anyone else’s feelings. I was sure it was one of the reasons he’d been divorced so many times.

Doubting Brand would leave until I returned to the gallery, I splashed my face with cold water from the utility sink and slowly made my way down the stairs, giving myself time to mask my anger and disappointment with my father.

“Hey,” said Brand, standing near the bottom of the steps. His eyes were scrunched, and when he stepped close enough, he took my hands in his.

“Um, hey.” I tried to pull away, but he tightened his grip, running his thumb gently back and forth on my skin.

“How did the call with your dad go?”

“Terrible. Apparently, his latest model arm candy wants to modernize the Fire Island house. ‘Fix it up and flip it,’ he

said.”

“Flip it? Why? Hailey Watson has more money than she knows what to do with.”

“You *know* her?” I practically shouted.

“I know of her. Hailey Watson. The name doesn’t ring a bell?”

I shook my head. “Who is she?”

“The actress who starred in that string of blockbusters. The ones based on the comic books.”

“You’re kidding.”

Brand shook his head.

“If she has more money than she knows what to do with, why is she with my father?”

“Maybe she’s hoping one of her relationships will stick. She could also have a daddy complex.”

“Ew! Brand! I can’t unhear that.”

“Look, I’m sure she’s going to get bored, or he will, long before anything happens on Fire Island. Before you know it, it will be winter and the place will be deserted. By spring, when the season heats up again, I’m sure your dad will have forgotten all about Hailey’s plans. Maybe even Hailey herself.”

“He was adamant. He raised his voice at me.”

Brand walked over and pulled me into his arms. “Come on. You know I’m right.”

There was something about his smug comment and the look on his face that set me off. “I know you’re right? About my dad?”

“His prior relationships make what’s going to happen damn obvious.”

“That’s easy for you to say when nothing you care about is on the line.”

“Butterfly—”

“Don’t call me that,” I huffed. I took his arms from around my waist and stalked over to my desk. “I don’t know where you get off showing up here unannounced and insinuating yourself into my life ten minutes later. It’s been years since I last saw you, and even then, I wouldn’t call us friends.”

Brand closed the distance I’d put between us. “I wouldn’t call us friends, either. We’ve always been more than that, Penelope. The attraction between us has been undeniable since we first met.”

I raised my chin. “You have a vivid imagination. Maybe that’s what made you such a good, ahem, artist.”

Like the one and only other time he’d kissed me, Brand put his hand on the back of my neck and brushed my lips with his. When his tongue pressed against my mouth, I opened to him, as much as I knew I shouldn’t. The possession, the urgency, the need I remembered so clearly felt stronger than before. He wrapped his free arm around my waist and brought our bodies flush together. His hardness told me his desire was equal to mine.

Brand ended the kiss but didn’t release me. “Undeniable,” he repeated. “Which is why I’m not going to let you blow me off or push me away or tell me there’s nothing between us. It’s always been there.”

Arguing with him was pointless. He was right. Our attraction was instantaneous, and no matter how much time passed between seeing each other, it returned in full force.

“We have a connection, Butterfly,” he said, moving his hand from my neck to my cheek. “I want to be with you more than I’ve ever wanted anything. That includes my job with Doc Butler. Don’t misunderstand me; the chance he’s giving me is once in a lifetime. I plan to do everything I can to prove to him I’m worthy of it. Worthy of you too, Penelope.”

“It isn’t about being worthy of me. God, Brand, you’re...” Hot as fuck. Every fantasy I’ve ever had of a man come true. The person I judged all other men by. No one had ever come close to measuring up in terms of how he made me feel.

Brand rested his forehead against mine. “Wanna see if you can transfer whatever you’re thinking so hard about straight into my brain?”

I breathed in to the count of five, then exhaled to the count of five as well. How had we gone from him showing up here to me telling him about my conversation with my dad? It was the kind of stuff I never talked about, even to my closest friends. I was the strong one of the group, particularly when it came to relationships with our parents. Since the first day of boarding school, I was the one who let things roll off my back, at least outwardly.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have snapped at you. It’s my father I’m angry with. Especially since he wants me to fly to LA to meet Hail. That’s what he called her. *Hail*.”

“So, let’s go. Get it over with. While we’re there, we can get together with Tara and Knox. Maybe even with Quinn and Mercer.”

I was grateful Brand already knew my closest friends and our history. There was so much I didn’t have to explain. I shook my head. “Wait. Did you say *we*?”

He smiled and nodded.

“No. Absolutely not. I would not subject you to a showdown with my father. That’s way too much to ask.”

“I know you won’t ask, which is why I’m telling you I’ll go with you. If you want me to sit silently with my hands folded in my lap, I will. But there’s no reason for you to do this alone. Plus, it will give us time to practice being engaged.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

I shook my head. “You’re crazy.”

“Crazy about you, Butterfly.”

The truth was, I hated confrontations of any kind, but especially with my father. If the Fire Island property weren’t so important to me, I’d drop it, let him do whatever he wanted with it. But what I said was true. He’d never cared about the place as much as I did. I’d spend my whole summer there

while he made an occasional guest appearance, usually around the Fourth of July, when there was a party on every block.

Would it really be so awful to let Brand come with me? I had to admit, just telling him about my conversation made me feel better. I lowered my head to his chest and rested my cheek against his heart. “Okay.”

He stroked my hair, and I could feel him nod, but he didn’t speak. After a few minutes, I did.

“We have to talk about—”

“We don’t.”

I stepped back. “You don’t know what I was going to say.”

“Doesn’t matter. Any sentence that begins with ‘We have to’ isn’t something we’re going to do *right now*. Unless it’s ‘we have to talk about dinner.’ That, I’d be up for.”

“That’s exactly what it was,” I said, shaking my head and smiling. “Too bad you don’t want to talk about it.”

“What needs to be done to close up?” he asked.

“Turn off the lights. Set the alarm.”

“Since it’s one minute after five, can we do that?”

I laughed. “Sure.” I walked over to the desk and waved at Derek, the security guard on duty, who was standing near the rear of the gallery. “I’m heading out.”

“Have a good evening, Ms. Ramsey.”

“How long has he been here?” Brand whispered.

“All day. I mean, they work in shifts, so maybe since lunchtime.”

“He makes me nervous.”

“Probably reminds you of a prison guard.”

“Ha, ha.” Brand held the door open, and I walked out.

“I’m not sure what you had in mind. It’s a little early for dinner,” I said.

“The tavern is always open, isn’t it? It’s still there, right?”

“Same place it’s been for over a hundred years.” I hadn’t thought I was hungry, but their ricotta cavatelli sounded good right now.

Over dinner, Brand shared what happened the day Kade showed up at the minimum-security prison where he was serving time.

“I’ll admit I was anxious when I saw him sitting at the table in the visitation room.”

“He can be intimidating,” I said, laughing. I didn’t know him well, but from what I’d seen of him with Quinn and her daughter—his first grandchild—the man seemed like a big Teddy bear.

“I left Meyersville the same day. Just like that, I was a free man. That’s part of what makes him so scary. Who has power like that? He got me *pardoned*. There wasn’t much time left on my sentence, but the pardon is something entirely different.”

“When was this?”

“Three days ago.”

I raised a brow. “But, your hair...”

“They’re not as strict at the so-called country-club lockups.”

“It’s only been four days since Tara and I talked to the detectives.” Had Kade really gotten Brand out the next day? Even if he had, it must’ve been coincidental, right? I shuddered. Maybe all the things Quinn told us about her dad were true, after all.

CHAPTER 4

Brand

“**W**here are you staying?” Penelope asked after I walked her to her brownstone following dinner.

“K19 sprung for a hotel. Unfortunately, it’s on Times Square.”

“Ah. Two miles, yet worlds away,” she said, looking up at the three-story structure I knew also had a lower level. The other thing I knew was, like the property on Fire Island, the townhouse had been handed down from her father’s parents. In this case, Harold had been bypassed, and it had gone directly to his daughter. It was a shame they hadn’t done that with the beachfront compound.

“Sometimes, I think it’s ridiculous to live in a place this big when it’s only me. I couldn’t give it up, though.”

“It’s where your grandmother taught you how to play poker.”

Pen chuckled and cocked her head. “How do you remember that?”

I took a step closer and cupped her cheek. “I remember everything, Butterfly.”

Her eyes were riveted on mine. “Do you want to come in?”

I looked up at the night sky, knowing going inside was a terrible idea, since if I did, I wouldn’t want to leave. “I should get going. We have an early day tomorrow.”

“Right.”

Over dinner, I’d convinced her to fly to California the next day. After meeting her father’s girlfriend, we could drive up the coast to Montecito and meet with Doc and Merrigan to solidify my plan to go undercover in order to flush out the forgery ring. Then we could continue north to Cambria, where Quinn and Tara both lived.

The other reason I wouldn’t take her up on her offer to go inside was because I wanted to contact Doc and see what K19 could find out about Hailey Watson. Why would someone who earned her kind of money, about to marry a man worth billions, care about a piece of property off the South Shore of Long Island? Something wasn’t adding up.

“This is an interesting development,” Pen said, glancing at her phone. “My dad sent another text. It seems Hailey isn’t as anxious for us to meet as he is.” Her eyes met mine. “Is it me, or does something seem off?”

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

“What should we do?”

“Go anyway. We may end up in Montecito first, then backtrack to LA.”

While she nodded, I could tell she was disappointed.

“Meaning backtrack from Cambria. I want to see my sister as much as you do. And Quinn, of course.”

“I know it might seem silly. I saw Tara a week ago, but with everything that’s happened, I feel very disconnected from her and the rest of the tribe. While I know it isn’t practical, I wish I could see Ava and Aine too.”

“Let’s get you inside,” I said when it started to sprinkle and I heard rumbles of thunder. The last sounded closer than the first.

Pen punched in her code to turn off the alarm while I waited outside the front door.

“Should we meet at JFK in the morning? Would that be easier?” she asked.

I wrapped my arm around her waist. “A car will be waiting outside tomorrow morning at six, and I’ll be in it.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Brand, for everything.”

“My pleasure,” I said, leaning in to kiss her. Unlike earlier, I limited this one to a brush of my lips. If it were anything more, I’d lose my resolve to return to my hotel. I’d dropped my bags off there when I checked in. Having to stop there tomorrow to pick them up would complicate our morning.

“You’d better leave before the weather gets worse,” she said when we heard another clap of thunder.

After reiterating I’d see her in the morning, I quickly made my way west, to Park Avenue, where I knew there’d be plenty

of taxis I could hail. *Hail*. That's how Pen's father referred to his soon-to-be-eighth wife. *Maybe*. Like Pen said, something seemed off.

Rather than wait, I placed a call to Doc as soon as I was inside the cab.

“Hey, Brand. How did it go with Penelope?”

“Slow at first, but she warmed up quickly.”

“Did you present your plan to catch the forgers?”

“I did. She said she wanted to think it over, but I predict she'll go along with it.”

I told him she and I were catching a flight to LA the next day and filled him in on the conversation Pen had had with her father.

“I agree that what you told me about Harold's girlfriend doesn't add up. I'll do some digging and let you know tomorrow if I find anything. I remember Quinn talking about the place on the island. From what she's said, it would be a tragedy if someone tore it down or even rehabbed it.”

I thanked him and said I'd be in touch after we landed. Knowing Doc, if there was anything to dig up on Hailey Watson, he would unearth it by then.

I slept fitfully, more because I'd periodically wake up, expecting to be in a prison cell rather than a swanky hotel room. I was also nervous about oversleeping and waking up too late for Pen and me to catch the flight.

At four, I decided to stop trying to sleep any longer, showered, and packed up the remainder of the clothes and toiletries I'd purchased yesterday when I arrived in the city.

By the time the car service arrived outside the hotel's entrance, I was on my third cup of coffee.

When we pulled up to the brownstone, I jumped out and saw Penelope open the front door, wheeling a small suitcase behind her.

“Let me get that for you.” I picked it up, carried it down the steps, and put it in the open trunk. “How are you this morning?” I asked once we were both in the car and on our way to the airport.

“Honestly? Exhausted. I didn’t sleep very well.”

“No?”

“I was worried I wouldn’t hear my alarm.”

I chuckled. “Same. Around four, I finally gave up and got out of bed.”

She covered her mouth when she yawned. “Will it be rude of me if I sleep on the plane?”

“Not at all, since I plan to do the same thing.”

I ended up remaining awake the entirety of the five-hour flight after my Butterfly rested her head on my shoulder and fell asleep within minutes of takeoff. I’d spent endless hours imagining her curled up against me, and now that she was, I couldn’t bear to miss a single minute of it.

When the pilot announced we were about to land, she opened her eyes and stretched, exposing her bare midriff. God, how I wanted to feel her naked skin against mine. As many hours as I’d spent fantasizing about just being with her, I’d spent exponentially more imagining what it would be like making love to her.

“You didn’t rest at all, did you?” she asked, looking up at me.

“A little,” I fibbed.

She shook her head. “I know when you’re lying, Brand.”

I chuckled. “Is that right?”

“You raise your left eyebrow just slightly. You never do otherwise.”

“I don’t?” I attempted doing so, but could only raise the right one.

She laughed out loud. “See?”

“I guess I’ll never get away with trying to keep secrets from you.”

The smile left her face. “I hope you never feel as though you have to.”

“What if I do it when it’s a good secret?”

She shrugged. “I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

While we waited for the rental car, I stepped to the side and called Doc.

“How was the flight?” he asked.

“Uneventful.”

“My favorite kind. Listen, I was able to do some research on Hailey Watson. She uses an alias, which isn’t unusual for someone in her profession. However, I did find one interesting piece of information. She attended the same boarding school that my daughter, Penelope, and their other three friends did—the Emma Stanley Academy in Dobbs Ferry. Even more interesting is Blair, last name Dumont, was there at the same time.”

“Same age?”

“Sure enough.”

“I take it she wasn’t friends with the tribe?”

“Unlikely. They were pretty tight-knit.”

“As you said, this is an interesting development.” I remembered Pen used those same words after getting the

message from her father saying Hailey wasn't anxious to meet her.

"I'll suggest Penelope get in touch with him before we leave LA. Maybe he'll see her if he knows she's in town."

"In the meantime, I'll check with Quinn and see if she remembers Blair."

"Good idea. I'll do the same with Pen."

"Hold off on that for a bit," he responded. "It might be better to see what their mutual reaction is when they come face-to-face."

"Yeah, maybe." Honestly, that didn't seem fair to Pen. I wouldn't want to be blindsided that way, although my unannounced visit to the gallery yesterday was no different.

I had another thing to discuss with him before ending the call, and after I had, I rejoined Pen.

"What's the plan?" she asked.

"I think you should contact your father, let him know you're here, and see if we can finagle a get-together."

"Finagle? That's an interesting word choice."

I decided to go against Doc's suggestion. "Does the name Blair Dumont mean anything to you?"

Her eyes opened wide. "Why?"

"She and Hailey Watson are one and the same."

"You're kidding me," she leaned in and whispered.

"Doc was able to run a background check on her. Apparently, she was at boarding school at the same time you were."

"More than that, she was Tara's roommate for about two weeks."

"Why only two weeks?"

"Tara got her father to spring for a private room so she wouldn't have to share with her. Blair was...unpleasant."

“How so?”

“The reality of boarding school is that most students are there because their absentee parents sent them. Others, because they got in some kind of trouble. Blair was both, and honestly, she had anger issues. She was such a bitch from the moment we met her until the day we graduated.” Pen cocked her head. “Now that I think about it, she was originally supposed to be my roommate. I can’t remember how she ended up with Tara instead. Either way, we were both glad to have dodged that bullet.”

“I have to ask...”

“If it’s personal?”

I nodded.

“Maybe, although I don’t know why it would be against me specifically, other than the fact my dad may have been an easy mark.”

“We should try harder to arrange a meeting,” I suggested.

“I’ll call my dad as soon as we take care of the car.”

“Go ahead. I’ll wait in the queue.”

Penelope stepped to the side like I had. I watched from afar, not so much to decipher how the conversation went but, more, just to look at her. As a teenager, she was gorgeous. With age came beauty. Simply put, my Butterfly was breathtaking. When she smiled, I thought my heart would beat out of my chest. I’d painted countless portraits of her from memory in which she looked exactly like she did now.

“Success,” she announced, bounding back over to me. “They’re having dinner at Musso and Frank’s tonight. I told him we’d already made plans, but we’d meet them there for an after-dinner drink.”

“Do you think he’ll forewarn her?”

Pen shook her head. “He suggested it would be best to keep it a surprise.”

My smile matched hers. “Perfect.”

CHAPTER 5

Penelope

I had no reason to be nervous about seeing Blair Dumont again, but I was. Maybe it was more that seeing my father always made me anxious.

I couldn't predict how he'd react to the news his girlfriend had gone to the same boarding school as me at the same time I had. Maybe he already knew. But if that were the case, wouldn't he have mentioned it? Frankly, Blair was a couple of years older than the last woman he'd married, so it wasn't like he was trying to hide her age.

By the time we got through the queue at the rental counter, it was shortly after noon. It was a beautiful day by LA standards. The Santa Ana winds didn't typically commence until later in September, but when our flight landed from the opposite direction it normally did, I knew they were blowing. The nicest thing about the warm breeze was that it pushed the smog inland, so the skies were clear, and you could see for miles. It made me understand why so many had flocked to the state back before the overpopulation and number of vehicles on the road changed the visible landscape.

"We have a few hours. What would you like to do?" Brand asked.

We'd rented a convertible, so I suggested we put the top down and drive south, since tomorrow we'd be heading north. "Maybe we should figure out where we're going to stay tonight first."

"Maybe we should wing it."

I laughed out loud when his left eyebrow raised. "Yeah, it happens when it's a good secret too."

Brand lowered his head and shook it, but he was smiling. "I already took care of it."

“Fabulous.” I sat back in my seat. “Do you need me to navigate, or do you know where you’re going?”

He turned toward me. “You don’t want to know where we’re staying?”

“You meant for it to be a surprise. I’m good with that.”

We took the freeway as far as Seal Beach, then drove to the coast, deciding to stop for lunch in Newport Beach. At this time of year, the weather was slightly cooler and kids were back in school, so the beaches weren’t crowded, and it was easy to find somewhere to park.

I took him to a place at the end of the pier that was famous for its chili. I liked it because they served breakfast all day and we could sit outside, watching the surfers trek along the boardwalk and the dory boats coming in after spending the morning catching the fish they’d sell to restaurants this afternoon.

“It seems like you know a lot about this place,” Brand said while we waited for the food we’d ordered to arrive.

“This is where my mom’s family is from. I used to visit when I was a kid, before my grandmother died.”

“I don’t remember you talking about it.”

“We didn’t come very often, which shouldn’t be a surprise, knowing my mother. Actually, you don’t, do you?”

Brand shook his head. “Never had the pleasure.”

“It wouldn’t have been,” I muttered under my breath. “Anyway, Oma—that’s what I called her—lived in a bungalow about four blocks from here. It’s probably been leveled so someone could build a god-awful monstrosity in its place.”

“When were you last here?”

“Right before she died. I think I was fourteen. While both my grandmothers were loving, she was more so. I remember

finding it surprising since my mom didn't seem to inherit the same parental gene Oma possessed."

"How did she die?"

"You know, I'm not sure. I guess I always assumed it was because she was old. Now that I think about it, she couldn't have been much over sixty."

After we finished lunch, Brand asked if I wanted to take a walk down the boardwalk. I was hesitant at first. While I expected the bungalow to be long gone, I wasn't sure I wanted to see what had replaced it.

"Oh my gosh," I exclaimed when we reached Sixteenth Street and I saw it was still there, looking almost exactly like it had the last time I saw it, thirteen years ago. Even the flower garden looked the same. It was such a disparity from the yardless houses surrounding it.

"Hello," said an older gentleman who walked out of the screened-in porch when he saw us standing near the fence.

"Sorry to be nosy, but your place is beautiful. How long have you lived here?"

"Going on fourteen years. I used to have a place a few houses from the beach, but when this one came up for sale, I was the first in line."

"This used to be my grandmother's place."

"Blanche Allen. She was a good friend of my wife's. Mine too. Do you want to come in? I haven't changed much. I always like the way Blanche decorated."

"Thank you, but no. I'd rather keep the other memories, if that makes sense."

The man smiled. "I understand. Hang on just a minute. I have something I think might belong to you."

He rushed inside before I could tell him not to. He was back less than a minute later, holding a picture frame in his hand. “If I’m not mistaken, this is you with Blanche.”

The photo he handed me was taken on the beach just a few yards from where we stood. Oma and I were building a sandcastle. “It is me,” I said. My eyes filled with tears, and I attempted to give it back to him.

He shook his head. “That’s yours to keep, young lady. I found it not too long ago in a box I guess was missed all these years, way back in the closet.”

I held it close to me. “We should be going, but thank you so much.”

“My pleasure. Name’s Charlie Farman. If you visit again when you have more time, I’ll take you to lunch. My family has a place near the pier.”

I smiled through my tears. “We just ate there. It’s always been one of my favorite spots.”

Mr. Farman beamed, then waved when we left after thanking him again.

“Amazing,” I heard Brand say when we were a few feet down the boardwalk.

“What’s that?”

“As I said earlier, I never met your mom. However, I’d be willing to bet you’re a lot more like Oma than her.”

“Interesting how it seems to skip generations. If I ever have kids, I hope they aren’t as much like my mother or father as I am like Oma.”

Brand put his arm around my shoulder. “They won’t be. We’ll make sure of it.”

I knew he was joking, but his words made me happy anyway.

“I can’t let my dad make changes to the Fire Island property. Or sell it. After seeing Oma’s place and how happy it makes me that it still looks the same, I have to intervene. I’d never forgive myself if I didn’t,” I said much later when we pulled up to the valet stand at Musso and Frank’s.

Before he could respond, Brand’s cell rang. “It’s Doc,” he said, accepting the call. “Hey, Penelope and I were just about to meet up with Harold.”

“Glad I caught you before you did. I just sent you an email that will change the outcome of your conversation.”

I was seated close enough to hear every word Doc said.

“How?” I mouthed, which Brand repeated to him.

Doc laughed. “Take a look and see for yourselves.”

The call abruptly ended, but we remained in the car while Brand pulled up the email.

My mouth hung open when I read the contents of the letter Doc had forwarded. “Do you think this is true?” I asked him.

Brand shrugged. “Let’s go inside. I can’t wait to find out.”

While Blair was an actress, she hadn’t had enough time to prepare in order to mask her reaction when our eyes met.

“Hi, Daddy,” I said, approaching the table with my hand in Brand’s. I never called him that, but with the nugget of information contained in the email, I couldn’t help but be a little smug.

“Sweetheart, what a surprise!” he exclaimed, even though all four of us knew it wasn’t.

Conveniently, he and Blair were seated at a four-top, so when Brand pulled out the chair beside her for me, I took it.

“So, *Daddy*, I’m surprised you didn’t mention Blair and I already knew each other.”

“Blair?” he asked, looking from me to her.

When she nodded and attempted a smile, I thought for sure she was considering rushing to the restroom or maybe even out of the restaurant.

“We were at the Emma Stanley Academy together.” I studied her face. The amount of plastic surgery she’d had was apparent. “I guess we’ve both changed a lot since then, but I still recognize you.”

Blair pulled herself together. “Your father never mentioned you to me, either. What a coincidence this is.”

My eyes met Brand’s, then I looked at my dad. It was equally apparent he *had* mentioned me.

Knowing I couldn’t stomach much more of him or her, I got right to the point. “So, I understand you have some ideas for *my* place on Fire Island.”

“Pen, we talked about this. I told you I was only thinking about giving it to you. It still belongs to me, and whatever I choose to do with it is my decision.”

“Actually, it isn’t.”

My father wadded his napkin and tossed it on the table. “This isn’t the time or place for you to act out, Penelope. We’ll discuss this later, in private.”

Brand cleared his throat. “Hi, um, Blair, is it?” She nodded, and he turned to my father. “Good to see you again, Harold.”

“Who are you?”

“Dad!” I feigned a gasp. “Surely, you remember Brando Ripa.”

“Ripa? Why does that name sound familiar?”

“I’m Tara Clarkson’s half brother. I haven’t been around much lately. I’ve been in prison.” He turned toward Blair and smiled. “For fraud. Art forgery, to be precise.”

“What is this all about?” my father spat.

“Go ahead, Brand. Let’s just get this over with.”

He nodded. “Harold, a few minutes ago, you said the place on Fire Island belongs to you. Actually, it doesn’t.”

“This is preposterous.” My father stood. “Come on, Hailey. Let’s get out of here.”

Brand continued talking as if my dad hadn’t said a word. “The property located at 1 Atlantic Walk in Patchogue, New York, will be held in trust for our granddaughter, Penelope Ramsey, by her father, Harold Ramsey, until such time as she reaches the age of twenty-five when the deed will automatically transfer to her.”

I folded my arms and looked at Blair. “So, as I said, it belongs to me. What were the ideas you had? Something about fixing it up and flipping it?”

“You always were a bitch,” she seethed. Blair stood and attempted to take my father’s hand. However, he pulled away from her.

I looked her up and down. “At least I have all my original body parts. Looks like you’ve done a little fixing up yourself.”

“Penelope, I’m taking Hailey home. You and I will discuss this tomorrow.”

I shook my head. “We’re leaving tonight, Dad, and from what Brand read to you, it doesn’t appear there’s anything for us to talk about.” I looked at Blair a second time. “I’d say it was nice to see you, but it hasn’t been. I’ve no doubt you feel the same way.”

I remained seated, as did Brand, until they left. Seconds later, the waiter approached the table.

“Would you care to order anything while you wait for the rest of your party to return?”

“They won’t be, and we already ate, so no, thanks.”

The man sputtered something about the check and pulled the waiter’s wallet from his waistband.

“Sorry. I can’t help with that. You might have some luck if you let the paparazzi out front know Hailey Watson skipped out on her bill.”

CHAPTER 6

Brand

Rather than sleep, Penelope and I sat on the terrace of the oceanfront room I’d reserved for us, listening to the crashing waves and talking.

“The first time you ever called me Butterfly was on Fire Island. Do you remember?”

I held her in my arms on the chaise we shared. “I told you I remember everything, but do you remember why?”

“What’s today?”

I checked the time. “As of three hours ago, it’s the fifteenth of September.”

“It was this time of year, almost exactly. Tara brought you to the island to see the annual monarch migration.”

I remembered it as if it were yesterday. Every year in mid-September, tens of thousands of monarch butterflies stopped to rest on the island’s dunes as they made their way from Canada to a mountaintop near Mexico City. I’d never seen anything like it before or since.

“There was one that would not leave you alone. It kept flying all around you. Finally, it landed on your shoulder. Seconds later, it flitted away,” Pen said.

“Tara had walked far enough away that only you could hear me when I said the butterfly reminded me of you. Flitting close, deigning to touch me, then flying away too soon for me to keep you.”

Penelope laughed. “Deigning? Hardly. God, Brand, I did everything I could to get you to pay attention to me.”

“What about now, Butterfly? What would you think about me keeping you?”

She looked up at me. “I’d like that very much. Promise to never clip my wings?”

I leaned in close enough to kiss her. “I promise.”

“I wish we were there.”

“Me too,” I said, knowing she meant Fire Island.

“Even if we left now, the monarchs would be gone by the time we arrived.”

“If we left now, you’d miss your surprise.”

“I thought staying here was my surprise.”

“Silly girl, thinking you’d only have one.”

The following morning, when we arrived at Doc Butler’s place in Montecito, my Butterfly’s surprise was waiting for her outside the front door.

“They’re all here!” she screeched, jumping out of the car as soon as it stopped to greet her four best friends in the world.

“I owe you one,” I said to Doc when he walked over and stood beside me.

“You owe me a *helluva* lot more than one, Ripa.” He smiled. “Although seeing the joy on my daughter’s face makes this one for me as much as for you.”

“Actually, it’s all for them. And you’re right; I owe you my life, Doc.”

“Live well, Brand. That’s all I ask. Oh, and catch the forgers. While the tribe doesn’t know it, there’s a whole lot more at stake than what their gallery suffered.”

“Understood, sir.”

“On that subject, the two of you will be leaving for Italy tomorrow. Before you do, you’ll need code names.”

“Hers is easy. Butterfly.”

“Did I hear my name?” Pen asked, winking when she approached and put her arms around my waist.

“It’s actually your new code name. Now, we need to come up with one for me.”

She looked up at me. “Michelangelo.”

Doc raised a brow. “Someone has a high opinion of your abilities.”

Pen shook her head. “He began his career by passing off one of his sculptures as an ancient Roman statue in order to make more money. The cardinal who purchased it recognized his extraordinary talent and forgave him. He eventually became one of Michelangelo’s patrons.”

Doc’s eyes opened wide. “You’re telling me one of history’s most famous artists started his career as a forger?”

ABOUT HEATHER SLADE

USA Today Bestselling Author Heather Slade's short, "The Butterfly Connection," is a prequel to her upcoming title *Code Name: Michelangelo*, <https://books2read.com/Michelangelo>, from the K19 Allied Intelligence series, available for preorder now.

Slade writes shamelessly sexy, edge-of-your seat romantic suspense. Giving herself the gift of writing a book one year for her birthday, she's now written fifty-plus. Her heroines are self-confident and strong with wills of their own, and hearts as big as the Colorado sky. The men are sublimely sexy, seductive alphas who rise to the challenge of capturing the sweet soul of a woman whose heart they'll hold in the palm of their hand forever. Add in a couple of neck-snapping twists and turns, a page-turning mystery, and a swoon-worthy HEA, and you'll be holding one of her books in your hands.

Connect with Heather here:

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/authorheatherslade>

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/heather_slade/

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Website: <http://heatherslade.com/>



ICE TIME

by Jami Davenport

Contemporary Sports Romance

MF, athlete, hockey, workplace

Hockey is my destiny.

I'm the son of a Hall of Famer, and I'm going places.

I've been called up from the minors to replace an injured player, and I intend to take full advantage of every second of ice time.

There's one distraction I can't walk away from.

I'm hot for the pushy social media intern who's hell-bent on increasing my internet presence.

Dazzling her with my charm and innate good looks doesn't impress her one bit. I should walk away and concentrate on hockey, but I can't, despite another insurmountable obstacle.

She's the team captain's little sister, and he's made it clear she's off limits, but since when does a little problem like that stop me from getting what I want?

CHAPTER 1

Cleanup Crew

~~Muri~~

I'm a one-woman cleanup crew after a social media disaster, and I'm not sure I'm up to it. The previous group exploited the team's hockey players to get social media likes and attention. They posted inappropriate images and suggestive descriptions of the guys to attract a large female following. Everything imploded shortly after the season ended, and the entire social media team was fired.

I've been on the job for about a week. While most of the players have left Portland for the summer, there are still several who live here full time, but they're avoiding me like I have a contagious disease for which there is no known cure.

Even my brother, the team captain, is avoiding me.

I've been recycling old images, but I crave new content.

Earlier today, I had a meeting with my boss, Addison Barlowe, who also happens to be the owner's granddaughter. She scares the crap out of me, and I'm not easily intimidated. After telling her my woes, she promised she'd get cooperation from the guys still in town, starting with our upcoming rookie star, Nolan Bellanger.

Now I'm waiting for Nolan to meet me to go over a series of media posts I have planned, interviews featuring our Icehawks Gold Partners, bars that pledge to show each Icehawk game on their televisions and as a result, are listed on the team's website as places to go to watch the games.

A guy walks in, and I instantly recognize him. Not only do I follow this team because of my brother, but I did my research. Nolan has an easy confidence in his stride and a ready smile. He's younger than my brother, Dash, but then Dash is a dinosaur when it comes to professional hockey players.

He's tall and muscled, but most defensemen are. His dark-blond hair is sun-streaked and in that faux messy style that

probably took a half hour to get just right. His perfect face is accentuated by a striking pair of green eyes. Simply put—he's hot AF.

He pauses and surveys the room before his gaze lands on me. Those green eyes slide down my body and back up before he pins me with the full impact of his gaze.

I give him a little wave, and he nods, altering his course and heading for my table.

“Mary?” he asks.

“Muri, short for Muriel,” I correct.

“Sorry, Muri.” He grins and displays two rows of perfect white teeth. I briefly wonder how many of those teeth are original, not that it matters. Pulling out a chair next to mine, he sits down.

“I'm Nolan. Nolan Bellanger.” He waits for my reaction, as if his name means something, and it does. Anyone familiar with hockey knows of the Bellangers. Nolan's dad is a Hall of Famer. His grandfather is the GM of a contending team, and his mom coaches college hockey. Nolan is the heir-apparent to the family dynasty. He was called up mid-season after an injury and played well enough he's considered a shoo-in for a slot on the team next season.

Addison selected him since he's still new enough to the team to cooperate with whatever we want, and she promised he has the personality to carry this off.

“Thank you for agreeing to take part in our project. My goal is for Portland to get to know you and your teammates better, while showcasing our Gold Partners.”

“You're new,” he says, ignoring my previous comments.

“I am.”

“You're better looking than the last bunch we had.”

“So my plan is—” He's irritating me, but I'm not going to let him know that.

“Yeah, I heard the entire social media team got canned,” he interrupts again.

“It was pretty ugly,” I agree, not wanting to talk about my predecessors. “But this is a whole new day. My mission is to build interest for the team within Portland and the surrounding area.”

“I won’t have to take off my shirt or do groin stretches for the camera?”

“No, you won’t.”

“Got it.” He seems disappointed.

“Is that a problem?”

“I’m game for anything. I don’t mind women drooling over my abs or enjoying my warm-up routine.”

“That’s nice, but we’re keeping this PG.”

“For the interviews, you mean?” His green eyes dance with mischief, and I realize he doesn’t know my brother is the team captain. He’s in for a surprise.

“Are you coming on to me?” I challenge him, and his eyes sparkle with mirth. Like most hockey players, he loves a good competition.

“Should I be?” He cocks his head and grins.

“Probably not, but don’t stop now,” I shoot back. His cockiness fades, and his eyes widen in astonishment. I laugh, loving that I got the best of him. “I’m joking. Just seeing how serious you are.”

“I’m never serious. I’m all about the fun.”

“I can see that.”

“Personally, I liked the stuff the previous social media team was doing. I’m all about gaining more female fans. I’m not sure what some of the guys were so upset about. I thought it was fun.”

“It stopped being fun when those female fans harassed the wives and girlfriends and subjected the players’ families to

sexually explicit remarks in private messages.”

“Yeah, well, their big mistake was not asking permission. I’d have given it.”

“Well, aren’t you a good sport.” Sarcasm seeps into my tone, but Nolan isn’t discouraged.

“You’re awfully young to be working for a professional hockey team.”

“I didn’t know age was a requirement. You can’t be much older than I am.”

“I’m twenty-four. You?” He shrugs and shoots me another brilliant grin. I almost need sunglasses in the bright light of his presence. Addison is right. This guy is perfect for rebuilding our image and flipping the negative attention into positive. Working off Nolan’s blinding charisma, we might be able to keep some of those female followers without exploiting our players.

“Twenty-three, not that it matters.” I look down at my notes, wanting to get this conversation back on track and out of the personal zone. “Let’s get back to business.”

“Aw, man, we were having so much fun.” He gifts me with another five-alarm smile. I grimace even as my body purrs like a satisfied tabby cat.

“My plan is to have you interview one player a week at a different Gold Partner bar. I want the interviews to be fun and personal without being prying. I have a list of questions you can ask.”

“I can’t make up my own?” He makes a big show of pouting by jutting out his lower lip. I laugh in spite of myself. Nolan is impossible to resist.

“Certainly, but I’ll need to approve any questions you come up with.”

For the first time since we’ve met, the smile drops off his handsome face, but his frown doesn’t extinguish his brilliance. If anything, it highlights his face in a different, but just as profound, way. Social media is going to eat this guy up, and all

I have to do is showcase his beautiful face and cocky personality. He's practically a one-man resurrection crew when it comes to repairing the Icehawks' social media reputation and pulling it out of the gutter.

This guy is tailor-made for what I have planned. He's also easy on the eyes. If I don't watch myself, he'll pull me into his magnetic field, and I'll be one more of the fawning women orbiting his sun.

I don't fawn, nor do I kneel at any man's feet. Well, not in supplication anyway, which presents an interesting visual. An image of getting down on my knees in front of this magnificent specimen of male hotness sends desires rushing through my veins.

I mentally shake myself. This is business, not pleasure. Besides, if I hook up with an Icehawk, my brother will mess up that pretty face of Nolan's.

"How'd you get this job?" Nolan asks.

"I applied for it." Defensiveness came across in my tone. I've dreaded this question ever since I started working for the organization. Everyone automatically assumes I was hired because of my brother. Even I wonder at times if that isn't how I landed a plumb position with a professional hockey team right out of college.

"Here's a list of interview questions."

Nolan scratches his head and narrows his gaze slightly, as if trying to figure me out. Within a second, his cocky smile returns. I push a piece of paper across the table. He reaches for it, and his fingers brush mine. A jolt of electricity flows through my body, and the chemistry between us sizzles like a steak on a hot grill.

"You can pick and choose which ones you prefer to ask," I stammer before I manage to spit out the words. This guy has me discombobulated with one random touch.

He winks, and my face flares with heat, knowing I've given myself away. He knows he affects me, and he loves it. I

study the notes in front of me as if they hold the key to world peace.

Nolan clears his throat, and I look up. His green eyes meet mine, and an involuntary shiver slides through me. He cocks a brow, as if he's noticed the chemistry between us, too.

"These questions are...lame. Like what's your favorite place to vacation? Boring. Who cares?"

"Lots of people care." I'm slightly insulted. I'm the social media person with degrees and all that crap. He should be listening to me.

"I think they're lame. Let's ask stuff no one else ever does. I'll come up with better questions."

"You'll need to run them by me first."

"Sure. Whatever."

I read between the lines. He's going to ask his own questions and not get my blessing. At least the episodes will be recorded, and I'll edit out the bad stuff, whatever that might be.

Nolan's phone buzzes, and he looks down at it. Standing, he smiles and reaches out a hand. "I gotta go. Contact me with the deets, and we'll do this thing. And don't worry, with me at the helm, the interviews will be a resounding success."

This guy doesn't have a humble bone in his body.

I stand and take his hand to shake it, but he holds it and gazes into my eyes. I want to pull away, but I can't. I'm mesmerized and completely under his spell—the last place I want to be.

"Good, uh, bye," I say as he releases my hand, which drops uselessly to my side.

"Later." He winks and saunters off.

I stare after him, unable to take my eyes off his backside with his nice ass and broad shoulders. He glances back and catches me gaping at him. Grinning, he blows me a kiss before the door closes behind him.

CHAPTER 2

That Kiss

~~Nolan~~

Muri doesn't waste time. Within twelve hours, she's set up my first interview with Captain Dash, no surprise there. Dash is the ultimate team player, selfless and generous with his time. He's everything a team captain should be and more. I admire the guy as does everyone else on our team.

I walk into the Portland Puck the next evening to film the first installment of *The Scoop with Nolan*. Sucky title, I know, but Muri loves it. I have to pick my hills to die for. That's not one of them. I note the lone camera guy near the bar and disappointment surges through me. I don't see Muri anywhere.

I've been looking forward to another sparring session since last night. I catch a flash of dark, almost black, hair and swivel my head in that direction. A slow, satisfied smile spreads across my face, as Muri emerges from the back hallway.

I approach her, and she points toward one of the barstools.

Nodding, I turn toward the seat nearest the camera. "Ready and willing to do your bidding." I bow low which elicits a giggle from Muri. I meet her gaze as I sit my ass on a barstool. She smiles this sassy, challenging smile that I've come to love in a very short time.

"I can't see you doing anyone's bidding." Her deep blue eyes remind me of someone, but damned if I can figure out who.

She has me pegged. Being a follower has never been one of my vices. I like to be in charge, and I want things my way. I'm my father's son when it comes to stuff like that. He's a legend in the league, and I aim to be as good or better. He was a center, and I'm a defenseman, which makes comparing us difficult, but the media still manages to do it anyway. I have a

good relationship with my parents, and they've always let me be my own person. I've been lucky like that.

"I'm not good at taking orders," I admit and draw a smile from her. Damn, but she's gorgeous. Her beautiful face and rocking body invaded my dreams last night, and I woke up with a purpose. I plan on making those dreams a reality. My first step is to ask her out after we're done filming tonight.

"Why am I not surprised?"

I hold her gaze and let her know with my eyes that I'm interested. Very, very interested. She glances away first, and I smirk with triumph. I'm getting to her just like she's getting to me.

Muri is spared for now when Dash enters the bar. I shake his hand, and he gives Muri a little hug. Envy curls within my stomach, and I don't like it. Jealousy is so not a good look on me. She's smiling up at my captain as if she's fond of him. Now this is freaking irritating. I'll be sure to tell her afterward that he's taken.

After some fussing with lighting, we're ready to go. Muri hands me a small stack of cards with questions on them.

"I won't need this."

She grimaces, and I grin. This woman is adorable when she smiles and frowns. Lots of women have resting bitch faces when they're unhappy, but somehow Muri manages to look sweet even when scowling. Now that's an art, and it's hot as hell.

"I insist you use these questions." She's digging in, but I always get my way.

"Sure, whatever." I take them from her and scan the cards. Same lame questions along with a few more that are even lamer. I shake my head in disappointment.

"What's wrong?"

"Still lame, sweetheart."

Dash, who's usually an even-keeled nice guy, levels me with an undeserved glower. Confused, I turn my head in his

direction.

“Don’t call her sweetheart,” he growls, as if I’d intentionally insulted her.

I held up my hands, palms toward Dash before directing my attention to Muri. “Hey, no offense intended.”

She shrugs and chooses not to comment. “Everyone ready?” Ross, the cameraman, is a tall, thin guy with thick glasses who looks like he’s been spending his spare time in his mom’s basement playing video games. Definitely a stereotypical nerd.

“Let’s start.” Muri stands back, and the camera starts rolling.

I state directly into the lens—the camera loves me—and start my spiel.

“Hey, Hawkers, this is defenseman Nolan Bellanger coming to you from one of our Gold Partners, The Portland Puck.” I read the spiel Muri has given me on the Puck and Gold Partners. I don’t mind using her intro, but the questions are going to be all mine. I flash a smile at Dash as I introduce him. He smiles back. Not one to hold a grudge, he’s forgiven my earlier misstep.

Muri beamed, pleased with my introduction. Score one point for me. I bask in the glow of her radiant smile like a fat and lazy cat in the afternoon sun. I aim to impress her with my charm and wit as I shoot questions at my captain. I’ll start out bold and adventurous to set the tone.

“So, cap, what’s your favorite sexual position?”

Dash opens his mouth but nothing comes out.

“Stop!” Muri sputters and waves frantically at Ross, who’s trying not to snicker and failing miserably. Dash’s eyes light up with amusement. She whips around and directs her fury toward me.

Whoa.

Muri is scorching hot when she’s pissed like that, and I’m more than happy to be burned by her passion.

“This...this...this has to be kept family-friendly. No questions on sex, drugs, or rock and roll.”

“Well, darn, my next question was Dash’s drug of choice.”

“Stick with the questions on the cards. You can pick from those.” She jabs her index finger at the stack in my lap, but personally, I like to think she’s pointing at my impressive boner because her outrage is making me hard.

Dash is quiet, but he’s showing too much interest in our bantering, and it’s making me nervous for reasons I don’t understand.

“Okay, fine.” I flip through the cards and find a question I can put my own spin on. “Dash, which of our coaches is the biggest hardass?”

“Stop!” shouted Muri. “That’s not the question.”

“I spiced it up a little.”

Exasperated, she blows out a long breath. Dash chuckles but immediately sobers when Muri shoots him a death glare.

“Just ask me the questions the way she wants them, or we’ll be here all night.” Dash tries hard to keep the smile off his face. He’s having as much fun as I am.

“They’re boring, but if that’s what you want...” I flip through a few more. “Do you have a sister, Dash?”

Dash’s puzzled expression is a clue something isn’t right, but I’m too dense to see the forest for the trees. “Well, yeah.”

“Okay, what guy on the team would you allow to date your sister?”

Dash gives Muri the side eye. She surprises me by not interrupting.

“Not one of them,” Dash says.

“Really? No one. What about me?”

“You’d be at the bottom of my list.”

I clasp my hands and hold them to my heart. “You wound me, Dash, right here.” I point at my chest to punctuate my

words. Dash rolls his eyes.

“Why? You wanna date my sister?” He glances at Muri. Two pairs of identical deep blue eyes regard me with interest. Then the truth slams into me like an opposing player seeking retribution.

“You’re not...you can’t be...”

“Oh, but I am. Muri Bates. You didn’t know that?” Muri’s smirk is triumphant, as if she’s gotten even with me for coming up with my own questions.

“Uh, no.”

“This is great stuff. Keep going.” Ross is filming every word, and Muri doesn’t stop him.

“You’re not dating my sister.” Dash literally growls, and I’m hurt, but I don’t show it. I’m a good guy, maybe a little wild at times, but basically I’m a good guy.

“For the record, dear brother, you don’t get to tell me who to date. Now, let’s get back to the questions,” Muri encourages, and I do my best to mind my manners for the remainder of the interview, even though I still think her questions are dull. I interject a few tamer ones of my own creation, and she doesn’t object.

Dash doesn’t linger after the interview, anxious to get home to Everly. Ross trundles away, probably back to his basement and video games. Muri hesitates as if she can’t decide whether to leave or stay.

“You’re good at this,” she says.

“I’m a ham,” I admit because it’s the truth. I love being in the limelight and have all my life. The expectations set for me are high, and I keep meeting them. My dad’s proud of me, and that means everything.

“No shit.”

“No shit,” I repeat with a wink. “You have to admit some of my questions are pretty damn good.”

“We’ll keep a few of them.” She smiles at me, and my insides melt like ice cream on hot pavement. I love women, but there’s something special about this particular female. Her deep blue eyes are warm, and her angelic face hides a quick, ruthless wit. She’s the full package.

And I want to ask her out despite Dash’s warning.

Muri reaches for her coat, and I put a hand on her arm. She shoots me a questioning smile. “What?”

“Stay and have a drink with me.” I sound like I’m pleading because I am. I’m not above begging when I need to.

Muri’s face reflects her inner conflict, then she shrugs and sits back down. “You’re buying.”

“The first round.” I grin, and she laughs, music to my ears and my soul.

“You’re a cheap bastard.” She tosses a sassy smirk in my direction, and my heart falls at her feet. I’m smitten. Like seriously smitten.

“I can be.” I’m actually frugal at times and a big spender at others. I’m a good combo of high-roller and cheap bastard.

“I’m hungry. How about some nachos?” she suggests.

“Whatever you want, I aim to please.”

Muri frowns and looks to the sky before returning her gaze to me. “You didn’t aim to please earlier.”

“Just helping you out. Your questions need spicing up.”

She wants to argue. I can see it in her eyes, but she doesn’t for once. We chat for the next couple hours until the bartender points out that it’s closing time. I glance around the large room and realize everyone has left but us. We’ve been so into each other, we haven’t noticed the bar’s emptied out.

I walk Muri to her car, and we both linger. She leans against the car door, and I face her. For a brief moment, the easiness of earlier fades, and awkwardness invades. Neither of us speak for several agonizing seconds. She breaks the ice first.

“Thank you. You’re going to be a star. These episodes will be popular with our fans.” Her eyes light up as she talks. Warmth spreads through me with the knowledge that I’ve put that smile on her face, and the awkwardness fades as quickly as it came. I can’t recall ever being this comfortable around a woman I’m attracted to. Usually I’m too busy trying to impress to be myself, but with Muri, I’m me, and all the pretenses and bluster fade to background noise.

“I couldn’t have done it without your planning and tutelage, even if I did give you shit.”

“So you admit I’m the brains, and you’re the brawn?”

A smart remark sits on the edge of my tongue, but I make the mistake of gazing into those deep blue eyes, and I forget how to speak English. Her lips part, and her pink tongue slips out and makes a circuit around her mouth. My breath hitches, and I almost have to jump-start my heart. I want to kiss that mouth. I need to kiss that mouth. I’m not strong enough to resist, and I don’t want to. I’d rather give in and taste heaven for one minute than live the rest of my life without ever knowing what she feels like.

I lean in.

She leans closer.

Our faces are inches apart. The world fades and leaves the two of us surrounded by a protective cocoon, like we’re the only two beings left on earth. And nothing else matters.

I feel her breath on my face. I inhale the sweet scent of her. I have to taste what she’s so willingly offered despite my captain’s warning.

Our lips connect, and powerful emotions almost drive me to my knees. Somehow I prevent myself from collapsing, and I step into her. Our bodies touch, and our mouths are gentle, seeking and exploring. My arms go around her, and she threads her fingers through my hair.

My slow burn flames and ignites a raging fire in my body. She matches my passion with her own blend of desire and

need. We're two people on a mission to give each other pleasure, and neither of us want to stop.

I forget we're on a sidewalk in a relatively busy area of town. I don't care. All I care about is getting more of her. Somewhere in the back of my brain, I hear a car pull next to us, and a door slams, but I'm not cognizant enough to pay attention to anything but her.

"Okay, kids, move along." The gruff voice invades our cocoon, and Muri pushes on my chest. It takes me a few moments to gather my wits and back away. Without her touch, I feel lost and alone, like a child abandoned on a street corner.

We turn as one. A smirking policeman regards us with amusement. I'm annoyed, and Muri is embarrassed.

"Sorry, officer. We got carried away." Muri slips away and hops into her car. The next thing I know, I'm standing alone on the sidewalk watching Muri's taillights fade into the distance.

CHAPTER 3

The Obstacle

~~Muri~~

That kiss.

That kiss.

OMG, that kiss.

The kiss that goes down in infamy as the hottest, toe-curling, body-slamming kiss I've ever had. Here's the problem. I want more of that man. My brother's warning won't stop me, but my worries about my job will.

When I was hired, Addison never mentioned a policy regarding staff dating players. In fact, after going over the employee handbook, what's mentioned is vague. My own brother is dating an employee of the team. Why can't I?

I'm jumping the gun, and I know it. Maybe Nolan isn't interested anyway. But I am.

On the other hand, we're both rookies in our respective jobs and trying to make the team, so to speak. I'm getting ahead of myself. It's just one kiss.

One kiss.

But damn, that one kiss.

I glance up from my desk as Ross wanders in.

"I have the video ready for you to go over. We can splice it up however you want."

Ross and I spent the next couple hours condensing the video down to ten minutes. The result is hilarious and entertaining without compromising our players. The former social media team didn't seem to grasp that the guys were humans with family and friends, not assets ripe for exploitation. I'm hell-bent on proving I can provide entertaining content without stepping over that invisible line.

At five p.m., I'm ready to call it a day. I lean back in my chair and rub the kink out of my neck caused by hours of staring at a computer monitor. I glance up when I hear a knock on my door. There stands Nolan in all his male glory, and I repress a gasp of appreciation. He's wearing shorts and a white T-shirt, showcasing his hard-muscled thighs and chest.

"Hey," he says with one of his panty-melting grins. I know my panties are melting.

"Hey," I say back as a happy-to-see-you smile lifts the corners of my mouth.

"Dinner? My treat." He wears the expression of a puppy hoping someone will throw his ball. I suppress a giggle at the thought of this big, muscled guy as an uninhibited puppy. He's not going to be a Golden Retriever, that's for sure.

"What's so amusing?" He studies me carefully, and I duck my head to hide my smirk. I hadn't meant to broadcast my thoughts so clearly.

"Just wondering what kind of dog you'd be."

His brows rise and disappear under his shaggy blond hair. “Dog? You’re picturing me as a dog?”

“Yeah, you know, maybe one of those Shih Tzus with the long hair.”

Nolan’s eyes reflect his disbelief. “You’re kidding, right?”

“You’d be cute with a pink bow in your hair.”

Nolan surprises me by throwing back his head and howling with laughter. The guy has a good sense of humor. I have to give him credit for being a good sport, and I find myself joining in with him. Finally, he sobers enough to speak. “So dinner?”

“Are you asking me on a date?”

“Nope, that’d be asking for trouble with the team captain. I prefer to think of it as a meeting of the minds between partners in crime. We’re interviewing Briggs next. That’ll take some planning.”

“You’re on. I was just finishing up.” I wish I had time to freshen up my makeup, but he’s standing in the doorway waiting, and I don’t think now would be a good time to primp. He’ll have to take me as I am.

Together we walk to the elevator and outside. It’s a lovely summer day in Portland. Not too hot or too cold. A nice breeze is blowing off the Columbia River keeping the temps in the upper seventies. We walk along the sidewalk and comment on items in windows. Nolan reaches for my hand. I should shake it off, but I don’t. I want to hold hands with him. I also want him to kiss me again.

“Do you like Thai?” he asks as we pause near a hole-in-the-wall restaurant with only a half dozen tables. There’s one empty spot for two. I consider it destiny, assuming destiny cares where we eat.

“Love it.”

“Let’s try this. These little places are often hidden gems.” He squeezes my hand, and we stroll inside. My hand feels so

good in his strong, yet oddly gentle, grip. I'm falling for this guy, and it's so unlike me to fall this hard this fast.

I have friends who are happily married and claim they knew the second they laid eyes on their soulmate. I'm not a believer in love at first sight or soulmates, yet there's something about Nolan, something special and exciting and intriguing. Okay, plus to be honest, he's hot, and I'm hot for him. He must feel the same way, or he wouldn't invite me to dinner.

We sit down and share multiple dishes and talk like old friends. Even though Nolan is drop-dead gorgeous and knows it, he's so easy to be around that I don't feel as if I have to impress him.

After dinner, we continue our stroll down the city streets, talking and laughing, until he pulls me into a recessed doorway of an apartment building. My gasp of surprise is cut off by his mouth on mine. We kiss as if our life depends on it. Like we can't get enough of each other. Like we want to crawl into each other's skin. The blaring of a car horn interrupts us this time, and reluctantly, we part.

Holding both my hands, Nolan gazes down at me, uncharacteristically serious. "I really like you, Muri."

"I like you, too." My voice wavers a little because I'm not kidding. I don't just like this guy, I'm head over heels for him.

"I want to date you. Exclusively. Is that too much too soon?"

"Probably, but let's throw caution to the wind and go for it."

"I like the way you think."

"There's one small obstacle."

"Small? I'd hardly call a six foot three, two-hundred-and-fifteen pound center small."

I laughed. "I want his blessing. I don't need it, but I'd like it."

"I might need it," he admits.

“I think it’d be easier for you in the locker room if he’s onboard.”

We exchange glances and read each other’s minds.

“Let’s do it.” He grabs my hand, and we hustle down the street, drunk on each other, and ready to take this next step. The whirlwind I’m on isn’t stopping but spinning harder, and I’m hanging on tight.

CHAPTER 4

Stay the Night

~~Nolan~~

I’ve done a lot of spontaneous stuff in my life, but going to Dash’s place wins the spontaneity cup. I raise my hand to rap on his door but stop in midair. I glance at Muri standing at my side.

“You sure you want to do this?”

“Positive. Dash is a reasonable guy. He’ll be okay with this once he gets used to the idea.”

“Okay, here goes.” I knock on the door. Muri puts her hand in mine in a display of solidarity. I’m not sure what the captain will think about that, but he might as well get used to it. I’m not going away.

Dash opens the door wearing sweats and a ratty T-shirt. His gaze snaps to our linked hands and back to our faces, first mine, then Muri’s, then mine again. His expression is unreadable. He’s more closed off than I’ve ever seen him.

“Can we come in?” Muri asks.

Before Dash answers, Everly rushes to the door and pulls us inside. If she notices our hand-holding, she doesn’t indicate any surprise.

“Muri, Nolan, how happy we are you dropped by. We were about to have a drink outside. Come join us.”

We follow them outside to their large patio that overlooks Portland with the river in the distance. Everly plies us with wine while Dash leans against the railing and sips on his drink. His expression gives nothing away, and I resist the urge to fidget. Dash is a personal hero of mine. I've watched his career since I was a little kid, and I have great admiration for him, which makes this doubly hard. Regardless, I'm committed to be upfront and honest rather than sneak around behind his back.

We sit down on the comfy patio furniture and make small talk about the team and living in Portland. It's tense and obvious that we came here for a reason. Dash isn't going to ask. He'll let me speak in my own time. That's just the kind of guy he is. As we skirt all around the subject, tension builds. I'm about to open my mouth when Muri beats me to it.

"Okay, I can't take this anymore." She almost shrieks. She's as nervous as I am. Dash cocks his head but says nothing while Everly hides a smile.

Not wanting Muri to take the bulk of the heat, I speak up. "I want your permission to date your sister."

If Dash is caught off guard, he doesn't show it.

"We don't need your permission, but we'd rather have your support," Muri rushes to add.

"Hmmm." Dash rubs his chin and swings his gaze to Everly. They exchange some kind of silent communication between each other before he faces us again. "If you hurt her, I'll run over you with a Zamboni, after which I'll tie you to the net and let the guys shoot pucks at you."

Muri and I blow out a breath of relief and start laughing. Dash and Everly join us. Everly beams at Dash, like she's proud of him.

"I promise I'll do right by her." I reach my hand out to my captain. At first I fear he might ignore the gesture, but then he takes my hand and shakes it.

"I'm serious. Don't hurt my sister." Dash's gaze slices into me, and I squirm under the intensity of it. He means every

word he's said.

"I won't." I also mean every word I've said.

"Well, then, I guess we should have a toast." Everly hurries to fill our glasses before raising her own. She looks to Dash.

"To a great future," he says, and we clink glasses.

The remainder of the evening is spent in relaxed conversation and laughter. I'm relieved that Dash isn't pissed about us, but I will heed his warning. I won't hurt his sister.

Afterward, I drive Muri to her apartment and walk her to the door. Of course, we share a few of those soul-searing kisses I've come to covet.

When she finally draws back and gazes up at me, I smile down at her. Her lips are parted and slightly swollen from our lengthy kissing session, and she looks hotter than hot. My body responds with a rush of desire.

"I guess I should be going. Good night, Muri." Reluctantly, I back away from her, but she reaches out and touches my arm.

"Don't go, Nolan." Her voice is husky with need, and her eyes glow with desire.

I freeze and gaze at her, not wanting to misinterpret the message. "Don't go?"

"Stay the night. Please."

Those might be the four best words in the English language.

Muri opens the door to her apartment, and we both start a new chapter in our lives as a couple. I couldn't be happier, and the world couldn't be brighter.

ABOUT JAMI DAVENPORT

USA Today Bestselling Author Jami Davenport writes sexy contemporary and sports romances, including her Seattle Sockeyes, Steelheads, The Scoring series, and Portland Icehawks. A retired former computer geek, Jami has now achieved her lifelong dream of becoming a full-time author. She lives on a small farm near Puget Sound with her Army Ranger-turned-plumber husband and assorted animals who make guest appearances in her books. She's a lifetime Seahawks and Mariners fan and a proud season ticket holder for the Seattle Kraken hockey team.

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SLOW MOTION

by Kat Mizera

Contemporary Romance

Rockstar, Unplanned Pregnancy

Whoever said love is the answer... obviously didn't ask the right questions.

I've loved Noah for a long time, but I can't compete with his addiction, especially while he's a roadie for a touring rock band.

Being with him is so much harder than I thought it would be, but I don't know if I'm ready to give up on him.

An unplanned pregnancy leaves us teetering on the edge.

It'll either pull us together or tear us apart.

CHAPTER 1

Kiki

Nine months was a lie told to women to make us feel like we could survive pregnancy. In actuality, you were pregnant for a hundred years and a few days. And right around the time you were positive you couldn't take another minute of it, your water broke in the middle of a shift at work.

I looked down at the puddle at my feet with disgust.

Gross.

With a sigh, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and called my fiancé, Noah. He was working so I already knew he wouldn't answer, but I left what I hoped was a relaxed, unemotional message on his voicemail.

"Hey, babe, it's me. Looks like Baby Girl has finally decided to make an appearance. Hope you can get back here on time. Love you." I disconnected and stuck the phone back in my pocket. A delicious tray of prosciutto and camembert puffs would be coming out of the oven in a few minutes, and I needed to watch them. Baby Girl, which was the only name we'd been able to agree on so far, didn't seem to be in any hurry considering my due date had been two days ago.

"Did you pee yourself?" My boss, Marla, demanded, staring at the puddle at my feet.

"No, I didn't pee myself." I rolled my eyes at her. "My water broke, but—"

"What?!" Marla gazed at me and then suddenly began shrieking. "Gordon, pull the van around! Nita, get Kiki's things from the back! We need to—"

"No, I don't think—" I tried to interrupt but she wasn't having it.

"Honey, once your water breaks, it's time. We *have* to get you to a hospital pronto."

"It could be hours!" I protested. "And I really want to hold off as long as possible, to give Noah time to get here."

“It could be five minutes or five days,” Nita said with a grin. “But you should be at the hospital either way.”

“I don’t *want* to be at the hospital any longer than necessary,” I snapped. “And I need Noah to get here. So, if you guys could slow down and let me catch my breath, it would be awesome.” I hadn’t meant to snap at them, but the words tumbled out anyway and my coworkers looked a little startled at my outburst.

“Bri would know what to do if she was here,” Marla mumbled, referring to my best friend, who’d once worked with us.

“Bri is in L.A.,” I responded. “Which means you guys need to chill. Now, the puffs will be done in three minutes. Once they’re out, I’ll call Noah again and we’ll go from there.”

“Are you having contractions?” Marla asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Not yet.” I managed to smile even though I was more nervous than I was letting on. I’d gone through most of my pregnancy on my own, since Noah was on tour with the band he worked for as a roadie, and it had only gotten harder as I’d gotten closer to my due date.

It wasn’t like Noah had abandoned me. He was working, making money we would need once the baby was here and I had to take time off from the catering company I worked for. But I hated being apart.

The worst part was I couldn’t tell him how I felt because he loved his job. And God knew, he needed something to be excited about. Between his history of addiction and recent stint in rehab, I’d been walking on eggshells when it came to my very unplanned and untimely pregnancy. Not that I’d gotten pregnant on my own, but he’d overdosed after I told him the news, so I’d been extremely cautious about letting him see how scared I was. And frankly, being on my own so much put me in a perpetual bad mood. Not being able to reach him when I needed him annoyed me even more.

“He’ll get here,” Nita said softly, putting a hand on my arm. “Now we need to go. Marla and Gordie will stay here to take care of the food, and I’ll take you to the hospital.”

I waved my hand in protest. “But—”

“The only thing you need to do right now is have a baby.”

“Bri’s about to call you,” Marla yelled. “She can be here in a few hours.”

My phone rang before I could respond, and I yanked it out of my pocket again. “Hey.”

“It’s time!” There was no mistaking the excitement in my best friend’s voice.

“Goody,” I muttered sarcastically. “I’m totally looking forward to spending the next however many hours screaming in agony.”

“You’ll get the epidural, and it’ll be fine,” she said, laughing. “And I’m heading to Vegas right now. Hopefully, I’ll be there before you give birth.”

“I’m sure you’ll be here before Noah,” I murmured. Noah was her brother, so I’d been careful about what I said with regard to our current situation, but I was too out of sorts right now to care.

“Did you call him?” she asked.

“Of course!” I snapped. “But even though he knows my due date passed two days ago, he couldn’t be bothered to answer.”

“They’re probably in the middle of soundcheck,” she said quietly.

“And I’m in the middle of giving birth to his kid!”

We were both quiet for a beat before she said, “You’re upset. I understand. I’m on my way and I’ll make sure Noah calls the minute he’s done.”

“He promised he’d be here,” I said, suddenly feeling defeated. “But all he thinks about is money.”

“Because you need it.”

“I know, but at what cost?” Tears came out of nowhere, and I hurried to the back door for some privacy. “I need him, not money. *Him!*” I swiped at my eyes, hurt and frustrated and suddenly battling an intense bout of pain. “Oh, shit.”

“What? Is it a contraction?”

I was too busy trying to breathe to answer.

“I’m coming,” Bri said softly. “Go to the hospital, get the good drugs, and wait for me, okay?”

“It shouldn’t be your job,” I whispered through clenched teeth. “*He* should be doing everything in his power to get here, not you.”

She probably didn’t respond because she couldn’t.

I was right, and there was no getting around it.

CHAPTER 2

Noah

Some days were easy. Everything went according to plan, work ran smoothly, and flights were on time.

Then there were days like today.

When guitar strings broke repeatedly, cables shorted out, and technology seemed to be relying on a drunk hamster running on a wheel somewhere. Every god damn thing that could have gone wrong during a sound check did, culminating with me losing my phone. And I hadn’t even realized it until I was on my way to the airport.

Panic washed over me because Kiki, my pregnant fiancée, was going to kill me.

I was already on thin ice with her so this was the last thing I needed. She’d been spectacularly annoyed with me lately, and while I’d gotten somewhat used to her pregnancy

hormones, this felt like something else. It was hard to put my finger on it from so far away, though, so I was doing the best I could.

Granted, our relationship had been a dumpster fire since day one, but she'd come into it with her eyes open. It wasn't like I'd lied about being an addict. Hell, we'd fallen in love while I'd still needed alcohol to get me through every shift at the catering company.

Then my sister started dating the drummer for Nobody's Fool, a hot, up-and-coming rock band, and suddenly this amazing opportunity had fallen into my lap. It wasn't just a job, it was a career, something a loser like me had never thought possible. I'd found friends—*brothers*—in the Nobody's Fool family, and then I'd found out I was going to be a dad. Kiki and I had been too new to have planned something like that, but fate seemed to have plans of its own.

I was the first to admit I hadn't taken the news well, overdosing and winding up back in rehab. That had turned out to be a good thing because it had been a huge turning point for me, but it seemed to have put a rift in my relationship with Kiki, which scared me. We'd done a lot of talking and soul-searching, and she'd said all the right things, but it was getting harder and harder to read her. As her pregnancy progressed, the distance between us grew as well, and I didn't know how to fix it from so far away.

I'd been working crazy hours, taking on small jobs for the headlining act of the tour, Onyx Knight, in addition to my work with Nobody's Fool. I wanted Kiki to take as much time off as possible to recover after childbirth, but we needed her salary to survive, so I'd been squirreling away money to surprise her. Hell, everything I'd been doing had been for her and the baby, but all she seemed to see was that I was gone for long periods of time.

It probably didn't help that I was busy and hadn't taken the time to really talk to her about it. I'd tried, but she'd been cranky and resistant to everything I said initially, so eventually I'd stopped trying. And frankly, I was hurt. I was busting my ass to change, get better, and be the man she and our unborn

baby deserved, all while trying to surprise her with the extra money I'd been making. In return, she was busting my balls about how long it took me to respond to texts or how often I could get home to visit.

I didn't know what she wanted from me, but I wasn't going to miss the birth of my kid. I'd already had a flight booked for today and had left right after soundcheck to get on a plane to Las Vegas. The plan had been to surprise her at work, so imagine *my* surprise when I'd arrived at the catering company's shop to hear she was at the hospital.

In labor.

And if she'd been trying to call me, it was going right to voicemail, which I was sure had pissed her off.

I couldn't afford to buy another phone at the airport, so I'd figuratively held my breath during the flight and as I'd taken cabs around town. Luckily, I managed to get to the hospital just before she started to push. I didn't know what I would have done had I been too late, but at least I didn't have to worry about that now.

"Noah!" Her eyes widened when I finally got to her room, as if she couldn't quite believe it was me, and then a smile broke out.

"Hey, beautiful." I practically ran to her side, leaning over to brush my lips across her sweaty brow. "Sorry I'm late. Lost my phone. It was a long day."

