



FLIRT

CARMICHAEL FAMILY SERIES

USA Today Bestselling Author

ADRIANA
LOCKE

FLIRT



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*This book is dedicated to everyone that has struggled to find love.
Keep looking.*

CONTENTS

1. [Brooke](#)
2. [Brooke](#)
3. [Moss](#)
4. [Brooke](#)
5. [Brooke](#)
6. [Brooke](#)
7. [Moss](#)
8. [Brooke](#)
9. [Brooke](#)
10. [Moss](#)
11. [Brooke](#)
12. [Brooke](#)
13. [Moss](#)
14. [Brooke](#)
15. [Brooke](#)
16. [Moss](#)
17. [Brooke](#)
18. [Brooke](#)
19. [Moss](#)
20. [Brooke](#)
21. [Brooke](#)
22. [Brooke](#)
23. [Moss](#)
24. [Brooke](#)
25. [Brooke](#)
26. [Moss](#)
27. [Brooke](#)
28. [Brooke](#)
29. [Moss](#)
30. [Brooke](#)
31. [Moss](#)
32. [Brooke](#)
33. [Moss](#)
34. [Brooke](#)
35. [Moss](#)
36. [Brooke](#)
37. [Moss](#)
38. [Brooke](#)

39. [Brooke](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Note from the Author](#)

[Crank - Chapter 1](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Books by Adriana Locke](#)

[About the Author](#)

ONE

BROOKE

WANTED: A SITUATION-SHIP

I'm a single female who's tired of relationships ruining my life. However, there are times when a date would be helpful. If you're a single man, preferably mid-twenties to late-thirties, and are in a similar situation, we might be a match.

Candidate must be handsome, charming, and willing to pretend to have feelings for me (on a sliding scale, as the event requires). Ability to discuss a wide variety of topics is a plus. Must have your own transportation and a (legal) job.

This will be a symbiotic agreement. In exchange for your time, I will give you mine. Need someone to flirt with you at a football party? Go, team! Want a woman to make you look good in front of your boss? Let me find my heels. Would you love for someone to be obsessed with you in front of your ex? I'm applying my red lipstick now.

If interested, please email me. Time is of the essence.

My best friend, Jovie, points at my computer screen. The glitter on her pink fingernail sparkles in the light. "You can't post that."

I fold my arms across my chest. "And why not?"

Instead of answering me, she takes another bite of her chicken wrap. A dribble of mayonnaise dots the corner of her mouth.

"A lot of help you are," I mutter, rereading the post I drafted instead of pricing light fixtures for work. The words are written in a pretty font on Social, my go-to social media platform.

Country music from the nineties mixes with the laughter of locals sitting

around us in Smokey's, my favorite beachside café. Along the far wall, a map of the state of Florida made of wine corks sways gently in the ocean breeze coming through the open windows.

"Would you two like anything else?" Rebecca, our usual lunchtime server, pauses by the table. "I think we have some Key lime pie left."

"I'm too irritable for pie today," I say.

"*You don't want pie?* That's a first," she teases me.

Jovie giggles.

"I know," I say, releasing a sigh. "That's the state of my life right now. I don't even want pie."

"Wow. Okay. This sounds serious. What's up? Maybe I can help," Rebecca says.

Jovie wipes her mouth with a napkin. "Let me cut in here real quick before she tries to snowball you into thinking her harebrained idea is a good one."

I roll my eyes. "It *is* a good one."

"I'll give you the CliffsNotes version," Jovie says, side-eyeing me. "Brooke got an invitation to her grandma's birthday party, and instead of just not going—"

"I can't *not go*."

"Or showing up as the badass single chick she is," Jovie continues, silencing me with a look, "she wrote a post for Social that's basically an ad for a fake boyfriend."

"Correction—it *is* an ad for a fake boyfriend."

Rebecca rests a hand on her hip. "I don't see the problem."

"*Thank you*," I say, staring at Jovie. "I'm glad someone understands me here."

Jovie throws her hands in the air, sending a napkin flying right along with them.

Satisfaction is written all over my face as I sit back in my chair with a smug smile. The more I think about having a *situation-ship* with a guy—a word I read in a magazine at the salon while waiting two decades for my color to process—the more it makes sense.

Instead of having relations with a man, have situations. Done.

What's not to love about that?

"But, before I tell you to dive into this whole thing, why can't you just go alone, Brooke?" Rebecca asks.

“Oh, *I can* go alone. I just generally prefer to avoid torture whenever possible.”

“I still don’t understand why you need a date to your grandma’s birthday party.”

“Because this isn’t *just* a birthday party,” I say. “It’s labeled that to cover up the fact that my mom and her sister, my aunt Kim, are having a daughter-of-the-year showdown. They’re using my poor grandma Honey’s eighty-fifth birthday as a dog and pony show—and my cousin Aria and I are the ponies.”

“Okay.” Rebecca looks at me dubiously before switching her attention to Jovie. “And why are you against this whole thing?”

Jovie takes enough cash to cover our lunch plus the tip and hands it to Rebecca. *Perks of ordering the same lunch most days.* Then she gathers her things.

“I’m not against it in *theory*,” Jovie says. “I’m against it in *practice*. I understand the perks of having a guy around to be arm candy when needed. But I’m not supporting this decision ... this *mayhem* ... for two reasons.” She looks at me. “For one, your family will see any post you make on Social. You don’t think they’ll use it as ammunition against you?”

This is probably true.

“Second,” Jovie continues. “I hate, hate, *hate* your aunt Kim, and I loathe the fact that your mom makes you feel like you have to do anything more than be your amazing self to win her favor. Screw them both.”

My heart swells as I take in my best friend.

Jovie Reynolds was my first friend in Kismet Beach when I moved here two and a half years ago. We reached for the same can of pineapple rings, knocking over an entire display in Publix. As we picked up the mess, we traded recipes—hers for a vodka cocktail and mine for air fryer pineapple.

We hung out that evening—with her cocktail and my air fryer creations—and have been inseparable since.

“My mom is not a bad person,” I say in her defense, even though I’m not so sure that’s true from time to time. “She’s just ...”

“A bad person,” Jovie says.

I laugh. “No. I just ... nothing I can do is good enough for her. She hated Geoff when I married him at twenty and said I was too young. But was she happy when that ended in a divorce? Nope. According to *her*, I didn’t try hard enough.”

Rebecca frowns.

“And then Geoff started banging Kim and—”

“*What?*” Rebecca yelps, her eyes going wide.

“Exactly. Bad people,” Jovie says, shaking her head.

“So your ex-husband will be at your grandma’s party with your aunt? Is that what you’re saying?” Rebecca asks.

I nod. “Yup.”

She stacks our plates on top of one another. The ceramic clinks through the air. “On that note, why can’t you just not go? Avoid it altogether?”

“Because my grandma Honey is looking forward to this, and she called me to make sure I was coming. I couldn’t tell her no.” My heart tightens when I think of the woman I love more than any other. “And, you know, my mom has made it abundantly clear that if I miss this, I will probably break Honey’s heart, and she’ll die, and it’ll be my fault.”

“Wow. That’s a freight train of guilt to throw around,” Rebecca says, wincing.

I glance down at my computer. The post is still there, sitting on the screen and waiting for my final decision. Although it is a genius idea, if I do say so myself—Jovie is probably right. It’ll just cause more problems than it’s worth.

I close the laptop and shove it into my bag. Then I hoist it on my shoulder. “It’s complicated. I want to go and celebrate with my grandma but seeing my aunt with my ex-husband ...” I wince. “Also, there will be my mother’s usual diatribe and comparisons to Aria, proving that I’m a failure in everything that I do.”

“But if you had a boyfriend to accompany you, you’d save face with the enemy and have a buffer against your mother. Is that what you’re thinking?” Rebecca asks.

“Yeah. I don’t know how else to survive it. I can’t walk in there alone, or even with Jovie, and deal with all of that mess. If I just had someone hot and a little handsy—make me look irresistible—it would kill all of my birds with one hopefully *hard* stone.”

I wink at my friends.

Rebecca laughs. “Okay. I’m Team Fake Boyfriend. Sorry, Jovie.”

Jovie sighs. “I’m sorry for me too because I have to go back to work. And if I avoid the stoplights, I can make it to the office with thirty seconds to spare.” She air-kisses Rebecca. “Thanks for the extra mayo.”

I laugh. “See you tomorrow, Rebecca.”

“Bye, girls.”

Jovie and I walk single-file through Smokey’s until we reach the exit. Immediately, we reach for the sunglasses perched on top of our heads and slide them over our eyes.

The sun is bright, nearly blinding in a cloudless sky. I readjust my bag so that the thin layer of sweat starting to coat my skin doesn’t coax the leather strap down my arm.

“Call me tonight,” Jovie says, heading to her car.

“I will.”

“Rehearsal for the play got canceled tonight, so I might go to Charlie’s. If I don’t, I may swing by your house.”

“How’s the thing with Charlie going? I didn’t realize you were still talking to him.”

She laughs. “I wasn’t. He pissed me off. But he came groveling back last night, and I gave in.” She shrugs. “What can I say? I’m a sucker for a good grovel.”

“I think it’s the theater girl in you. You love the dramatics of it all.”

“That I do. It’s a problem.”

“Well, I’ll see you when I see you then,” I say.

“Bye, Brooke.”

I give her a little wave and make my way up Beachfront Boulevard.

The sidewalk is fairly vacant with a light dusting of sand. In another month, tourists will fill the street that leads from the ocean to the shops filled with trinkets and ice cream in the heart of Kismet Beach. For now, it’s a relaxing and hot walk back to the office.

My mind shifts from the heat back to the email reminder I received during lunch. *To Honey’s party*. It takes all of one second for my stomach to cramp.

“I shouldn’t have eaten all of those fries,” I groan.

But it’s not lunch that’s making me unwell.

A mixture of emotions rolls through me. I don’t know which one to land on. There’s a chord of excitement about the event—at seeing Honey and her wonderful life be celebrated, catching up with Aria and the rest of my family, and the general concept of *going home*. But there’s so much apprehension right alongside those things that it drowns out the good.

Kim and Geoff together make me ill. It’s not that I miss my ex-husband; I’m the one who filed for divorce. But they will be there, making things super

awkward for me in front of everyone we know.

Not to mention what it will do to my mother.

Geoff hooking up with Kim is my ultimate failure, according to Mom. Somehow, it embarrasses *her*, and that's unforgivable.

"For just once, I'd like to see her and not be judged," I mumble as I sidestep a melting glob of blue ice cream.

Nothing I have ever done has been good enough for Catherine Bailey. Marrying Geoff was an atrocity at only twenty years old. My dream to work in interior architecture wasn't deemed serious enough as a life path. "*You're wasting your time and our money, Brooke.*" And when I told her I was hired at Laguna Homes as a lead designer for one of their three renovation teams? I could hear her eyes rolling.

The office comes into view, and my spirits lift immediately. I shove all thoughts of the party out of my brain and let my mind settle back into happier territory. *Work*. The one thing I love.

I step under the shade of an adorable crape myrtle tree and then turn up a cobblestone walkway to my office.

The small white building is tucked away from the sidewalk. It sits between a row of shops with apartments above them and an Italian restaurant only open in the evenings. The word *Laguna Homes* is printed in seafoam green above a black awning.

My shoes tap against the wooden steps as I make my way to the door. A rush of cool air, kissed by the scent of eucalyptus essential oil, greets me as I step inside.

"How was lunch?" Kix asks, standing in the doorway of his corner office. My boss's smile is kind and genuine, just like everything else about him. "Let me guess—you met Jovie for lunch at Smokey's?"

I laugh. "It's like you know me or something."

He chuckles.

Kix and Damaris Carmichael are two of my favorite people in the world. When I met Damaris at a trade show three years ago, and we struck up a conversation about tile, I knew she was special. Then I met her husband and discovered he had the same soft yet sturdy energy. All six of their children possess similar qualities—even Moss, the superintendent on my renovation team. Although I'd never admit that to him.

"I swung by Parasol Place this afternoon," Kix says. "It's looking great. You were right about taking out the wall between the living room and dining

room. I love it. It makes the whole house feel bigger.”

I blush under the weight of his compliment. “Thanks.”

“Did Moss tell you about the property I’m looking at for your team next?” Kix asks.

“No. Moss doesn’t tell me anything.”

Kix grins. “I’m sure he tells you all kinds of things you don’t need to know.”

“You say that like you have experience with him,” I say, laughing.

“Only a few years.” He laughs too. “It’s another home from the sixties. I got a lead on it this morning and am on my way to look at it now.”

“Take pictures. You know I love that era, and if you get it, I want to be able to start envisioning things right away.”

“You and your visions.” He shakes his head. “Gina is in the back making copies. I told her we’d keep our eye on the door until she gets back out here, so it would be great if you could do that.”

“Absolutely,” I say, walking backward toward my office. “Be safe. *And take pictures.*”

“I will. Enjoy the rest of your day, Brooke.”

“You, too.”

I reach behind me to find my office door open. I take another step back and then turn toward my desk. Someone moves beside my filing cabinet just as I flip on the light.

“Ah!” I shriek, clutching my chest.

My heart pounds out of control until I get my bearings and focus on the man looking back at me.

I set my bag down on a chair and blow out a shaky breath. “Dammit, Moss!”

He leans against the cabinet and smiles at me cheekily.

“We’re going to have to stop meeting like this,” he says. “People are going to talk.”

TWO

BROOKE

I'm going to kill him.

“Meeting like what? Like we work together?” I ask, dropping my hand and exhaling. “You scared the shit out of me.”

He chuckles.

“You’re an asshole.” I shake my head as my heartbeat returns to normal. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

I walk around the far side of my desk and collapse in my chair. Moss takes a seat across from me.

He stretches his long, lean body until the toe of his work boot hits my desk and his fingertips touch the wall behind him. The hem of his dirty black T-shirt rides up his six-foot-something frame. A hint of his chiseled abdomen is visible above the waistband of his jeans, and it takes everything that I have not to stare.

I’m only human. Even if he can be an asshole, he’s still drop-dead gorgeous.

“Stop it,” I say, shuffling papers around on my desk.

He sits up and flashes me a megawatt smile. “Stop what?”

“I know what you’re doing.”

“And what might that be? I’m just loosening my muscles after a hard day’s work.”

I keep my face blank. “It’s early afternoon, Moss.”

“Okay, well, I put in a hell of a half-day, thank you.”

I fold my arms on my desk and look at him. It’s difficult to ignore his pursed lips, arched brows, and stupidly long eyelashes. He’s good enough to eat, and he knows it. That’s *one of the* problems with him.

We hold one another's gaze in a battle of wills that I know, with absolute certainty, I'll win if I make it more than thirty seconds. *Why?* Because Moss can't go that long without talking.

"You look very pretty today," he says, batting those ridiculous lashes at me.

Even though I know he's fooling around—and even though he does this type of stuff routinely—my cheeks still flush.

"Thank you. Please stop pandering to me now," I say, shifting in my seat.

"When are you going to learn to take a compliment?"

"When are you going to stop using compliments to distract me from whatever you came here to tell me?" I blink. "You did come here to tell me something and not just aggravate me, right?"

He sighs. "It was so much easier working with you before you understood me."

"I bet."

The corners of our lips lift at the same time.

He leans forward, balancing his elbows on his knees. His eyes—one green and one blue—sparkle with mischief.

If Moss is anything besides an excellent superintendent and solid guy, he's a rascal. Lovable but frustrating. A shameless troublemaker. He's endearing while also making you want to pull your hair out. It's a large part of his draw, strangely.

"You know who doesn't understand me?" he asks.

"How many guesses do I get?"

"One." He grins. "You only get one."

"Great because I think that's all I need."

His grin grows wider.

"My guess is ..."

I pause for dramatic effect, pretending I have to reach for a name when, in fact, I don't. While it's true that Moss has a gaggle of girls at his beck and call, there's one that seems to think she could be the one to get him to settle down.

Poor girl.

"*Courtney*," I say like the name just came to me.

"You are *so good*."

I laugh. "What happened?"

"In not one of my brightest moments, I caved."

“Moss.”

He holds his hands up in a shrug. The small turtle tattooed on his inner bicep wiggles with the movement.

“I felt bad,” he says. “So even though you and I had a conversation—”

“An explicit conversation.”

“An *explicit conversation*, even though I don’t know what that means, about me not leading her on and how I have to set boundaries ... I caved and told her I’d take her out last night.”

I hold my temples. “Why would you do that? She misreads your kindness for interest. This is only going to make things worse for you.”

“She made me feel bad and I figured, what the hell? I’d have to eat anyway—no pun intended, you dirty girl,” he teases, wagging a finger in my direction.

I roll my eyes.