Her eyes narrowed for a split second, but then she just shook her head. "Only you, babe."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm just glad you're here." She reached up, putting a hand on my cheek. "I've missed you."

"I missed you too, but I'm here now. And so excited to meet our baby girl."

"Me too. She's not in a hurry to get here, though."

"Hey, bro." My sister came over, gave me a quick hug and headed for the door. "I'll see you guys later."

“Where are you going?” Kiki called after her.

“I’ll just be in the waiting room, but you don’t need me,” she said softly. “There are already a bunch of people in the room.”

“Thanks, sis.” I gave her a quick nod before turning my attention back to Kiki. “Did you get an epidural?”

“Yup.” She nodded.

“So not too bad so far?”

“Not bad at all, she’s just taking her time. I’ve progressed really slowly, but I think something is happening.”

“It’s time to push, Kiki,” her doctor said, speaking up for the first time.

“Let’s do this,” Kiki whispered, her big blue eyes meeting mine.

And four hours later, Elizabeth Brianna Ellis was born.

CHAPTER 3

Kiki

Being a mom was weird.

Not good, not bad, just weird.

She’d just come out of me, all seven pounds, eight ounces of her. She had a shock of white-blond hair that seemed to be standing straight up most of the time, cloudy blue eyes that the nurses assured us would clear up, and a big pimple on her chin. Poor baby, getting acne right off the bat. She also had perfectly shaped berry-red lips, pudgy little cheeks, and the cutest, tiniest little toes. I spent far too much time staring at the different parts of her body, knowing Noah and I had created her but suddenly unsure what to do with her.

Thankfully, she didn’t cry much the first twenty-four hours, so I slept and Noah held her. I’d made the decision not

to breastfeed, because once Noah was gone, I'd be on my own and I needed to be able to breathe. I had to eliminate any possible stressors and that felt like the easiest. It wasn't the most cost-effective decision, but I had breast implants, so there was a fifty-fifty chance I wouldn't produce enough milk anyway.

"Hello, my sweet Elizabeth." Noah had the baby in his arms as I woke up the first morning we were at home, and it was obvious he was enthralled with her. He'd gotten up with her overnight, so I'd managed to sleep seven straight hours, which was amazing.

"Good morning," I whispered, getting out of bed and joining him by the window of our bedroom.

"Good morning." He smiled, the sun glinting off his shaggy, gold-blond hair. When we'd first gotten together, it had been long, stringy, and dull, his meth addiction killing him from the inside out. More than a year later, it was full and healthy, and I loved running my fingers through it. I loved everything about him, really.

He was a quiet, gentle soul who'd suffered so much in his twenty-four years on earth. His parents were useless—they hadn't even met the baby yet—and though Bri was amazing, there had only been so much she could do when they were growing up. The car accident that killed two of his best friends and made a quadriplegic out of his then-girlfriend had hit him hard. He hadn't been driving but waking up to find two of his friends had died had been a lot for a sixteen-year-old.

After that, it had been all downhill.

Until we got together.

I'd known it would be a hard road, loving a man with internal demons I couldn't see, fix, or understand, but the heart wanted what it wanted, no matter what my brain was telling me. And I loved him so much, but I was struggling with the way things were. What kind of relationship could we have if he was never home? And how was he going to be a father that way? At the same time, how could I ask him to give up the one thing he'd become so good at in such a short amount of time?

Asking him to choose between his job and his family seemed wrong, even to me, but I hadn't been happy the last six months and I didn't see any kind of light at the end of the tunnel.

"Kiki, she's perfect." Noah looked at me. "You did good."

"*We* did good," I said, leaning over to rest my head on the side of his arm. "And yes, she's perfect."

"I don't know how I'm going to go back to work," he whispered. "Leaving you guys is going to suck."

The moment of magic was gone, and I sighed. "We should talk. Let me throw one of the casseroles Marla brought over in the oven and make coffee."

"Casserole is already in the oven," he said, chuckling. "I was hungry. Five more minutes. And I made coffee."

This right here was one of the many reasons I loved him.

Noah gave one hundred percent in everything. Whether it was work or play or our relationship. He was present, interested, invested. That dedication had been a problem when it came to his situation with drugs, but it was awesome when it came to how he treated me. Always thoughtful, gentle, loving. That was partly why I missed him so much when he was gone.

"I need to apologize," Noah said once we'd put Elizabeth in her bouncy chair and had steaming cups of coffee in front of us. "I know I haven't been as attentive as I would've liked, but all I wanted was to save up enough money for you to stay home with her while you heal."

"Sometimes it's like you forget about me when you're on the road," I said quietly.

"You and the baby are all I think about," he said, frowning.

"It doesn't feel like it."

"I'm sorry I work so many hours, but I was saving up for her." He motioned to the baby. "So when our little rebel got here, you could relax and not worry about money." He pulled

an envelope out of his leather jacket, which was on the back of his chair.

“What’s this?” I asked, opening it. I stared. There were a lot of hundred-dollar bills in there. “Noah, where did you get this?”

“Working.” He met my gaze. “Babe, I was working eighteen-hour days, doing my normal stuff for Nobody’s Fool and then helping Z out at night with some special projects Onyx Knight has going on.”

“This is four thousand dollars.”

“I know. It’s for my beautiful little rebel girls.”

He’d always called me his little rebel because of my piercings, tattoos, and crazy hair colors. But I hadn’t felt like much of a rebel lately. Not with swollen ankles, short nails, and natural blond hair. I’d been dying my hair jet black since I was seventeen, but I hadn’t hesitated when the doctor had suggested I not dye it during the pregnancy. Then I’d decided to save money by not getting my nails done anymore and I’d slowly morphed into the mommy version of myself. And she was someone I didn’t know at all.

“I’m not her anymore, Noah. The rebel you fell in love with.”

“Sure you are.” He reached for my hand, holding it tightly. “This is an adjustment period. New baby, all the hormones and shit... it’s going to settle down.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” I whispered.

“We’ll figure it out together.” He inched his chair closer to mine.

“How?” I asked. “With you on the road and me at home? How are we going to figure anything out?”

“If I don’t go back on the road, what will we do?” he asked. “You can’t work yet. And Beth is going to need you.”

“She’s going to need you too.”

“She also needs parents who have a purpose in life.” He frowned. “You really want me to move home to Vegas and go back to bussing tables? Making minimum wage and tips? Is that what you see for our future?”

“What do you see?” I asked the question though I was dreading the answer.

“I see us having a house in the suburbs where we don’t have to worry about whether or not we have money for our daughter’s new bike. Or for you to fly out to see me on the road. Or to go to the doctor.” He paused. “What do you see, Kiki? Us living in an apartment, always worrying about how we’re going to pay bills, wondering how we’re going to afford health insurance? You not being able to take days off because you don’t get paid if you don’t work?”

“I don’t have those kinds of visions!” I snapped impatiently. “Mine are about us. Our love. Our family. I don’t care about that stuff as long as we’re together!”

“Love doesn’t pay the bills,” he said.

“And paid bills don’t make a family,” I responded.

“I don’t want to be poor anymore,” he said, his voice tight. “I’d like to do more than work a dead-end job with nothing to look forward to.”

“And I’d like a husband I’m actually going to see more than once every few months!”

We stared at each other.

“What do you want me to do? You want me to quit?”

“I don’t know.”

“I love you,” he said softly. “But I can’t just walk away from our future. It’ll be a short-term sacrifice for our long-term goals. I won’t be doing this forever.”

“No?” I countered. “What else are you going to be able to do? Roadies only make money on tour. Once you stop, we’ll be right back to square one.”

He didn’t respond, and I had nothing else to say.

We'd reached a stalemate, and I was too afraid to think about what that might mean.

CHAPTER 4

Noah

The next four or five days were hard. Kiki and I didn't say much to each other, and I didn't want to upset her any more than I already had. She was still healing from the delivery, so I tried to let her sleep as much as I could. The truth was, I didn't know how she would handle everything once I was gone, which just reinforced my need to make more money.

I hated how hard this was, and it made me hate myself for being in a situation where I couldn't hire a nurse to help her. Bri and Bash, her husband, had gifted us a night nanny for six weeks, but Kiki was saving it for when I was gone since I could only take two weeks off. I didn't know what else to do. Nobody's Fool wasn't in a position to keep me on the payroll for any longer than that since they were an opening act.

The problem was that she didn't want me to be out on the road at all, but it was the only thing that had ever fulfilled me. I loved Kiki, but I knew you couldn't base your entire self-worth on the feelings you had for someone else. That was part of what had sent me down the addiction road in the first place and I never wanted to go there again. Especially not now that I had so much to live for.

After the car accident that took the lives of my friends and crippled my then-girlfriend, it felt like I'd lost everything. My friends, my girl, myself. Alcohol and crystal meth had tricked me into believing nothing else mattered. Now I knew better, of course, but getting clean had been the hardest thing I'd ever had to do, especially the second time. And I absolutely couldn't screw up again. Ever.

I had a family, and they needed me.

“One of the good things about working for a caterer,” Kiki said, pulling a foil pan of chicken and rice out of the oven. “We have enough food to last us weeks, and they keep bringing more.” In addition to the food they’d brought when Beth had been born, we’d also been getting all of the catering company’s leftovers, so we didn’t need much in the way of groceries and all we had to do was stick stuff in the oven or microwave.

“Yeah. We have good friends.”

She nodded. “Yeah.” She shifted from one foot to the other, as if she had something else she wanted to say. And she looked so damn sad. Even with her hair up in a ponytail and no makeup, I thought she looked beautiful, but the main thing I’d seen in her since our talk the other morning was sadness.

“What’s wrong?” I asked softly. “Talk to me, Kiki.”

“You haven’t wanted to talk.”

“I have, but it seems like no matter what I say, it upsets you, and I don’t want you to be upset right now.”

“I’m not upset,” she muttered.

“Then why have you been avoiding me?”

“We have a newborn and we’re busy.”

“We literally have nothing else to do but take turns holding, feeding, and staring at her,” I replied. “And she’s been sleeping pretty well, so we can’t even say we’re not sleeping.”

She looked away.

“You want me to quit,” I said finally, waiting until she met my gaze.

“I want you to do something where you come home at night.”

“I don’t have any skills to work nine-to-five,” I said. “I didn’t even graduate high school. I’m not good with math, and I’m not well-read. I don’t know anything about cars, my

computer knowledge is limited to video games, and I don't think I'm cut out for construction."

"Marla would give you your job back," she said. "And you could work your way up to waiter or bartender and—"

"You want me to be a bartender?" I asked, suddenly frustrated. "So we can live paycheck-to-paycheck, and if one of us breaks an arm or leg, we're fucked?"

She threw up her hands. "I've been doing just fine waiting tables. I've been on my own since I was eighteen and waiting tables pays the bills. There's no reason why we can't both do it for a while. Until you find something else."

"I can't just leave the tour. They're counting on me. They paid for me to go to rehab. They're paying me right now even though I'm not working. Is Marla going to give us paid time off?"

"Not yet, but she's working on a benefits plan."

"I *have* benefits."

"But you're not here, and they don't cover me or the baby!"

"They already cover the baby, and they'll cover you once we get married."

"You haven't even wanted to talk about getting married."

"We don't have the money, and I don't want to elope."

"Everything is about money with you," she yelled.

"Because without it, life is fucking hard. You know that as well as I do."

We stared at each other for a few beats and then my phone started to ring.

Since I didn't want to yell anymore, I decided to answer it even though I didn't recognize the number. "Hello?"

"Noah, hey. This is Z."

"Hey, Z. What's up?" William "Z" Zerkesian was the lead guitarist for Onyx Knight, and while I knew him, he'd never

called me before.

“Listen, we have a situation. I know you and your girl just had a baby, but I could really use you. Roddy fell and broke his leg so he’s out of commission for six weeks, maybe the rest of the tour. I’m willing to pay anything you want, within reason, if you’ll roadie for me while he’s recuperating.”

“Seriously?” I nearly choked.

I made about half of what Z’s roadies made so even asking for double, which I knew was doable, would be incredible.

“I can probably get by another four or five days, but I could really use you next week. The timing is horrible, so name your price. I’ll even spring for a nanny or whatever to help your girl with the baby while you’re gone. Whatever you need. I can make some calls, get the union to send someone, but I need someone I trust, who already knows the set. And that’s you.”

Fuck.

Kiki was going to kill me.

But how could I say no? He was offering me a potentially ridiculous amount of money.

“I have to talk to Kiki, so let me call you back,” I said diplomatically, since in my head the answer was a resounding yes, but Kiki was watching.

“Cool. Talk soon.” He disconnected, and I turned to her.

She was going to be pissed, but if Z paid for someone to help her for the next six weeks or so, and then we still had the night nurse gift from Bri and Bash, she’d have help for close to three months. At that point the tour would be over, I’d come home, and we could re-evaluate.

Right?

I really fucking hoped so.

CHAPTER 5

Kiki

“You’re going back to work early.” I knew that before he even hung up the phone.

“Z’s in a bind and desperate,” he said quickly. “He’s even willing to hire a nanny to help you. He said to name my price, and I’m going to ask for double.”

“What about Nobody’s Fool?”

“We didn’t get that far. I wanted to talk to you first, but I have to assume since he had to have gotten my number from Stu or Bash, they’ve already discussed it.”

I sighed. “This is what I’m talking about.”

“What? I know the timing sucks, but this is the kind of money that allows us to relax a little when the tour is over.”

“When is that?”

“We go until May, so there’s about two months left.”

“So, we have enough to last us until your job ends. Then what? Do you have something else lined up?”

“Not yet,” he said. “But that’s why I want to do this, so we don’t have to stress while I look for something else.”

“You think I’m upset because you’re going to be gone a lot,” I said slowly. “But the truth is, I’m a lot more worried about how unstable it is. A tour ends and you’re out of work. That’s never going to change.”

“Sure it will. I’m making contacts and building a reputation. That stuff takes time, but once it does, I’ll potentially have jobs lined up one after another.”

“That’s the plan? To just hop from one tour to the next, sending home money?”

“Short-term, yes. How else are we going to survive? Babies are expensive.”

“So I’m essentially going to raise her as a single mom, while you’ll be partying and traveling the world, living your best life.”

“Partying?” His eyebrows rose. “I’m an *addict*, struggling every damn day to stay clean while working around both drugs and alcohol, away from my girl and now my kid, and you think I’ll be living my best life?”

“Well, you don’t seem to want to stay here and be a dad and fiancé.”

“You were on board with this when I got the job!” I protested. “Now that I’m doing it, making money and learning the ropes, you want me to stop? With nothing but waiting tables to fall back on? What’s changed, Kiki? We both know I’m not going to be happy waiting tables or even bartending.”

“We didn’t plan to get pregnant, but we did, and now we have to adjust our lives accordingly.” I knew I was being somewhat unreasonable, but we’d both made this baby, and it didn’t seem fair that I was going to be home raising her while he got to follow his dreams. Even if those dreams paid the bills.

“I just went through a bunch of huge adjustments,” he said quietly. “My second time in rehab, training for a new job, moving in with you, becoming a father... I need a break, Kiki.”

“What about me?” I whispered, suddenly on the verge of tears. “What about what I need?”

“Babe, I’m trying.” His green eyes met mine sadly. “I’ve never tried harder to stay sober, or worked harder than I am now, and it’s all for you. You have to know that.”

“I do.” I took a shaky breath. “It’s just hard. Everything is so fucking hard.”

“It’s hard for me too.”

“Is it? You’re busy, going from one city to the next. You work a lot more hours than I do, so you’re probably not even thinking about me most of the day. Then you’re sleeping, eating, and doing it all again.”

“We spend hours on the road driving,” he said quietly. “Half the time, I don’t get to sleep in a bed at a hotel. I sleep in the passenger seat of one of the trucks unless it’s my turn to drive. For a couple of hours, during the actual performance, I’m too busy to breathe. The rest of the time it’s drudgery. Sure, we have fun sometimes, and occasionally we go to a movie or do something touristy, but that’s rare. Maybe twice a month. Other than that? I’m missing you and so horny I jack off in the shower every damn day.”

“I’m sorry.” I looked down, battling a weird combination of sad, angry, and terrified.

“Everything I’m doing is for us, so we have a future. I need to have something to focus on other than you and the baby.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m an addict. And a bored addict goes looking for drugs.”

“So I’m boring?”

I sounded pathetic even to my own ears but couldn’t seem to stop the things that were coming out of my mouth.

“Jesus, babe.” He got up and came closer to me, dropping down to his haunches so he could look up into my face. “You’re not boring. I love you. My addiction is a separate thing, and you know that. I need to stay busy and focused, and you have a life too. I have to have my own things, my own interests, because co-dependency isn’t healthy for me. And I love my job. I’ve finally found something I’m good at. Something I look forward to everyday. Eventually, it’s going to pay really well too.”

“I know. I just...”

“What? Tell me.”

“I don’t know if I can do this, Noah.”

“Do what?”

“Be with a man who’s not here.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.” I turned away, resting my elbows on the table and my chin in my hands. “Maybe we need to take the time while you’re finishing this tour to think about what we want. Both together and separately.”

He looked so shell-shocked I felt bad.

But just for a few seconds.

I didn’t want to raise Beth alone, and deep down I’d always been afraid that was what would happen anyway. Between his job, his addiction, and the general fragility of our relationship, it didn’t seem likely it was going to work out, so why even bother putting in the effort?

“Are you saying you want to break up?” he asked, slowly getting to his feet.

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. But since you’re going to be gone anyway, we need to use that time apart to think.”

“I don’t need to think.”

“Well, maybe I do.”

“Is ending things what you want?” There was hurt and a touch of anger in his green eyes.

“I don’t know!” I snapped, tears filling my eyes. “I don’t know anything and you continuing to ask me doesn’t help!” I jumped up so fast my chair tipped over, making a crashing sound and startling Beth, who started to cry.

“Kiki!” Noah called after me as he reached for the baby, but I turned and ran to our bedroom, locking the door behind me. I wrapped my arms around myself and leaned against it, letting the tears pour down my face.

I didn’t know what had just happened, but I didn’t know how to fix things either.

Maybe this had been our destiny all along.

CHAPTER 6

Noah

It nearly killed me to leave two days after the big fight with Kiki, but she wasn't talking to me, and my very presence seemed to upset her. I had no intention of ending things, but it might be a good thing all around for us to be apart for a few weeks because I didn't know what was going on with her. I really needed to talk to someone, but it had been impossible while I'd been home. Now that I was on the road again, I was busy as hell, but Kiki and the baby were always on my mind.

"You okay, bro?" Bash asked me on my third day back. I'd been running around like a chicken with my head cut off, working for both bands with no break between shows.

"Busy," I replied.

"Yeah, I know, but Brianna told me there's some trouble at home. I wondered if you needed to talk or anything."

He was the best brother-in-law a guy could ask for, and I took a minute to gather my thoughts.

"I don't know what's going on with her," I said simply. "She said we should use the time we're apart to think about what we want going forward."

He frowned. "Has she ever said anything like that before, or did this come out of left field?"

"She's suddenly really upset about the fact that my job keeps me on the road for months at a time." I stopped what I was doing and looked at him. "I don't know how to fix that because I need to work. She seems to think waiting tables is a viable career option for me, but that's bullshit, and we both know it. I'm guessing she's insecure about taking care of the baby on her own or something? But she wouldn't talk to me. She literally shut me out. Completely."

"Bri thinks there might be some postpartum depression going on," Bash said quietly.

Guilt hit me right in the gut.

Why hadn't I thought of that?

It made sense.

Not that I knew what to do about it.

“Is Kiki receptive to that idea?”

“I’m not sure.” Bash scratched his head. “Bri’s trying to talk to her, but she seems to be pissed at everyone and everything. Not the baby,” he added quickly. “Bri stops by every day, and the baby’s fine.”

“I don’t know what to do,” I admitted. “I love her, but I can’t go home to be a busboy who might work his way up to bartender someday.”

He winced. “Yeah, that’s not ideal. Have you ever thought about engineering? Sound engineering, I mean.”

“Like working in a recording studio?” I asked. “Sure. I’d love that, but I’d need to go to school for it, and I can’t do that and work.”

He nodded thoughtfully. “Yeah, it’s a little complicated, but not impossible. Let me think about it and make some calls. I’m wondering if they need anyone at Casey’s studio.” Casey Hart, who owned the record label Nobody’s Fool was signed to, also owned a recording studio in Las Vegas.

“I appreciate you, man, but listen, I gotta go.”

“Go on. We’ll figure this out, okay? I don’t want you to worry.”

I paused, eyeing him. “You worried I’m going to slip up? Get drunk or high or something?”

He didn’t hesitate. “Yeah, a little.”

I smiled.

It didn’t offend me that the people I was closest to worried about me. I worried about me, so it was nice to know I wasn’t alone. Battling addiction was a never-ending thorn in my side, so knowing my friends and family had my back was important.

“I’m good, bro. For real. I wouldn’t do that to my girls. Even if one of them is being a pain in my ass right now.”

He chuckled. “You’d come to me if it got to be... too much? Right?”

“I would. You have my word.”

“Okay.” He slapped me on the shoulder. “Now get your ass back to work.”

I turned and headed backstage.

I had plenty to do, but contrary to what Kiki thought, she was never far from my mind. And now that we had Beth? I thought about them non-stop. I’d been confused about the way Kiki was behaving, but now it made sense. If she had postpartum depression, it needed to be dealt with. Either by talking to a professional, taking medication, or both. Whatever it took, I’d support her decisions, but she had to let me back in.

That was the biggest roadblock.

Even though I didn’t really have the time, this was too important to put off, so I called my sister.

“Hey!” She sounded surprised to hear from me. “How are you?”

“Listen, I don’t have a lot of time, but I just talked to Bash. How’s Kiki?”

She huffed out a frustrated-sounding breath. “I think she’s in rough shape, but she’s not willing to acknowledge it.”

“What do we do? She won’t talk to me either. She sends me pictures of the baby every couple of days, but she won’t pick up the phone when I try to call and most of my texts get one-word answers.”

“I know. She’s not opening up to me either.”

“Fuck, Bri. Can we do some kind of intervention?”

“I’m working on it. Look, I’m keeping an eye on her, but I’m driving back and forth from L.A. so I don’t see her every day. The truth is, she needs you. I know you have to work, it’s just...”

Another wave of guilt washed over me. “I know, dammit, but if I don’t work, we won’t eat,” I grumbled. “We have a

little money put away, but I don't know what to do, sis. I really don't."

"I don't either, but I'm going to talk to her, and this time make her listen."

"I appreciate it. Just keep me posted, okay? Please?"

"Of course."

"I love you, sis."

"Love you too."

We disconnected, and I stuffed my phone in my pocket.

I was scared and worried and sad, but there was nothing to be done tonight.

Tomorrow was a day off so I'd do my best to reach out to Kiki.

Again.

As many times as necessary.

I just hoped that when we got past whatever this was, she would still love me.

CHAPTER 7

Kiki

Sleep had been elusive since Noah had left.

I had a night nanny who got up with the baby, Bri came by every few days, and all the bills were paid, but I was a wreck. I wasn't sleeping, didn't feel like eating, and spent my days staring at the TV, the ceiling, or Beth's sweet little face. Holding my daughter was the only time I felt calm, so I did it as much as possible, but I knew something was wrong.

Bri had suggested postpartum depression but that seemed far-fetched. I'd never suffered from any kind of mental health issues, and I didn't like the idea of not being able to handle things after having a baby.

I wasn't stupid, though, and finally got online to research it.

The symptoms were in line with what I was feeling.

Withdrawing from friends and family.

Ya think?

Depressed moods or mood swings.

Oh, yeah.

Loss of appetite.

Definitely.

Losing interest in things I normally enjoyed.

I'd lost interest in almost everything.

There was more, enough to make me realize there might be something to this. I didn't want to hurt myself or my baby, so at least there was that, but I didn't know what to do next. The thought of finding a doctor, taking medication, and all the things associated with treating postpartum depression was daunting.

I'd done some reading and it said that rest, a healthy diet, and exercise could help. There was something about fish oil too, but I hadn't gotten that far in my research. The idea of exercise made me want to crawl back under the covers, and I couldn't think of anything that sounded like fun right now.

The knock on the door roused me from my reverie and I peered out the peephole.

Bri was back? She'd just been here yesterday, and she had classes in L.A. today. Or at least, that's what she'd told me. She was in culinary school there and had already taken off so much time in traveling back and forth to Vegas to visit the baby and me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked as I opened the door. "I thought you had class today?"

"Canceled, so I turned around and headed here." She grinned, holding up two shopping bags. "Then I went

shopping and decided we needed a girls' night in."

I smiled, even though my heart wasn't in it; there was a reason she was my bestie.

"I'm not great company," I whispered as she brushed past me.

"That's why I'm here. To cheer you up. And spend time with my niece."

I padded after her, sinking onto the couch. "She's asleep, but you're welcome to hang with her when she wakes up."

Bri turned, green eyes just like Noah's focused on me. "I know it goes against everything you are to admit you need help," she said. "So, I'm here to give it to you whether you like it or not." She started unpacking one of the bags, and the first thing she pulled out was a bottle of my favorite champagne.

I chuckled. "I don't know what I am, but you're welcome to try to figure it out while we drink that."

"Yup. Then you need to talk to your doctor."

"I was thinking about some natural remedies, like exercise and taking long, relaxing baths."

She rolled her eyes, pulling out two beautiful crystal champagne flutes that appeared to be hand-painted with the word "Besties" on one and "Forever" on the other. "Look, I'm all for that kind of stuff, but postpartum depression can be dangerous. Both to you and to the baby. You need a professional opinion, and possibly pharmacy-grade medication."

"I'm not a fan of antidepressants," I said slowly.

"Are you a fan of being a depressed, miserable, non-functioning member of society who might not be able to care for her child because of an untreated issue?" she countered, pulling a pair of pink, fuzzy socks out of the bag and tossing them at me. "That's one of many things that can happen. I'm already seeing signs of the depression. Not to mention you

pushing away the people closest to you.” She gave me a pointed look that told me she’d talked to Noah.

I’d explained to her that I wasn’t happy he’d gone back on tour so soon, and that we’d argued, but I hadn’t mentioned the part about us taking time to think about our future. The look on her face told me she knew.

Crap.

I’d assumed she would be too busy to get involved, plus we’d made a deal early on that we would keep our friendship separate from her relationship with her brother. I’d obviously miscalculated this time.

“These are so soft,” I whispered, rubbing the socks against my face. “Thank you.”

“Think about what I’ve said while I open this in the kitchen.” She left the room, carrying the champagne, and I stared after her.

I hated the idea of needing to be medicated, but I also wasn’t fond of the idea of falling into a depression that might impact my ability to care for my daughter. And obviously whatever was going on had put a strain on my relationship with Noah.

I didn’t want to lose him, no matter how bleak everything seemed right now.

“Good thing I was in the kitchen,” she said as she came back on, the champagne bottle wrapped in a dish towel. “That was quite the explosion.”

I watched her pour us a glass each and slowly reached for one. “I’m scared,” I whispered. “I’ve never felt anything like this. I waffle between not wanting to get out of bed and wanting to explode at the slightest little thing.”

“Hormones can be a bitch even without postpartum depression. If you do have it—and I see a lot of signs, girlfriend—just say the word and we’ll do whatever we need to help you feel better.”

“Does it go away?” I asked finally, fighting back the panic threatening to overwhelm me.

“I think so, yes. From what I’ve read, it’s treatable and usually goes away in six months or so. Especially if it’s treated immediately.”

I took a sip of champagne. “Mm. Yummy. Thanks for doing this. And for being here for me.”

“Always.” She met my gaze over the rim of her glass. “Noah would be here for you too, if you let him. Even if he’s not physically here, you know he wants to be.”

I groaned. “I’ve been awful to him.”

“You have.”

“I need to get this sorted out first. Then I need to see him. I owe him the kind of apology that shouldn’t be done on the phone.”

Bri grinned. “We can make that happen.”

CHAPTER 8

Noah

Almost a month had passed since I’d left Vegas, and still, Kiki wasn’t talking to me. According to Bri, she’d seen a doctor to discuss her postpartum depression, but other than pictures and videos of the baby and a text that said, “please be patient—I’m working on some things,” she’d been quiet. That text had given me hope, though, and since there was nothing I could do from so far away, I’d thrown myself into work.

I hated that I was missing so much of Beth’s early growth, but if I was going to be away from her, it was probably better that it was now instead of when she was old enough to notice. At six weeks, she was still basically a cute but helpless blob.

And Kiki wasn’t the only one working on things.

Bash and I had done a lot of talking and research.

There was a school in L.A. that offered a certificate in sound engineering that could be earned in six months. It was expensive, but I could start in the fall. Bash had offered to loan me the money—interest-free—and since Bri was in culinary school there, I could live with her. Bash had pulled some strings to get me in, so I'd filled out the application and now we were just waiting for it to be official.

It would require more sacrifice on both my part and Kiki's, but it was the first step toward something that would allow me to be at home instead of on tour. On top of that, Bash had spoken to Casey, and she'd said I had a job waiting for me at Hart Studios whenever I was ready. So, there was a lot to be excited about.

If only I knew what was going on with my sweet, beautiful fiancée.

I couldn't wait to surprise her with my news, but Bri had told me to give her the space she'd asked for. On one hand, it pissed me off, but on the other, I felt like I owed it to her. After I'd overdosed, I'd spent months in rehab, unable to call or see her, and she'd waited for me.

So I owed her a little grace, no matter how much it frustrated me not to be there for her, emotionally if nothing else.

I was eating dinner after sound check and scrolling on my phone, when I opened my email. To my surprise, there was one from the school in L.A. and my heart pounded nervously as I read it.

It was my acceptance letter.

"Oh, fuck." I stared at it. Bash had assured me it was a done deal, but I hadn't wanted to make any assumptions until it was official.

And now it was.

"You okay?" Z asked, since he'd stuck around today.

"I got in," I told him, grinning. "To that sound engineering program I told you about."

“Fuck yeah!” He high fived me. “Congratulations! When do you start?”

“I don’t know yet. There are some slightly different programs, and I need to go down there and talk to one of the advisors before I’ll have those kinds of details.”

“This will be good for you,” he said, nodding. “And for your family.”

I’d told him what was going on with me and Kiki.

“I think so too.”

“And if you need some part-time work while you’re in school, depending on your schedule, I can hook you up. Lots of local gigs where they just need roadie or tech for the night, you know?”

“Thank you,” I told him. “I really appreciate that.”

“Anything I can do.”

“Noah!” Bash came around the corner calling to me. “We need you for a sec. It’s important.”

“On my way.” I got up, glad I was almost done with my dinner, and went in the direction Bash had gone. “What’s up, man?”

“There’s a situation on the bus,” he said. “Can you check it out?”

“Of course. But what—” I turned to him but he’d already jogged back into the building.

I stared at the tour bus, suddenly suspicious.

I was working more with Onyx Knight than Nobody’s Fool right now, so I wasn’t sure what they might need. Especially on their bus. Curiously, I pushed open the door and climbed the steps.

“Hello?”

“Well, hello there, handsome.”

Kiki was sitting on one of the built-in tables, a playful smile on her face.

And she looked amazing.

Her blond hair was gone, dyed jet black with hot pink on the tips. She'd also cut it into a faux mohawk, with the sides shaved close to her head but not bare, and the top long and spiky. She'd lost most of her pregnancy weight and wore a ripped-up Onyx Knight concert T-shirt, a short black denim skirt, black fishnets with holes in them, and her favorite black and purple Doc Martens.

My girl was back.

“Babe.” I walked toward her slowly, unsure where we stood but unable to keep from touching her. I moved between her legs and put my hands on either side of her face. “What are you doing here?”

“I came to surprise you.”

“I’m surprised. Where’s the baby?”

“At the hotel with Bri.” She bit her lip. “We needed a little us time.”

“Definitely.”

She reached up and wrapped her arms around my neck, tugging me down so she could kiss me. Her lips were sweet against mine, and when she slid her tongue between them, there was an urgency that caught me by surprise.

Normally, I loved when she took charge like this, but there was an emotional distance that had to be bridged before we could do this.

I drew a deep breath and began, “Babe, I think—”

“I know we have to talk,” she whispered against my mouth. “And I owe you an apology. But I need for us to touch first.”

I understood what she was trying to say, and this time I kissed her, pulling her against me and letting my lips say some of the things we obviously couldn’t put into words. Not yet. When we’d met, it had been all about sex and companionship, two lonely people looking for the only kind of comfort they’d

thought they could get. It had turned into so much more, but somehow, it felt right to go back to where we'd started.

Our relationship had surged ahead at warp speed, so going back to the beginning felt natural.

Except she'd just had a baby.

"Hey, did the doctor say sex was okay?"

She smiled. "She did."

"Oh, fuck yeah."

"Wait." She put a hand on my chest, and before I realized what was happening, she'd dropped to her knees in front of me.

"Babe, what—"

She gazed up at me. "Remember the first time we hooked up?"

I groaned.

She'd been on her knees in front of me.

Just like this.

CHAPTER 9

Kiki

I hadn't really had a plan for the sexual part of tonight's program, but the moment I dropped to my knees I knew this was what I wanted to do. Not because I had to. Not because I felt guilty. Not because I owed him an epic apology.

Because it was what had first brought us together.

He'd seemed so lost and confused when we'd gone out that first time, it felt like a blow job might be the one thing to remind him he was still alive. That there was still fun and life to be lived, even when you struggled with addiction. And from that moment on, we'd been together.

I fumbled with his belt and the buttons on his jeans, sighing happily when his erection sprung free.

“I’ve missed this,” I whispered, reaching out to nuzzle his shaft.

“Me too,” he murmured.

Fisting him with light pressure, I stroked up and down a few times, but he was already rock-hard. It had been months since we’d had sex, so he was probably as worked up as I was, which was always fun.

“You gonna shoot down my throat, baby?” I purred against him, nuzzling and tracing little lines with the tip of my tongue.

“Fuck yes, I am.”

I lifted my gaze to find his emerald-green eyes burning into mine.

I fucking loved that look.

Without hesitation, I wrapped my mouth around him, sucking him deep. His sharp intake of breath told me I’d surprised him, but that was what tonight was all about. Surprise. Fun. Reconnecting.

His cock pulsed in my mouth, so I backed off, stroking his shaft with one hand and squeezing his balls with the other.

“That’s it, baby.” His voice got gruff when he was turned on, which turned me on too.

He gripped the back of my head, digging his fingers into the longest part of my hair, and began to move. He started with short, quick thrusts, slowly pushing deeper every time. When he was steadily gliding all the way in and out, I closed my eyes and relaxed my throat. He picked up speed, thrusting in all the way. As soon as he hit the back of my throat, he shot off, a guttural growl leaving his chest.

“Oh, fuck, Kiki, yes!” He continued to pump in and out a few times, until he was spent, and then quickly pulled away.

Before I could gather my wits, he’d dropped into the nearest chair and dragged me onto his lap.

“If that was your apology, we’re going to have to fight more often.”

I chuckled. “That wasn’t nearly enough of an apology for the way I’ve behaved lately, but I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“Are you ready to talk now?” he asked softly, wrapping his arms around me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, burying my face in his neck. “I was so mean and selfish, and you deserve better.”

“You were going through a rough time,” he said. “And postpartum depression is serious. I’m glad you figured it out. I just wish you’d been able to talk to me and tell me something was going on.”

“I was embarrassed,” I admitted. “And at first, I didn’t know what was going on. I didn’t think it could happen so fast.”

“I did some reading, and they say that right after the birth your hormones are all out of whack and lots of women struggle to get back to what they consider normal. It seems like the postpartum depression kicked in almost right away, though, so it’s almost like you got hit twice.”

“But I shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

“No, you shouldn’t.” He gently lifted my chin, gazing into my eyes. “We’re a team now, babe. We have to lean on each other, no matter what’s happening. Especially when things are hard. If you can’t lean on me, then why would you marry me?”

“I can!” I said quickly, tears springing to my eyes. “I love you and want to spend the rest of my life with you. I’ll never do this again. I promise.”

“You better not.”

“I want you to be happy, Noah, and if that means being on tour, that’s okay. We’ll adjust. And maybe—”

“I’ve got a surprise for you too,” he said, cutting me off. “It will take a short-term sacrifice, but in the end, I think we’ll both get what we want.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m going to get certified to be a sound engineer, like in a recording studio, working on music. There’s a six-month program in L.A. and once I’m done, there will be a job waiting for me at Casey Hart’s studio in Vegas. The money isn’t great to start, but it’s enough. And Bash is going to lend me the money for school, so it won’t—”

I cut him off, pressing my lips to his and kissing him hungrily. “You didn’t have to do that,” I whispered when we finally broke apart. “I don’t want you to do it for me. You have to follow your dreams, no matter what.”

“Our family is my dream. You, me, Beth...and any other little ones who might come along. All I’ve ever wanted was a family. And you. While I’ve loved being on tour, this is literally the best of both worlds, and most people don’t ever get that lucky.”

“I’m the lucky one,” I said softly. “The luckiest day of my life was the day you told me you had a crush on me.”

“Luckiest day of my life too.”

And I couldn’t wait to find out what was next.

ABOUT KAT MIZERA

USA Today Bestselling author Kat Mizera was born in Miami Beach with a healthy dose of wanderlust. She's lived from coast to coast, and everywhere in between, but home is wherever her family is.

A devoted mom and wife to her wonderful and supportive husband (Kevin) and two amazing boys (Nick and Max), Kat loves to travel the globe with her adventurous, hockey loving family. Greece is at the top of that list.

Kat is former freelance sports writer who now writes steamy hockey romance about her favorite fictional teams, like the Las Vegas Sidewinders and the Lauderdale Knights. The library of novels she's penned also include sexy contemporary stories about athletes, bodyguards, rock stars, and royalty. Regardless of genre, her books about bad boys with hearts of gold will steal your breath, rock your world, and melt your heart.

Follow Kat by signing up for her newsletter: <https://www.katmizera.com/newsletter>



TENNESSEE HONEY

by Lydia Michaels

Contemporary Romance, Office Romance, Love Triangle

From bestselling and award-winning author, Lydia Michaels, comes a scorching contemporary romance dripping with southern charm, in this friends-to-lovers, office romance, love triangle that burns hotter than the Texas sun!

My sexy supervisor, Preston Fellowes, has blatantly threatened to take me to bed. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't tempted, but I won't risk my career and professional reputation.

Frazzled by fantasies of what would undoubtedly be an unforgettable night of sin, I seek the sound advice of my best friend and roommate, David, only to be blindsided when he kisses me. Life turns upside down when he confesses he's harbored romantic fantasies about us for more than a decade.

One man is pure authority and the other is all heart. Caught in a love triangle between two completely opposite men who despise one another, I'm distracted by temptation like never before. I've always been hungry for power and success, but now my body aches for so much more and I'm unsure which path to choose.

Chapter 1

“That’s all for now, gentlemen.”

That’s how conferences concluded. Every. Single. Time.

Board meetings here at good old PGS, otherwise known as Patriarch Global Solutions, consistently failed to acknowledge the female contributors, even though the women on the team pulled just as much weight as the men—despite being outnumbered sixteen to one. It was a patriarchy indeed.

Baritone chatter preceded the men’s exit and I relaxed, taking my time to close my portfolio and make a few extra notes on my phone. Sarah Barclay, a female intern like myself, stood only to pause when Alan Warner, one of three senior partners, doubled back into the boardroom.

“Honey?”

My hackles rose as the endearment seemed to physically pinch the nape of my neck. Such sugary endearments had no place in a professional atmosphere.

Thankfully, Mr. Warner wasn’t addressing me. He waved a gnarled finger toward the table, addressing Sarah with minimal eye contact. “Take that tray down to the lunchroom, sweetheart, and see that all the glasses get cleaned and put back on the shelf.”

“Yes, Mr. Warner.” Sarah meekly nodded as she collected the scattered glasses the men abandoned.

I wished she would lift her head. Women who cowered around men only enabled the assumption that we were somehow the weaker sex—a bullshit stigma that had been proven wrong a thousand times over but lingered all the same.

Permitting sugary terms of endearment didn’t help matters. Not a single male associate noticed when the higher-ups threw out a *honey*, and why should they? We all knew the men weren’t addressing other men. Unfortunately, Sarah answered every time.

Vince Gianetti, a fellow intern who started after Sarah and me, should have the same menial chores assigned to him, but he was never asked to clean up after meetings. Technically, Sarah and I had seniority, but Vince had a penis, so there was that.

Torn between helping her with the lowly task and battling my own indignant refusal to tidy up after a bunch of adults who could very well pick up their own damn mess, I set a reminder on my phone. Without argument, Sarah took up the diminutive task. If anything, she was efficient. She had the table cleared and was out the door in under a minute.

A good little soldier. I rolled my eyes and my indignant, feminist rage shattered like a glass bottle shot with a bullet.

Preston Fellowes, otherwise known as female kryptonite, silently chuckled at me from across the table. His steely blue eyes thickly fringed with feathery black lashes watched me with unmistakable interest. He smirked as if reading my disgust and finding my frustration entertaining.

God, he pissed me off. The only thing more annoying than his amusement with my exasperation was the fact that some archaic part of me really wanted to fuck him. I blamed Victorian romance novels.

I didn't understand how I—a ball-busting, intelligent, hard-working woman—could entertain victim fantasies with a quintessential—albeit, gorgeous—douchebag. I generally hated any show of helplessness from women, including myself. But when it came to Preston Fellowes, I secretly—*shamefully*—wanted him to push me against a wall, shove his hand up my skirt, and wear me like a fucking glove until I helplessly came on his fingers and swooned in his arms like some innocent dove in a bodice ripper.

The rest of me wanted to punch that dove in the tit. Preston was as chauvinistic and privileged as the rest of them.

My chin lifted with haughty petulance and I met his stare. “What?”

Preston's smirk stretched to one side, forming a dimple. "You know what."

I couldn't pretend to guess why my irritation turned him on, but I felt his arousal when he looked at me like that. It seemed to beat harder with every heavy thrum of my quickening pulse. But misogyny wasn't cute, nor was my silent outrage, so my brain insisted he stay filed away in the dickhead category no matter what my lady bits thought.

I stood and gathered my notes. "Whatever."

"Running off?" His lean, toned body cut in front of me, blocking my exit.

My breath hitched, as my knees softened. His gaze did a slow inspection of my attire, lingering on my chest. He never just glanced at me—he tasted me with his eyes, savored every curve, and shamelessly stared his fill.

I fucking hated myself for allowing it, but I liked it. Those long, tantalizing gazes were a shot of serotonin to my ego, his unspoken desire hitting so sharply that my body clenched in physical response. He knew the potent effect he had on women. The fucker got off on it.

Hard, broad shoulders faced me, and gray eyes, sharp as flint, followed my every move. His proximity could melt my professional façade in two seconds flat.

I darted around his body, careful not to touch him. "I don't know what you're talking about." Forcing an unhurried gait, I entered the hall but he casually took up pace by my side.

He was too damn sexy, too damn confident, and way too successful at twenty-six to be anything but cocky. "That went well." His hungry gaze never left me as he matched his strides to mine.

That voice... A few words and my panties were wrecked. So unfair.

"Yep." Of course, the meeting went well. I'd done all the preliminaries and triple-checked my research. Preston wouldn't know any of that, though, mostly because he didn't

have to. Things rarely went poorly for men like Preston, to no fault of their own.

“Drinks tonight?” His long, toned body cut in front of me and I abruptly stopped. He gripped a doorway and stretched, casually. My stare drifted from the notch lapels of his suit, across his broad chest, to his trim hips.

“Tennessee,” he said my name with a teasing breath, luring my focus back to his face. “We should celebrate.”

The corner of his mouth kicked up suggestively. Had he been ugly, he’d be a complete leech. Unfortunately, he was gorgeous, which made him a threat.

Tightening my arms around my portfolio, I shielded my chest. The temptation was real.

The lines of his tailored, Italian suit fit his body like a second skin. He smelled like refined savagery. I wanted to climb onto his broad shoulders and ride his face until my lips were razor burned from his hard jaw—without ever kissing him.

“Tennessee?”

I shook my head, shoving the inappropriate thought away. “Can’t.”

No matter how hot or determined he was, Preston Fellowes and I could never happen.

He stepped closer. “You sure?”

My mind flashed back to last week’s quarterly planning meeting when he whispered in my ear how much he’d like to fuck me on the conference table. I’d been sipping coffee at the time and sputtered an unladylike cough into my mug.

The rebuking glances earned by my choking only made me look foolish. Preston looked perfect. He was such a dick, but I sort of enjoyed it. He provided masturbation material for days.

Clearing my throat, I shifted, glancing at my phone as if too busy to be bothered by him. “Positive.”

He pushed off the door frame, caging me in without touching me. “I know a brass-balled belle like you isn’t afraid of a little fun, Tennessee.”

His voice, thick like honey and edged with gravel, sank into me like a delicious secret. Every contrasting inch of him turned me inside out.

He was right. I wasn’t afraid of fun. But he was Jack Barrett’s godson, and I was too ambitious to tamper with that.

There were three senior partners at PGS—Jack Barrett, Alan Warner, and Walter Stark—and three junior partners under them. Preston wasn’t one of the six, but he was earmarked for seniority thanks to nepotism. And he made sure everyone knew it by flouting his relationship with his godfather whenever possible.

Mr. Barrett was a big bastard who filled out every inch of his custom-tailored, Texan wardrobe, from his cattleman-crowned Stetson hat to his broken-in pair of 1836 boots. The man moved in a clomping shadow of authority that equally inspired and terrified.

There was something unpredictable about Jack Barrett. His position as my boss and Preston’s mentor assured I would never cross that line with his godson, no matter how much the fantasy tempted me, or blocked my path in some pathetic form of playground foreplay.

“What kind of fun?” I asked, knowing Preston’s endgame.

A chuckle lived and died in the depth of his throat—the dark shadow of his chiseled jaw already thick and distracting. “With you? I prefer the down-and-dirty kind.”

I bet he did.

Leaning forward, I flicked an invisible fleck off the shoulder of his suit jacket. A trick to break his intense eye contact and puncture his ego with a tease of uncertainty. My role in this game of sexual tension and bantering foreplay was to make him work as hard as possible with no reward, so I played dumb.

“What are you implying, Mr. Fellowes?”

An associate passed by and Preston's posture and expression transformed into a mask of professional composure. The slight shift was the mortal tell of a vulnerable man who liked to pretend he was an omnipotent god. He cared too much about appearances to truly be impervious to what others thought of him.

Eventually, Preston Fellowes would take Jack Barrett's place, but first, he had to climb the corporate ladder. That meant he had to get the board's vote and *appear* to play by the rules. His trajectory toward partner at PGS was all part of the unpublicized plan Preston shared with me during my first week at the company, part of his *Why You Should Fuck Me* pitch.

As soon as we were alone in the hall again, the challenge in his eyes returned. "You want me to spell it out?"

I did and I didn't. Men like Preston never publicly backed down from a challenge, which was exactly what I was to him. I couldn't ignore the true temptation he posed, nor could I ignore the threat.

"Not gonna happen, Fellowes."

"I disagree. I think it's just a matter of time, Keller."

He knew well enough not to use cutesy endearments with me. But somehow my last name on his full lips was worse. It stung like a tantric slap, triggering a doe-eyed submissive response in me I didn't care for.

His gunmetal eyes held me captive. "I saw your schedule. Tonight's *wide* open."

"Well, I'm not."

"Come on, Keller." He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "I don't mind a *tight* squeeze. Fit me in."

I could eviscerate him with one call to HR, but I didn't want the banter to end. The truth was, the more I turned him down the more he wanted me. I purposefully egged him on for the sheer joy of the chase, but every week the risk of getting caught heightened. I liked that too. And at the same time, I

didn't, because if he ever truly caught me, work would become an awkward nightmare. I knew better.

I was a vendetta he wanted to conquer. Entitled, wealthy men hated being told no. Hard-working, middle-class women like myself enjoyed providing that experience for them.

"Sorry, Preston, things are just too *tight*." I feigned regret dramatically so he understood I enjoyed rejecting him.

He sucked his lower lip between his teeth and growled. "Tease. Why deny yourself? You want to give me what I want and that scares you."

Possibly, but I'd never admit such a shameful truth. My role in his world had to stay professional. No matter how deeply I desired to show vulnerability and softness, my success relied on hard, impervious strength.

Resilient as always, I sighed. "It's just too *hard*. It'll never work."

He rolled his eyes back and groaned. "You're killing me. Look, a few friends and I are going to the Candleroom tonight. You should come."

"I plan to." I didn't need to join him for that to happen.

He laughed, pure enjoyment and intrigue in his eyes.

There was no way I was joining him and his friends outside of work at one of the sexiest establishments in Dallas's entertainment district. Preston and alcohol would be a combustible equation.

His gaze, once again, dipped to my chest. "There's a prospective client I want you to meet."

He was a quick study. Rather than flatter me with meaningless praise, he teased my desire for success. Like him, I wanted a name in the game and craved advancement as much as every man at PGS.

"Is there really a lead, or is this your way of ensuring I show up?"

“I guess you’ll have to find out.” There was no potential client. If there was, he would have admitted more.

“Pass. I have plans.” His disappointment paired with his growing desire was a twisted joy I’d grown addicted to over the past six months.

And it wasn’t a total lie. My plans dated back to my childhood in San Antonio, when I was a little girl dreaming of someday working in the southern metropolis of Dallas. My rise to the top would not include fucking powerful men for a quick boost like my mother recommended. No. I was determined to earn that corner office on my own merit.

“I call bullshit.” Preston’s eyes sparked with challenge. “You’re just scared that I’ll break down your walls and see the real you.”

I chuckled, despite my discomfort. I couldn’t possibly be that transparent.

Stepping forward, so not to appear intimidated, I met his challenging stare with one of my own. “You think I’m scared?” Leaning close enough for him to scent the delicate perfume on my skin and the sweet berry gloss on my lips, my voice lowered to a throaty tease, “I’m not a little girl who gets manipulated by boys who pull my pigtails.”

The mental image had his pupils dilating. He was probably picturing me in an open blouse and a school skirt.

“The girls I’m used to aren’t afraid to say yes.”

I believed him, but my rejection had nothing to do with fear. When it came to my success I had insurmountable courage or, as my male counterparts liked to say, brass balls.

As soon as I graduated from college, I moved into a two-bedroom apartment in Glen Rose with my best friend, David. It was an hour’s commute to the city one way, but I was determined to land a job with PGS, which I did. I intended to not only get hired full-time but also get promoted to junior partner—the same position Preston would eventually inherit. But I wouldn’t stop there. Eventually, I’d make senior partner, and privileged men like Preston would work for me.

“Preston,” I chuckled. “Trust me, I’m the furthest thing from afraid. I’m a woman—much more complicated than an impressionable girl.”

My premonitions for success weren’t dreams. They were goals backed with grit and hard work. Potent testosterone and the promise of Herculean sex weren’t enough to confuse my purpose.

He lifted his chin. “Girl or woman, a cat’s gotta purr. I’ll make it worth your time.”

“Like I said, I’m not a little girl. I’m a woman. A real man understands what I want. Have fun with your boys.”

He caught my wrist. “You don’t bend, do you?”

I glanced at his grip on my arm. My heart rate doubled and my breath caught. So much authority in one single gesture. He had me. In that moment I was his, but his grip loosened before he realized how close he’d come to breaking my resolve and getting everything he wanted.

My gaze hardened and returned to his face. “I only bend when *I* want to.”

His gaze dropped to my mouth and his stare darkened. “Sooner or later, Tennessee, I’m going to have you bending in ways you’ve never imagined. It’s just a matter of time.”

Speaking of time, I checked my phone. “I’m late. They’re expecting me down the hall.”

“So? You like making men wait.”

Not always. I was a stickler for promptness.

I broke all contact and stepped back, and the distance instantly retrieved an air of professionalism. “Good luck with your prospective client tonight.” We both knew there was no lead.

Certain he watched my ass as I walked away, I swayed my hips. My filthy mind wanted him to chase me down, peg me to a desk, and force my thighs wide. But the part of me that hungered for success forbade it. The moment women crossed that line, all future progress was forever tainted.

“Tennessee,” he called, just as I was about to round the corner.

Pivoting, I paused. “Yes?”

His mouth curled into a half-smirk. “One day soon, we’re going to close a deal together, and I’m going to celebrate by sipping champagne off your body.”

My breath hitched, but I kept my expression blank. “We’ll see.”

“We will. I promise.”

Chapter 2

Preston’s hard body plastered me to the wall in a gnashing of teeth and mouths. His urgent fingers greedily ripped open my clothing as he hissed out my name like a filthy profanity. His hard cock shoved between my thighs, that first press of flesh to flesh burning hotter than the Texas sun.

The ping of my phone jerked me out of my fantasy and the vision evaporated, replaced with far too much reality as I rode the DART toward home. Ah, public transportation. Just one of many perks for Dallas workers making less than a desirable salary. Despite having a car, I was reliant on cabs, buses, and trains inside the city, but riding the rails didn’t bother me so long as my earbuds were charged.

Two women argued loudly about God knew what while the rest of the passengers on the DART acted as if they were deaf. I checked my phone, finding a text from David to a link for a TikTok. Perfect timing. Funny bird videos were our love language, and this one had me laughing instantly.

Smiling, I texted back.

LOL. Drinks tonight? It’s been a day.

His response was immediate.

Grapes, potato, agave, hops, or rye?

I silently chuckled. This was why I loved him.

Rye. You score, I'll pour. See you soon.

By the time I got to my car, I was caught up on this week's episodes of my favorite podcast, so I gave my mom a call—knowing full well that my tolerance for our conversations was only as long as my twenty-minute drive to Glen Rose.

My mother, Connie Keller, was a lovely woman in small doses. She and I didn't always see eye to eye, and she was too polite to argue, but the woman excelled at the art of passive aggression. She also had a gift for martyrdom.

After my ninth birthday, my dad left and my mom lost her identity. She'd been so tied up existing for a man, she didn't know how to exist for herself. I never wanted to be that sort of woman, just a footnote to a man, so I forgot my dad's existence and set my heart on being something powerful.

My mother didn't understand that kind of *strong-willed independence*. She obsessed over aging as if defying mortality was a woman's sole purpose. In her eyes, a woman's career would always be a second job. The first priority was nailing down a husband, preferably one with money and influence.

No, thank you. This girl was doing just fine without the weight of offspring or a wedding band. But no matter how much I agreed to disagree, my mother harped on the subject. Every single conversation we had eventually ended on the topic of career versus marriage.

“Well, you don't want to come off as abrasive, Teeny. I worked in an office. Overly ambitious women become social pariahs. You never know who's watching. I'm sure some of the executives there are single. These are your best years.”

I pressed my lips tight. My mom worked in an office—a small municipal one—for a hot minute. She knew nothing about corporate settings. In her eyes, female ambition outside of a race to the altar was a waste of time. These were my childbearing years and, after thirty, my beauty would fade, so I was missing an opportunity.

“Mom, I’m twenty-two. I’m exactly where I want to be right now.” That wasn’t completely true. I’d like a promotion. “Marriage isn’t even on my radar, and I’d never get involved with someone at work.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s unprofessional.” I had to say these things to remind myself why I couldn’t cross that line with Preston—who had texted me twice about going out tonight even after my adamant rejection earlier.

“I was married with a baby on the way at your age.”

And look where it got you, I wanted to argue. Not that I didn’t want children. I did. But the idea of being tied down at this age felt more like a prison sentence than a blessing.

“Your plan isn’t my plan,” I reminded her. “I want to establish my career before I think about those things.”

She sighed, her disappointment spilling out in a single breath. “You’re stubborn like your father.”

Any comparison to the man who abandoned us was an insult. “Well, I’m pulling up to my apartment now, so I’ll have to let you go.” I was still several blocks away, but I hit my limit.

“Fine. Don’t forget to read that article I sent you about those exercises.”

“I will.” That was a lie. “Bye.”

I tossed the phone into my bag and turned the wheel. Pecan trees lined the road, the manicured appearance somewhat spoiled by a random prickly pear cactus. Glen Rose was nice, but nothing like the polished metroplex of wealthy Dallas.

I liked the cactuses. I could relate to their resilience and not-so-subtle hostility. Cacti could withstand Texas’s subtropical summers without irrigation. They didn’t care how much the township paid to landscape the public roads. This was their turf, they had every right to be here, and they weren’t

about to be pushed out by bigger, fancier, shade-throwing plants.

I parked in the condo lot and grabbed my bag. The moment I got out of the car the muggy air hit my skin like a weighted blanket. I was used to sunniness year-round, but I'd grown accustomed to central air.

Texas humidity did nothing good for my red, wavy hair—the only thing my father gave me that I kept. It was both the bane of my existence and the most memorable thing about me. I'd heard it compared to ginger, carrots, flowers, Little Orphan Annie, and, my favorite, fire. It took me almost two decades to learn how to rock my natural color and waves without looking like a possessed sea witch.

I pulled out my key and a horned lizard shot across the walk, puffing up the moment it spotted me, and then flipping over. “Chill, bud.”

I stepped over the spikey guy and unlocked the door, a welcomed burst of cool air hit my face. The lizard darted under the shrubs into the arid debris the landlord never mulched.

“Hello?” I dropped my crap at the door and kicked off my shoes.

“*Lucy?*” David answered in his best Cuban accent.

“I'm home.” It was our daily routine. Somehow, over the course of our fifteen-year friendship, we became the Ricardos.

David appeared at the top of the steps, whiskey bottle and rocks glass in hand. “It's time for your medicine.” He waved the bottle temptingly.

I trudged up the steps, my back aching from wearing heels all day and my hair coming undone before I hit the top step. “Make it a double.”

“Tell me all about it.” He laughed and poured.

Untucking my blouse and ditching my jacket, I told him about the closing on the cranberry deal that morning. He knew

how much work I put into the deal, and how little my male counterparts prepared, so he had plenty of empathy locked and loaded.

“Well, at least the client liked your proposal. You should be celebrating.”

I sipped and nodded. “I am. I just need to whine a little first.”

He waved his fingers, encouraging me to continue. “Let’s have it. I’m your guy. Unload.”

I plopped beside him on the sofa and groaned, my head filling the wedge of his armpit perfectly. “It’s like high school all over again. I do all the work and get zero credit, while everyone else is coasting by on my efforts.”

“Bunch of pallbearers.”

I frowned and twisted to see his face. “What?”

“Pallbearers.” He motioned like he was carrying a coffin. “They’re pallbearers. They’re only there to let you down in the end.”

I snorted then nestled back into his arm. “Mmm, is that a new cologne?”

“Do you like it?”

Twisting, again, I gave his shirt a sniff. Traces of bergamot mingled with the scent of fresh laundry and the unmistakably familiar scent of David. “I do.” David was too beautiful to be single. I wanted him to find the right woman, but I also believed no one was good enough for him.

“Good, because I paid a fortune for it.”

I nestled back into his side. “I also like when you come home smelling like cilantro.”

He chuckled. As a chef, that happened more than not. Cilantro and other delicious herbs would always be David’s signature scent to me.

“Thank God you’re not one of those weirdos who think cilantro smells like stinkbugs and soap.”

“That’s actually a chemical thing. But, yeah, so glad I’m not one of those people. Your guacamole is way too good.”

“You use me for my avocado skills.”

“Duh.”

He clanked his glass to mine. “So, did you at least get credit for the research you did?”

I ignored the ache in my chest. “Preston did. Technically we’re on the same team, so I guess that counts.”

David frowned like he always did whenever I brought up Preston Fellowes. “He should have acknowledged your work. You could have a degree in cranberry bogging for all the research you did.”

The campaign had been for a new juice hitting the market next October. “There’s still time. My work will get noticed eventually.”

His mouth pursed. “You shouldn’t have to wait for acknowledgment.”

“At least I’m not doing the dishes. Poor Sarah’s just a maid to them. They never ask Vince to wash out the coffee mugs or take the lunch order. It’s completely unfair.”

“Or sexist.”

“Or that.” The smells wafting from the kitchen suddenly hit me and I stilled. “Do I smell *chili con carne*?”

“Maybe.”

I shot off the sofa and bolted into the kitchen. Snatching the wooden spoon off the counter, I swiped a taste from the pot on the stove and moaned. “How are you still single?”

He was an incredible chef, in the process of opening his own restaurant called *Street*, which specialized in American street foods prepared with gourmet flare.

Ignoring my question, he watched me and asked, “Is it good?”

My eyes closed and I moaned again, savoring the heat and spices as they melded together in a sauce that coated the meat perfectly. “So good.” I went in for more and he caught my wrist.

“Hold on, you animal.” He snatched the spoon and I pouted. “Go sit down.”

Hiding a smirk, I did as I was told.

David prepared two bowls, topping each one off with a hefty sprinkle of cheese, a squeeze of lime, and a dollop of sour cream. He handed me a spoon. “Now you can eat.”

I shoveled a bite with all the fixings into my mouth and remembered it was Thursday. “Oh! Did you have your inspection today?”

The shift in his expression told me it hadn’t gone well. He waved away my excitement.

“No.” I sympathized and took his hand. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged. It was his sixth inspection. “This time we failed over a handle that needs to be two inches higher.”

“You’ll get there. You’re almost through all the permits, and then your only problem will be making room for all the reservations you’re going to get.”

A sad smile curved his lips as his hand turned, gripping mine, our fingers lacing naturally. “It’s okay. I’ll have another chance in a few weeks.”

All of David’s savings had gone into the restaurant opening. He didn’t have any additional income to lean on. These little repairs cost him a lot in the long run, not just in labor and supplies, but in municipal fees and lost time. I had no doubt that the restaurant would be a great success, but he was starting to panic that it might never open.

I wanted to help. “I wish I made more money—”

“Stop. I’m fine.” He stood and carried his bowl to the sink.

I hugged my dish protectively. “I’m not done yet.”

“Relax.” He laughed and added another scoop of chili to my bowl. “I almost forgot. I have cornbread.”

“What! You made cornbread?” His cornbread won an award at our hometown festival when we were in high school, beating all the more experienced moms’ and dads’ recipes. It was so damn good it deserved its own tier on the food pyramid.

After dinner we took our whiskey into the living room and toured Netflix for over an hour, never settling on something to watch. Before we made up our minds, I fell asleep using David as a pillow. I woke sometime after midnight to David trying to escape the couch. I had sprawled out and trapped him in a sort of octopus pretzel hold. He was basically my human pillow.

He pushed off the back cushions, prying his body from mine and I grumbled, “Stop moving.”

“Your knee’s in my crotch.”

I snickered, nuzzling my face deeper into the crevice of his neck. “I like it there.”

“You’re a couch hog.”

“Comfy,” I slurred, snuggling closer, refusing to fully wake and aid in his escape.

He stiffened when my thigh pressed snugly between his legs. “What are you doing?”

“You’re warm. Don’t go.”

“Tennessee?”

“Fine,” I groaned, rolling away from him.

He caught my hip before I could get up. “Wait. You don’t have to get up. I just need to adjust.”

Then I felt it. And it was my turn to stiffen.

“David,” I spoke slowly, staring into the shadows of the living room. “Tell me that’s the remote.” But the remote was on the coffee table across from me.

His hand on my hip lifted.

Yup. That was his dick.

I shot off the couch. “*Are you kidding me?*”

“What? You had your face in my neck!”

“So, you got a boner? What are you, twelve?”

“I’m a guy!”

And I really had no right to judge. One glance from Preston in the boardroom today, and my panties had been drenched. We all had issues.

I raised a finger. “Totally inappropriate. I’m going to bed.” I snatched the fuzzy blanket

“It’s a natural response!” he yelled.

Chapter 3

Something was wrong. The strange energy hit me the moment I arrived on the nineteenth floor and stepped onto PGS territory. Reception was buzzing, as phones rang and administrative assistants whispered gossip from one huddle to the next.

“What’s going on?” I asked Georgianna, the front desk receptionist.

“Carter Sanchez was fired.”

My eyes widened. Sanchez was one of the junior partners. “Why? What happened?”

Georgianna glanced left and right then leaned closer. “Apparently, he sold out to one of the major competitors.”

I gaped. “Not the cranberry campaign.”

“That, and about six others.”

“But we closed!” I gasped, realizing what this meant. “That was my work!” That slimy fucker.

“There’s a clause where the clients have a preliminary period to take their business elsewhere. I don’t know all the ins and outs, but he definitely screwed over the company and the seniors are pissed.”

I bet they were. “Holy shit.” I needed to find out what this meant in the grand scheme of things.

After dumping my belongings at my desk, I went to find Sarah and Vince. Vince was missing in action, but Sarah was waiting in the boardroom for the scheduled meeting. “Where is everyone?”

She shrugged. “They’re usually here by now.”

Every morning the ad team met before the day’s clients arrived. Sarah had become accustomed to setting out the coffee fixings and filling the pitcher of water that went on the table. I scowled, triggered by the sheer domesticity of her morning routine.

“You know, you don’t have to do that stuff. The guys can make their own coffee.”

“I don’t mind.”

Didn’t she? Maybe I was projecting and being overly judgmental. Some women were happy to take on that nurturing role and dedicate their lives to helping others shine. What was wrong with me that I couldn’t accept such roles? Was I like my mother but in reverse? Maybe I was a narcissist, or missing some team player gene.

I was spiraling. Shaking off my thoughts, I waited for the others to arrive.

Looking for a distraction, I noticed Sarah’s ring. “You went to the University of Texas?”

“Yes.”

“That’s one of the best advertising schools in the country.”

“It *is* the best.”

I grinned. So, she had a little spit and vinegar inside of her after all. “I’m guessing you have your bachelor’s?”

“Masters. Summa Cum Laude.”

“Damn. That’s impressive.”

Her silent agreement showed a bit of her hidden confidence. She glanced at the door.

Was the meeting canceled? It would be nice if someone told us. And where the hell was Vince?

The longer we waited the more I thought about the Sanchez situation. Cranberries were out. I wondered what other clients he took.

A smaller client roster would free up a lot of time, but could also alter the dynamic of the company. What if PGS had to let employees go because there wasn’t enough work? They’d start with the interns. And chances were, they wouldn’t get rid of Vince.

Sarah was the only other female involved with the advertising team. I wanted an ally, but this might change things. What if it came down to me or her? Shit.

Then I thought of Preston. If he’d been telling the truth, this would be his shot to move up to junior partner. That would create an opening on the associate level. Holy crap. I could take his place if I played my cards right.

My gaze darted to the door and my foot tapped impatiently. I bounced my pen against the polished surface of the table.

“Do you mind?”

I paused, suddenly aware of my fidgeting. I couldn’t stay there. I needed to find out what was going on and make my move before Sarah saw the same opportunity—or worse, Vince.

Without making an excuse I left my materials at the table and went to find Preston. He’d have answers. Only I didn’t get far.

As soon as I reached the door, a mob of suits filtered down the hall. Preston was in the lead, smiling widely. Vince was also there, like one of the guys.

“Morning, Tennessee,” Preston greeted, leading the pack of associates into the boardroom.

I took my seat and waited as everyone mixed their coffee and got situated. No Jack. No Allen. No Walter. But no one else appeared concerned by the senior partners’ absence.

A heavy box landed on the table with a clattering thud. “It’s called Sweet Honey,” Preston announced, lifting the lid and revealing several bottles of what appeared to be whiskey. “The client is the daughter of Warren Bellefleur.”

He passed the bottles of Sweet Honey whiskey around. When I received a bottle, I examined the branding. It didn’t look like the whiskey I typically saw in stores or bars. The buttery yellow label was formed out of hexagonal shapes resembling honeycombs and the writing was unmistakably feminine, with long scrolling Ys and a swirling S.