“Anyway, we go out and have dinner. It was a decent time.” He grimaces. “She thinks I’m taking her to the Excellence Awards banquet, I think.”

That would not be a good look for you or for Laguna Homes. “So are you?”

“Hell, no. I’m not taking her. I don’t even particularly like her. I promised Mom I’d find someone to go with me, but it’s not going to be Courtney.” He hangs his head. “Why did I have to be my super charming self accidentally?”

“You were your charming self *accidentally*?” I slow blink. “Do explain.”

“I tried to tone it down. I attempted for the first time in my life to be less attractive and I failed. I didn’t want her to fall in love with me, Brookie, but I think she did.”

I sigh. “She’s been in love with you for a year. You know this. She knows this. Hell, *I know this*, and I’ve met her precisely one time when she came by the job site to bring you lunch.” My lips twitch. “Remember that?”

He groans, making me laugh.

“Suffice to say, I’m fairly certain that no amount of toning down your *charm*, if that’s what we’re calling it now, was going to help,” I say.

He gasps. “*I am charming.*”

“You are. *Absolutely*,” I say, nodding exaggeratedly.

“You’re being sarcastic.”

“Am I though?”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re just used to me. That’s why you don’t find me charming these days.”

“It’s cute of you to imply that I ever found you that way.”

I didn’t mean the words as a challenge. I wasn’t throwing down a gauntlet or calling into question his ability to capture the attention of the female species. *The man captures attention way before he opens his mouth.*

Light, golden-brown hair that’s permanently sun-kissed, cut short in the back and longer on the top so it falls into his eyes when he laughs. High cheekbones and an angular, squarish jawline that’s nearly always dusted with stubble. And those eyes. *My God, those eyes.*

Even though I wasn’t intentionally provoking Moss, he’s provoked.

“*Come on,*” he says, taunting me. “Don’t act as though you’ve never found me mesmerizing.”

“Mesmerizing?” I laugh. “Right now, you’re irritating.”

His smirk slices right through my resistance. “I’m irritating because I’m right, and every time I’m right, you’re irritated.”

I meet his gaze head-on. “Wow. Have you been thinking about me that much? *That’s so great to know.*”

“Yeah. It’s almost as much as you’ve been thinking about me.”

I laugh, pointing a finger at him. “Hardly.” I glance around the room for a tool to assist me in changing the subject. My sight lands on my bag. “Hand me that.”

He lifts it and dangles it over my desk. I take it from him without making any contact with his hand whatsoever.

“Did you come here for a reason?” I ask, sitting it on my desk. “I have work to do.”

Moss typically doesn’t swing by my office just to shoot the shit. He calls me to do that. If he comes by during the day, it usually means he has something he wants to discuss. He’s a lot like his father in that way. He never makes a decision and tries to coerce me to cooperate or thinks that he knows what’s best. It’s one of the reasons I love working here so much.

“I actually have a reason.” He reaches in his back pocket and pulls out a folded piece of paper. “I want to talk about the sink. I’ve made a list of why we should at least consider trashing it instead of salvaging it.”

I fall back in my seat. “We’ve been over this.”

“*But I made a list.*”

“Your list won’t change my mind. I’m pretty certain you’ve shared your list with me a dozen times anyway and, every single time, we’ve agreed that the sink should stay.”

All humor and levity vanish from his face. In its place is soberness that he only gets while talking about work.

“Brooke ...”

“No.”

He fake cries. “It’s going to be a complete nightmare to get it out of there without damaging it. And I have to take it out to renovate the rest of the room.”

“It’s the centerpiece of the entire kitchen design. We agreed on that, remember? If that sink goes, then the entire design needs to be changed, and we don’t have the time for that nor the money in the budget.”

“Can’t we buy one that looks like a vintage sink but is brand new?”

I shoot him a look. “It’s not the same.”

“No, it’s not. It’s new. *New is better*. New is sturdier. New is shiny and perfect and comes in a box and I can toss the old one and—”

“No.”

He looks at the ceiling.

“Look, we’re spending all of this effort to preserve the original details of the house,” I say, reiterating our theme for the project. “It’s what makes this place so special. The sink is such a treasure and I don’t want to lose it.”

Slowly, his head drops and he’s looking at me again. I bring my bottom lip out, jutting it forward ever so slightly—just enough to tickle his compassion.

“I gave in on the window in the living room,” I remind him. “All I’ve really asked for is the sink.”

He snorts. “The fact that you can say that with a straight face is alarming.”

“The fact that you can come in here and ask me *again* to remove the sink from the design plan is what’s alarming. Don’t you fear for your life?”

“I fear for something but my life ain’t it.”

“Don’t make me go to your mother.”

He throws his hands up.

“I will,” I say, grinning. “I’ll call Damaris right now and tell her that you hate the amazing almond-colored vintage piece, which she absolutely loved and—”

“Fine. *Fine, fine*. You brought out the mom nuke on me. What can I say now? There’s nowhere to go.”

I smile. “Thank you for your willingness to see the right side of this

argument.”

“I’m losing my touch.”

“That’s not what Courtney said,” I say with a wink.

He tries to glare at me, but we both start laughing instead.

Gina walks past the doorway and peers into my office. “I should’ve known,” she says, her bun wobbling on her head.

“Hi, *Gi-na*,” Moss says, singsonging her name.

“I have a bone to pick with you,” Gina tells him. “Come see me before you leave.”

I wave at her just before Moss closes the door, sealing us away from whatever grievance Gina has with him.

“What did you do to her this time?” I ask, smiling.

“Nothing.”

I lift a brow.

“I know what she *thinks* I did. But it wasn’t me. It was Banks,” he says, referring to his youngest and wildest brother. “But I can’t tell her that because I’m not a snitch.”

“*And* because Banks knows that you put a dent in the side of your dad’s truck with that two-by-four last week and blamed it on a nameless pizza delivery man.”

He grins. “Well, and that too.”

I pull my gaze away from his pouty lips and perfectly straight teeth. It lands on my computer. Suddenly, the entire birthday party situation suppresses my spirits again.

Jovie is definitely right. I can’t post that ad.

Moss cocks his head to the side. “What?”

I hum, unsure what he means.

“What happened?” he asks. “Your whole face just wiped out.”

I blow out a breath.

If there is anyone I don’t want to talk to about this it’s Moss. For one, he wouldn’t understand a dysfunctional family if his life depended on it. Two, he’s my co-worker. Unlike him, I don’t love oversharing. And three, it’s a little embarrassing to admit that my mom thinks I’m a loser.

“Brooke?”

“It’s nothing,” I say. “I just ... My life would just be easier if I were more ...”

Normal? Traditional? Unaffected?

“I’m waiting,” Moss says, shaking his boot side to side while he watches me.

“I don’t know how to finish that sentence.”

“Well, I’d love to know what you think you’re not enough of. Humor me.”

The tenderness in his voice hits my heart in a way that I’m unprepared for. I’ve seen this side of Moss many times over the years, and it throws me off-kilter every damn time.

My face flushes, and I pick up a pen. Twirling it in my fingers, I try not to get sucked into a serious conversation.

“My life would be easier if I was a relationship kind of girl,” I say, figuring it’s enough of the truth to suffice but not too much to make things heavy.

His face lights up. “What do you mean?”

I toss the pen on my desk. “Have you ever seen me seriously date a guy? Ever?”

“No. Not once. Well, you had the guy from the bank for a couple of weeks, but that was never going to last.”

I don’t know why I find that offensive, but I do.

“Hey,” I say, furrowing my brows. “That could’ve worked.”

He makes a face. “Come on, Brookie.”

“Don’t call me Brookie.”

“I always call you that,” he protests.

“Not when you’re being ...”

He grins. “What? Honest?” His grin gets wider. “You were never going to stay with that guy. He was a dweeb.”

“*He was not a dweeb.*”

The longer we watch each other, the more my resolve wanes. *He was kind of a dweeb.*

“No one uses that word anymore,” I say, shifting in my chair.

“I do. I’m bringing it back.”

“No one is going to catch on. It’s not coming back.”

He extends his legs out in front of him again. “Back to the no relationship thing.”

“Let’s not.”

“*Let’s.*” His eyes sparkle again. “Why do you not like them?”

“Why do *you* not like them?” I ask, trying to turn it back on him.

“Because once you commit to a woman, it can only go downhill from there. *Period*. Now your turn.”

Shit.

His smug grin tells me that he knows he has me backed into a corner. *He gave me a straightforward answer.* The fact that he’s quiet suggests he’s not letting me get out of it either.

I sigh again. “I am unequivocally unhappier in relationships. *Period.*”

Moss watches me closely, taking in every reaction I give him. “That’s not an answer.”

“Oh, but it is. Besides, we’ve talked about this before,” I tell him. “It isn’t new information.”

“Eh, I don’t think we have talked about this.”

“What does it matter?” I run my palm across my forehead, hoping to ward off a headache. “We have shit to do. You have a sink to save, and I have lighting fixtures to locate. We both need to get back to work.”

He groans and gets to his feet.

“Did the garage conversion get started today?” I ask, sorting through the various price sheets on my desk.

“It’s starting this afternoon. I’m heading that way now.”

“Awesome.” I lift my eyes to his. “I’ll come by tomorrow and take a peek.”

“Okay.” He heads to the door and wraps his hand around the knob. “Are you coming in the morning then?”

I nod. “Around eight, probably. Depends on how long the line is at the coffee shop.”

“I’ll be there.”

“I’ll be there too,” I say.

He tosses me a playful wink before walking out of my office.

THREE

MOSS

I grab my cooler out of the back of my truck.

The sun dusts the tops of the trees, encasing the houses along Honeysuckle Lane in a warm, hazy glow. I glance down the street at the homes of my parents and brothers. Mom and Dad slowly bought the houses neighboring theirs as they came up for sale throughout the years. Now they're almost living their dream—all of their sons live on the same street as them. If only my sister, Paige, would move back from Savannah, I'm pretty sure my parents would die from happiness.

The house I grew up in, the one Dad bought just after proposing to my mother, is at the end of the cul-de-sac. My eldest brother, Foxx, lives on one side of them. Jess, the third boy in the lineup—the one right after me—lives on the other. I live beside him. Banks and Maddox each have houses across from Jess and me. The lot between Foxx and Banks was originally for Paige, but it sits vacant now—a little buffer between my eldest and youngest brothers.

That's probably for the best.

I carry the cooler over to a bright red flower by the driveway and empty the water. It's still cold from the ice I placed in it this morning. The droplets splashing against my skin are welcome in the humid air.

Just as I'm about to head into the house, a blacked-out truck slides up to the curb. Banks hops out.

"Hey," he says, taking his sunglasses off and hooking them on the neckline of his shirt. "Do you have one of those long lighters that you use to light a grill? What are they called?"

"A grill lighter?"

He makes a face. “Really? That’s what they’re called?”

“Wild, I know. It’s like two words that don’t even belong together. Why would they call it that? Just to confuse people? So crazy.”

“Don’t be a dick.”

I lift a brow and walk into the garage. “I was trying not to make you feel bad for being stupid. Sometimes I lie awake at night and think, ‘*Man, we’re too hard on Banks. We’re gonna give him a complex.*’”

He watches me put the cooler upside down on a metal rack so it can dry.

“Do you really do that?” he asks.

I smirk. “No.”

“Asshole,” he mutters, making me laugh.

I open the door to the mudroom and take off my boots. Banks steps in behind me and closes the door.

“So do you have one?” he asks.

Something about the way he says it—too casually cool—raises my suspicions. *This is Banks I’m talking to.*

The youngest of my brothers is a handful. While he owns a wildly successful classic car restoration business, and his name is known in some very swanky car groups, he’s still a shit. That can be fun when you’re on the right side of it. But something tells me this will put me on the *aiding and abetting* side of things instead.

“What do you need it for?” I ask, trying to get a grasp on the situation before I get in too deep. The last time I dove headfirst into something with Banks without asking questions landed me overnight in jail.

That wasn’t a favorite day of my life.

“Why do you have to ask so many questions?” he asks, taking off his shoes.

I glance at him out of the corner of my eye before heading into the kitchen.

“You know, there’s a whole faction of people who prefer not to have too much information,” he says. “They can plead the Fifth.”

“I’m not really worried about the Fifth. I’m worried about the ten knuckles that might come flying at my face if I help you do something stupid. *Again.*” I run a finger down my nose. “I’m too pretty to get into fights.”

He rolls his eyes.

“Besides, isn’t Maddox your usual accomplice?”

“Who says I need an accomplice? I just need a grill lighter. Why won’t

you just give me the one that you keep in that drawer over there?” He motions toward my junk drawer. “The red one, if you have it. It has a better flame than the blue one.”

I pull open the refrigerator and scan the contents. *How does he know the colors of my lighters?* “You’re to blame for my trust issues, Banks.”

“What, uh, are you looking for?”

“Water.” I poke my head around the door and look at my brother. “Where did all my water go? I swear there were three or four left when I packed my cooler this morning.”

He sighs.

“Dammit, Banks.”

“It’s water. It’s not like I took something valuable.”

I close the door. “I take it back. I’m willing to risk my nose if I can just take a good solid swing at you.”

“Over water? Yeah, that’s going to make Mom happy.”

“I think a small part of her would think you probably had it coming.”

His eyes go wide. “Me? Never. I’m her favorite.”

We both laugh at the same time. Paige is her favorite. We all know that.

I grab a glass out of a cabinet when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I set the glass down and check my texts.

Jess: If you see Banks tonight before I get home, tell that little bastard that I know he took my grill lighter last night. I have cameras. If he doesn’t put it back, I’m going to kill him.

Me: Banks? Haven’t seen him.

Jess: He’s ignoring my texts.

Me: Huh.

“Who is that?” Banks asks.

I glance up. “Who do you think it is?”

He looks at the ceiling and sighs.

“Jess wants to know where you are.”

“*Do not tell him.*”

I grin. “What’s it worth to you?”

“I’ll fill your whole fucking fridge up with water—premier water. That pure volcano shit from the mountains of some magical island. Just *do not* tell him I was here asking about lighters.”

Jess: I'm so sick of him.

I keep an eye on Banks and smirk while I respond to our brother.

Me: Same.

Jess: I get that a lighter is like two bucks, but it's the principle of the matter.

Me: You're preaching to the choir.

Jess: It would be a shame if someone borrowed his Corvette tomorrow while he was at work and forgot to tell him.

I grin.

"Don't make that face," Banks says, pointing at me. "Where is your loyalty?"

"It was with the water. And the shovel you borrowed last week and didn't return. And the pillows from my guest bedroom."

"You don't want those back. *Trust me.*"

I roll my eyes before going back to my phone.

Me: I like where you're going with this line of thought. How may I be of assistance?

"You told him I was here, didn't you?" Banks asks. "And here I thought I could trust you. You're Moss the Boss. The man. My favorite brother—"

"Shut up."

He sighs. "Okay," he says, sounding defeated.

It's a shame I'm all out of pity. I liked those pillows.

Jess: Does he still keep his keys in the cigar box in the hallway?

Me: Yes. I think the backup spot is in the garage in an old paint can.

Jess: Cool.

Me: Cool.

Jess: Talk soon.

Me: Good chat.

I slide my phone back into my pocket. "You know, Moss the Boss really

has a nice ring to it.”

He makes a face as if he’s not sure what to say. It’s highly amusing to see Banks worried about getting his ass kicked by the two people on the planet he’s scared of—Jess and me.

“So lighter or not?” he asks, marching forward with his plan.

“Banks, why didn’t you just go to the Dollar Twenty-Five Tree and buy one on the way home?”

“Because that would’ve taken forethought, and I just remembered when I pulled onto our road.”

I sigh and dig around in the junk drawer until I locate the red grill lighter. It’s the only one there.

“Thank you,” he says, snapping it out of my hand.

“I’m not getting that back, am I?”

“Probably not.”

“Good to know.” I pick up my glass and finish making my drink. “What are you doing tonight?”

“Helping Maddox with his club wrestling class.”

I laugh. “You haven’t wrestled in forever.”

“It’s like riding a bike. Once you get it, you never forget it.”

“Have you ever used that as a pick-up line?” I stroke my chin. “It needs some tweaking, but there’s a solid base there.”

“Why didn’t I think of that?”

I head into the living room and collapse in my chair while Banks settles himself on the end of the sofa. He grabs the remote off the coffee table and turns on the television. A sports news station is on the screen. He turns the volume down and then tosses the remote back where he found it.

My body aches from the demolition of the past two days. Taking down walls and removing cabinets are my favorite parts of every renovation. You get paid to be destructive. But like all fun things in life, it only feels good for a moment. The pain comes later.

And there’s always pain.

“Speaking of pick-up lines,” Banks says, “I heard you were with Courtney last night.”

I groan. “Don’t say it so loud.”