I turned the bottle and raised a brow. The ingredients were all natural and locally sourced.

Doug cracked open the seal. “Warren Bellefleur? As in—”

“As in the founder of Bellefleur Blues, the record label,” Preston finished. “I don’t need to tell ya’ll what kind of money that is. We grew up on those blue labels.”

“Why would he invest in something like this?” Garry sniffed the open bottle and grimaced.

“The Bellefleur family has a reputation for producing alcohol that dates back to prohibition days,” Sarah informed, drawing a table full of awkward glances. Most of the men looked at her like an orphan who snuck in off the streets, as if just realizing she was there.

Undeterred, Sarah continued, “Their legacy is some of the best moonshines the South has to offer. It’s how Warren Bellefleur inherited his first fortune. He used his inheritance to start the Bellefleur Blues record label. I suspect this is his daughter’s attempt to stay out of the music industry but still work within the family’s brand.”

I grinned, glad to see Sarah finally showing off her intellectual skills instead of her hospitality ones. The men,

however, looked at her like a lost stranger and went back to examining the product.

Glasses were divvied out and golden liquor was poured. Were we actually going to consume the whiskey? It wasn't even nine a.m.

Sure enough, the tasting began, followed by several coughs and dismissive grunts.

"It's achingly sweet," Brett commented.

"Good Lord. This ain't no whiskey," Doug practically cursed.

Not one to be left out, I poured a small sampling. It wasn't bad. Mellow and smooth with notes of caramel, vanilla, and a sort of oakiness I liked. But most of all, it tasted of honey.

Several men pushed their glasses away, declining a second sip. "Too sweet for me."

"There's more liquor in it than actual whiskey."

Doug laughed. "They should have called it Sweet Honey *Wine*."

A round of laughter busted out of the men. I never saw them mock a client's goods in such a manner. I couldn't help but wonder if their mockery stemmed from a lack of respect for the product or the creator.

"Actually, if you want to get technical," I said, examining the amber hues swirling in my glass. "Tennessee Whiskey isn't even whiskey. It's bourbon."

"Horse shit."

I grinned at the challenge. I didn't know shoes or makeup or celebrity gossip, but I knew my whiskey—probably due to my father, who named me after his favorite kind, which technically wasn't whiskey at all, so I was happy to school these gentlemen.

"It's true. Whiskey can come from different grains like barley, rye, or wheat, but bourbon has to have a certain amount of corn and must be made in America. Tennessee Whiskey is

made in the US and it's more than fifty-one percent corn, which makes it a bourbon, *not* a whiskey.”

I could have gone on, telling them about the perfect whiskey-making climate of Tennessee or how Confederate supporters started the first prohibition before the Civil War to turn the state's whiskey-making efforts toward fielding and supplying the army, but Preston was grinning at me, and I didn't think I could tell them all of that in a swooning thread of monosyllabic words.

“Of course, you're a whiskey connoisseur,” he said, raising his glass in a sort of salute that felt enough like praise to make my thighs clench under the table. “What else do you taste?”

The men obligingly sipped some more but continued to wince. I was in awe of how they deferred to Preston. Had he already been promoted?

“It's a little too perfumed for me,” Garry said, pushing his glass away.

“How about you, Tennessee? What's that sharp tongue of yours tasting?”

The mention of my mouth caused a furious blush to burn my alabaster cheeks. His stare zeroed in on my mouth as I brought the glass to my lips and swallowed. My throat was tight and my cheeks heated as everyone else watched me.

“Um, well, I taste the honey, but also a hint of ethanol, the main contributor of the alcohol content. Legally, I'd venture to guess this is technically a liquor, not a whiskey, but she's marketing it as such to tap into a particular industry.”

“Very good, Tennessee.”

More praise. My body hummed. Why was that so pleasantly triggering? It was a strange sort of affirmation play, one where I occupied the role of subordinate, which—if he got the promotion—I technically did, but I didn't like it. Except I did. I wanted more praise. More compliments. More attention. Fuck. When did I get so needy?

I scowled, pushing the alcohol away and turning my confused stare toward the bottle.

“And what market is she targeting, Keller?”

Attention and a last name? It was a kinky oxymoron, pushing all my buttons. I was a good girl but also one of the guys. The room was getting warmer. Or was that the booze? What was the question?

“I’m certainly not the market,” Doug joked, and several other men barked out in agreeable laughter.

I wasn’t the target customer either, but I knew who the market was. “It’s women. Southern and Western women mostly, but also other demographics. She’ll want to hit country music lovers. Traditionalists. Women who want to be a part of the modern bluegrass crowd without rotting their insides on grain alcohol.”

“She’s absolutely right, gentlemen,” Preston announced, his admiration a verbal stroke along my nerves.

I practically preened. Despite my product intuition, I wondered what the alcohol content was because this whiskey was making me frisky.

Preston stood and moved to the front of the room. His assumed authority only added to the fire burning through my loins. Jesus, I should have duked it out last night. I was holding way too much sexual energy. I felt like a powder keg about to burst.

“This whiskey’s made *by* a woman *for* women, gentlemen.”

Gentleman? Why gentleman when I had been the one providing all his desired answers? Just like that, the flame was doused.

“It ain’t whiskey,” Doug objected, trying to get another laugh.

Preston arched an unimpressed brow. “Maybe not. But Bellefleur Blues’ money isn’t necessarily blue. It’s green. You going to object to that technicality, too, Doug?”

“No, sir.”

Sir? How was that hotter and still immensely irritating?

What the fuck was happening? Never, in all of my six months with PGS, had I witnessed Doug defer to Preston. The man was young enough to be his son. Something had definitely happened this morning. Dynamics shifted, and Preston naturally slid into his new role as junior partner.

“Listen up...” The men straightened like soldiers falling into line.

God, help me, he was sexy when he took control. Preston, apparently, had a natural gift for authority. Much more of this power-eroticism and my ovaries would start bursting like confetti.

My shoulders drew back and my chest pressed forward as I gave him my full attention. I couldn't understand why part of me wanted him to boss me around. Literally. I craved his direction and praise. Maybe I even craved a touch of admonishment.

Preston scanned the faces of everyone at the table. “There's a hell of a lot of Bellefleur Blues money about to sink into the marketing of this product. If any of you think you're too good for that, there's the door.”

He was ruthless. Always hot, but now that he had additional authority, he rivaled the heat of the Texas sun. The men stopped their mocking and finally started showing the product the respect it deserved.

“The Bellefleurs will be here in two hours to share their vision. I'll be leading the campaign and choosing three of you to join me. Prove to me that you belong on my team. You don't have to like a product to sell it. But you do have to do your job.” He pointed behind him where the letters PGS illuminated the paneled wall. “I expect all of you to sell Patriarch Global Solutions to the Bellefleurs, and I want to see everyone at this table giving Sweet Honey Whiskey their best efforts. Take the next few minutes to dig up what you can. Anything on whiskey competitors, the history of the Bellefleur moonshine business, and the creator, Beatrix Bellefleur.” He tapped a knuckle on the surface of the table. “We'll reconvene here in one hour.”

Several men opened their laptops and started searching the internet. Others gathered their belongings and stood.

“Vince,” I called as he rose with the men. “Why don’t you give us a hand cleaning this up?”

He frowned and glanced back at the associates leaving the conference room. No way was he getting off this time. Sarah was already tidying the scattered glasses and she only had an hour before everyone messed everything up again.

“Uh, sure?”

My stare met Sarah’s and I caught a little glimmer of satisfaction in her eyes. I gathered up the bottles.

“Tennessee, a word.”

My heart jolted as I was summoned by Preston. Setting the bottles into the box, I followed him into the hall.

He smiled, an expression that might as well be a sexual act—illegal in at least seven states. “You did well in there.”

“Thanks.” My heart raced as a vision of Preston pouring champagne between my thighs filled my head.

“Did you hear about Sanchez?”

I nodded, my body reflexively clenching as my own ambitious hunger gnawed at me to make a move. If he got the promotion that left an opening on the associate roster.

“I told you I would make junior partner.”

“Congratulations.” Whether he’d earned it or not, the accomplishment deserved recognition.

“We need to celebrate.” The promise in his eyes sent my heart racing. “Are you free tonight?”

Free to have him lick champagne off my... “*Fuck.*” My palms were sweating. “Um...” I bit my lip.

“Sweet Jesus, you got a mouth on you.”

Shit, had I cursed out loud. I needed to focus.

“Enough torturing me, Tennessee. You and I have business to handle.”

Things were getting way too heated between us. I drew back. “I can’t.”

“Enough. When are you going to put me out of my misery?”

The answer was never. I wanted his old position as associate. If I slept with him, people would find out and assume that was the cause of any promotion. “Sorry, I’m busy.”

“You’re always busy.”

I shrugged. “I’m a busy woman.”

Brett and Garry exited the boardroom and he took a step back, inhaling a long breath. “Expect to clear your schedule over the next few weeks. I’m putting you on my team.”

“You haven’t heard my pitch yet.”

“You’re a woman. I trust your instinct.”

“What about Sarah? You have access to two women.”

“She’s not right for the product.”

“She’s smart.”

“If she was smart, she would have sampled the product and said something. You have to speak up to get the big opportunities in this business.”

“If not for her, none of us would have guessed the Bellefleurs had a family history in bootlegging.”

He considered my point. “I’ll think about it. Let’s see what she comes up with.”

I couldn’t waste any more time campaigning for a woman who was still sweeping up spilled granules from the men’s sugar packets. “I have research to do.”

“Go. I’ll see you in an hour.”

My creative focus relieved some of the flustered energy pinging inside of me. I loved advertising because every product brought fresh challenges. I already had a handle on the

history of whiskey, but I wanted to know more about the client.

When the meeting reconvened, the group shared information as an administrative assistant recorded everything into a shared document. We were fully acquainted with the product and its maker when Beatrix and Warren Bellefleur arrived.

The tune of the men completely transformed from mocking to an ass-kissing, stroke fest. The problem, however, was that they were only stroking Warren Bellefleur, and he wasn't the client.

While the men gushed over Mr. Bellefleur, I took time to get to know Beatrix, the creator behind Sweet Honey Whiskey, who appropriately went by Bea. Although she was twenty-three, her big, whiskey brown eyes and flawless toffee skin, made her look no older than eighteen.

Turned out, Bea was a bit of a badass. Being raised by her father, she grew up doing all the things southern boys did, like tractor hopping, bridge jumping, vine swinging, and hunting water moccasins. So, it was no surprise that she didn't just come up with the recipe for Sweet Honey Whiskey, but also raised the bees and harvested the honey herself.

She and her dad owned several acres of farmland where Beatrix's flagship, Bea farm, and production facilities were located. Warren had nothing to do with the company, and Bea already had the necessary seed money for a robust marketing campaign, so I wasn't sure why she brought him.

“Is your father a partner?”

“Oh, no,” she said with the most delicate southern twang that spoke of proper manners and a good education, the kind only old money could buy. “Daddy's just here to get our foot in the door. His boots work better than my heels when it comes to opening doors.”

I glanced down at her long, dark legs and the four-inch heels. She was lithe and stunning from head to toe. And I especially liked how her hair was braided into a spiraling

beehive, being that she was the face behind Sweet Honey Whiskey.

“What’s your vision for Sweet Honey?” I asked, curious to hear the extent of her passion and goals.

When Bea spoke, her voice remained soft and her dark eyes held me in suspense. We talked as though we were alone in a bar, sharing dreams and cocktails the way women often do. The men were too boisterous and loud to catch the details she shared as she explained to me where she wanted Sweet Honey Whiskey to go, how she hoped to get it there, and what she was looking for in an advertising company.

The men eventually stopped stroking Warren and turned their focus to the actual client, but there was little interaction beyond their curious stares and uncertain approach. To me, Bea was just another visionary in need of our services. Her gender detracted nothing from her or her product’s value.

“Don’t let her fool you, gentlemen,” her father spoke up on Bea’s behalf. “My sweet honey Bea has a stinger and she’s not afraid to use it.”

Warren’s statement was undercut by the charming chortle that escaped Beatrix’s lips. The men appeared unconcerned and unconvinced, while I saw dollar signs and endless opportunities to market a product the industry could use.

At the end of the meeting, the men shook hands with Warren and merely thanked Bea. I promised to stay in touch with her, already planning my follow-up email I’d send later that afternoon.

As soon as the Bellefleurs were gone, I gathered my belongings and hustled back to my desk. The day was half over and I still hadn’t set eyes on any of the senior partners. A quick trip to the restroom to freshen up, and I was off to lunch. Except I didn’t go to lunch, I went to the twentieth floor.

A receptionist greeted me with a blank expression. “May I help you?”

“I was wondering if I could speak to Mr. Barrett.”

“Is he expecting you?”

I bit my lip, wondering if my spontaneity would be misconstrued as unprofessionalism. “No. I work on the nineteenth floor.”

“Your name?”

“Tennessee Keller.”

She held up a finger and spoke softly into the phone. “There’s a Tennessee Keller here to see you, sir. She says she’s from nineteen.” The receptionist frowned. “I’m not sure. I don’t recognize her.”

“I’m one of the interns with advertising,” I whispered, only to get another silencing finger raised in my face.

“Yes, sir.” She hung up the phone. “You can have a seat.”

I wandered over to the small waiting area and sat down, debating if it was a mistake coming here without an actual appointment. It wasn’t the best day, considering what had happened with Sanchez, but I couldn’t stop thinking about what Preston said about opportunities going to those who spoke up first. There was an opportunity here, and I didn’t want to miss it.

Considering what I might say when I finally saw Jack Barrett—well, I hadn’t had time to think that through—I tried to think of something sophisticated that would sound capable and hungry rather than desperate and unprepared. My mind was going a million miles a minute in a thousand different directions when a long shadow fell over me.

I looked up and into the shaded eyes of Jack Barrett.

“You asked to speak to me, honey.”

Because I wanted something, I swallowed down my revulsion to the endearment and forced a smile. “Yes, sir.” I stood. “You can call me Tennessee.”

Chapter 4

y car key trembled as I tried to slide it into the ignition. I held
M the wheel in a white-knuckled grip all the way home but
my hands started shaking again the moment I let go. I
burst into the condo and threw my purse at the coat tree,
kicking off my shoes as I yelled, “*David!*”

“Lucy?”

I rushed up the stairs with the acoustics of a stampede of
wild mustangs. “You’re never going to believe what happened
to me today!”

He frowned, taking a quick head-to-toe inspection of my
body. “Are you hurt?”

“No. God, no. I’m fan-fucking-tastic! I’m an associate!”

His jaw went slack, and the sponge he was holding
dropped into the sink. “Seriously?”

“I am officially employed by Patriarch Global Solutions!”

The pan he’d been washing clattered against the other
dishes. I was suddenly lifted off my feet and spun through the
air. I laughed to the point of tears as we both screamed and
then everything went silent.

David’s lips landed on mine. Holding. Softening. Kissing.

Maybe it was my excitement. Or perhaps it had to do with
the adrenaline coursing through my veins. But, at that
moment, it wasn’t David kissing me. David wouldn’t kiss like
that. This was too good, too tempting, too mind scrambling.
This was not my best friend’s tongue in my mouth, sending
shockwaves down to my clit.

But it was.

I jerked back and gasped, covering my lips with my
fingers.

David looked unsure. Just unsure. Not startled. Not
apologetic. He almost looked pleased or relieved.

“David, what the hell was that?”

His body language appeared too steady, and I was shaken
to the core. “Was that not okay?”

Of course, it wasn't okay!

Was it?

We didn't kiss.

We never kissed.

He just stood there, studying me, as if giving me a chance to catch up, but I was lost. As opposite-gender, heterosexual best friends, everyone assumed we kissed and more, but we never had.

My fingers trembled from my lips and I took a step back, but the distance did nothing to relieve my confusion. "Why did you do that?"

His glance darted toward the kitchen. "I... You were excited. We were celebrating. The moment got away from me."

"David, you *kissed* me." And where had he learned to kiss like that?

"I know." He frowned but no longer looked at me. "I'm not sorry."

"What?" I drew back. "We don't do that. I mean, we might peck on New Year's and birthdays, but that was no peck. That was full-on tongue."

"I get it." He held up a hand, his scowl darkening.

"Then why did you do it?" And why would he say he wasn't sorry? Was he glad he kissed me?

He finally looked at me through those dark coffee eyes, his explanation expanding in the silence that separated us. That look held more finality than I could handle. It explained things I couldn't comprehend. Things I didn't want to know.

I shook my head, begging him not to say anything. If we didn't talk about it, it wasn't real. Childish, I know, but if he spoke, he might destroy everything. My friendship with David was the most important relationship in my life. "Don't—"

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that."

My throat closed and my insides shook. Every organ in my torso trembled until my heartbeat lost its rhythm. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on, Teeny. You knew.”

“Knew *what*?”

Every skittering part of me shrank with fear as I held my breath. At that moment, I silently admitted that some tiny part of me had always known, or at least suspected. But that’s not what we were. We were Teeny and David. Friends to the end.

“I...” His gaze cut away again and he laughed quietly to himself. When his stare returned to mine, there was no humor in his eyes. “I’m in love with you.”

“Stop.”

“I can’t.”

“You can!” I covered my ears. “I don’t want to hear this.”

He caught my wrists and forced my hands away from my head. “Teeny, it’s too late.”

My face went numb as my vision blurred. I could no longer feel my legs. “No.” The plea escaped in a breath.

“I thought you knew.”

My useless legs gave out and I dropped onto the sofa. Did I know? Everything was jumbled. Reality mixed with denial until I couldn’t differentiate prior instinct from the aftermath. “How long?”

He tried for a smile and failed. “Probably since the day you gave me half of your brownie.”

“David, that was in second grade.”

He shrugged. “It’s the only secret I’ve ever kept from you.”

I shook my head. All this time he had feelings for me? “You’ve seen me naked.” It felt like a betrayal, but was it? “I thought we were friends.”

“Come on, Teeny, we are. You’re my *best* friend. This doesn’t change that.”

I scoffed, too stunned to hide my shock. “*This* changes everything. What are we gonna do? Where am I gonna live?”

“Why would you have to move?”

“I don’t know.” I blinked away unshed tears of frustration. Why couldn’t I recall how *When Harry Met Sally* ended? “You should have told me sooner.”

“I tried. A hundred times.”

“Then why didn’t you?” I hadn’t been this blindsided since the day my dad left.

“You’re...intimidating.”

“Don’t do that.” A tear fell from my lashes. “Don’t be like everyone else and tell me I’m too much. You’re the only person I can be myself around.” Did that still stand?

“You still can. I love who you are.”

“But you didn’t trust me enough to share your feelings. Our entire relationship has been a lie.”

“That’s not true.” He sat beside me and took my hands, turning my body to face him. “Every laugh, every important conversation, every life-altering decision, it’s all been real. You’re the most real person I know. Can you blame me for falling in love with you?”

Love? Of course, I loved him and he loved me, but the love he implied was something totally different. I dashed away another tear. “Our friendship means everything to me—”

“To me as well.”

He wasn’t hearing me. I shook my head. “I don’t want to risk our friendship.”

He dropped my hands and stood. The added space forced miles of distance between us. It was happening already. The awkwardness was smothering us.

“David, I love you like a—”

“Don’t,” he snapped.

I looked up at him through a wall of tears, unsure what else to say.

“I don’t want to be your brother, Tennessee. You’ve already got Ethan. I’ve never looked at you like a sister. It’s always been more.”

How could that be? How could we live together and spend so much time together without him ever giving himself away? I thought of all the dates I had over the years and how I told him every dirty detail. Maybe his silence was a sort of self-preservation, but the longer I thought about it the more it felt like a betrayal.

Numb, I stood. “I have to go to bed.”

“It’s not even seven.”

“I need to think.”

“Let’s talk about it.”

Confusion boiled into a mess of sorrow and anger. “Now, you want to talk? You had sixteen years to think this through. I deserve at least a night or two.”

“You do, but at least give me a chance to explain.”

“Explain what? What else is there to say? I’m not even sure what this means. Is it a sexual thing or an emotional thing? You say it’s love, but what if it’s just a crush?”

“It’s love.”

“How do you know?”

“I know.”

“How?”

“Because you’re my first thought in the morning and my last thought at night. I can’t stomach the idea of another man’s hands on you. Not when I want to be the one touching and holding you. Kissing you... Making love to you.”

My stomach pinched in an unrecognizable way. He was going way too fast.

Recalling the way his mouth felt against mine, I wondered if—in that moment—I, too, felt more than a platonic response to him. Had I?

The kiss should have been repulsive but it wasn't. The curiosity was there. There had been a time when we were teenagers that we had discussed it, but there was too much at risk, so we never went through with anything.

“Your friendship means too much to me,” I finally said, repeating those words we both agreed upon many years ago when we were both horny, inexperienced kids looking for a safe outlet.

“I want to be more than your friend.”

It honestly wasn't about him. Somewhere, packed away in the compartmentalized pieces of my heart, I knew my greatest love would end in tragedy. I truly believed the moment I gave my whole self to someone they would abandon me, just like my dad, the first man I loved, had.

I spent half my life trying to be *less* after my father left because my mother constantly told me I was too much. Too bold, too brash, too loud, too everything. For years, I tried to change my appearance, my voice, my humor, all so that I'd someday avoid the rejection of another man. That man couldn't be David. I needed him. He was the only person to ever fully accept me as I was.

Or did he? What if after all this time his love was conditional? Conditional on the one thing I couldn't give.

“I'll disappoint you.”

“That's bullshit.”

“It's not. You know me, David. I burn people out.”

He held open his arms. “Do I look worried? We made it through high school and college, and now we live together. Trust me when I say my feelings for you have only grown.”

“You're looking for something I can't provide. I'm not girlie.”

“I didn't ask you to be.”

But if we went there, he'd eventually look for more. He'd search for a softer side or some hidden trove of sexy feminine wiles I didn't possess.

"Teeny, I know the real you better than anyone else does. I like you loud and honest. I'll take you hyper, silly, lazy, or moody. I know what I'm asking for, here. I've spent most of my life thinking about what I want. It's you. Just you."

His words were everything a woman should want to hear, but... David was a haven, a sanctuary where I could unwind and take up all the space I needed to vent or cry or zone out without judgment. I couldn't risk losing that.

The world was a draining place, one where women needed to stuff their bodies into spandex and force their sore feet into high heels. We straightened our frizzy curls and bleached everything from our teeth to our assholes just to meet some ridiculous societal standard, but none of that applied when I was with him. I didn't have to turn down my volume or smooth out my rough edges for him to accept me because he loved me just the way I was.

That love was perfect. He shouldn't mess with it. I wanted it to stay measurable and safe.

His hand touched mine after several moments of silence and I realized seeing me speechless was probably terrifying to him. "Will you say something?"

I sat down. "I don't know what to say." My thoughts were going a mile a minute.

David was the only man I counted on to stay. Losing him would destroy me. Life had taught me that *more* often leads to *too much*. "I can't do this."

"We haven't even tried—"

"I can't."

"Why?" When his voice broke it chipped a piece of my heart loose. "I love you, Teeny. Don't you love me?"

"Of course, I love you. You're probably the most important person in my life. You're everything, which is

exactly why I would never do anything to risk our friendship.”

“I want to be more than your friend.”

“You want something I can’t give.”

“Can’t isn’t part of your vocabulary.”

That wasn’t fair. I didn’t want to hurt him. Every word did more damage. “You want something that I don’t.”

“I’ve waited, Teeny. I’ve watched you date one douchebag after another. I…” He glanced at the ceiling, pressing his lips together. “Your virginity—”

“Hey! It’s not like you never dated.”

“I tried to make it work with other women, but it’s only ever been you. None of them compared to what you make me feel. This isn’t something I haven’t thought about. I love you.”

“I can’t.” I stood, uncomfortable in my skin. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I can’t—”

“How can you say that without even considering—”

“I can’t lose you, David! No amount of consideration will change that.”

This time when he looked away, his throat moved as he swallowed back whatever he’d been about to say. A tear fell from his dark lashes and he nodded. “It’s fine.” He cleared his throat and wiped his eyes, moving further out of reach without ever taking a full step. “I’m sorry if I made things weird.”

“Wait…”

He turned away but paused without looking back.

“You’re upset. We should talk about it.”

“What else is there to say?”

The silence stretched until we both lost our handle on the situation. The reality of this fresh awkwardness made me sick to my stomach. He already started pulling away. We were changing no matter what either of us decided.

His confession was a bell that couldn’t be un-rung. The realization that this was the beginning of the end, that I was

losing him, shook me to my core.

Desperate, I crossed the living room, and threw my arms around him, pressing my cheek to his back. “David.”

His hand rested on mine, squeezing softly as we breathed through this life-altering shift.

He pivoted before I could anticipate his next move. The press of his lips stole my breath, and the moment I gasped in surprise, he deepened the kiss.

Familiar hands sifted through my hair, pulling me close. My instinct to pull away was deferred by fear. I didn’t want to lose him and if I pushed him away he would undoubtedly go.

His arms slid down my back, wrapping us tightly together so my chest pressed to his. My hands lifted reflexively, holding for a split second in midair until instinct took over and I gave in.

He was indisputably a good kisser, so much so his skill shocked me. Heat pulled like warm honey through my veins as my body gave in to every sensation. My heart hummed like a swarm of bees chasing the first promise of spring. Every nerve ending came alive, chanting, laughing, buzzing with want and need.

His breath became mine. Our bodies moved as one, like words that flirt and play within the lines of poetry. I gripped his shoulders, wondering when they grew so broad.

Irritation teased the peripheral of my thoughts when I realized that some other woman taught him to kiss like this. Who was she? The nosy friend in me wanted to ask, but the kiss was too delectable to break.

My back hit the wall, and my mouth angled against his. His fingers curled softly around my neck, the pad of his thumb tracing my jaw as he bit tenderly at my lips. His hardened cock pressed against my stomach and the moment shattered.

I ripped my mouth away and his face pressed into my shoulder, both of us breathing heavily. I’d do anything to prolong the moment if it meant postponing reality from intruding, but it already had.

I wasn't one to make emotional decisions. I liked a plan. I liked control. But I also believed in taking action. Sometimes, that meant hurling myself off a cliff toward a goal, long before I felt ready. Oftentimes, that was the only possible way to take that first, terrifying step.

I could do that now. Shut my eyes and let instinct lead. Everything he'd been doing felt incredible. It had been so long since a man kissed me properly, and I couldn't recall anyone kissing as well as David.

Head tipped back against the wall, I screwed my eyes shut tight and slid my hand between our bodies, cupping the hard bulge in his pants, testing this new reality. It was real.

He thrust into my palm and moaned, as if he'd been waiting a decade for me to touch him there. "Fuck, Teeny."

There was a masculine edge to his voice I didn't recognize. A hunger in his eyes that scared me. This wasn't my David. This was a man I didn't know, with dark desires I couldn't satisfy. I pulled my hand back and slipped out of his hold.

"I can't. Not with you. It's too much."

"We can slow down." His hair stood on end, and his clothing was rumpled.

"I don't want to slow down. I want to go back to thirty minutes ago when we were just us."

He stared at me for a long moment, then finally said, "I can't go back."

A wall of unshed tears filled my eyes and collapsed. Unlike my best friend I'd come to lean on after years of reliance, he kept his distance. The cold absence of his touch only enhanced my panic.

Covering my face, I cried through a storm of confusion, wishing he would hold me but also needing him to keep his distance. "You can't do this to me. I can't deal with the possibility of losing you."

Silence met my ears and my greatest fears taunted me as he let me work through my own turmoil. How could he just

stand there while I cried? I spent a lifetime talking through my problems with him and I struggled to make any decision without his input or approval.

If I rejected him, would he really leave me? Was there no going back? I needed to face this so we could talk it through. But when I wiped my eyes and lifted my face, he was gone and I was gutted all over again.

Chapter 5

The stipulations of my new position weren't exactly as permanent as I'd hoped, but it was still an upgrade from a paid intern. Jack Barrett was first a southern gentleman and a businessman second, so while he politely took my meeting and listened to my rushed together proposal of why I should fill Preston's old position as an associate, he closed with a firm reminder that this was business, and business is about making money, not losing it.

He offered me a trial run as an associate with the firm. Jack would be out of town over the next two weeks, and he expected to find signed contracts and a robust marketing campaign when he returned. Until then, I'd be working directly under his godson, Preston, who would essentially oversee the Sweet Honey Whiskey account in Jack's absence.

It wasn't a good day to be off my game, but I'd hardly slept the night before, and I woke up still shaken from David's revelation. I didn't see him this morning when I left for work like I usually did, and he hadn't answered my multiple texts asking if we were okay.

When I got to the office, I felt like my brain was running on fumes. Preston cornered me at first chance, which didn't help matters. My nerves were frayed and I wasn't in the mood for games. Things only got worse when Sarah spotted us standing close enough that our position could be misconstrued as inappropriate.

“Preston.” I immediately put space between us and darted my eyes in Sarah’s direction, but he was undeterred.

“Why don’t you stay late tonight? We can order in and start tossing ideas around.”

Why was that necessary when we had all day to accomplish the same? There was no way I was working late. If it weren’t for my new promotion, I probably would have called out and stayed home to fix things with David.

Oh, God, what if we were unfixable?

I couldn’t think that way. I needed to stay positive.

We were Teeny and David. Of course, we’d work this out. I didn’t work without him. Did he work without me?

Insecurity gnawed at my insides. It was probably best if I stayed focused on the campaign and my career.

Submerging myself into the Sweet Honey pitch development, I gathered with the others. Preston had yet to make his final team selections because he wanted to give everyone a chance to sleep on their proposal ideas. My brain hadn’t stopped, but I was so distracted and tired I could barely spell whiskey let alone sell it. I pulled out my notes from yesterday.

Rebuffed from our encounter in the hall, Preston’s gaze fell on me the moment he entered the conference room. “Keller, why don’t you brew up a fresh pot of coffee?”

My shoulders stiffened. Had he really just asked that? It took every bit of my composure not to glance at Sarah standing to my left. Making beverages wasn’t her job either, but I was an associate now, it certainly couldn’t be mine.

“Thanks, but I already had a cup,” I said, politely letting him know that if he wanted coffee, he could make it himself. He had two thumbs and a brain.

“Come on, be a team player.”

I hated comments like that because I could never tell if I was being gaslighted or selfish. Gritting my teeth, I rose and snatched the pot off the burner, filling it with water at the

kitchenette. By the time the coffee was percolating, everyone had already broken into groups and started working. Vince had partnered with Garry and Doug, so Sarah was with Rob and Michael. That left me with Preston. Did he do that on purpose? Was coffee just a distraction to get me alone?

I didn't have the energy to combat his flirting. Nor did I feel like having the credit for my hard work assigned to someone else. More than once on past projects, I had to tell him, "I know, I did the research for that." Or "I'm the one who suggested we take that approach."

Despite my status elevation, Vince was still the noticeable favorite. He was now a position below me but treated as if he had seniority. My aggravation grew when Sarah was asked to take the lunch order.

Too exhausted to come up with clever responses, I stomached being addressed as "honey" several times. But my patience snapped when I was sent to make copies. Not asked. Sent.

By the time lunch arrived, I needed a break. I took my sandwich to my desk and tried to call David, but he didn't answer. My three texts sat on *read* and with every passing minute my stomach got more upset. Then I did the one thing I should never do when upset about boys. I called my mom.

"What's wrong? Why aren't you at work?" she answered.

"I am at work. I'm on lunch."

"Oh. You don't usually call me during the day. Is everything okay?"

I sighed. Confessing any sort of problem to my mother was like pouring water into hot oil. There was a big chance it could backfire and hurt me.

"I got a promotion, and I think everyone thinks I earned it by sleeping with one of the junior partners."

"Did you?"

"Mom! No! How could you even ask me that?"

“I asked because you mentioned it. But six months with a company does seem fast, Teeny.”

“So, you think I’d—” I glanced around and lowered my voice. “So, you think I’d screw my boss?”

“Sometimes that’s the fastest way for women to get ahead.”

Why the hell did I call her? “Well, that’s not how I operate.”

“Then what would you like me to say? What other people think of you is none of your business, Tennessee.” A funny statement from a woman who obsessed over impressions.

“Well, they’re treating me differently. I don’t like it.”

“How so?”

“Like, they’re asking me to fetch coffee and make copies, and belittling my ideas.”

She sighed into the phone. “Working in groups has always been difficult for you. You have to give everyone a chance to shine.”

Again, I wondered what on earth possessed me to call her. Forget telling her about David. I’d rather confide in a stranger. At least then there would be a chance of logical advice and empathy.

I deconstructed my sandwich with no appetite whatsoever. “I gotta run, Mom.”

“Try to smile, sweetie. Beauty holds as much power as brains in some circles. It’s okay not to share every thought that crosses your mind.”

I frowned. Just because I liked being direct didn’t mean I didn’t have a filter.

But she wasn’t done. “It’s nice to let others have a turn.”

“I know how to take turns.”

“Well, men like to lead, Teeny.”

“So do women.”

She made an unimpressed *pfift*, as if female leadership somehow went against nature. “If you want my advice, try to be a little more agreeable. You get more bees with honey.”

I closed my eyes and silently counted to ten. “Thanks. I have to go.”

When I returned to the conference room, bottles of Sweet Honey were being passed around and things were getting sloppy. Had they drunk their way through lunch?

“Vince, you’re coming tonight, right?”

“You betchya.”

“Tonight?” I asked Sarah, taking the seat beside her.

She glanced at me with a blank expression and made no response. What the hell was that about?

Smoothing the wrinkles out of my blouse, I moved to the side of the table where Preston was working. Taking my mom’s approach, I softened my tone and forced a smile. “I hear everyone’s going out tonight.”

Preston looked up from his sketch and lifted a brow. “I thought you had plans?”

I needed to talk to David, but maybe it was more important to give him some space and fix my relationship with my colleagues at the moment. “Well, that depends on what’s going on. If everyone’s going to be there, I don’t want to miss out.” In case it needed saying, I added, “I’m a team player.”

He sat back and studied me. “Is this a joke?”

Alarmed that he’d ask that, I frowned. “No.”

He chuckled. “Then why are you being so...nice?”

“I’m always nice.”

“No, you’re not.”

I sucked in a deep breath, prepared to argue, but then I remembered what my mother said about bees with honey, so I pushed another smile. “If something is going on tonight for work, I’d love to be a part of it.”

I couldn't explain why I found it so appalling to speak with such a delicate, artificial tone. He couldn't be buying this. Did some women really get away with such a sugary approach? My words felt brittle and fake. Plastic. Any second now he was going to burst out in laughter.

But, instead, he grinned. "Okay, we'll join them."

My rigid smile held as I spoke through clenched teeth. "Great."

"Perfect."

"Super." Manners had never sounded more superficial. Was this the cost of success?

His hand landed on my knee and I froze. Before I could move, he leaned close and whispered, "It's interesting... watching you battle with your natural instincts to be such a good girl. Shows a real initiative to please." His grip tightened and his eyes darkened. "I like it."

My eyes widened as my palm twitched with the urge to slap him, but my gaze latched onto his mouth and his smirk rendered me motionless. The fucker knew he was getting to me. I just didn't know how he'd managed it in such a way.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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ABOUT LYDIA MICHAELS

Lydia Michaels is the bestselling and award-winning author of more than forty novels. She is the consecutive winner of the *2018 & 2019 Author of the Year Award* from *Happenings Media*, as well as the recipient of the *2014 Best Author Award* from the Courier Times. She has been featured by *USA Today*, *Romantic Times Magazine*, the *Women in Publishing Summit*, and more. She is the CEO and founder of the *East Coast Author Convention*, the *Behind the Keys Author Retreat*, and *Lydia Michaels Coaching & Consulting*.

Michaels started her author career in 2007 and has become a recognized presence and advocate within the publishing industry. She is an outspoken feminist who is happily married to her childhood sweetheart. Some of her favorite things include cooking Italian cuisine, hosting extravagant dinner parties, sipping espresso martinis, and escaping to her coastal home on the Jersey Shore.

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A BEAUTIFUL SPARK

by M.L. Broome

Contemporary

Billionaire, Secret Identity, Rags to Riches

My boss's instructions were simple: arrive early at the luxury resort and ensure everything was ready for her soirée with Benjamin Hartwood, the world's most eligible billionaire.

So, I traveled to Barbados, even splurging to book an additional night at the fancy digs. Trust me, when you work for a prima donna extraordinaire, you need time away.

I planned on a quiet evening with some wine and a bubble bath.

But then I met a gorgeous stranger at the hotel bar and that's when things went sideways.

Before I could blink, he whisked me to a private lagoon to lounge under the stars.

If only he hadn't been so beautiful, witty, and charming, I might have been able to resist him.

But then he kissed me, and all bets were off.

There's just one *teensy* kink in our fledgling romance—his name is Benjamin Hartwood.

CHAPTER 1

My boss needs a hobby, preferably one that doesn't involve me schlepping to every lounge of a high-dollar resort in search of the world's most eligible billionaire.

Also, the world's most elusive, as it turns out.

I've dropped by six of the seven lounges at the swanky Barbados resort, and no one has a clue where Benjamin Hartwood is. Oh, they all know who he is but his whereabouts? No idea.

Or if they do, they've signed an oath to not tell me.

But Samantha Dodson, the woman signing my meager paychecks, doesn't take no for an answer. When she wants something, she'll stop at nothing to get it.

And she wants Benjamin Hartwood.

But rather than get her feet dirty, she's sent me, her grudging assistant, to lay the groundwork.

It's the only reason I'm at this upper crust retreat; to help ensure a smooth and 'accidental' meeting between my employer and her unwitting suitor.

Most days, I plaster on a smile and seal all contrary objections safely *inside* my mouth.

But today is *not* one of those days.

Why?

It was supposed to be my first proper day off in six months. No joke. I haven't had a full day to myself since I signed Samantha Dodson's NDA and sold my soul to the celebrity realtor.

Instead, as with every other day off, it's turned into a litany of tasks ranging from hanging her clothes in the closet to ensuring her makeup team is ready for her arrival tomorrow.

But the crux of her requests? To search out Benjamin Hartwood.

I'm not sure if you've ever looked for a reclusive billionaire, but there are no signs leading you to their door, and I feel like a lech for invading this poor man's privacy when it's so apparent he holds it in the highest regard.

The worst part is I have zero idea what Benjamin looks like. Per Samantha, he's gorgeous—tall, tanned, and aloof—but that sums up about 80% of the men prowling this high dollar hideaway. Apparently, the man has zero social media presence, and even Google doesn't have a clue. Samantha swore she'd send me a photo of Benjamin at a rare public appearance, but that was two hours ago, and my phone hasn't beeped once.

Under normal circumstances, I'd love the silence, but until I know *who* I'm looking for, I have zero chance of finding him.

Besides, this is his resort, so I'm fairly certain there are a ton of women sending in private investigators and stool pigeons to locate the man.

If Benjamin Hartwood has the intelligence god gave a goat, he knows I'm on the prowl and is avoiding all public areas tonight.

But if I don't try, then I'll have to listen to Samantha complain, and that is something I avoid at all costs.

So, I play the game, but let me tell you, I'm a sore loser at this point.

I limp toward the heavy oak bar in the seventh lounge, aptly named Incognito, and hoist my cranky ass onto a bar stool, releasing a far louder than expected sigh that catches the bartender's attention.

I lift a hand when he shoots me an expectant glance, assuring him I'm not some entitled prick who deems my time more important than his own.

“Fucking hell,” I mumble as I slide off the stiletto and massage my toes. Who invented these torture devices, anyway?

I'm far more comfortable in sneakers, but Samantha insisted I look the part of a rich heiress, even if I feel like a clown in this get-up.

Yes, the dress is beautiful and costs several thousand more than I make in a month, but I'm a world-class klutz and all I can focus on, besides my spur-of-the-moment treasure hunt, is not destroying said dress.

The heels can go to hell, which is no doubt where they were fashioned.

I gaze around the dimly lit interior, drinking in the high-end fixtures and furnishings, while trying desperately *not* to resemble a stalker.

Unlike the other lounges, this one is understated, resembling a library in an old English cottage.

I like it immediately, save for the nouveau rich couple at the corner table, laughing a bit too loudly while they feed one another caviar at \$500 an ounce.

I've tried caviar and for \$500 an ounce, I'd rather eat horse dung. To each their own, I suppose.

My eyes track the perimeter of the room, stopping to rest on the man at the other end of the bar.

He's talking to the barkeep, and although his face is hidden in shadows, there's no denying his quiet power.

He also possesses another quality, one that practically seeps from his pores—keep your distance.

No problem, sir. I so get you.

“Good evening, miss. What can I get you?” the barkeep asks, breaking into my thoughts.

Before I can answer, my phone pings with new messages.

Eight. Of. Them.

All from Samantha and yet, *still* no picture of Benjamin Hartwood. Just some blathering about how all hired help are morons, and she's furious with her stylist.

Groaning, I bury my face in my hands. “A lobotomy, please,” I mutter.

I meant for the words to stay in my head, or at the very least, to remain unintelligible to the other patrons.

No such luck.

A chuckle sounds from the shadowy figure at the end of the bar. “That bad, huh?”

“It’s sure as hell not good, but then again, it’s not Russia invading another country bad, either.”

Another laugh from my new bar buddy, and this time the barkeep joins in the fun.

“I apologize,” I state, chewing my lower lip. “My sense of humor flew out the window three bars ago.”

The man glances around the lounge, and although I can’t see his expression, I hear the humor in his voice. “Are you on a solo bar hopping mission?”

“That term implies some degree of fun, which is, sadly, nowhere to be found. I’m working.”

“Are you a cocktail critic?”

I snort out a laugh. “Heavens, no. I wouldn’t know the difference between that bottle”—I point at a tall blue glass bottle with a mermaid engraved on the front—“and that bottle. Except that I assume they’re both extremely expensive brands of alcohol.”

Seems that statement was enough to pique the man’s interest, as he stands and moves under the light to claim the seat next to mine.

I surmised he was good looking by the deep timbre of his voice, but when he emerges from the shadows, I realize I was mistaken.

The man is exquisitely beautiful: a chiseled jaw with a full mouth surrounded by a short dark beard peppered with gray. But it’s his eyes, the most piercing blue, that capture my full attention.

Then he smiles, and I swear to God, I damn near orgasm.

He's what they describe as painfully handsome. The only upside to that level of beauty? He's likely a total douchebag. Sorry, but most gorgeous people are fully aware of their looks, regardless of their claims otherwise, and have spent years wrangling others to do their bidding with nary more than a flash of their pearly whites.

Or boobs, as is the case with my boss.

I jerk my focus to the fancy bottles lining the mirrored wall, determined to appear indifferent to the man's devastating good looks.

It's not working.

"Do you prefer whisky or rum?"

"Sorry?"

The gorgeous man nods toward the bar. "That bottle with the mermaid is rum. The other bottle is single malt whisky."

"How low class will I appear if I beg ignorance of both?"

"Not low class at all." He reaches out and brushes a lock of hair behind my ear before skating his index finger along my jaw and directing my gaze back to him.

That sort of forward move would earn a smack on any other occasion, but there's something so damn mesmerizing about his touch.

An odd sort of safety.

His luminous blue eyes scan my face, while a hint of a smile plays on that oh-so-kissable mouth. "Rodney, can you get us two single malts, please?"

The barkeep nods and sets two glasses before us, filling them halfway with the amber liquid. "There you go, sir. Enjoy."

My new friend picks up his glass before shooting a glance at mine, untouched on the bar. "My money is on you being a single malt type. What should we toast to?"

I grab the glass, trying not to cringe at the strong smell wafting toward my nose. “World peace, while commendable, is unlikely to occur, no matter what alcohol we consume, so let’s aim for something more attainable.”

“Ladies’ choice,” he grins.

If his sexy smirk is anything to go on, this man knows the effect he’s having on me and my lady parts.

I hate that fact.

No doubt he’s enacted this same scenario with countless women, so it’s time for my New York mouth to come into play and set Mr. Wonderful back in his place.

I hold up the glass and salute the ceiling. “Let’s see ... I know. To the world’s greatest orgasms. May they be multiple in number and mind-bending in nature.”

His eyes widen as a shocked huff flies from his mouth.

Didn’t see that one coming, did you?

Biting back the giggle, I shoot him my best innocent expression. “Exactly the reaction I was hoping for—complete and utter shock.”

The man shifts in his seat, but his gaze never falters from my face.

So much for him having a sense of humor.

With a shake of my head, I lean over and give his arm a pat. “I didn’t mean from you. Just in general.”

Now his eyes darken as a scowl passes over his features. “Sorry, that won’t do.”

Figures, he’s gorgeous and has a stick up his high-class ass.

“Then you make the toast. World peace is still on the table.”

He runs his tongue along his lower lip, his gaze focused on the far wall. “No, I like the orgasm one far better, but it requires an addendum.”

“How so?”

Once again, he turns to me, leaning in so our faces are mere inches apart. “May your next kiss bring you to your knees, leaving you with a hunger that only I can satisfy. And may I ruin you for any other man.”

My mouth drops open as flames shoot through my body. Seems it’s my turn to be rendered speechless.

He clinks his glass against mine, his eyes flashing with intensity. “Cheers. Two can play the shocking statement game, you know.”

Snapping from my over-sexed reverie, I chuckle and raise the glass to my lips. “Touché. Well played.”

“I meant every word, although the look on your face was priceless.”

“Very few people shock me into silence, much to my mother’s horror. She’s a quintessential lady and I am not.”

“I disagree.”

I clear my throat, directing his attention to my stilettos laying on the footrest. “See these things? My mother could walk in these for hours with nary a wince. Me? I stumble around like a day-old calf.”

“You are not like the other women I’ve met. What’s your name?”

“Raleigh.”

“Raleigh,” he repeats, as if trying it on for size. “A name as unusual as the woman.”

“Unusual is a fair description and much better than some adjectives used to describe me.”

Pedantic, challenging, and difficult are all terms Samantha has used on more than one occasion. Sometimes I wonder if she’s right.

That this man also pegs me as an outlier is *not* helping my fragile ego.

“Let me provide you with a few more descriptors, at least from where I’m sitting.”

“Can’t wait.”

“Wildly intelligent, a witty conversationalist, and ...” he pauses, a hint of a smile on his mouth.

“What?”

“Exceptionally beautiful.”

Now I really *am* speechless. Perhaps it’s a well-oiled line, but it makes me all warm and fuzzy on the inside, regardless.

I wave away his compliment as the flush climbs my cheeks.

“Don’t do that. When someone compliments you, believe them. Especially if they have no reason to lie.”

“I’m terrible at taking compliments, but I appreciate it nonetheless. What’s your name?”

He extends his hand and I note how warm and safe I feel when he touches me. “Thomas.”

“You’ve made a most egregious night exceptionally pleasant. Thank you.”

“Why stop now? The night is young, although I have a question.”

“By all means.”

He leans on his hand, offering a pointed gaze at my shoes. “I know women are all about fashion, but shouldn’t comfort trump pain? Why do you buy the shoes if you hate them so much?”

“They’re not mine. They belong to my boss. This outfit costs more than I make in a few months.”

The man straightens, the smile falling from his face. “I didn’t realize.”

“That I’m poor? That’s kind of the idea, right? I know, despite the outfit, I don’t fit in here.”

No doubt he’s regretting that orgasm statement now.

Thomas motions toward Rodney, offering him a smile when he tops off his drink. “On the contrary, you’re a refreshing change, but something isn’t adding up. You said you’ve been in a few of the bars tonight. You’re dressed in clothing you despise, although you look stunning, and you seem none too happy to be here. Were you supposed to meet someone tonight? Forgive my crassness, but there are many women who come here to hunt a husband.”

I sputter my drink at his direct words and grab the cocktail napkin to my mouth.

Talk about hitting the nail on the head.

“You’re correct, although I’m not the hunter in this situation. To be brutally and pathetically honest, I have no time for a social life, and I can’t recall the last time I experienced an earth-shattering orgasm.”

My cheeky statement makes its mark, as Thomas’s face once again splits into a grin. “That’s a tragedy, Raleigh.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Why don’t you tell *me* about it? There’s a story and a half in your words.”

I shrug, dismissing Rodney when he offers me a refill. “Isn’t there always a crazy and tragic backstory? You have one, too.”

“And what is mine?” he asks, raising his brows in amused contempt.

“You said it yourself that this resort is teeming with beautiful women, all desperate for a man like you. You have your pick of the lot. Hell, several per day, if that’s what you fancy.”

“It isn’t.”

Thank God.

“Exactly my point. You have women at your disposal and yet, you sit here, alone, with a wall about a mile thick surrounding you.”

Thomas nods slowly, a sigh rising from his chest. “Why do you think that is?”

In my defense, when someone asks me a question, I answer it. Honestly.

I skew my mouth to the left, my gaze traveling over his face and body. “You might be married, although I don’t get that vibe off you. No, you’re not. In fact, you’re very lonely, but you’d scorn the attention of any woman who approached you. You don’t trust people and I have a feeling you have a damn good reason for it.”

“Is that a fact?”

“No, it’s an opinion. How far off am I?”

He leans back against the bar stool and chuckles. “Closer than you realize, and I hate to think I’m that transparent.”

“You’re not. I’m a fairly good read of people. You’re not a typical rich guy, either.”

“I consider that a compliment. Most rich guys are pricks, right?”

“Most rich people, sadly.”

“Your turn, Raleigh. Why are *you* here, scoping out the bar scene?”

Here goes nothing. “I’m looking for Benjamin Hartwood. Do you know him?”

Something flashes in Thomas’s azure eyes as he and Rodney exchange a glance.

I’ve seen *that* look before. No doubt, they’re about to ask me, in the kindest of terms, to get the hell out of the lounge. Pronto.

Although I have had a blast chatting with this handsome stranger, I’m fully aware nothing will come of it.

Sadly, not even those back-bending orgasms he promised.

The man scratches his chin, but his gaze remains focused on Rodney. “Why are you looking for Benjamin Hartwood?”

What business do you have with him?”

“Correction, *I’m* not looking for him. My boss is, but she’s still in New York, so she sent me on a quest to locate him.”

“What are you supposed to do with him once you find him?”

“God, this sounds terrible. I’m to report back that he’s here at the resort so she can meet him when she arrives tomorrow. Although, if given the chance, I plan on telling the man to run screaming in the opposite direction. I know I would if given a do-over.”

Thomas guffaws at my unexpected statement. “Not a huge fan of your boss, I take it?”

“She’s a world-class bitch.” I clap my hand over my mouth and groan. “This is why me drinking alcohol is a bad idea. Everything that should stay in my head flies right out of my mouth.”

“I find it endearing. So few people ever say what they mean and yet you can’t help yourself.”

“It’s a gift,” I mutter, lowering my head to the bar.

“You’re in luck. I know Benjamin Hartwood.”

My head flies up just in time to catch the shocked expression crossing Rodney’s face at Thomas’s admission.

No doubt, people don’t give out the owner’s whereabouts, especially not to underpaid underlings. I’m sure Rodney will have some choice words for Thomas once I leave.

Which, knowing this bit of information, is any moment now.

“Are you going to tell him I’m looking for him? And if you do, is he going to kick me out of here? Because I’m seriously broke. I don’t have enough money for another hotel. I barely have enough for this one.”

Thomas ducks his head near mine as he bites back a grin.

Under normal circumstances, my panties would be sopping wet—again—at his proximity, but I’m a bit too concerned for

my well-being at the moment.

“I guess that depends. What does your boss want with Benjamin Hartwood?”

Huffing out a sigh, I throw up my hands. Why stop now, right? “*She’s* hunting a husband. She wants to marry the elusive billionaire and parade him in front of her bougie friends.”

Thomas halts, his glass halfway to his mouth. “Seriously?”

“She’d color her reasons with some glitter and fancy terminology, but that’s the crux of it. They met once, at some charity event, and she claims he’s incredible. She wants her shot with him, but apparently, he’s reclusive.”

“That he is, because there are a lot of women like your boss in the world. What’s your boss’s name?”

“Samantha Dodson.”

Thomas furrows his brow and shakes his head. “Never heard of her. Have you, Rodney?”

The barkeep shrugs, but I notice he’s hovered close since I announced my true intentions for being in the lounge. No doubt he’s waiting for the signal to boot my ass. “Can’t say that I have.”

I love that outside the tri-state area, Samantha isn’t the royalty she perceives herself to be. “She’s a realtor in New York, catering to the rich and famous.”

A flash of recognition passes over Thomas’s face. “She’s the tall blonde on that ridiculous reality show, right?”

Despite my internal distress, I giggle at Thomas’s pained expression. “That’s her.”

“Forgive me, but how the hell did someone like you wind up working for her? You two are opposite in every way.”

With a sigh, I swirl the remaining whisky in my glass. “I’m actually a writer, but they forced me out of my last job. I caught the owner in bed with an intern. Worst part was it was *my* boyfriend and *my* bed. Then, as a penance for calling him

out on his deplorable behavior, they blacklisted me from the editorial world, so finding work became impossible. I was desperate, and my mother mentioned her colleague's daughter, Samantha Dodson. I figured it would be easy enough work while I scouted out a new position.”

“Has it been easy?”

“The toughest gig of my damn life.”

“Why do you stay?”

I shrug, unsure how much further down the rabbit hole I want to tread. “I have a landlord who likes their rent paid on time. “

“Valid reason.”

“Although I wonder how much more I can take. This is my first day off in six months.”

Thomas clears his throat, motioning around the bar. “But you're working.”

“Exactly. I planned on having a bit of fun, but Samantha had other ideas and at the end of the day, she signs my paycheck. I also can't believe I besmirched my boss to someone who knows the man she's trying to land. Not exactly my shining moment.”

“Blame the alcohol.”

“It puts a temporary restraining order on my filter, but to be fair, I speak the truth. Does that make me a horrible person?”

“Not at all. It makes you forthright, which is sadly lacking in today's world. I've dealt with thousands of people and barely a handful have the decency to look me in the eye and tell me what they want.”

“Well, you have a riveting stare. Your entire presence is larger than life.”

He shifts in his seat, those sapphire eyes searching out mine. “Am I making you uncomfortable? If so, I apologize.”

I shake my head and lock gazes with him, feeling yet another bolt of warmth shoot through my body.

Who needs whisky when Thomas is in the vicinity?

“Quite the contrary. I don’t know you, but I feel safe around you, along with a myriad of other emotions.”

“Such as?” Thomas’s voice is deep velvet, coursing through my sex-starved veins.

“You know, the usual: wondering if you could actually make good on your earlier claim. The one where one kiss from you would bring me to my knees.”

I’m blaming the whisky for that last sentence.

I turn toward the bar, my cheeks flaming.

I can’t believe I just said that.

As is the story of my life, our moment is interrupted before Thomas has a chance to react to my lustful words.

A willowy, elegant woman walks to Thomas’s side and whispers in his ear. There is a familiarity between them, and I realize my earlier observation of him being a lonely soul is way off the mark.

No doubt she’s his wife or mistress or some combination of the two.

Am I surprised? Not one iota.

Am I disappointed? Beyond belief.

“If you’ll excuse me for a moment, Raleigh. I have something that needs my attention.”

More like someone.

My eyes track Thomas and the waifish model as they walk out of the lounge before signaling Rodney.

Back to reality.

“I better go, too, before I turn into a pumpkin. Can I settle my tab?”

“Sure. What’s your room number? I’ll attach it to the bill.”

“635. How do I tip you?”

Rodney waves me off. “No need. I’m just glad to see Thomas so engaged. That rarely happens. Thank you.”

“At least me and my big mouth are good for something. Will you tell Thomas goodnight if you see him again? I appreciate his discretion regarding my situation. And yours. Thanks so much.”

With a last wave, I limp from the lounge, hoping for another glimpse of the debonair, dark-haired stranger.

Sadly, he’s nowhere to be found.

CHAPTER 2

“Fifty-seven dollars for a hamburger and it doesn’t include cheese? I’m far too poor to be here,” I grumble, pushing myself from the bed to answer the knock at the door.

After leaving the lounge, I headed straight for my room, where I stripped off Samantha’s wildly expensive duds and threw on my ratty gray sweatsuit.

I may be the antithesis of elegance, but at least I’m comfortable.

Now, to spend my last remaining savings on dinner and a movie before bed.

Must hand it to the hotel; it’s the fastest room service delivery I’ve ever seen.

“That’s record time. I only called ten minutes ago,” I state as I swing open the door. “You’re not room service.”

Leaning against the doorjamb, looking far more delectable in the bright light, stands Thomas, his arms crossed over his chest. “I could be. Depends entirely on what you’re looking for.”

“A cheeseburger platter.” I pull a hand through my hair, fully aware of how ridiculous I look. “What are you doing

here?”

“What do you think? Tracking you down after you snuck out on me.” He scans the length of my body, a smile tugging the corners of his mouth. “You certainly look more comfortable.”

I sigh as I gaze down at my outfit. “I wasn’t expecting company, so this is as good as it gets.”

“You’re perfect. Come on, let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“This,” he motions around the room and hallway, “is the saddest excuse for a vacation I’ve ever seen, so we’re going to remedy that right now. First order of business? Get your gorgeous ass out of the room but leave your phone behind. We’re forgetting about work tonight.”

A nervous laugh flits through my lips. “Gorgeous, huh?”

“Absolutely, although you’re welcome to strip down and let me have a better look.”

“Aren’t you cheeky all of a sudden?” I huff out a sigh, smiling as the room service person appears at the end of the hallway. “I would love to throw caution to the wind, but abandoning my phone might be hazardous to my health.”

“I’ll handle your boss, should she have an issue with you taking a proper day off. Besides, I want to share something with you. Call it my Barbados, if you will.”

Without missing a beat, Thomas asks the room service delivery guy to pack up the food before slipping him a fifty and a flash of his dimpled smile.

Damn, but he’s got a gorgeous smile.

He’s got a gorgeous everything, including a beautiful woman who left the lounge by his side.

Best to not forget that fact.

“Now we have food and I have locally made rum waiting for us. All I need is you.”

There go my panties again. Soaking wet with just a few sentences from his delicious mouth.

“What about your wife?”

Thomas pauses, his brow furrowing. “My what? You mean the woman in the bar? She works at the resort.”

I plant my hands on my hips, desperate to read him. “Not your wife or mistress or fuck buddy?”

A grin splits his face. “No, but I can speak to her about it, if you’d like. I’m not personally a fan of threesomes but as I said earlier, ladies’ choice.”

Now it’s my turn to smile. Hey, Thomas makes it easy.

“No, I’m good with her staying put, although what kind of crap are you spouting? All men love threesomes.”

“Not all men. When I get lost in you, Raleigh, I get lost in *you*.”

Tingles break out across my skin at his words, and I fan myself, releasing a small sigh. “That was exquisite. Damn, it’s hot in here.”

Thomas smiles, leaning in to steal a soft kiss from my mouth. “Then let’s get out of here. Come on, what do you have to lose?”

My fingers fly to my mouth as color stains my cheeks. “You kissed me.”

Thomas smirks at my reaction. “You noticed. Is that okay?”

It’s *more* than okay, but I’m having far too much fun teasing the man to let him get away that easily.

“I don’t know. You claimed your kiss would bring me to my knees and ruin me for other men. I’m still standing.”

His gaze darkens as he tosses the food onto the table. He then crushes me to him, his mouth claiming mine hungrily. A soft moan rises from my chest as I fall into the moment, each caress a command I have no intention of disobeying.

Thomas's hands slide down my body to cup my ass and pull me flush against him, but he never falters with his slow, drugging kisses.

I tangle my fingers in his dark hair, raising on tiptoe in a desperate bid to get closer. When his mouth wanders from my lips to trace the contour of my jaw, I belong to him utterly.

He nips at my pulse point, his breath heated against my skin. "Any better?"

"Uh-huh." It's all I can manage, and I'm grateful for his powerful arms holding me upright. Every cell in my body is alive and screaming out for more.

He smiles against my throat, the scruff of his beard a delicious tickle. "Sorry, I couldn't quite hear you. Should I kiss you again?"

"Most definitely," I murmur, opening my eyes to focus on his handsome face. "You need to do that all night."

His hands tighten around me, and I release a low moan as his erection presses against me. "I might be convinced. But if I kiss you again, I won't stop there. I'll peel these clothes off you and love every inch of your body. I can't wait to find out how delicious you taste."

"Only if I get a turn, too."

This time, I instigate the kiss, possessing every inch of his gorgeous mouth. By the time we part, we're both heaving.

Glad to know I have the same effect on him as he does on me.

"Shall we shut the door and take this inside?" I ask, motioning toward the bed.

Thomas releases his hold on me before grasping my hand and pressing a kiss to my palm. "Soon. But I'm doing this right with you."

Did I just get a brush-off?

Thomas slides his hands along my jaw, forcing me to meet his gaze. "You deserve all the little moments, Raleigh."

I chew my lip, still uncertain of his sudden disinterest in consummating our relationship.

He tugs my hand, a grin splitting his features. “Come on. I promise I’ll make it worth your while.”

When he swoops down to place another kiss on my mouth, I relent.

“Let’s go,” I reply, flashing him a brilliant smile as I toss my phone on the bed. “Show me your Barbados.”

Hey, a night with a gorgeous man is way better than any hamburger platter and a movie I’ve seen ten times.

Plus, there’s always the off chance I still might get those exquisite orgasms Thomas promised earlier.

Thomas is either a diehard romantic or has all the gestures on lockdown. Thirty minutes after leaving the hotel, we’re floating on a private lagoon in a small rowboat with a blanket of stars above us.

It’s heaven.

Thomas hands me a glass of rum with a smile. “Thank you for sharing this with me.”

I sip my drink, sucking in a lungful of the salt scented air. “It’s gorgeous. Do you do this with all the hired help?”

“I never do this with anyone. I’m pretty much a loner.”

“By choice or necessity?”

He sighs, averting his gaze. “It’s safer that way. No attachments. No confusion or hurt feelings.”

His statement puzzles me, and I’m not sure if he includes me in that group.

“Well,” I state, reaching over to squeeze his knee. “I promise I won’t walk away with hurt feelings. Just some beautiful memories.”

“Raleigh, you’re the last person I’d ever hurt.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” I tease, releasing a contented sigh.

“Please do.”

“What is that chirping sound I’m hearing?” I wave toward the trees, just beyond us in the dark.

Thomas grins and relaxes against the side of the boat, his hand behind his head. “Tree frogs. They’re singing.”

“You love it here, don’t you?”

“More than you know.”

“Do you live here?”

“Part of the time, although I hope to spend significantly more time here in the future.”

I inch closer to him and relax against his chest, tilting my head up to take in the stars. “There are millions of them. You never see this many in New York.”

“Light pollution. There are even more in the desert. The Sahara at night is unlike any place on earth.”

I prop my head in my hand, desperate to know more about Thomas’s background. “So, you live on a tropical island part of the year, and you’ve traveled the globe. Let me guess ... a lawyer? No, that’s not right.”

Thomas chuckles, shaking his head. “Not even close.”

“Hmm. Investment banker?”

He grasps my chin, his burning eyes holding me still. “No more talk of work, bosses, or responsibilities. Let’s just be here, together, at this moment. Tomorrow, I’ll tell you everything you want to know, but tonight, I don’t want to share you with any of my obligations. Can we do that?”

“Absolutely,” I breathe out as relaxation floods my cells.

So, we do.

The next few hours fly by as we share some delicious rum and a bevy of stories, ranging from the ridiculous to the tragic.

By the time the darkness has fully enveloped us, I've determined Thomas is one of the greatest men I've ever met. Not only is the wrapping delectable and drop-dead gorgeous, but he is absolutely brilliant. Plus, he's humble with his achievements, which all focus on the conservation of native lands and ecological sanctuaries.

Basically, he's perfect in every way and for reasons I won't look too deeply into, he seems as enamored with me as I am with him.

"Ah, the show is starting," Thomas remarks, earning a curious look from me.

"Are the frogs moonlighting as Broadway performers?"

He chuckles, raising his hand to point at the streak sailing across the night sky. "That's tomorrow night. Tonight, the stars have their due. There's a meteor shower with tons of shooting stars waiting for wishes. Look, there's one now."

I glance skyward before capturing his gaze, my fingers tracing the outline of his mouth. "Did you make a wish?"

Thomas nods, knitting his fingers in my hair. "The same one I've had for years now. Just never thought she'd come true."

I straddle his lap, smiling when his breath hitches. "Maybe both our wishes might come true, then."

"What's your wish, beautiful?"

I shake my head. "Can't tell you."

"Unacceptable."

When he slides his fingers along my ribcage, I grab his hands to avoid the tickle. "Play fair."

"No way."

I keep hold of his hands and focus my gaze on his mouth—a mouth I very much want to kiss again. "You were my wish."

It's a bold move, making this claim to a relative stranger, and it could go either way.

But when I dust my lips against his, I feel the slight tremble reverberate through his body as he traps me in his embrace.

As the kiss deepens, every doubt and fear slip away until all I feel is his warmth surrounding me.

After three more wishes, another glass of rum, and dozens of earth-shattering kisses, we dock the rowboat and return to my room.

But this time, everything is different. The colors are brighter, the sounds sharper.

And for the first time in a *long* time, I'm happy. Really and truly happy.

"That's it," I declare, twirling in the hallway. "I'm never leaving."

"Then don't."

I chuckle at Thomas's offhanded remark. "Easy for you to say. You're rich and already own a home down here. I'd be relegated to the streets and I'm not sure I'm cut out for that kind of life."

Thomas backs me against the wall, caging me in his embrace. "Move in with me."

"Sure, we'll be roomies."

But Thomas isn't laughing. "Why not?"

"Because by tomorrow, you might be tired of the sight of me."

He drags his fingers along my jaw, and a shiver rushes up my spine. "Raleigh, I don't think I'll ever tire of you."

"Easy to say that now."

Thomas shakes his head. "I've met enough people that I can read someone within seconds. Ninety-nine percent of

those people only see me as a means to an end.”

“I see you.”

“Exactly, which is why I want to keep you close.”

Thomas’s loneliness echoes my own. Although he’s far better off financially, we share the same distrust of people.

When you get knocked down enough times, you choose safety over stepping into shark-infested waters again. You choose solitude.

“That’s why you sit alone in the bar and live here, away from the bustle of the big cities.”

He nods, a sadness lining his face. “People think being alone is the worst thing in the world. It’s not. Being in a room full of people and feeling alone is far worse.”

I press a kiss to his mouth, trying desperately to convey that I understand the longing in his heart; an emotion he ignores for fear of being trampled again. “Thank you for allowing me into your world. So long as I’m around, you never have to worry about being lonely.”

Thomas twirls a lock of my hair around his finger, his eyes soft. “And that is why you need to move here. Something in your soul spoke to mine, and I knew if I didn’t act on it, I’d regret it forever.”

Is it a line?

Possibly.

Or maybe, just maybe, it’s two people who somehow stumbled upon each other and decided it was safe to open up one more time.

For now, I want to fall into his words and believe every one. Namely, because I feel the same way.

I know the concept of love at first sight is debunked by science and jaded individuals, but right now, I believe in it.

It makes zero sense. The timing is terrible, our future is uncertain, and yet, none of that matters.

All that matters is this moment.

“Come on,” I whisper, nipping his bottom lip. “Let’s go to the room.”

“Are you sure?”

I cock my head at his hesitancy. “Aren’t you?”

“I’m positive, but you’ve had a few drinks and I don’t want you regretting anything later. Regretting me.”

I lean against the wall, studying his handsome face. “If the rest of the night is half as wonderful, there’s no way I’ll have a single regret. So, I’m going inside and I hope you’ll join me.”