“I thought you were gonna stay away from that train wreck?” he asks, laughing.

“It was a moment of weakness,” I say. “And not even *that* kind of

weakness, you know? Like I didn't give in because I just couldn't help myself. I felt bad because she said she just needed a friend to talk to and—

“And you bought that?”

“I was trying to be a nice guy. Trying to balance my chi,” I say. “It's hard being me.”

He leans back against the cushions and smirks. “It amazes me that you have *a moment of weakness* with Courtney. Yet you manage to keep your moral compass, or whatever the fuck it is, when you're around Brooke.”

Oh, let's not go there.

He whistles between his teeth. “Sometimes, I think about giving up my business and going to work for Dad just to spend time with that little dime.”

I work my bottom lip back and forth between my teeth, my eyes pinned on my brother. He holds my gaze, taunting me with a smug grin that I'd punch off his face if he wasn't my sibling.

There is no doubt in my mind that Banks has a thing for Brooke. *How could he not?* She's this drive-me-wild creation of gorgeous, adorable, and all-out sex appeal. Mix that with the sweetest personality, sharpest mind, and quickest wit, and you have a package that no sane man can resist.

Except for me. *I resist.*

Brooke is my co-worker and also my friend. I razz her on the daily, but there would be no point in taking things any other direction with her—even if her ass makes me hard every time we're together. Neither of us wants anything long term. And neither of us would ever jeopardize our friendship and working relationship just so we can sleep together. We've only known each other a little over two years, but I couldn't imagine my life without Brooke. She gives me shit—*just like my family*—and I'd hate to lose her.

That doesn't mean I want to hear Banks talk about stepping up to the plate, though.

“Don't give up your day job, Banks. You're not smart enough to do what I do,” I say. “Not by a long shot.”

“*Please.*”

“Brooke wouldn't give you the time of day anyway.” I take a long sip of tap water and watch him over the brim. “She's entirely too good for you.”

He lifts a brow. “Sounds to me like you're a bit worried that might not be true.”

I lift a brow—*higher*. “Sounds to me like you're trying to convince yourself of that.”

“Has she said something about me?” He pops his collar. “She has, hasn’t she?”

“Why would she want anything to do with you when she has the bigger, better-looking, best Carmichael with her every day?”

He scoffs and then grins as he stands. “Dad is a beast, isn’t he?”

I snort, shaking my head.

“On that note, I’m going home to grab a shower before I head to the gym with Mad,” he says. “Want to come with me? See if you remember anything from your glory days?”

“High school was most definitely not my glory days, but no thanks. I’d hate to show the both of you up in front of a bunch of kids.”

“Suit yourself.” He heads for the doorway. “Also, if you say anything to Jess about the lighter ...” He turns around. “Did you know I borrowed Jess’s lighter, or were you shooting in the dark?”

“I don’t have to shoot in the dark. I can read you like a children’s book.”

He thinks for a long moment before his face finally breaks into a Grinch-like smile. “Fine. You don’t mention to Jess that I borrowed your grill lighter, and I won’t have to retaliate.”

I make a face. “How are you going to retaliate? There’s nothing you can do to me. I am impenetrable.”

“Everyone has a weakness.”

I laugh. “Not me. There’s literally nothing you can do to me to hurt me, embarrass me, or play me. I’m an island. I’m above all of your hijinks. That’s what happens when you’re *the one*.”

“It’s amazing that there’s any confidence left for the rest of us.”

“Go play wrestling with Maddox and sneak Jess the grill lighter,” I say. “Also, if you say I gave it to you, I’ll call you a liar. I’ll say you took it. *And he’ll believe me.*”

“You play dirty.”

I shrug. “I’m not having Jess pissed at me. He’s Dad’s favorite, you know. The last thing I need is Dad making my life harder at work.”

Banks nods. “He could totally have Brooke work with Jess instead of you. That would suck.” He walks backward toward the door. “I don’t like that look in your eye, so I’m gone. See you later.”

“Good decision.”

Banks disappears around the corner. Shortly after he’s out of sight, I hear the back door open and then close.

I rest my head on the back of the chair and close my eyes. The cinnamon and clove-scented candle that I burned last night while going over construction plans for work lingers in the air. It's comforting and helps me relax.

For a minute at least.

Until my attention shifts to Brooke.

A warmth fills my veins. I love her smile and how her light blond hair sparkles like a halo above her head. How she simplifies complicated problems into something manageable. How she speaks her mind with such confidence that you have no choice but to hear her out.

"She's so damn impressive," I say out loud.

If I were to ever date seriously, Brooke is the kind of woman who would capture my interest. Someone smart and funny, kind and engaging. A woman I would be proud to introduce to my family and could trust enough to build something real with.

The idea alone causes my stomach to churn so hard that I wince.

"No need to think about that too much. It's not going to happen," I say before downing the rest of my iced water.

I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

All of these thoughts about Brooke are pointless. Like I have many times before, I banish her from my mind.

She's my co-worker and my friend. That's it. That's all it will ever be.

FOUR

BROOKE

“I need a pedicure,” I say, spraying the sand from between my toes.

A walk on the beach was exactly what my soul needed. The afternoon seemed to have packed in an entire week’s worth of calls into five hours. But at the end of the day, the lighting fixtures for Parasol Place were ordered, a conundrum with the layout of the master bedroom remedied, and Kix sent me pictures of a gorgeous new property he’s convinced would be a perfect job for Moss and me.

I shut off the hose and then fling my wet flip-flops beside the back door.

The house is warmer than I expect when I walk inside. I toss my keys on the kitchen table and make my way to the thermostat. It’s set where I like it, but I notch the temperature down a couple of degrees anyway. Warm houses remind me of my mother.

That’s all it takes to send my spirits flailing inside me like a one-winged hummingbird with too much sugar.

I fall onto the sofa, knocking a black pillow onto the floor with my dramatics. The mere idea of facing my family is enough to erase the satisfaction of a productive day.

“I don’t need them to be the Brady Bunch.” I swing my legs up on the cushions and wiggle down until I’m flat on my back. “I’d settle for the Bundys. They were dysfunctional, but at least you knew what you were getting.”

The idea of my mom as Peg Bundy makes me laugh.

I reach for my phone. My hand is stalled in the air as the sound of the front door opening rings through the house.

My insides still. A warning fires through my brain to escape through the

kitchen door when I hear Jovie's voice call through the house.

"Hey! Where are you?"

"In the living room. Do you ever knock?"

"Nope. Just like you don't ever listen."

Jovie turns the corner and walks to the chair she always sits in—the one by the overgrown aloe vera plant. *I really need to thin that thing.* Her eyes are narrow, filled with suspicion.

"What?" I ask. "What don't I listen to?"

"Anything, apparently."

I hold my hands out to my sides. *What is she talking about?*

"You're calm," she says, more as an insult than an observation.

"Why wouldn't I be? Did something happen, and I don't know about it?"

She tucks her legs beneath her, the suspicion in her gaze mixing with uncertainty.

"Let's back up and start over," she says. "What did you do today?"

What on earth is this about? "I got a coffee at Muggers. Went to work. Met you for lunch. Went back to work. Came home. Walked on the beach. Now I'm here. With you. Answering very random questions."

"That's it?"

"Basically. Normal day. *What's going on?*"

She furrows her brow like a talk show host who isn't getting the answer they want out of an interviewee. "So no new developments with the birthday party debacle?"

"Developments? Like did my mom call and tell me she put her foot down and refused to cooperate if Geoff came for my benefit?" I grin facetiously. "If that's what you mean, then no. But I did have an idea."

"What's that?"

"Maybe you can go with me, and I'll tell them I've started batting for the other team. I'd really like to see you go toe-to-toe with my aunt Kim. I won't feed you for six or eight hours and then just unleash the dragon."

She laughs. It's restrained, though.

Weird.

"So ..." I say, moving my hands in a circle as a prompt for her to get to the point.

"Are you ...?" She takes a breath and adjusts her line of thinking. "Look, Brooke, I'm really confused. I was literally five minutes from getting oral and panicked and came over here. You're so ... *cool* about everything. Much

cooler than I anticipated.”

My heart begins to beat harder in my chest. Something is amiss, and I’ve known it since she walked in. But the longer she sits here not getting to the point, the more I think it might really be bad. *For me*. Not for the world.

“I’m so cool about what?” I ask, furrowing my brow. “Just say it. Stop screwing around. You’re freaking me out over here.”

“I didn’t think you’d post your ad, if I’m being honest. I thought you were kidding. That or you’d at least listen to me because—”

“*Whoa*. Wait.” I hold up a hand. Confusion fogs up my brain. “What do you mean? I didn’t post it.”

She swallows hard as her eyes grow wide.

“I wasn’t kidding. I think it would be a damn good idea,” I say, my brain trying to wrap itself around her insinuation. “But I *didn’t* post it.”

The whole room stills. Jovie nods in the slowest, most subtle way.

A chill slinks down my spine in a lazy, torturous spiral.

There’s no way. It couldn’t have posted. I didn’t post it.

“Jovie ...” Her name is stuck in my throat.

“I got home from work and pulled up Social, and *there it was*.”

“*What?*”

I spring to my feet and race into the kitchen. Jovie is on my heels. I grab my bag off the chair and slide it onto the tabletop.

“You better be kidding me,” I say, although I know she’s not. “I’ll be mad for a whole day, but then I’ll let it go. Just tell me you’re joking.”

Jovie is silent.

My fingers shake as I pull my computer out and lift the lid. It takes sixteen years for the screen to wake up and three tries for me to enter my password correctly. And then, staring at me from my Social profile is it.

The ad. The wanted post for a fake boyfriend.

“Oh, *shit*,” I say, fumbling around for a chair.

I sit on the edge of the seat. Jovie stands behind me. We both stare at the mess I somehow made.

“I didn’t post this,” I say, my insides paused like they’re in shock. “I don’t know how this happened ...”

My hand covers my mouth as I stare at the screen.

The little star beneath the post has over two hundred interactions. *And the comments?* It would take me all night to read them.

“I don’t know whether to laugh or cry,” I say, my voice wobbling.

“Crying is never the answer, my friend.”

I try to get my bearings, but they seem inaccessible at the moment. All I can do is scroll through the tags, shares, and some offers from random people who scare the daylights out of me.

“What do I do, Jovie? I should just delete it, right?”

She sighs. “I don’t think it’s going to be that easy.”

“Why not?”

“Let’s read some of the comments. You’ll see.”

I keep scrolling down the list, scanning the various replies. Then just under a line of heart eye and drool emojis is the reason Jovie says it’s not going to be that easy.

@KimQueen: Interesting choice, @MrsCatherineBailey.

“Interesting choice?” My jaw drops as I reread my aunt’s comment that tags my mother. “I can’t believe she has the gall to pop on my post and comment—especially when it concerns dating!”

“She’s fucking your ex-husband and bringing him to family events. I’m pretty sure she has the nerve to do just about anything.”

I hear Jovie beside me, but I’m too focused on the computer to really *hear her*.

The top of my head might detach from my body at any moment. My blood might hit boiling point soon. I blink to prevent my bulging eyes from drying out as I read the comment once more.

“The interesting choice is that you ...” I exhale, closing my eyes briefly. “No. I’m not going there. *Fuck her.*”

Jovie scoffs, shoving my computer away from me. Her caramel-colored eyes shine with concern.

“I know you’re good, but just ... are you okay?” she asks. “This is just a quick check-in before we go any further. I need to know what best friend to be for you.”

God, I love her. I nod. “Yeah, I’m fine. For real.”

And I am fine. I will be fine. I’m always fine.

Besides, which thing would I focus on first? *The fact that I actually made a post for a fake boyfriend? That everyone I know has seen it? Or that I have to go to my hometown and face those people soon?*

So many choices.

I shake my head, the motion grounding me. In lieu of the plethora of options before me, I go with the easiest one—*how did this happen?*

“I must’ve hit enter when I closed the computer. I haven’t opened it since lunch. I used my company computer at my desk and haven’t even thought about going online since I’ve been home,” I say, working through my thoughts.

“You don’t have the app on your phone?”

“No, because I’ll sit around waist-deep in someone’s aunt’s grandma’s cousin’s dog’s veterinarian’s business from three counties over.” I frown. “I’m a sucker for a good drama.”

Jovie grins. “And now you have a whole one of your own.”

I cover my face with my hands and fake cry.

She laughs and grabs my shoulder, giving it a shake. “Okay. You had your moment. Now you gotta woman up and fix this.”

“How?” I drop my hands. “Every person in my life thinks I want a fake boyfriend.”

“Well ... you do.”

“But I don’t want them thinking it! I want a *secret* fake boyfriend.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it’s too late for that.”

I stand and then head into the kitchen. “Jovie, I’m going to need a pineapple vodka cocktail. Stat.”

“Sure thing.”

I pace the kitchen while she makes the drink. I have no idea how this happened, but Jovie is right. *It’s already happened*. My energy should be spent on the cards I’m holding now instead of wondering how they got in my hand to start with.

Deleting the post would make me look like I panic-posted and then reconsidered. That’s not the vibe I want to put out into the world. I have to own it, make it look intentional—like I’m living such a fun, carefree life that I’m not bothered with societal opinions.

“Here,” Jovie says, sliding the cocktail in my hand. “Drink.”

The fruity concoction goes down way too easily. I down the whole thing and then burp.

“Nice.” She makes a face and takes my glass from me. “With manners like that, you’re going to need a fake boyfriend.”

“Very funny.”

She laughs as she puts my glass in the sink. “So where are you mentally with this?”

I blow out a breath. “I can’t delete it.”

“Agreed.”

“But people saw it. So what do I say? How do I save face?”

“You do realize that people would’ve seen it before when you were all gung-ho about this, right? Like, what was your plan then?”

I glare at her. “I didn’t have one. Obviously, I hadn’t thought it through. But, if you recall, my final decision was not to post it at all. I’d like to think I would’ve realized this little speedbump beforehand.”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “Well, the easiest solution would be to say you were joking around. Or blame it on me. Make a post or edit that one and say—ha-ha, joke’s on you. My best friend Jovie did this to get me back for something or other.” Her lip twitches. “Make sure you put that I’m your best friend so Gina from your office sees it.”

“Gina doesn’t think she’s my best friend,” I say with a laugh.

“Put it in anyway for good measure.”

We walk back to the table and sit again. I stare at my computer, afraid to touch it—afraid to read any more comments or, God forbid, the messages.

“You’d really let me blame this on you?” I ask Jovie.

“Of course I would. You can even tag me, and I’ll put something on my profile that says I did it, just in case anyone goes all online private investigator and needs to confirm it.”

I smile at her. “You’re the best.”

“I know.” She smiles back at me. “So is that the plan then? I need to know in case anyone asks me about it.”

“Is there any other option?”

She shrugs. “Not really. You can delete it, admit you posted it, even though you didn’t actually do it, or say it was an accident. But saying I did it to tease you is the best option, in my opinion.”

I weigh everything carefully. But no matter which way I look at it, I realize she’s right. The only thing I really can do at this point is laugh it off.

Besides, I should laugh it off.

“Do I edit that post or make a new one?” I ask.

“I’d edit that one so you can be sure everyone who sees it, saw it, or comes back to the post gets the update.”

“Good point.”

“That’s why I’m the best friend. Not Gina,” she adds.

I yank the computer toward me and hit the trackpad. It comes on immediately with my post front and center. But when I look at it this time,

it's almost ... funny. Whether that's from alcohol or my new perspective—I'll take it.

"This is a bit of an ego boost," I say, giggling.

Jovie points at a comment from a guy I went to high school with. *@ItsBrookeBailey I've waited for this opportunity for the past twenty-five years. I messaged you my number.*

"That guy wore a trench coat to school every single day for all four years of high school," I say, scrolling on. "There's no opportunity here, sir."

"Look at that one," Jovie says.

*@ItsBrookeBailey I've sent you a pic I think you'll enjoy. *winks**

"Ew!" I shiver. "I'm definitely not opening that. You know what it's going to be."

Jovie laughs. "I want to see it."

I elbow her, making her laugh harder.

"What? I do. It's always good to know what's out there," she says.

"Something is wrong with you," I mutter, going back to the screen. "I think I worked on this guy's house."

@ItsBrookeBailey Hope you're well. Let me know if you need a friend.

"Um, that's a no," I say.

"Hey. Is that your boss's son?" Jovie points at a message at the bottom of the list from *@MadMaxMan. @ItsBrookeBailey GOLD.*

"Gold?" I look at Jovie, puzzled. "What's that mean?"

She shrugs. "I have no clue. But look at his profile pic. Damn. The Carmichaels know how to grow hot-ass men, don't they? He's as hot as Moss."

Not even close. But I don't say that.

I slide that thought out of my mind and make quick work of scrolling back to the top. "Why are people weird?"

She shrugs again.

I hit the edit button on the post and then type furiously across the keyboard.

UPDATE: The joke is on me. My best friend *@TheRealJovieRey* thought this would be hilarious. I'm only seeing the post now, some six hours after she posted it. I'm glad you all got a good laugh out of this. Also, I'm not opening any of your messages so don't hold your breath for a response. **laughing emoji**

“Good?” I ask, looking over my shoulder.

“Looks good to me.”

I hit enter—this time intentionally.

“You know, I wonder if you got any good leads from that,” Jovie says, cupping her chin in her hand. “Like, you already did the hard part. You should see who messaged you. It might be a missed opportunity.”

I close the computer lid with a flourish. “Or not. You want to get tacos?”

“Uh, yeah.”

We get to our feet, and Jovie goes to use the restroom. My mind wanders back to the post and to Maddox’s comment specifically.

He and I are base-level friends. I’m closest with Moss since we work together, and I have a great relationship with Jess, too, since we cross paths a lot at the office. Foxx is never around, so I’m least familiar with him, but I’m pretty good friends with both Mad and Banks. Both of the youngest Carmichael boys make sure to ask me out every time I see them. They’re kidding, of course, but it’s a running joke at this point.

My stomach knots as I wonder if Maddox will tell Moss about this whole thing. I mean, it doesn’t matter if he does. It was a joke by all intents and purposes. But there’s something about Moss thinking I need a fake boyfriend that feels a little humiliating—especially considering he has women carrying their phones around just waiting for him to call. The few times we’ve been to lunch together have been downright ridiculous. The batting of the lashes, the not-so-subtle slip of their phone number with the bill.

Yeah. He can’t know.

Please, Maddox. Don’t say anything to him.

“Are you ready?” Jovie asks, shaking her hands off to finish drying them.

With a lingering glance at my computer, I nod. “Yeah, let’s go.”

FIVE

BROOKE

I've drunk tequila and vodka on the same night many times, and it's not bothered me a bit. Someone told me once that they have roughly the same alcohol content, and that's why you can mix them. I don't know if that's true, but it's always worked in my favor.

So I guess I can throw that out as the reason I can't sleep.

I piddle around the kitchen aimlessly. There's nothing left to clean or organize. No clean dishes to put away. No speck of the Doritos that I binged earlier left on the counter. There's nothing left to do but sit with the rock of reality weighing heavily in my stomach.

"Just ... don't care," I say, my words slipping through the dark house.

I might not care if Honey's party wasn't on the horizon. If I could stay in Kismet Beach and ignore my mom's calls and never see Kim and Geoff, I probably wouldn't care. But, unfortunately for me, that's not the case.

"Maybe Mom will laugh this off too," I say, rolling my eyes at myself but continuing with my self-pep talk. "Maybe she'll message Kim back and say, '*Look at my daughter enjoying her life.*'"

It's amazing that I still have hope.

"I'm so freaking tired of this. I'm sick of them having the power to make me feel any certain way. I'm not a bad person. I don't hurt anyone." I pace the kitchen, my feet smacking against the cool tile. "But I need to stop putting myself in a position to be hurt."

It's a no-win situation.

The security light on my back porch shines hazily through the window. Whether the light is actually pointed at my computer or if I'm imagining it, I don't know. But the longer I avoid looking at my Social account, the brighter

the glow on the table becomes.

It seems that way, at least.

The unknown lures me in. I haven't looked at Social since Jovie and I left for tacos, and my curiosity is starting to eat me alive.

Did my mother reply to Kim? How many messages are there? Did Moss see it?

"Oh, just look and get it over with," I say, growling into the air.

My heart pounds as I head toward the table. My palms start to sweat. Fear of the unknown settles inside my stomach, and I say a silent prayer to the heavens that this whole thing blows over. *Fast.*

I grab a seat and open the computer, keeping it at arm's length. My Social profile is still pulled up. There are more stars, shares, tags, and comments than before. The biggest change, however, is the *massive* number circled around the envelope in the top right corner.

You've got to be kidding me.

I exhale, releasing some of the tension that I've been carrying around all evening. After I get situated, I reach for the trackpad.

"What the hell is happening here?" I click the comments button. "This is not how I ever thought I'd go viral."

The newer comments at the bottom are mostly light-hearted. Some of Jovie and my mutual friends heckle her that I'll be getting back at her—to sleep with her eyes open. That makes me smile. And Jovie, bless her heart, commented *Gotcha!*

"That's not so bad," I say, scrolling back up the page. Then I click on the envelope. "*Wow.*"

Message after message fills my inbox. I promptly delete all messages with an attachment. *Penises are never cute. Ever.*

"Why are you guys messaging me, anyway? I said to email me, boys. If you can't read, you don't qualify," I say, amused.

My shoulders sag as I get comfortable and pull the computer closer to me. I open a couple of messages from friends. Some laugh about the post or offer to hook me up with their brothers or, in one case, their dad. *This whole thing was a joke but thanks!*

I make my way down the list, a bit shocked at how many people would've been into this whole situation.

"Would've been a good idea had I gone about it a different way." I tap my tongue against the roof of my mouth. "Let's see what else we have going

on.”

I peruse the preview pane and nix all messages that start with corny terms of endearment. “No *baby*, no *hon*—ooh, darlin’ isn’t bad,” I say, skipping over that message. “We’ll circle back to that. *Ew*. Definitely no *old lady*. How is that even a nice thing to say?”

I’d love for ya to be my old lady—fake or otherwise. I got a truck and a cooler full of ice-cold beer. Hit me up, and we can get to know each other.

“Or not,” I say, clearing him from the list. “Oh. What’s this one?”

I click on a message that says *I like turtles*.

“What?” I laugh. “*I like turtles?* Okay. You got my attention.”

*Just a hunch, but I think we’d be great at this. *winking emoji* I don’t have much of a social life, so I wouldn’t need too much of your time. But I tick all of your boxes and fake most things in life, so a situation-ship shouldn’t be that hard. No games. No bullshit. Hit me up if you’re interested. Red lipstick and heels optional.*

I back out of the message, curiosity piqued, and click on the sender’s profile. *@NothingButTheReal*’s account was created this evening. Profile picture—*abs*. Profile banner—*solid green*. Posts—*none*.

“Huh,” I say, going back to the inbox.

I make quick work of deleting the messages without opening them, including a new one from my mother. *Not touching that tonight*. But I keep the one from *@NothingButTheReal*.

“He’s honest,” I say, opening his message again. “At least he admits to faking stuff.”

I read his note again. Something about it prickles the back of my neck. There are no silly pet names, no assumptions, and no freaking dick pic. It’s almost as if he actually read my post and ... “What’s with the winking emoji?”

My finger trails over my lip as I try to work out my tangled thoughts. *Someone made this account just to message me. Is that possible?*

“It has to be, I think,” I say, ironing the details out.

But what does that mean? Why am I so bothered by this?

I glance at the clock. It’s well after one in the morning, and the fact that I’m still up at this hour thinking about a fake Social account is frustrating. But I know if I go to bed without taking action in some form, I won’t be able to put it to bed. So I hit *reply*.

Profile looks a little sketchy.

I start to grab the top of the computer to close it when a message pings back almost immediately.

What? You don't like abs?

Abs are overrated. Prefer shoulders.

Hold, please.

I watch as the small circle beside his handle changes to a set of shoulders.

The computer dings with a new message. *How's that?*

You did see that I posted that this whole thing was a joke, right?

I call bullshit. That post was too crafted to be a joke.

I lift a brow. *Sounds like you know a lot about jokes.*

If you're insinuating that I'm a jokester, you would be incorrect. But I do know a lot about human behavior. It's just one of many topics I can discuss.

"Well played." It's almost half past one. Don't you have to get up for work? (I did have the legal job requirement, you know.)

My inbox dings again. *I'll be up and impressing everyone around me at six. (At least in my head.) No worries.*

Do you just not require sleep?

May I kindly point out that you're still up?

"Eh, good point," I grumble on a yawn. *Speaking of which, I'm heading to bed. Thanks for replying, but this really was just a stunt by my best friend.*

You know where to find me if you change your mind.

I close my computer before I can respond. There's no point in going back and forth with this person. I couldn't possibly follow through with this now. Not after everyone saw the post.

"That's too bad," I say, getting to my feet. "I don't think it was a terrible idea. I just needed to execute it better."

I pad down the hall toward my bedroom and refocus my brain on things that matter—like the garage conversion in the morning.

My stomach sinks as I fall into bed. I wallow around in my sheets until I'm halfway on my right side, and my hands are positioned perfectly under my pillow. My eyes flutter closed, and I sigh.

I drift off to sleep thinking about a man with the most dazzling eyes.

SIX

BROOKE

“Good morning, I—*oh*. Sorry. Got it.” Moss cringes. “When you walk in here with that look on your face, I know my role. *We gotta ease into the morning.*”

I close the door to Parasol Place behind me.

“Rough morning, Brookie?”

I study Moss’s face for any indication that he’s about to tease me. *That Maddox told him*. His eyes are crinkled at the corners, but not like he’s preparing to crack a joke. It’s more of a curiosity. And that makes me curious. *Does he know or not?*

“You could say that,” I say, although the morning hasn’t really been rough. It was last night that sucked.

I slept solidly for an hour. Then I tossed and turned in that twilight-y state of being that’s not quite sleep but not quite awake either.

“Here.” I thrust a cup of coffee from Muggers toward him. “They were out of mocha, so you got caramel. Deal with it.”

He takes the cup with his name written in a bright red marker on the side—with a heart. Clearly, the barista knows Moss. That cost her a dollar of her tip which is petty, I know. But here we are.

“You shouldn’t have. No, well, you should’ve because ... Follow me.” He winks, those long, dark lashes fluttering as he heads into the kitchen. “I think you’re going to be one very happy lady.”

“I’m a lady. Wow. That’s nice.”

He laughs as he spins on his heel and poses Vanna White-style by the spot the sink should be. “*Ta-da!*” Coffee sloshes onto the floor. “That was a complete bitch to get out of there and heavier than shit. But I had Jason stay over. We got it out and into the storage locker in the driveway until we’re

ready to put it back in.”

“Moss ...” I say, grinning.

“Is it everything you thought it would be?”

“You sure know how to make a girl happy in the morning.”

“Weird. That’s what they usually say when I’m putting something in and not taking something out—*ouch!*”

He chuckles as I swat his arm.

“So what did you do last night?” he asks, leaning against one of the remaining cabinets.

My cheeks redden. “Why?”

He shrugs, but the nonchalance of the movement doesn’t quite make it to his face. “You seem a little testy today.”

“I didn’t sleep very well.”

“Any reason in particular?”

I watch him. *He watches me.* I have no idea if he’s alluding to my Social stunt and the unknown gnaws on my nerves.

“Can’t a girl just have a bad night’s sleep?” I ask.

He cocks his head to the side and sips his coffee. “Well, if it makes you feel any better, you look like you got all kinds of beauty sleep.”

His crooked smile disarms me like it always does.

“I’ve already given you coffee,” I say, turning away from him so he doesn’t see my grin. “You can stop buttering me up now.”

“You think *this* is buttering you up?” He snorts. “You couldn’t handle my actual butter game.”

I laugh, turning around to face him again. “Your butter game?”

“I’m as smooth as room temperature butter, baby.”

He runs a hand through the air in some kind of demonstration of smoothness, I think. But the sheepish grin on his face sits in stark contrast to the finesse he’s purporting to have.

My laughter grows louder. “That didn’t come out as you hoped, did it?”

Moss laughs too. “Maybe not exactly. Now come on. Let’s look at the garage.”

I follow him through the house, making quick notes of the progress. Things are right on schedule, which never happens in construction.

“Hang on,” he says, stopping so abruptly that I almost run into him. His fingers fly across his phone. “Fucking hell.”

“What’s wrong?”

He pauses and then starts texting again. There's no response until he's satisfied with what's on the screen.

"Last night, Banks ... Long story," he says, starting over. "Banks has been helping himself a little too much to everyone's shit. Jess had enough of it yesterday and decided to *borrow*, the term used loosely, Banks's Corvette today without asking."

My eyes go wide. "That's ballsy. Should we expect an angry Banks today?"

"I don't know. I don't know when Banks will find it gone. But I do know, as of two minutes ago, that Jess fucking hid the 'Vette *in my garage*."

I can't help it. I laugh.

"Now it's going to look like I did it when I didn't. I just encouraged it," he says.

"That's considered an accomplice, I think."

"Yeah, but now I look like I'm the thief—*of Banks's baby*. He's going to go ape-shit crazy, and I'm gonna have to deal with him when I get home. And—*and*—I'll never get my water back now."

My cheeks ache from smiling. "I have so many questions."

"Well, you won't have to ask why I have a black eye tomorrow because now you'll know. I fought Banks."

"Are you saying he'll beat you up?"

He scoffs. "Hardly. But he'll get a shot or two in. He's a squirrely bastard."

"Why do you guys not lock your doors or something?" I ask, laughing. "Is your neighborhood that safe? Because if I left my house unlocked, everything that I own would be gone before lunchtime."

Moss's face sobers. He lifts a brow.

"Slight exaggeration," I say, backtracking. "But I really don't understand why you don't just change your locks."

He leans against the drywall and sighs. The early morning sun streams through the windows, and from the way it hits him, it looks like he's the cover model for some kind of DIY magazine.

I'd buy that.

I study him while he thinks, happy to have a moment to absorb all that he is. His woody cologne always reminds me of a jobsite. Thick shoulders that I dream about being tossed over sometimes. The warmth that seems to radiate off his body in waves, making me so comfortable in his presence that I forget

how gorgeous he is.

Until he smiles again.

Damn. If I was a relationship kind of girl and he was a relationship kind of guy, we might be a fun pair.

I laugh at my thoughts, earning a raised brow from Moss. I wave him off with a hand through the air.

“We could change our locks, I guess,” he says, running his teeth over his bottom lip. “And maybe we will someday when one of us gets married or needs privacy.”

“Um, I’m not sure your wife would appreciate your brothers just walking in randomly.”

“My wife? *I’m* not getting married.” He laughs. “Won’t be a problem for me.”

“But there’s a Corvette in your garage that’s probably going to get you in a fight today, so yeah, I think it’s a problem, pal.”

He rolls his eyes. “It’s a minor inconvenience.”

“Let’s judge that by the color of your eye socket tomorrow.”

He smiles, pushing off the wall. “I guess it’s because I grew up with my whole family close by. My gran lived with us until she passed away, and my aunt and cousins lived on the street over. We’d come and go as we pleased. I could smell Aunt Kat frying chicken from my house, and I’d hop on my bike and head over. When dinner was ready, I’d grab a plate and take my seat.”

The thought of having such a large, warm family hits my heart. *I have no idea what that would be like, but it sounds wonderful.*

We bring our coffees to our lips at the same time, smiling around the brim before we each take a sip. My iced chai latte is perfectly spicy and sweet as it trickles down my throat.

“What is your family like? You don’t talk much about them,” he says, stretching an arm overhead.

I try not to watch the way his body elongates and focus on his face instead.

“They’re ... my family,” I say with a laugh. “I’m not sure what else to say.”

“You don’t talk about them. They’ve never come to see what fantastic work we do together. It’s strange, that’s all.”

My body itches to move, needing to get rid of the anxiety that sprang up out of nowhere. I move as easily as I can into what will be the formal dining

room and pretend to be engrossed with the details of the drywall.

Even though I know for a fact that's not what Moss intended, I'm uncomfortable with being put on the spot. It's awkward. There's never a time when I feel motivated to dig into the depths of my family's dysfunction with anyone. But that time is definitely not today.

Before I can answer him, my phone buzzes in my purse. Relieved, I pull it out ... and then quietly try to pull the knife out of my windpipe.

Mom: Please call me sometime today. We need to talk.

"Is everything okay?" Moss asks.

"Speaking of my family ..." I groan, tucking my coffee in my armpit. "It's like she knew I was thinking about her."

"Who?"

I look up at him. "My mom."

His brows tug together in an unspoken question. I avert my gaze back to my phone so I don't have to see anything in his eyes.

Me: Everything okay?

Mom: With me, yes. With you? I'm not sure.

I sigh.

Me: I'm good. Honest.

Mom: I hope you wouldn't lie to me.

Me: You know me—I endeavor to be honest with you even when it makes you utterly disappointed in me. *smiling emoji*

I look up to see Moss watching me.

"It's fine," I say, giving him my best smile. "I've just failed her as a daughter yet again. Normal breakfast banter."

Mom: Your post last night was humiliating, Brooklyn. Why would you do that to yourself?

Me: It was a joke. Didn't you see the update?

Mom: I don't care if it was a joke or not. Why would you even have friends who would do such a thing? That is not friendly behavior.