Pressing a quick kiss to his mouth, I duck beneath his arm and scurry to my hotel door.

But before I can slide the card against the reader, Thomas swoops me into his arms and this time, there’s no apprehension on his face.

Just a hunger that echoes my own.

I earn a grunt of approval when I lock my legs around his waist as he eases open the door.

“What you do to me, Raleigh,” he murmurs against my mouth as he carries me to the bed.

I lean back on my elbows as he stands at the foot of the bed and strips off his shirt, showcasing a washboard stomach and chiseled pecs.

Oh yes, *now* we’re getting somewhere.

When he slides off his shorts, I can’t hold back my moan of delight.

“I knew you were going to be that beautiful underneath your clothes,” I sigh, drinking in every inch of his bronzed skin.

Thomas smiles, a hint of a dimple visible beneath his beard. “Glad you approve.”

“That’s an understatement.”

Seriously, I could stare at him all night. He’s perfect.

But Thomas isn't willing to preen for me. Instead, he closes the small space between us, his fingers dusting the hem of my shirt. "Your turn."

This is where, rum or no, my womanly insecurities come screeching into play.

I work out and I'm in shape, but I'm not in Thomas's kind of shape. You can't bounce a quarter off my stomach, my ass has a bit more jiggle than I'd like and like every other woman in the world, I have faint stretch marks dancing across my thighs.

"Maybe we could dim the lights or—" I begin, a surprised huff flying from my mouth when he pushes my shirt up my stomach.

"Maybe not?" is his only reply as he pulls my shirt over my head. He clears his throat as his gaze wanders over me and there's no denying the hunger in his eyes when they finally meet mine. "Why would I ever turn off the lights when this is my first time seeing you?"

He grazes his palms along my abdomen, hooking his fingers in the waist of my sweats.

"Lie back," he demands, his voice a low growl.

I know arguing is pointless and besides, I want this. I want his mouth on my body, reminding me of how good a real man can make me feel.

I rest my head against the mattress, lifting my hips as Thomas slides off my sweats and underwear in one fell swoop. After tossing them over his shoulder, he works his way up my body, his tongue and hands searching out every single pleasure point.

Trust me, he's finding them.

When his mouth meets mine, I'm trembling from the overwhelming feelings coursing through my body.

Thomas leans on his forearms, brushing his lips against mine and earning a satisfied moan. "Promise me something?"

"Anything."

“Let me have you the way I want to have you tonight. I don’t want you self-conscious or in your head for one second. I want you here, with me, feeling it all. Will you do that for me?”

When I pause in answering, he drops a kiss to the top of my breast.

“Raleigh, you’re gorgeous. I’ve explored the world and now I want to explore you.”

I bite my lip, wrapping my hands around his neck. “Do I get to join in on this exploration?”

“In the future, absolutely. Tonight, you belong to me.”

“And tomorrow you belong to me?”

A gentle smile crosses his face as he settles between my thighs. “Tomorrow, we belong to each other.”

CHAPTER 3

Something tickles my nose and I swipe at it, a soft grumble rising from my chest.

Another tickle and a husky chuckle remind me I’m not in my apartment. Blinking my eyes open, I meet Thomas’s gaze as he sits over me, the morning sun bathing his skin in a golden hue.

“Good morning,” I murmur, smiling when he steals a quick kiss from my mouth. “What smells so good?”

“I think it’s you, but I ordered us breakfast.”

“You’re perfect, aren’t you?”

“Hardly. That’s your role.”

I know that last night was perfect. No man has ever owned my body the way Thomas did, as if he innately knew where to touch me. Just the memory brings a flush to my cheeks.

A blush that Thomas notices.

“Trust me, it’s all I can think about, too.”

“One night with me and you’re ruined for all other women,” I tease.

“Exactly, although we need to talk.”

Well, shit. So much for the afterglow.

Grasping the sheet, I sit up in bed, realizing we’re about to have *the* talk.

Game face, Raleigh. You knew it was a one-night deal. You didn’t buy into all his romantic claims of something long term.

Not ... really.

I force a smile onto my face and nod, all the while scanning the room for my clothes.

Now, do I wait for Thomas to say it or beat him to the punch?

Strike first, right?

“I know you’re very busy with your travels and work and you live about fifteen hundred miles from me—”

Thomas nods, grasping my hand. “Exactly.”

“Which is why, although this was great fun, you can’t promise anything.”

“What?”

“Isn’t that what you were going to say? It’s okay.”

“Is it?”

“Actually, it’s not, because my romantically naïve heart believed you. But my naivety is not your fault. *I* own that.” I scramble from the bed, the sheet clutched to my naked body. “Last night was wonderful, but it’s a new day, and it’s back to reality.”

Thomas wraps his fingers around my wrist, bringing me back to the bed. “You need to stop doing that.”

“What?”

“Trying to run away from me. First in the lounge and now here. Yes, you live far from me, although I have a place in New York, too.”

“You do?”

“Yes. But I don’t enjoy being there for extended periods, even for a woman as magnificent as you. So, I have an alternate plan.”

“Go ahead.”

“Like I told you last night. Quit your job and be with me. Travel the world and write about the conservation efforts.”

“What?”

“Be with me. You told me I was lonely, and you were right. But with you, I’m not alone anymore. I don’t want to let that go. I won’t let that go, at least, not if you’re willing.”

I stare at him, dumbfounded.

“Worse comes to worse, you decide you’re not that into me and we part company. But either way, you get to live a little.”

I see his mouth moving, but my brain is running a thousand miles a minute, rendering me mute.

“Can you please say something?”

I squeal with excitement and throw my arms around his neck. Hey, when Prince Charming rides up and asks you to spend forever with him, you don’t ask questions.

You say yes.

“Is that a yes?”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

This time, there’s zero hesitancy as I possess his mouth with a fierceness I didn’t know I possessed.

Seems it’s *my* turn for a happy ending.

Thomas leaves about an hour later, with a promise to come back as soon as he finishes his meeting.

No doubt he's saving the world somehow.

I know damn well he's saving mine.

I still must face the firing squad, also known as my boss, but this time, I'm fully prepared.

Nothing can break the glow of happiness radiating from my core, and it's more than the several incredible orgasms Thomas delivered last night.

It's everything about him.

I toss on some clothes and grab Samantha's dress, dropping it at the onsite dry cleaners. Thankfully, there are no stains, although I'm sure I'll get an earful about not having it ready for her arrival.

Such is life, right?

Then I head back to my room, all the while humming a lilting tune under my breath.

"Raleigh?"

Screeching to a halt, I scrunch my eyes shut.

I know *that* voice.

I spin on my heel, forcing a smile for my boss. "Hi, Samantha."

"Where the hell have you been? Let me guess. You blew off work in lieu of shagging a cabana boy?"

"He isn't a cabana boy. He's a gentleman, and what we did is none of your business. I took a day off, Samantha. One day in six months."

I'm not sure where my sudden moxie comes from, although I have a sneaking suspicion Thomas has something to do with it.

Samantha offers me a twisted smile. “You’re entitled to time off, but you could have told me. Did you at least get my messages?”

I slide the keycard in the door, waving her into my room. “My phone was off.”

“Of course it was.”

“Again, it was my time. Not yours.”

Samantha puckers her lips and huffs out a sigh. “At least tell me you located Benjamin Hartwood. I sent you a few photos.”

I click open her messages and the phone slips from my grasp when I see the pictures.

Yes, I definitely saw Benjamin Hartwood. I saw every inch of him when he spent the night buried deep inside me.

My heart races as I scroll through the photos, all showcasing the handsome face of the man I know as Thomas.

“Raleigh, are you okay?”

No Samantha, I’m really fucking far from okay.

“Raleigh, what is the matter with you?” Samantha presses.

Again, I ignore her question, unable to answer.

But Samantha is relentless in her quest for information. “I’ll ask you one more time. Did you find Benjamin Hartwood?”

Forcing back the tears, I shove the phone in my pocket and face my boss. “I found him.”

The only good thing about working for an egomaniac? The woman is so excited I’ve located the elusive billionaire she never asks about the tears coloring my cheeks.

Meanwhile, I’m fighting to hold down the contents of my stomach.

She flits around my room, rattling off a list of demands, while I perch on the edge of the bed like a lump on a log, unsure what to do at this point.

Obviously, I can't tell her about Thomas ... Benjamin. *That* can never come to light. Besides, I know the great billionaire will simply vanish into the ether now that he's had a night of illicit fun with a no-name.

Love the fact that *I'm* the no-name. Even better that I believed every word from his gorgeous, lying lips.

Plus, he intimated he had zero interest in meeting Samantha.

A morning meeting, my ass. He's likely on a private jet and halfway to Fiji by now.

A knock sounds at my door, and Samantha sends me a look. "Are you expecting someone?"

"Likely the dry cleaning. I had your dress cleaned, as requested." I trudge to the door and swing it open.

It's not the dry cleaning.

There, on the other side of the vestibule, stands the man who saw fit to rip my heart apart for sport.

"Who is it?" Samantha asks.

"Benjamin Hartwood," I hiss, glaring holes into the man's visage.

At least he has the decency to blanch at the fury in my tone. He grabs my hand and gives it a squeeze before I snatch it away. "I was coming up here to talk to you, Raleigh. I wanted to tell you, but ..."

"But what? Lying was more fun?"

"May I please come in?"

Samantha, after hearing *who* is at the door, isn't content to sit on her laurels. She rushes over, extending her hand to Benjamin. "What a pleasure to see you again. I was going to call you during my stay."

Benjamin forces a smile as he shakes Samantha's hand. "I hope you have a pleasant visit, but if you'll grant me a few moments, I need to speak with Raleigh."

Samantha's eyes volley between the two of us. "What in the world for? Did she insult you? I swear, I've told her numerous times that her mouth will get her in trouble one day. Please accept my apologies in advance."

This is where Benjamin claims we met during my hunt yesterday and then creates some ridiculous excuse about why he's at the door now. We both know he excels in duplicity.

Anything to save my ass and my job, regardless of how pathetic both are at the moment.

But it seems Benjamin has reached his quota of lies.

And the muscle jumping in his jaw as Samantha insults me is proof that the worst is yet to come.

"She's the most incredible woman I've ever met, and the only rude person in this room is you. Raleigh is every inch a lady, although you're right about her mouth. It is the best kind of trouble."

"Excuse me?" Samantha's gaze narrows.

This time, a genuine smile crosses Benjamin's face as he looks at me. "I spent the most remarkable night with Raleigh."

"What?" For the first time, my boss is speechless.

Come to think of it, so am I.

I grasp the door handle as my world shifts on its axis.

There's no coming back from this.

"Would you excuse us, Mr. Hartwood? I have a few things to discuss with my assistant." Seems Samantha has regained her composure.

At least one of us has.

"I need to speak with Raleigh," Benjamin insists.

Time for me to jump into the shit soup that is now my life. "I have to go, Thomas—I mean, Benjamin."

I push on the door, but Benjamin stops it, grasping my hand and pressing a kiss to my inner wrist. “I’ll wait for you in the lounge. Please, Raleigh, find me.”

But his words hold no sway over me.

I shake loose from his grip and close the door. Then, with a ragged breath, I turn to face my executioner.

The only upside to a limited wardrobe? It doesn’t take long to pack and considering I have fifteen minutes to get out of the hotel room before I’m charged for an additional day, I have zero time to lose.

I stomp between the closet and the bed, paying no mind to how I toss in my belongings.

Knowing my luck, the airline will lose my luggage somewhere in the Amazon rainforest.

Par for the mine-ridden course.

My emotions vacillate between anguish and anger, meaning I’m crying as many tears as I am wishing I had a voodoo doll of both Samantha and Thomas.

Correction, Benjamin.

Benjamin *fucking* Hartwood.

He’s the world’s most eligible billionaire and, like so many women before me, I fell for his lines—hook, line, and sinker. I realize how foolish I was to miss all the signs, but the truth is I wanted to believe him.

My entire life, I’ve waited for someone to choose me first.

And he did.

Only trouble? *He* doesn’t exist.

A knock sounds at my door, and I release a noisy exhalation when I glance at the clock.

Time to go.

I pull open the door, my heart seizing as my gaze lands on Benjamin. “What do you want? I still have ten minutes to vacate this room, so if you’re here to escort me from the property—”

“That’s not why I’m here and you damn well know it.”

It hurts to look at him, knowing everything he told me was a carefully constructed lie. Seems the rich really do operate on a different moral code.

“Then what?” I grumble, my eyes fixed on the carpet.

He grasps my chin, forcing me to look at him. Those eyes, so riveting only yesterday, are bright with emotion, but I know better now. “I wanted to tell you, but after learning why you were here, I knew if you discovered the truth, you’d put up a wall and shut me out as an option.”

“An option for what?”

“For you, Raleigh.”

“For your one-night stand, you mean. Your chance to knock boots with the lower class and see if we’re more fun than those uptight rich women. What did you deduce?”

He grasps my upper arms. “Stop it. You know that isn’t the case.”

“Here’s what I know. I’m broke and now, I’m also unemployed. My boss owes me a month’s back pay, but we both know I’ll never see it. My only skill set is in writing, a world I’m blacklisted from because a rich man decided my life was expendable. And now, here I am again, screwed over by another rich guy who wanted to have some fun at *my* expense.”

Then the tears, held at bay for the last several minutes, earn their due as they slip down my cheeks.

“Are you happy now?” I shriek, swiping at my cheeks.

Benjamin pulls me to him, his arms banding around me. “Samantha Dodson is a horrible excuse for an employer ... and a human being. You deserve so much better, Raleigh. Let me give you that. Plus, you know I have money, so don’t

spend one second worrying about your bills. I've got you covered. Besides, I want you to come work for me and write about the places so few know. Infuse your life into the pages and make people care about something beyond their doorstep."

I shove out of his embrace, raking my hands through my hair. "I don't need you to save me."

"You're right. You don't, but I need you to save me. I know we just met, but I don't want to go through life without you. We have something so special, and I know you feel it, too."

"We have nothing. We had one night built around a ton of lies that you spun."

"Everything I told you was the truth."

"Except who you are."

He shakes his head and pulls his wallet from his pocket. "Thomas is my first name. Thomas Benjamin Hartwood."

"How many times have you played a woman by pretending to be someone else?"

"Never."

"Right, which is why Rodney didn't bat an eye when you used your pseudonym. Even *now*, you're lying."

"I'm not, but you're not willing to accept that it's the truth. You think because you're poor, people judge you, and you're right. But they judge me, too. Most people don't give a damn about me. They only see dollar signs and what that money can bring them. Just like you, I longed to find that one person who would bring happiness to this crazy world." He steps back, offering a small shrug. "I found it with you. Now, if you don't feel the same way, I'll have my car take you to the airport and I'll cover your bills for the next year. Plus, I'll make a call and get you any job you want with any magazine."

"It comes right back to money again."

"The money means nothing. It's about helping you because the world needs more women like you. Even if you never want to see me again, I will always ensure you're safe. You have a

tough exterior, but you're a gentle soul and the world has wounded you enough. Protecting you from further harm is the least I can do."

My head swims from his deluge of promises, but I can't think straight right now. Plus, I can't believe Benjamin's lines. I did that once, and it's cost me a fortune.

"I have to go, but you're right. It was never about your money. It still isn't. The only thing you owed me was the truth."

"If I had told you who I was, would you have stayed?"

I finger the zipper on my suitcase, averting my gaze. "No. I would have wanted to, but I wouldn't have crossed Samantha like that, even if she doesn't deserve a man like you."

Benjamin throws up his hands. "I think *we* deserve each other, Raleigh. You and me. I know I'm asking you to make a huge decision about your life, but I know I can make you happy. Give me the chance to try."

"What are you asking of me?"

"To stay. Spend the week here with me and then we'll return to New York together. I'll help you pack and then you can choose our next adventure. Wherever you want us to live, I'll make it happen. I'll ship all your belongings to your new front door."

As I peer up at him, a mix of emotions tumbles through me. I *want* to believe him, but how many times can I play the fool for a man?

So, I opt for my old standby—sarcasm. "Trust me, most of my belongings aren't worth anything."

"They're yours and I want all of you. Even the parts you deem unworthy. *Especially* those. You were ready to go this morning, Raleigh. I'm waiting for you to say yes."

He extends his hand, and I fight the urge to seize his fingers and follow him to a new life.

But he played me once and my head simply won't allow my heart to run untethered again.

It can't handle more promises that wither in the light of day.

"If I don't leave, I'll miss my flight."

The smile slides from Benjamin's face as he punches a number into his mobile phone. "Hi, it's Ben. Can you take Raleigh to the airport and ensure she's safe all the way through the checkpoint? Thanks."

"I can take the bus," I argue.

"Take the car, Raleigh." He slides me a card. "All my numbers, although you'll likely toss it in the first trash receptacle you see."

I pull my suitcase off the bed as the tears back up again. "Thank you. Maybe in another life ..."

"I wanted you in this one." Benjamin focuses his gaze on the far wall. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. This is not how I saw us ending."

I raise on my tiptoes and press a kiss to his cheek. "Neither did I."

I half expect Benjamin to block my exit or chase me down the hallway.

But he doesn't.

A shiny black car sits outside the resort entrance, guarded by another familiar face.

Rodney.

And he's about to get a piece of my mind.

"Why didn't you tell me who he was? Why would you play that game with me?"

"It wasn't a game."

"Really? He always uses the name Thomas?"

"Never."

"Then what was that last night?" I cry, scrubbing my face with my hands.

“You think he’s some billionaire playboy, but he’s not. The man you met last night is for real.”

“He didn’t even tell me his *real* name.”

“Actually, it is his real name. But he only uses Thomas for his family and friends. He told me years ago that if he ever happened across a woman he thought might be the one, he would use his given name and see what happened when he was just Thomas. Not some billionaire with deep pockets and a huge real estate portfolio.”

My mind reels. “He’s never done that before?”

“You’re the first woman he’s ever taken a chance on.”

“I don’t give a shit about his money,” I grumble.

Rodney crosses his arms over his chest. “You sure about that? The only thing Benjamin failed to mention was the size of his bank account and his last name. He wanted you to like him despite his station. Sadly, you didn’t.”

“But I did. Last night was perfect. We had this incredible time together. I felt seen and heard and appreciated.”

“It would be terrible for that to happen daily.” Rodney shakes his head, pulling open the door. “I’m sorry that our deception hurt you, but Benjamin will take care of you.”

“How do you know?”

“That’s what he does for the people he cares about and trust me, it’s a very small group.”

Then it hits me.

Who will take care of Benjamin?

Not the billionaire with resorts around the world and a portfolio of real estate rivaling a Saudi prince. Not the man with the model good looks and the throngs of women clamoring to be by his side.

The gentle, sweet soul who wanted to show me his Barbados, which consisted of nothing more than a rowboat, a blanket of stars, and some tree frogs.

The world will hurt him, and he'll retreat to his darkened corner, much like I'm about to do.

That is unacceptable for a man like Benjamin.

I thrust my bag at Rodney. "Where the hell is he now?"

A small smile crosses Rodney's mouth. "He's meeting with the CEO, whose office is down that hall and to the left. Go get him, tiger."

With a thumbs up, I turn and dash into the hotel at full speed, damn near turning my ankle on the slick marble.

Then I barge into the CEO's office without knocking, earning shocked looks from the men in the room.

One man in particular.

Benjamin stands, his face creased with concern. "Raleigh, are you okay?"

"No, but I could be. I'm still really mad at you, but I don't want to live this life without you, either." With a deep breath, I extend my hand. "Let's try this again, shall we? Raleigh O'Neil. Pleasure to meet you."

A slow smile splits his face as he pulls me into his embrace. "Benjamin Hartwood and the pleasure is *all* mine."

ABOUT M.L. BROOME

M.L. Broome is a bohemian spirit with a New York edge. She writes high-octane contemporary romance with plenty of angst and steamy, sexy goodness. Her characters are bitingly real, always earning their happily-ever-after, but only after some emotional ass-kicking and personal growth.

When M.L. isn't writing or holding one-sided arguments with her characters (spoiler alert—they always win), she loves losing herself in nature on her North Carolina farm, one of her rescue fur babies by her side.

She adores dressing up and kicking back with a glass of whiskey, a stunning view, and experiences that make the soul—and senses—tingle.

For all the latest releases and exclusive goodies, subscribe to M.L. Broome's newsletter today at <https://www.mlbroome.com>.



STORM DAMAGE

by Maddy Lowe

Contemporary

Small Town, Second Chance

Tara

My agenda for a solo relaxing weekend didn't include coming face to face with my biggest regret. But when my ex-high school sweetheart shows up at my family's Maine cabin, our history isn't the only thing I'm forced to face.

Jesse

All I wanted was to get home in this storm. Ending up stranded with the only person I've ever loved and hated at the same time must be someone's idea of a joke. But with a single look, I can't help wanting a whole lot more.

We just have to ride out the snow, then go back to our lives. But after ten years, can either of us handle this much storm damage?

CHAPTER 1

Tara

I wasn't a selfless person. I wasn't really a selfish jerk, either. But being the youngest of three sisters, I learned I had to fight for what I wanted or get used to settling for what was left. New clothes instead of hand-me-downs, a bike that actually fit my long legs, even a prom dress in my favorite color – emerald green. I never settled.

But the last six months had taught me that when life picks a fight with someone you love, you'll give up every single thing you ever thought you wanted to hold on to what matters.

Moving into my sister, Mel's, house to help take care of her three kids while she battled cancer was a thirty second conversation where I barely let her get the words out to ask me. My boss made accommodations so I could work more from the road, and the rest of my life was...well, let's just say no one was going to miss me in Boston.

Mel & Sam's house in Melrose was tiny, but they doubled up the girls into one room and gave me a tiny, pink-walled enclave to call my own. Between the kids' schedules and my trips into the office for meetings I couldn't take on video, I was barely there anyway. Plus, the glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling were a nice touch.

"T, you ready?" Sam's voice carried up the narrow stairs.

"One sec." I tossed another flannel into my suitcase. I hadn't been to our cabin in Maine in years, but I still remembered the dress code; plaid shirts, duck boots, and jeans. Flopping the lid closed, I yanked it off the bed, looking up in time to catch myself in the mirror. I set the suitcase down to take a step closer to the mirror. The circles under my eyes had never been so dark, but then again, my skin had never been so pale. And I wasn't even the one who'd been going through chemo.

"Tara, come on!" Sam yelled again, his impatience mixed with humor.

This last-minute solo-getaway for the long holiday weekend was his idea. Mel was done with her last chemo round this cycle and they'd wanted to give me a break for a few days. Sending me off to a sunny island wasn't really an option. So, leaf peeping in our old hometown would have to do. I wasn't complaining. I hadn't asked for a break, but as I sighed, shaking my head at what I saw in the mirror, I clearly looked like I needed one.

"If we get to the mechanic in time, I can grab my car and still make the second half of Peter's game." Sam held the door open for me then reached for my luggage. "Jesus, Tara, did you pack for a month?" He pretended to tip over from the weight.

"Winter clothes are heavier."

"It's October. I don't think you'll need the thermals just yet."

"It's Maine," I shot back. Sam was from North Carolina but had been in New England for the last ten years. He should have learned to never trust the weather. "It's not like I'm flying," I added, heading down the sidewalk toward my car. "One of the best parts of road trips is packing any damn thing you want."

He gave me a pleased grin, warmth in his light green eyes. As much as my sister appreciated my help these last few months, Sam might have been even more grateful. Helping with the kids meant he'd gotten to focus on her. And I couldn't have asked for a more supportive husband for my sister. "I hope you have a great time," he said, setting the suitcase in the trunk.

"I will," I assured him. "Now, let's go get your car so you don't miss the game."

While I was sad to miss Peter playing, I had a two-hour drive ahead of me and hoped to get to the cabin before dark. I knew I'd made the right call when I crossed the bridge

from New Hampshire into Maine and the cloud cover thickened. Night was going to fall even faster with this weather.

The long driveway that led into the woody acres of our old family home curled around me, bringing back memories from my first two decades of life spent there. It was a great place to grow up, and I was glad my folks had kept the cabin even after they'd decided to move closer to Boston as empty nesters. Some places are just special, and letting them go would be too great a loss. Setting my eyes on the rough-hewn logs of the cabin, I knew this was one of those places.

By the porch lights already on, I knew our friend, Maxwell Downey, had come by to open the cabin up for me. Mel had mentioned she'd talked to him, so he wouldn't worry when he saw activity at the house. Sure enough, the water was turned on and the heat set at a comfortable seventy degrees. Max knew I liked it warm.

After taking a quick look around, I headed back out for my things. Once I was settled in, I had a date planned with our old soaker tub and a glass of wine. Just me and the quiet of these woods I hadn't realized I was craving.

CHAPTER 2

Jesse

*C*ome on, baby, don't give up on me now. I turned the key again, hearing the ignition turn over with a pathetic scraping sound, but then the engine chugged and sputtered, finally coming back to life. *Thank you*, I sighed, my head falling back onto the seat. I gave her some gas and relaxed a little more as she roared in response.

Pulling my hat down on my forehead, I glanced out the window, relieved to see the parking lot was deserted. It was god-awful out, so nobody but other plow guys should be on the roads. The last thing I needed was for my truck to keel over with an audience. I kicked myself for the hundredth time

for not bringing her in to Jack's to get serviced. But between work and taking care of Suze, I hadn't had the time. Plus, it wasn't supposed to be snowing yet. It was only October for fucks sake.

Pulling out of the Thai place, I grabbed my phone and thumbed to the text thread I had with my niece.

Got the goods. Be home soon

The noods? Nice

Don't call them that

It's what they are

I rolled my eyes. My thirteen-year-old niece was smarter than me and she knew it. She also knew exactly which buttons to push.

Everything good there?

I had a generator hardwired in, so even if this storm took out power, she should be fine. Still, I didn't like leaving her alone this long. Trees had come down around town making the route I took to my regulars even more complicated, and the worse things got the more I worried about a tree landing on my own house.

It's a rager, you should see the keg stand this guy is doing

I couldn't help the laugh that escaped. This kid had no quit in her. I didn't know how my brother handled her sass when he was home. But I guess he hadn't had to deal with it much the last couple of years while she was coming into her own. If anything, his deployments might have been why she'd gotten so salty. Luckily, she let her guard down often enough with me that I wasn't worried this was some sort of permanent thing. She was a sweet kid, when she wanted to be.

Just keep them out of my room

Don't you mean your house?

No. It's our house. But you're cleaning up after them

Ugh

I waited a minute but when she didn't text more, I tossed my phone onto the seat beside me. Another tree was down on the main road, so I pulled a u-turn to try a different route. This storm had come on fast, without enough warning. The trees were still full of leaves, so the heavy wet snow was pulling them over with ease. It was going to be one hell of a mess to clean up. I'd have to do another round in the morning, but for now my accounts were good.

Two miles later another tree blocked my route and I put it in reverse as my phone buzzed. I thought it was going to be Suze wondering where the hell I was with the food, but I saw another name on the screen.

"Maxwell, what's up man?" I hadn't heard from old man Maxwell in nearly a year. I'd spotted him at the parade last summer, but was too busy helping Suze's girl scout troop to stop and chat.

"Jesse, I'm so glad I caught you. Are you still out on the road?"

"I am." I sensed too late that I should have probably lied. A request was coming and I just wanted to get home.

"Thank god. I need a favor. I was going to go check on the Harris place, but I can't get out. Can you swing in there and plow them out? I should be able to get there in the morning, but I don't want them to be snowed in."

The Harris cabin... Maxwell knew he didn't need to give me the address, and my heart rate kicked up at the memories that flew to mind. It was probably the last place I wanted to go in this town. But by the sound of his voice, Max would have trudged over on foot if I said no.

"Yeah, I can hit it on my way home." I didn't ask who was there. It had been years since I'd seen any of the Harris family, and that was fine by me. It wasn't far from my house, but given the way my route kept getting cut off, it was definitely going to add extra time.

"That's great, Jesse, thank you. I'll owe you one."

Maxwell Downey had been my high school science teacher, but he'd been a lot more than that, too. He'd helped me graduate, and given me someplace to turn when shit hit the fan. He didn't owe me a damn thing, and he never would.

"It's no big deal, Max. Happy to help."

We hung up and I told myself it *was* no big deal, just like I'd told Max. It was just a driveway that needed plowing. But as I drew closer, and more memories came to mind, I wished I'd missed Max's call. No good ever came from revisiting the past, even for just a few minutes.

CHAPTER 3

Tara

This is not the weekend I was envisioning.

But I bet it's pretty.

Pretty isolating. There must be more than ten inches out there.

There was no way my car was going to get back out of the driveway with that much snow, and the storm wasn't even close to being done. This stupid blizzard had come out of nowhere, and now I was stuck.

I'm sorry sis. At least you're not stuck with three kids?

At this point I might have enjoyed that. I'd gotten used to them being around, constantly causing mayhem like three little whirling dervishes. They made me laugh, and right about then, I could have used one.

Are you guys okay down there?

Oh sure, Sam's got them outside shoveling to earn their hot chocolate and movie night.

What are you watching?

Not Frozen. I can tell you that much.

Now that did make me laugh. We all knew that movie by heart at this point. I'd started to hear the lyrics on repeat when I was groggy in the morning, like my brain was defaulting to the most worn pathway in my memory. I wasn't sure how long it was going to take to fix that.

Well, tell them all I say hi. I'll be up here marinating in the silence and pretending to read.

Just relax. I know that's hard for you, but you need to take a break, T. All this madness will be here when you get back.

I sighed, leaning heavily into the soft down pillows on the sofa. She was probably right. Between work and her family, I might have gotten a little too used to an unhealthy pace. I just wasn't sure going cold turkey into solitude and silence was the answer.

I'll text you later with an update on how much snow I get.

Sounds good. Enjoy!

Enjoy...When was the last time I'd done something I enjoyed? I considered my options, and there weren't many. Closing deals at work? That was satisfying, but I'm not sure that's what she meant. I shrugged as I pushed off the couch to get some tea. It wasn't like I was miserable. Maybe I just needed to learn a little balance.

In the kitchen I pulled out the box of food I'd brought, but didn't see the tea. Sam had wisely insisted I bring all my favorite guilty pleasures with me, the ones I hadn't indulged in the last six months because of the kids, and I'd run out of room in the first box. With a renewed sense of enthusiasm, I slipped on my boots and coat and went to get the other box I'd forgotten in my car.

A gust of wind nearly threw me back inside, stealing my breath before I waded out onto the porch. I gripped the rail and eased down, completely unable to tell anymore where each step started and stopped. The snow was coming down fast, and the porch light only made it so far before everything was swallowed in a wall of white.

With the second box in my arms, I tried to use my deep footprints to retrace my steps from my car to the house. But as I went for the third stair, another gust of wind blasted through the valley and sent me sideways. My foot slipped off the lip of the step, twisting and crunching as it slammed into the one below. I cried out, losing my balance and flailing backward into the snow. As I lay there wallowing in my continued bad fortune, the only thing that could have made the situation worse rumbled up the driveway behind me; someone was here.

The sound of the engine would have been startling even if I hadn't been prostrate in the snow. But being seen in such a state sent me into a panic. Only, the more I struggled to right myself the worse it got.

As the truck's plow blade came to stop a few feet behind me, I unceremoniously rolled onto my stomach and pressed up. I could only imagine what I must have looked like, but for a split second I didn't care. I was getting plowed out; freedom was mine once again. I could have kissed the plow driver I was so overcome by relief. But then they cut the engine and hopped out of the truck, slogging a path toward me. And as soon as I saw who it was, I cursed under my breath. Of all the people to find me like that, it had to be *him*.

CHAPTER 4

Jesse

If it hadn't been for the pit in my stomach, I probably would have keeled over laughing. The sight of Tara flopping around in the snow was almost too much. But then, the more she struggled to right herself – and failed – the more my agitation at being near her ebbed into something a lot easier to handle.

Climbing out of my truck I made my way toward her slowly, twirling my keys around my finger as I waited for the moment she realized who I was. And there was no mistaking

it. Her eyes went wide, and her mouth popped open for a split second before her surprise was replaced with frustration. A subtle pink tone rose to her cheeks as her enticing mouth turned down at the corners. She regarded me with her chocolate brown eyes as though I was the last person she'd want to see her like this, and there was no way her pride wasn't taking a hit.

I didn't revel in the moment long though, because as soon as she pushed up to stand, she let out a howl and folded right back down into the snow. I lurched forward, too late to catch her, but fast enough to grab her by the arms and pull her back up.

"What's wrong?" I scanned down her body.

Tara shook her head. "The list is fucking long at this point."

I rephrased. "Are you hurt?"

She glanced up at me. "I twisted my ankle."

Looking over her shoulder, I spotted the contents of a box strewn across the steps. She must have been bringing it in from her car. It would explain why she only had on her boots and coat. Not even a damn hat in this blizzard. "Let me help."

"I've got it." She huffed out a breath, using me to balance against as she swung toward the rail.

I let her go as she reached for it but as soon as she went to step up, she stumbled, her long brown hair falling into her face but not before she grimaced. My stomach turned at the sight of her in pain. It had been a long time since I'd seen Tara Harris, and the realization I still cared about her was unwelcome.

"Just let me help," I snapped, wrapping my hand around her arm. I ignored the glare she gave me. She could throw daggers at me all she wanted as soon as I got her back inside and finished clearing the driveway. "Where's everyone else?" I selfishly hoped someone in her family was about to pop out the door and take her off my hands. Literally.

She didn't answer me, instead attempting to hop up to the next step. But the snow was too deep and she just slumped

harder against the rail. This was ridiculous. I jammed my keys into my pocket and swept her up into my arms. She didn't make a sound, as if she knew it was coming – as if she still knew me – and that grated on my nerves.

I cleared the porch and carried her inside. I didn't even bother knocking off my boots as I crossed the living room and deposited her on the couch. That was when I looked around and saw how empty the house was. "Are you here alone?"

"You say that like I'm tent camping in the Serengeti. Yes, I'm here alone."

Fuck. I scratched at the indent my hat was making on my forehead. Leaving her on her own when she was hurt felt like a douche move.

"It's fine." She swung her legs off the side of the couch and pulled off her coat. "I'll put some ice on it."

After the way things had ended with Tara, I shouldn't have cared that she'd be laid up here by herself. But it was impossible to forget that the *only* bad thing about us had been our ending. If you could even call it that. Still, I didn't owe her anything. And I had Suze to get back to.

"You sure you'll be okay?"

"Yes, Jesse. It's a little sprain. Don't get twisted about it."

No need to tell me twice. "Okay, Max said he'd be by tomorrow. Have a good night." I practically ran for the door. I glanced back as I pulled it open, but she wasn't looking at me. Her eyes were trained on her boot as she slowly slid it off. I hesitated, unease curling around me at how bad she might actually be hurt. But when she paused and looked at me with an attitude, I shook my head and slammed the door behind me.

That goodbye was more than I'd gotten when we were eighteen.

I almost stopped on the stairs to put the snacks and tea back in the box, most of it already covered by fresh snow, but I didn't. She was a big girl, she'd manage. My hand was on the door to my truck when I stopped short. *Fuck*, I muttered into

the wind, turning back. I tossed the stuff into the box and slid it across the porch toward the door. At least it was out of the snow now. I climbed in and frowned when I noticed the Thai food beside me. *Suze.*

Hey, got held up. You still okay?

The rager has turned into an orgy.

God damn kid. I didn't need that kind of imagery right now. Not ever, but definitely not when I'd just held Tara in my arms. The soft, plush feel of her, the way she still smelled the same. All of it brought back entirely too many memories for my body to fight off. I was semi hard, even with how irritated Tara made me.

Use protection.

Ew, I didn't say I was in the mix. Gross J!

I chuckled. Two can play at this game, little one. I took her speedy responses as sign enough that she was fine, and that we hadn't lost power or internet. Something told me if that happened, she'd be sure to let me know.

Jabbing the key into the ignition. I turned it over and froze. Nothing. I spun it back and pressed down on the gas a few times. But when I turned the key over again, still nothing. Not a click. Not a rumble. Not even a scary scraping sound that was a sure sign something was wrong. Nothing at all was worse than all those things. I tried again. And then again. After a solid ten minutes, my body heat had risen to an unnatural level. Reality set in, and I finally gave up.

I slammed my hand on the wheel. This was my fault. I'd ignored this problem and now it was coming back to bite me. Looking over to see Tara's sleek sedan – even buried under the snow I could tell it was nice – was like a trigger on an avalanche of regret.

I was so angry I hadn't even noticed the door to the house open, or Tara shuffling out, using a tall umbrella as a cane. But just before the snow got too thick to see through, her eyes caught mine, and it was clear she'd seen more than I'd like.

CHAPTER 5

Tara

I knew I hadn't heard his truck pull out. With the howling wind and thick snow, I'd tried convincing myself I'd missed it. But no; he was still there. And his face was red. I couldn't see much through the snowy windshield, but I knew what Jesse looked like when he was pissed. It was a look I'd probably never forget for as long as I lived. It was the last memory I had of him, even if he didn't know it.

With what looked like an extraordinary amount of effort, he peeled himself out of the truck. He had a white plastic bag tucked under his arm as he came toward me. I dropped my eyes, only slightly surprised to have them land on the box of snacks he'd cleaned up and slid toward the door. Of course, he had. Jesse was a good man. That was never going to change, not even if he hated me.

And there was no doubt he hated me.

I deserved it. But it wasn't like seeing him was easy for me, either. As he approached the porch and I put together that his truck had just refused to start, the idea of spending more time with him only sharpened the ache in my chest. It had been easy to avoid him for over ten years by living in three other states, but it looked like my luck had finally run out.

"It won't start?"

"Nope."

My hands had gotten sweaty and it was getting harder to hold onto the smooth, wooden handle of the umbrella. "Come on in." I leaned down to grab the box, but he was already up the stairs and bending to retrieve it.

"I've got this."

When I straightened, my arm brushed against him and the contact made me pause. That, and the look in his eyes. He was

red faced, and tension rippled across his ruggedly handsome features. The same ones I'd fallen for when we were sixteen. Oh hell, when we were thirteen. I just hadn't known it then. But I did now. His full lips, and hard-edged jaw covered by scruff. And as he looked down on me, his stunning light blue eyes with their dark rims boring a hole through me, I started to wonder if having him come in was a good idea. There was clearly too much between us for this to go any way but poorly. But it wasn't like I could make him stay out in the storm, right?

As soon as we got inside, Jesse took off his coat and boots, his eyes locked on my feet where my boots were still snugly laced up.

"You gonna sleep in them?" he asked, leaving me by the door to walk to the kitchen. His familiarity with our house only added to the sense of history rushing toward me.

"They're warm."

"You're scared."

I balked. "I'm not scared. It was just easier to leave them on." His expression softened a little. I was shit at lying to Jesse. It was why I'd ended things the way I did. If I hadn't, he'd have seen right through me. He always did.

"Sit." He rolled his sleeves up, exposing his thick forearms. Covered in dark brown hair on one side and smooth, taut skin on the other, I watched with too much focus as the tendons shifted and pulsed as he moved. "If that thing is swelling, it's best to take them off now before it gets any more painful."

More painful? I hadn't stopped before because I wanted to, I'd stopped because it hurt way too much for me to manage. And I'd broken both legs in college – at different times, of course. Thank you soccer and skiing. Why couldn't I have liked golf or knitting?

With a roll of my eyes, I hopped to the couch and sat. My shoulders slumped at the prospect of needing help. It was sort of a thing I hated. And he knew that.

“First aid kit still in the downstairs bath?” he asked, heading in that direction.

“I’d guess so. I haven’t been up here in a while.”

He came back into the room holding an ace bandage in one hand and an icepack in the other. As he carefully slid my boot off, it took all my strength to not shatter both our eardrums. My ankle was massive.

Jesse was patient and gentle, his big hands working with care as he silently wrapped my ankle with the ice pack and shifted me on the couch, raising my leg up with a couple of throw pillows.

“I need to make a call. Stay here.”

He disappeared into the downstairs bedroom and I was left in the dim light of the side table, nothing but the sound of the wind and the low tones of his voice coming through the door. When he came back, he seemed slightly less agitated.

“You tell the Misses you’d be late?”

The look he shot me said I had no right to go there. But a curious sort of envy unfurled in my gut. Having someone as kind as Jesse fighting to come home to you, clearly distressed when he couldn’t make good on what I was sure was a sweet, under-the-sheets kind of promise to be back soon. I had to look away. That was the sort of man I’d been looking for since the day I’d left Holden Cove. So far, I’d come up empty.

“You hungry?”

My eyes drifted closed and I settled back into the pillow behind me. Jesse couldn’t help himself. And as selfish as it made me, I was relieved to have him there. “Starving.”

CHAPTER 6

Jesse

It was only because I'd had groceries delivered the day before that I wasn't stealing Tara's car to get home. Suze had everything she needed to heat something up to eat. If anything, she sounded stoked to have free run of the house for a while. I promised her Thai another night this week, but for now there was no sense in letting this food go to waste. And by the looks of what I'd seen in those boxes, Tara wasn't planning on eating even remotely healthy while she was here.

"I'll bring you a plate. You want pad thai, sweet and sour, or satay?"

"Do I have to choose?"

The laugh that rose in me was more from our history than her response. Tara loved food. She was the one who'd gotten me to try sushi for the first time. She'd come back from a family vacation to New York City and was hell bent on finding the best place for sushi in Maine. We'd spent half the summer combing through any place that offered maki rolls from Kittery to Boothbay.

When I handed her a plate with a little bit of everything, I caught the way her expression went soft. She held my gaze a moment longer than needed as she thanked me.

"Thank Suze, she's the one who likes Thai."

Tara stiffened a little. "Where did you meet her?"

I smiled as I grabbed my own plate off the counter. "Oh, I've known her her whole life."

Tara's fork held in midair as she tried to piece that together. "What?"

"She's beautiful. Smart. Funny. Really keeps me on my toes." I was getting too much enjoyment out of this. But watching Tara fidget on the couch was like winning at some sort of game. I liked seeing her get uncomfortable at the idea of me with someone else.

"I'm happy for you," she finally got out, before shoving a forkful of noodles into her mouth. Her eyes were anywhere but on me, and it only took a minute of seeing her look forlorn for

me to break. I was too soft where she was concerned. Probably always would be.

“She’s my niece, Tara. Suze is Hank’s kid. She’s been with me for the last few years when he has to go overseas on deployments.” I didn’t owe her any sort of explanation, but when her eyes finally landed on me again, my chest expanded. Hurting her now wasn’t going to make the old pain go away.

“Oh.” She set her plate on her lap. “That’s really sweet of you to take care of her for him.”

“Well, her mom bailed when she wasn’t even one. And dad tried at first, but schlepping her to Florida every winter wasn’t an option once she started school.”

She eyed me with something like empathy, but deeper. “That doesn’t take away from how good you are for giving her a home.”

It hardly felt that way. If anything, Suze was the reason my house was any sort of home at all. Her spitfire energy had lit that place up since the day she’d walked into it.

“What are *you* up to these days?” I heard the condescension in my voice even as I tried to stay civil. Maybe I shouldn’t still be angry with her. Maybe I was an ass for holding onto my hurt this long. But being around her only fanned the kernel of resentment I harbored into a full-blown flame.

“I’m in business development at a venture capitalist firm in Boston. But the last six months I’ve been staying with Mel, helping her and Sam with the kids.”

Her family always had money, so it wasn’t surprising to hear she’d landed a cushy job to continue the tradition. “Thinking of a new career? Want to be a nanny now, too?” The way her eyes caught mine had me swallowing hard. There was a sadness in them I wasn’t sure I’d ever seen before.

“Mel’s been battling cancer, actually. That’s why I moved in.”

Fuck. Fuck every fucking thing. I closed my eyes, my teeth grinding as I let out a loud sigh. “Sorry. I’m sorry she’s been

going through that.”

The idea that top-of-her-class Tara Harris would put her own life on hold to help her sister wasn't that hard to believe, but only if I took my own bruised ego off the table. She was always strong willed and determined, but she'd never been cold or unfeeling. Tara loved her family as much as I loved mine. It wasn't even a question that she'd have taken that on for Mel.

“She's doing okay. Finished her last round the other day. That's why I'm here. My brother-in-law, Sam, he wanted me to get away for a bit. I guess they think I've been going too hard.”

“They're probably right.” I saw for the first time how pale she was, how tired she looked. I'd attributed her complexion to the cold and her embarrassment before, but now I saw it for what it was. She was exhausted. “How many kids?”

“Three. Clare, Darla, and Peter.”

“How old?”

“Ten, eight, and six.”

Jesus. And I thought it was bad with Suze. Hank and dad had managed her when she was that young. And there was only one of her. And no one was sick at the same time. I stared at Tara longer than I should have, my heart pounding at how scared she must have been. Maybe still was? If anyone was strong enough to beat cancer it was the Harris women, but still, I hated that they had to wage that war at all.

“How are you doing?” I half expected a flippant response, for her well-worn armor to clang back into place around her. But it honestly looked like she was too tired to make the effort.

“I'm okay.” It was a bullshit answer, but by the look in her eye she knew that. So, I waited her out. She pulled her gaze away from me, looking into the kitchen. “I guess I feel like I'm caught in the middle.”

“The middle of what?”

“In one way time stopped the day Mel told me. We made the plans, moved me in, and life as I knew it went on pause. But for everyone else, everything’s still in motion. And I’m in the middle, watching as it all goes by. I just don’t feel a part of it anymore.”

“Maybe you’re not in the middle as much as you’re just different.” I set my plate down on the coffee table between us.

“I don’t feel different.”

“What do you feel?”

It took her a long time to answer, and when she did, she looked me right in the eye. “I feel kind of lost.”

“It sounds like you stepped into a role for Mel that was completely outside yourself, Tara. How could you feel normal after that?”

Taking on Suze had been gradual. Hank lived with us when he was home, so it wasn’t nearly as jarring as the change Tara had gone through. And for the first time in my entire life, I saw Tara in a whole new way. I saw her unsure. And it broke my heart a little.

CHAPTER 7

Tara

Jesse was giving me that look. It was the look that made me feel safe when I was sixteen and hadn’t ever kissed a boy before. It was the look that told me he saw who I really was. It was the look that made my stomach flutter and my sex clench. It was a look I’d missed for more than ten years.

I wasn’t sure why I’d just told him all that. It wasn’t like he and I were close. It had been too long since we’d seen each other for that. But no matter how much logic I tried to throw at how unrealistic it was that Jesse could still know me, my heart tossed it all out the window. And the longer he looked at me like that, the more I started to falter in my denial.

“You want more?”

It took me a whole three seconds before I realized he was asking about food. “No, I’m good. Thank you. It was really nice of you to share your dinner with me.”

“It wasn’t like I could leave you to eat mega-stuff Oreos and nacho cheese Doritos for dinner.” With a smirk, he collected my plate and went for the kitchen.

I laughed. Those were my favorites and I’d missed them, so I wasn’t about to apologize for a weekend of indulgence. But as I hoisted my leg off the pillows and grabbed my make-shift cane to hobble into the kitchen, I was even more grateful for the infusion of real food into my belly.

“I can do that,” I said, sliding between Jesse and the sink.

“Tara, Jesus. Why are you up? Just let me get it.”

“You can’t clean up after you brought food, that’s against the rules.” But even as I said it, catching his eye with a smile, I knew I’d just hated the distance he’d put between us by leaving the room.

It was a stupid thing, to feel this way for someone after more than a decade apart. And maybe it was the rush of endorphins from hurting my ankle, or the way he’d basically rescued me, but there was a fresh charge inside me that hadn’t been there in a long time.

Jesse held his plate out of reach, his grin turning playful. “What are the rules, exactly?”

I opened my mouth to tell him but, before I could, the lights went out. “Shit.”

“You guys have a generator. It’ll kick on in a second.”

We waited but nothing happened. After another minute, Jesse muttered something and went for his coat. He’d been gone almost ten minutes before I heard the angry snarl of an engine start up. Lights came back on and the refrigerator began to hum again. But the rest of the house was silent; the heat was still off.

As he toed off his boots and shook the snow from his hair, Jesse's eyes fell on the wood stacked beside the old stove. "The hardline wasn't working, so I pulled out the old plug-in. I can't believe that thing started up. It'll run the basics, but it's not as powerful."

"Is that why the heat's not on?"

"Yeah. No heat, hot water, or stove with this one."

"Good thing you just fed me."

He gave me a weak smile as he headed for the wood stove and began pulling out smaller pieces. While he got it started, I hobbled around gathering the bedding for the pull-out. Sleeping anywhere but the living room wasn't going to be an option now without the furnace.

Once the fire was going, Jesse did most of the work to pull sheets on the flimsy mattress. I stuffed the pillows into fresh cases and then sat heavily on the bed.

"Will Suze be okay? Without you?" We hadn't said it out loud, but it was clear he was stranded here for the night. I wasn't sure what he thought about that.

His expression darkened. "I don't like leaving her overnight. I've never done it. But she texted a little while ago to say she was okay. They still have power over there, and the neighbors know she's on her own."

"I'm sorry."

His eyes whipped to me. "You didn't do anything." As soon as he said the words, I saw the way he stiffened. I hadn't done anything *tonight*. But my apology – the only one I'd ever given him – hung between us as if it was meant for something a hell of a lot harder to forgive.

"I..." I faded out. Jesse was standing by the stove, the orange light of the fire cast across his beautiful face. It had been a decade. You'd think it wouldn't have been so hard to finally talk to him about this. "I'm sorry I left like that, Jesse."

His head bobbed, as if he'd heard me and was taking it in. But his expression was unreadable. "Why did you?"

After all this time, an explanation was the least I could offer him. “The morning we were supposed to go to the beach I got a call from one of my dad’s former colleagues. She offered me an internship. The kind of gig most people can’t even look at until after they have their degree. But she had an opening and offered it to me if I flew out to California that week. I still had my acceptance to USC and she said I could work for her while I went to school. It was everything I’d wanted, the best education and real world experience in one. I knew if I worked for her, I’d be able to get any job I wanted. But I had to go right away. And I guess my dad had told her about you. So, before she hung up, she asked me what you would want for me.”

Jesse froze, like he was holding his breath. “Me?”

“Yeah. She said to not let myself get held back by the wrong things.” I swallowed, feeling the heat of regret burn the back of my throat. “I knew if...If I had to tell you I was leaving, knowing you couldn’t come with me, I’d never go.”

“I never would have asked you to stay.”

“I know that,” I said, shifting to the edge of the mattress. “I knew that. But I wasn’t as strong as you. So, I ran. And I let you hate me instead.”

“Jesus, Tara. Why?” He turned, his hands balled into fists at his side.

“Because I hated myself for wanting that freedom more than you.”

I had never expected to fall in love in high school. And if I did, I never expected it to be as real as Jesse and I were. We’d known each other as kids, grown up together. But when it came time to make a choice about school, I knew he’d never leave Maine. And staying felt like being stuffed into too small a space, the same way I’d just stuffed the pillows for the sofa bed. Too small and too tight and never enough room to breathe. I wanted him to come with me, but that wasn’t an option.

So, I left. And I thought making it hurt us both would help leave it in the past. But the second I'd crossed the bridge in Kittery I knew I was wrong. Because with every mile that closed the distance between us, I felt like I was finally coming home.

Judging by the look of disgust on his face, Jesse didn't feel the same.

CHAPTER 8

Jesse

I could still taste the salt on my lips. I had sat on the tailgate of my truck for hours waiting for her to show up at the beach. I'd convinced myself something terrible had happened, and that was the only way she'd have ghosted me like that. But no. She'd made a choice to leave town without ever saying a word.

"I didn't leave right away."

Her words snapped through me. "What?"

"I saw you."

She hesitated, like she was afraid of how I'd react. "When? Where?"

"It was a few days later. We were driving down to the airport and I saw you in town. You were sitting—"

"On the bench." I'd sat on that bench in the center of town for hours every day after that. I'd gotten one lame text from her that she "cared about me and would see me at Thanksgiving". But that was it. Even still, I'd sat in town waiting to see her. It was the main road in and out. The chances of her going anywhere and not driving by were nearly impossible. But for all those hours I'd spent sitting there, it sounded like I'd still missed her. Tara was the girl who never stopped slipping out of my hands.

"I'm sorry."

“Don’t be.” I stuffed down my anger and frustration. She’d been eighteen. The pressure from a new boss, her parents. Hell, half the town wanted to see Tara go off and make something of herself. I was never going to stand in the way of that. Her leaving was inevitable. I don’t know why it took me over a decade to see that, but I sure as shit did now. We were a waste of time from the start.

“Don’t do that,” Tara said, her voice lowered. I turned to find her propped up on the umbrella beside me. “Don’t act like I wasn’t a selfish jerk for treating you like that. You deserved better, Jesse. I thought breaking it off like that would make it easier for both of us to move on. But I was wrong. And I was cruel. And I’ve never stopped being sorry.”

Her words hung there between us. I *was* fucking angry. I *was* fucking hurt. She’d boxed me out like I was a stranger. Like I was as throw-away as most of the people in this town used to think I was. No college wanted me, no posh internships. I was just glad Mack Ellis had the patience to hire me back then and teach me some usable skills. Working construction was never going to be good enough for Tara Harris and her family, but it was fine for me. Hank and Suze sure didn’t mind it. And even if my shot-to-hell truck, dead in the Harris driveway no less, made me look like I was still just as worthless, I knew better. I knew what mattered to me.

The thing was, as Tara held my gaze, I could see it in her eyes; she did, too. Maybe she hadn’t always. But she did now.

“I’m sorry, Jesse,” she said again, as if she could tell I’d struggled to hear it before.

“I know.” Her eyes were glassy, and I let out a sigh as I swept her hair back from her face. “I hope by now you don’t need to hear this, but I forgive you.”

A single tear slipped down her cheek. “Of course, I need to hear that. I loved you, and I hurt you, and I never got to say goodbye.”

Goodbye. The word sank like a stone in my gut. In a matter of hours, we’d be facing another one, and god help me, it felt almost as hard as the one we never got to have. I closed

my arms around her, taking her weight as she nestled into my chest. It was like I was a lock and someone had just slid home the key. Tara in my arms now was just as good as the memory I'd kept alive all this time.

But as I rested my cheek on top of her head, relishing the feel of her, other memories began to weave their way through me. And even though I was sure at first I was imaging it, the slide of Tara's hand under the hem of my shirt told me pretty clearly I wasn't the only one. Tender, hesitant fingers traced the valley of my spine, and my throat went thick.

"T..."

She froze, her hands whipping away from me before she spun back toward the couch. "Sorry, shit. I shouldn't have done that--"

I stopped her with both arms closing tightly across her chest and my lips to her ear. "You only shouldn't have done that if you don't mean it...If you don't want it."

"Want *it*?" She turned to look at me over her shoulder, her brow scrunched low. "You mean want *you*?"

I nodded, my throat too tight from the way she was looking at me. I'd been with women since Tara but none of them could chase away the memory of her.

"I'll *always* want you."

Every muscle in my body went taut. I could hear it in her voice, the way it hadn't faded for her, either. I knocked the umbrella from her hand and swept her up into my arms, setting her on the bed and climbing on top of her.

"Say it again," I whispered, my lips hovering above hers.

She dragged her nails across the skin of my back and I flinched at the harsh contact. "I have wanted you for over ten years, Jesse. In all that time, nothing has ever been as real as this."

I exhaled, lowering to kiss her. Her mouth was warm and soft and she opened for me like she was as starved as I was to get back to that place we'd both missed. I slanted my mouth

over hers and stole the tiny whimper of surrender that escaped her. She tasted just as sweet as I remembered, but there was a fresh edge to her. More take, less tentative. And I liked it.

Her roaming hands pushed my shirt up until it bunched around my shoulders and I leaned back to rip it off. The greedy way she surveyed me was like pouring heat directly down my spine. It pooled in my dick and made my jeans too fucking tight. *How the hell did we still have this power over each other?*

“God, you’ve only gotten better,” she sighed, her hands splaying out against my chest before sliding south. Tara had never been shy about appreciating my body, but the heat in her gaze now went straight to my ego. Being wanted like this wasn’t the norm for me, least of all from a prize like her.

“Let’s get these off before I lose the ability to go slow,” I said, pinching the leg of her pants. If we waited much longer, I was liable to just fuck her half clothed. And I didn’t want that. I wanted to savor this. She nodded, a whisper of apprehension on her face as she glanced down at her ankle. “I’ll be gentle.” I turned to slide them off her bad leg first.

“With the ankle. But don’t feel like you have to be otherwise.”

I paused, jerking my head up. *Who the hell was this woman?* She read my expression and shrugged, a wicked grin on her lips. *Ten years, Jesse,* I reminded myself. Plenty of time for both of us to have learned a few things.

After her pants went mine, and I finally got to roll back on top of her. I kissed her hard, tongues reaching deep into each other’s mouths, clamoring to get closer. I wanted to get inside her more than I wanted a single other thing. Thankfully Tara seemed to be on the same page as her hand slipped into my boxers and she closed her fingers around me.

“Fuck, Tara,” I growled, tingles already creeping up my thighs.

She nipped at my jaw. “I’ve missed you.”

CHAPTER 9

Tara

It had been a while. But regardless of that, no one had ever gotten me like Jesse. Maybe it was the whole “*you never get over your first*” thing. Or maybe he really was the best sex I’d ever had. In that moment I didn’t care. I just wanted to feel him claim my body the way only he knew how.

His teeth dug into my neck, the air gusting out of him as he ground into my hand. I closed my fingers tighter and he shuddered. I knew his body, too.

He tugged roughly at the buttons of my flannel. “Fucking shirt,” he exhaled, giving up and yanking it over my head. My bra went next, and then his lips closed around my nipple with a bite. I yelped. I’d have sworn I heard him chuckle before he gave it a soothing lick. “You said I shouldn’t be gentle.”

I arched up into his touch, my body reacting more to the harsh bite than I cared to admit. “Don’t stop.” Jesse raised his eyes, a heat in them darker than I’d ever seen.

He’d changed. We both had.

But *this*, this connection between us, it was just as all-consuming as ever. With his gaze still on me, he spun both my nipples between his fingers and smiled as I pushed up into his grasp. “You’re so damn hot.”

Sinking back down, he sucked and twisted until I writhed under him. My fingers curled into fists in his dark hair, the ache between my legs throbbing as he teased me. His wide shoulders wedged my thighs wider as he made his way down my body, the heat of his mouth leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake. He yanked my underwear down, dropping them over the edge of the bed, and turned his gaze back to my body. His eyes landed on my pussy and he licked his lips, making my toes curl into the sheets.

“Still the sweetest fucking sight,” he muttered before he lowered his head and closed his lips around me. He drew a long line up my slit with the flat of his tongue and I peeled off the bed.

“Oh god, *Jesse...*”

“I fucking love the sound of my name on your lips. Get ready to say that again.” He gripped my thighs and held me open as he went back again, pulling my clit into his mouth and flicking his tongue until I was shaking, his name sputtering out of my mouth.

Stars floated into my periphery as I craned up off the bed. He didn't stop. He devoured me like he'd been dying for the chance. Breathless moans burst from my throat, and my nails dug into his shoulders. I was lost, incoherent, spiraling toward an orgasm faster than I ever had before. As I crested, words tumbled from my mouth, rough and tight.

There. Yes. Please. God. Yes.

Jesse held me down when I bucked off the bed, and I came in a crashing wave, aftershocks quaking through me as he laid tender kisses to my trembling thighs. Struggling to catch my breath, I watched him stand tall beside the bed and skim his boxers to the ground, his beautiful cock springing free. He gave his hard length a couple of rough tugs, his eyes tracing up my body and locking with mine.

“You still want to do this?”

Only Jesse would ask that after breaking me into a million pieces, sweat on his brow from holding himself back. But I could tell he meant it. There was sincerity in his eyes; he'd stop now if I'd changed my mind. If there was a man on earth more kind and giving than Jesse Montgomery, I'd never met him.

But I didn't want to just *tell* him how ready I was, how bad I wanted to make him come undone like he'd just made me. So, I shifted, sliding down the mattress and sitting up so my legs hung off and I could reach behind his thighs to pull him toward me. “You think I'd stop after that?”

He floated gentle fingers through my hair. “I’m just making sure.”

I wrapped his cock with my fingers and closed my lips around the head, giving it a strong pull before popping off the end. He flinched, the air hitching out of him.

“I’m sure.” I gave him a grin before I closed my eyes and took him deeper into my mouth. My tongue slid along the underside of his shaft and he growled, his fingers clamping down on my hair.

“That feels so damn good,” he rasped, thrusting into my mouth in time with my strokes. His praise went right to my head, the power and pride in making a man weak something I’d almost forgotten. “Don’t stop, Tara. Just like that.”

I took him to the back of my throat, relishing in the guttural moan that filled the room. He was practically panting, his muscles bunching with every sucking pull. But then his grip in my hair tightened, and he jerked me back.

“You keep doing that and I’m not sure I can hold off.”

I wanted to tell him not to worry, that we had all night. But the thought brought our temporary reunion to mind in a way that pinched in my chest, so I licked my lips and gave him a coy smile. “I’m ready if you are?”

He laughed, but his expression only darkened. “Been ready,” was all he got out before he grabbed the wallet from his pants and scooted me back up the bed. He slid on a condom as he knelt on the edge. “Now, open those thighs and let me show you what I mean.”

CHAPTER 10

Jesse

If we’d still been eighteen, I’d have come in Tara’s mouth thirty seconds ago. Party over. Doors closed. But I’d

managed to hold back, yanking her off my cock before the night ended far too quickly.

I wanted to take her a hundred different ways, but the less I threw her around the less I'd hurt her ankle. And it wasn't like looking down at her swollen, wet lips and sex-messed hair didn't do it for me. In fact, I had to count to five as I inched up the bed just to get back under control. If she kept biting her lip like that, I wasn't sure even the counting would work.

"Lay back, baby," I said, reaching for the other pillow and lifting her ass to shove it underneath her. I'd never admit to how many times I'd imagined fucking Tara again. The scenarios ran the gamut from sweet apology to frenzied frustration. But none of them could compare to how god damn good this was.

I nestled myself at her entrance, taking a breath as I gripped her thigh and pressed it high and tight against her chest. I leaned to kiss her, the smooth heat of her lips like a balm to the fire storm of memory churning below the surface. But when she ran a slow hand through my hair, moaning as she sucked on my tongue, I came apart a little more.

With a single fluid stroke, I sank into her to the hilt, pausing when I bottomed out to savor the sensation. Her heat was wrapped around me, gentle pulses along my length from where her orgasm lingered. If I let it, those tiny tremors would be enough to pull me under.

Her pussy clung to me as I began rocking into her. "Fucking hell, Tara," I grit out.

Her nails bit into my back and the prick of pain shot fire through my groin. The wild desire in her eyes threw me. It was beyond anything I'd dreamt in all my fantasies. So much better. I'd never been so happy to be wrong in my life.

"*Harder,*" she whispered, her chin pitching up.

The friction built as I slammed into her with long, hard strokes. The frenzy to come was rushing toward me, growing stronger with every broken cry that burst from her lips.

“Come again, baby,” I husked, tilting to rub against her clit as I pumped into her. Her eyes slammed shut, the flush from her face racing across her chest. “Look at me, Tara. Eyes open.”

She found my gaze, her jaw hanging open as she gulped for air. Her body seized around me as she climaxed again, and her brow bent as she let go. The orgasm crashed through her like a vice around my dick.

“Yes, baby. You’re gonna make me come so fucking hard,” I gasped, hammering into her, chasing my own relief. Burying to the base and sliding out again, I rocked into her faster, rougher, until I could barely breathe. I stilled when the bolt of lightning shot up my spine. I got lost in her eyes as I released, her name spilling out in a garbled moan.

I’d never come so hard in my life. Fighting for air, it took a second to come back to the room. Tara ran gentle fingers up my back as I panted into her shoulder. It felt so good, being there in her arms, her legs still curled around me, as if she wasn’t in any rush for me to move. As if she didn’t want to be anywhere but there.

Eventually I shifted, easing beside her and letting my body go lax as she went to the bathroom. I tossed the condom in the kitchen trash and pulled my boxers back on before throwing another log on the fire and climbing under the covers. Relief pulled at me when she came back and nestled her head on my shoulder. If sex with Tara was unexpected, having her back in my arms afterward was downright transcendent.

But as right as all this felt, a knot of warning tightened in my chest, just below the place her hand was resting as she fell asleep. The things that made Tara who she was – her drive, her ambition – they’d never let her stay here. *Stay with me.* And sleeping together hadn’t changed that. It was why we fell asleep without saying another word to each other. Because we both knew it. And there were no words that would ever change that.

Tara's ankle looked worse the next morning. She tried to downplay it, but I could tell she was still in pain.

"I'll take you to the ER," I said, handing her a cup of coffee.

Shaking her head, she took it in both hands. "You don't have to do that. I know you need to get home to Suze."

Of course, I wanted to get home to check on her, but she'd made it through the night just fine. Jack was on the way with the wrecker for my truck, and was going to drop me off to grab my dad's old Chevy. The storm was over. All that was left now was the clean-up. It was a Saturday morning, so I had a little leeway before my accounts got antsy, but not much.

"I already texted Mel. She and Sam are going to bring the kids up. One of them will drive my car back."

"By the time they get here, you'll be done getting checked out and they can bring you home. Just let me drop you off. That thing needs more than an icepack."

A ding went off on her phone and she stopped short of arguing with me to pick it up. She scowled as her eyes read the screen. And then her face got red.

"Son of a bitch."

"What is it?"

She sighed, closing her eyes to calm down. "Work."

When she opened them again, I recognized the look on her face. It was the same one she always got when she was competing. Soccer. Pool. Even a friendly game of Uno. Tara hated losing. It made me wonder what – or who – was bringing out that look on a Saturday, but I wasn't going to ask. If I was going to drop her off, we needed to get moving.

"Listen, I don't want to leave you here by yourself like this." I motioned to her ankle. "So, please let me bring you to the ER, and then I can go check on Suze before I have to get

back to work.” She looked like she was going to argue again, and I cut her off. “Jesus, Tara. Please.”

The last thing I wanted was to lose my cool. We’d both know it wasn’t really about her ankle. But I didn’t want to be that guy. The kind that makes a bigger deal out of last night than it was. We’d had a nice night together and things felt more settled between us. I could let her go now.

“Okay,” she said, her voice softer. “Thank you.”

We finished getting dressed and I cleaned off her car. There was enough snow to make the sedan struggle a bit getting out, but once we hit the main road, we were fine. Or at least the drive was. I was anything but.

CHAPTER 11

Tara

The pain in my ankle had gotten worse, but it still didn’t touch the ache in my chest. My heart pinched with every beat and I couldn’t catch my breath. Getting the email from my boss that my colleague, Chad, was trying to snake my latest deal – one I sorely needed after being distracted so much the last few months – hadn’t helped. But that wasn’t what was upsetting me.

Falling asleep inside Jesse’s arms had been perfect. *Too perfect.* It had reminded me how good it felt to be held that way, to be utterly safe and supported. It had dragged up the past with a bitter cruelty that almost made me regret sleeping with him. *Almost.*

As he maneuvered us around downed trees and power lines, my mind spun. From work, to my leg, to the goodbye that was coming. My stomach was in a knot and the coffee I’d chugged churned in it like acid. I was amped up by the time he pulled under the covered entrance for the ER.

“You tell Mel you’d be here?”

My fingers were already tugging on the handle. “Yeah, she and Sam will be here in a couple of hours.”

“I’ll put it in the lot and text you the location,” he rushed to say as I started to get out.