Me: My friends are more fun than yours.

Mom: I have to face my sister today and all of the ladies at the tennis club, and you know they all heard about it. What am I supposed to say?

That you're proud of me. That you believe in me. That you'll back me because that's what moms do. That I'm living my best life in Kismet Beach, and you're thrilled that I'm doing exactly what I want to.

But I don't say that. There would be no point. She's never said anything like that in the thirty years I've been alive, and I know better than to expect her to start now.

Me: I don't know. That my friends are funny? That your daughter isn't worried about a bunch of people's opinions who don't even like her anyway? Hell, tell them I have a smoking-hot boyfriend, and I lick icing off his abs every night for all I care. That's your world. I don't know how to suggest you handle it.

Mom: Call me when you get home if you're working today.

Steam pours out of my ears.

Me: Gee, what day is it? Maybe I should check the calendar and see if I was supposed to work today. Whoops.

Mom: I hope you're being more responsible than you portray online and over text.

Me: Well, you could call me and ask about my life and then maybe you'd know.

Mom: I'm late. We'll talk tonight.

Me: Can't wait.

I hit the side button on my phone and drop it into my purse with a thud. Moss's gaze is heavy. I don't want to look up but know there's no way to avoid it.

After pulling a long slug of air into my lungs, I meet his eyes.

"You okay?" he asks.

"I'm always okay."

He mulls this over. "You could invite whoever that was to my house tonight, and we'll tell Banks they took his car."

Moss's grin tugs at mine, and before I know it, I'm smiling too.

"I'm pretty sure your parents wouldn't approve of Banks beating up my mother," I say.

He flinches. "That was really your mom? I thought you were joking, and it was an old boyfriend or something."

"There's never a moment I pine for any of my exes to text me, but today, I'd take it over the conversation I'm probably going to have with Mom tonight."

"Can I ask what it's about?"

My insides pause. I search his eyes, trying to see if he's leading me into a conversation about the post. But there's nothing there. *Only concern.*

I sigh. "Let's just say that she and I don't always see eye to eye and leave it at that."

I'm not sure if Moss hears the resignation in my voice or sees the frustration I'm trying to hide from him. But for some reason, he puts his strong arm lightly around my shoulders.

"It's probably because you're so damn short," he says.

I try to push away from his side, laughing, but he's a solid wall of muscle. The contact sends a whiff of his cologne into the air, and when I look up, his eyes are sparkling.

My body purrs at the sensations riddling it as Moss guides me toward the garage.

"You feel tense," he says. "Let's check on the garage. I'm sure I've fucked something all the way up and you can take all of your frustrations out on me."

I lean my head against him. "Sounds like a good plan."

We stop at the doorway, and he slides his arm off my shoulders. The skin where he was touching me tingles.

"Thank you," I tell him.

"For what?"

I shrug. "I don't know. For being nice to me, I guess."

"You should never have to thank someone for being nice to you. You should expect it." Then as if he feels the wild intensity between us as much as I do, he winks. "But if you ever want to see just how nice I can be, all you have to do is ask."

"Yeah. That's okay," I say, shoving away from him.

His chuckle drifts through the air. "What? I meant as friends. I'm a great

friend, you know. No games, no bullshit. Just here with a shoulder to lean on.”

Just as I’m about to turn around, something strikes me. *I’m a great friend, you know. No games, no bullshit.*

What the ...?

No ... Our gazes lock, an expression of pure amusement written on his face.

My heart begins to thunder in my chest as I try to decipher if Maddox opened his big mouth. It’s something he would do, the little mischief-maker. But as we stand in Parasol Place, eyeing each other carefully, Moss sighs.

“We have a lot of work to do,” he says. “And I need to get your final opinion on the windows out here.”

My shoulders slump. *I’m reading way too much into this.* “Cool. Let’s go.”

“After you, my lady,” he says, opening the door.

I step into the garage. “I’m not going to lie and call you a gentleman.”

His chuckle follows me out the door.

SEVEN

MOSS

Fuck.

I run a hand over the top of my head and stare at Banks's car in my garage. A part of me hoped that Jess was kidding about parking the 1957 Corvette here.

I should've known better.

Messing with our youngest brother's beloved car might be a step too far. It was hilarious when I was merely a bystander. Now that I'm an active participant—unwillingly, but that won't matter in the long run—I see it for the time suck it's going to create.

Also, there will be retaliation. It won't be pretty.

I dig my phone out of my pocket and call Jess. He picks up on the first ring.

"Any fireworks yet?" he asks.

"You really fucking parked it at my house."

"I told you I did."

"What's wrong with your house?" I ask.

He cackles through the line.

I close the garage door and walk back toward the kitchen. "I know what you're doing here. You want to piss Banks off, but you don't want him standing in your house all night, wasting your time."

"Nope." The second syllable pops as he says it. "I don't."

"What have I ever done to you?"

"Oh, I'm sure I can think of something."

I scan the kitchen counter. "What did you do with the keys?"

"Why?"

“Because my house is burning down, and I need to get the car out of the garage.”

“You are amazingly cool for a person going through something so traumatic.”

I roll my eyes. “I think Banks has an extra set in his garage. I’m going to get them and then put this stupid car in your damn garage and let you deal with it.”

“Just take one for the team, Moss.”

“No. No, I won’t. I’ve had a long day. My back hurts from hauling this ridiculous sink out of the house yesterday because Brooke won’t even consider—”

“*Oh, yes. Brooke. How is she?*”

Jess doesn’t even try to hide his interest in Brooke. Hiding my irritation will be much harder to do.

“Back to the car,” I say.

“I don’t know why Dad gave me Cala, who is practically a nun—”

“But she’s so sweet, though.” I laugh. “Dad really hooked you up with a sweetie.”

“*And you got Brooke. The embodiment of every wet dream I’ve ever had.*”

I wrinkle my face. “That’s ... Never say that again.”

“Why? You jealous? You know I could pull her if I really wanted to, right?”

Jess is a good guy. He works hard, has a big heart, and takes care of the people he loves. That aside, the idea of him touching Brooke sends fire through my veins.

I don’t know what it is. Brooke has dated men since I’ve known her. I’ve even met some of the pricks and have done my best to give them a look that suggests I will rip their balls off and feed them to them if they get out of line. But the idea of her dating any of my brothers is a different ball game—one I have no desire to be a spectator for. *Fuck. That.* At least when she’s with some asshole I don’t know, I don’t have to see it. But I think watching her in my personal life with some other dude—related or not—would really get under my skin.

I won’t ponder that anymore.

“Am I jealous? *Of you?*” I ask with as much of a laugh as I can muster. “Hardly.”

“You know what I think?”

I walk through the house and stop at the front door. “I could bet there are a few things you’re thinking right now, Jess. One might be what Banks is going to do to get back at you for this. Another might be why you got the shortest genes in the family. That sucks for you, man.”

“Fuck off.”

I laugh. “You might also be thinking about ... *Shit.*”

The sound of Banks’s truck coming down the road stops any plans I had of finding the spare keys. I peek out the window.

“Banks is home,” I say, pulling the curtain back as stealthily as I can. “He’s going into his house now.”

“What are you doing? Spying on him?”

“You put me in this position. Don’t judge the tactics I use to make sure I don’t get blindsided.”

“He’s calling me.” He laughs. “Let me send that to voicemail.”

I blow out a breath as a call beeps in. I glance at the screen. “He’s calling me now too.”

Jess is much more amused than I am about this whole thing. His laughter turns into a cackle again as he imagines Banks’s shock and, probably, horror.

My phone dings.

Banks: BETSY IS GONE.

Banks: DID YOU SEE ANYTHING?

Banks: WHAT TIME DID YOU GET HOME?

“He’s freaking out,” I say. “Also, he calls his car Betsy. Did you know that?”

Jess laughs. “I did not, but I’ll file that away for later use. But I’m glad he’s freaking out. Let him. The dickhead can sweat a little. Won’t kill him.”

I agree—Banks can use a good ruffling of his feathers. But I also don’t want to be the guy in the middle of it all.

Me: What do you mean Betsy is gone?

Banks: My ’Vette is gone. It’s not here. You didn’t see anything?

Me: Have you asked Jess?

Banks: Texting him now.

I didn't deny anything, nor did I throw Jess under the bus. I think I handled it pretty well.

I grin.

"He's blowing me up," Jess says.

"How long do you plan on letting this play out?"

"I don't know. Until it's not fun anymore."

Movement catches my eye, and I peel back the curtain again. Banks is standing in his driveway, hand flying through the air as if he's trying to demonstrate to someone how to land a plane.

I almost feel bad for him. *Almost.*

"He's in the driveway ..." My voice fades as my attention is redirected.

To the sirens in the distance.

Oh, shit.

My heart starts to pound—*hard*. I sort through any legal things I might've heard throughout my life, trying to decide if this is a problem. *Can I go to jail for this, even though I wasn't technically party to this whole thing? Do I talk to the police? Doesn't everyone tell you to stay silent and tell them you want to talk to your attorney?*

I really should've paid attention to that kind of stuff.

But I also didn't expect to be in this position.

"He called the cops," I say, my voice rising. "Jess, you fucking idiot. *Banks called the cops.*"

"What?"

"I hear sirens."

"Oh, shit."

I move away from the window. Perspiration dots my forehead. "That's all you have? *Oh, shit? The car is in my fucking garage.*"

"Good point. I am less sweaty than I would be if I were you."

The top of my head feels like it might blow off. "I'm gonna fucking kill you."

"Not if you're in jail."

I open my mouth to tell him to fuck off but am stopped by flashing lights roaring up the road. Two officers step out of a cop car and meet Banks at the end of his driveway.

My mouth goes dry as I watch in disbelief at the situation unfolding in front of me.

"What's happening?" Jess asks.

“Two cops are over there. One is talking on the radio. The other is trying to calm Banks down.”

“Damn.”

“You and I are gonna have a conversation when you get home tonight,” I say through gritted teeth. “I have to go out there and tell them the car is here.”

“Don’t be a snitch!”

“I think your bigger worry right now is that I don’t pummel your fucking face. Jail would be a better look for you.”

“Moss—”

I end the call and throw the front door open. I don’t even think it closes as I march across the street.

All three heads turn toward me as I make my way down my driveway.

“Hey,” I say, the word sliding over a lump in my throat.

Banks’s eyes are wild. If I wasn’t on the verge of getting locked up, I’d appreciate that a little more.

“Hi, Moss.” Skylar Schultz, a guy Maddox went to high school with, shakes my hand. “Good to see you. Wish it was under different circumstances.”

I clear my throat. “What’s happening?”

“Someone broke into your brother’s house and stole his car,” the cop with the name Radke on his chest says. “Did you happen to see anything?”

“No. I already asked him,” Banks says.

I clear my throat again. “Um, so, I, um So I got home and went through the front door. And Banks called and I was, you know, on the phone.” *Which is true.* “I just opened my garage door and, um, your ’Vette is in my garage.”

“Say that again,” Skylar says at the same time that Banks starts shouting.

“*What do you mean it’s in your fucking garage?*”

I hold up my hands. “Look, I don’t know what happened. This is all news to me. I just wanted to come out here and tell you—”

“You’re in possession of stolen property,” Radke says. “I’m going to need you to put your hands behind your back.”

My eyes nearly pop out of my head. “What? You’re kidding me.”

I look at Skylar.

He shrugs. “Standard procedure.”

“I’m sorry, Moss,” Radke says. “We’re going to need to take you in for questioning.”

“Banks,” I say, my jaw brushing against my shoes. “Fucking stop this, dude. Your car is over there. It’s fine. There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“How’d it get there?” he asks.

“I ...” *Fucking Jess*. “I don’t know.”

“Did you check your house for missing property?” Skylar asks. “If they were in your house too, you might have been robbed as well.”

I growl into the air. “I wasn’t robbed. Banks wasn’t either.”

Radke grabs my arm, and I jerk it away.

“We’ll get to the bottom of this down at the station,” he says.

I step away from all of them. “I’m not going to the station because nothing happened here. The car is over there. We’ll go get it. Everything is fine.”

“It’s not fine because Mr. Carmichael didn’t put his car over there. That’s a violation of Florida law,” Radke says.

My jaw sets as heat rolls off my body. I square my shoulders to Radke.

“You can take your Florida laws and—”

“*Okay!*” Banks waves his arms in the air, laughing. “That’s enough. Point made.”

Radke’s lips press into a smirk.

What the fuck?

Skylar and Banks burst out laughing as I stand like the odd man out and try to get my bearings.

“What’s happening here?” I ask, stepping backward. My heart beats so loud that I can barely hear anything but the rush of blood through my eardrums. “Banks? What’s going on?”

His palms are pressed against his knees as he pulls air into his lungs.

It becomes obvious what happened. Although my body sags in relief, my brain screams in anger.

“*You’re kidding me,*” I say, clenching my teeth.

“I saw Jess on my camera system this morning and watched him drive it to your house,” Banks says. “I gave you both a chance to come clean with me, and neither of you did, so I called Skylar.”

“This isn’t funny, Banks.”

“I think it’s hilarious,” he says, smiling.

I swing around to Skylar. “Isn’t this a breach of some kind of oath of office or something?”

“Not really. I’m not on the clock.”

I throw my hands up and start back toward my house. “You better get your fucking car or I’m going to stick a knife through the pedal and let it coast into the road.”

Their laughter follows me as I walk away. I can still hear them when I open my door.

“Fucking hell,” I grumble, whipping my phone back out.

Jess’s texts are piled up on my screen. I don’t read them all, but it’s clear he’s panicking.

Good. And he needs to stew some more. Just like I fucking had to.

Me: I think I’m getting arrested.

Jess: WHAT?

Me: Banks told them not to press charges, but they said they have to at least book me on possession until they get it all worked out.

Jess: You’re kidding.

I can almost feel his panic through the line. It’s the most satisfying experience I’ve had in a long time.

Me: I wish. Make sure they get my house locked up for me, okay?

Jess: Okay. Call me when you know your bail, and I’ll come get you.

Me: Thanks.

Jess: I’m so sorry. I didn’t think he’d call the cops. I’ll call Banks now.

Me: They said I should know my bail in a couple of hours.

Jess: I got you. I owe you. I’m so sorry. Just call me, and I’ll take care of it. Don’t worry about it. I’ll get you an attorney if it comes to that. Fuck. I’m so sorry.

Me: I gotta go. They’re cuffing me.

Jess: Love ya, man.

I huff and swipe out of the text application. But as soon as I do, it dings again. This time, I smile.

Brooke: So do I need to bring ice packs tomorrow? Bandages? I can get little ones with boy bands on them if you prefer something custom.

I laugh as I type out my response.

Me: Considering I was almost arrested tonight, I think I'm doing pretty well.

Brooke: WHAT? What happened?

I snap a picture of the police car on the street and send it to her.

Brooke: Are you okay? Do you need me to come over?

The thought of her coming to my house stirs a different set of emotions in me.

Me: Better not. I'd hate for you to get handcuffed too. Unless you like that sort of thing.

Brooke: Funny. What happened?

Me: Long story. I'll tell you tomorrow. My brothers are assholes, basically. Everything is fine now.

Brooke: Promise?

I grin, some of my irritation dissipating.

Me: I promise.

Brooke: I'm bringing Band-Aids anyway. Just in case.

Me: Whatever floats your boat.

Brooke: Speaking of boats, what about a nautical theme in the new living space in the garage? I have a whole vision. Want to hear it?

I grab a water bottle out of the fridge—*when the hell was Banks here to replace them?*—and make my way to the living room. I collapse into my chair and get comfortable.

Me: Shoot.

Brooke: Okay, here's what I'm thinking ...

EIGHT

BROOKE

I hum along with the song playing from my phone, shaking my butt like some kind of sexy nightclub dancer—that I’m absolutely not—as I load the dishwasher. The beat is catchy, and although I don’t really understand all the words, it has something to do with being *handsomer*.

The kitchen is filled with light. It makes all of the little turquoise details and hints of sparkly golds I subtly layered in my décor really pop.

I love it.

Damaris showed me this house when I arrived in Kismet Beach with only my bags and a hotel reservation for a week, and I knew it had to be mine. The spaces were open and bright with all kinds of cozy spots that added an enormous amount of character. Luckily, Damaris knew the owner, and she was willing to rent it to me on the spot. And, even better, she encouraged me to paint, wallpaper—do whatever I wanted to the space.

It’s a dream setup.

I place a detergent pod into the dishwasher and then close it. I push three buttons, and the cycle begins.

“Done,” I say before grabbing a towel and wiping off the counter around the sink.

The paint sample cards I pulled for the new living space at Parasol Place are on the table. I toss the towel next to my glass of tea and head over to them.