“Thanks.” I almost didn’t turn around, but at the last minute I stopped, the umbrella braced in one hand. I looked back over my shoulder and into his eyes. “Thank you for everything, Jesse.”

He held my gaze, the corners of his eyes pinched in a scowl. “Let me help you in.”

“No,” I snapped. “I can manage.”

He wanted to argue, but he didn’t. The muscles in his jaw twitched before he huffed and turned to look out the windshield. “Fine. Bye, Tara.”

“Goodbye, Jesse.” It took all my strength to keep the words from revealing how much it hurt to say them.

With a deep breath, I leaned heavily on the umbrella and hobbled toward the door. I heard my car drive off behind me, but didn’t risk looking back. I didn’t want to fall...or cry. Both of which were pretty much certain if I did.

Once across the threshold, I paused to catch my breath. Pain was shooting up my calf from just the tiny bit of pressure I was putting on my leg, and I nearly cried out. It was oddly quiet as I took one slow step after another, leaning against the wall in case I slipped. The desk was only twenty feet away, but I hoped someone would spot me before I got there.

When the wall stopped, I had nothing to lean on but the umbrella. But after only a couple of steps, I started to doubt if I was going to make it. I paused, looking around for someone to help me, but I was alone. I opened my mouth to call out when I lost my balance and began to fall.

“I’ve got you,” a voice came from behind me, just as a strong, sturdy arm circled my waist.

When I turned my head, I saw Jesse over my shoulder. I couldn’t believe he’d come back. After I’d practically run

from the car, he'd come back for me.

“Put your arm around my neck.” When I hesitated, his light blue eyes captured mine and he nodded. I did what he said as he lifted me in the air. His arms cradled me like I weighed nothing. “Just hang on, I’ve got you.”

As he carried me toward the check-in, a nurse appeared. She brought over a gurney and Jesse laid me down carefully.

“We’ll get you checked out,” the nurse assured me as she began to wheel me down the hall. “Does your boyfriend want to come?” She looked between the two of us as we passed through a set of double doors.

I stared back at Jesse, standing in the middle of the hallway, his expression long as I moved further away from him. “He’s just a friend,” I lied before the doors closed behind us and he was gone.

Two hours and an inflatable cast later, I was released from the hospital. But Mel and Sam weren’t there. They hadn’t even made it into Maine. The storm had been more ice than snow down south, and accidents were everywhere. The highway had been closed for over an hour – with them trapped between exits.

I sighed as I stashed my phone in my bag and slung it over my shoulder. Leaning on a new set of crutches, I made my way toward the entrance to sit and wait. And that was when I saw him.

Jesse was leaning forward in one of the plastic chairs, elbows digging into his thighs as he hung his head. He was looking at his hands, and didn’t see me approaching. It wasn’t until the clank of the crutches stopped just in front of him that he raised his face to mine.

“What are you still doing here?” My heart was racing, the sight of him releasing butterflies loose inside my chest.

He looked me over, visible relief at the temporary cast on my leg. “I just wanted to make sure Mel got here okay.” He paused, letting out a loud breath, like he’d been holding it. “I didn’t want you to be alone.”

I sagged into the crutches, realizing how much I’d wanted him to stay.

I’d spent the last two hours thinking about what the hell I was doing. Here in Maine, but back in Boston, too. My life had always been focused in a straight line, always moving forward. Always fighting for something. But where I’d landed wasn’t where I’d thought it would be. And I wasn’t sure it was what I wanted anymore.

“You want me to take you home?”

It was such a simple question, but I didn’t know how to answer it. The cabin in Maine had been my home, a long time ago. Melrose was my sister’s home, not mine. And I’d stopped thinking of Boston as my home somewhere along the way these last six months. When I thought of home now, only one thing came to mind, and it wasn’t a town, a building, or a house.

It was him.

I sat beside him, his eyes watching me warily. “I don’t know where I want to go,” I admitted, forcing myself to look him in the eye, even when it scared me. “I don’t know what I want, really. But I do know one thing.”

He swallowed. “What’s that?”

“I don’t want to go back.”

“To Boston?”

“No. To missing you.”

Jesse’s eyes floated closed. When he opened them again, he cupped my cheek, pulling me close. Resting his forehead on mine, he sighed. “Then don’t.”

CHAPTER 12

Jesse

Tara's words twisted in my chest, hope and hesitation winding tightly around my heart as I dared to believe this was happening. I wanted her, but I had no idea how to make that work. We both had lives, and responsibilities, that weren't going to suddenly go away.

"I know last night was intense." I offered her an out. We'd waded into a lot of history last night, and with everything else going on in her life, it made sense she'd want to hold on to something familiar. But if that's all this was, I needed to know. "I get it if that brought up a lot and you need some time to figure things out."

"I do need to figure things out."

For a second I thought she was going to take the chance to bail. But then she slid her hand into mine. She twined our fingers together, fixing her gaze on where she'd taken hold of me.

"But besides making sure Mel is okay, and helping her until she doesn't need me anymore, there's nothing else holding me back." She looked up at me, her chocolate brown eyes wide and open and so damn sweet. "The rest will work itself out, one way or another. But I'm not giving you up again."

The possibility that this could be real had me in a choke hold. Every emotion bottlenecked in my throat so no words could come out. I tightened my grip on her hand and tugged her close again, kissing her like it was for the first time. Her lips pressed into mine, and then opened, letting me deepen the contact and take comfort in her.

"Are you sure this is okay?" She jerked back with a look of concern. "What about Suze?"

I smiled. "Suze is fine. She got picked up by her friend's family to go sledding at the high school." I rubbed my nose against hers and closed my eyes at how good it felt to touch her like that again. "And if you're worried about things down

the road, don't be. We'll figure it out. Together." If Tara wanted to stay with me, I had the room. And Suze would love her...

But then I pulled back, a jolt of apprehension rocking through me. "How can you be sure this is what you really want?"

What if she changed her mind again? What if this was just good sex and memories having their way with us? I wanted to believe that what we'd had when we were kids was the kind of foundation we could build on, but what if all this did was leave me more wrecked than I was the first time she left?

She caressed my cheek, running her fingers through my hair. "Because I never stopped wanting this. I just thought I *should* want something else. I got caught up in the dream of what I "could have" instead of realizing I already had everything I actually wanted."

"Life isn't the same up here. It's slower. Smaller." And she liked bigger and faster.

She straightened to face me. "You're worried I'll get bored, but that's because you're still thinking of the world the way it was when we were kids. I can do my job from anywhere now." She looked away with a scowl. "Though maybe with better people."

I must not have looked convinced, because she leaned closer, her lips drifting over mine. "I've chased the wrong things, Jesse. Fought for them for over ten years, trying to make them be enough for me. But I think I finally know what matters. And I know I can build a better life with you by my side. I want to fight for us now."

When she leaned back, I saw it in her eyes; she wanted me to be a part of whatever came next. I was worried I wouldn't be enough, but that was just it; this wasn't about me. This was about *us*, and everything we could create, *together*.

"Are you sure this is what *you* want?" Her expression was bright even as her eyes revealed her fear.

I smiled, bringing her hand to my lips and kissing the back of it. “I’ve always known what I wanted, baby. And you’re it.”

A life spent with Tara had been my dream since we were kids. And maybe we’d gone about it the hard way, but I wouldn’t change a thing. Because now I knew that *us* was part of her dream, too.

ABOUT MADDY LOWE

Maddy Lowe is a contemporary romance author who lives in the woods of Maine with her adopted coonhound, Gus. When not swatting at mosquitos or cleaning mud off Gus's paws, she can be found reading too many books (fiction and non-fiction alike), eating too much cheese (as if there is such a thing!), and buying plane tickets for her next great adventure.

Follow her on Instagram to keep up with her latest attempt to craft the perfect book boyfriend @maddylowebooks.



LOVE GROWING WILD

by Michelle Windsor

Contemporary Romance

Second Chance

After recovering from two rounds of chemo, a double mastectomy, losing all her hair, and countless days spent in bed, Gwendolyn James returns to the farm she spent every summer from the time she was a little girl up until she left for college.

Her grandparents still live there, and along with the happy memories she treasures, she knows both will help her find her way back to herself.

When she walks back into the barn her first day back, she quite literally slams into the very last person she ever expected to see again. And good lord, Ford Miller sure aged well. Too bad he broke her heart into a thousand pieces that last summer.

PROLOGUE

“You’re in the clear, Gwen.” The doctor’s smile broadening as she comes around her desk engulfing me in a bear hug. “You are in complete remission.”

Her breath is warm against my ear, the scent of wintergreen floating in the air from a mint she must have chewed on in the last few minutes. A tear rolls down my cheek, and I try to swipe it away as we pull apart, but she catches me anyway.

“Don’t you dare be ashamed of crying!” Her finger wags in the air between us as she scolds me. “Cry every damn tear you want! As long as they are happy tears. You’ve earned this moment!”

I half cry, half laugh as I try to keep my mouth from forming a smile. A smile I’ve longed to show for so long, but afraid until I knew for certain I was going to be okay. “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive.” Dr. Snow, or Melody, as I’ve come to call her over the last two years, reassures me. “All your scans are clear, your blood work is normal, and there are no detectable cancer cells in your body.”

“I’m afraid to believe it.” My hand raises, covering my mouth as I drop into the seat behind me, my eyes still damp as I gape up at her.

Melody lowers her body into the chair next to mine, pulling my hand into her lap. “I know. And I understand your trepidation but believe me when I tell you, you are okay.”

My head bobs up and down as I blow out a breath I didn’t even realize I was holding, every fiber in my being wanting this news to be true. “Okay.”

“You’ll need to come back in six months, and then every year after that to get checked, but I feel confident that we’ve gotten it all.”

Her fingers tighten around mine for a quick second before releasing them entirely as she rises and moves back to sit

behind her desk. “So, tell me Gwen, what are you going to do now that you have your life back?”

CHAPTER 1

Eight days later, now with a confident smile on my face, I walk off the jetway at Wichita airport and make my way to baggage claim.

I know, I know. Who goes to Kansas to start their life over? Or to celebrate the fact that I can think about a future again?

I do. That's who. It's where the best days of my life were spent up to this point, and I'm hoping to capture the peace and happiness I once found here. Up until college, I had spent every summer at my grandparent's ranch for as long as I could remember. And then life just became too busy, and then I got sick. I can not believe it's been fifteen years since I've been back.

I almost yell out loud with joy when I see my grandparents waiting at the bottom of the escalator that leads to baggage claim. I run down the rest of the steps and throw myself into both of their waiting arms.

"Grampy!!!" I plant a kiss on his cheek and then turn my head to my grandmother, "And Grammy!" I duplicate the same kiss on her cheek. "I missed you both so much."

"Oh, my angel, we've missed you even more." My grandmother responds before pushing me back, her hands gripping my forearms as she gazes at me. "Look how lovely you are. All grown up." Her lips lift into a small smile. "It's been way too long." And then she's drawing me back in for another hug, longer this time, and much, much tighter.

We grab the two suitcases from the already spinning carousel, and then head out to the parking lot. I follow my grandfather, who's rolling one of my suitcases behind him, while I tow the other, my free hand wrapped in my grandmother's. We're chatting about everything and nothing at all when I come to an abrupt stop, my Grammy's hand falling from mine.

"You've got to be kidding me?" I turn, my mouth hanging as open as my eyes are wide, staring several parking spaces

away. “Tell me that is not the same truck you had the last time I was here?”

“Sure is.” Grampy states with a firm nod. “We build things to last out here in the mid-west, Kiddo.” A smile brightens his face as he treats me to a playful wink. “Just look at you.”

“But that means that thing has got to be at least twenty years old!” I proclaim as we continue in its direction.

“Twenty-two actually, but who’s counting?” He shrugs as he lowers the tailgate and loads both suitcases into the bed of the truck.

“Wow.” My brow lifts with a small shake of my head. “Things sure don’t last like that in New York.”

“Course not.” He grumbles. “Too much salt. Too much snow. Too much everything up there.”

“Oh hush, Grampy.” I admonish with a smirk on my face. “You know I love it there.”

“But not as much as you love it here?” He bounces back at me.

“I could never love anyplace as much as Sterling.” I concur, my cheeks lifting.

We climb into the cab, me in the middle on the single bench seat, squeezed lovingly between my two favorite people.

Sterling, Kansas, where my grandparent’s ranch is located, is about an hour’s drive Northwest of Wichita. We spend it catching up. My grandmother tiptoes around questions regarding my health, if I’m dating anyone, (no), and if I plan on going back to my marketing job for Sapphire Resorts after my time off, (yes). The ride passes quickly and before I know it, we’re driving through the high, wooden-pillar gates that deliver us to the ranch.

My grandparents inherited the ranch from my grandfather’s father, so it’s been in the family for over a hundred years. It’s not a huge ranch by some standard’s; just over a hundred acres, but it’s enough to raise and board horses.

With two barns on site, there are enough stalls to house up to two dozen horses at a time. They mostly raise Appaloosa's, or board them for cowboys looking for advanced training for the rodeo circuit. Of course, they also have a bunch of hens, some pigs and a few cows as well.

“How’s the ranch these days, Grampy?” I look over at the two huge barns we’re driving past, memories of time spent there flooding my senses.

“Oh, it’s as good as you can expect.” He nods, his lips set in a firm line. “Be better now that these COVID restrictions are easing up and we can have some rodeo shows again. Boys have been struggling without their source of income.”

I simply nod, not wanting to get him upset with more questions. It’s late afternoon, and quiet on the ranch right now. The in-between time. Ranch hands resting before the evening feedings and put downs. We pull up to the front of the house, my heart leaping to be here again after so long.

“It looks exactly the same!” I exclaim as we climb out of the truck. “It’s like no time has passed!”

“Oh, these hip joints will tell you otherwise.” My grandmother chuckles, leading me up the wrap-around porch, and up to the front door.

My grandfather brings both my suitcases in behind us, almost running into me as I stand still as a post, absorbing every facet of the home I’ve missed for so long. Sunlight streams in through the front windows, dust particles floating in the beams of light. It smells like lemon and cedar and fresh cut grass all at once.

I lean into my grandmother, wrapping my arms around her as I bury my face into her neck, and whisper in gratitude. “I’m so happy to be here.”

“This will always be your home, dear. Always.”

CHAPTER 2

I wake up more rested than I can remember feeling in so long. Cancer definitely took its toll on me. And even though I spent countless hours in bed, I still only ever felt exhausted or weak. Some days it was all I could do to drag myself out from under the mountain of blankets I cocooned in, and that was usually so I could go throw up.

I smile. One of those toothy smiles that lifts my cheeks and makes my nose scrunch. I run my hands up and down my body, relishing in the fact that not a single part of me is in pain. I feel good. I didn't think I would ever feel this way again. A part of me wants to cry. Even though these would be happy tears, I tell myself no. No more tears. I'm done with crying. I will not waste another ounce of my energy on tears.

I sit up, swing my legs over the side of the bed and hop to my feet. I'm going to go ride a damn horse. It's been way too long. I only want to do things that make me happy while I'm here, and this is at the top of my list.

After a quick clean-up in the bathroom, I rummage through the drawers of my old dresser, and am thrilled to find an old pair of jodhpurs. I pull them on, surprised they are loose on me. Further proof of what cancer did to my body. I shrug off the negative vibes starting to creep in on my mood and yank a plain maroon t-shirt over my head. My riding boots are right where I left them the last time I rode, covered in dust at the foot of my bed. Even if I didn't know, my grandmother knew I'd be back. I tug a boot onto each foot, stomping a few steps until they feel comfortable.

I check my reflection in the mirror above my dresser, scowling at the mess topping my head. Before chemo, I had straight, blonde hair that flowed past my shoulders to the middle of my back. After chemo, not so much. Over the last year, my hair had grown back about four inches, but in big, curly waves. I had no idea how to style or manage it as it's grown, so I look a little like a Muppet. I stick my tongue out at myself before turning away to head downstairs.

Neither of my grandparents are to be found in the main house, but I'm not surprised. It's after nine, so I'm sure they are both off performing one of the many chores required to

keep this place running. I spy fresh blueberry muffins on the kitchen table and snag one as I head out the door towards the barn.

It only takes a few minutes to make my way across the yard between the two buildings, my footsteps sounding loud as I thump my way up the wooden incline into the barn. I blink my eyes trying to adjust to the darker interior after the bright sunshine outside, to no avail as I slam into a hard object. I bounce back, landing on my rump, the muffin smashing under my hand as I try to keep my head from slamming into the ground.

“Ow!!” I yowl at the same time a deep voice sounds over me, my head jerking up in recognition, the familiar tone sending a shiver down my spine.

“Sorry! I thought you saw me.” He bends over me, his hand extended, and it dawns on me that he hasn’t realized it’s me yet. Figures. I spent over a year trying to forget everything about him, without any success I might add, and he doesn’t even recognize me.

I swat his hand away, loose muffin bits scattering in the air, and scowl up at him. “I don’t need your help.”

As soon as I speak, his expression changes, eyes going wide, his mouth forming a small O shape. “Gweny?”

He squats, angling his face above mine, the corners of his lips rising. “It is you.” He shakes his head, his hand lifting to drag down his beard. “I didn’t recognize you with all the curls.”

I gape across the small space separating us, absorbing all the ways he’s changed, and all the ways he hasn’t. Same chocolate brown eyes, same dark head of hair, same voice, same gorgeous mouth. But now there are small crinkles at the outside edges of his eyes, and that beard, making him appear older, more rugged. He looks good. No, better than good. He looks like a man now, even more than he did fifteen years ago. When he broke my heart. My brow furrows as I remember, anger seeping in.

“Don’t call me Gweny!” I jump to a standing position, not wanting to be smaller than him, but still having to look up when I continue. “I’m not a little girl anymore!”

“Clearly.” He rakes his gaze down and then back up my body, stopping when he’s reached my face again.

“And don’t look at me like that either!” I wag my finger in his face.

“Like what?” His mouth quirking up in a lopsided grin.

“You know exactly like what.” I roll my eyes. “What the hell are you doing here anyway?”

“I could ask you the same question.” He reaches up, catching a curl between his fingers, rubbing the strands gently. “And where did all these curls come from?” He releases my hair and focuses his attention back to my face. “I thought you were never coming back here.”

“If I had known you were still here, I might have reconsidered.” I retort through clenched teeth.

“Well, sorry to disappoint you. I’m the foreman on the ranch now. Have been for the last eight years. Plan to be here for as long as your grandfather will have me.”

I stare at him, amazed he can’t hear how hard my heart is beating, or how quickly the blood is whooshing through my veins. I thought I was completely over him. I thought every kiss, every touch, every secret we shared was tucked away in the dark recesses of my mind. I thought he was in my past. But here he was, standing less than a foot from me, very much in my present.

“I can’t do this.” I plant my heel and turn away from him. “I’m going for a ride.”

“Wait, what?” He trails behind me, not taking the hint that I want to be alone. “Let me saddle a horse for you then.”

I screech to a halt, his body stopping so close to mine I can feel heat radiating from him. I don’t bother turning around. I do not want to see his face, afraid of what it might do to me. “I can saddle my own damn horse.” I grind out, then stomp off.

His heavy footsteps echo over my softer ones, only silencing when I finally come to a halt in front of Atticus's stall. Except, it doesn't seem to be his stall anymore. Instead of my beautiful dark quarter horse, a smaller tan and white horse examines me while it lazily chews on some hay.

I turn my head and ask the question I already know the answer to. "Where's Atticus?"

"Gwen, he's been gone for three years." He takes a step closer, his voice softening. "Didn't your grandparents tell you?"

I shake my head once, biting my lip to keep from crying. I said no tears today. "They must have thought I didn't care anymore." I glance in his direction, shrugging. "I mean, it's not like I came back to visit him."

He rests a hand on my shoulder, giving it a small squeeze. "Gweny, I'm so sorry."

Anger rises from my belly at those words. The very words he said to me all those years ago. The same words that broke my heart into a million pieces and left a hole the size of the Grand Canyon.

I could feel my cheeks burning from the heat churning in my veins as I lashed out at him. "You're sorry?" A sarcastic laugh escapes as I repeat myself. "You're sorry?" I blow out a huff of hot air. "You're always sorry, aren't you?"

I poke a finger into his chest, his eyes growing wide as he takes a step back. "Screw you and screw your sorrys!"

I twirl in a circle, stomping my foot at the end, knowing I'm starting to sound a little crazy. "You know who's sorry?" Not waiting for an answer, I keep barreling on. "Me! That's who's sorry!"

I jab my finger into him again, getting even angrier at myself for noticing how firm his pec feels. "I'm sorry I ever met you, Ford Miller! Sorry I ever met you! Sorry I fell in love with you! Sorry I ever believed in you! And sorry you were ever born!"

“Gwe-” Ford attempts to speak, but I hold the palm of my hand up to his mouth, silencing him.

“No!” I shake my head. “No more. Don’t you dare say another word.”

His lips slide shut against my skin, hot and wet, and I yank my hand back to my side, turn around, and flee.

CHAPTER 3

I storm into the kitchen, the screen door slamming after me, a short shriek sounding from my grandmother.

“Good Lord, child! What’s got your feathers so ruffled?” She wipes her hands on the apron she has tied around her waist.

“Ford Miller, that’s who!” I plant my fists on my hips. “Why didn’t you tell me he’s still working here? And why didn’t you tell me about Atticus?”

She lets out a heavy sigh and motions for me to sit at the table. “Oh honey, we had just found out you were sick when Atticus passed.” She drops into the chair across from me. “Your grandfather and I just didn’t have the heart to tell you when you were already going through so much.”

“I’m not a little girl anymore, Grammy. I could have handled it.”

“Well, we did what we thought was best at the time. Neither one of us wanted to cause you any more pain.” She slides her hands across the table and grasps one of mine. “And as for Ford. He’s been a part of this place for twenty years, honey. He’s like a son to your grandfather. We couldn’t turn him out over young love ending, could we?”

“Grammy, he broke my heart.” I tug my hand away and lean back. “You could have at least warned me he was still here.”

“And here you were just telling me you aren’t a little girl anymore.” Her brows raise with a tilt of her head.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I cross my arms over my chest.

“You dated Ford one summer fifteen years ago. When the summer ended, you left for college. Left for an entirely different life than Ford had or wanted. Don’t you think it’s silly to hold a grudge after all this time?”

“A grudge?” I scoff. “Grammy, I was in love with him. He told me to go. Told me he had a fun summer, but summer was over and so were we. He made me believe he loved me. I cried myself to sleep for months after I got to college. He didn’t answer a single letter I wrote, return any of my calls. It was like I meant absolutely nothing to him.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you, Baby. I really am. First love always hit the hardest.”

“Yeah, like a punch to the gut.” I mutter, upset that she’s not seeing things my way.

“Well, my Dear, if you plan on spending the next month with us, you’re going to have to learn to live with him.” I watch as she stands, then moves back to the counter reaching for the potato peeler. “He’ll be here for supper later.”

Seven hours later, I trudge down the steps from my room, walk into the dining room and prepare to face the enemy. Ford is already seated at the table but stands when I enter and moves to pull out a chair for me.

Damn it all to hell. Why does he have to be such a gentleman, and oh, I inhale as I sit, why does he still smell so good?

“Thank you.” I murmur, trying my best to be cordial.

He nods before moving back to his seat, which is of course, directly across from mine. I reach for my water glass,

taking a couple large gulps, trying to quench my desert of a mouth. If he had just gotten worse with age, instead of so much better looking, maybe this would be easier. But no. Sitting there in a clean white t-shirt that stretches quite nicely over his torso, faded blue jeans and clean work boots made him look every inch the man he had become. And that beard. I couldn't get over the beard. It was the same color as his hair, and just as thick, but trimmed close to his face, accenting his strong jaw. I wondered if it was as soft as I remembered the hair on his head being, or if it was rough and bristly.

“Gwen?” My grandfather's voice cut through my thoughts.

“Huh?” I replied, not sure what had been asked.

“Can you pass the chicken, if you're done daydreaming over there?”

“Oh, yes!” I grab the plate and hand it to him, a sly chuckle sounding from across the table.

I glare in Ford's direction, trying to make it clear I didn't think anything was funny. He cocks one side of his mouth up, flashing the slightest of smiles at me, staring back without a care in the world. His way of letting me know he's not intimidated by me in the least. If only I could practice that same behavior. He's always had a way of getting under my skin without any effort at all.

“Gwen, tell us about your job at Sapphire Resorts?” My grandmother requests, I'm sure to break the staring contest Ford and I seem to be having. “Was it all glamour, glamour, glamour before you got sick?”

I whip my head in her direction, and then back at Ford, and then to her again, confusion muddling any kind of response. Did Ford know that I had been sick? When I glance back in his direction, his expression confirms my suspicion.

Instead of answering my grandmother's question, I ask one of my own. “Who else did you tell that I was sick?”

I'm embarrassed. I don't even know why. I shouldn't be ashamed I had cancer. It's not like I caught a sexual disease.

It's cancer. There is nothing I could have done to prevent it. And I did everything, including cutting off both my breasts, to fight it. Maybe I just wanted to go somewhere and have people treat me like they always have. Not with kid-gloves, and looks of pity, or fumbling over what to say to me. I feel like that's been taken away from me now. And I especially didn't want to see Ford look at me the way he is right now.

"I didn't know you wanted it kept a secret." My grandmother looks stricken, aware that she's made a mistake. "Everyone was praying for you. Wanting the best for you. I didn't know. I'm sorry." Her voice trails off as she finishes.

"I know." I know she meant no harm. Who wouldn't want to share that grief, that worry with others? I understand. I really do. But still, I can't help feeling betrayed. "It's okay." I state quietly, even though in my heart, it's not for me.

I understand why people always say, 'Fuck Cancer'. The truth of the matter is, cancer fucks you. In so many ways. This being a perfect example. I'm in no way trying to make my grandmother feel any worse, but after all the pain I've gone through, it's hard to separate right and wrong sometimes.

"We're all really glad you're okay." My head lifts and I look across from me. "*I'm* glad you're okay." He continues. "I would have never forgiven myself if the last words I ever said to you were, 'take it easy, kid'."

He shrugs, regret on his face. "You deserved so much better."

CHAPTER 4

I lie in bed pondering everything that happened at dinner last night. I've been awake for hours, waiting for the sun to rise. Waiting to start a new day, again. It feels like Groundhog Day for me. I keep trying for a fresh start, but each day seems to be a perpetual repeat of shit hitting the fan. I'm not going to give up though. I will be stronger than all the other forces that appear to be against me.

Swinging myself up, I get out of bed and put on the riding clothes from yesterday. I hit the bathroom, scowling at my hair as I glance in the mirror, then head downstairs. I'm surprised to see my grandmother in the kitchen.

"Good morning my beautiful granddaughter." She offers me a warm smile. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

Instead of replying, I walk to her and wrap my arms around her waist. "I'm sorry about last night."

"Oh Darling, it's okay." She holds me, patting me on the back. "I'm so sorry I disappointed you by sharing your illness with people."

I step back, releasing her. "Grammy, you could never disappoint me. I was just taken off guard. Of course, you'd want to share with people. I'm not upset."

She nods, her mouth set in a soft line, pointing to the coffee pot. Her way of indicating the conversation is over and we're moving past it.

"No, thank you. It no longer appeals or agrees with me since chemo." I shrug. "I'm a tea girl now, but I think I'm just going to go out to the barn and find a horse to ride."

"Take Juniper." She instructs. "She's a doll and will be gentle with you. She's in the newer barn."

"Thanks, Gram." I place a kiss on her cheek then exit out the door and head to the barn.

I enter the darker space of the stalls, my step faltering as I take in the scene in front of me. There are two horses, already saddled, hitched and waiting outside one of the pens. I scratch my head, wondering if one of those is Juniper, then pause again as Ford steps into view.

"There you are." His face lights up with a wide smile, the crinkles around his eyes deepening.

“Here I am.” I cock my head. “Is one of those horses for me?”

He nods. “Yes, ma’am. I got Juniper here all ready for you. I had a feeling you were going to be wanting to ride.”

I take a few hesitant steps forward. “And just who is the second horse for?” Of course, I know it’s for him, but I need to hear him say it to believe it.

“Come on, let’s try to be friends again, okay?” He moves beside me, cupping his hands as he bends down. “Why don’t you step up onto this horse and see if you still remember some of those riding skills?”

I want to scowl, or at the very least, feel angry, but I don’t. Instead, I feel, hope. I do want to see if I can ride, see if I can control something, anything in my life. So, instead of arguing, I place my foot in his hands and swing myself over and onto the saddle.

“See, that wasn’t so hard.” He untethers both horses, and then, like the expert cowboy he is, hauls himself onto his horse in one swift move.

He digs his heel into the side of his horse, making a clucking sound as he grabs his reins. “Let’s go.”

I’m a little nervous, and definitely out of practice, but mimic his actions and follow him out of the barn. We ride in silence for the first fifteen minutes, me trailing slightly behind, until I urge Juniper to move up beside him. He glances over, offering me a smile.

“Wondering when you’d show up.”

“Are you married?” I blurt out, the first thing that pops into my mind, but not the first time I’ve wondered since I discovered he was still here.

“Nope.” His gaze drifts back to me. “You?”

“My grandmother hasn’t told you about me?”

“Haven’t asked.” A quick frown pulls down his mouth before he continues. “Not sure I wanted to know, to be honest.”

“Oh.” My brows furrow, confused by his response. He seems to notice, so he keeps explaining.

“I guess if I knew you were married, I couldn’t hold out hope anymore.” He stares out into the distance.

My voice comes out in a whisper, the shock I feel hard to disguise. “Hope for what?”

His head turns, his eyes locking with mine. “That you’d come back.”

“Oh.” This time, I break eye contact, leaning down to pat Juniper’s neck. I’m quiet for a long time as I ingest what he’s revealed. He broke up with me, never responded to any form of communication from me, but hoped I would come back?

“Why didn’t you ever leave the farm? Wouldn’t that have been easier?”

“It’s really not that difficult to figure out, Gweny.” He tightens his reins, the horse stopping. I do the same, our legs brushing against each other. “I had to let you go. I had to make sure went to college, went after your dreams. I didn’t want to stifle what you could or wanted to be. I figured if you came back, came back to me, after all that, you would never second guess your decision, your feelings.”

“You-” I start, but he waves his hand to indicate he’s not done.

“You didn’t come back though.” He clears his throat, scraping a hand down his beard. “So, I figured you made your choice, and that I did the right thing after all.”

“*You* were my dream, Ford.” I shake my head. “Falling in love, making a home, starting a family. That’s all I ever wanted. And I wanted to do all that with you. But you turned me away.”

“I had to be sure.” He fiddles with his saddle, not looking at me anymore.

“Then why didn’t you write me, or return my calls?” I throw my hands up in the air. “Anything to let me know you cared for me!”

He peers over at me. “I knew I had to leave you alone for at least the first year. To make sure you really had a chance to see what else life had to offer you. And after that first year, when you stopped writing, stop calling, I just assumed you had moved on. Met someone good for you. Your grandparents said you were happy. That you were doing well.”

“You didn’t exactly give me a choice, Ford!” I kick my boot against his to make sure I have his attention. “You completely ghosted me!” I peek over at him, my voice softening. “You broke my heart.”

He closes his eyes, drawing a deep breath through his nose before opening them again. “I broke my own heart too, believe me.”

CHAPTER 5

That was the first of many rides and long conversations between Ford and I that first week. I woke up every day, anxious to be next to him again. Feeling alive after such a long period of wondering if I would survive my illness. We got comfortable with each other again. We shared what we had done the last fifteen years, who we had fallen in love with, and subsequently, who we had fallen out of love with. We told each other about the favorite places we travelled to, pets we’d had, our friends, and of course we talked about my cancer.

One particularly hot morning, the second week of my stay, Ford took a different trail than we normally rode. As we proceeded further along, I realized where he was going and brought Juniper to a gallop, racing past him, laughing out loud as I did. When I saw it, I pulled the reins tight on Juniper, coming to a skidding halt, dismounting with a single swoop of my leg. Ford stampeded right after, jumping down beside me.

“I didn’t know if you’d remember?”

“How could I not remember?” I beam up at him. “This was *our* place. I dreamed about this brook for years after I left.” I scan the landscape in front of me; the small grassy clearing that surrounded a pool of water created by a damn Ford built across the brook years ago. There were small white wildflowers along the edge of the water, growing in the mossy soil.

“It’s still my favorite place to come.” He confesses, as he begins to unbuckle the belt around his waist, a cocky grin spreading across his face. “Want to go for a swim?”

His jeans fall to his ankles as he kicks off his boots, so he can pull them off all the way. I stare at him, enamored at how beautiful he is. He yanks his shirt over his head, and I draw in a deep breath, my focus drawn to a tattoo over his heart. His eyes meet mine as it dawns on him what I’m gawking at.

I shuffle close enough to trace the blank ink over his heart with my fingertips, then gape up at him. “You have my name tattooed on your chest.”

His expression softens, his hand reaching up to cup my face. “It’s always been you, Gweny. You’ve owned my heart from the first moment I met you.”

My heart flutters as if a thousand butterflies just took flight, all sense of time and motion freezing at his words. I’m speechless yet there is so many things I want to say. He speaks instead though.

“When you asked why I never left the ranch, it’s because no other place felt like home without you. At least here, I still had our memories, pieces of you to hold onto.”

I surge forward, pressing my lips against his, kissing him with a longing I had kept locked away for years. This is what I had waited for my whole adult life. Being in his arms, feeling him against me, hearing his heart beat with mine, I finally felt complete.

EPILOGUE

We were married just six months later. We figured we had waited long enough to start our lives together, so much time already wasted. We didn't live on the ranch, instead choosing to start our lives together in a little bungalow style house in Sterling. It was only a few miles from my grandparents, and Ford still worked for them. I continued my marketing career with Sapphire Resorts, albeit remotely. When I did have to travel, if Ford could come with me, he did.

We want a family more than anything, but we aren't sure how that's going to happen. I did freeze a bunch of my eggs prior to my treatments, but we weren't sure if my uterus was strong enough to carry a pregnancy to full term yet. We decided to wait two years and try the natural way first. If that doesn't work, we'll try hatching my eggs, so to speak. And if that doesn't work, we'll just see what God has in store for us. We can always adopt.

The bottom line is life is short. Follow your dreams, whatever they may be. Chase them if you must. Make every moment count. Count every blessing. Focus on the good things and try to brush off the bad. May good always outnumber the bad, and light always reign over darkness.

This story is dedicated to every single person who has had to fight this terrible battle called cancer or has loved and supported someone who has.

ABOUT MICHELLE WINDSOR

Michelle Windsor is the author of over a dozen steamy, contemporary romances filled with alpha males and even stronger females. She has achieved both Amazon and Barnes & Noble International Best Seller status, and was awarded Best Contemporary Romance Writer by Passionate Plume Ink in 2019. Her first book, *The Winning Bid*, was nominated for the Summit Indie Book Awards by Metamorph Publishing in 2017, and continues to be her best selling book to date.

Michelle is married with three grown children, and lives north of Boston in the type of suburban neighborhood you read about in sweet romance books, (not hers)! When she's not working on another book, you can find her spending time with her husband, hanging out with her three sisters, or snuggled up with her three cats, yes three, watching a movie or reading a book.

You can find out more about Michelle, as well as links to all her books, on her webpage: www.authormichellewindsor.com

Or go give her a follow at one of the social media locations below:

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BEFORE YOU

by Mimi Flood

Contemporary Romance

**Friends to lovers, Damaged Heroine, Cinnamon Roll Hero,
Opposites Attract**

Sebastian loves to save the damsel in distress. The problem is, Tyler doesn't need saving.

For Tyler, fun comes before reliability, which explains her attraction to bad boys. But her perspective shifts when she meets Sebastian, a sweet, nerdy guy who awakens something deeper in her heart. Can she let go of her past and let him in before it's too late?

Sebastian wears his heart on his sleeve, unafraid of being labeled as an eternal romantic. When he crosses paths with Tyler, a woman drawn to the wrong guys, he sees past her tough facade. Will he be the one to break through her barriers and remind her of how much she's worth?

CHAPTER 1

Tyler

Sweat covers his brow, surrounding his narrow nose, and the way he grunts while hovering over me, like he's shoveling dirt, is totally turning me off.

How is it that the stunning, tall, dark and handsome stallion who walked in here thirty minutes ago turned into a disgusting mess, stabbing me with a cock he clearly has no clue how to use?

"Yeah, fuck, baby," he cries out, arching his back with one last thrust.

Pleased with himself, he rolls off of me, lying down with an arm slung over the pillow. Relieved it's over, I watch him smile and bite his lower lip. Save for his dick hanging out of his pants, drooping half-flaccid to the side, he's fully dressed.

I tug my pencil skirt over my hips, locating my panties on the floor.

"Can you get up, please?" I ask, stepping into my black 5-inch Louboutin heels.

"What's the hurry?" Too busy getting rid of the condom, he caresses his dick affectionately as though it's some sort of pet.

I tug at the comforter that's twisted beneath his heavy body. "I have to wash this before my next buyer shows up."

"Next buyer?" Offended, he stands up abruptly, finally freeing the blanket. "I thought I was the only one?"

"For a penthouse like this?" I laugh, sliding the window open, hoping to air out the smell of sweat and sex. "I have a few more interested."

"And are you planning to give them the same service you gave me?" He sneaks up behind me, reaching into my skirt and cups me, hard.

Such class.

After a deep breath, I pull his arm out and turn around, meeting a dark brown gaze that screams he wants another go.

“No,” I reply, stepping away. “That’s not something I usually do.”

It’s true, I don’t. Well, at least not in a long time.

I didn’t become a great broker because my father, Richard Benedict, owns the top real estate agency in Montreal. I worked my ass off to get where I am today, to earn the sales I do, but once in a while, the rush of having sex in another person’s house gets to me. My client base usually includes older men or couples, so when this young, good-looking man showed up, it wasn’t long before I was leading him to the master bedroom with every intention of fucking.

The thing is, when I recall his rough, sloppy kisses, bile rises in the back of my throat along with aggravation. Now, not only will I need to clean this room and throw the comforter into the wash before my next visit, but I’ll need a shower, too.

“So, what’s your offer?” I ask without shame, exaggerating my *agent smile*, as friends call it.

His expression darkens as his jaw drops. “That’s your thing? You fuck your clients for an offer?” He snorts. “And you think *that* was good enough?”

“No, I *fucked* you because I *wanted* to. But we both know that lay wasn’t worth the time. So, back to business.” I step away, stripping the sheets off the bed. “You seem like a smart man. This place is going to move quick and it would be a mistake to miss out.” I shrug, leaving the room, then turn to add, “But if you’re not interested, you’re not interested. I’ll see you out.”

“Don’t bother.” He adjusts his silk navy tie, rolling his shoulders back, then brushes past me, slamming the front door on his way out.

I throw the sheets into the wash, then check my watch.

One minute. Two.

I pack up my business cards and listing sheets.

Three minutes.

The door opens and Stallion Man sticks his head in. “I’m not going any higher than four-point-one.”

I reach into my white Vuitton handbag, hiding my satisfied smile and pull out my cell. “I think that could work.”

While filling out paperwork for the sale, feeling better with each zero I write, I call my best friend, Dominique.

“Hey, Ty,” she answers with a snuffle, causing my heart to pinch.

“What’s wrong? Is it David?”

These days, her douchebag boyfriend is constantly to blame for her tears, and I hate it. Dom deserves so much better. She shouldn’t waste her time with him and it’s so sad that she doesn’t see her self-worth.

“No, it’s not David. I’m sick.” She hacks, and I pull the phone from my ear. “It’s like a cold mixed with a stomach bug. I’ve been puking all—”

“Eww, nope, I don’t need to hear that. Thanks.”

“Sorry, babe. I know you were looking forward to tonight.”

“It’s all right.”

“Any offers on the penthouse?”

Another cough.

“Yeah,” I smile. “Just sold it.”

Her cheerful *woo hoo* comes out so feeble, I frown.

“Want me to bring you some soup or meds?”

“No, thanks. Dad has Nathan running errands for me.” We both laugh, imagining her lazy younger brother going out of his way for another human being. “And I wouldn’t want you catching this with your huge weekend coming up.”

“Right...” I shove the paperwork into my bag, remembering the lineup of property visits over the next two days. Truth is, I’d much rather stay in bed all weekend.

“You don’t sound too happy for someone who just made a gigantic commission.”

“I’m happy.”

Another snuffle, or a doubtful snort, I can’t tell. “You’re lying.”

“No, I’m just tired, I guess. Nothing a party won’t fix.”

The bed is freshly made, but despite the opened windows, the guy’s spicy cologne still hangs heavily in the air, so heavy, I can taste it.

“I wish I was going with you,” Dom says, half-heartedly. “I promise I’ll make it up to you as soon as I’m better.”

“Don’t worry about it. Rest up. I’ll call you tomorrow?”

“Okay. Not too early, though.”

“On a Saturday? Never. I probably won’t be up before ten, anyway.”

Downstairs, I shove my things into my Audi before heading home. Without having to pick Dom up, I have some time to kill, so I pass by McDonald’s on my way.

It’s shit food for my shit mood, but I don’t care—I’m as desperate for greasy goodness as I am for a scalding shower.

CHAPTER 2

Sebastian

“**H**ang on! *Hang on!*” I holler through gritted teeth.

The phone keeps ringing, but I ignore it. I know it’s Jesse and that he won’t stop calling until I answer, but I have to beat this level. On Jesse’s third attempt, I finally reach a

safe point and pause the game, tossing my controller to the side.

“What’s up?” I answer.

“Took you long enough.”

“Sorry, busy.”

“New game?” Jesse asks, and I can hear the smile in his voice. The guy knows me too well.

“Nah, *Final Fantasy*.”

“*Again?*”

“Yes, again.”

“Which one?”

“Six. The best one. Well, to you lowly non-gamers, *Final Fantasy Three*.”

He laughs. “Nerd.”

“Thank you,” I say, taking no offence. “What do you want?”

“I forgot to buy Queso. Can you pick some up on your way here?”

“You’ve been planning this party for months. How are you not ready?” I tease, typing a reminder into my phone. “How much do you need?”

“Enough for thirty people?”

“*Thirty?*”

“Maybe more.”

“All right. I’ll get it.”

“Thanks, bro. Did you decide what you’re dressing up as?”

I look down at my costume, the one that took me weeks to come up with. “Oh, yeah. It’s gonna be great.”

There’s a heavy sigh on his end. “Please don’t show up here dressed like last year.”

“What was wrong with last year?”

“Dude, you showed up covered in paint swatches.”

“*Fifty Shades of Grey* paint swatches, to be precise.” Still pleased with my ingenuity, I chuckle. “That was an epic costume and you know it.”

Jesse’s hearty laugh booms into my ear. “It was, it was. I just hope this year’s more creative, that’s all.”

“It’s definitely creative. You’ll love it.”

“I’m sure I will. All right, buddy. See you soon. Don’t forget the queso.”

“What queso?” I joke before pressing *End*.

The only reason I’m going to this stupid Halloween party is because Jesse is like a brother to me. To be honest, I’d rather stay in, dressed in comfy clothes, eating junk and playing my game.

Like any other Friday night.

“**W**hat... the... hell?” Jesse stands in the doorway, his blond brows dipped with confusion. “Error four-oh-four?”

I can’t help laugh. The priceless expression on Jesse’s face is totally worth it. I spin around, pointing at my back. “Costume not found.”

Jesse’s head drops with his smirk. “You are the biggest dork.” He puts a hand on my shoulder, shutting the door behind me.

“Hey, at least I’m not the one dressed like Hasselhoff.” I point to his red shorts before handing him a bag with five jars of queso. “This is all they had.”

“More than enough. And I’m a Baywatch lifeguard, not Hasselhoff.”

“Whatever you say... *Hasselhoff*.”

I follow him through his loft, toward the kitchen, saying *hi* to a few friends. Costumed people pepper the open space and loads of bright colours fill my sight. Jesse reaches into the fridge, pulling out two bottles of Heineken. After cracking them open, we clink our bottles.

“Happy Halloween, dude.”

Spider webs hang from the bookshelves and windows. Creepy, bloody limbs and fake weapons lie on nearly every surface. There’s even a machine somewhere pushing out a constant stream of smoke and a large, iron-looking cauldron filled with deep red punch on the kitchen island.

“Well done, Jesse. The place looks great.”

He grins, stroking his beard. He’s grown it out over the last few months, and it’s just my opinion, but I don’t like it. However, the way the women keep ogling him, I guess I’m the only one who thinks that way. Then again, it could be his bare chest drawing their attention.

Speaking of women, an auburn-haired one appears, kissing him on the cheek and wraps her arms around his neck.

“Seb, this is Marsha.” Jesse pulls her against him. “Marsha, this is my brother from another mother, Sebastian Murano.”

She smiles, but doesn’t let go, dropping her head onto Jesse’s chest. He’s into one-night hookups, but she’s clinging to him as if this is more than a casual thing. I force a smile, wondering why I didn’t know about her. There is nothing Jesse doesn’t share with me.

Usually.

Marsha sticks herself between us, attacking Jesse’s mouth with her own, with no regard to me standing there.

Clearing my throat, I turn around and stuff some Cheetos into my mouth, but when I see *her* the handful of chips stops mid-air as time slows down.

Tall, with long, blond, verging on golden, wavy hair that stops a few inches above her ass—and quite the ass at that—

the woman is an angel disguised as a lion tamer. Matched with a black velvet top hat and coat, her red and black bustier strangles her waist and lifts her incredible breasts. Fish net stockings wrap around legs that go on for miles and the sexiest pair of gold, knee-high boots complete the costume.

I stiffen at the breathtaking sight of the mysterious woman, then smack Jesse on the arm.

“Who is *that*?”

Jesse extracts himself from Marsha’s stranglehold. “Who?”

“The blond with the whip.”

“Ah, that’s Tyler Benedict.”

I’ve heard the name before...

My eyes go wide. “Your *real estate agent*?” Jesse mentioned her once or twice, but I wasn’t paying attention and assumed Tyler was a man.

Silly, silly me.

“Yeah. She’s pretty, right?”

“She’s magnificent.”

“Magnificent?” Marsha giggles. “Seb, you’re a dork.”

I give her a tight smile. I can’t tell what Jesse sees in this girl, but right now, I’m not a fan of hers and ignore her comment.

“Is she single?” I ask.

“I think so. Go on, say hi.” Jesse gives me a gentle shove, but I hesitate. A girl like her is entirely out of my league, but rather than staying put like an idiot stuck in crazy glue, I force my legs to cross the crowded living room.

Unfortunately, I don’t make it far. Some douche in a sheet—and not much else—steps in my way, leaving me standing in the middle of the room with my metaphorical dick in my hand.

CHAPTER 3

Tyler

Marsha.

Jesse met her two weeks ago, but she's already hanging off of him as if they've been together for months. She seems nice enough, but something feels off. Then again, maybe I'm a tad bitter. After all, here I am, single and obviously loving life.

Most days, Jesse gets on my nerves, so I don't know why I care. A blond Viking God, he's sexy, and he makes no attempt at being bashful about it. Normally, I love that in a man, but he's too... *sweet*. Some might enjoy a man with a heart of gold, but that's not my thing. I've never been attracted to nice guys and probably never will be. I prefer them rough around the edges, dark and mysterious.

Sipping my Vodka-Cranberry, I watch the crowd of mainly women—not surprising considering the host—and the few couples. A profound loneliness strikes deep in my chest, making me wish my wing-woman was here. Even if she's probably asleep, I contemplate calling Dominique, but get distracted by a pull from across the room. That's been happening a lot tonight, which is surely because my legs are fucking killer in these boots.

When I turn around, I find the reason my skin feels warm.

A dark-haired man with equally dark eyes offers me a smile that hints at his next move. Similar to the penthouse guy, with a wide build and Mediterranean features, he's even better looking. I ignore the regret stewing in my gut—the regret a shower couldn't wash away—and tuck some hair behind my diamond-studded ear.

As if he's on the prowl, he saunters my way, and the heated rush returns, lighting me up from the inside out.

“Hey. I'm Joey.”

Shitty name, but it's not important.

“Hi, I'm Tyler.”

“Nice to meet you, Tyler. Are you a friend of Jesse’s?”

“Yeah. I was his real estate agent.”

“Were you?” He scans my body, and I let him. People incessantly jump to conclusions when they find out what I do for a living. Some have even accused me of lying. “You don’t look like a realtor.”

And there it is.

I sit my hand on my hip. “What do I *look* like?”

“You’re gorgeous. I assumed you were a model. I’d never think you were in real estate.” Again, he doesn’t hide the ravenous way he looks me up and down.

“Must be why I’m so good at it,” I respond with a wink, then watch him melt before me.

“I bet you are.”

Annoyed at myself for being so obvious, I hold back an eye roll.

I don’t know when I took on this sex-kitten role, but this constant flirting/teasing/playing thing I do is growing tiresome. Of course, I’d love to take him home to do nasty things, but then what? It won’t turn into anything. He’ll never see me as more, simply because I’ll never let him. And that’s the part I’m sick of—the constant need to play the field, while knowing they’ll never be around long enough.

Joey steps closer, the intense scent of Cool Water and beer tickling my nose. “Hot costume, by the way.”

His brown eyes refuse to lift from my chest, so I do the same, slowly scanning down his exposed, hairless skin.

“Yours is pretty good, too.”

He’s a waxer with a great upper body, even better six-pack, and a tapered waist that hides behind a toga, but the sex appeal stops there. Unfortunately, there isn’t much going on below the belt—his scrawny calves scream he’s not into leg day. I like thick thighs and muscular calves. Rugby or soccer players

have the best legs. Joey doesn't strike me as the sporty type, but he's sexy enough for a good time, which is all I'm after.

"What line of work are you in?" I ask.

"I'm in sales."

"That's fun." *Also completely vague.*

While he brags about his latest achievement, the familiar sensation of someone watching me tugs from my peripheral, but unlike what I'm used to, this time it sends a pleasant tingle across my skin.

I shoot a quick glance over Joey's shoulder, landing on the bluest eyes I've ever seen—bluer than Jesse's, if that's possible—staring from a few feet away. With honey-coloured hair, a square jaw, and the most striking smile, the guy is cute, but he's dressed in a loose white t-shirt and black sweatpants. The guy didn't bother dressing up and I fight a yawn.

And yet I'm unable to look away from his intense, but bashful gaze. His grin shows off two deep dimples, and then he... waves. Like an actual *wave*. It's the cheesiest thing ever, but something flutters in my stomach, anyway.

I shake the spell off, returning my attention to Joey, who's now rambling about his fitness regimen.

"So, do you work out?" he asks.

"I do some yoga."

"I can tell." He studies my body, only this time with a sinister gaze. When he leans in, his lips tickle the edge of my ear. "Want to go upstairs?"

"Upstairs?"

There's nothing up on the mezzanine save for Jesse's bedroom.

Joey's thick brow dips, but his grin speaks volumes. "Yeah. So we can... *talk*."

Talk. Right. Despite knowing better, I consider it. For like a second. But there's no way I'm doing anything at this party.

An empty penthouse is one thing. A friend's bedroom is another.

“Yeah... I think I'll pass.”

He recoils with a grimace. “You're playin', right?”

“Nope, not *playin'*.”

The fury burning in his eyes sends a sudden chill across my exposed skin. He grunts and in a snap any attraction I had to him fades.

“You know, maybe you shouldn't dress like that if you're not looking to hookup. Fucking tease.”

Disgust mars his face and makes me see red, but I blink back my rage, hiding behind a sip of my drink.

I wish I could say his reaction surprises me, but this happens when I don't give them what they want. They see one thing when they look at me, and more often than not, I take advantage of it.

Only now, the niggling in my gut returns, along with a heavy distaste I'm not used to.

CHAPTER 4

Sebastian

Without looking too obvious, I watch Tyler while this nearly naked clown practically corners her. I'd love it if she told him to fuck off, but she doesn't. Every smile she gives him, every *touch*, makes my blood boil.

Someone bumps into me, but I don't dare look away. Then Tyler's gaze lifts and meets mine, stopping my heart and erasing all thoughts. Even my body goes numb.

I blink, then smile, popping the dimples everyone loves so much, and for some stupid reason, as if someone else is controlling my limbs, my hand lifts and I wave.

An actual *wave*.

She reacts like any sane person would—her face contorts into a *what-the-fuck* expression—and she shifts her attention back to Thor.

Dejected, I return to the fridge to grab a second beer, but Jesse has Marsha pinned against the counter, so I leave them be and walk around, pretending to be super interested in the books on Jesse's shelves. There's a mirror on the wall to my right that gives me the perfect view of Tyler.

Only she's alone. Toga-asshole is gone.

Now's my chance.

I comb my fingers through my hair, checking my reflection before heading over.

"Hey," I say, noticing her perfect smile is gone, her glowing face dimmed. I have no clue what the prick did, but a deep urge to hug and make her happy grows in my chest.

"Hi." She shoots me a fleeting glance before looking away.

"I'm Sebastian."

Her sapphire blue eyes dart up. "Sebastian? Jesse's friend?"

Her tone makes me unsure of what she's heard. It's no secret that I'm a stand-up guy. There's nothing Jesse could have told her that would cast me in a poor light.

"Yeah, but don't hold that against me." A soft smile hints at the corner of her ruby red lips, but when she aims those blue darts at my head, it makes me think she wants me... *gone*. "You're Tyler, his agent?"

"*Former* agent." She finishes her drink, gazing longingly into the empty cup, her blood-red fingernails catching my attention.

"Want another one?"

She shrugs dismissively, handing me the cup. "Sure. Vodka-Cranberry."

Let down that she isn't coming with me, I hesitate, unsure what to do. She stands there, her gaze travelling from the cup to me, then lifts an eyebrow that makes me rush to the kitchen.

When I return, she's sitting on a sofa. I settle next to her and my breath hitches. Up close, she's stunning.

"Your costume is really cool, by the way."

"Thanks." An expensive, feminine scent hits my nose, but she keeps averting her eyes from mine, glancing over my shoulder.

"Is something wrong?" I follow her line of sight.

"No, why?"

"Cause you keep looking for that guy." Across the room, toga-asshole chats with some other girl.

Douchebag.

She laughs a deep chuckle. "I'm not looking for him."

"Good to hear. So, what do you—"

"Look, Sebastian." She touches my knee and I tense up. An enormous diamond ring on her right fourth finger catches the light and sparkles. "You seem like a nice guy, but I'm not interested."

Woah. That was quick.

"Interested in?"

"Whatever it is you're here for."

"Damn. Did they put that on my shirt?" I look back and sigh. "Because I specifically told them *not* to write *Sleazy Player*."

Pleased with my sarcasm, I laugh, but my joke sputters out with her disappointed expression.

"Ah, you're a smart-ass like Jesse. Fun." She rolls her eyes, but instead of turning me off, it only makes her more endearing.

"Listen, I'm sorry if you got the wrong impression. You looked like you needed someone to talk to. I thought..." I stop,

rubbing my chin. “You know what? Never mind. My mother raised me to be a gentleman, so I’ll leave you to it.”

I stand, offering her my hand. A jolt goes through my arm when the smooth fabric of her cut-off glove hits my palm like silk.

I breathe in deeply and smile. “Have a good night, Tyler.”

Determined to keep my doubts at bay, I roll my shoulders back and tilt my chin up. I know I’m a good guy, and I have a lot to offer someone, but I guess I’m cursed or something. No matter how hard I look, I can’t seem to lock down the one.

I have no clue if Tyler is the girl of my dreams, but in those brief moments sitting by her side, something told me she’s damn close to what I’ve been searching for.

CHAPTER 5

Tyler

There’s a huge run in my tights spreading up my thigh, and I stick a finger in it with an internal cuss, while standing in line for the one and only bathroom.

Even if the party is going strong, the last two hours have dragged and I’m ready to head home. Dominique alone could save me from this rut, so I send her a text.

Me: *Are you awake?*

Dom: *Am now. What’s wrong?*

Me: *Sorry! Nothing’s wrong. Feeling any better?*

Dom: *I got so sweaty I had to take a shower, so... no? Guess the party’s shit?*

Me: *No, it’s fun.*

Dom: *Then why are you texting me?*

Me: *Good point. I’m going home.*

Dom: *Alone or...?*

Joey's chatting with a pretty girl in a geisha costume. They're hitting it off if his hand up her kimono is any sign.

My thighs clench.

He's a prick, I remind myself, but then why am I craving his touch?

Something is wrong with me.

Me: *Alone. 100%*

Dom: *I'd invite you over, but...*

Me: *All good. Keep your germs. Kisses!*

It's my turn for the bathroom. I sit on the toilet, trying to decide if I should bother taking the stockings off. My lack of energy convinces me to keep them on.

When I step out, Joey leans against the wall and smiles at me as if he's completely forgotten about earlier or the geisha, wherever she is. He keeps quiet when I walk past him, which is a good thing for us both.

Moments later, I'm in Jesse's room, rummaging through the pile of coats on the bed, when the sounds of the party below go quiet.

"You leaving?"

I startle and turn.

Joey is standing behind me, sweaty skin, eyes glossy and void of life.

Even more troubling? The bedroom door is closed.

Strangled by fear, my throat seals shut. I position my coat in front of me like a shield.

As if it'll make a difference.

"Yeah, I am." I attempt to move around him, but he grabs my arm, digging his fingers into my skin.

He leans in. "Nah, come on. Stay a while."

"Look, I'm tired, so..." I try to pull my arm free, but he squeezes it tighter. It hurts and I glare at him as panic takes

hold.

“If you’re tired, there’s a bed right behind you.” He glues his body to mine, forcing me to step back. The bed pushes against my calves.

His heated glare screams danger, and though I’m afraid, I also calmly prepare for what’s going to happen.

He releases my arm, then runs a finger down my cheek. “Don’t you want a taste?”

The nauseating stench of liquor makes me want to gag, so do his slightly crossed eyes.

What did I see in this creep?

“No, I don’t,” I snap, shoving past him, but he grips the coattails of my costume, yanking me back. A strong, sweaty arm binds me to his chest.

“Let go.” I try to free myself, fighting the rising, recognizable terror.

“Just a little taste?” he insists, his lips at my ear, his nasty breath hot on my skin.

I shiver, but stop fighting.

Once his grip loosens, I turn, forcing my lips into a seductive, accepting smile. Falling for it, Joey takes the opportunity, sneaking a hand down to my crotch. I seize my chance, swinging my leg back and forcefully slam my knee into his balls.

“I said no, asshole!”

He keels over, groaning, and sinks to the floor.

I hurry downstairs, bumping into people as I do, looking for Jesse and find him chatting with Sebastian.

“Hey. Having a good—” Jesse’s smile drops when he sees me.

“I need to...” I start, breathless. “Your friend, Joey? You might want to check on him. He’s upstairs.”

Jesse's eyes widen. His nostrils flare, but he rushes away without another word. Sebastian steps closer, his hand pausing mid-air, as if hesitating to touch me.

"What happened? Are you okay?" He drops his hand, deep concern creasing his forehead. He looks like he's going to be sick. "Did he...?"

"He tried," I answer. "But I'm fine."

Safety drifts over me with Sebastian's tall frame at my side, which is good because when Jesse returns, he's got Joey with him.

"Want me to call the cops on this piece of shit?" he asks, holding said piece of shit by the neck.

I purse my lips, staring directly into the scared little fucker's eyes. Joey trembles, still clutching his balls.

"Nah, it's not worth their time."

With a selection of choice words, Jesse drags Joey out and it's only then that I notice the deathly silence.

The music has stopped.

Everyone is motionless.

Gawking.

A deep blush consumes my face, burning like acid, stinging my eyes.

"Come on," Sebastian says with a nod. "Let's get out of here."

On our way downstairs, we cross Jesse, who informs us that Joey left in a cab with a possibly broken nose. He keeps apologizing, but I reassure him I'm all right, reminding him this wasn't his fault.

"Still," Jesse says, shaking his head, his fists clenched. "I'll murder the fucker if I ever see him again."

I take Jesse's hand, mustering the best smile I can. "Not if I get to him first."

Sebastian holds the door open for me and when we step onto the sidewalk, I catch the way he scans the area as if making sure the coast is clear.

The crisp autumn night hits like ice on my still-flustered skin, so I rush to put my coat on, but something's not right.

The sleeves catch... Or it's inside out.

Maybe I took someone else's jacket?

I struggle.

I can't get into it...

Rage swells in my blood.

Suddenly, Sebastian's there, stilling my shaky hands in his. "Let me help you."

He holds the coat up, letting me slide into it and I fight the impulse to lean back into his embrace. The rush of fear has left me shaken, and craving a release, but he's a good guy, not one I could take this—*whatever* I'm feeling—out on.

CHAPTER 6

Sebastian

There's always some dickhead that makes us look bad.

Even if Jesse said the asshole is gone, I keep looking around, making sure while giving my blood a chance to cool.

My phone pings with a text.

Jesse: *Make sure she gets home safe.*

I sigh, typing my reply.

Me: *As if you need to ask.*

A pain stabs me in the chest when I look up and find a frustrated Tyler wrestling with her coat. I offer to help, stilling her shaky, ice-cold hands.

Once she's wrapped in her jacket, I hail a cab, but she stays silent as we wait. She averts her gaze, but I can read her thoughts: *Where was I? Why didn't I stop it?*

OK, maybe she isn't thinking that, but I still feel partly responsible, after all, I'd been watching her all night—how did I miss it?

When the taxi pulls up, I open the door for her. She gets in, thanking me, but I don't budge.

Puzzled, she peers up at me, then nods to the door. "Do you plan on closing that or...?"

I bend down, looking straight into her eyes. "I can't let you go home alone."

Anger consumes her face, making me immediately regret my words.

"That's not your choice, buddy." She reaches for the handle, but I pull the door wider, then slide in next to her. "Sebastian! What the hell are you doing?"

"I know you're a strong, independent woman and you don't need a man to take you home, but I'm a worrier so there's no way I can leave you alone after..."

She shakes her head, giving me one of her eye rolls, then sighs. "That's cute, but I'll be fine."

The impatient cabbie glares over his shoulder at us. I give him a reassuring nod.

"How about this?" I say to Tyler in a calm voice. "Let's share the cab. I was leaving, anyway. Where do you live?"

With her steady blues locked on me, she purses her lips. "Peel, above Sherbrooke."

"Perfect, I live near there," I lie, looking away. I live twenty minutes in the opposite direction, but she doesn't have to know that.

"I really don't need you to bring me home," she insists, a small line forming between her eyebrows.

“Consider it a favour to me. I’ll sleep better knowing you got home safe.”

She blows out her cheeks. “Ugh, fine.”

Too busy checking her phone, scrolling through Instagram, Tyler doesn’t speak as we drive to her place. I normally hate when people are glued to their tech, which is ironic considering I work in IT. Maybe looking at screens every day is why I prefer people being present.

But I shouldn’t judge; put any kind of gaming console in front of me, and I become a useless bag of bones.

Is that it? Is she ignoring me because she’s anti-social or because after what happened tonight, she’d rather lose herself in the mindless distraction social media provides?

“Tyler, I realize this is none of my business, but,” I start, rubbing my hands on my thighs. “Are you sure you don’t want to report the guy?”

She exhales, slowly looking up at me. “No, but it’s not like anything really happened, so…”

“That’s not exactly true.”

“He copped a feel. I’ve experienced worse.” The brightness in her eyes dims as she drops her head. “Men do that. I’m used to it.”

A deep sadness consumes me and I frown. “I’m sorry you feel that way.”

“It’s just the way it is,” she says matter-of-factly.

“No, it isn’t. Sure, some are like that, but don’t lump us all into the same category.” I sigh, then shift to face her. “You should consider raising your standards.”

“My standards are fine.”

“Not if you’re willing to let this slide because you think it’s common.”

She side-eyes me, pursing her lips. The magnitude of the words she's holding back start to take up space between us, crowding the backseat like an unwelcomed passenger.

“And tell me, *Saint-Sebastian*,” she begins, her eyebrow arched, flooring me with her disapproving gaze. “Say I report the guy. What difference will it make?”

“Maybe it'll stop him from doing it to someone else.”

Her pessimistic snicker only deepens the pain in my chest. The thought of anyone putting their hands on her again sends shards of glass through my skin.

“Nothing ever happens. One gets a warning; five others are born. They're like bacteria.” She stops, aiming her angry glare at the back of the cabbie's head. A minute rolls by, then she offers me a lopsided grin and shrugs. “I'll think about it.”

“Good.” My shoulders relax. “Anyway, on behalf of mankind, and despite your low opinion of us, I'm sorry it happened.”

Her glower soon cracks with a slow smile. “It must be impossible to hold the world on your shoulders the way you do.”

I glance out the window. “It feels that way sometimes.”

“How do you even get out of bed every day?”

“With a raging hard-on, usually,” I reply deadpan.

Like music to my ears, a sexy laugh bursts from her mouth and her glossy eyes meet mine. She seems astonished by the sound and though I want to join in, I'm too afraid to miss out on the sight. Tyler Benedict laughing is a fucking masterpiece.

“Well, this is me,” she says, as we pull up to a high-rise building. Judging by the massive modern structure with white and black marble in the lobby, she must make a killing in real estate.

An unreadable emotion flits through her gaze as she gets out. I hurry around the car to meet her and ask the cab driver to wait. She fishes her keys from her purse as we walk to the door.

“You know, you’re great at what you do.”

She glances up at me through thick lashes. “What I *do*?”

“You’re a lion tamer, no?”

She looks down at her costume. “Oh, right.” She lifts her chin. “I’m the best in town.”

“No doubt there. You’ve definitely tamed *this* lion,” I say with a bow.

When I rise, she’s at the end of an eye roll, but her cheeks flush pink. Her smile—the best one I’ve seen so far—lights up the night.

“Goodnight, Tyler. Thanks for letting me bring you home.”

CHAPTER 7

Tyler

I’ve been lying in bed for an hour, tossing and turning, too hot, too uncomfortable despite having opened the windows wide. My mind keeps wandering back to Joey, to his clammy hands on my skin, and I shudder, forcing myself to think of something, or better yet, *someone* else.

You’ve definitely tamed this lion.

Thinking of Seb, of his dorky responses makes me forget my shitty evening. I type his name into Google, generating a few links, but I click on his LinkedIn profile first. Despite having the geekiest profile picture, I sort of find it... charming.

Sebastian Murano: Web and IT specialist. Degree in Computer Science from McGill. Incurable gamer. Explorer. Organizer. Internet nerd. Avid student of life.

I grimace, but giggle. He’s my polar opposite.

I switch to Facebook, finding a friend request from none other than him. A grin works its way across my face.

Within seconds of accepting his request, a notification lights up on Messenger.

Sebastian: *Thanks for being my friend :)*

Me: *You're welcome?*

Sebastian: *Can't sleep?*

Me: *No. You?*

Sebastian: *Nope. Too wired.*

I'm curious if his version of *wired* is the same as mine. I shake my head, repulsed by my body's need for release, before heading to the bathroom to splash some cold water on my face.

There's a new message when I come back.

Sebastian: *You still there?*

Me: *Yeah.*

Sebastian: *You didn't deserve that, you know?*

It's like he's reading my thoughts. I glare at my phone before replying.

Me: *I know.*

Sebastian: *You're a great person, Tyler. You should be worshipped.*

Me: *Gee, thanks.*

I send a laughing emoji.

Sebastian: *I mean it.*

Me: *I mean it, too... Thank you.*

Sebastian: *I didn't make you uncomfortable, did I?*

Me: *I don't get uncomfortable.*

Sebastian: *Good. Then I can admit how honest I am when I'm not looking into your beautiful eyes... And have had a few beers.*

Me: *Honest and cheesy, too.*

We chat about work and family, and gossip about this new girl in Jesse's life, Marsha, who Sebastian doesn't seem to like too much. At least we agree on that.

After an hour, I yawn and realize how late it is. Maybe it's because we're typing and not face-to-face, but I can't remember the last time I stayed up chatting with someone like this. Not even with Dom.

Me: *I really should get some sleep. I need to be up in a few hours to show a bunch of houses.*

Sebastian: *Same.*

Me: *You're showing houses? lol*

Sebastian: *Haha. No, I mean, I have to get up early. Soccer.*

The image of Sebastian playing soccer, the possibility of his thick thighs, reignites the heat deep down in my belly, forcing me to cross my legs.

Me: *I guess this is goodnight then. Again.*

Sebastian: *Guess so...*

Me: *Talk to you soon.*

There's a pause. The dots bounce, then disappear, then bounce again.

Sebastian: *Have dinner with me tomorrow night. How does 7 sound?*

My thumbs freeze over the keys. I'm sure he means well, and we'd have a good time, but I wouldn't want to lead him on and wind up hurting him.

Me: *As friends?*

There's another pause. I wait.

Sebastian: *Sure, friends. Unless I missed something in the cab?*

He sends me a suspenseful emoji and I smile as I type.

Me: *K. C U @ 7*

A GIF of a boy jumping up and down fills my screen, making me laugh once again.

Immediately, I'm torn. He's kidding—at least I hope he is. But what if he really is expecting more?

What if he picked up a vibe in the cab?

What if I made him think there was a chance?

Don't I always?

CHAPTER 8

Tyler

My neighbour's wrench does the trick, stopping the leak, if only temporarily. Tears that have been building all day threaten to spill over and after the shitstorm of an afternoon I've had, I'm tempted to let them fall.

Instead, I call the superintendent.

No answer.

I send him an insistent text, which he answers quickly. The soonest he can come is the following morning.

Irritated, I scrunch my eyes, inhaling deeply and hope my attempt at plumbing lasts, then busy myself mopping up the flood in the middle of my kitchen.

Ten minutes later, there's a knock at the door. Assuming the super has sent someone in his place, I look through the peephole.

It's *Sebastian*.

I don't even consider my appearance before unlocking the deadbolt.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, opening the door. "I sent you a text. Cancelling our plans..."

A small smirk hints at his lips as his gaze dances over my body. I nearly cringe imagining what he sees: the messy bird's

nest of hair plopped on my head, the t-shirt—which has more holes than it reasonably should—slipping off my shoulder, and the short shorts with a wet spot on the crotch. But worst of all, I have zero makeup or underwear on, having peeled it all off when I got home.

He glances around me. “You sounded like you had a bad day and said you didn’t feel like going out, so…” He holds up a plastic bag, the word *Rockaberry* written across it. “I brought you a treat.”

I blink a few times in disbelief. “What’s in the bag?”

“Blueberry cheesecake.”

“That’s my favourite.” I practically weep from joy, but cock my head. “Did you know that?”

“Instagram,” he replies with a small nod.

I should slam the door in his face, if only for showing up here unannounced. Especially when I bailed on our plans. But those charming dimples have me swinging the door wide open instead. I mean, him bringing me the best dessert in the world helps a little, too.

“You honestly didn’t need to do this,” I say as he follows me into the kitchen.

He takes in the disaster—the water on the floor, the mop and bucket, the dish towels. “What the hell happened?”

“A pipe burst.” I peer under the sink. “But I think I got it to stop leaking. At least until the super comes by.”

“And when’s that?”

“Tomorrow,” I reply.

“Well, that won’t do.” He places the bag on the counter, then sets his coat on the kitchen stool. He crouches to check under the sink, shoving his shirtsleeves up.

“Do you know anything about plumbing?” I take the cheesecake out, my mouth instantly watering.

“Enough.” He lies on his back, asking me for some pliers. I hand them over, watching him work, but get distracted by his

thick forearms twisting and flexing.

After a few minutes, he shimmies out and stands next to me. A sweet scent hits my nose, which I assume is the cheesecake.

We stare at the sink as if expecting something to happen. When it doesn't, he folds his arms across his chest with a satisfied sigh.

“That should definitely last until—” A loud noise interrupts him and water shoots out of the pipe, targeting us like a firefighter's hose.

“Fuck! Fuck! *Fuck!*” I scream, while Sebastian, dodging the spray, dives beneath the sink once more. By the time he stops the geyser, I'm part laughing, part crying.

He re-emerges, soaked from head to toe, water dripping off his face. Taking in his messy appearance, I can't stop laughing and reach out, pressing my hand to his chest. His heart hammers beneath my palm.

“That was... fun.” With a chuckle, he looks down at himself.

Drenched, his shirt sticks to his chest, contouring the dip between his pecs and the subtle curve of his abs. My throat runs dry.

Turns out the IT nerd was hiding quite the six-pack.

Although I know I should remove my hand—that with every passing second I touch him, the heat between us grows ten-fold—it seems glued to his hard wall of muscle.

CHAPTER 9

Sebastian

There's water. *Everywhere.*

My shirt, my pants, they're stuck to me like a second skin, but so is Tyler's hand and *that's* all I seem to care about.

At that moment, I thank my lucky stars Jesse convinced me to start working out regularly six months ago.

Small droplets of water linger on Tyler's lower lip and strands of golden hair have fallen free and stick to her face.

Earlier, when she opened the door with messy hair and no makeup, I thought she couldn't look more gorgeous.

Boy, was I wrong.

Now we're wet, and the tension between us is palpable.

We don't speak. We're perfectly still. Her heavy breathing matches mine.

Scratch that, we're not breathing, we're *panting*.

Dizzy. I'm definitely dizzy.

And hard. *Very* hard.

Worry swims in her eyes, but her thoughts remain a mystery. I pray this moment won't change her mood, but I also know that if anything is about to happen, it needs to be her choice. I can't push this.

So, I finally tear my eyes away from hers.

And it *kills* me to do so.

I only have time to brush a strand of hair off her cheek before her mouth slams to mine.

All bets are off.

I pull her hips against me. She feels so light, so fragile, it brings out a side of me I've never known. It's animalistic, but also confusing. I want to tear into her as much as I want to keep her safe.

She plunges her fingers into my chest, clawing my skin with her nails, before sliding her hands up into my hair. She bites my lower lip. When I pull back, I find her grinning a grin that screams lust.

I cradle her face with my hands, continuing my attack on her mouth and feel her melt in my embrace, her arms dropping to her sides.

We stumble, bumping into the counter before I lift her up to sit on the granite edge. Pressing myself between her thighs, her warmth sears through my pants and the breath whooshes from my lungs when she clutches my shirt and hooks her legs around my waist, tugging me closer.

I slide my hands under her shirt, cupping her perfect breasts, rubbing my thumbs over her peaked nipples. Her head falls back with a moan.

I assume she doesn't care about the shirt, considering it's littered with holes.

Perfect.

I grip the neck with both hands, yanking it down. The fabric tears, the torn collar falls around her naked breasts and she peers up at me, not with annoyance that I ruined her top, but with naughty defiance.

Suddenly, with a dark laugh that spills over her plump lips, she grabs my face, shoving it against her chest.

She's twisted. And turns out I kind of like it. It's not in my nature to be a rough guy. Unless I'm *asked* to be.

I nip at her skin, circling a nipple with my tongue while I roll the other between my fingers. She rocks her hips, grinding on me, the wet denim creating an intense, heated friction against my swollen length.

A voice inside me screams, *this is happening*, like I've won the lottery.

I tug her shorts down, ecstatic when I find she's not wearing anything underneath them. She leans back onto her elbows, spreading her legs apart, a salacious, expectant grin consuming her lovely face.

Licking my lips, I crouch down and she props her legs on my shoulders as if she's running the show, which she totally is.

I run my nose along her slit, inhaling her scent.

“Sebastian, wait.”

I glance up over her belly and watch her stick two fingers into the cake. Full of smooth filling, she brings them just above her middle.

“You don’t want it to go to waste, do you?” She glides the dessert across her pelvis and I nearly die.

With a groan, I run my tongue from the inside of her thigh, along the edge of her sex, and finally lap up the sweet filling on her belly.

She bites her lower lip, her eyes growing darker and she runs her fingers through my hair, pushing me down. I take her clit into my mouth, slowly sinking my fingers into her and she rubs against my face with no hesitation, her feral moans bouncing off the walls.

I’m a mess. So is she. There’s cheesecake on my nose and cheeks, along her thighs and belly.

Still, this is hands down the best dessert I’ve ever had.

CHAPTER 10

Tyler

Winded, Sebastian helps me down from the counter, but I notice he isn’t meeting my eyes.

“Um, can I throw this in the dryer?” he asks, pointing at his wet clothes.

“Sure. I’ll find you something you can wear in the meantime.”

After washing my stomach, and everything between my belly and knees, off in the bathroom, I change into some sweats and search through my dresser for a pair of my biggest pyjama pants.

Back in the kitchen, Sebastian is standing in nothing but his boxer briefs and the sight stops me in my steps. He’s even more defined than I thought, with strong pecs, wide, solid

shoulders and his thighs? They're thick, muscular, covered in light golden hair that makes me want to drop to my knees and open my mouth.

"Here." I hand him the pants, which he hurriedly puts on. They're too tight and I laugh. "Sorry, they're all I had."

I offer him a fork as we sit at the counter, digging into the messy remnants of the dessert, poking around the holes I made.

A giggle falls from my mouth.

"What?" he asks.

I glide my fingers through his mussed-up hair. "I've never done that."

"Which part?" A blond eyebrow shoots up, but a blush colours his cheeks.

"No, I've done *that*." I nudge him with my shoulder. "I meant with food."

"You've never let someone eat something off your body?" he asks, as if it's the most common activity in the world.

Now I'm the one who's embarrassed. I shake my head, looking away.

"That's a shame."

I moan in agreement, licking my fork, enjoying the rich filling, noticing the hints of lemon in it. Even if I've eaten this dessert more times than I can count, it's never tasted better. Something tells me that's because of who I'm sharing it with.

"I've never done that, either," he admits a few beats later, his voice low. He drops his head, poking the cake, but doesn't eat.

A weight settles on my chest, recognizing the loaded tension in the air, knowing what he's not saying. Regret stews in my stomach for letting things get this far, for adding to his confusion.

"Sebastian, I hope I didn't give you the wrong idea."

“What, that you don’t eat food off of plates like normal folk?”

“Oh, hell no. Plates are overrated.” The corner of his mouth lifts, even if his eyes don’t shift from the plate. “But this can’t turn into anything, you know that, right? We can only be friends.”

“And why is that?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I have time.” Setting the fork down, he turns to face me, his knee bumping with mine. “Is it because you don’t like me?”

This is a serious moment, but the pink bunnies on the loaner pajama bottoms make it hard not to burst out laughing.

“I like you. I do. You’re great.”

“But...?”

“We wouldn’t mesh well.”

“I thought we meshed just fine,” he says playfully, his gaze shifting to the counter.

Suddenly blushing, I slide off the stool to get us some water from the fridge.

“I like a certain type of guy. I don’t do relationships.” I hand him his glass, a tiny spark heating my fingers when our hands touch. I clear my throat. “You’re really sweet and you’ve got this big heart. You’re always thinking of others.” I roll my shoulders back. “Only, I don’t... go for that.”

“So, you only date assholes?” This time, his tone isn’t lighthearted; he’s pissed.

“In so many words, yeah, I guess I do. I realize it’s odd.” *Not to mention unhealthy.* “But that’s who I am. I’m not into serious things. I don’t do well with commitment.”

“I get it. If I was a prick who used you for sex, then you wouldn’t have cancelled our date.”

Not impressed by his sudden sarcasm, I drop my head to the side. “I cancelled because I had a shitty day.”

He pushes the stool back and stands abruptly. “There’s more to it than that. I think some jerk scared you from taking chances. From being yourself.”

“We’ve just met. You don’t know what I’ve been through or what I think.”

“I know you deserve to be happy.”

“I *am* happy,” I retort, my voice unsteady.

Happy. The word leaves me unsettled, burning up my throat.

He narrows his gaze, reading my lie. “Are you?”

“Yes,” I insist, folding my arms, tucking my shaky hands into my elbows. This is becoming too raw. “Don’t act like you know me, because you don’t.”

A line forms between his sad eyes. “You’re right, I don’t. But I’d like to.”

“And I said we could be friends.”

“All right then, as your friend, tell me why you’re so hard on yourself?”

“I’m not.”

“You are.” He exhales a short laugh. “Maybe I’m out of line, but...” He steps closer, never dropping my gaze, then takes a breath. “I think you feel you have to be with these assholes because no one’s ever treated you right.”

CHAPTER 11

Sebastian

Since the age of fourteen, when my hormones were raging, I’ve been looking for *the one*. Jesse lovingly calls me an eternal romantic. And I am. Can’t help it. Never could.

I want love in my life. I want someone to come home to, to cherish, to spoil. Someone who'll bring me joy, as much as I can bring to them. It's corny, but I blame my parents—they still act like teenagers even after thirty years of marriage.

So, sue me; I want that.

Did I think finding the one would be easy? Absolutely not. In fact, I thought it would be the opposite. I imagined she would be tough to crack. That she'd be completely aware of her beauty, using it to wrap me around her finger. She'd be strong and independent, too. Above all, she'd be insanely smart and, with one look, would know I wasn't worth her time.

Did I think when I found her, she'd be oblivious to her worth?

Not even close.

What kills me the most isn't the time it'll take to win Tyler over; it's knowing she doesn't see what I see. People have treated her like a sexual object for so long, she believes who she is can only be encompassed by their views. And nothing breaks my heart more.

“And I suppose you'd treat me right?” With her game face on, Tyler stares me down, her arms crossed and eyebrow arched.

“Absolutely. And then some.”

She shakes her head, pursing her lips. “Do you think you're the first guy to promise me that? 'Cause you're not.” She shoves the leftover pie into the fridge, slamming the door. “Yes, I go for the asshole over the nice guy, because assholes are predictable. They show me their cards up front. There's no disappointment. There are no false hopes.”

“That's what you're worried about? Someone letting you down?”

“When it keeps happening, yes.”

“Amazing.” My brow scrunches.

“What?”

“Your view of... everything. Of men. Of relationships. It’s like why you didn’t report that asshole at the party—”

“I *did* report him.”

Surprised, I stop, taking it in. “You did?”

“This morning. They said they’d look into it, but that it was just some stupid drunk guy at a party.” She holds her fingers up and does some air quotation marks before adding, “It’s not as if he actually *did* anything.”

Infuriated with the incompetence of our so-called law enforcers, I take a deep breath. “I’m sorry they treated you like that, but you did good.”

“Did I?”

“Sure you did. It’ll make a difference.”

The piercing stare she shoots my way tells me exactly how broken she is, how little she agrees. “You’re so naïve. It was pointless.”

“I have no idea who hurt you or who made you think that, but you’re wrong. It wasn’t pointless. None of it is.”

She ignores me, storming by to pull my clothes out of the dryer, then tosses me the bundle. They’re warm and still damp, but I put them on anyway, the zipper on my pants burning my fingertips. I hiss.

“Too hot?” A trace of amusement flickers over her expression.

“Nope,” I lie, shoving my wet socks into my pocket. I take a hesitant step toward her. “You’re worth more than that, Tyler. Can’t you see that?”

She stares at me blankly and I wait for her to speak, to acknowledge what I’ve said. The ball’s in her court.

Her shoulders drop, then she leans against the counter, her face indifferent. “Thanks for the cheesecake.”

The air rushes from my lungs, deflating my chest. I wasn’t expecting that. I thought maybe I’d made a dent in her rigid armour, but I guess I was wrong.

“No problem.” I grab my coat, but my entire body tenses, resisting the need to leave.

Nibbling on her lip, she looks up to the ceiling like she’s considering her next words. Hope consumes me, gathering in my chest.

“I’m sorry...” Tyler begins. She blinks, her eyes glistening, but what follows is only one of the saddest smiles ever. “I’ll see you around.”

The joy that filled me when I walked into her apartment vanishes and I clench my fists beneath my jacket, letting my shoulders drop.

“See ya’.”

CHAPTER 12

Tyler

Sebastian’s slow steps fade down the marble hallway as I lock the door behind him.

The nasty, bitter aftertaste of blueberries settles on my tongue as I sink into my sofa. I turn the TV on, flipping mindlessly through the channels.

For a second, just one *teensy* second, I consider chasing after him and admitting how I feel. How I’m worthless, I’m trouble and he’ll only wind up hurt.

Options hurl around my mind like a tennis match.

I know that if I tell him who I really am, he’ll run away. Good guys like him never stick around for messed up girls like me.

But if I don’t tell him, then he’ll think I’m a bitch, and that’s the lesser of two evils I’m happy to settle for.

Still, my insides cramp at the idea of him hating me. Of how I let him go.

The phone rings, startling me and I nearly drop it when I see who's calling.

"Hello?"

"Hey. It's Sebastian. You know, the guy you met at the Halloween party with the lame costume?"

My brow pinches. "What?"

"So, I met this woman," he continues, ignoring me. "She's amazing."

"Sebastian..."

"Want to know how amazing?" he asks, his tone playful.

I frown. I know practically nothing about this guy, but I know he enjoys a good joke, so I play along, too tired to argue. "Sure."

"She's so amazing, I think I dreamed her up. She's smart and can level me with one look. And she's damn strong."

"You're right, she sounds made up." I tuck my knees into my chest, hoping the warmth blooming in my heart will spread through my limbs. "And is she pretty?"

"Pretty?" He blows out a breath. "The word didn't even exist before she was born."

Tears fill my eyes, shutting down my ability to speak. A sniffle fills the silence as I work on swallowing the lump in my throat.

"Unfortunately, she doesn't want me," he adds. "She thinks I don't see who she really is. That we won't work well together. And she's wrong."

"Maybe she's right."

"She's not," he insists.

"But her beliefs are *hers*. They're important to her. Maybe they're all she has."

"But that's the problem. *She's* important to *me*."

My heart breaks, but I respect him for his effort. "Sounds like a shitty dilemma."

He releases an anguished sigh. “The shittiest.”

The profound silence on his end stretches on for so long, my pounding heartbeat becomes deafening.

“Tyler, you’re a smart lady. What should I do? I want to respect her wishes, but the thought of not being around her, of not being able to see her all the time... to *kiss* her? That makes me ill.”

“You sound obsessed,” I say, forcing a laugh.

“Obsessed? I’m ruined. She’s ruined me.”

A tear escapes, running down my cheek. I rub it away with the back of my hand. This is too much, and I need to roll my tongue inside my mouth to keep my emotions in check.

“That’s too bad, but if she doesn’t feel the same way, then...”

“See, I think she might. I think she’s just afraid.”

There’s a long pause. The bubbly effect of euphoria left in his wake still embraces me, clouding my judgment, making it difficult to breathe.

Sebastian truly is a terrific guy. One of the best. From the moment we met, I’ve felt as if he sees me. Sees the real me, like I haven’t been seen before. And strangely, he doesn’t hate what he sees.

It’s unknown.

It’s *terrifying*.

And opens a door to a part of me I’ve kept hidden.

I swallow before letting the truth tumble out. “I think she could...”

“She could what?”

“Feel the same way.”

“Yeah?”

“*Maybe*. One day.” I squeeze my eyes together. “She might need time.”

“Time. Absolutely. Yes. I’ll give her that.”

The excitement in his voice brings a smile to my lips.

Am I being completely stupid for giving into this?

“Does that mean she’ll open the door?” he asks.

The tears break through with my laugh. I rush to the door, throwing it open, and find him standing on the other side with the phone pressed to his ear.

“Were you out here the whole time?” I ask.

“I made it to the elevator before coming back.”

“You can hang up now.” I reach out, lowering the phone.

A diamond-like sparkle lights up his sky-blue eyes when he smiles. I’ve noticed it before, but it’s never been as bright as it is now. It resurrects a warm feeling I used to know—*security*.

I don’t know who he is. He’s a nerd, I’m not. He’s a gamer; I hate video games. He likes to organize, but I’m a mess.

I have so many doubts. One of which is how long he’ll stick around once he gets to know me better. The *real* me. Assuming I don’t kick him out first.

But for now, what I know is he brings out smiles that come from the heart. He makes me happy. *Genuinely* happy.

And maybe it’s time I took a chance on that.

CHAPTER 13

Sebastian

The door opens.

Tyler smiles, her eyes wet but bright. She lets me back in with her heart open, but guarded.

Right then and there, I know that what happened before me doesn't matter because I'll do all I can to prove she's worth everything.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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ABOUT MIMI FLOOD

Mimi Flood writes sizzling stories with flawed beginnings and happy endings.

A love of movies and screenwriting earned her a BFA in film studies and creative writing from Concordia University.

She's a stay-at-home mom and wife, a devoted *Supernatural* and *Friends* fan, and a lover of anything where the guy gets the girl. Oh, and apple pie.

Mimi's first novel, *The Long Weekend*, a contemporary small-town romance set in her home province of Quebec, was a 2019 Kobo Emerging Writer Prize finalist.

She lives in Montreal.

Website: <http://www.mimiflood.ca/>

Newsletter: <https://subscribepage.io/mimifloodnewsletter>

Mimi's books: <https://bit.ly/mimifloodbooks>

<https://www.instagram.com/MimiFloodAuthor/>

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FALLING FOR THE PRINCESS

by Patricia D. Eddy

Romantic Suspense

Instalove, Bodyguard, Royalty

Gabriel

The job should be easy. Protect Bhutan's princess for three days. It would have been too. If she weren't the most alluring woman I've ever met. We're crossing lines with every touch, but when all hell breaks loose, I have to save her. Or die trying.

Nima

In Boston for a charity event, I do not expect danger. Or the hot bodyguard assigned to protect me. My father—the king—does not want me spending time with him. But one touch, and I want more.

Will we get our happy ever after? Or will the men after me destroy...everything?

Author's Note

When writing in the "real world," sometimes you take liberties. This is a royalty story, but to be the romance it is, I

had to play a little fast and loose with some of the political realities of the world today. Princess Nima is from Bhutan. This is a real country with a real monarchy. But I've changed names and a few details about the political process in Bhutan.

I do all of this with the utmost respect for the Bhutanese people and their royal family. Check out [my website](#) where I provide references for you to learn more about Bhutan. Thank you for reading.

CHAPTER 1

Gabriel

“Here we go,” Ford says over the muffled hum of the announcements at Logan airport. I straighten and sweep my gaze around the terminal.

Half a dozen police officers stand at attention, polished shoes and crisp blue pants glaringly out of place against the tired carpet.

Passengers strain to see around them—wondering who the hell is on the incoming flight that warrants this reception.

Today’s my day off—or was—but Clive ate some bad shrimp, so I’m in my best suit, waiting to escort honest-to-God royalty to their hotel.

Two men in knee-length robes with orange scarves pinned to their shoulders emerge, look around, and stand sentry on either side of the gate.

King Minjar Sonam walks with purpose. His bright yellow scarf is wider than his guards’, a testimony to his position as Bhutan’s ruler.

Silver threads his dark hair, but not a single line mars his skin. From what Dax said, he’s only sixty-one and has ruled for twenty-five years.

Impressive.

But the moment his daughter emerges from the jetway, I forget all about him.

Stunning. That’s the only word to describe Princess Nima. She’s a few inches shorter than her father, with dark brown eyes and a flawless complexion.

The corner of my mouth twitches at the sight of her bright pink heels peeking out from under a colorful, embroidered skirt.

Dax adjusts his grip on his white cane. He may be blind, but he’s former Special Forces and still one scary dude.

“You ready?” Ford asks. Offering his elbow, he waits for Dax to take it so he can guide the man over to the king and Princess Nima.

“*Ngada Rimboche*,” he says with a half bow, then covers his mouth in the Bhutanese tradition. “I’m Ford Lawton, and this is Dax Holloway. We own Second Sight.”

The king stares at Dax, a furrow deepening between his brows. “You are blind.”

“Yup, which is why Ford and Gabriel Vasquez,” Dax gestures to me, “will be primary on your detail. Should they need backup, Ronan Murphy and Ella Phillips are on call.”

“The Secret Service assures me you are the best at what you do. Are they correct?”

Dax adjusts his tinted glasses. “Your majesty, *they* asked us to assist. If we’re good enough for them, I assume we’ll be good enough for you.”

Princess Nima touches her father’s arm. “Papa, the ambassador insisted these men were the best.”

One of the guards clears his throat and says something to the king in his native language. Turning back to us, he sighs. “The other passengers are restless. We should go. Lead the way.”

Nima

The handsome bodyguard—Gabriel—walks a few feet behind me. American men are so tall. If I stood at his side, the top of my head would only reach his lips.

His very firm lips.

Stop, Nima. You are being inappropriate.

For five days, I have been the dutiful daughter. Staying inside the embassy in New York while Papa spent his days at

the World Environmental Summit, speaking about Bhutan's carbon-negative status, leaving me to my boredom.

But here in Boston, *I* am the one with business. The first annual BRCA Awareness Weekend spans three days, and I have been asked to speak at the ten-thousand-dollar-a-plate gala dinner.

I wanted to refuse, but Papa insisted this was Mama's doing.

"She is sending you a message. Tell her story—and yours—so that other daughters will not lose their mothers so young."

A biting wind blows through the automatic doors. Exhaust stings the back of my throat, and I taste cigarette smoke from a group of men huddled around a garbage can.

Two large SUVs idle at the curb, and I shiver.

"Comms on," the blind man—Dax—says sharply. "Vasquez, go with the princess. Ford will ride with the king."

Gabriel holds the back door open and offers me his hand to help me up onto the seat. He smells like sandalwood—one of my favorites—and his fingers are warm. Strong.

"All set, Princess?" Gabriel asks as he buckles his seatbelt across from me.

"In private, please call me Nima." A flush crawls up my cheeks. I don't know why it is so important he use my name, but it is. Very.

Gabriel nods at the guards in the front seat. "We're not in private, Princess. But thank you."

CHAPTER 2

Gabriel

We move in lurching stops and starts. Five feet. Ten if we're lucky. Lights flicker on both sides of the highway,

held aloft by orange construction cones. Four lanes funnel into three. Then two.

After twenty minutes, we've gone less than three miles.

"Is it always like this?" Princess Nima asks. Her delicate fingers trail over the glass as she stares out the window.

"The wind isn't helping. But yes. Three quarters of a million people and the city still shuts down lanes like it's their favorite pastime."

She laughs, the sound so light and happy, I smile. Until the guard in the front seat glares at me.

Got it, dude. No talking to the princess.

We take the next exit, but the surface streets are as congested, if not more.

"Is there a problem, Gabriel?" Nima touches my arm. "You seem concerned."

"No." I cover her hand with mine. "Everything's fine, Princess."

The guard narrows his eyes at me again.

No touching the princess either. Noted.

For the next ten minutes, silence falls over the car, broken only by the slow *thump* of the tires on the road. The princess fidgets with her scarf, occasionally glancing at me like she wants to chat.

Is Ford as uncomfortable riding with the king? Doubtful, since he's not sitting two feet away from a stunningly beautiful woman he's not allowed to talk to.

Her perfume tickles my nose. I can't pick out the exact scent. It mixes with the leather seats, a hint of exhaust, and the royal guards' cologne.

Suddenly a horn blares from a side street. Sitting up straighter, I check around us. Clear in front. And to the left. No familiar cars behind us.

The princess smiles as I turn my focus to the window next to her. We're stopped, waiting for the light to change. A faint ray of sunshine glints off the windshield in an alley.

The driver floors it. Smoke wafts from the tires. He's making a beeline right for us!

"Fuck! Move, move, move!" I shout, but I already know there's nowhere we can go. Not in this traffic.

I release Nima's seatbelt with one hand and grab her arm with the other. Hauling her into my lap, I press her head to my neck as I turn away from the oncoming SUV.

It hits with a screech of metal, spinning us into the next lane. Nima screams. One of the guards up front curses. The other...

The coppery tang of blood replaces the scent of her perfume.

We're exposed here. Vulnerable.

Shifting her, I release my belt and shove at the door. "Come on!"

She doesn't move, shock stealing the color from her cheeks.

Three men wearing black hoodies, their faces mostly obscured, spill from the SUV. I throw Nima over my shoulder.

"Ford! Get the king the fuck out of here."

"Status report!" Dax shouts over comms.

Ford fills him in as I weave between cars, dodging more than one.

Brakes squeal. Someone lays on their horn.

After a loud crack, pain sears my bicep. Fuck. They're shooting at us. Digging deep, I pray for a miracle. Ahead of us, there's nothing but a wide open park. Another shot ricochets off the concrete.

"Taking fire. Get me some fucking backup!" My left arm throbs. Warmth trickles down to my elbow.

A black *T* sign looms a hundred feet away. This is a bad idea, but it's the only one I've got.

I carry Nima down two flights of stairs, then swing her legs over the turnstile and set her on her feet. If there are any MBTA cops around, we're fucked. But no one shouts, so I vault over after her.

She stares at me until I grab her hand. "We need to move!"

I don't give her a choice. Half dragging her after me, I head down to the platform.

The air stills more with every step. Burnt rail, body odor, piss, a hint of weed.

"What the hell are you doing?" Ford asks. "You're sitting ducks on the T!"

"If you had a better idea, should have told me two minutes ago," I mutter. "On the train, I'll be able to see them coming."

I hope to all that's holy, I didn't sign her death warrant coming down here. Nima's bright dress shines like a beacon. There's no way they won't see us.

Untucking my shirt to cover my holster, I shrug out of my suit jacket, thankful she doesn't bolt when I drop her hand.

"Put this on. Keep your head down and stick close."

"You're bleeding," she says softly. Brakes squeal as the Green Line rolls into the station.

"Give me your scarf?"

"My *rachu*?"

I scan the crowd all the way to the stairs. Fuck. Black hoodie and sunglasses at our four o'clock. "Yes. Hurry."

The train's doors whisper open, and I pull her inside. She fiddles with something under my jacket, and as we reach the front of the car, pulls the bright red scarf away from her body.

"Here."

“Wrap it around my arm. Tight. I need to watch the doors.” A family—mom, dad, two kids—moves away, letting me put my back to the wall. It feels like a fucking year before the doors close.

No assholes yet. From this vantage point, I’ll see anyone coming from the next car.

Nima ties the *rachu* around my upper arm, and I stifle my grunt. It’s a flesh wound. Anything else, and I’d have bled out already. But it still hurts like hell.

“Sit down.” I offer her the seat next to the wall. “Stay behind me. If anything happens, get down, cover your head, and make yourself as small as possible. Got it?”

She nods, pulling my jacket around her body. “Is my father safe?”

“I don’t know, Nima. But I’ll find out.”

CHAPTER 3

Nima

He used my name. Why is that the only thought running through my mind? Someone *shot at us*.

I close my eyes, but all I see is the SUV racing toward me. I was certain I was going to die. Until Gabriel pulled me into his arms.

Every few minutes, someone announces the next stop. Boston is so much bigger than Thimphu, and while I studied the area around our hotel, I know nothing of the rest of the city.

Even the subway is all new to me. It smells strange. Like sweat and something bitter, burnt, and stale.

Gabriel watches the sliding door at the other end of the train while talking quietly to his bosses. I can’t see his face, but he’s tense.

“Next stop: Chinatown Station.”

I peer up at him. “Are we not going to the hotel?”

“No.” He tugs at his white dress shirt and moves his hand to his hip.

A holster. With a gun.

Of course he’s armed. He’s a bodyguard. I try to stand, but he shoots me a look that stops me. He’s terrified something will happen to me—to us.

“Ford? Where’s our backup?”

After a beat, he adds, “Dammit. I know. But it won’t be long til they find us. We’re in the front car. I want confirmation Trevor, Ronan, and Tank are here *before* we get off.”

He taps his ear once, then moves to my side. “Your father is at the Ritz with Ford and the royal guards. But we’re going somewhere else.”

“Why?”

He squeezes my shoulder gently. “After the SUV hit, all three guys came after *us*. I don’t know why, but you’re the target. Not your father.”

My fingers are suddenly cold as ice. Gabriel’s suit jacket does nothing to warm me. I cannot seem to move at all.

“Nima? Look at me.”

His voice comes from somewhere far away. I want to listen, but my body refuses to respond.

“Nima!”

He’s in front of me, cupping my neck and staring into my eyes. “I need you to say something, sweetheart. Tell me you’re okay.”

I shake my head. “No,” I whisper. “Not...me.”

With a quick glance at the sliding door, Gabriel stands, pulls me to my feet, and wraps his arm around my shoulders. The end of my red *rachu* drapes over the sleeve of his jacket.

“We’re getting off at this stop. Three of my team are waiting. We’ll keep you safe, Nima. I promise.”

Gabriel

Trevor—a former CIA assassin—is in my ear. “Go left out the door. Don’t stop until you’re past us.”

“Roger that.” Guiding Nima to the doors, I brace myself so we don’t fall as the train jerks to a stop.

Copley Station is packed, but I zero in on Trevor in seconds. He’s a few inches taller than I am with the kind of icy gaze you only get after years of seeing the worst of humanity.

Tank and Ronan fan out on either side of us. Tank’s been with Second Sight for a little over a year, and he’s spent most of that time protecting Evianna—Dax’s wife. He could be a model. Dark, umber skin, black hair cut short on top, shaved on the sides, and two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of solid muscle.

Ronan’s complete opposite.

The Irish bastard—until last November, he was the most disagreeable son of a bitch I’d ever met—is wiry and so pale, he’s almost translucent.

Nima trembles against me as Trevor motions us behind him.

“We’re clear,” Ronan says. “If they were on the train, they didn’t get off.”

Trevor’s gaze lands on my arm. “Way to blend in, Vasquez.”

“You’d rather I bleed all over the T? I improvised. Can we go? Nima needs...”

Shit. I have no fucking clue what she needs.

Trev checks his phone. “We’re going to the Fairmont. It’s only a little over a block. You’re okay to walk?”

I glance at Nima. She's barely holding on.

"We'll make it. Let's go."

CHAPTER 4

Nima

Trapped between Gabriel and Trevor, I can't see much of anything as we hurry toward the Fairmont Hotel.

Red awnings welcome us. My heels click on the marble floors, and crystal chandeliers glitter overhead.

My entire body aches, but I feel safe in a way I didn't know I could after everything that's happened in the past two hours.

The corner room on the sixth floor is quiet. Simple compared to the lobby.

"Sit," Trevor points to the sofa against the wall. "Ronan, the first aid kit is in my bag. Patch up Vasquez's arm while I call Dax."

He disappears into the bedroom and shuts the door. Tank checks the pistol hidden under his leather jacket. "I'm gonna check the perimeter."

"The perimeter?" I sink onto the cushion, wishing I could burrow deeper into the jacket.

Gabriel grimaces as he shifts next to me. "He's going to check the streets around the hotel for anything suspicious."

"Like what?" My voice rises half an octave, and I scramble to my feet, teetering on my pink heels. Gabriel pushes up and wraps his arm around my waist.

"He won't find anything, Nima." His voice rumbles through me in the most comforting way. "We were careful. No one will find you here."

Ronan pulls on a surgical glove. “Enough talkin’, mate. Get the scarf off so I can see how bad that arm is.”

My fingers shake, but I loosen the material and pull it away for him. There’s more blood than I expect. The harsh scent turns my stomach. I scrub my skin with a corner of my *rachu* while Ronan swipes an antiseptic pad over the deep gash in Gabriel’s arm.

“Fuck. That stings.”

Ronan drops the bloody pad onto the table and reaches for a roll of gauze. “Ya’ ruined the princess’s fancy scarf.”

“I have others.” Twisting my hands in my lap, I stare down at the hem of my *kira*. Dirt mars the embroidery. “My luggage was to be delivered to the Ritz. Will I...be able to go there soon?”

“Not until we neutralize the threat,” Ronan says. “But Ella can bring your suitcases over.”

“I need to speak to my father. He must be worried.”

Ronan wraps a compression bandage around Gabriel’s arm. “It’s too dangerous.”

I want to scream. Or cry. But instead, I turn to Gabriel. “Surely a single phone call would be safe?”

“Trev’s in charge,” he says. “Until he’s done with Dax, we need to sit tight.”

Frustration stiffens my spine. “What about *my* needs?”

Before he can answer, the door opens. “Dax has been on with the Secret Service since the attack,” Trevor says. “Wren’s pulling traffic camera footage. We should have pictures of the assholes who hit the SUV by morning.”

“What good will that do?”

“We’ll be able to find out if they have ties to Bhutan or your father’s adversaries,” Gabriel says. “Until then...staying here is the best option.”

“You can talk to your father,” Trevor says. “But don’t let him know where you are. Vasquez, call Ford. He’ll put you on

with the king.”

Gabriel holds out his hand, a wince flattening his lips.

Laying my fingers over his, I settle at the touch. Once we’re alone, he unlocks his phone. “I’ll be in the main room when you’re done.”

“You trust me?” I don’t let go of him. I can’t. He’s the only thing about this day that makes sense.

“I don’t think you have a death wish, Princess. And you don’t strike me as someone who puts other people in danger.” He shrugs. “Leave the door open a crack, but I promise. We won’t listen in.”

CHAPTER 5

Nima

To say my father is unhappy is the understatement of the century.

It took ten minutes to convince him I was not hurt. Another ten before he understood I was not joining him at the Ritz.

When I refused to tell him where I was, he threatened to call the police and have the men with me arrested. Until Ford stepped in.

I kick off my heels and slip out the door to the main room. Gabriel is shirtless, facing the window. Half of his back is covered in burn scars.

“Tank won’t mind?” he asks as he pulls a black t-shirt from a duffel bag.

“You’ve seen what he wears when he’s not on assignment,” Ronan says. “That shirt’s been in his go bag since day one. He won’t miss it.”

I should let Gabriel know I’m behind him. But I’m mesmerized by the way his muscles flex.

Ronan notices me first. “Need something, Princess?”

Gabriel turns, the shirt still in hand, and my cheeks catch fire.

“N-no. My father is...worried. But that is nothing new.” I sweep my gaze around the room and frown. “Where is...?”

“Trevor?” Gabriel tugs the shirt on. “He’s downstairs waiting for Ella. Your luggage isn’t...light.”

Ronan touches his ear. “She’s double parked and there’s no one at the bell desk. I’m headin’ down to help.”

When the door clicks shut, Gabriel flips the latch. “Are you okay, Princess?”

He’s so formal, my heart hurts. It should not matter. But it does.

“I asked you to call me Nima.”

His dark brown eyes lock onto me, something dangerous in his gaze. “I don’t want to run afoul of the king. He’s pissed we stole you away.”

“He understands why you did it.” I fiddle with the sleeve of my blouse. A drop of Gabriel’s blood stains the fabric. “And he is ‘pissed’ at *me*.”

“Why?” He reaches his hand out like he wants to touch me, but then drops it.

With a shrug, I perch on the arm of the sofa. “Like all kings, he is set in his ways. His careful plans were ruined today.”

Six knocks, and Gabriel rushes to the door. Trevor and Ronan muscle my trunk into the room, grunting the whole way. “Bhutan knows what wheels are, right?” Trevor asks.

“There was supposed to be a trolley.”

Trevor arches his brows. “I think your father’s staff wanted to make us suffer.”

My laugh surprises me. I wasn’t sure I could laugh after today.

The three men carry the trunk into the bedroom. “Get some rest, Nima,” Gabriel says. “We’ll be here if you need anything.”

Alone, I change into a pair of loose pants and a long-sleeved t-shirt, then sit on the bed. It’s only a little after seven. What am I supposed to do now?

Gabriel

I raise my hand to knock, but Nima opens the door before I can. Relaxed, barefoot, and wearing a deep blue tee, she takes my breath away.

“We’re...uh...ordering room service. Are you hungry?”

“I’m ravenous. Can I see the menu?” She smiles, and I wish we had a few more minutes alone to talk. To get to know one another like two *normal* people.

Stop. She’s royalty, and you’re a damn bodyguard. There is nothing normal about this.

“Gabriel?”

It takes me a full minute to realize I’m still holding the menu. “Sorry. Here.”

Our fingers brush, sending a jolt of electricity up my arm. I need to put some space between us before I say—or do—something I can’t take back.

“*Sorry? Here?*” Trev mouths.

Like either of them can give me shit for my awkward fumbling. Ronan’s first big case for Second Sight, he fell in love with the woman he was supposed to apprehend. And Trev pined over Dani for fifteen years before he finally admitted his feelings for her.

“Gabriel? I’ll have the eggplant parmesan.”

“Got it. Go relax. I’ll bring it to you when—”

“Can...I,” her gaze darts to Trev and Ronan, then back to me, “stay out here? I don’t want to be alone.”

“Uh...sure.”

Trev snorts. He knows I’m attracted to her. Any man would be. “Ronan, let’s make the rounds before the food shows up.” The corner of his mouth quirks up in a half smile as they head for the door.

I’m gonna owe him one later.

When we’re alone, Nima skims her fingers over the bandage on my arm. “Does it hurt?”

“I’ve had worse.”

Awkward silence stretches between us, but her eyes hold endless questions.

“Ask. Whatever it is, you won’t offend me.”

Her cheeks flush crimson. “Earlier...the burns...”

Fuck.

I stare up at the intricate design on the ceiling. “Apartment fire. Six years ago. I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have seen them.”

“We all have scars...”

“Not like mine.” I grab a bottle of water and drain half of it. “You’re beautiful, Nima.”

She tugs at her t-shirt, her hand over her heart like she’s rubbing a bone-deep ache. “And you think you’re not... handsome?”

I jerk up as she reaches for my arm. “What are we doing here? I’m your bodyguard. My job is to protect you. Not...”

“Not what?” She stands and peers up at me. “I haven’t asked you to bed me. Just talk to me.” She presses her palms to my chest. “I’m scared. I don’t know why anyone would want to harm me. I’m next in line to rule, but my father is only sixty-one. Coming after me serves no purpose.”

I cover her hands. For as long as I can, I’ll keep her close enough to touch. To protect. With my life—if that’s what it

takes.

“You’re not alone, Nima. Until we know what’s going on, you’ll never be alone.”

CHAPTER 6

Gabriel

This night has been one surprise after another. Nima ate with the rest of us, and by the time we finish the meal, I barely recognize her.

Gone is the shy, timid princess. In her place is a woman who *lives*. Who loves spicy food. Tai Chi. K-dramas.

I don’t want to say goodnight. Not with her snuggled against me like she belongs there. But she nodded off a few minutes ago, and Wren is waiting for us to call.

By inches, I ease her into my arms. She doesn’t stir when I carry her into the bedroom, lay her down, and cover her with a blanket.

“Good night, Princess,” I whisper against her forehead. It’s almost a kiss. More than I should give, but so much less than I want.

Trevor and Ronan are whispering to one another when I close the door behind me.

“Out with it.” The couch feels cold—and uncomfortable as fuck—without her next to me.

“You were only on the T for twenty minutes. What the fuck happened?” Trev asks.

“Give me a break. Ronan took Zephyr *home* with him after ten. And he thought she was an assassin at the time.”

The Irishman’s cheeks turn bright red, and he stalks over to the kettle to make a fresh cup of tea. But Trevor is still staring at me, waiting for some sort of explanation.

“Nothing happened. Nima kept her shit together. There’s something about her. I can’t explain it.”

“Leave him be,” Ronan mutters as the kettle beeps. “Dax is gonna kick his arse tomorrow. He doesn’t need it from us too. And Wren’s waitin’.”

We gather around Trev’s tablet to start the video call. Wren’s heart-shaped face appears on screen as she yawns. “Sorry. Haven’t slept much lately.”

“Zephyr’s available,” Ronan says. “If ya’ need to rest—”

“Puh-leeze.” She rolls her jade green eyes. Despite the sleepless nights, Wren’s still the best damn hacker in the world. Her face shrinks down to the right corner of the screen and three grainy photos pop up.

“Meet Genno Tshering, Jikai Tshering, and Kokan Dorji. Genno and Jikai are cousins. They arrived in Boston on a commercial flight from Bhutan by way of Berlin two days ago.”

“So, this is political.” I glare at Kokan’s photo. He’s the one who shot me.

“Probably. But why wouldn’t they have gone after the king? Nima has no political power of her own until her father decides to retire.” The men’s photos disappear, and Wren plays traffic camera footage of the attack.

Genno spared the other SUV a brief glance, but all three men were very clearly after Nima.

“I’m monitoring the security cameras outside the Fairmont,” Wren says. “If any of these spitsnacks show up around the hotel, I’ll send an alert to your phones.”

“What about tomorrow? Nima’s supposed to meet with some Jimmy Fund execs in the morning, then visit patients at Dana-Farber from noon to three.”

“Dax is coordinating with the Secret Service. They’ll be with you the whole time. Sending their names and dossiers to your tablets now.” Our devices beep in tandem. “Anything else?”

“We’re good, Wren,” Trev says. “Thanks.”

Ronan and Trevor lay sleeping bags on the floor and stretch out while I take first watch. Within minutes, they’re snoring, but I busy myself learning all about the agents who’ll be guarding Nima tomorrow.

CHAPTER 7

Nima

I tossed and turned most of the night. Several times, I peered out the crack in the door to see Gabriel staring out the window or stretched out on a sleeping bag by the door.

The other two men are gone when I smell coffee at sunrise, and I wrap myself in one of the Fairmont’s long, white robes.

“Gabriel?”

He smiles up at me, but he wears the strain of the long night on his face. “Good morning. Did you sleep? I can order breakfast if you’re hungry.”

“Do they have pancakes?” Despite the hours we spent together last night, there’s nothing but distance between us now. “Where are the others?”

Gabriel pauses, the phone halfway to his ear. “They went home around five.”

“It’s safe? With just you and me here?”

He crosses the room and runs his hands up and down my arms. “Yes. Wren—she’s our hacker—sent the photos of your attackers to the Secret Service. If those assholes get within a hundred feet of you today, they’ll be in a world of hurt.”

“And you? Where will you be?”

“At your side. Every minute.”

Gabriel

Nima's back in full ceremonial dress a little over an hour later. "Can I talk to my father before we leave?"

She's nervous, her fingers toying with the endless knot pendant hanging between her breasts. Today's scarf is a deep crimson, and her pink skirt is embroidered with hundreds of yellow flowers.

I shake my head. "Ford called a few minutes ago. The king's having lunch with some bigwig at ElectriWheels, but he'll stop by the Jimmy Fund first so you can see him."

Relief lends even more beauty to her features, and she throws her arms around me. The suddenness of her embrace leaves me off balance. I should step away, but she feels so damn good.

"Thank you, Gabriel. For everything."

She pulls back so our lips are only inches apart.

"We shouldn't..." I whisper.

Seconds pass, frozen in time, before she leans closer. The kiss is gentle, velvet heat with the subtle taste of mint. A low moan rumbles in my chest.

Before we go too far—do something we can't take back—my phone vibrates in my jacket pocket, breaking the magical moment.

"I'm sorry," I manage. "We can't do that again." My dick strains against my boxer briefs. Thank fuck these dress pants aren't tight or she'd see how much I want her.

She won't look at me as she moves to the mirror and touches up her lipstick. "I'm the one who kissed you. And I don't regret it."

Sorrow and longing tinge her tone. Dammit.

Tank: I'm downstairs. Get a move on.

"We should go." I rest my hand on the butt of my gun.

One thing I know—Nima won't be in danger as long as she's with me.

CHAPTER 8

Nima

I can still taste him. His kiss was everything I'd imagined it would be.

His desire pressed to my hip. He wants me as much as I want him.

I wish we could have more than this. But while his scars are beautiful, tragic, and very much a part of him, mine...are not so easily explained. Or accepted.

With his hand at the small of my back, he escorts me to the waiting car. The guests in the lobby stare at me—my dress is so much brighter than anything the locals wear—and I wish I'd picked more "American" clothing for today. But Bhutan's laws...*frown* on such a thing.

Tank grins at us in the rear view mirror. "Morning, Princess. Sleep well?"

"Yes. Thank you." The big man seems to always wear a smile, and this morning is no different.

"Your father's waiting at the Jimmy Fund offices. You'll have fifteen minutes with him before he leaves for his meeting. Just remember not to tell him—"

"Where I'm staying. I know. You don't have to remind me."

I regret the edge to my tone and sigh. "My apologies. You are simply doing your job. I should not have snapped at you."

"Ain't nothin' to feel sorry about, Princess. We're good."

The ride passes in silence, but at every light, Gabriel scans all around us, then locks his eyes with mine. The power held

in them is like a punch, and my body comes alive with the memory of that one, perfect kiss.

At the Jimmy Fund, four Secret Service agents escort us to the sixth floor. “All the offices along this hall are empty. And we’ve locked down the elevator. Take as much time as you need.”

Gabriel opens the door for me. “I’ll be right outside, *Princess*.”

I don’t know why I thought he’d come in with me. Touching his arm, I hold his gaze for so long, my father clears his throat.

“I promise,” Gabriel whispers. “Right here.”

“Papa!” I rush to throw my arms around him once the door closes. He pats my back stiffly, then steps away.

“You are too familiar with that man.”

“Why? Because I treat him like a friend and not an employee? Gabriel saved my life. He is kind, and I feel safe with him.”

My father’s eyes darken, and he starts to pace. “I want that company gone. You will return to the Ritz with me after your trip to the hospital.”

“Why? I am not a child, Papa. I can stay alone for the next two nights. With Gabriel’s protection.”

“You are safer with me!” His outburst is so unexpected, I step back, but he follows me, dark eyes blazing, and grabs my arm.

Two short raps on the door, and Gabriel pokes his head in. “Are you all right, *Princess*?” His gaze zeroes in on my arm—and my father’s vise grip. “Mr. Tarizen’s secretary called. He’s ready for you.”

“I should not keep him waiting. I will see you tomorrow at the gala, Papa.” Pulling free, I take Gabriel’s arm and we step into the hall.

“What was that all about? Your father sounded angry.”

“He was.” I don’t say another word until we’re alone in the elevator. “He ordered me back to the Ritz. Without you. Or anyone at Second Sight.”

“What?” He links our fingers as the car slows. “It’s not safe, Nima.”

“He believes it is.” I sigh and lean against Gabriel until the doors open.

“And what do *you* believe?” he asks.

“I believe you can protect me until we return to Bhutan. So I will stay with you.”

The relief in his eyes is worth all my father’s anger. Even if he wanted to know where we were staying, he could not find out.

“Will your father be a problem?” he asks outside of Tarizen’s office.

Shaking my head, I give his hand a squeeze. “The press will be covering my visit to Dana-Farber. Papa will not make a scene. Not with the whole world watching.”

CHAPTER 9

Gabriel

Watching Nima with the patients at Dana-Farber, I’m amazed by her compassion. By how genuine she is with every person she meets.

Men. Women. Kids. Weeks ago, she had boxes of toys, soft blankets, and handmade socks sent from Bhutan to Boston, and leaves everyone a piece of her country and her heart.

By six, she's exhausted. The press demanded too much. Too many photographs. Too many questions.

She moves carefully. Measured steps. Holding tight to my arm.

"I'm starting to worry," I say when we're in the elevator to the parking garage.

"It was a long day. We're going back to the hotel?"

I nod and wrap an arm around her waist. "You haven't eaten since breakfast."

Her warmth seeps into my side. "Room service again tonight?"

"Unless you want to change into something...less recognizable and go out."

Her eyes light up. "Really? We could have dinner like two normal people?"

"You are *far* from normal, Princess." Winking, I wait for the agents to check the garage before we leave the elevator. "But yes. We can have dinner like two normal people."

Nima practically glows sitting across the table. Her peach sweater dips to a *v* between her breasts, and she's relaxed in a way I haven't seen before. While she's every bit as beautiful, she almost a different person. One without a whole country's weight on her shoulders.

"Tell me about your job." Her fingers curl around the stem of her glass. "Is it always as dangerous as yesterday?"

"No. Not usually. Second Sight is a full-service security firm. We take on missing persons cases, hunt down deadbeat dads—and the occasional mom—find missing objects, track down fugitives..."

"Fugitives?" Her eyes widen.

“Well, the last one turned out to be innocent,” I say with a smile. “She and Ronan have been together for almost a year now.”

“Really? Was *he* the one who was sent after her?”

“Yep. The bastard didn’t last five minutes once he saw Zephyr. Brought her back to his place and hid her from the rest of us for days. Dax was livid when he found out.”

Like earlier. I didn’t tell Nima he called while she was changing, cursing up a blue streak because the king fired us. Thank fuck Dax is one of the smartest men I’ve ever met.

“You’re staying on the princess until she and her father are on the plane back to Bhutan. Hell, if I didn’t think he’d have you arrested the second you landed, I’d send you with them.”

“Gabriel? Do you want to try this?” Nima offers me her cranberry martini. “I know you don’t drink while working, but...”

“One sip won’t hurt.” With a grin, I lean closer and taste the bright pink cocktail. “Do you like it?”

“It’s wonderful. Everything...is perfect.”

I feel the same, but I can’t admit it. We crossed the line with that kiss. One more step, and there’s no going back.

By the time we return to the Fairmont, I don’t know how I can ever let Nima go.

In a little over twenty-four hours, she’s become so much more than a job.

“Tomorrow, can we go to the waterfront?” she asks when we curl up on the couch. “The gala isn’t until six.”

“We can go anywhere you want, sweetheart.”

She gasps at the term of endearment.

“Shit, Nima. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

Her lips crush to mine. With one hand cupping the back of my neck, she pulls me down on top of her.

“We can’t.”

She straddles me. “I heard you talking earlier, Gabriel. My father fired your firm. You are not my bodyguard. We can do whatever we want.”

I palm her ass, tugging her closer. Her fingers tug up my shirt. But when she sees the scars extending from my shoulder to my belt, she pauses.

Fuck. This was a mistake.

I try to roll away, but she stops me. “Do you think these make me want you any less?”

“They should. I can get it up, but my leg...it’s worse.”

“You are not the only one with scars. Do you know why I came to Boston?”

“No.”

“Six years ago, my mother found a lump in her breast. She was accompanying my father on a diplomatic tour and did not go to the doctor for more than two months. By the time they diagnosed her with cancer, it had spread to her bones and her brain.”

“God, Nima. I’m sorry—”

“Some breast cancers are hereditary,” she says. “The BRCA genes...I have the mutation that makes it much more likely...” Her cheeks tinge a dusky crimson. “My father arranged for me to come to Dana-Farber a few months after Mama died. There were so many tests. For days. They found a tumor—smaller than a pencil eraser—in one of my ducts. Not long after, I had a double mastectomy.”

Standing, she pulls off her sweater, raises her arm, and shows me a small scar. “That’s only one of them. There are many more. They did reconstruction, but I don’t have...

sensation. And since the mutation comes with an increased risk of ovarian cancer...”

I’m in front of her in a heartbeat. “Nima, you’re beautiful. Perfect.”

She won’t look at me. “They took everything that made me feel...like a woman.”

“Sweetheart, they took what they needed so you would *live*.”

CHAPTER 10

Nima

Gabriel murmurs in his sleep. We fell into bed, exhausted, after talking until midnight. Then woke in the middle of the night to finish what we’d started hours before.

He worshipped me, kissing every one of my scars, telling me how beautiful I was, and how he’d never met anyone he felt so drawn to.

The first time I’d touched my breasts after they’d healed, I’d wept at how little I felt. I didn’t think I’d want to be intimate ever again.

I was wrong.

“You’re thinking hard enough I can hear it.” He reaches for me, and I go willingly.

“In a few months, if I came back to Boston, would you see me?”

Gabriel presses a kiss to my lips. “See you? Or wait for you?”

“I can’t ask—”

Another kiss, this one almost desperate. “You don’t have to.” His need presses to my hip. “Whatever this is between us is special. But I don’t know shit about being with a princess.

What we do at Second Sight..." He rolls onto his back and stares up at the ceiling. "We're the good guys, Nima, but we're not always on the right side of the law."

I pull the duvet to my chest. "I have something to tell you. But I need your word you will keep this secret."

"I promise." He's so solemn, like the words are sacred to him.

"My father will abdicate the throne next month and name my uncle as the new king. When he does, I will be a commoner. I'll be...free."

"But...you're next in line. Why wouldn't he give *you* the throne?" A hint of anger laces his tone, and the idea that he's outraged on my behalf warms my heart.

"I don't want it." I scoot back against the headboard, and Gabriel joins me, our legs tangling under the blankets. "I love my country. But my life is nothing but ceremony and politics and public appearances. I want to make a *difference*. I have a Master's Degree in Public Health from Oxford. My meeting with the Jimmy Fund executives was...a job interview."

"Did you get it?"

A flush races up my neck. "There will be a position waiting for me."

His kiss steals my breath. "I want to see where this goes, Nima. Yes. I'll wait for you."

Gabriel

The bowtie is tight as fuck, but after the perfect day we had, I'll endure anything for a few more hours with Nima.

The charity gala is too crowded. Too many exits. Trevor and Ronan circulate among the patrons, while I stick close to Nima's side. Second Sight vetted all the staff at the venue and there's been no sign of the three men who attacked us that first day.

Nima shines amid the tuxedos and ball gowns, her bright red *rachu* studded with sequins and her *kira* hand-embroidered with silver thread.

After the auction, one wall of the space opens to reveal a dance floor, and a full band starts to play.

Offering Nima my hand, I smile. “Will you dance with me, Princess?”

“I would love to.”

She’s so light on her feet, so practiced, I feel like a Neanderthal, despite taking lessons a few years ago.

Half an hour later, she collapses back at the head table. A server brings us glasses of champagne.

“Can you toast with me?” she asks.

“Not tonight. But when you come back to Boston, it’s the first thing we’ll do.” Feathering kisses along the shell of her ear, I add, “Maybe the second.”

“Do you promise?”

“I promise.”

“Nima!” The king’s harsh rebuke has her jerking away. “What do you think you are doing?”

She stands, facing off with her father. “Enjoying the evening with a man who sees me for more than my title.”

“You are the Dragon Princess of Bhutan. Not a commoner.” He leans closer and lowers his voice. “Not yet.”

The two exchange heated words in their native language for a full minute before the king glares at me. “You protected her yesterday. I am grateful. But she belongs to Bhutan. Not to you.”

He turns and stalks away. Nima’s hand shakes as she picks up the champagne flute and drains it. “He had no right,” she says, her voice taking on a shrill edge. “I belong to *no one*.”

“Come here.” I pull her close, not caring if anyone sees us. “Be honest with me, sweetheart. When you go home, will you

be safe with him?”

“Safe?” Her eyes widen. “My father is very traditional. But he would never hurt me. He knows about my plans to return to Boston. He will not interfere.”

I search her gaze for any deception. Any uncertainty. She believes what she’s saying, but I still worry.

Nima presses her hand to her stomach. “I should not drink champagne when I am upset. I need some air.”

Tapping my comms unit to activate the microphone, I take her arm. “Trev, do you have eyes on the king? He’s mad as hell. I’m taking Nima outside for a few minutes.”

“Negative. But we’ll find him. Everything okay?”

“He upset her.” With another tap, I turn off the mic.

A set of French doors lead out to a large patio. Hundreds of lights hang in a twinkling canopy. Nima goes to the railing, leaning her elbows on the decorative stone.

I rest my hand on her back. Her uneven breathing worries me. “What’s wrong?”

The lights flicker, then go out. Before I can grab my pistol, something slams into me from behind. I’m flying. Up and over the railing, then...nothing.

CHAPTER 11

Gabriel

“**H**oly shit! I found him!”

Trevor lands in a crouch next to me. “Can you move?”

With a groan, I touch the back of my head. “Fuck. What happened?”

He slides his arm behind my back to help me sit up. “The lights went off, and you disappeared. We’ve been searching

for you for fifteen minutes. Looks like someone pushed you off the goddamn roof. You're lucky there was a balcony two floors down."

"Nima..." I jerk to my feet. The world spins, and I pitch against Trevor. "Where...?"

"Come inside."

Shoving at him, I growl, "Tell me. Right fucking now."

He passes me his mobile. "Ford cloned the king's phone before the bastard fired us. This message came in a few minutes ago."

You would not listen, so we have taken the princess. She will be returned to you once you give the throne to Dechan Basnet.

The attached photo sends my rage boiling over. Nima sits in an airplane seat wearing a plain, gray dress. Unbound. No visible bruises. But her eyes...there's nothing there.

As I stare at the screen, the king's reply appears in real time.

I agreed to your demands so you would leave my daughter alone while we were in the United States. Why should I believe you now?

I turn to Trevor. "He knew. The king fucking knew."

An hour later, Ryker McCabe, Wren's husband and the biggest, meanest son of a bitch to ever walk this earth, looms on Second Sight's video screen.

"We have video," he says. "The princess, along with those two dipshits, Genno and Jikai Tshering, left the Compass Hotel at 9:05 p.m."

The assholes have her by the arms and rush her into a waiting SUV. But...she's not fighting them.

“Wren, can you zoom in?” I ask. “Something’s wrong with Nima.”

She stumbles twice, and when the video sharpens, I understand. Her eyes are dull, her face slack.

“They drugged her,” Ryker grits out.

“Fuck. It had to be the champagne. She had a whole glass of it after we danced, then started feeling sick. I thought it was the stress of fighting with her father. I should have known!”

“Blaming yourself won’t get her back,” Dax snaps. “We vetted everyone working tonight *and* tapped into the security feeds. Those Bhutanese assholes shouldn’t have been able to get within fifty feet of her.”

“But they did!” I whirl on Dax. “They got her on a goddamn plane and we have no idea where they’re taking her!”

“Back to Bhutan.” Ford slams the conference room door. His lip is bleeding and his fancy suit has a tear at the shoulder. “A private plane took off from Logan bound for Paro by way of Istanbul. The gate agent I talked to said Nima’s ‘brothers’ were escorting her home because she’d ‘had a breakdown.’”

“Where the fuck is the king?” Dax asks. “You were supposed to bring him back here.”

“Boarding a flight to Athens. He’ll land a couple of hours after Nima.” The two men face off, and though Dax can’t see, he stares Ford in the eyes until the other man loses his shit. “Six of his guards formed a goddamn brick wall around him. I tried. But I’m too old for this shit.”

“Wren? Is there any way we can get to Paro before Nima?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “No. Not even if Ry sent the team from Seattle.”

I sink into a chair and drop my head into my hands. “Then we’ve lost her.”

CHAPTER 12

Nima

The dusty wool blankets scratch my arms, but I pull them tighter. Huddled in the dark, the only light seeping from tiny cracks in the roof of this empty shed, I shiver.

My last memories before this place are of dancing with Gabriel. After that...only flashes.

Angry voices. Someone asking if I was okay. Being desperate for help, but unable to speak.

“She had a breakdown.”

But I didn't. Two men loyal to my father's rival, Dechan, drugged me. Stole me from Boston and returned me to Bhutan.

I've spent four days trapped in this shed in the middle of the countryside. No shoes. My wrists bound in front of me with a plastic tie.

At dawn each day, they drag me from the darkness to a run-down home a few meters away. They let me use the bathroom, give me a small plate of food, and take a picture—proof of life for my father—before locking me away again.

When the drugs wore off, I screamed and pounded on the door for hours. But that left my hands so sore, I can barely lift the Mason jar of water they leave for me.

The second day, I kneed one of the men in the balls and tried to run. But it was so bright, I could barely see. My foot landed on a rock, my ankle rolled, and I fell. Now I can hardly put weight on my left leg.

They say I'll be released once Dechan takes the throne. But will I survive that long? And what is to stop them from simply walking away and leaving me to die?

Tears warm my cheeks as I mourn the life I was only weeks from having. The one where Nima Sonam was free.

Gabriel

I jerk up so fast, my head misses Trevor's by inches.

"Gear up," he says. "We leave in ten."

It's been five days since Nima disappeared. Five days of planning, traveling, sneaking across borders from Myanmar to Bangladesh to Bhutan.

King Minjar refused our calls—not even the Secret Service could get through to him—and rescheduled his abdication ceremony for tonight—only two hours from now.

Wren pulled GPS coordinates off the photos Nima's kidnappers send to the king each morning, and we're three miles from where she's being held.

Being this close to her and unable to act was pure torture, but the small farmhouse is on a hill surrounded by wheat fields, so we had to wait until dusk to leave our hiding spot.

"Comm check," Trev whispers.

"Loud and clear," Ronan and I say in tandem.

The hike takes over an hour. Rough terrain and almost a thousand feet of elevation gain don't make for an easy go of it.

Once we're pressed to the side wall of the house, Trev sends Ronan to the back door. M4 in hand, I wait for his signal.

"Go!" With a hard kick, the former CIA sniper busts the door and we breach.

Genno shouts a warning. A shot splinters the wood to my right. Trev fires. Jikai's head snaps back. What's left of it.

“Drop it!” I jam the barrel of the M4 under Genno’s chin, and his pistol clatters to the floor. “Where’s Nima?”

“Outside! Outside!” The man stares between me and his dead brother, hands so high in the air he’s standing on his tiptoes. “Back door!”

“Go,” Trev says. “We’ve got this asshole.”

I find a small building a hundred feet away with a padlock securing a brand new, heavy wooden door. Even Ryker couldn’t kick that in, so I pull out my lock picks.

The seconds pass in slow agony until the tumblers align.

“Nima?” It’s so dark, I can’t see shit. My flashlight beam sweeps over the space until I find her huddled in a corner, trying to make herself as small as possible under a dirty blanket.

I’m at her side in two steps. “Nima? It’s Gabriel. Look at me, sweetheart.” I can’t touch her. What if they’ve hurt her? Or worse?

She’s shaking, teeth chattering, and tears spill down her cheeks. It can’t be more than forty degrees outside, and they left her in here with only a couple of blankets to keep her warm?

“Gabriel?” Her voice is so weak, my heart threatens to shatter.

The blanket falls away when she reaches for me. Shit. They bound her wrists, and the short sleeves of the thin dress reveal deep fingertip bruises all along her arms.

I cut the plastic tie, and then she’s in my arms. “I’ve got you. Everything’s going to be okay.”

“M-my f-father...the cere-ceremony. Is it...over?”

“No, sweetheart. We’ll get there in time. Can you walk?”

The dull *thump, thump, thump* of the helicopter blades grows louder. Raelynn—out of Seattle—waited fifteen miles away for Trev’s signal.

“N-not...f-far.” She hasn’t let go of me, and I don’t want her to. Sliding one arm under her knees, I stagger to my feet as Ronan’s shadow falls over the doorway.

Nima’s back in my arms. Whatever happens now, we can deal with together.

CHAPTER 13

Gabriel

“**L**et go, sweetheart so I can strap you in.”

Trev slides a pair of headphones with a built-in mic over her head, and Raelynn glances back at us. “If we don’t get a move on, we ain’t makin’ it to Thimphu in time.”

Nima flinches and releases the death grip she has on my neck. Trevor tosses me a blanket, and I tuck it around her and belt her in.

Once we’re in the air, I check her vitals. Her pulse is thready, and she’s still shivering. But it’s her pale skin and sunken eyes that worry me the most.

“What do you need, sweetheart? Food? Water?”

“There’s coffee,” Raelynn offers and passes me a thermos.

Nima’s hands shake so badly, I don’t trust her to hold anything, so I take a quick swig to check the temperature, then carefully tip the insulated container to her lips.

For the first time, I think she truly sees me, and tears well in her eyes. “I don’t remember anything after...we danced...”

“I know.” Cupping her cheek, I pull her closer until our foreheads touch. “They spiked your champagne with GHB. I should have realized what was going on when you said you didn’t feel well.”