I tap my finger against the blue that leans the heaviest green, allowing a grin to brush across my lips. It’s my favorite out of the six shades I brought home, and as much as I want to pretend that I don’t know why—I do.

Most people gravitate to natural hues because they’re soothing. Whether

consciously or subconsciously, there's a sturdiness, a serenity, that we as humans associate with the color blue. Green, too. Both remind us of nature—the sky, the sea, plant life—and have very few negative associations.

But me? This specific shade of blue-green reminds me of Moss's eyes.

I pick up my preferred sample and tap it against my other palm.

“He'll make someone a very *interesting* husband someday.” My mind goes back to the conversation we just had about Banks's car, and I burst out laughing. “I love those guys so much.”

I toss the paint sample back down and wander aimlessly around the house, smiling. Each room that I come to is just the way I want it. Bright, clean, *pretty*. It's the first space that I've ever felt like *me* in.

I've always wanted a place like this—something warm and cozy. I used to think that I would also have a husband and a child or two. I imagined having elementary artwork hung all around the kitchen, late-night dinners on the patio, and children's cartoons blaring on Saturday mornings.

That was back when I had hope. *When I was stupid.*

When I still believed that love could come without a price tag.

The music is interrupted by my ringtone. I make my way back to the kitchen, turn off Spotify, and answer the phone ... woefully.

I can hear my mother's disapproval before I ever say hello.

“Hi, Mom,” I say as cheerfully as I can manage.

“Hello, Brooklyn. Did you have a good day, dear?”

Every time I roll my eyes this hard, I get worried that they'll get stuck. *Is that even medically possible?* I shrug. *I'll have to look that up later.*

I take a deep breath and blow it out—away from the phone. *Stay calm. Do your best. You can only control yourself.*

“I actually had a great one, Mom,” I say. “Thanks for asking. How was tennis club? Did you have a nice lunch?”

“You'll never believe this. They hired that chef back from Des Moines—you know the one. He couldn't prepare a piece of fish properly if his life depended on it. I was forced to order beef today, and I've already had beef once this week.”

“*The horror,*” I mumble.

“What did you say?”

Oops. “I said that's horrible. Totally unacceptable. I hope you complained to the management.”

“Oh, I did. We *all* made sure that our opinions were heard. We just went

right around the manager and sent emails to the owner. He should know what a mockery they're making of the place."

I plop down on the sofa and try not to do anything that might set her off. No sighs. No switching topics. No suggestion that maybe just because she and her squad of cronies don't appreciate a chef's cooking techniques, that doesn't mean they have to go get him fired.

God knows I didn't wear enough armor for that battle.

"I'm glad your connections came in handy," I say, feeling out the situation. *There's always a right or wrong answer.* "Are you feeling okay after the beef?"

She sighs dramatically. "Yes. A touch bloated but nothing a cup of ginger tea won't fix."

"That's good."

"Yes. It is. That's a benefit of taking care of yourself, darling. If you have your things in order, getting back on track is rather simple."

Here we go. I close my eyes and brace myself for the punches.

"Speaking of getting back on track, we need to discuss that atrocious post from last night, dear."

"It was a joke."

"That kind of thing is simply not something you joke about, Brooklyn," she says, her words coming out faster. "It's childish and deplorable and *makes you look pathetic.*"

I jump to my feet. "Pathetic, Mom? Really?"

"I didn't say *you* were pathetic. I said the whole situation reads as such. Don't overdramatize this."

Oh, the irony.

Sounding angry, frustrated—even hinting that I'm hurt by her words—would only fuel her. She feeds off that. *Don't play into her hands. Keep your voice free of emotion.*

I take a deep breath and remember Jovie's words.

I loathe the fact that your mom makes you feel like you have to do anything more than be your amazing self to win her favor.

"I understand that you think I'm not doing myself any favors by having that on my Social—"

"You haven't taken it down yet?"

"No."

She expresses her displeasure with a loud hiss.

“Mom,” I say carefully, forcing a swallow down my throat. “We live very different lives. What’s acceptable to you may not be acceptable to me. And vice versa.”

“I think we’ve already established that.”

“Maybe you’re embarrassed by the post on my personal profile, but maybe I’m embarrassed that my mother would publicly attack a chef who’s doing his job—just not to her standards.”

“*Don’t you even think about turning this back on me.*”

I throw up my free hand. “I don’t want to turn this on you. Or me. Or anyone. I don’t even want to be having this conversation at all.”

My attention is snagged by movement in the dining room. I glance over to see Jovie watching with wide eyes. *When did she get here?* I shrug helplessly.

“I’m sure you don’t,” Mom says. “But if you were more willing to listen to the things I tell you, you wouldn’t be in the situation you are now.”

“And what’s that situation? Do you know something that I don’t? Because I’m quite happy. Probably the happiest I’ve ever been, actually.”

“*How can you be happy?*” she scoffs. “You are thirty years old. Alone. Childless. You don’t even have a real job.”

“Maybe your definition of happiness isn’t mine,” I fire back at her. “Maybe I’d rather be content than in a marriage that degraded my very being. I’ll have kids if that’s what’s in the cards but choosing not to at the moment certainly doesn’t take away my value as a human being. And my job?” I laugh angrily. “I’m not even going there with you. I’ve tried. You won’t listen.”

“Well, I hope for your sake that you stay *so happy* because no one wants a middle-aged divorcee who tells people what curtains to hang.”

“You’re right. *Definitely right.*”

“I know I’m right, Brooklyn. And if you’d stop being so facetious, you could turn your life around. You could be happy like Aria right now.”

Ding!

Catherine Bailey doesn’t use my cousin against me unless she’s really mad. Unless she really wants to twist the knife in my heart. Or back. Maybe both.

There have been enough conversations in my life with my mother for her to know what a sore subject Aria is with me. And, sadly, it’s not Aria’s fault. She’s a great person. It’s the way my family praises her, supports her, loves

her all because she stays close to them and lives for their approval.

It's jealousy, I guess. *But what woman doesn't want her mother's acceptance?*

Her love?

Why can't my family actually see me how Kix and Damaris see me? Or love me like the Carmichaels love all of their kids regardless of what they say, like, and do?

I'm so over this. I've hit my limit for the day.

"Yeah," I say, cringing. "I'm not going there with you."

"And where might that be?"

"I'm not going to bash Aria so you get some deranged pleasure out of it and have something to gossip about with Aunt Kim." I shake my head. "I'm not doing that."

"Do you think that's what I wanted you to do?"

"It's really sweet how you play innocent when you're busted."

The line grows cold. I'm not sure what path we're about to travel. *Is she going to raise her voice and grow angrier with me? Is she going to burst into tears and say that I'm ruining her life? Or is she going to dismiss me with an arrogant coolness that I know all too well?*

Even though I truly don't think I'm to blame for this heated encounter, guilt still shifts through my insides. It happens every time I talk to her. It's heavy self-condemnation—an innate sadness—that I have never been able to cultivate something good with my mom.

"Honey told me to pass along her love," she says softly.

Well, that's a path I didn't expect.

I sigh, sinking back into the sofa. Jovie walks across the room and slides into her chair. I'd forgotten she was here.

"Tell her I love her too," I say.

"You're coming to her party, right?"

"Will I be an embarrassment to you?"

I wait for her reply—one that I expect to be quick. But ... *crickets.*

Ouch.

It was a joke. Mostly. I didn't expect her to pause to think about it, but the reality doesn't surprise me. It just hurts a little.

"I don't know," she says, her words measured. "Are you bringing an escort with you?"

"For the last time, it was a joke."

“Was it? I think there’s something more behind it.”

It’s her coolness that breaks me down. Ices me out. Snaps me out of the pity party that I was starting to have for myself.

“Why? Because you assume I’m sad and lonely? The only way I could wrangle a man to spend time with me is to *pay them?*” I throw my free hand up in the air. “Believe it or not, Mom—and I know this might be a stretch for you—but people actually like me. I’m not sad, and I’m not lonely.”

Either she doesn’t know how to respond or she catches herself from saying something ugly that she can’t take back. If it’s the latter, it’s progress.

“There’s a small part of you that would like that, isn’t there?” I ask, my voice returning to a more normal volume.

“No mother wants to see their child unhappy.”

“Then why can’t you be relieved that I *am* happy?”

“Because I don’t know that you are. I don’t know how you could be.”

I laugh sadly. “Well, you would know if you ever called me and asked about how things are with me. Or came to see me. Or had any involvement in my life besides making sure to point out everything that you deem is wrong with me and my choices.”

She scoffs as if the idea is preposterous. “*Come on, Brooklyn.*”

There’s nothing more to say to her. We won’t get anywhere if I try. You can lead a person to an idea, but you can’t make them think.

“I will see you at Honey’s party,” I say, frowning at Jovie.

“With your boyfriend, I presume?”

There it is. Woven in her on-the-surface excitement for me is a challenge. A test. A *call-me-to-the-floor-and-make-me-prove-it*.

Fuck.

My palms start to sweat as I try to decide what to do. But with each passing second, I know she’s both smug and even more self-satisfied.

And that pisses me off.

I should’ve seen it coming but I didn’t. That’s on me.

Jovie wrinkles her brow in response to my balled-up fist.

“It’s the logical answer,” Mom says sweetly—way too sweetly. “If the whole thing was a joke and you’re not lonely, then you must have a special someone. Am I wrong, dear?”

She thinks she has me. She thinks she has me backed into a corner, and I’ll have to admit defeat. *You’re right.* That’s what she wants to hear, and I’ll be damned if I’m going to give her that.

“I might bring him,” I say as flippantly as I can. “I’m not sure if you can behave and manage not to embarrass yourself.”

Jovie jumps to her feet with her hands in the air, questioning me, but I wave her off. *I’ve already jumped into the water.*

Her laughter is so snobbish it makes my stomach roil. “Well, if he can deal with you and your idea of fun, then I’m sure he will be able to take me for an evening.” She clicks her tongue against her teeth. “*I cannot wait to meet him.*”

What am I doing?

Standing, I tap a foot against the tile. I know this is crazy, but I can’t help but hear the tinge of almost ... surprise in her voice. And I don’t mind the victorious feeling that creeps slowly over my soul like a much-needed blanket.

My palms start to sweat as I try to decide what to do. But with each passing second, I know she’s even more self-satisfied.

And that pisses me off.

“I’ve asked him to come,” I say, straightening my shoulders. “I’m not sure if his work schedule will allow it.”

“*What?*” Jovie mouths.

“Oh, that’s wonderful. I will be looking forward to it.”

I roll my eyes. She never really listens to me. “Speaking of him, I need to go because we’re going out to dinner tonight, and I still need to get ready.”

“By all means, don’t let me hold you up. Go enjoy yourself. I can’t wait to hear more about your mystery man.”

“We’ll talk soon.”

“Love you, darling.”

I sigh. “Love you, Mom.”

A lump springs up in my throat as a wave of emotions—emotions that I’m usually able to keep restrained—wash over me. *If only she did truly love me for me. For who I am.*

NINE

BROOKE

Jovie waits until I toss the phone on the sofa to speak. “What on planet Fucked Up was that?”

My mind races, careening off into what feels like a giant pit of snakes as reality hits me. My relationship with my mother is on the cusp of getting worse. She thinks I lied to her. If I arrive alone, I’ll never live it down, and even worse, I’ll prove her right.

“You told her you have a boyfriend, didn’t you?” Jovie asks.

I nod as my brain scrambles to put all of the pieces of this messed-up puzzle together. I move around the room, thinking.

“Okay,” I say, pointing a finger in no specific direction. “Let’s think this out.”

“It’s a little late for that.”

“I didn’t want to go alone anyway. Not with Geoff and Kim. But if I could take someone with me, maybe it would give me some breathing room with my mother. He could run interference and let me enjoy Honey’s party.” *And for once, I wouldn’t feel so ... demoralized.*

Jovie considers this. “It also lets you save face a little bit after the Social debacle.”

“True, as long as we can absolutely play it off like we’ve been together for a while. We’ll have to come up with a story about how he saw the post and laughed at it or something, but it could technically work.”

“I still say it’s bullshit that you have to even consider this.”

I stop moving and look at her. “I don’t *have* to do anything. I’m fully capable of going to the party and taking the jabs and pointedly ignoring my ex-husband. I just don’t want to. There’s a big difference.”

“Fair.”

The list of possible candidates that I know in real life is a fat zero. That only leaves one possibility ...

“What are you thinking?” Jovie asks, warily.

I smile and turn toward the table.

“Talk to me, Brooke. You’re scaring me.”

I sit at the table and pull my computer toward me. “I’m putting this into the universe’s hands.”

“That’s scary.”

“Well, it’s better than moping around about it. It’s also better than walking into the lion’s den alone.”

Jovie peers over my shoulder as I get logged in.

Biting the inside of my cheek, my determination fueled by my mother’s holier-than-thou attitude—and my refusal to be the whipping girl any longer—I open Social.

“Brooke ...”

“*Shh.*” I shake my head, warning her not to try to talk me out of what I’m about to do. “This is happening.”

Jovie peers over my shoulder as I tap out my message to *@NothingButTheReal*.

Are you still interested in pursuing this?

Straight. Simple. To the point.

I sit back in my chair, ready to take a second to get my head together when his response pops up.

Absolutely. I’m readier than ever.

“Do you even know this guy?” Jovie asks.

“Nope. But I’m about to meet him.”

“You can’t take some guy you don’t know to meet your parents.”

I shrug. “No, but once I meet him and it’s doable, he won’t be some guy I don’t know anymore.”

Awesome. Are you busy tomorrow night?

I told you I don’t have much of a social life.

*Want to meet for dinner and decide if this could work?
I WOULD LOVE TO.*

“Look at that,” I say, pointing at the screen. “Enthusiasm to spend time with me. I like it.”

“He’s probably going to chop you up and feed you to his pigs.”

I look at her like she’s lost her mind. “What goes through your head?”

“It’s a dark place here sometimes.”

My fingers fly across the keyboard.

Want to meet at Shade House at seven?

I can make that happen.

Do you have a black baseball cap?

Is this one of those things where I’m just supposed to say something like—whose car are we taking? Because this is feeling sketchier than my profile.

Jovie snorts. “He’s funny.”

I laugh.

I need to be able to tell it’s you when you walk in.

I know what you look like. I’m certain I’ll make a beeline toward your table.

Cool. But I’d like to know it’s you.

Okay. Black hat. Fine.

See you at seven.

I’ll be there.

“You’re really doing this?” Jovie asks.

I stare at the words on the screen, pausing to give myself a chance to freak out. But the longer I sit with the decision I just made, the more content I feel.

“I am.” I shrug. “I’ll just meet him and see what happens. If it’s a bust, then I’ll reassess.”

She sighs. “Fine. I’ll be there at six thirty.”

“Why?”

“Because I’ll be sitting in a booth in the corner watching this all go down.” She gets to her feet. “I have a vested interest in making sure you’re

not pig food.”

I laugh. “I’ll just go in before you and get seated. Then you can come in and get a good viewing spot.”

She makes a face as if I’ve lost my mind. “*I’ll* go in first and survey the place. The spy always goes in first. You need to watch more crime television.”

I stand and stretch.

“We need a distraction from all of this,” Jovie says, grabbing my hand and tugging me to my feet. “Let’s go to my house and you can interiorly architect my house for a super romantic evening tonight with Charlie.”

I laugh. “Interiorly architect?”

She shrugs. “You know what I mean.”

“How much time do I have?”

“About three hours.”

“You could’ve told me yesterday and I could’ve interiorly architected you something *amazing*.”

“I like to keep you on your toes.” She laughs. “Now follow me and maybe grab some of your candles because I’m all out. I want the mood set for some serious action.”

I snort.

Jovie heads to the front door. I turn to close my computer. My gaze lands on the paint samples again.

A smile tickles my lips. “You, Moss Carmichael, would make the perfect fake date if you weren’t my co-worker. You’re gorgeous and funny and have no interest in a real relationship either.”

Laughing at the idea, I follow Jovie outside.

TEN

MOSS

“Okay. Hear me out,” I say.

Brooke hands me a cup from Mugger’s with a side-eye. “I hate when you start mornings like that.”

“But this is a *go morning*.”

“A what?”

“A *go morning*. You didn’t give me the look that signals a slow morning,” I say.

She suppresses a smile as she sets her bag on top of a giant box in the living room.

The gray pants she’s wearing are my favorite. They hug the curves of her ass and the slope of her hips perfectly. She usually pairs it with a black shirt with a bow that hangs in the front, but today she chose a pink silky number that matches her lipstick.

“You look very pretty today,” I say.

“Thank you.” Her lips twist into a grin. “How are you so energetic this early without caffeine?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m just built differently.”

She rolls her eyes. I roll mine right back at her. It gets a full-blown smile out of her.