“Where were you?” Her tears fall on our joined hands, but it’s the fear in her voice that breaks me.

“I could tell you I’m sorry every single day for the rest of my life and it wouldn’t be enough. I should have stopped them.”

“The fuckers threw you off the goddamn roof,” Trevor says. “If you weren’t the luckiest son of a bitch I’ve ever met, you would have died.”

She flinches, and I mutter, “Not helping.”

“I didn’t think anyone would find me. It was so long...”

“We couldn’t fly direct. Your father won’t take our calls or answer our texts. For all we know, this Dechan asshole has him under lockdown. It took us three days to get here from Myanmar.”

I need her to understand I didn’t abandon her. That I wouldn’t. Couldn’t.

“We’re cuttin’ it close,” Raelynn says. “You’re gonna have less than ten minutes...”

Nima swipes at her eyes. Dozens of small cuts and splinters mar her hands. Shit. She needs a doctor. And we’re charging right back into danger.

“Five minutes out,” Raelynn says. “Get ready to run.”

We split the last of the coffee, and Nima manages half a protein bar and some water. By the time Raelynn sets the helicopter down outside of the city, a hint of color’s returned to her cheeks.

Trevor wraps her swollen ankle, and I help her into yoga pants, a red sweatshirt, and her tennis shoes.

“I haven’t been warm in days,” she whispers.

It’s a good thing Jikai and Genno are dead, or I’d feed them both their own tongues for what they did to her.

I keep my arm tight around her waist. Her feet barely touch the ground for the five-block trek from the van to the

back gate of the palace.

Trevor and Raelynn make quick work of the guards, and we lock ourselves in the security office.

“Wren has the best toys,” Raelynn says as she strips a cable and attaches two alligator clips to the wires. “Flip it, CIA.”

“I’m retired,” Trevor hisses and taps his tablet screen. “Taking over the broadcast feed in three, two, one...”

Nima, sitting in a red leather chair, looks so much worse in the overhead light. Dirt stains her cheeks and hair. She’s lost weight. But some of the fire is back in her dark brown eyes.

“Stop the ceremony,” she says. “Papa, you must listen to me. Dechan Basnet had me kidnapped in Boston five days ago. His men drugged me, flew me back to Bhutan, and held me in a small shack outside of Damphu. I was rescued an hour ago.”

On the security screens, King Minjar covers his mouth with his hand. Dechan, adorned in a golden yellow *gho*, backs away. The king doesn’t say a word to his guards, but Nima’s uncle races across the dais and tackles the wannabe usurper.

All hell breaks loose.

“We need to git,” Raelynn says. “Nima, now that your daddy knows you’re free, we’ll drop a mobile number onto his phone so the two of you can talk. But we ain’t doin’ that from here.”

Nima

A day and a half later, we land in Boston. I was able to shower in Thailand and sleep for a few hours in Gabriel’s arms.

My father called me in tears, apologizing time and time again for his behavior the night of the gala and for ignoring Dax’s calls once I’d been taken. I am still angry he kept the

threat a secret. Every time I close my eyes, I am back in that shed in the dark.

He begged me to return to Bhutan, but I cannot. I need to be somewhere safe. Somewhere I can be...*me*.

“We’re here.” Gabriel hops out of the town car and runs around to open my door. We take the elevator to the fifth floor of a quaint building in north Boston, his arm around me the whole time.

The apartment smells like him. Clean. Fresh. A hint of sandalwood. Large windows look out over a tree-lined park.

“It’s not much.”

I cup his cheek and brush my lips to his. “It’s perfect. All I want is to be free. With you.”

ABOUT PATRICIA D. EDDY

Patricia D. Eddy writes romance for the beautifully broken. Fueled by coffee, wine, and *Doctor Who* episodes on repeat, she brings damaged heroes and heroines together to find their happy ever afters in many different worlds. Her characters are unstoppable forces colliding with such heat, sparks always fly.

Patricia makes her home in Seattle with her husband and very spoiled cats, and when she's not writing, she loves working on home improvement projects, especially if they involve power tools.

Her award-winning *Away From Keyboard* series will always be her first love, because that's where she realized the characters in her head were telling their own stories—and she was just writing them down.

Sign up for her newsletter, visit her website, and join her Facebook group for all the scoop on Patricia's books. For information on the other characters mentioned in this story, please visit <https://patriciadeddy.com/PrincessReference>.

Website: <https://patriciadeddy.com/>

Newsletter: <https://patriciadeddy.com/maillinglist>

Facebook Group: <https://facebook.com/groups/UnstoppableForcesTeam>



FLOWER POWER

by Pepper North

Contemporary Romance

Sometimes the simplest thing is the most powerful.

Julie discovers the magic inside a bag of battered hooks and scraps of yarn as she battles against the disease that threatens her. Supported by her handsome firefighter husband, she distracts herself and finds that giving gifts rewards the giver equally. Who knew that flowers had so much power?

CHAPTER 1

Julie clicked the disconnect button and stared at the screen. One phone call had changed everything. The growing lump in the pit of her stomach rolled inside her and she instinctively reached to turn up the fan inside her new car. She'd just bought it two weeks ago. That new smell still surrounded her.

Will I be here to even pay it off?

The sound of a message pinging from the phone still in her hand drew her mind away from the negative possibility. Automatically, she read the words.

Hey, beautiful. Could you pick up almond milk on the way home?

How was she going to tell her husband? How?

Swallowing hard, Julie forced herself to focus. She looked around the parking lot she'd pulled into to answer the phone. When the coast was clear, she exited and resumed her path home. The short drive seemed to take seconds as she automatically followed the same route she'd driven so many times.

Pulling into the garage, she pushed the button to lower the door behind her and turned off the vehicle. Her mind told her to get out, but her body wouldn't do it. Julie didn't want to see the look on Sean's face.

"Hey! Are you stuck in there?"

At the sound of his deep voice, Julie turned her head to stare at the handsome man framed in the doorway. She lifted the phone so he could see it and stared at him helplessly.

"Julie? What's wrong?"

Immediately, he jogged to her door and knocked on the window when the lock didn't release. "Push the button, beautiful. Let's get you out of there."

Able to follow his directions, Julie freed herself from the confines of her dream sports car and allowed Sean to help her

out. Julie wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her head against his muscular chest.

“You’re scaring me, Julie. Let’s go inside.”

With ease, he scooped her up in his arms and carried Julie into the house. Sitting in his favorite recliner, he held her on his lap, stroking her hair and back with one hand. “Tell me what’s going on?”

“The doctor called. The test results are in,” she struggled to say.

“Dr. Jones called himself?” Sean seemed to note that their super busy physician usually had a staff member take care of notifications like that. “What did he say, Julie?”

“I’m not pregnant.”

“That’s okay, sweetheart. We can try again,” he reassured her.

“We can’t. That’s just it. They think I have ovarian cancer. He’s sending me to a specialist but warned that based on the images, a complete hysterectomy and removal of the ovaries would be required.”

“Do you have that appointment yet?”

“They’re going to call.”

As if on cue, her phone rang—a cute jingle that usually made her smile but today horrified her. She stared at it, not wanting to answer. Sean plucked it from her hand.

“Hello?”

“This is Sean Douglas, Julie’s husband. We just got the news. I can make the appointment for her. Whatever is your earliest date, we’ll make it work. You have an appointment tomorrow at three? We’ll be there.”

Julie loved that he spoke so she understood. “Thank you. Can you go with me tomorrow?”

“I wouldn’t miss it, Julie. I’m so glad we don’t have to wait. We’ll get more information tomorrow.”

She nodded and laid her head down on his broad chest. His heart beat faster than normal and she knew Sean was stressed, too. For some reason, that made her feel better—less alone. “What happens if I’m not okay?”

“Look at me, Little girl.” His tone brooked no refusal. Sean had been dominant in their relationship from the first night they met. He’d dashed into the street to keep her from getting struck by a passing car when she’d been goofing around with friends.

Automatically, she lifted her head to meet his gaze and exhaled a deep breath. Some of the weight on her shoulders seemed to dissipate. Sean always made her feel better.

“We’ll know more tomorrow. Whatever happens, I’ll be right there with you. I wish this was happening to me instead of you.”

“I don’t,” she rushed to contradict his statement. “I’m sorry, I ruined our plans.”

“The universe has other plans for us sometimes, Julie. We’re going to fight like girls to change its mind.”

“Fight like girls? All hair pulling and scratching?” Julie laughed, imagining her muscular firefighter husband being reduced to that.

“If we need to, we will. We’re going to do everything we can. Are you ready to fight with me?” he asked, looking directly into her eyes.

She swallowed and nodded. Julie was petrified.

“Thank you, baby.”

Two long weeks later, all the testing was complete. Again, her cellphone had announced the bad news. The specialist’s nurse had called to schedule the surgery—a full hysterectomy with the removal of both ovaries. Julie checked

off the list of questions that Sean had helped her compose to make sure she got all the information she wanted to have.

Julie immediately selected Sean's number from her directory. When he answered, she efficiently gave him the date so he could request time off.

"Tell me the good news," he requested.

"The doctor doesn't see any signs that it has spread. He'll take some samples from various places to test but he thinks it's in early stages."

"That is excellent news. Tell me the thing that scares you now."

"Both ovaries, Sean. I'll immediately hit menopause. They don't know whether they'll be able to give me hormone replacement."

"How about if we deal with that scary thought after the surgery? Then we'll put it at the top of the list to attack."

"O-Okay. I know it seems silly to worry about that now."

"You have a free pass to worry about whatever you want to worry about, Julie. Chemo?" he asked.

"They'll know after the biopsies are back."

"Okay, we put that on our worry after list. How long will you be in the hospital?"

"Three or four days."

"Got it on my schedule. I'll get the days off and some extra for when you go home," he told her.

"You don't have to be at the hospital to look at me as I recover," she protested.

"I get to decide that, Little girl. Are you okay, or do I need to come home?"

"I'm okay. I'm going to go to the library and let them help me set up online book downloads from their system," she shared. "It's complicated."

"Good idea. I'll be home at my normal time."

A few minutes later, Julie walked into the library and had an amazing librarian coach her through the process of borrowing books online. With that accomplished, she headed for the rows of adult books. While she was there, she might as well check if a book from her favorite author was in. Julie didn't know how many times she'd read that book. Somehow, it always made her feel good. She needed that today.

Walking through the stacks, Julie told herself she could just order the book to have at home, but finding it was so much more rewarding. Like a treasure hunt. She leaned over to check the second to last shelf and pulled a tattered book out with a smile. *Got it.*

"You like that one, too?" a woman observed from behind.

Turning, Julie looked to face a woman she'd never seen before who was about her age, who smiled at Julie like they were best friends. "Hi. Yes. I love this book."

"I think you and I have been passing it back and forth. It's showing its age. I'm Elizabeth."

"Hi, Elizabeth. My name is Julie." Looking down at the book, Julie forced herself to offer, "Were you going to check this out today? I could let you read it before me."

"Heavens, no. Finders keepers. I was just coming to put a flower inside." Elizabeth reached into her bag and pulled out a pretty crocheted flower that instantly made Julie smile. "Here. You keep it."

"Oh, I couldn't. That took time to create."

"They're not hard. My aunt makes them. She like to send smiles to others. She'll be tickled you have one."

"Thanks. What a sweet gesture."

"I found the pattern online for her when she wanted a new project. I searched for a simple crocheted flower and this popped up. The world needs to be flooded with smile flowers."

"Wouldn't that be amazing? Thank you again. If you're sure?" Julie asked, tapping the book to double-check that the

other woman was okay with her taking it.

“Of course. Read chapter twenty-one twice. Once for you and once for me,” Elizabeth requested, making Julie laugh.

“I’ll do it. Thanks, Elizabeth. I’m glad we met.”

Julie turned and walked back to the checkout station, turning the flower over in her hand in bemusement. Sliding her card into the machine that electronically processed each loan, she set the flower on the book and placed them into the designated spot for the scanner to read the barcode.

“This one is acting up today,” a librarian said, coming forward to help when a strange message popped up on the machine. She pushed a few buttons and reset the machine.

Pointing to the flower, she commented, “I see you’ve met Elizabeth.” The librarian pointed to a purple flower pinned to her shirt. “I have several. She gives me a new one when she gets a fresh batch from her aunt.”

“How do you attach it to your clothing?” Julie asked in curiosity.

“I use a small safety pin.” The other woman lifted the bottom of the flower to show a small brass fastener threaded through the yarn. “It does make people smile—including me when this machine doesn’t cooperate.”

“I love that.”

“I’ve got a bunch of pins at the front. Let me get you one.”

Before Julie could say no, the woman dashed behind the desk and pulled out a safety pin. The librarian quickly attached it and handed it back to Julie. “Now you can spread smiles, too.”

CHAPTER 2

i, Little girl. Did you have a good day?” Sean asked when he arrived home. He pulled her close to press a kiss to her lips before sniffing the air appreciatively. “It smells good in here.”

“I decided I wanted something spicy.”

“Yum. Your famous chili?”

“You got it.”

“I like this.” He tapped the small decoration she’d worn since she got into the car to head home.

Julie watched him carefully. To her delight, the corners of his mouth tilted up. It did work. “A lady gave it to me. Her aunt makes them and gives the flowers away to make people smile.”

“That’s a fun idea.”

“I got some writing done today,” she reported. Her productivity as a writer had taken a big hit in the last few weeks.

“That’s wonderful, Little girl. I’m glad you had a good day.”

“I need to finish this story.”

“It’s a good distraction for you,” he suggested.

“My writing is not a distraction, Sean. It’s what I do,” Julie said, narrowing her gaze.

“Bad choice of words, sweetheart. You make way more money than I do with your perfectly crafted novels. I just meant I’m glad you had something else to focus on as we wait for your surgery.”

Sighing, Julie nodded and leaned her head against his broad chest. She knew that her husband was so much more than just the man who’d put a ring on her finger. He was her life partner, her best friend, and the one man who turned her on just by entering the room. “Sorry. I don’t mean to be touchy.”

“You get to react however you want.” Sean threaded his fingers through her hair, soothing her. “Did you nap today?”

“No. I didn’t have time for napping,” she answered, dismissing that idea.

“The chili can simmer for a while?”

“Sure? Why? Aren’t you hungry?”

“Oh, I’ll be super hungry after our nap.”

Julie leaned back to stare at him. His waggling eyebrows told her nap was a codeword for some very different types of activity. When she smiled, Sean scooped her up in his powerful arms and carried her into the bedroom for a different type of distraction she enjoyed thoroughly.

Thankfully, the time went quickly, and her surgery date arrived. As they headed for the early morning surgery, Julie reminded Sean, “Don’t forget to bring my laptop case to the hospital tomorrow. I still need to finish that story.”

“Maybe I’ll wait until we see how you feel. Your brain may need to rest,” he suggested.

“I’m sure I’ll be okay,” she stated firmly. “No keeping me from work, Sean.”

“If you feel like writing and the doctor says it’s okay, I’ll make sure you have your computer. If you’re exhausted and need to rest, you’ll take a day or a few days off.”

She glared at him and opened her mouth to argue as he turned into the hospital parking lot. Julie’s mind seemed to shut down as she focused on the immense battle ahead. Sending a prayer up into the heavens, she let go of her worries about the story. She had other things to concentrate on now.

After the flurry of getting settled, Julie clung to her husband’s hand. He squeezed her fingers in support as the doctor came in to review what he planned to do. It all seemed surreal. This shouldn’t be what she was facing. Julie had never

backed down from reaching her goals. Those early years of struggling to earn her fan base and make her mark as an author had not been easy. Now, those efforts paled compared to the challenge she faced.

“One thing I’ve always found in my career in oncology is that a positive outlook makes everything better,” the doctor suggested before leaving.

“He’s right,” Julie whispered to Sean.

“Of course he is, baby. And you’re going to be great. Let’s just get this step finished.”

“We’re ready to take you back, Julie. Give her a kiss for good luck,” the nurse suggested.

With one last squeeze of her hand and a kiss, Sean stepped back from her bedside to allow them to whisk Julie away. She craned her head back to get one last look at his handsome face before the doors closed behind the bed. Once in the surgery area, Julie felt her anxiety rise. She’d never had a panic attack before, but recognized that something was wrong when the urge to flee overwhelmed her.

“You need to knock me out or I’m out of here,” she forced herself to admit to the figures around her. Instantly, she lost consciousness.

CHAPTER 3

Looking at her laptop bag sitting on her desk, Julie shook her head. She’d been so wrong about her energy level. Sean, thank goodness, had paid attention more to her actions than her words. She’d needed the time to heal. Even now, back at home, Julie forced herself to recognize that she needed to allow herself some grace in not being as productive as she had before her surgery.

After taking a nap in the mid-morning, she finally felt the need to get some words added to her story. Immersing herself in the final chapters of the romantic journey between her characters, Julie wrote until she needed to rest once again. By the end of the week, she'd finished the story and sent it off to the editor with an extreme feeling of achievement.

When the results of the biopsies came back, she and Sean celebrated when the doctor announced only a quick burst of chemo would be needed to make sure any lingering cells were destroyed. Julie packed her laptop bag and lifted it from her desk before setting it back down.

"Too heavy, sweetheart?" Sean asked from the doorway.

"Maybe I should just take a sleeve with my laptop case," she wondered, pulling her computer from the padded bag. "I'm afraid I'll need my charger or some of the other things I have in here."

"I have another idea for you." Sean walked into her office to run a finger over the yarn flower she'd received. "Why don't you make some of these?"

"I don't remember how to crochet," Julie said, shaking her head automatically. "My grandmother showed me years ago. Besides, I don't have the directions."

"I think you could find a refresher course and a pattern online," he suggested, running his fingers over the laptop case. "Maybe I need to learn as well."

"Really? You want to crochet?" she asked incredulously.

"Why not? It sounds like fun. Hold on..." Sean jogged from the room and returned to hand her a gift bag.

"What's this?" she asked, peeking inside. "Yarn and hooks?"

"There's a bunch of different colors. I had a call at an elderly lady's home last week. She was having some blood pressure problems that got worse as we all worked with her. I suspected it might help to distract her. I talked about the lady who had made flowers to hand out and how I thought maybe I needed to learn how to crochet."

“Did it work? Did her blood pressure come down?”

“Yes. We got her stabilized before the paramedics got there. Two days later, her daughter showed up with this. We’re not supposed to take gifts, but the woman was insistent and showed the captain that it really had no value. Just a bunch of scraps of yarn and some banged-up hooks.”

“These aren’t just banged up, they’re totally experienced,” Julie said, running her finger over the hooks. “Do you know how many projects that woman had to complete to get them to this condition? They could practically crochet by themselves.”

“Let’s try them out.” He guided Julie into her chair and grabbed another from the kitchen table. “Search for an easy how-to video.”

“Don’t you have anything to do?” Julie wondered.

“Nope.”

Noting the determined look on Sean’s face, Julie opened her laptop and powered it on. In five minutes, they were giggling over their mistakes as they tried to follow the directions. Julie loved how her grandmother’s instructions came back to her as she held the hook and yarn in her hands. Sean had a bit more difficulty, but he was a good sport and hung in there.

“I’m ready for a flower,” Sean announced.

“Don’t you want to practice that stitch again?”

“In a flower.”

“Okay...” Julie typed in a second search. *Simple crocheted flower.*

Her screen filled with possibilities. She looked at Sean, overwhelmed by the choices.

“That’s it!” he announced, pointing at the bottom of the screen where a small, familiar shape appeared.

Clicking on it, Julie pulled up the instructions. It seemed to be as easy as the woman had suggested. “I think we can do this.”

Carefully following the directions, Julie and Sean created flowers with a few obvious flaws. Their second attempts were so much better. And the third? They looked almost perfect.

“Time for bed, Little girl,” Sean announced.

“I want to make another one,” she protested before looking at the clock. “We’ve been working on this for three hours?”

“And we have flowers for your wall.” Sean quickly attached all their attempts to the bulletin board.

“Those first ones need to go in the trash,” Julie said, laughing at the errors.

“Nope. They make me smile. That’s what they’re supposed to do, right?”

Julie stared at the handsome man she’d fallen for on their first date. Somehow, he always pinpointed the most important lesson in everything. The flaws didn’t matter. The smiles did.

“Can I take the bag to chemo tomorrow? It’s not supposed to take too long. Not long enough to get any work done, anyway.”

“I think that’s a perfect idea. Just don’t get too good without me,” he cautioned, making her laugh. “Now, no more practice. Bed.”

Nervous, Julie walked into the large infusion room. There were others there at the cancer center getting their treatments as well. She said “Hello” to everyone as she chose a recliner to sit in. The nurse was wonderful and quickly had her hooked up and the solution flowing.

A TV played on one side as a distraction. Julie glanced around the room and found some watching while others played games on tablets and a few dozed. Most were women, but a couple of men sat in the chairs as well. Pulling a hook and a small ball of bright purple yarn from her bag, she crafted her

first flower. Julie snipped it free from the tail of yarn and laid it on the arm of her chair to assess her work.

“That’s cute. I love the color,” the older woman next to her commented.

“Would you like it? I ran into someone at the library who made these to make people smile. It seems to work,” Julie suggested.

“I could use it as a bookmark.”

“You could. She made them into pins,” Julie shared, dropping the rest of that yarn ball into the bag. She spied a plastic box and pulled it out. “My husband is the best. He even put safety pins in here.”

“It sounds like he’s a keeper.”

“He is. There. Now you can wear it if you’d like.” Julie watched the woman attach the flower to her sweater and pat it fondly.

“Thank you. That makes me smile,” she commented.

“You don’t have yellow in there, do you?” A woman two chairs over had watched their interaction.

“I do.” Julie rummaged in the bag and pulled out a pale yellow ball. “How’s this?”

“Beautiful!”

Getting to work, Julie fashioned another flower. Each one got a bit easier, and she crocheted faster. The light color was beautiful when she finished. After equipping it with the pin, she passed it along to its new owner.

“What are you making?” a man asked from across the room.

“Flowers. Would you like one? What’s your favorite color?” Julie asked, delighted by the response.

Before she knew it, the machine beeped that her chemo was complete. Gathering her things together, Julie waved goodbye to all her new friends. The atmosphere in the room

felt completely different. People chatted. The nurse patted her on the shoulder as she left.

“See you next time, Julie. Thanks for the flower.”

“Of course!”

Exiting to the waiting room where Sean sat to drive her home, Julie leaned against his powerful frame as he guided her to the car. She was exhausted and ready to go home to take one of the naps her husband always suggested to her.

“How’d it go?” he asked as he settled behind the steering wheel.

“They try to make you very comfortable. There were more people in there than I expected. A dozen, maybe?”

“Did you make the right call by leaving your laptop at home?”

“Probably. It would have been hard to concentrate, I think. I’m getting faster on making flowers,” she shared.

“Leaving me in the dust, huh?” he suggested with a grin.

She wanted to smile, but suddenly her stomach did flip-flops inside her. “Sean? I don’t feel so well.”

“Let’s get you home, baby.”

Later, Julie laid in bed with a cool cloth on her forehead in an attempt to control her nausea. Miserable, she listened to Sean as he talked to her doctor’s nurse. She never wanted to go back there. Maybe she could be done.

CHAPTER 4

“**Y**ou’re finishing your chemo,” Sean stated firmly.

“That’s easy for you to say,” she snapped, angry that he didn’t agree with her decision to tell the doctor she was ending treatment.

“Do you really think it’s a piece of cake for me to take you back? I saw how sick you were. I also talked to the nurse. They’re going to tweak the medication to help with the nausea. That will help.”

“I don’t want to go.” Julie could hear the childish stubbornness in her voice.

“Come here, Little girl.” Sean picked her up and carried her to the big recliner he’d insisted they buy. Holding her on his lap, he kissed her softly.

“You’re going to make me go, aren’t you?”

“If I have to. I’m hoping you will decide that this will be a blip in our lives that we’ll survive before smothering it in a million happy memories in the future.”

“That seems easy for you to say,” she shuddered, remembering the vicious onslaught of illness following the last treatment.

“They’re going to make it better for you this time. We also have nausea medicine here to help immediately.”

“You have an answer for everything.” Julie fisted the fabric of his shirt in her hand and tugged.

Sean hugged her tighter before relaxing his hold to stroke the length of her spine. She felt herself melting against him. *If only I could stay here.*

“I’ll be waiting for you to get this second one done,” he promised.

“Promise?”

“Always.”

Sean had swapped shifts with the other firefighters at the station to give himself time off with her. Everyone had supported them along the way. She felt like she was letting an entire crew down as she railed against the treatments.

“Maybe we should go look for some more yarn?” Sean suggested. “The guys and girls at the station want some. Maybe we could find one of those variegated patterns in red,

white, and blue. Those would be awesome for holidays when we have parades.”

“You’re going to have to help me crochet that many,” she warned.

“Not a problem. I’ll take some yarn to work.”

The image of her burly, macho husband hooking colorful string together to craft flowers in the fire station made her laugh.

“What? We have lots of sit-around time. Maybe I’ll get better than you.”

“You!” Julie shook her head and laid it back down on his broad chest. “I’m going back. I give up.”

“That’s the whole point, baby. You never give up—not when you write, not when you market your creations, not now. Besides, how many people had smiles on their faces when you left the chemo room?”

“Most of them. The others were asleep and hadn’t woken up to find the gift I left.”

“How many were smiling when you walked in?”

“Oh! None of them,” she answered, shaking her head. Their expressions had been like what she felt before Sean started working on her. They dreaded being there just as much as she didn’t want to go back. All her arguments flew out the window. She could get angry about it, but she had to go for herself and for Sean.

“Yarn shopping after a nap?” she asked.

“Perfect.”

She also invested in a cute basket to carry all her stuff in. It was light and small but shallower than the gift bag, so it was easier to see where everything was and to show off her

collection of yarn. Julie still wasn't eager to step into the infusion room, but she was resigned.

"Julie! Come sit next to me," a woman called.

Walking to the empty seat next to the woman wearing a neon orange flower pin, Julie searched her mind for the woman's name and came up empty. "I'm sorry. I don't remember your name."

"Of course you don't. I was asleep while you were working your magic and woke up to see this treat. Everyone had them on and were talking about how sweet you are. I really wanted to see you here today."

"How fun. I'm glad you liked yours."

"Liked it? It totally made my day. I'm Bea, by the way."

"Hi, Bea. I'm glad to meet you," Julie answered as she settled back against the recliner seat.

Their conversation faltered for a few minutes as the nurse got Julie hooked up and the drip started.

When she could talk again, Julie turned to Bea and asked, "Would you like a different color?"

"No way. This is perfect. It's my husband's favorite color."

"Are you the flower lady?" a young woman about Julie's age asked from her other side.

"I can crochet flowers. Can I make you one? What color would you like?" Julie tilted the basket so she could choose her favorite.

"Could I have that raspberry color?" she asked.

"That's new. I haven't made a flower with that. I'm so glad you chose that one. I'm super curious to see how it will look," Julie commented as she pulled out the selection and a crochet hook.

Again, time flew. Julie kept an eye on the dwindling level of the fluid in the bag and waited to get sick. When it was almost finished, Bea touched her arm. "Julie, did you have side effects after your first treatment?"

“I was so sick. I almost didn’t come back.”

“You never let cancer win.” Bea patted her arm. “It will be better this time. Soon, you’ll be on your last one, just like me. Your flower convinced me to come back. I was scared, too.”

“Why? This is your last treatment.”

“I know. I’ve been so focused on fighting the cancer with all the trips here that not having a way to continue sparring against it seemed scary.”

“That makes sense. I hadn’t considered how I’d feel when I’m done,” Julie remarked.

“You get up in the morning and put on a flower. Let it be a reminder to enjoy life and smell the blossoms.”

Julie smiled. In the hustle and bustle of life, she knew she was guilty of working too hard and missing some fun opportunities. “I need to do that, too.”

“We all do, Julie. Your flowers make us smile and that’s the first step.”

“You’re all done, Bea. That’s the last drop,” the nurse announced, and both patients watched it dangle and tumble.

Within minutes, Bea stood up and walked to the large bell hanging on the wall. She rang it tentatively and then again with enthusiasm, drawing applause from the others in the room.

Returning to pick up her belongings, Bea told her, “I’m glad we got to meet, Julie. Keep making flowers. Everyone needs their day brightened. You’re doing more good than you think.”

“Go have a wonderful life, Bea.”

Bea patted the simple blossom on her shirt and winked. “Thank you. I plan to.”

EPILOGUE

Julie carried her basket back into the facility. She felt just like Bea had described it. It was scary, thinking all the treatments were over. It was also freeing and exciting. She touched the blue flower she wore today.

Sean had planned a hot-air balloon ride for them tomorrow. He thought getting above all the stuff here on the ground would be good for her. She couldn't wait to let the air blow through her hair and look down at all the small buildings below.

For today, however, she had one last trip into the infusion room. Hopefully, for the last time ever.

"Julie! You ready?" The nurse greeted her by name and waved her into a chair.

As she got Julie ready, the nurse chatted. "We're going to miss you bringing flowers into our lives."

"I brought some extras to leave. My husband taught the firefighters at the station how to crochet. They've been making flowers on their off time. Some aren't the best," she confessed with a laugh.

"I bet they're charming. And if they're a little goofy, that will make someone smile a bit more."

"The world needs more happiness and hope," Julie suggested.

"It certainly does. Here comes a new patient. Work your magic on him, Julie."

The nurse waved to the uncertain looking man who walked into the infusion room. "Come sit over here by Julie."

"Hi. My first time," he confessed.

"My last. It's scary, isn't it? Here, I make these for everyone. They make me happy. I hope it helps you, too."

"Thanks, Julie."

ABOUT PEPPER NORTH

Ever just gone for it? That's what USA Today Bestselling Author Pepper North did in 2017 when she posted a book for sale on Amazon without telling anyone. Thanks to her amazing fans, the support of the writing community, Mr. North, and a killer schedule, she has now written more than 100 books!

Enjoy contemporary, paranormal, dark, and erotic romances that are both sweet and steamy? Pepper will convert you into one of her loyal readers. What's coming in the future? A Daddypalooza!

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DON'T KISS AND TELL

by Remy Reigns

Contemporary, Dark Romance

Mafia

Dante Moretti is the youngest of the Moretti mobsters, but don't let that fool you into thinking he's naïve about this life. He's the medic of the family and has seen it all. But who saves him if something happens?

Natallie Siciliano has come a long way in life, fighting against familial responsibilities and pre-set destiny. She's made a career of saving souls and patching wounds. When she stumbles upon a stranger near death, her instinct as caregiver takes control. Will her principles collapse when she finds herself falling for the rival family member she nursed back to health?

DANTE

“Are you finally ready?” I ask Tommy as he opens the passenger side door. We were supposed to pick up the supply truck thirty minutes ago.

“Yeah, man. Sorry I’m late. I had something to take care of real quick,” he says, climbing into the seat.

Throwing the car into gear, I head toward the main road in Chaney. “Quick? Son of a bitch, man. We were already supposed to have this shit done.”

“I said sorry,” he pleads.

“What’s in this truck, anyway?” I ask.

“Lots of promising things,” he says excitedly.

He supposedly got this new shipment of guns for us, and with Dino grabbing up new territory, they could come in handy. The last few months, Tommy has been trying to suck-up to Dino’s good side. After all these years of knowing him and being an associate of the family, I’m not sure why he insists on being a brown-noser. It used to be a favor in return of a favor with him and that was it. Perhaps he’s trying to become *something* in the family, attempting to be accepted as a Moretti and rise up the ranks. Makes more sense than a kiss-ass.

The ride to the extraction spot is quiet. More quiet than I like because it makes me nervous. Tommy keeps looking behind us from the side mirror, but trying to not make it obvious.

“A bit nervous, bud?” I ask as he checks his phone for the fourteenth time within the last ten miles.

He jerks his head to me. “I’m always nervous these things won’t work out.”

I tilt my head a little to the side, confused with his strange response. “Won’t work out? The truck’s already here,” I say,

nodding at the lone semi about fifty yards away on the left. “We change vehicles and that’s about it.”

“Park over there.” He points to the opposite side of the parking lot.

“Why so far away?” Shit is seeming weirder and weirder the more I’m with him.

“It makes it not so obvious. We’re in a hospital parking lot. A place like this is always crawling with people. I don’t want someone to see us get out of this car and climb into the truck, leaving this one behind.”

“Paranoid much?”

“Nah, just cautious.”

“Whatever, Tommy,” I say, parking the car almost a damn football field away from our destination. “Let’s just get this shit over with.”

I get out of the car and wait for him by the trunk. I’m not starting the walk to the big truck without him since he’s acting so damn weird.

“The keys will be in the visor,” he says, walking to the back of the car. “I got my hands on some good quality guns. They will come in handy for the future. Very promising,” he says and checks his phone for the twentieth time. It hasn’t made a ding, ring, or come off that lockscreen any time he has given it attention.

“Yeah, you said that,” I deadpan. His strangeness has taken any excitement away from this. I’m a bit annoyed with him now. Dino will have to find someone else to do any more dealings with this shady bitch because fuck this.

“You can drive,” he says.

“The consent really wasn’t needed.”

“Why are you being a dick, Dante?”

“Why the fuck are you acting so damn sketchy?”

“I’m not, man. Seriously, it’s just nerves.”

“Well, get them...” I pause as the earth slightly vibrates beneath my feet. We stop dead in our tracks. Sharing a look with Tommy of *What the fuck was that*, he crosses his arms over his chest. My eyes veer toward the cab of the semi, and I notice the glow in the window. “The fucking time...” I knew my gut was telling me something was off.

The 18-wheeler stands about fifty feet from us. It’s like everything is in slow motion. I’m unable to move or think fast enough, but I know this is going to hurt. I finally get my body to turn and tell it to run. Looking back at the truck, I try to see the expanded distance, but there isn’t much. In the corner of my eye, Tommy stands motionless with his arms crossed over his upper body. A stronger shake of the ground and forceful wave accompanies the growing flames. I throw my arm up to cover my head because that’s the only thing I can think of to help. It won’t be much, but hopefully it will be enough to keep me alive. A sharp boom fills my ears, and I’m lifted and thrown forward into the air.

Slamming into something hard, the shattering sound of glass and denting of metal are evidence of it being a vehicle. My body ignites with pain. There’s a constant ringing in my ears that won’t stop.

My entire body aches as I muster up the energy to roll off the hood of this random car that thankfully caught my fall. Setting my feet on the concrete ground, I breathe through the pain as I look around. The bright sun burns my eyes, so I squint. My face pulses with a stinging sensation emulating a thousand bees attacking, accompanied by warm streams trickling down my flesh. Using my fingertips, I lightly touch my face. Hitting sharp, hard pieces in their path, I decide it’s glass and the warmth is blood that now stains my fingertips.

I look for Tommy to find him lying motionless on the ground a good bit away from me. I take a step, slowly moving toward him. My right leg erupts in excruciating pain. Looking down, I see a nice sized piece of glass sticking out of my leg. Blood flows from the wound more rapidly than I want to be seeing and my self-taught skills kick in.

I pull my shirt off and rip away a long piece, tying it tightly above the glass. It instantly slows the flow of blood. If I pull the glass out, I may bleed out, so it has to stay put for now.

Finally making my way to Tommy, I nudge him with my boot. He doesn't move. I tilt all my weight to my left leg and bend a little at the knee and hip, keeping my right leg as straight as possible. Placing two fingers on Tommy's neck, I search for his pulse. Nothing. I'm certain that wasn't part of his plan, but the lucky bastard got the easy way out to say the least.

Searching through blurry vision, I spot a parking garage not too far away and make my way toward it. I hear voices in the distance, making me move my ass faster. *A fucking hospital! Damn it, Tommy.* The law will be here shortly.

My energy is leaving me at a fast pace. Although my leg isn't bleeding as badly, it still hurts like hell. I get between two vehicles and slide down the side of one, sitting on my ass. Digging in my pocket, I search for my phone. I need help. A drained feeling washes over me and my hand goes slack. I breathe, trying to build more energy.

I hear the distant chatter of people and sirens screaming through the air, and I just hold out hope none of the bystanders saw me. I won't be able to stay concealed for too much longer. My vision is more blurred and I don't know if it's from blood, sweat, or what. I can't wipe my eyes, knowing glass is piercing my skin throughout my face. Pulling my phone to my face, I realize I'm not able to see clearly, which makes calling someone difficult. I lean my head back against the car and breathe out a breath of frustration. "Fucking Tommy!" I gasp as my sight leaves me.

"Oh my God." A sweet, delicate voice sings through the constant ringing and darkness. An angel, I think. I have to be dead. No, it would be a demon from the fiery pits, coming to take me to hell if I were dead. I try forcing my eyes to open, but it's nothing but a bright haze. I don't know how long it's been. "Can you hear me?" the voice calls again.

“Help,” I breathe out.

“I’ll get someone for you,” she says.

“No.” I reach out, tiredly. I connect with something soft, silky, and hold on. “You, please!” I beg the angel. I can’t help but think a demon is here, trying to trick me. I wiggle my fingers to see if I can move my other arm because I won’t let go of her. It works, so I attempt to pull my hand up to my face, blocking the sensitivity to open my eyes. The face glows down at me, a shadow in the eliminating light that I can’t make out. It has to be an angel since it’s glowing. I breathe through the throbbing pain radiating down from my side down to the piercing throb in my leg. My right side must have absorbed most of the damage without me knowing. My energy completely fails me and the pain is too much. Everything fades to black.

NATALLIE

I didn’t know if he was going to live when I brought him home. I’ve second guessed myself more times in the last thirty-six hours than I have in my entire career as a nurse. And with working in the ER for the first six years of them, that’s really saying something. I still question myself for not bringing him to the ER. I’m not sure why I didn’t. Maybe because he looked terrified, helpless, like a wounded bird. But he’s not a bird. He’s a human, Nat. Thanks to the higher power above, I kept him from dying.

Opening the door to my spare room, I make sure to keep quiet. I’ve used it as a patient’s room since I brought the stranger home. The only thing left for him is rest, and lots of it. He lost so much blood. Trying not to wake him, I watch as his bronze, muscular chest rises and falls with each breath he takes. I look down at my watch resting on my wrist. I used this little guy more since the incident than I have with my job at the Newport Cancer Center. I’ve been there for five years now,

so this trauma was definitely out of my league. Damn, I should've taken him to an actual doctor. He begged me to help him. Me. I only did what he asked. Thankfully, he's still breathing.

He's been sleeping without any medication for twelve hours and twenty-three... no forty-three minutes. Yeah, twelve hours and forty-three minutes. He hasn't really been awake since the incident; in and out mostly, raving to some man named Dino about another man named Tommy. He really hates Tommy.

He starts shifting in the bed, wincing when he moves weight off his left side. He straightens his left leg, letting his foot rest off the end. He's too long for this full size bed, but his leg being straight does seem to help his comfort. I can't give him any more medicine until he fully wakes up. I know I'm not a doctor and could definitely lose my nursing license for all of this, but I need him coherent enough to tell me how he's feeling before I can help him anymore. I told myself if he's not awake and talking in the morning when I have to go to work, I'll call an ambulance and lose my license just to make sure he's absolutely fine. He slips his left hand under the pillow, and runs his right up and down alongside him on the bed.

Oh shit! This man could have a girlfriend or wife that's freaking the hell out right now because he hasn't been home in two nights.

I stammer to the other side of the room where I put all his things neatly on a chair. I know he had a phone on him. Finding his phone, I softly sit down on the other side of the bed.

Nothing! I mean, he has a ton of missed calls, but not one number is saved in his phone. That's weird. I lift myself enough off the bed to reach for his things. I grab his wallet. Dante Moretti is even handsome in his driver's license picture. Who the hell looks good in that picture, ever? I plop back down on the bed with the wallet in hand.

"Mmmm." A moan breaks the silence behind me.

Shit! Regretting sitting down so hard, I don't move a muscle. I feel a little bit of movement on the bed and something makes contact with my leg. A warm, big hand rubs up and down alongside my thigh just like the empty space on the bed earlier. I turn my head slowly, praying he's not thinking he's woken up from a one night stand. I don't know why that's my first thought in this situation, but I'm relieved when his eyes are still closed and his hand stops in its tracks to rest upon my upper thigh.

I ever so slowly remove his hand and lift myself off the bed, lightly lying his hand on the warm spot where my ass was taking up space. I bend at the waist, moving closer to him. "Please just wake up," I whisper with a light kiss on his lips and leave the room still holding the wallet and cellphone. It worked for Disney so why not try.

Who is this stranger? Dante is his name, obviously, but why no saved numbers? And the amount of cash in his wallet doesn't make me feel any less skeptical.

A knock on my front door makes me jump like it's the cops or something and I've been harboring a fugitive. And that might be the case here; definitely not far from it. With my past, I'm very familiar with how the darker side of the human race lives. I hurry and throw the evidence in the first draw I come to where I've been standing. Looking out the side curtain, I wish it were the police coming to take me away. I'm capable of arguing my case to get out of handcuffs.

"Look, I don't have time for you," I say when I finally answer the knock at my door. Kale's not one to leave just because you don't answer. Plus, he can see my car in the driveway.

"Hello to you, too." He barges in, pushing my arm out of his way.

"What do you want?" I ask, glancing toward my hallway. *I hope he doesn't wake up and come out of the room until Kale leaves.*

"I was sent to check on you, duh," Kale says, standing between the small, conjoined living room and kitchen.

“It’s been a long week. I’ve witnessed an explosion, glass piercing a guy’s face, and a dead body. That was just Monday, so I’m too tired for your shit today.”

“I know.”

“You had something to do with that, didn’t you?” I ask the hair-brained jackass.

“Who knows.” He shrugs, turning to the bar in my kitchen. He picks up a few grapes from the fruit bowl on the counter, rolling them in his fingers. He pops one into his mouth. “But that should make you feel right at home.” He smacks his lips, chomping the grape between his teeth. “You’ve seen far worse things than a dead body.” He tosses the remainder of the grapes into his mouth, letting one fall to the floor. He doesn’t pick it up but instead continues forward a step, trying to walk further into my living room.

I step into his path, keeping my body between him and the hallway. He can’t find what’s in there. “I don’t think much else is worse than a dead body,” I say, angling my body so he gets my hint to leave.

“What leads up to the final blow of mercy can be pretty rough.” He points a finger at me as he closes the small distance between us. “The beating they take before is worse than giving them mercy and killing them quickly,” he says as he brushes my long hair off my shoulder. Letting his fingers drift slowly along the thin strap of my tank top, he keeps eye contact. “Isn’t that right, Nat?” he asks with a wink.

I swallow hard as past regrets and emotions come flooding back. How can someone who I once saw as my protector be so damn cold toward me? It was all an accident, and one I will always have to live with. He knows I didn’t plan what happened, but he’ll never forgive me.

“Ugh!” I breathe out, walking to the front door. I need him gone. “Piss off,” I tell him as I open the front door to my home.

“I’ve been sent to tell you something.” He walks closer and pauses in the doorway. He runs his finger along my

collarbone. “Your uncle misses you.”

I slap his hand. “Y’all can piss off together. How sweet would that be?” I ask with sarcasm, pushing him out the door.

He chuckles with a snide smirk. He glances at something behind me, his eyes widening as they come back to me. Quickly looking back, his eyes lock on something behind my right shoulder. His cocky smile instantly fades. “Well, well. This is what you’ve been hiding. Dare I say, *who* you’ve been hiding?”

“What I do is none of your business!” I slam the door in his face and quickly lock it. “Fucker,” I whisper, turning on my heels and bending to pick up the fallen grape.

“Who’s a fucker?” A man’s voice comes through the silence.

As I look up, I’m met with staring eyes from the hallway.

Shit! Kale saw him! “Nobody,” I say, rolling my eyes at the thought of Kale. “How are you feeling?” I ask the man standing in just blood stained boxers. I’m not sure why I did it. I’m not sure why I’m not scared, nor why I didn’t just drop him off before leaving the hospital. Maybe it was for past regrets that Kale brought up. But, he’s here now, so whatever.

“I guess okay,” he says, touching his face. That hand moves to his side while the other holds his leg as he limps to the couch. “How long have I been here?” he asks in a weak voice as he slowly bends to sit.

“A few days,” I say, feeling sorry for his injuries. The one on his leg was awful. I almost didn’t get it sewed up. If the glass would’ve been any further to the right there wouldn’t have been anything I could’ve done.

“Shit!” He runs his fingers through his dark hair. “Did I have a phone on me?” He looks up at me with hopeful eyes.

“You did.” I smile and walk to the kitchen counter that divides it from the living room. I fumble in a drawer and pull out his phone. “It kept ringing, so I turned it off,” I say, walking toward him and stretching my arm out.

“That’s just great,” he says, taking the phone from my hand.

“Geez! It was getting annoying when I was trying to concentrate on all the stitching,” I say, lifting a brow.

“No, not you. Sorry!” He lets out another deep breath. “Thank you,” he says, looking up at me with sincerity in his eyes.

“No problem.” I turn on my heels. “What do you want to eat before I bring you home?” I ask.

“I’m not hungry,” he deadpans, looking down at his phone.

“Good, because I can’t cook,” I say. He looks up from his phone and smiles at me. Meeting him in the condition he was in and seeing him smile brightens my heart a little. I bite down on my bottom lip. “You need food, though. We will stop somewhere on the way to bring you home,” I say, grabbing my keys off the counter of the bar.

“I can get someone to come pick me up.”

“Nonsense. I’ll bring you wherever you need to go.”

“Ready to get rid of me, are you?” He smiles as I sit beside him on the couch.

“Not at all!” A look passes between us, causing my body to heat. While I was tending to his wounds, I had lots of time to appreciate his body. Even with cuts and bruises scattered on his olive skin now, his abs and chiseled jaw are what bring me to a freeze. I shake my head. “I mean, I have to get back to work. I only had these two days off.”

“You spent your only two days off nursing me back to health?” he asks, shifting so he’s more in front of me. He reaches out, touching my shoulder with his fingertips. The heat ignites under his touch. Letting his fingertips trail down my arm, he stops at my wrist. My eyes follow his movement. He gently takes my wrist within his palm and brings it to his chest. Wrapped in the warmth of his chest and hand, chills ripple up my arm and throughout my body. With his other hand, he places his index finger under my chin, bringing my

face up to meet his gaze. "I'm in your debt," he says, running his thumb right beneath my bottom lip. I can tell he feels bad.

"You weren't a burden, so stop thinking that," I say, still making direct eye contact. My teeth slowly rake across my bottom lip and a sexy smirk takes the corner of his mouth. "However, you may want to put on pants before we leave."

DANTE

"Any doctor's orders before we part ways?" I ask her as she pulls her car into my driveway.

She puts the car into park, shifting in her seat to get a better look at me. Fuck, she's beautiful. Her brown hair cascades down her shoulders, a bouncing curl at the end of each strand. Her green eyes dance along my face as I take in a long drink of her beauty.

Her tongue slips out, wetting her lips, and her top teeth rake over that lush bottom lip. "Maybe stay away from exploding trucks." She gives me a sexy smirk. It's the first time she's mentioned anything about the cause of my injuries. Her eyes give me an all knowing glare. She probably has suspicions of why I was there. Hell, she might even know.

"I don't run from trouble, my Angel." I cock my head to the side. "Seems we have that in common, wouldn't you say?" I give her a wink before exiting her vehicle.

The man who visited her had a very familiar voice and in my world, familiar voices are never good. It's not a coincidence she helped me that day. Any other woman, hell, person, would've run the opposite direction, not load an injured man into their car and bring them home. She's definitely way too comfortable with this type of life. Is she a pretty treat to throw me off what Tommy did to us? I think he's dead, but fuck, I don't really know to be honest. She

might be the key to this whole thing or just a beautiful face I get to enjoy. Either way, I'll get to the bottom of this mess.

“While you've been laid up with that broad, we took care of business,” my big brother's voice echoes as soon as I open the door to my house.

I scoff, giving Franco a side eye. *Laid up with that broad*, yeah, that's what I've been doing. He has no fucking idea what's going on. Big brother has been tied up with a woman for weeks and not only that, he's brought her into family business, bringing her along on a job. Now this Tommy shit. I don't know who's working with whom or who the fuck is even involved. But I do, for fuck sure, know someone is coming for us. Hell, Tara, his newfound broad, could be tangled into this fuckery. I don't react to his jab. He will find out soon enough at our sit down.

“Doesn't matter what you've been doing.” Franco stands up from the couch. “Tara needs our help with something, so get your ass dressed.” He pats me on the chest. “You look like shit, little brother.”

Franco fills me in on what's been happening these last few days as I change and we quickly head toward Tara's workplace.

It seems this woman of Franco's has gotten us into more shit than I was aware. I don't have a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach like I did with Tommy. My brother would never allow me to get into a situation he couldn't fight us out of. Franco, one of his crew members, and myself burst into Richard's office without so much as a warning knock. Richard is Tara's boss, Franco's woman. The guy's eyes are wide and his mouth pops open, shouting obscenities as he stands up from our entrance.

Walking around the desk, Franco slaps Richard back down into his chair using the back of his hand. When the chair rocks from his weight, Richard's feet don't touch the floor. Big brother is rough, but I've witnessed much worse from him. Franco is the enforcer of the family, so kicking Richard in the ribs and beating the fuck out of him with his bare hands is

more Franco's style. He doesn't though. Instead, he clenches his hands into fists and tightens his jaw. "You sick son of a bitch, you prey on women for your own fucked up game."

Richard stands, getting in Franco's face. I sit down in a chair in front of the desk, propping my feet up on the big, wooden desk. One soldier crosses his hands in front of him, standing on the right side of the room, giving him a visual of the situation and traffic from the stairs. With the house full, we don't want a huge scene of gunfire or anything of that sort. Why interrupt everyone's evening? This dick isn't worth it.

"Get your sleazy ass out of this fucking town tonight. This place is mine," Franco says, tossing a bag of cash at his feet. Richard looks down at the bills that are peeking out from their fall. He looks back up at my brother with furrowed brows and starts to open his mouth.

"I forgot the pen, but I assume that's not going to stop you from signing?" Franco pushes him down into his chair again, tossing a folder at his chest. He nods to me.

I reach over, pulling a pen from the cup on the desk. Smiling, I hand it to the piece of shit. Richard's eyes are wide, staring at his former life in one, tiny folder.

"I warned you, you were fucking with the wrong doll. She's mine, so stay the fuck away from her. If I catch you even breathing in her direction... well, let's just say, the universe will have one less sleazebag taking up oxygen." Franco walks to the window. Slipping his hands into his pockets, he gazes down at our new business. "This isn't a threat, motherfucker. And it's not a promise. It's a rude fucking awakening for what's coming if you think in the slightest I won't end your life like I'm ending you in this business world."

Richard stares, blinking at the papers on his desk. He knows he's fucking done. Quickly signing the papers in the folder, he lays them on the desk.

"My crew is cleaning out downstairs as we speak. The only mercy you get is ten minutes to get the fuck out of my building," Franco confirms.

“You don’t know what you are taking on for her.” Richard finally finds his words. “That woman is going to get you into more problems than your family name can dig you out of.”

“I don’t ask for anything. I take it. Two minutes.” Franco replies.

Richard stands from his desk and opens the side drawer. One of Franco’s soldiers draws his gun, pointing it at Richard. Richard freezes, holding a hand up. Franco doesn’t turn around, keeping his back to Richard, but doesn’t call his soldier off. He lets him have his fun. Sleazeball slowly reaches in, pulling papers from the drawer. Picking up his laptop, he walks to the door and gives Franco a defeated nod as he walks out the door. The soldier follows Richard with his gun still drawn, escorting him from the building.

“Damn, brother. She *has* brought out a softer side in you,” I say. “And here I thought Dino wanted me along for my medical expertise on anything you might force upon him.”

“Ha!” He turns around, looking out the glass windows. From up here, you’re able to see the entire building. We watch as the rest of his crew escorts security from the building. Franco ordered them to not disturb any of the girls’ performances. This club is going to be a good investment.

“It’s done. Go enjoy yourself,” Franco tells me as we ascend the stairs to the main stage.

It’s been a hell of a day. I could probably go home and sleep for days. There’s one thing I want to do before today ends, though.

I climb into the car and speed my ass across town. It’s late, but it’s something I have to do.

“Woah! Why are you here?” my Angel asks when she opens the door. She’s in a short pair of shorts and a t-shirt that’s snuggling against those curves.

“I’m not a creep, I promise.”

“That’s exactly what a creep would say.” She crosses her arms over her chest.

I chuckle. It's from what she said, but also she noticed me staring.

"I would've gone to the hospital, but I knew you were off today."

"And that's helping the creepiness," she sarcastically says with an arched brow and a smirk.

Damn, I'm so out of my league here. "Look, I owe you something."

"You don't." She turns around, leaving me standing at her front door.

She doesn't shut the door in my face, so I take that as an invite and step inside.

"You could've turned me in or left me for dead," I say, shutting the door behind me, "but you didn't." I finish my words, turning around to look at her.

"I'm good, really."

"I'm trying to repay you for your kindness."

"I know who you are," she says, leaning against the counter in her kitchen and crossing her arms over that chest again. But this time, she breaks eye contact and looks to the floor.

She slips on her composure. She's nervous and I can tell. Why is she nervous? That's definitely out of her warrior nurse character. I close the space between us.

"I had your wallet," she says, as if reading my mind.

"So." I sift a finger under her chin. "I know you kissed me like I was some Snow White."

"Dick!" she chirps, but it's accompanied with a smile.

That made her gain that strong persona back. I smile at her, looking into her green eyes. It's like I can see her soul. A strong, tough woman who can handle even the most difficult situations. "I'm just saying, we have secrets and we're both aware."

“We?”

I shake my head, not letting our eyes break away from one another. “Talk about it over coffee or lunch?” I don’t want to ruin this before it can start.

“I’m not sure that would be my best idea.”

“You convinced yourself to bring a bleeding, half-dead, strange man home with you.” I smirk. “This one isn’t your idea. It’s mine.”

Her eyes squint.

I shrug. “Good ideas just might not be your strong suit. I always have great ideas,” I playfully say.

“We won’t count the idea that brought you into that situation.”

“Yeah, let’s leave that one out,” I laugh.

“Oh, you think we should?” She matches my playfulness.

“For now,” I wink. “Maybe afternoon drinks instead of coffee? Like you said, you know me. So let me get to know the woman that saved me and nursed me back to health.”

“Fine.” She sighs. “One drink. And food since I’m starving. Although, I’m not sure you should be drinking right now.”

“Now?” My eyes widen with the fact she insists on an immediate time. “Deal!” I chuckle. “It can end with you kissing me again or more.” I lean down, placing my mouth by the shell of her ear. “I don’t kiss and tell, either,” I whisper.

Ending For Now!

ABOUT REMY REIGNS

Remy is an over-thinker who lays awake at night with bouncing thoughts of her WIP, the events of her day, and why Fresh Prince of Bel-Air isn't making more episodes. Once she believes in something, she's never giving up on it, just as she believes her eyebrows will grow back from the 90s thin look.

Let's be honest, Remy sucks at marketing her own work. Her quote says it all; "I'm not a salesman." As long as she has readers that anticipate her next release, she's content with her writing career. "Seeking fame or fortune aren't things that deem me an author; giving stories to people that they can use as an escape from this world does. I've achieved that." She believes the world needs more books and less social media.

Her newsletter sign-up —> <https://landing.mailerlite.com/webforms/landing/w7f2n5>

Find out more about her here —> <https://linktr.ee/remyreigns>



MOVING FORWARD

by Samantha Cole

Contemporary Romance

Starting Over, Introduced by a Friend

Haunted by his sister's death from breast cancer, Jonah funnels his grief into fundraising for a cure. But at a 5k race, an introduction to a beautiful survivor ignites an awareness that he still has his own life to live.

Though Emery shut out romance since her diagnosis and resulting surgery, this striking stranger awakens a powerful attraction. But she must be a reminder of all that he's lost.

Grief draws their souls together, but can it help them both heal from their tragic pasts?

CHAPTER 1

Here we go again, Jana. I couldn't do enough to save you in time, but I'll keep doing my part to save someone else.

Jonah descended the steps of the shuttle that'd transported him from a parking lot three miles away to near the starting point of the Sarah K. Sharpe Breast Cancer Half Marathon he'd entered. Glancing at his sports watch, he noticed there was still about an hour for him to check in before it started. For the past five years, every six to eight weeks, he ran in a fundraiser—from 5Ks to full marathons—to benefit research for the disease that had taken his twin sister. He'd started doing them after she was first diagnosed, then continued after her death a year later at the age of thirty. It helped him keep part of his connection to her, which was broken far too soon.

He followed the signs and the throngs of people to the check-in tables and got in line. Twenty minutes later, he had his running bib with his assigned number pasted on the back of his tank top. It was a perfect mid-March day in Tampa—not too hot or humid, with big, white, fluffy clouds to keep the direct sunlight at bay. He'd slathered on sunscreen made specifically for sports in case the sun did come out before he locked his car up, taking only the key fob to hang around his neck. His wallet and cell phone were at his condo for safekeeping.

While stretching his body to ensure everything was loose and ready for the 13.1-mile race, he heard someone shout, “Jonah Bloom!”

He'd recognize that woman's voice anywhere. Glancing around, it only took a moment to spot Shelby Christiansen—his business partner's wife—waving at him furiously. While race days were usually a bad time for him emotionally, he couldn't help but give her a little smile as he approached her and two other women she was standing with.

When he got close enough, she stepped forward and threw her arms around him in an affectionate but sisterly hug. “I've

been looking for you for the past hour. I knew you wouldn't miss the race."

Jonah squeezed the petite pixie's back before letting her go. Parker Christiansen had married well—his wife was one of the sweetest people Jonah had ever met. If only he could stop her from trying to hook him up with her single friends. His divorce the year before Jana had passed away had been ugly—thank God he and Dara didn't have any kids together—and there was no way he was going anywhere near a serious relationship again. After lengthy negotiations, his lawyers had arranged for his ex-wife to keep the house they'd bought together as long as she didn't get alimony from Jonah. She'd fought tooth and nail for the monthly stipend, but since he had proof she'd cheated on him, she was lucky to get anything at all. He hadn't cared about the house—he couldn't live in it after knowing Dara had been having sex with her boyfriend there. Initially, he moved into his sister's rented townhouse until he could find a new place and ended up staying to care for her after her diagnosis.

"Hey, Shelby. What're you doing here? I thought 5Ks were more your speed." She had run a few with him.

Grinning, she chuckled. "They are. After running after Victor and Franco all week, though, the last thing I want to do is a half-marathon. However, I did volunteer to hand out water along the route."

Jonah wasn't surprised about that. Shelby had fought cancer twice—ovarian and lymphoma—and kicked its ass both times. As a stay-at-home mom to her and Parker's adopted eight-year-old boys, she volunteered for several cancer organizations whenever the kids were in school. Since today was a beautiful Sunday morning, Parker probably took his sons fishing or something so his wife could be at the race.

Before he could say anything more, she touched his upper arm and pivoted toward the two women she was with. "Jonah, you remember Kat Michaelson, right?"

He smiled at Shelby's friend, whom he'd met at a few barbecues at the Christiansen's. Thankfully, she was married

and not on Shelby's list of women to hook him up with. "Of course. It's good to see you again. Are you running or volunteering?"

"It's good to see you too. And I'm not doing either. I'm here with a few officers and guards with their new K9s, getting the dogs used to working crowds with their muzzles on." The woman trained German shepherds and Belgian Malinois for the Florida State Police, as well as some smaller police departments and private companies. Her husband was a retired Navy SEAL who now partially owned and worked with Trident Security in Tampa. "In fact, I have to get back to them. I just spotted Shelby and hurried over to say hi." She waved at them as she started to walk away. "See you later. Have a good run, Jonah and Emery!"

"Thanks," he said, simultaneously with the other woman standing beside Shelby.

"Jonah Bloom, this is my friend, Emery Crawford—it's her first half-marathon, and I thought maybe you could run together. Excuse me a second," she added. "I have to make a quick call." Pulling her phone from her pocket, she stepped a few feet away from them.

Of course you thought we could run together, Miss Little Matchmaker, and I doubt you have to make a call too.

Her friend was slender, with a runner's physique, shoulder-length brown hair, hazel eyes, and a smattering of freckles on her nose and cheeks. In sneakers, she stood about four inches shorter than his own six feet. Like him, she was dressed in a white tank top and running shorts—hers were hot pink while his were gray. He politely held out his hand to the attractive woman. "Hi, Emery. It's nice to meet you."

She smiled shyly. "It's nice to meet you too, Jonah. But, please, don't think you have to run with me. You probably have a faster pace than me." She rolled her eyes. "Sorry, but Shelby's been trying to fix me up with all her single guy friends. I hope you're not offended."

A snort escaped him. "I'm not offended at all. In fact, I'm used to it. Despite my protests, she's been trying to hook me

up with all her single women friends.”

“I love her like crazy, but she just doesn’t get that I’m not looking for a relationship right now.”

“Same here. However, that doesn’t mean we can’t be acquaintances or even friends, right?” Now, what had made him say that? Maybe it was because he knew she felt the same way he did. Involved relationships were out, but friendships were okay. “I’m not out to get a best new time or anything, so if you want, we can run together—you know, encourage each other when needed.”

Her smile broadened, bringing out a pair of dimples. “I doubt you need encouragement. Shelby told me you’ve been running races for years, including full marathons. But *I* could use some, so thanks—I’ll probably need someone urging me on after the first half of the race.”

“It’ll be my pleasure. What’s the longest you’ve run before this?”

“I’ve done two ten-Ks so far and decided to double that this time. I hope I make it.”

Noticing Shelby returning from her phone call, he said to Emery, “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you do—just don’t tell her that.”

The three chatted about random things for a few minutes, but as the starting time drew near, Shelby left them to catch a ride to her assigned water station. Jonah and Emery continued chatting with each other and a few people standing near them. They settled in toward the back of the hundreds of runners since neither would be among those with a legitimate chance of winning the race. The bibs they’d been given at the check-in tables had chips in them that would trigger their personal clocks when they stepped on the timer mats at the start and end of the race. From their position, they would soon be out of the crowd and not have to worry about being jostled by other runners.

“So, what do you do for a living, Jonah? Shelby didn’t say.”

He laughed. “Rarely does. She says that’s so we’ll have to ask each other questions in order to learn about one another. If we already know the answers, then there’s not much to talk about without trying to figure out what to ask.”

“Yup, that’s Shelby,” she replied as she stretched one leg and then the other.

He tried to ignore how lean and sexy her legs were and glanced at his watch for a distraction. They only had a few minutes before the starter pistol went off at the front of the race. “To answer your question, I’m Parker’s partner at New Horizons. I owned a construction business in North Carolina, where I was born and raised. Parker and I went to college together and just happened to fall into the same business a few states apart. After my divorce, I took him up on his offer to move here and become a partner. He’d developed a great reputation and had more contracts than he could handle—especially when they were trying to adopt at the time.”

Emery’s eyes had widened. “I didn’t know you were Parker’s partner! I mean, I knew he had one. I just didn’t know your name. You built the Sunset Ridge condo complex, right?” When he nodded, she continued. “I live there now. I’m a real estate agent, and when they first came on the market, I fell in love with the neighborhood and the condos and ended up buying one.”

“Tell me you got one overlooking the pond and the woods behind it.” That was his favorite building out of the eight in the entire complex, which had finally been completed three months ago. The first four finished buildings, including the one Emery lived in, had sold out quickly while New Horizons continued to work on the others. Jonah had considered buying one of the units but hadn’t felt like moving again.

Her face lit up. “I most certainly did! I got the north corner unit. I absolutely love the setup.”

Jonah chuckled. “Well, I can’t take credit for the design—I’m no architect—but I will say that was one of my favorite places I’ve ever built. It’s a great neighborhood with all the amenities.”

“It’s beautiful. You should be proud.”

Warmth filled him. It’d been a long time since anyone told him he should be proud of something he’d built. His mom and sister had been his biggest supporters, and they were both gone now. His father had left when the twins had been five years old, and they’d never heard from him again. Jonah had no clue if the man was dead or alive and, honestly, didn’t care either way. His mother had worked her ass off to raise her children, and as far as Jonah was concerned, she was the only parent he ever had.

Before he could respond, the sound of the starter pistol echoing reached them a few blocks from where someone fired it. While they still had to wait for the crowd in front of them to begin moving, everyone in their section was getting ready. The race would take them a little over thirteen miles along the streets of Tampa.

Ahead of them, the sea of runners began to surge forward, its momentum making its way toward the back of the crowd. Jonah glanced up at the sky and sent a silent prayer and message to Jana, as he always did. “This is for you, sis.”

CHAPTER 2

After Emery and Jonah stepped on the timer mat at the starting line, it took about five minutes before the mob of runners thinned out. She didn’t know what Jonah usually paced at during races but was grateful he matched hers. Hopefully, he’d been honest and wasn’t sticking with her just because Shelby had asked him to. Having only moved to Tampa nine months ago, she hadn’t had time to make many friends between work, learning the area, running, volunteering at a breast cancer awareness charity, and joining a cancer survivor’s support group. That’s where she had met Shelby. Unfortunately, Emery’s new friend wasn’t a runner—she preferred to walk the 5Ks she entered.

Her move to the south had been a spur-of-the-moment decision a little over a year ago, after another failed relationship that only lasted a few weeks—her fault, not his, as usual. Even though her two sisters and their families still lived in New York, her parents had retired to Sarasota on the Gulf Coast, and Emery visited them there numerous times. She'd gotten tired of the nasty winters up north and wanted to live somewhere warmer. Once she'd made the decision to move closer to her parents, getting her real estate license transferred to Florida took several months. In the meantime, she'd packed up her condo and got ready to relocate as soon as possible. For the first two months in Tampa, she'd stayed at a reasonably priced AirBNB while she scouted the area for something permanent.

She hadn't lied earlier when talking about Sunset Ridge with Jonah. She'd initially toured the condos at Sunset Ridge in preparation for a client's appointment and immediately knew she wanted to buy one of them. Not wanting to miss out, she chose the nicest available unit she could find, contacted one of the mortgage companies she regularly dealt with later that day, and closed a few weeks later.

They ran in silence for a bit, well past the first-mile marker, when Emery got curious enough to ask Jonah a question before they got to the point where she'd have to choose between running, talking, and breathing. Two out of three would be all she could manage after the fourth mile or so. "So, who are you running for?"

Keeping his gaze on the road ahead, he didn't pretend not to understand. "My twin sister lost her battle with breast cancer four years ago. I started doing charity races after her diagnosis because I felt helpless, even though I took her to all her doctor appointments and chemo treatments and cared for her after the double mastectomy. I couldn't find a cure for cancer, but I can do this to raise money for those who could find one. In high school, I was on the cross-country track team, but after I started college, I only ran about two or three miles a few times a week. So it took a while before I was in shape enough to run a half marathon and then a full one."

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks. It was hard enough to watch our great-aunt die of the same thing ten years ago, but she was seventy-two. Jana was only thirty—it just didn’t seem fair. She should have had a long, happy life in front of her, but she never fell in love, got married, and had kids like she dreamed of doing.” When he brought his hand to his face this time, he swiped one eye and then the other.

Emery gave him a moment to collect himself. Survivor’s guilt not only affected family members of those who’d died but also the people who kicked cancer’s ass like she and Shelby had.

They hit the two-and-a-half mile mark when he finally asked, “So, who are you running for?”

Stationed every thirty feet or so were tables holding cups filled with water or electrolyte drinks to keep the runners hydrated. Before responding to his question, she grabbed a paper cup filled with water from a volunteer, took a few sips, and poured the rest over her head. The temperature had risen in the past hour and would continue to do so.

“Myself,” she said. “I was diagnosed with stage one breast cancer six years ago when I was twenty-four. Caught it early enough that I went into remission after a lumpectomy and a round of radiation treatments. Three years ago, I was diagnosed a second time. Even though we caught it early again, I didn’t want to risk rinsing and repeating every few years, so I opted for the double mastectomy and reconstructive surgery. I started running after the first remission with some women from a survivor’s support group. It gave me something to focus on besides working and worrying if I would face a recurrence.”

“I’m sorry you went through all that, but I’m glad you kicked the big C’s ass—not once but twice. Even though my sister and I talked a lot about what she was going through, I still can imagine what goes through a woman’s mind or anyone’s mind when they get that life-altering diagnosis. My worst medical issue was an appendectomy at age thirteen.”

She knew exactly what he was talking about. A high school friend had died of leukemia during their junior year of high school. Emery had thought she knew the fear her friend felt during the course of the disease, but it was nothing compared to her own fear following her first diagnosis. “I don’t wish it on anyone. There’s a cycle of being terrified to hopeful and back again. Like I said, rinse and repeat. I’ve met some women in the support groups who refused to believe they might succumb to the cancer, and some denied it to the very end. I knew one woman who never told her family or friends until a month before she died. She thought she would beat it and the only support she needed was from our group. With her family, she somehow acted like nothing was wrong for almost a year—even hid her chemo treatments and said she was dieting when anyone questioned her weight loss. Her poor family only found out when she collapsed one day—she fell into a coma and never came out of it. No one had a chance to tell her they loved her or anything else. It was so sad.”

Emery stopped talking for a few reasons. The subject was depressing, and she figured Jonah felt bad enough over losing his sister. She was also getting winded as they hit the four-mile mark.

It wasn’t until the start of their seventh mile before her pace began to slow. True to his word, Jonah stuck with her, matching stride. He was an attractive man—Shelby hadn’t been wrong. He stood a few inches taller than her. His black hair had the occasional gray strand, which she didn’t mind, and his warm brown eyes held hints of sadness she completely understood. The race had to be a painful reminder of his loss, and being paired with Emery and her medical history probably made things worse for him. Regardless, he didn’t appear to want to leave her behind.

Emery hadn’t had a decent relationship with a man that lasted longer than two months since her breasts tried to kill her for the second time. She now found it hard to be intimate with a man, much less romantic, despite the well-done autologous tissue reconstruction using tissue from her abdomen. Since she started running, her body had trimmed down, especially her lower half, so there’d only been enough fat and skin available

to give her two A-cups—a far cry from her former 36-Cs. She wasn't as flat-chested as she'd been following the double mastectomy, but she still wasn't used to the drastic reduction even after three years.

“C'mon, Emery! You've got this!” Jonah handed her a cup of PowerAde, which she quickly downed. He then grabbed one from another volunteer, drank it, and tossed it aside.

“Slow your pace if you need to, but you're doing great.”

Sparked by his encouragement, instead of decreasing her speed, she increased it—not by much, but enough that she stayed abreast of several other runners to her right.

Emery continued the race in silence, not wanting to exert her body beyond its limits. Every quarter of a mile or so, Jonah cheered her on, giving her the momentum to keep going.

Around Mile #10, they passed Shelby along with a few other women from their support group at one of the watering stations. They all screamed and whistled as Emery and Jonah passed, raising her spirits even more.

She could do this. Only three more miles to go. Grabbing another PowerAde, she drank it and pushed onward.

A while later, uncertain of how much time and distance had passed, she was surprised when Jonah announced, “There's the finish line, Emery! C'mon! Pick it up, and let's finish with a bang!”

Sweat poured off her as her legs burned and her lungs heaved. She couldn't believe she was about to reach the end of her first half-marathon. If it hadn't been for Jonah, she'd probably have stopped running and just walked the rest of the race, starting around Mile #8. But his morale-boosting had been exactly what she needed to finish strong.

Emery nearly collapsed from exhaustion and relief when they stepped on the timer mat, but Jonah grabbed her around the waist and held her up as she burst out crying, overjoyed by what she'd achieved. Someone wrapped shiny thermal

blankets around each of their shoulders so they wouldn't get cold and shiver as their soaking wet shirts and shorts dried.

Jonah moved them away from the finish line to avoid the incoming runners and their families and friends waiting with congratulatory signs.

A female EMT stepped over to them. "Are you both okay?"

"I'm good," Jonah replied. "Emery?"

Still trying to catch her breath, she nodded. "Yeah . . . good . . . just . . . need . . . a few . . . minutes."

The uniformed woman seemed satisfied with her response. "Okay. If you need help, just flag one of us down." It was then she noticed numerous men and women in uniform scattered about, checking on the runners as they crossed the finish line.

Jonah walked her around the recovery area to prevent their muscles from stiffening and ensure they drank enough PowerAde. It was recommended that runners drink about forty ounces of electrolyte beverages immediately following the race. Emery paced herself, not wanting to have too much too quickly because she'd probably puke—not something she wanted to do in front of the man who'd been so nice to her.

His breathing returned to normal faster than hers—he had a better lung capacity after all the half and full marathons he'd run—but Emery felt better and stronger after about twenty minutes. It would take two to four days to recover fully—and she would have to eat a lot of carbs and drink plenty of water and electrolyte drinks.

"Thank you so much, Jonah. I don't think I could've done that without you."

He grinned at her. "You're stronger than you think. I'm sure you would've managed without me."

"That's nice of you to say, but I doubt it's true."

"I don't doubt it. You did great."

They walked around some more, stopping several times to stretch their legs as the winners of the gold, silver, and bronze

medals were announced on a nearby stage.

“Did you bring clothes to change into?” he asked.

“Yeah, I have sweats but left them in my car.”

“I did the same too. Which parking lot did you use?”

She patted her chest to ensure her vehicle’s key fob was still hanging from her neck, which it was. “The convention center’s parking garage.”

“I’m in the South Regional Garage, which is right near there. We can shuttle over together, and I’ll make sure you get to your car okay.”

“Oh, you don’t have—”

“Emery, I want to,” he interrupted. “Can’t have my star apprentice walking around alone after running thirteen miles?”

The shy smile that’d crossed her face when she’d first been introduced to him returned. “Okay. Thanks. I’d like that.”

CHAPTER 3

Jonah tried to concentrate on the contract on his computer, but his gaze kept flickering to his iPhone sitting on his desk. It was four days since the half-marathon, and he couldn’t get Emery out of his head. After escorting her to her vehicle that afternoon, he asked for her phone number to check up on her later. A thirteen-mile run was strenuous, especially for someone who’d never done it before, and he wanted to make sure she was hydrating enough and not suffering from any ill effects. At least, that’s what he’d told himself.

She’d found a pen and paper in her car and jotted down his number before retrieving her cell phone from a compartment between the front seats and entering his number into it. After arriving home, he’d taken a shower and then pulled the high-carb pasta dish he’d prepared the night before out of the

refrigerator. While it was reheating in the microwave, he sent his first text to make sure she got home okay and was drinking and eating something. Two hours later, he hadn't been able to resist calling her. They'd been texting every few hours ever since about anything and everything, with an occasional phone call thrown in.

It felt like he was back in high school and stumbling his way through getting to know a girl he had a crush on. His last date had been a few months before Jana had died—four-and-a-half years ago. The only reason he'd gone on it was because his sister had insisted when one of his friends set him up on a blind date—it had failed miserably. Jonah just couldn't enjoy himself or the woman he was with because he was so worried about a test Jana had been scheduled for a few days later.

He was currently waiting to hear if Emery had sold a \$750,000 house she was showing to a client for the second time. It would be a nice commission for her if they bought it. The appointment was at 10:00 a.m., and it was now 11:30.

Ugh. Staring at the thing won't make her respond any faster, asshole. Get some work done!

Just as he focused on the computer screen again, the door to his office opened, and his business partner strode in with Spanky on his heels. The giant, brown Bullmastiff didn't come to the office often anymore, usually staying home to keep Shelby company while the kids were in school, but occasionally Parker brought him in. The big lug ran over to Jonah for an ear scratch while his owner sat on the other side of the desk.

“Hey, Spanks. What're you doing here today?”

The dog moaned in delight while Parker said, “Shelby had a few errands to run this morning and was then having lunch with Kat and some of the other Trident women, so I took the big guy on my rounds to check in with the foremen.”

“Everything running smoothly?”

“Like butter, aside from a lumber order mix-up for the Regency Arms renovation. I've already taken care of it,

though.”

Before Jonah could say anything else, his phone dinged. He snatched it up without hesitation and used his fingerprint to unlock the screen.

Emery: *They put in a bid and it was accepted!!!!!! Yay!!!*

He quickly typed a response into iMessenger.

That's awesome! Congratulations!

Dots appeared, disappeared, and reappeared as if she were typing another text. After thirty seconds or so, it popped up.

Emery: *Would you like to go out to dinner with me tonight to celebrate? My treat!*

Jonah paused momentarily, wondering if this was a friend-zone thing or an actual date. He was surprised to realize he really wanted it to be the latter.

Sure! But let me treat you this time.

Emery: *Why don't we go Dutch?*

Well, that sounded like a friend-zone thing, right? Damn. Had he screwed up? Honestly, it didn't matter right then because he was looking forward to seeing her again.

Sounds good. Where and what time?

Emery: *Do you know Donovan's Bar & Grill?*

Yeah, I like that place. 6:00?

Emery: *Perfect. See you then.*

Great! Congrats again!

Emery: *Thanks!*

Smiling, he set the phone on his desk and suddenly remembered he wasn't alone. Parker was staring at him with a wide grin on his face.

“What?”

Parker snorted. “I'm just wondering who put a smile on your face. I was starting to think you forgot how.”

“What do you mean? I smile.”

“Not like that, you don’t. So, who is she? Shelby’s friend Emery?”

He gave his partner the finger. “Get out so I can work. And take Spanky with you—he’s got those smelly farts again.”

The dog groaned as if insulted.

“If he was farting, we’d need gas masks.” Getting to his feet, Parker shook his head. “He didn’t mean it, Spanky. He’s just mad I’m bustin’ his chops. C’mon, I’ve got new treats in my office for you. Let’s leave the grumpy asshole alone so he can go back to smiling about whatever Emery said to him.”

“Fuck you.”

“You’re not my type, my friend.” He paused in the doorway. “She’s a nice woman, Jonah, and you know Jana would be pissed that you’ve gone this long without dating anyone. Don’t pass up the opportunity to see where it goes.”

He walked out the door with the dog following before Jonah could respond. Parker knew about his four-year dry spell only because they’d had a few beers after dinner one night at the Christiansens’s, and Jonah’s lips had loosened enough for the confession to fall from them. Thankfully, he only lived a few blocks from them and often walked over to their house when invited, so he wouldn’t have to worry about drinking and driving.

Staring at his cell phone, he thought about what Parker had said. Jana *would* be pissed at him if she saw him these past few years. Whenever he thought he was moving forward, a bout of depression would swoop in and swallow him. He should probably talk to a doctor about that, but he was stubborn and looked for other ways to deal with it, like running or working long hours. Before Jana’s diagnosis, he’d been the life of the party, but between her death and his divorce, dating hadn’t appealed to him—until now.

Emery’s face popped into his mind, and he smiled, thinking that Jana would’ve liked her—he sure as heck did.

Hopefully, by the end of dinner, he would know if he had a chance with her.

CHAPTER 4

Emery was surprised when all her fears and nervousness disappeared once they were seated in a booth at the Irish pub she'd been to several times. It was cozy and inviting. The food was fantastic and not too expensive—the perfect place for a date.

But was this a date? She still didn't know and was uncertain if she wanted it to be one. Okay, that was a lie.

She was attracted to Jonah more than she could ever remember being so with a man. Something about him brightened her days every time they texted back and forth or spoke on the phone. The more she got to know him, the more she craved seeing him again. That's what had prompted her to blurt out the invitation to have dinner tonight. Celebrating her most recent sale, a big one at that, had been the perfect excuse for them to get together.

Her nerves had been shot earlier as she'd tried on outfit after outfit until finally settling on a blue knit, three-quarter sleeve dress that hung to her knees and hugged her curves. The way the top was designed made her chest look a little bigger than it really was. Then she'd spent another half hour choosing her jewelry and shoes before styling her hair and putting on just the right amount of makeup for the evening. She couldn't remember the last time she'd put so much effort into getting dressed for a date.

God, she had to stop thinking of that word until she knew if Jonah felt the same way too.

He'd been waiting for her in front of the restaurant when she'd pulled into the parking lot. As she approached him, his smile grew. He'd kissed her on the cheek and given her a

colorful bouquet of flowers while congratulating her again. It could've been taken as a friendly gesture or a romantic one.

Once they'd been seated and their drinks ordered, she relaxed as she told him all about the home she'd sold. As a building contractor, he had asked a lot of questions about the construction and design, which she'd answered to the best of her ability. Their conversation flowed easily, as if they'd known each other longer than four days.

When the waitress returned with their drinks and asked if they knew what they wanted to eat, they had to request a few more minutes to decide because neither had even glanced at the menu.

"What looks good to you?" Jonah asked as his gaze scanned the menu he was holding.

She pointed at the special's board hanging on the wall nearby. "I think I'm going to get the pasta primavera. I can't believe I'm still craving carbs from the race."

A deep chuckle erupted from his chest, sending goose bumps skittering across her skin. "Yeah, I usually crave them for a week after the half and full marathons. In fact, I think I'll get the cheeseburger macaroni—my mom used to put ground beef in her macaroni and cheese when we were growing up. To this day, it's still one of my favorite comfort foods."

The waitress chose that moment to return for their orders. Once she left them again, Emery sipped her white wine. "Are your parents still around?"

Pinching his lips together, he shook his head. "No. Mom had a massive heart attack in her sleep eight years ago. Our sperm donor left when Jana and I were five. Never saw him again, and I couldn't care less. It sucked for Mom, though, because she had to file for a Publication Divorce—you know, put an announcement in the newspapers since her lawyers couldn't find him to serve him with the divorce papers. She never got a penny of child support but did everything she could to give us a good life. I miss her and Jana so much." He picked up his draft beer. "Sorry. I didn't mean to get so blah there."

“No worries. I get it. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks. I have a few aunts, uncles, and cousins, but they’re scattered up and down the East Coast now. We’re all in a private Facebook group so we can keep in touch. What about your family?”

With a smile, she said, “My folks live in Sarasota, and my two sisters are still in New York with their husbands and kids. My parents moved down here about six years ago after Dad got tired of shoveling snow every winter. I don’t blame him—I got sick of the cold, too, so I finally relocated here.”

“Why not closer to them? I mean, it’s not that far, but it’s still an hour away.”

Emery shrugged and waited a moment while the waitress returned with their salads. “I love my folks, really I do, but a little distance works for both of us. Besides, they have their own life down there in a sixty-five-plus neighborhood. Dad golfs a lot, and my mom has a women’s club and her bi-weekly bridge games, among other things. We usually meet about halfway between us for lunch every two weeks or so.”

“That’s great.”

Spearing a tomato with her fork, Emery said, “You mentioned before that you’re divorced but didn’t say anything about kids. Do you have any?”

“God, no!” He grimaced. “Sorry, that came out wrong. I would love to have children someday with the right person, but I’m grateful Dara and I didn’t have any together. About a year after we were married, I kind of knew we made a mistake, but I tried to stick it out. We’d just celebrated our second anniversary when I found out she was cheating on me right after Jana’s cancer was diagnosed, so I ended it right then.”

“I don’t blame you. I would’ve done the same.”

“Between the divorce and losing Jana only a few years after we lost Mom, I couldn’t stay in Delaware anymore. They were both cremated, so I had their ashes interred down here. I think they would’ve liked Tampa. I do.” He hung his head.

“Crap. Sorry, I keep veering into sad stories, and we’re supposed to be celebrating your big sale.”

She laughed. “Don’t be sorry. I asked a question, and you answered it.”

“My answer was a lot longer than necessary. You don’t need my negativity in your life.”

He looked so embarrassed, and she felt bad for him. Reaching across the table, she touched the back of his hand. “Jonah, I like you—positivity, negativity, and all. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t be here tonight. We all have our ups and downs in life, which make us who we are. You had a shitty marriage and lost your mom and sister. I had cancer and lost my breasts. It’s all a part of life. All we can do is move forward and make the rest of our time on this earth the best it can be.”

At first, he didn’t respond—just stared at her. After a few moments, he turned his hand over so they were palm to palm. “I like you, too, Emery. And you’re right. It’s time for me to move forward.”

CHAPTER 5

A week ago, if anyone had told Jonah he’d be on a date tonight with a beautiful woman who cooked him dinner at her place, he would’ve thought they were crazy. But here he was, finishing the last of a delicious chicken marsala while sitting across from said woman—and loving every minute of it.

He’d honestly thought his marriage to Dara would’ve been his first and last one, but after getting to know Emery during the previous seven days, the idea of a long-term relationship didn’t sound so dreadful anymore. Not just dating long-term, but living together and eventually getting married and having kids. Jonah had never met another woman like her before—Dara, at her best, couldn’t hold a candle to Emery. She was

funny, thoughtful, kind, generous, sexy as hell, and so much more. She didn't monopolize the conversation with sentences filled with "I" and "me," something he'd regretfully not noticed while dating his ex-wife. Emery asked him questions and listened to his answers. They had debates—he didn't expect them to see eye to eye on everything—and she respected his point of view as much as he did in return. Then, they'd agree to disagree and move on.

When they'd finally left Donovan's the other night, after three hours of talking, they'd left the waitress a nice tip for occupying the table for so long, and then Jonah had walked Emery to her car. He'd found the courage to ask her for a goodnight kiss, and sparks flew between them when their lips met. Jonah would've given anything to take her home that night if she let him, but he hadn't wanted to rush things.

He hadn't been with a woman since Dara—there had been too much going on with Jana, and then his grief had taken over when she was gone. He and his sister had that twin thing that many others had—a connection so strong that, when she died, it was almost like he'd lost half his heart. Losing her had been far more painful than realizing the woman he'd loved enough to marry had cheated on him.

Yesterday, Emery met him for lunch near his office and then invited him over for dinner tonight. Her expression had been shy yet earnest, and he wouldn't have said no if his life depended on it.

Using a napkin, he wiped his mouth. "That was the best meal I've had in ages."

Emery smiled. "Thanks. It's my great-grandmother's recipe that's been passed down through the family."

She stood and picked up their empty plates, and Jonah quickly got to his feet. "Let me help clean up. It's the least I could do."

Minutes later, everything was put away in the dishwasher, the refrigerator, or a cabinet, and her kitchen/dining room combo was nice and neat again. She'd decorated the condo in warm earth tones, and the bay window in the living room,

overlooking the pond, was filled with flourishing houseplants. It was a home as opposed to his own place, which looked like the bachelor pad it was. He had a few decorations that had belonged to his mother or Jana, but other than that, it was kind of blah.

As she bent over to reach the far end of the table to wipe it down with a sponge, Jonah's gaze zoomed in on her heart-shaped ass. He almost groaned aloud. It'd been a long time since he'd been with a woman, and any thoughts about not wanting to rush her fled from his mind. She'd been an active participant in their kiss the other night and as breathless as he'd been when it had ended. Her pupils had been dilated, and the pulse at her neck had been near supersonic.

With his cock hard as a rock, he took a quick moment while her back was to him to adjust himself and then leaned his ass against the counter and watched her. She straightened the teal blue table mats and matching salt and pepper shakers before turning around, walking toward him, and tossing the sponge in the sink. Jonah couldn't resist. He gently grabbed her around the waist and pulled her between his legs. Surprise morphed into lust in her beautiful brown eyes.

“Permission to give the cook a kiss?” he asked.

Smiling, Emery ran her hands up his chest, over his shoulders, and then around his neck. Her eyelids grew heavy as she leaned into him. “Permission granted.”

Their mouths met, and Emery quickly parted her lips, inviting him in. Jonah swept his tongue inside to duel with hers. His hold on her hips tightened, and the groan he'd been holding in rumbled from his chest as she ground her pelvis against his hard-on. Shifting, he spun them around, reversing their positions.

Leaving her mouth, he kissed along her jawline to her ear. “Tell me now if we should stop, sweetheart. I haven't been with a woman since before my divorce, and I'm hanging on by a thread here.”

His heart sank a little when she pulled away from him, but there was still hope because she didn't release his neck. Her

gaze roamed his face as she bit her bottom lip for several heartbeats. “Just be honest with me. Is this us just having fun or the start of something more? Fun is fine—it’s been a long time for me, too, so if you want to be friends with benefits for now, I’m okay with that. But I feel like there’s something more between us, and I’m not sure if you feel the same.”

He cupped her chin. “Sweetheart, you’re the first woman I’ve been attracted to in a very, *very* long time. It’s not just your beautiful face and gorgeous body. It’s your intellect and humor. Parker’s been busting my chops, calling me a giddy, love-sick school girl because, apparently, my face lights up every time you text or call. Since I met you, I’ve been happier—a lot happier. I’d forgotten what it was like to talk to a woman I felt chemistry with—someone who sparked my interest on every level. Hell, I’ve never even met another woman like you. We’ve only known each other a week, but it seems much longer than that to me. I’m already starting to forget what life was like before you entered it. Is that a good enough answer?”

“A lot better than I expected, yes.” She briefly kissed him. “I feel the same way. I . . . I want to make love to you tonight, but I’m nervous that when . . .” Her body stiffened a little.

His brow furrowed. “When what?” She hesitated, and he rubbed his hands up and down her arms. “Talk to me, Emery. I doubt you can say anything that would turn me off.”

Her gaze and hands dropped to his chest, and she sighed. “I’ve been very self-conscious since my mastectomy and reconstructive surgery. The doctors did a great job, but I don’t have a lot of sensation in them, and they’re much smaller than they used to be.”

A blush spread across her cheeks and neck, which he found absolutely adorable. He brushed his lips across her forehead. “I would never judge your appearance—not after what you survived. I’m not like most guys, Emery. Outward beauty isn’t the only thing that makes a woman intriguing and sensual to me. If I can help my sister change the dressings after her mastectomy, I can handle anything.” He groaned, then chuckled. “And, no, I’m not comparing you to my sister

‘cause that’s just gross ... I mean ... um. Oh, God, please help me get my foot out of mouth!”

Laughter erupted from Emery as her shoulders relaxed. She leaned into him again. “Here, let me replace your foot with my tongue.”

Yeah, he wasn’t turning that down.

Their mouths and bodies molded together as they touched and tantalized each other. Jonah dragged his hands down her sides until he cupped her ass. He squeezed the cheeks a few times before lifting her and pulling away just long enough to say, “Put your legs around me.”

Once she followed his order, he carried her out of the kitchen, through the living room, and into her bedroom. What it looked like, he couldn’t say because his main focus was on Emery and how badly she turned him on. He’d never felt a near-instant connection to a woman before her and had a passing thought that he’d have to send Shelby some flowers for her matchmaking.

When Emery tugged his white dress shirt from his jeans, he stepped back and unbuttoned it. While he did that, she pulled her royal blue shirt over her head, revealing a bra in the same color. Her breasts were small like she’d said, but even without them, she’d still be sexy as sin to him. Her silhouette curved in at the waist before flaring again at her hips.

His shirt joined hers on the floor, followed by their shoes, his jeans, and the black knee-length skirt she’d been wearing. Skimpy panties that matched her bra barely covered her. A thin, well-healed scar horizontally crossed her abdomen right above the elastic band. That was where the surgeons took the autologous tissue to reconstruct her breasts. His gaze didn’t linger for two reasons—one, it didn’t bother him at all, and two, she was probably just as self-conscious about it as her breasts.

Taking in her long, athletic runner’s legs, he ran his gaze up her lithe body until it met her brown eyes. “You’re stunning, Emery.”

Her blush returned, and before she could deny his statement or brush it off, he added, "I'm not saying that because you're standing half-naked in front of me or to make you feel better about your scars. I'm saying it because it's true." He stepped forward and briefly kissed her lips. "You're the most beautiful woman I've ever met, and never once think that's just a line of bull because it's not. God, I want you so much, but we'll take this as slowly as you need to."

She ran her hands through the smattering of dark hair on his chest and spoke softly, as if not wanting the sound of her voice to break the spell they both seemed to be consumed by. "I can see in your eyes that you're not just saying that. For the first time in a very long time, maybe even ever, I feel beautiful, and that's because of you and how you look at me and touch me. Please make love to me, Jonah."

Not needing to be told twice, he took possession of her mouth, and after a moment, she reached back and unclasped her bra, adding it to the growing pile on the floor. Their hands seemed to be everywhere at once, mapping out each other's bodies.

Emery moved her lips to his neck, licking, kissing, and sucking as she went lower and lower until she knelt before him. And God help him, the sight of her almost brought him to his own knees. Grasping the waist of his boxer briefs, she slid them down his legs, and he stepped out of them. His cock stood at attention between them, hard, pulsating, and weeping with need. Her tongue ran over her lips before she leaned forward, wrapped her hand around his length, and swiped a pearl of pre-cum from the tip with her tongue.

His knees shook, forcing him to sit on the edge of the bed a second before her mouth enveloped him. Jonah gasped at the sensations swirling through him and somehow managed to keep his hips from bucking forward to shove his cock into her throat. The combination of wet heat, her firm grip, and the moans emanating from her and vibrating through him had his eyes almost rolling back into his head. He could barely keep them open but was determined to watch her. It was decadent debauchery at its finest.

He let her indulge herself until he was almost too far gone. Gently grabbing her hair, he pulled her off him. “Come up here, sweetheart, before this is over too soon for me. You’re an angel with a devil’s mouth.”

CHAPTER 6

When Emery stood, Jonah hooked his index fingers under the elastic of her panties and slowly pulled them down. This was when she usually felt embarrassed about her body—when she was completely naked in front of a man. There’d only been two men she’d been with since her surgery, and neither relationship had lasted long after an initial night of sex. But with Jonah, she felt different. Maybe it was how he gazed at her as if he would never tire of doing so. Perhaps it was his earlier words, spoken in such an undaunted yet comforting tone. Whatever it was, it kept her mind off all the thoughts that would’ve had her trying to cover herself from his intense gaze.

She wasn’t the only one feeling the intense chemistry between them. Jonah pulled her hips forward, then shifted on the bed for her to lie down beside him. His kisses burned like a branding iron, imprinting on her skin everywhere his lips touched. His five o’clock shadow rasped against her, giving her goosebumps. As she’d done earlier, he started at her neck and worked his way down. He reverently kissed her sternum, then looked up at her. “Can I touch your breasts?”

She knew she was falling head over heels for the man at that moment. Neither of the other men she’d been with had thought to ask that question and one hadn’t seemed to want to touch them at all, which, of course, had made her feel awkward. Following her recovery from the mastectomy, her plastic surgeon reconstructed new nipples and areolae. A star-shaped incision had been made to form the new nipples, and then tattoos were added to shade in the new areolae. While they appeared real, and she had some feeling in the

surrounding tissue, she had no sensation in her nipples. However, that didn't mean she didn't enjoy the thought of watching Jonah play with them.

“Yes.” Her response was breathy as she felt pussy grow wet.

His hand wandered down her torso as he licked and kissed the breast closest to him. When his finger brushed over her clit, Emery moaned loudly and clutched the comforter with one hand and the back of Jonah's head with the other.

His fingers went lower, drawing some of her juices from her slit and back to her clit. When he rubbed it with the perfect pace and pressure, Emery couldn't keep her eyes open anymore, and she arched her back.

“Does it feel good?” he asked, sending her higher and higher.

A little nip on the inside of her arm had her eyelids flying up again to find him grinning at her. “Yes,” she responded as she squirmed under his touch and raked her fingernails over his shoulder. “It—it feels amazing. Please don't stop.”

His thumb replaced his fingers, and then two of them entered her. She widened her legs, silently urging him for more. He shifted so he could kiss her again as his fingers increased in speed and had her racing toward an orgasm with the strength of a tsunami. When it hit, she screamed into his mouth as wave after torturous wave tumbled over her. Bright multi-colored bokeh lights flashed before her eyes as her head spun around and around. Up was down, and down was up.

Emery was breathless, and her heart pounded in her chest as Jonah eased her back to earth. Limp and sated, she lay there watching as he reached over the side of the bed and found his pants. A moment later, he was retrieving a condom from his wallet. As much as she wanted to help him put it on, she had no energy to do so.

Once sheathed, he crawled over her and rubbed his chin against hers. “Ready, sweetheart?”

“If you're going to destroy my brain again? Absolutely.”

His chuckle started low and then got louder. “Emery, Emery, Emery. I can’t remember the last time I laughed during sex—hell, I can’t remember the last time I *had* sex. But I love it.” He brushed his lips across hers. “And I love you too.” When her eyes widened, he quickly added, “I know it might be too soon to say those words, but that’s how I feel. This is the start of something wonderful—something I didn’t even know I was looking for.”

She reached up and caressed his jaw. “I feel the same way. I think I started falling in love with you when you walked me to the car after the marathon.”

There would be plenty of time for more declarations of love later. Grasping his cock, she guided him to her entrance which was still soaked. Slowly, he eased in, but she wrapped her legs around his hips and urged him to go deep. She never felt as complete as she did the moment he was fully inside her. She knew in her heart this was her soul mate—the man who’d been made for her.

Jonah pulled almost entirely out of her and plunged in again. His hands went under her upper arms and grabbed hold of her shoulders. With every thrust, he held her in place. This time, she barely had a moment to realize it was coming before her climax vaulted her into a spiraling abyss. He fucked her through the orgasm, then stiffened and roared his own release.

Minutes later, he cleaned them both up with a wet hand towel and then climbed under the covers she was holding up for him. She curled into his chest, and he kissed her forehead. “Thank you.”

She glanced up at him. “For what?”

“Moving forward with me.”

ABOUT SAMANTHA COLE

USA Today Bestselling Author and Award-Winning Author Samantha Cole is a retired policewoman and former paramedic. Using her life experiences and training, she strives to find the perfect mix of suspense and romance for her readers to enjoy.

AWARDS

Wannabe in Wyoming (co-authored by J.B. Havens) won the bronze medal in the 2021 Readers' Favorite Awards in the General Romance category.

Scattered Moments in Time won the gold medal in the 2020 Readers' Favorite Awards in the Fiction Anthology category.

The Road to Solace won the silver medal in the 2017 Readers' Favorite Awards in the Contemporary Romance category.

Samantha has over thirty-five books published in several series and a few standalone novels. A full list can be found on her website - www.samanthacoleauthor.com.

Newsletter—samanthacoleauthor.com/newsletter-signup

BookBub—www.bookbub.com/authors/samantha-a-cole

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Instagram—www.instagram.com/samanthacoleauthor



THE BREAKFAST PROPOSAL

by Zoe York

Contemporary romance

Hockey romance

Hayden Calhoun missed out on the NHL draft because he stayed in Pine Harbour to become a teen dad instead. Now he has another chance at making the big game, and he's convinced his girlfriend to take a chance on this once-in-a-lifetime adventure with him. But parenting a toddler together while juggling the ups and downs of a pro hockey try out contract is a lot. Finding exactly the right moment to ask Becca Kincaid to be his wife proves trickier than he imagined!

The Breakfast Proposal

6:36 am

“Don’t look at me like that.” Hayden Calhoun paused, then groaned. “I know. I *know*. So far, it hasn’t gone exactly as planned. But I gotta be straight up with you, bud. You haven’t been helping.”

His son Charlie stared back solemnly. Then he shook his head. “No, Dada.”

Right. This was all on Hayden. It was official—he might be doing his best as a young dad and working his ass off on the ice to turn into an amazing hockey player, but when it came to planning wedding proposals, he was the worst.

He’d had a plan, and then a back-up plan, and then a *third* plan...and then hockey got in the way for a week. In the off-season.

Which wasn’t an excuse. Hayden didn’t like to be the worst at anything, but he *really* didn’t want to be the worst at getting engaged. Plus, if he didn’t get it right this time, then he’d officially be in an extended losing streak, and that wasn’t...no. He didn’t do losing streaks.

He was no stranger to competition. He liked games, and he liked strategy. He liked winning.

But the last few weeks had been like pitting himself against the universe and losing repeatedly to forces greater than himself. Like Charlie’s vomit, for example. That scuttled proposal number one.

“We need a new way to think about this,” he said out loud as he changed Charlie out of the onesie and diaper from overnight, and dressed him for the day in an outfit Hayden knew that Becca liked. “You think Mommy wants a nice breakfast? Hmm?”

“Nice,” Charlie repeated, then made the baby sign language gesture for food.

“Yes.” Hayden held up his hand for an enthusiastic slap. “Let’s go to the store.”

He poked his head into the bedroom, where Becca was fast asleep. She’d stirred when he got up with Charlie, but the early mornings were always his time. Some weeks, it was all he got with his son—like this past week, when he’d been given a last-minute opportunity to commute into Chicago for daily training with some other prospects.

And he would be back there in two more weeks, which gave them a short window of opportunity here to go home to Pine Harbour for part of the summer.

It would be even sweeter to do that and celebrate an engagement at the same time. Today was his last chance to do this privately, before they headed home tomorrow.

Fuck.

Yeah, he needed to make her the world’s greatest breakfast, and then just do it. No more crazy plans. No more treating this like a high-stakes, high-stealth pursuit called “The Engagement Mission”, starring Hayden Calhoun—boy dad, versatile hockey forward, and amateur but improving-every-day home chef.

He’d brought a lot of confidence and swagger to the mission. He came up with great plans.

And so far the score was Universe 3, Hayden 0.

He hadn’t lost three games in a row since juniors.

The good news was that, statistically, his next plan had a high probability of going off without a hitch, especially if it was radically different than the last three attempts.

“Right?” Hayden said out loud, repeating the affirmation to Charlie as they headed down the stairs. “This morning has to be the one that sticks, huh? Because your Mommy is so important to me. She holds our little family together. I want to ask her the right way. I want it to be special.”

Charlie smiled and whispered something under his breath.

“What was that?” Hayden paused when they got to the door and got down to Charlie’s level.

“Mama special.”

Hayden nodded slowly. “That’s right. And if you can repeat that new two-word sentence in an hour, I will forever be in your debt.”



two weeks ago

“Is that the ring?”

Hayden snapped the jewellery box closed as his closest friend on Chicago’s AHL affiliate team, Quinn Yancey, plopped down next to him. They’d just boarded the coach bus in Milwaukee, and they had a ninety-minute drive ahead of them.

He wouldn’t crawl into bed next to Becca until the middle of the night.

Originally, she was going to come to the game tonight, so he’d brought the ring with him in the hopes the night would be a glittering success on every level. But she’d sent a text mid-afternoon saying Charlie wasn’t feeling well, and they were going to stay home.

Hayden told himself it was fine. All they had to do was win and extend the Central Division semifinals series by one more game. He’d get another chance at the proposal of a lifetime.

But with tonight’s loss, they were done for the season. No more chances to get down on one knee on the ice, not this season.

Fuck, Becca would have loved that. Her cheeks would have gone all pink, and she’d have fought hard not to cry, but little crystal tears would have appeared on her eyelashes.

And Hayden would have scooped her into his arms, Charlie too, and kissed those tears away.

It wasn't meant to happen, though. Universe 1, Hayden 0.

"Fuck off," he growled at Quinn.

His friend just grinned at him. "Come on, show me."

"You can't see it before Becca."

"What do you mean? That's not the superstition." Quinn laughed.

"Yeah, it is," Hayden growled again. "It's bad luck."

"That's her dress on the wedding day."

"It's... All of it is bad luck. I shouldn't have even told you I had it. And why the fuck are you smiling? We lost."

"Yep. And I was pissed in the moment. But then I got on the bus and I saw you holding that rock and thought, good things are going to happen to my buddy this summer."

Hayden grinned despite himself. "Fuck off."

"Love you, too, bud. I want an invite to the wedding."

"Of course you'll get an invite." He chewed his lower lip. "Gotta get her to say yes first, though."

"Do it tonight. Wake her up, and tell her that you lost, and it sucks, but if she'll marry you and maybe give you a blowjob, all will be right with the world."

Jesus, Hayden had actually thought Quinn was having a soft romantic moment for a minute. "Fuck. Off."

Quinn was too busy cackling to respond.

But it gave Hayden an idea. Maybe it was better to propose in private. Not some clichéd moment on the ice, but something just for the two of them.

He punched Quinn's shoulder.

"Ow, you fucker. What was that for?"

"I need you to babysit tomorrow night. With—" Hayden craned his neck. "Zipper! You busy tomorrow night?"

Levi Zimmerman, the fastest skater on the team, slipped his headphones off. “Pardon?”

“I need you to babysit with Yancey tomorrow.” He didn’t trust either of them individually, but they could work together to guard over Charlie while he slept.

Zipper shrugged. “All right.”

Beside Hayden, Quinn shrugged too. “All right.”

And a plan was formed.

Hayden searched up a couple of restaurants in Chicago Becca had talked about going to, something nice enough to be worthy of a proposal, and found one that had reservation space for the next night.

As the bus turned onto the highway, his phone vibrated with a text message confirming reservations at one of Chicago’s nicest restaurants.

Excellent pivot, he thought as his phone vibrated again.

This time, the text message was from Becca. Hayden grinned as he thumbed into the message. But his grin immediately faded.

Becca: I feel like I should put a biohazard symbol on the door of the apartment...Charlie’s throwing up and I feel queasy. Maybe don’t come home???

There wasn’t a chance of hell of that.

Hayden: Nowhere else I’d rather be.

Becca: Don’t want you to get sick.

Hayden: Season’s over now.

So it didn’t matter. But his heart ached that her first instinct was to protect his health—and they’d had conversations about that over the winter, how he really couldn’t get sick now that people were watching every game he played, where every game was a chance to impress the right pro scout, and get called up or get bundled into a trade that would work out better.

Becca: I know, I'm sorry we weren't there for that, too.

God, she was so supportive.

This was what it was to be a pro hockey player, and have a family around a pro hockey career. How many times over the next decade—if he was lucky to play that long—would they have a conversation where she had to balance taking care of sick kids with protecting the health of her athlete husband?

He went still at that thought.

Her husband.

That would make him damn lucky on a whole other level.

He squeezed the ring box and tapped her name to call her.

“Hey babe,” he said quietly when she answered.

“Hey, you,” she said softly. She sounded exhausted, and he knew they weren't going to go out for a fancy dinner the next night. “I really think you should maybe crash at Quinn's.”

Beside him, his friend heard his name and glanced sideways.

Hayden shook his head. “I'm coming home to take care of you. Go to sleep. I'll pick up medicine on my way in.”

“Okay. I love you,” she murmured.

“I love you, too,” he whispered back, wishing he wasn't surrounded by his teammates. He wasn't ashamed of this being his life—their life—but he didn't like sharing the softest, most vulnerable parts of it with other people.

Which probably was a sign he should have done something else for a proposal in the first place.

He cleared his throat after he ended the call. “Never mind about the babysitting,” he said gruffly.

“Sorry, bud,” Quinn said, bumping his shoulder sideways.

Universe 2, Hayden 0. A double header of disappointment in a single day—plus the season ending loss. *Fuck.*

Hayden tucked the ring box into his pocket and refocused his plans for the week. First step: healthy family. Next week,

he could worry about proposing.

present

7:05 am

“**S**trawberries or blueberries?” Hayden asked, pointing to the fruit.

Charlie made grabby hands in the direction of both of them. “Berries.”

“*Both* is the correct answer,” Hayden agreed. “Can you say *both*?”

“Boff.”

“And ‘Mama is special’?”

“Mama special,” Charlie said with a laugh. They’d practiced the whole way to the store.

“That’s my boy.” Hayden pushed his shopping cart ahead to let a woman behind him look at the berries, too. He felt her gaze on him, trying to sort out how old he was, and what his relationship was to the toddler sitting in the baby seat of the cart.

Some of his teammates had full beards. Hayden? He shaved every day to hide the fact that he only had a dozen whiskers on his chin so far.

He knew he had a baby face. Took his multivitamins and stayed hydrated, too, plus Becca liked to put face serums on him. So that didn’t help—not that he wanted to look craggy.

But he wouldn’t mind being a few years older, just enough to actually look like he was Charlie’s dad instead of his much older brother or some shit like that.

“Pancake mix next,” he muttered. His skills didn’t extend to buying base baking ingredients. It didn’t matter how many

times his parents swore up and down it was easy.

And cooking for Becca was less about the ingredients or technique—she didn't care about that—and more about proving to her that he was all about the home life.

Which is why his third proposal attempt had been something a little more personal.

“You foiled that one, too,” he said to Charlie.

“Mama special,” Charlie said confidently.

“All right, you're forgiven.”

one week ago

Charlie bounced right back to health from the stomach bug.

Becca took a few more days to be up for eating anything more than crackers. But a week after Hayden's last game of the season, when they were all safely on the other side of it, he took his third swing at a romantic proposal with a picnic in the country.

He searched for the most romantic, private spots in a fifty-mile radius, and decided on a cute little park in the middle of nowhere that had a very shallow wading creek in it. He didn't want to give away the plot, so he casually brought it up —“Hey, do you think Charlie might be able to walk in this creek I saw on Instagram?”—and let Becca think she was an equal participant in the picnic packing. When she wasn't looking, he added some of her favourite treats, and a small bottle of champagne.

They headed out just in time for Charlie to have his afternoon nap. He fell fast asleep on the drive and stayed conked out when they arrived, so Hayden handed the picnic basket to Becca and scooped Charlie out of his car seat.

“This is really pretty,” Becca said as they wound their way down to the grassy bank of the creek. “How did you find it?”

“Just scrolling on my phone, you know.” He gave her a disarming smile. “One of those ‘you won’t believe this secret paradise is only an hour away from Chicago’ type of videos.”

Becca laughed. “I love those videos, but the places are usually swarming with everyone else who has found them. Uncle Will was saying The Grotto is just insane now.”

Back home, just north of Pine Harbour, there was a swimming hole on Georgian Bay that looked like something straight out of the Caribbean—until you arrived in person and realized the water was so frigid only the bravest took the plunge.

But the photos for the Gram were worth the trek, and thousands of people flooded the peninsula.

“Maybe we lucked out,” Hayden said. “Maybe the universe wanted us to have this place all to ourselves today.”

Becca set down the picnic basket and unfolded the blanket he’d put on top of it.

He set the ever-present diaper bag down beside it, then lay Charlie down before grabbing Becca around the waist.

“Mmm hi hello,” she murmured as he nuzzled his face into her neck.

“You’re beautiful—”

At their feet, Charlie let out a startled cry, then pushed up and glared up at them.

Becca crouched down. “Hey, buddy. You fell asleep in the truck, and now we’re at a park.”

Hayden joined them on the blanket. “Who’s hungry?”

Charlie crawled onto Becca’s lap and pressed his still-sleepy face into her shoulder. Over his tousled head, she gave Hayden a *what are you going to do* smile. “I am.”

He opened up the basket and pulled out the food. Becca gasped when she saw he’d snuck in some stuffed cherry peppers and her favourite broccoli salad—and chocolate brownies for dessert.

“We love the off season,” she whispered as she patted the brownie box with love.

He laughed. “We get brownies during the year.”

“Yeah, but like, you’ll just get two. So reasonable.” Her eyes sparkled as she counted the half-dozen brownies he’d bought the day before from the Eastern European bakery she really liked. “And are they all different?”

“That one is German chocolate. It has a layer of coconut and something on top? And that one...” He described them each as best he could, and by the time he was finished, Charlie had fully woken up and was trying to open the brownie box.

“Let’s have some salad first,” Becca suggested.

“No, Mama.” Charlie pushed the salad container away.

“Yes...”

“No...” And he smiled.

A fun game.

They played *yes no yes no* with a few more dishes before Charlie got bored and jumped up, noticing the creek. “What’s dat?”

“A river.” Hayden got up.

Becca did, too, glancing down at the containers. “I guess it’s okay like this? We haven’t opened anything.”

Hayden took her hand and together they followed their son to the river.

Their son.

When Becca told him she was pregnant, he reacted like the worst kind of eighteen-year-old boy. He’d freaked out, gone silent, and pulled inside himself...and it wasn’t until her belly started to grow and she held her chin high, not caring what anyone said about the fact she was pregnant in their final year of high school that he figured his own shit out and decided to walk beside her.

Charlie stopped a few feet short of the creek and turned to look back at them, his eyes wide with wonder. “Wow,” he said, exactly the way Becca said wow.

He was so much like her. He had Hayden’s go go go energy, but his mannerisms were all Becca. Because she was with him around the clock, while Hayden...

He stuffed his free hand into his pocket, only to remember that he’d put the ring box in the diaper bag instead so it wouldn’t be visible.

Damn it.

The feelings welling up inside him felt like they should spill out into the perfect proposal, but he thought he’d do it later, and...

“You okay?” Becca asked, glancing briefly at him before sliding her attention back to Charlie, who had plunked his butt down to look more closely at the burbling water.

“Just thinking about how much I love how much Charlie sounds like you.” Hayden’s voice sounded thick to his own ears. “I’m glad we have this time together.”

She beamed, her profile almost glowing. “Me, too. When do you hear about the prospects training schedule?”

The NHL team he was under contract with would work with him over the summer. He’d go to their development camp in a few weeks, then have assigned workouts to do carefully building him up toward a prospects showcase and then training camp. “Soon,” he nodded. “I think I’ll still be on the farm team next year. Don’t want to rush and get injured.”

At the AHL level, he was a top scorer and a fast-as-hell skater who could stay out of trouble.

In the NHL? He’d get pegged as the weakest link in the team if he wasn’t careful—and then pegged, literally, straight into the boards. One of the things that had been drummed into him by team staff and the development coaches was that twenty-year-olds were rarely ready for the big show. Outside of the elite, generational players, it was almost always better to spend time maturing where he was.

Which was fine for single guys. Twenty-year-olds with a girlfriend and a toddler son? He had other things to worry about. Like the fact their toddler would need his own room soon, and a yard would be nice, and knowing what city that room and yard should be in would also be nice.

And he wanted more for Becca. He'd saved up for more than a year to buy her the ring in that diaper bag. Skipped drinks and sipped soda water when out with the team, so she wouldn't notice him saving that money instead. Working all last summer instead of entering the draft on his second chance—because he'd missed the first one due to the pregnancy.

He'd gone undrafted because there was money that went into that, a gamble on a future he wasn't sure he'd ever have, and the future he knew he could have with Becca was a hundred times more important.

He would never, ever choose hockey over her.

But now that they were in a good place, and he'd managed to get an entry-level contract, anyway?

Now he wanted the world. For her. For Charlie. For *them*.

“Come on, Charlie, let's go back to our lunch,” Hayden called. He went to pick up his son, but Charlie rolled away, laughing, then got up and sprinted back to the picnic.

“Brownie,” Charlie said with glee.

“Salad first,” Becca called out, chasing after them.

Hayden was closer, and Charlie wobbled as he realized he was going to be thwarted on the brownie-as-first-course plan again.

Just as Hayden got to Charlie, Charlie twisted and fell onto the picnic basket. He caught himself and said “uh oh”.

Then he sat down.

And because he was sitting, Hayden stopped, and all three of them were laughing. So maybe that was why Hayden didn't immediately realize Charlie wasn't done.

Before he could stop him, Charlie grabbed the small, single-serving bottle of champagne that had been snuck into the bottom of the basket, and took off running with it in his soft, pudgy fist.

“Charlie,” Hayden called, which only made his son run faster.

Becca looked confused as Charlie tore past her. “What is he holding?”

“Champagne,” Hayden bit out, and then they were both chasing Charlie, who thought this game was so much fun.

He stopped at the water, wobbling enough that Hayden thought he might fall in.

Hayden dove.

Charlie fell back into his arms, and they came to a stop at the creek edge, Charlie’s legs dangling forward, Hayden’s elbows smarting with the collision with the ground—and the champagne bottle rolling away in the burbling stream.

“Uh oh,” Charlie whispered.

Becca slid to her butt beside them. “Okay, so the river is kind of terrifying.”

“It’s shallow enough to wade in,” Hayden gasped, holding Charlie tight. “I didn’t think it would be a problem.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Everything is chaotic with a toddler.” Then she laughed. “Why did you pack a bottle of bubbly in the basket, anyway?”

“Because it’s a picnic,” he protested. “It’s romantic.”

“Oh babe, noooo. There’s nothing romantic about a picnic with a toddler.”

Fuck.

She was right. This wasn’t as romantic as he thought it was going to be. It was stressful, and he’d projected romance onto it because that was all that was on his mind these days.

Universe 3, Hayden 0.

She leaned over and wrapped her arm around his shoulders, her breast rubbing against the side of his face.

Which was deliberate on her part, he could tell. The temptation to nip her with a gentle bite was almost overwhelming.

Her lips pressed into the top of his head. “There is something very romantic about you diving to save our kid, though.”

“You liked that?” He leaned into her more heavily. “How about you, Charlie? Did you like Daddy catching you?”

“I like it,” Charlie said.

“Hey, that’s three words!” Becca gasped. “You like it?”

Charlie nodded. Then he laughed and repeated his first three-word sentence. “I like it.”

Hayden nuzzled his nose against Charlie’s cheek. “Yeah, you do.”

Charlie climbed over Hayden and pointed to the picnic. “I like...brownies?”

Hayden groaned and stood up, giving Becca a resigned smile. “Well, that probably earns him a brownie, doesn’t it?”

She nodded and sighed. “More salad for me.”

They ate until they were full, then took their shoes off and waded into the creek. The delighted sound Becca made when she sank her toes into the soft riverbed was warm and soft and perfect.

“I love this,” she said as she grabbed his hand. “Thank you.”

“I wanted us to have a quiet family day before the madness ramps up again,” he said, and that was true. It wasn’t the whole truth, but after the *not romantic* point, he was happy to shift gears.

“Let’s never stop doing stuff like this,” she breathed. “Look at Charlie.”

He was leaning over, looking at his toes under the water. Transfixed.

And for a moment, still and not needing his parents' hands on him, so Hayden stole the opportunity to pull Becca hard against him. "We made a good kid."

She kissed him, her lips curving into a smile against his mouth. "We sure did."

Hayden slanted his head, deepening the kiss for a tender, aching sweet moment. Then he rubbed his thumb over her lower lip. "We will always do stuff like this. Promise."

They walked all the way to the bend in the creek where a small rock dam was slowing the river behind it, then splashed their way back under the dappled sunlight filtering in from the trees overhead.

By the time they finally put Charlie back in his car seat, he was happy and tired out—and he fell asleep again when they hit the highway.

He'd only been driving a few minutes when his phone vibrated with a news alert. He glanced down at the screen, only catching the words *expansion draft* before the alert was replaced with a text message from one of the assistant general managers for the NHL team—someone he'd only texted with once before.

Someone who would only text him if there was something big going on, like a trade.

"Babe," he said softly.

Becca had been looking out her passenger-side window, which was rolled down. Her hair was blowing in the wind and she had a lazy, happy smile on her face. "Mmm?"

"I've got a text message. Can you read it to me?"

"Sure." She twisted in her seat and grabbed his phone from where he kept it in a clip. "Uh, okay. It's from someone named Dustin Choi. It says, *Can we have a quick phone call today?*"

He swallowed hard. "Type back, *I'm driving but will be home in an hour.*"

Her thumbs flew across the screen. “Done.”

“There’s a hockey news alert, too.”

“Which app?”

He told her, and she flipped over to it, then read off the screen. “*NHL Teams to submit their expansion draft lists to the Hamilton Highlanders by the end of the month, but rumours swirl around owner Jack Benton wanting to load the team with local Ontario lines...*” She trailed off. “What does that mean?”

“I dunno.”

“But you think it’s related to the text?”

Part of him didn’t want to admit that just yet, but he wasn’t able to hold anything back from Becca. “Yeah.”

Her whole body curled in on itself, her hands flying to cover her mouth as she squealed. “Are you serious?”

“It might not be related.”

“But you think it is.” There was so much aching desire in her voice. And he shared it. Hamilton was only three hours from home, instead of the eight to ten hour drive from the Chicago suburbs.

As a prospect who hadn’t yet earned his place on a full-time NHL roster, it wasn’t on his radar to be considered in the expansion draft. Now... “I’ll find out what Dustin has to say.”

“Who is he, exactly?”

He explained the different AGM roles, and why he thought Choi might want to talk to him. It could be a trade, it could be about being exposed in the expansion draft. Hayden thought he hadn’t played enough NHL games for that to be a risk—or in their case, a non-risk, since they’d be open to moving to Hamilton.

But the new team would need two-way prospects, too. Which meant he could get traded to an NHL team near their hometown...and still wind up playing on a minor farm team far, far away. “Hamilton doesn’t have their own AHL team yet,” he warned Becca. “I’m not sure where they’d put me if I

got sent down. It wouldn't be like here, where the AHL team is commuting distance to the NHL team. Most teams don't have that luxury."

Her face fell. "Right." But then it immediately brightened again. "But I know where they'll put you. On the top line."

He laughed hard, out loud. And then he took her hand and kissed her knuckles. "From your lips to God's ears, and then to my legs and arms."

"You're an amazing hockey player," she whispered as he rubbed his lips over her fingers. "I have so much faith in you."

They spent the rest of the drive home talking about the what ifs. And when Hayden called the AGM back, it turned out, that's all they were—for now. Potential options, and gossip.

"Thanks for calling," Dustin said. "Are you back in Canada? You said you were driving home."

"Ah, no. I just meant our apartment here."

"So you're around? Could you come in to the city next week? Do some training with the team and get a head start on some of the medical stuff for next season?"

It was asked casually.

Hayden wondered if there were any players who fell for that. Didn't they all memorize the standard schedule? Wouldn't everyone pick up on the weirdness of needing a physical this early in the off-season, so much so, there could only be one reason—another team requiring it for a trade.

Which made Hayden think his leap to hoping for Hamilton was premature. They weren't trading for anyone yet. Not until they went through their expansion draft next month.

He tamped down his expectations and made the wild riot of nerves take a seat, too. "I can come in next week, yep."

"Good." Choi paused. "Listen, I want to give you a heads up that your name has started circulating as a prospect that Hamilton might be interested in."

So it was Hamilton, after all. Hayden held his breath, hearing the *but* that was coming.

“The thing is, we think you’re a very valuable prospect for Chicago. We’re not looking to lose you, unless it’s in a win-win trade for everyone involved. Also, we want you to know, since you haven’t been involved in a trade before, that you won’t hear about it online first. That’s not how our team operates. That is why we want you to come in, full disclosure.”

“Okay.”

“But if you hear rumours, that’s all they are. Got it?”

“Understood. Thank you.” Hayden rubbed his chest.

“Do you have any questions?”

The right answer here was no. No, he was just happy to be playing hockey. No, he was focused on his off-season training and coming back stronger than ever to the Chicago organization, playing wherever they put him.

But his life wasn’t as simple as that. “Do they know I have a family?” *Do they know I have a child, and a wife-to-be, just as soon as I ask the fucking question?* “We want any opportunity we can get, of course, but I can’t room with guys.”

“They know that. There aren’t any guarantees where they’ll place you, but they know you aren’t a single kid. We do, too.”

Relief coursed through Hayden and he wiped his hand over his mouth. “All right. Good. Really good. This is...thanks for the heads up. I’ll keep my helmet on, so to speak, and wait for more news.”

“Let’s keep this tight, all right? Talk to Becca, but don’t tell anyone else.”

If nothing else came of this, Hayden could at least tell Becca that one of the team’s highest level leaders knew her name. “Will do. Thanks, Dustin.”

“Of course. The trainers are going to be in touch later tonight or tomorrow, too. We want to get you in the training

facility more this summer.” Confidence surged through Hayden at that casual drop, but Choi kept going. “We’ll talk soon.”

When Hayden went inside, he found Becca in the kitchen. “Where’s Charlie?”

“Passed out hard on the couch,” she whispered. “How’d the call go?”

He wrapped his arms around her waist and tucked his face into the curve of her neck. “No news yet. But something might happen this summer, and they want me to do more intensive training with the team, it sounds like? I told him that we’re excited for any opportunity.”

“Can you imagine?” Her voice caught. “Oh Hayden...”

He had the ring in his pocket now. But just as his brain hit the *this is the moment* realization and he started to reach for it, she twisted and nipped his ear with her teeth. “Since Charlie’s on the couch, we have the bedroom all to ourselves...” Her voice was sultry and irresistible. “You want to fool around?”

There wasn’t a doubt in his mind that future Becca would love that he was romantic and wanted to propose. But right now, present Becca needed him in a baser way. A more physical, less emotional, less talking more doing kind of way.

He slipped the ring deeper into his pocket and scooped her up around the hips, making her gasp as she flung her limbs around him, clinging like a spider monkey.

“Is that a yes?” Her voice brimmed with horny need.

Of course, that was a yes.

“Always,” he promised.

Other yeses could come another day. His girlfriend needed to come tonight. At least three times, once for each missed proposal opportunity.

present

7:41 am

Hayden quickly mixed the pancake batter together, then set the bowl in the same spot where he'd sat Becca's ass down so he could kiss her deeply before they sprinted for the bedroom.

That day, a week ago, may not have been the picture perfect proposal he'd envisioned, but it was perfect in other ways. Real, authentic ways. The shrieks of laughter as they collapsed on the blanket, all of them damp from river, all of them grinning like fools—he'd never forget that afternoon.

And the hungry way Becca had climbed on top of him later that night...that was going in the top memory list, too.

And it fuelled him as he powered his way through an exhausting week with the trainers in Chicago.

He was going to find a way to tell her all of that just as soon as she woke up.

"Blueberry?" he offered to Charlie.

"Yes berry." Charlie snatched it out of his dad's hand, then toddled off. He was starting to like playing by himself in the living room more and more.

The bedroom door creaked open, then Hayden heard Becca's voice. "Good morning," she said, her words still full of sleep.

"Mama special!" Charlie yelled.

She giggled. "What?"

That was Hayden's cue. He wiped his hands on his jeans, then grabbed the bouquet of flowers they'd picked up at the store.

"Got you something," he said, leaning against the doorway and holding out the flowers.

Becca loved a good doorway lean, and she loved flowers. He was luring her into his trap.

She glanced up and gasped. “Oh, they’re so pretty!”

“You’re so pretty,” he said, grinning. And she was, all sleep tousled and soft looking. “Come and get them.”

She followed him, slowing as she stepped through the kitchen door and saw the breakfast fixings all neatly set up. “What is all this?”

“Cancakes,” Charlie said, toddling in.

“We went shopping.” Hayden handed her the flowers, hoping she’d press her face into the roses and have a sniff.

She did.

And while her face was pressed into the petals, he lowered himself to one knee. His pulse jacked up, pounding so hard in his ears he only faintly heard Charlie repeat the magic phrase.

“Did you teach him that?” Becca asked as she lifted her head.

Then she dropped the flowers.

Hayden’s arm shot out, catching the bouquet and setting it to the floor softly, all without taking his eyes off her face. “Charlie and I talked this morning, as we do a lot of mornings, about how special you are.”

“What are you...” Her voice caught on a burr of emotion as her gaze swept over his position and the glittering ring he was holding between shaking fingertips.

“Something I’ve been thinking about doing for some time now. Something I’ve been overthinking, actually. Something I want to get just right, so give me a minute here, because you deserve for this to be perfect.”

“Hayden...” Her voice wavered, but she pressed her lips together and waited.

“I love you so much, Bec. I love the life we’re building with every fibre of my being.” He pulled in a deep breath. “You ground me, and make me want to grow roots with you.

And you came with me on this adventure. You let me drag you away from home, and dive into the chaos of hockey life, because you believe in me. And I never want to stop trying to live up to those expectations. I want to build you the most incredible life.”

Charlie quietly wrapped himself around Becca’s bare leg.

“Careful for the flowers,” she whispered to him, her shimmering gaze not leaving Hayden’s face.

Hayden reached out and pressed his hand wide against Charlie’s back, so they were both touching him.

“I thought about doing this on the ice,” he confessed. “And at a fancy restaurant. That picnic in the park last week, too.”

She gasped. “The champagne!”

“But this is better. This is us. Just the three of us. I know you miss home, Bec, but in this little apartment? You are my home. You are my everything, through the ups and downs of being in the pros, and trying to be a good dad, and—”

“Hayden,” she breathed. “You are such a good dad.”

“But I wasn’t at first.” His voice cracked.

“We’re still young. It’s okay if we’re just figuring it out.”

Her capacity to love him should have brought him to his knee a long time ago. “That’s the thing, sweetheart. I’ve figured it out. I promise. I want to marry you. I want to be your husband, and make you my wife, and honour you for my entire life. Will you marry me?”

“Yes.” Tears finally slipped free as she nodded and sank down, pulling Charlie in as she cupped Hayden’s face in her hands and kissed him. “Yes,” she repeated in a soft, warm murmur just before he kissed her back. Hard and deep, a claiming kind of kiss. A kiss that said, *you’ll be my bride and my everything.*

And while the universe may have won three rounds before this one, none of those mattered. In the end, this was the only play that counted.

When she pulled back and swiped at her wet cheeks, he slipped the ring on her finger, his heart hammering against his ribs as he nudged it over her knuckle. He smoothed his thumb around it once it was settled on her hand.

“I want cancakes,” Charlie said, his priorities clear.

“Okay.” Becca sniffled and kissed the top of his head. “You go play, and Daddy and I will make cancakes.”

Charlie ran into the other room, and Becca threw herself at Hayden.

Laughing, he caught her and settled himself back against the cabinets, holding her on his lap. “My fiancée,” he murmured. “You’re going to look good in a white dress.”

She squeaked and covered her face.

He kissed her fingers one by one until she revealed her blushing face, and then they kissed over and over again until they were both breathless.

“My fiancé,” she whispered back. “Who is going places. Like the top line of an NHL team.”

“It’s coming, Bec. I can feel it. One day soon, I’m going to get that break, and I’m going to be able to buy you a house we can fill with babies.” When her eyes went wide, he hastily added, “If you want more.”

“I want more. And we don’t have to wait until you ‘make it’. This is all we need to grow our family. You and me and unexpected pancakes.” She squirmed against him. “We make a pretty good home wherever we are.”

“Maybe let’s wait until after the wedding so your dad doesn’t absolutely murder me?” But Hayden asked it in the form of a question, because the truth was, if Becca wanted another baby, he’d give her that tomorrow.

She smiled, not at all terrified of her old man who had never liked Hayden much, even before he got Owen Kincaid’s daughter pregnant while they were still in high school. “My dad loves you.”

“That is quite the stretch.”

“He admires you as a father.” She wound her arms around his neck. “And he accepts that *I* love you. With my entire being.”

“Mmm, I like the sound of that.” He kissed her again. “You said yes.”

“I said yes.”

“Think we can convince Charlie to have a morning nap on the couch?”

She threw her head back and laughed. He kissed the stretch of her neck, feeling her chuckle roll beneath her skin.

“You know what this feels like?” He feathered his lips down to her collarbone. “The day Charlie was born. That’s how I feel right now. Like I’m the luckiest man in the world.”

“You will be,” she whispered. “But not until the afternoon.”

He groaned and laughed, then they slowly disentangled their limbs. That heady warmth, the perfect happiness, didn’t dissipate all day. First they made pancakes together, then they took Charlie to the gym down the street for a kid-friendly family workout that tuckered him out well.

And then after lunch, with Charlie tucked in on the couch, Hayden finally got to take his fiancée to bed.

“I want you wearing nothing but that ring,” he growled as he peeled off her shirt.

She shimmied her hips, helping him drag off her panties. “It’s so pretty.”

“You. You’re so pretty.” He fell on top of her, his cock thick and aching. “You said *yes*.”

She laughed. “You weren’t worried, were you?”

“You might have said not yet.”

That made her giggle. “Come here.”

They kissed, hungry nibbles that turned into slow, deep licks.

And then he worked his way down her body and shouldered his way between her thighs, kissing her where she was pink and soft and wet for him.

God, he loved the way her clit fluttered against his tongue before it started to grow. Before it strained and got hard for him, it pulsed like an eager little bunny. He liked to play with it, with his fingers and the tip of his tongue. But most of all he liked to suck on it, the way she'd shyly taught him she liked best.

Blindly, he reached up and found her hand, weaving their fingers together. He could feel the ring against his knuckles.

His fiancée.

He was going to give her the best life.

He lifted his head so he could see her face as he circled her tight entrance with his fingertips. "I love you."

Her eyes flared with bright desire. "I know."

"Cheeky girl."

"I love you, too," she said, her breath hitching. Her eyelids fluttered, hooding her gaze as he sank two fingers in to the hilt.

She was so fucking hot.

"I want you on top of me," he said, surging up.

She lifted to meet his mouth, tasting herself off his lips.

He caught her around the waist and spun them around, pulling her up on top of his body. She straddled him, her thighs sliding against his hips, her pussy nudging against his full balls, then she lifted up.

"Like this?" She brought them together, his diamond flashing on her hand as she notched his cock against her slick entrance.

"Fuck...yes. Look at us. Look at you take me."

She curved her body, glancing down, and together they watched as she took him inch by inch. A low, heady moan slid

out of her mouth once she was fully seated, and it wrapped itself around his spine, anchoring them together in this moment.

He cupped her breasts, her nipple pebbling against his palm. God, he loved feeling it turn into a taut eraser nib. A perfect, pinch-able peak. He tugged, and she swayed, gazing down at him with a hazy softness.

She rocked against him, her tits pushing against his hands, then she threw her head back. Her throat worked, her skin flushing and gaining a sheen of effort.

His cock throbbled deep inside her at the vision she was, riding on top of him.

“Let me taste your tits,” he whispered, and she leaned over, swaying those nipples in front of him. He caught one in his mouth, sucking and pulling. Making her shake and grind down. Making her *hot* and *needy* and *frantic* and *desperate*.

One of his hands sank to her hip. The other wrapped around the back of her neck. He licked his way up to her mouth, kissing her everywhere. Her neck, her mouth, then back to her tits.

Becca moaned, moving faster now. Her legs gripped his hips and wetness slicked between them.

He pulled her flat against him, wanting to feel every inch of her on top of him, needing to kiss her and taste her as she got closer. He angled his hips, fucking up into her harder, finding her clit on each thrust before snapping his hips down again.

He felt her pussy clench around him, and then she was babbling in his ear, “I’m coming, oh Hayden, I’m coming.”

Hayden groaned and followed her, spilling into his fiancée. His future wife. His everything.

Her breath puffed warm and satisfied against his neck as he stroked her through the aftershocks that rolled through both of their bodies.

“I’m going to love you forever,” he promised against her damp temple.

She smiled so big he could feel it.

And he knew that no matter what they faced, they would face it together.

Thank you for reading “The Breakfast Proposal”! Becca and Hayden are secondary characters in my Kincaid Brothers series. Her father’s book, *Reckless at Heart*, is where we see them for the first time, when Becca finds out she’s pregnant. I’m so proud of how they’ve grown up, and grown together. You can also see them as secondary characters in *The Playing Game*, a hockey romance I wrote as Ainsley Booth.

ABOUT ZOE YORK

Zoe York is a fourteen-time USA Today bestselling author of small town and military romance. She also writes hockey romance as Ainsley Booth. To keep in touch and maybe see future glimpses of Becca and Hayden, follow her on social media (she is @zoeyorkwrites everywhere), or sign up for her newsletter at <https://www.zoeyork.com/newsletter>

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100% of the book proceeds will be split equally and donated to the US Breast Cancer Research Foundation & the Canadian Cancer Society-CIBC Run for the Cure, both charitable organizations dedicated to funding breast cancer research.

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