“So big plans today?” I ask, pivoting from my original direction.

“Why do you ask?”

She bites the inside of her cheek, watching me closely. *What is up with that?*

“You’re wearing pink,” I point out.

Whatever she thought I was going to say, this wasn’t it. She laughs, her

cheeks warming to the same shade as her shirt.

“And?” she asks.

“You never wear pink.”

She walks through the room and into the kitchen. “I have to work late and have a little *thing* tonight. I won’t have time to change.”

“Oh?”

“I don’t want to talk about it, if you don’t mind.”

Well, I kinda do mind but okay. “Fine. Then are we slowing or going? I need to know. I have an idea that I want to collab with you—”

“I’m sorry.” Her eyes sparkle. “Did you just say *collab*?”

“Yeah. Why?”

She sips her iced chai slowly. Her lips are wrapped around the pink and white striped straw and I have to forcibly remove my eyes from the action.

“Thank you for this,” I say, holding my coffee in the air.

“You’re welcome. Now, what are we *collabing* on?”

I grin. “I had an idea.”

“Why do those words and that smile of yours together send a chill down my spine?”

“Um, probably because you know me.”

She sighs.

“Follow me. I need you to see *my* vision,” I say.

“You’re scaring me.”

Still, she lets me lead her to the sliding glass doors in the kitchen. I pull them open and wait for her to step onto the patio.

The backyard is spacious, nearly double the size of most lots in this area. There are tall palm trees along the back property line just in front of the block wall and dead shrubs on both sides of the patio. We have to do something with this and I have just the thing. *Maybe.*

“Do you know what this house needs?” I ask.

“Well, I would’ve loved a big soaking tub in the master bathroom but there wasn’t room.”

I tilt my head, giving her a look. “I wasn’t asking for an answer. I just wanted you to let me keep talking.”

“A question is a prompt. It needs an answer.”

“And I have the answer.”

She tries to look irritated with me but fails miserably.

“This house needs a lanai,” I say proudly.

Brooke's shoulders slump. "We don't have the budget for that. We barely have money in the budget for the garage renovation."

"What if I can talk Dad into it?"

"We can't just *talk him into* sixty or seventy *thousand dollars*. Are you out of your mind?" she asks.

"It will be attractive to buyers and get rid of our landscaping problem—or most of it, anyway."

"Moss ..."

Her words fade as the sound of footsteps and voices filter onto the patio. We look over our shoulders to see our concrete foreman, Pete, and Maddox coming our way.

"What are you two doing out here?" Pete asks as they step outside. He wipes his brow with his leathery hand. "I swear, you bring Miss Brooke around and Moss forgets how to work."

"You mean he knows how to work *when* I'm gone?" Brooke nudges me with her shoulder. "That's surprising."

"Sometimes," Pete jokes.

"Keep it up and I won't tell you my big idea," I warn them.

"Like borrowing Banks's car?" Maddox asks.

I snap around and shove Maddox's shoulder. It's an attempt to establish contact so I can take an underhook. Before I can do that, he posts my arm and changes levels, throwing an underhook of his own. *Shit*. He captures my other wrist. I circle away from him, rolling my wrist out to try to free it. When it's almost out of his grasp, he steps in front of me, pivoting his hips and I laugh.

"Stop," I say before he tosses me over his leg.

He chuckles, keeping a grip on me until we're both upright and balanced again. "I don't know why you fuck with me. You never win."

"Uh, that's not true," Brooke says. "Does anyone but me remember that rainy day last summer in the office when Maddox got tossed on his face?" She grins at my brother smugly. "*Because I do.*"

Pete laughs. "Brooke always has her boy's back."

My ego swells despite having gotten dominated by Maddox. *She did have my back*. I put my arm around her shoulders and grin.

"Of course she does. She's my girl."

Maddox finds this amusing. He leans against the side of the house and smirks. "Your girl, huh?"

“Well, you know.”

I look down at Brooke. Her head is tilted back so she can see my face.
She’s so damn pretty.

“At least you two are starting to admit it,” Pete says, shaking his head.

“I haven’t admitted anything,” Brooke says, laughing. “You guys are hilarious today.”

I slide my arm off her. Even though she’s right—there’s nothing to admit—her implication bothers me.

“What are you saying?” I ask, taking a step back. “That you’re not my girl?”

“I’m your partner at work. Yes.”

“She’s your *partner at work*,” Maddox says, teasing me.

I glare at him. This only entertains him more.

My attention is redirected when Brooke grabs my bicep. Her fingers wrap around my arm and squeeze it gently. I look over my shoulder at her to find her grinning.

Her eyes stay locked with mine when she speaks.

“Regardless,” she says, her voice bright. “I do have his back. We’re a team.”

Pete scoffs. “You two are a team all right. I gotta get back to work.” He clasps Maddox’s shoulder as he turns toward the house. “I’ll get the guys ready to level the garage floor, Moss. Give us thirty minutes and we’ll be ready.”

“I’ll be right out there, Pete. Hey, can you get Leo to grab my toolbox out of the back of my truck?”

He gives me a thumbs-up as he closes the door behind him.

A breeze whips through the patio, swirling Brooke’s hair around her. I catch a whiff of her perfume. I think Maddox does too because he wiggles his eyebrows at me.

Fucker.

“What are you doing here anyway?” I ask him. “Don’t you have somewhere you’re needed?”

He slips his hands in his pockets, rocking back on his heels. “Yeah. I have places to be. I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d check out the project Dad keeps talking about.”

Sure.

“Did you check it out when you came in?” Brooke asks. “It’s really

coming along so well.”

“It looks great. And so do you, Brooke. Very spiffy for work.”

“What is it with you two?” She laughs. “Is the shirt that big of a deal? Damn.”

Maddox looks at me. “Did you say something about it?”

“Just that she doesn’t wear pink very often.”

“Huh. I didn’t notice *that*, but it looks like you have somewhere to be,” Maddox says, narrowing his eyes.

How would you notice that? You don’t see her every day like I do.

Brooke narrows hers back at my brother. “Right now, I’m supposed to be in a conversation with Moss about a proposed lanai.”

“Did he tell you he was almost arrested the other night?” Maddox asks.

“Yup. And he also told me how he’s going to get you back too. But I can’t tell you that. I promised.”

I didn’t see that coming but I like it. “What she said.”

Brooke looks at her watch. “Maddox, I hate to be rude, but I have an appointment in an hour and I really need Moss’s attention for the next twenty minutes or so. If you want to stick around, could you do it outside with Pete? We really need to nail down this landscaping issue.”

I hide my surprise as best as I can. It helps that Brooke pointedly doesn’t look at me.

What is she doing?

“I need to go anyway,” Maddox says, smirking. “Want to hang out sometime, Brooke?”

My eyes widen, even though I knew this was coming. He asks this every single time he sees her. And, just like every time he asks, she answers the same.

“No.”

Ha.

He sighs. “Well, damn. It’s a good thing that I didn’t expect you to say yes.”

“I would hope not since I’ve told you no thirty-six times.”

He laughs and backs toward the door. “I’m leaving. I hope you have a very nice day, Brooke. And try not to steal any more cars, Moss.”

“Fuck off. *Nicely*,” I say, as Brooke elbows me in the ribs again.

Maddox chuckles, opening the door and then closing it behind him. As soon as he’s gone, Brooke rolls her eyes.

“I like him. I do,” she says. “But he’s such a handful.”

“Tell me about it. I grew up with him.”

She laughs. I’m about to circle our conversation back to the lanai when my phone buzzes. I pull it out and see that it’s a text from my mom.

Mom: Would you like to have dinner with me?

Me: When?

Mom: Tonight.

Me: Should be fine. I’m in the middle of something. I’ll text you later for details.

Mom: Great. Love you, honey.

Me: Love you.

“Guess I’m having dinner with my mama,” I say, shoving my phone back into my pocket.

“Just on a whim? That’s so fun.”

I laugh. “She’s taken us on one-on-one dinners since we were little. Dad’s probably out of the house scouting or something, and she doesn’t want to sit at home alone.”

“I love that she does that.” She wrinkles her nose at me. “And that you go. That’s sweet.”

“You know me. Mr. Super Sweet.”

“*Sure.*”

We both laugh.

“Maybe I could talk to her about the lanai,” I say.

Brooke grins, pulling her eyes away from mine and glancing over the backyard. “It would be pretty special out here.”

“I have one and spend so much time there. It’s my favorite spot.”

She hums. “I can see that. And with the expanded lot and those trees back there, it could really be fun. But I have no idea what our options would even be.”

“Let me try to convince the bosses first—starting with Mom at dinner. We can go from there. But I’m pretty sure I can make this work.”

She laughs. “Are you saying that you can charm your mother?”

“You better believe it. After the whole cops thing with Banks, I think Mom is feeling a little bad for me. I can probably get the cash cleared in

record time.”

“Okay. If you can get the money, I’ll sign off on it. If I get any free time today, I’ll price them out and then give you a rundown as soon as we’re good to go.”

So capable.

“Cool,” I say.

“Cool.” She laughs again. “I need to get to the office. Do you need anything else from me?”

“I don’t think so. Nothing you’ll give me anyway.”

She shakes her head, reading that innuendo correctly. “You’re right about that. We’d be a mess together.”

“Can you imagine? Your hardheadedness.”

“Your petulance,” she says.

“You always think you’re right.”

“You always need to get what you want.”

I wink. “That’s true. I always get what I want.”

She turns toward the door. I reach in front of her and grab the handle, pulling it open before she gets there.

I follow her inside, appreciating the way her ass looks in those pants.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” she says, grabbing her bag off the box in the living room. “If you need anything, just call.”

“You still don’t want to tell me where you’re going tonight?”

“Nope.” She grabs the knob before I can. “I’ll let you know tomorrow how it goes.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks. Good luck today too. With the garage.”

I nod and watch her dip her chin and duck out of the house. I have half a notion to follow her and press the pink shirt issue, but I don’t. It’s none of my business.

And I’ll remind myself of that all day.

ELEVEN

BROOKE

I turn off my car in front of Shade House and look around. My stomach flutters as I spot Jovie's car parked by the dumpster in the back. If she's trying to go incognito, taking up two parking spaces isn't the way to go.

Laughing, I turn to grab my purse when my phone rings. The number is unfamiliar.

"Hello?" I ask, figuring it's a supplier returning my call.

"Is this Brooke Bailey?"

"Yes, it is."

"Hello, Brooke. I'm Nancy Kellerman with the Florida Excellence Group. It's such a pleasure to speak with you."

I glance quickly at the restaurant and withhold my sigh. *Of course she calls after business hours.*

"Hi, Nancy. How are you?"

"Good, good." Papers shuffle in the background. "I'm just touching base with you in regard to the Excellence Awards. We received your RSVP—thank you for returning that. Unfortunately, you didn't indicate whether you'll be bringing a plus-one. That normally wouldn't matter, but since you are one of our honorees, I need to make sure we seat you appropriately."

Fuck.

I didn't fill that out on purpose.

My mind races to come up with a response that doesn't make me look like a fool.

"I apologize," I say, talking faster than I would like. "Um, yes. I'll be bringing a plus-one." *Please don't ask me their name.*

"That's wonderful. I'll seat you and your guest at the same table as Mr.

Carmichael and his guest. Would that work for you?”

I roll my eyes at *Mr. Carmichael's guest*.

It better not be Courtney.

“Yes. Of course,” I say. “That works fine.”

“One more thing before I let you go. We have a monthly newsletter that goes out to our Excellence community, and we were wondering if you would be so inclined to give us an interview for an upcoming edition? We just adore the work you do with Laguna Homes—taking dilapidated structures in our area and turning them into gems. It’s a true public service.”

“Well, thank you. It really is Kix Carmichael’s brainchild,” I say, watching a car pull into the parking lot. I exhale when it’s a woman driving. “But yes. I’d be honored to be interviewed.”

“I spoke with Kix earlier today, and he credited you and your visions for so much of their success.” She laughs heartily. “I won’t take up any more of your time. I realize this all could’ve been done by email, but email is so impersonal. I wanted to reach out and speak with you myself.”

“I’m glad you did.”

“Perfect. I’ll get in touch soon about scheduling the chat for the newsletter. Thank you so much for speaking with me today.”

I grab the door handle and open it. A blast of humidity and heat smacks me in the face.

“The pleasure was all mine. Talk to you soon, Nancy.”

“Have a great weekend, Brooke.”

I slide my phone into my purse and climb out of my car and into the evening air. The locks click in place after I shut the door.

“He credited you and your visions for so much of their success.”

A huge smile splits my cheeks as I enter Shade House. There’s a sign beside the hostess station that says to seat yourself. Beyond that is a sea of tables beneath industrial-looking lights. They cast a soft, muted glow over the patrons.

This is really happening.

The joy from a moment ago fades rapidly, replaced by a lightness in my stomach that usually comes just before I vomit.

Breathe, Brooke. You can leave at any time if it’s weird.

I scan the room, looking for a man wearing a black hat. There are two—one sitting with a woman and one with a child.

Why didn’t I pick something more unique? Like a sombrero.

The thought makes me snort and eases my anxiety a little.

Pop music plays overhead, mixing with the conversations taking place around the building. Silverware rattles as I pass a busboy clearing a booth. Just as I'm about to succumb to a rush of adrenaline, I spot Jovie in the corner.

I exhale.

"Grab a seat," a woman says as she walks by. "One of us will be right with you."

"Thanks."

I choose a booth that gives Jovie a front-row seat to either the magic or madness. Time will tell. She waves, giving me a double thumbs-up, and I give her the same gesture back.

As I get situated, I give myself a pep talk. *Just relax and see what happens. If it doesn't work out—no harm, no foul. I can get up and go home and forget that I ever tried this crazy experiment.*

This crazy experiment that might be fun.

"This is going to be good," I whisper. "What can it hurt? If nothing else, I tried something out of the box for once, and ... *what the fuck?*"

My body freezes. The only thing I can feel is the absolute pounding of my heart with the force of a thousand horses. Even my thoughts pause for a moment as I take in ... him. The man standing next to the hostess desk.

The one wearing a black hat.

He never wears a black hat.

Brain waves begin to stream again—slowly at first. But as soon as my eyes meet his, one blue and one green, it's like a switch is flipped. Every possible scenario floods my mind so quickly that I can't keep up.

No. No, no, no.

There's no way.

What the heck is happening?

Internally, I cringe. Externally, I remain as relaxed as I can. Because this could be a coincidence.

It has to be. Moss wouldn't play me. He wouldn't embarrass me, and he knows me well enough to know that if he was just screwing around about this, I'd be upset. And pissed.

He walks across the restaurant, making what seems like a beeline toward me.

"Hey, Brookie," he says, stopping at the end of the table.

One hand is in the pocket of his dark denim jeans. A white T-shirt, untucked, gives him a casual yet intentional look that has the woman sitting at the table beside us staring.

“*What are you doing here?*” I blurt out the question without meaning to, but I can’t help it. I can’t take it. I need to know this is a remarkable concurrence of events that means nothing.

“Having dinner with my mom. What are you doing here?”

That’s right. I knew he was having dinner with her tonight.

I gulp, a touch relieved by the information. “I’m having dinner too.”

He looks around the table and into the empty booth across from me. His brows pull together. “Who with?”

“I don’t ...”

I catch myself and clear my throat. As much as I want to lean into the explanation and go with it, something is amiss. There’s fuckery afoot. I feel it.

“You never wear hats,” I say, pointing at the top of his head.

It’s not what I planned to say. I was going to ask him where Damaris is and suggest that he find her. Instead, I go all Freudian slip on him and mention the random-as-hell hat.

Way to play it smoothly.

He takes the baseball cap off his head. His hair flops to the side just before he runs his hand through it.

“Mom asked me to wear a hat, of all things. I called her to get details on dinner and she said I needed a haircut, which might be true, and she wanted me to wear a hat.”

“*Oh.*” *Thank God.* But still ... “I didn’t know you were a White Sox fan.”

He glances at the logo just above the brim. “I’m not. I had to borrow this one from Maddox.”

The explanation makes sense. It’s odd, but it tracks. Even so ...

I glance around the restaurant. Still no *new* man in a black hat.

“So where’s your mom?” I ask, tapping the tabletop with my finger.

“I don’t know. Have you seen her? It’s not like her to be late.”

There’s an answer for everything. The Carmichael boys often have solo dinners with Damaris. She asked him to wear the hat. He came after work, which is a natural time to meet someone for dinner.

But there’s one thing I can’t shake—one thing that I keep going back to. It’s a wobbly piece of this whole puzzle that makes none of the explanations

fit perfectly.

Maddox.

I shift in my seat. “You know, maybe you should call your mom. Just check on her.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right.”

Moss digs in his pocket and retrieves his phone. After a couple of swipes across the screen, he holds it to his ear.

My gaze stays pinned on him, my stomach tightening, as he reaches her.

“Where are you?” he asks.

Please be here. Please be here.

He blinks. “At Shade House.” The phone is switched between his hands. “Why would I be mad at you?”

Oh. Shit.

His eyes slam into mine, holding them in place as he listens to Damaris on the other end. I slink back into the booth, resting my back against the wall. It’s the farthest that I can physically get from him.

“When you start a sentence with *Maddox said*, it ever ends well,” he says warily.

My insides sink in one quick drop. It takes my pride right along with it.

I’m going to kill Maddox Carmichael. And it’s not going to be pretty.

Moss continues to talk to his mother while I make a valiant attempt at staying calm. I pull my eyes away from his and pointedly avoid looking at Jovie either.

What is Moss going to say about this?

Uncertainty riddles me as I try to get a handle on the situation before he gets off the phone.

Moss is my friend. This will be fine. He’ll laugh it off and help me plot ways to get back at Maddox. I know he will.

He’ll also know how lame I am.

I wail in my head since I can’t do it out loud.

Moss’s voice fades back in, breaking through my thoughts. “Oh, no worries. This conversation isn’t over, Mother.” He chuckles. “Goodbye.”

Dammit.

He clears his throat. It prompts me to look up.

His eyes sparkle with a mixture of amusement and curiosity. There might also be a dab of embarrassment hidden in those irises, but I can’t sit around and decipher it. I have to defend my honor.

“So” he says, fighting a grin and sitting across from me. “We need to have a conversation.”

“Really? About what?”

“I think *you* of all people should know.”

I point at myself. “Me? How would I know why your mother isn’t here? I’m not the one meeting her for dinner.”

“I’m not either.”

“That’s weird,” I say, grabbing my purse. “Let’s just, uh, leave. Yeah. Let’s just get up and walk out of here—”

“*Stop.*”

My body is positioned sideways, my chest facing away from the wall. I don’t move. I just stare into his handsome face and try not to melt when a smirk settles against his lips.

“Who are you meeting tonight?” he asks.

“Let’s just forget this whole thing happened.”

“Let’s not. I’m invested.”

“Then uninvest yourself.”

He laces his fingers together and places them in the middle of the table. *He’s getting comfortable.*

There’s no way out of this. The truth will come to light sooner than later. Besides, he’s obviously committed to getting the entire story and I really don’t want to be hounded about it for weeks.

He’ll never let it go.

But there’s a chance that he *will* let it go if I come clean now. Just admit the truth. Maybe he’ll understand. Hell, maybe he’ll think it’s a solid plan and help me think my way through it.

I put my purse back against the wall and face him. Shoulders back. Chin lifted. I shove a strand of hair behind my ear and prepare myself to admit to Moss Freaking Carmichael that I’m desperate enough to do this.

“It seems as though Maddox knows what’s happening here. Banks knows. My mother knows. Everyone is in the loop but me. And I’d really like to be clued in too,” he says, his tone curious.

I take a deep breath.

“Fine,” I say, resolved to get the conversation over with. “You want to know what’s going on? I’ll tell you.”

The pause is so exaggerated, so produced, that even I wait for something bold to happen. Then I remember I’m the storyteller. *Damn.*

I peer into his eyes.

“Moss, I need a fake boyfriend.”

TWELVE

BROOKE

A slow, sinful smile slides across Moss's lips. It does nothing for my heightened anxiety.

Bastard.

"You what?" He tilts his head to the side. "Did you just say you needed a *fake boyfriend*?"

"Yes. Now, if you don't mind," I say, pausing to swallow. "I have some questions for you too."

He leans back in the booth, his arms crossed over his thick chest. Even if I didn't know it was Jovie blowing up my phone, I still wouldn't be able to look at it. My attention is fixed on Moss.

Amusement is written all over his handsome face.

I open my mouth to fire off my first question when our server interrupts me.

She approaches the table with a bounce in her step. *Perfect timing.*

"Hi, I'm Jazzy. Can I get the two of you anything?" she asks, her gaze lingering on Moss for a moment too long.

"Coke for me," Moss says. "Cherry Coke for Brooke."

"Great. Your menus are on the table. I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Thanks," he says.

I stare at him.

"What?" he asks.

"What if I didn't want a Cherry Coke?"

He leans forward, his eyes sparkling. "It's not like I was making a decision for you. You always drink Cherry Coke. I've never seen you drink anything else past noon."

He's right, of course. And he's ordered my drink for me half a dozen times when we've gone to lunch for work. *So why does it feel the tiniest bit different now?*

"Fine," I concede. "That's what I would've ordered."

"I know." He rolls his tongue around his cheek. "So let's go back to the *you need a fake boyfriend* part of this conversation."

"Well, since I'm the gatekeeper of that information, I think I'll be the one asking the questions."

"Is this a fake boyfriend interview?"

I take a napkin out of the dispenser, wad it up, and throw it at him. Naturally, he catches it with little effort.

"Here you go," Jazzy says, appearing out of thin air again. "Do you know what you'd like to eat?"

Moss sighs. "Ladies should order first. My date will have a grilled chicken sandwich with tomato and pickle and a side of curly fries. But we should let her tell you that. Otherwise, she'll get pissy."

I start to argue, to tell him that I was going to order something different, but there's no use. He's right. Again. And if I try to get cute with this, he'll see right through it.

"What he said," I grumble.

"Make it two but add lettuce to mine, please," he says, ignoring the bedroom eyes Jazzy is making at him.

"Great! I'll put your order right in."

She sashays her way through the dining room. I follow her swinging hips until she passes Jovie's table. My best friend starts mouthing an entire conversation at me, her hands flying wildly through the air. She looks like a madwoman and I can't help but giggle.

"What are you looking at?" Moss asks, looking over his shoulder.

Jovie drops her hands and tucks her chin to her chest, trying to be discreet. Too late.

"Is that Jovie?" he asks, facing me.

There's no point in telling him that I didn't know she was here. Clearly, I did. The ball of facts that I've been able to avoid unraveling starts to loosen.

"Yeah. That's her," I say, sighing. "She wasn't going to let me meet a stranger without supervising the whole situation. You know, it's a part of her duty as my best friend."

A shadow filters across Moss's face. "You were meeting a stranger?"

“I thought so.”

“To be your fake boyfriend?”

Suddenly, the whole idea isn't as fun. Or smart.

“That was the plan,” I say, my voice wavering.

I slink back into the booth and wait for the storm rolling through his eyes to subside. Unfortunately for me, it doesn't quite disappear altogether.

“Fill in the blanks for me, Miss Information Gatekeeper. Start from scratch.”

It's an order coupled with a no-nonsense, *don't fuck with me anymore* look that I've only seen a couple of times. Neither worked well for the receiving party.

I take a long, deep breath—much to his irritation. I blow it out just as slowly—irritating him even more.

Here we go.

“I'm waiting,” he says.

“Not so patiently.”

“I think I'm being overly patient for a man just told that his friend was going to meet some dude she didn't know, presumably from the Internet, to be her boyfriend.” He raises his brows. “*Humor me.*”

“*Fine.*” I sit tall and straighten my shoulders. “You are correct. I was going to meet *some dude* that I didn't know *from the internet* to be my boyfriend.”

“Why?”

“Because I need one.”

He watches me with confusion that seems like it might take a while to sort. And, being that I don't want to talk about this anyway, I give him all the time he needs. *Maybe something will happen, and we won't have to delve into this mess.*

I swirl my straw around my drink and try to relax. I try to imagine someone else sitting across from me. All of a sudden, a wave of nausea hits me like a hurricane.

How did I ever think I'd be able to talk about this with a random guy?

Surely, I'd have to explain the reasoning behind this setup. That my ex-husband is dating my aunt. My mom thinks I'm pathetic and won't let me breathe without hounding me about it.

I'm the outsider in my own damn family and need a friendly face to get through a party.

I could never have shared that with just anyone. It'll be hard enough with Moss even though I know, without a doubt, he'll have my back ... even if he thinks I'm lame.

Moss leans forward. *We're delving into this mess.*

"You obviously know that was a terrible idea," he says. "Right?"

"I thought it was kind of brilliant, actually."

"*Brooke.*"

My name is a sentence of its own. It's a warning, an expression of frustration—the fact that he used my name and not Brookie—that has me shifting in my seat.

"*What?*" I ask as if his tone didn't just get to me.

He rolls his neck, refusing to look at me.

"Look, I have to go home next weekend," I say. "My grandma Honey is having a birthday party and my family dynamics are a little ... *fun*. And I just need someone to go with me. Okay? It's not a big deal."

It's not the smoothest flowing explanation I've ever given anyone, but it gets the job done.

"There's a lot to unpack here," he says, narrowing his eyes. "I'm trying to figure out where to start."

"Let's not start at all. Let's just—"

"Why can't you take Jovie?" he asks, turning his hat around backward.

My cheeks start to heat as I refocus on the topic at hand and try to decide how to approach this with Moss. I don't know how much to tell him. I don't really want him to know all the yuck of my life. But when I look into his eyes, all I see is a guy who I'm happy is sitting across from me. *In that black fucking hat.*

Damn, that's hot.

I clear my throat and ignore the question about Jovie. It'll just delay the inevitable.

"My family isn't like yours," I admit.

"Oh, so you mean your brothers don't call the police on you? I'm jealous."

His grin makes me grin, and before I know it, I'm relaxing in my seat.

"My mom thinks that I pick out curtains all day," I say, resigned to the conversation. "According to her, I've wasted my entire life. I'm thirty. Divorced. No kids and no real job and, there's no way I can be happy now or ever. There's not a moment that goes by that she doesn't remind me of all of

this.”

“I ...” He frowns. “Are you happy? You seem happy. Did I miss something?”

My heart swells because his concern is genuine. That and because Moss chose the part about me being happy to focus on. Not my perceived failures or opinions of others. He focused on my happiness.

Damn you, Moss.

I smile at him. “I *am* happy. I love my life. For the first time *in my life*, I’m really good and I’d like to avoid returning from the party feeling like crap. I want to maintain my happiness.”

“And you think taking a guy instead of Jovie would help ... how?”

“Mom is big on appearances. If there’s someone with me—specifically a man, because men’s opinions of her weigh more than, say, mine—she’ll back off. She might even be impressed. And that would be a nice change instead of having her jab me with insults at every turn.” I sigh. “I just want to have a nice weekend.”

“Okay.”

I swallow hard. “And, you know, *maybe* she saw my post on Social and I *might’ve* told her it was a joke and that I had a boyfriend to save face.”

“Your post on Social?”

Shit.

“I made a wanted ad on Social, and she saw it,” I say, holding my breath. “That’s how you got here, I think.”

Moss’s lips twitch, but he doesn’t quite smile.

“I know Maddox saw my post,” I say. “He commented. But I was going back and forth with a different account that I never dreamed was him. Apparently, it was. Right? He sent you here?”

“In a very roundabout way, yes.”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“You can get in line,” he says, chuckling. “Can I see the messages he sent you?”

“No.” I shake my head with vigor. “I’m not ... *no.*”

He rolls his eyes. “Come on.”

“Don’t you think this is embarrassing enough?”

“Why would it be embarrassing? I mean, I don’t like that you did this but I see your point. You need the benefits of a relationship without the pitfalls. You found a way to get that, even if your method was stupid.”

“It was not stupid,” I say.

He lifts a brow. “You were messaging a fake account and met up with them. Don’t you watch TV? That’s how people get killed.”

“I’m still here.”

He pauses, his eyes shining. Those stupid kissable lips of his press together to hold back a smile. *Thank God he does hold it back because my defenses are weakened, and I might melt otherwise.*

“It was Maddox,” he says. “Mom told me. I’m sure Banks was in on it, though. This feels like a Banks idea with a Maddox assist.” He runs a finger over his lips. “Was the grammar and punctuation correct?”

I nod.

“Then it was definitely a tag-team effort because Banks can’t spell for shit. *Fuckers.*”

I laugh. “I’ve already started plotting how I’m going to get them back for this.”

His laughter mixes with mine. For the first time since he got here, I breathe easy.

“So you need someone to impress your mom and keep her off your back,” he says. “That’s it?”

I grimace, laughing through gritted teeth. “*No.*”

“What else?”

I press on my forehead with my fingertips. “My ex-husband is dating my aunt.”

“*What?*”

“*Yup.*”

He looks at me warily. “And how do we feel about that?”

I take a sip of my Cherry Coke, hoping it’ll relax the knot in my stomach. “Honestly, I don’t care what he does. I’m the one that filed for divorce and I have absolutely zero regrets about that, besides wishing that I would’ve done it sooner. But having him in what should be my bubble, with my family, at my grandma’s party ... feels like a betrayal. And it’s shitty of Kim to do that to me and it’s shitty that no one will say anything about it on my behalf.” *No one has my back.*

“*You fucking think?*” He scoffs. “That’s bullshit.”

He has no way of knowing how much his outburst means to me. I dip my chin so he can’t see the smile on my face.

“Why are you even going?” he asks, obviously annoyed on my behalf.

“Fuck them.”

The smile is still there when I look at him again. “Because I want to. Honey is turning eighty-five and I love her and want to be there. She wants me there. And, maybe more than anything, I don’t want to be the person who lets assholes keep me from doing what I want.” I shrug. “I guess I’m just stubborn. Or a glutton for punishment. Either way.”

Moss takes a long drink. As he swallows, Adam's apple bobs in his throat. I should look away—*I need to*—but I can’t.

Finally, he sets his drink down. “All right. When do we leave?”

I blink once. Then twice. *When do we leave?*

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“I’m going.”

“The hell you are.”

The intensity in his gorgeous eyes takes my breath away.

My heart pounds as I take in the stimuli swamping me—his reaction, his words, the possibility he’s throwing my way—and try to make it all make sense.

“There is no way that I’m letting you go by yourself,” he says. “Not a chance. And I’m definitely not letting you take some asshole either. You’re taking me.”

Every cell in my body stills as I absorb the seriousness rolling off him. There’s no smirk, no laugh, no biting back of a smile that predicates a joke.

Nothing.

Just a matter-of-fact resolve.

“Thank you for offering, but—”

“*I’m going, Brooke.*” He folds his hands together on the table. “First of all, as your friend, you need me so I’m there. I’m a little irritated that you didn’t ask me to start with.”

I smile.

“Second of all ...” His grin stretches from ear to ear. “I’d make the best fake boyfriend in the world.”

My laughter falls from my lips before I can stop it. Strangely, I’m somehow relieved by his declaration.

“We’re not doing that,” I say, still laughing.

“Think about it.” He leans across the table as if he knows his proximity makes my brain short-circuit. My laughter wanes. “You’re gonna have to sell this to your family, right? They know what you were up to, so if you actually

take someone, they're going to be suspicious."

"Yeah."

"Then you better take someone who can pull this ruse off. Someone you're comfortable with. Someone who can look at you like you're the most beautiful woman in the world. Someone who knows you so well that it's believable. Who knows you better than me?"

"You don't know me," I say, ignoring that beautiful part for my own good. *Don't look too far into that.*

His jaw drops open. "Bullshit. You take your chai hot in the winter, iced in the summer. You like oat milk and a little cinnamon dolce syrup unless you're in one of your health kicks and then you leave the syrup out. That lasts two days—three tops and then you can't live without the syrup and abandon your plans."

It's my jaw that drops now. *How does he know this?*

"You usually paint your fingernails a pinkish shade that almost looks white in the sun. But when you're stressed out or working too much, you go with a deep green."

He picks up my hand and holds it in the air. My green fingernails shimmer in the light.

The weight of his palm, the heat of his skin, injects energy into my body that sizzles all the way to my toes.

He drops my hand, pleased with himself.

"What can I say?" I ask. "That was impressive."

"I know. I'm skilled. And I can guarantee you that your ex isn't nearly as handsome as I am."

True.

"And every woman there will be eating out of the palm of my hand," he says. "But I'll only have eyes for you."

I roll *my eyes*, but secretly—*this sounds perfect.*

"Your mom will think I'm so in love with you. *Obsessed with you,*" he says. "I'll have her thinking I follow you around all day, waiting for the opportunity to give you oral."

"*Moss!*"

His smile is a smolder—a promise of something lewd and lascivious.

I gulp, my face burning.

"Or not," he says, winking at me. "Would you rather have me make your mom fall for me? I can do that. I'm a cougar whisperer."

“No. Not that.”

The idea is repulsive but also ... offensive. He’s *my* fake boyfriend. Or would be. In theory.

I shake my head, ridding it of thoughts of Moss between my legs, and refocus.

“What would you get out of this?” I ask him. “*If* we did it. And that’s a big if.”

“Easy. I want you to do the same thing for me in front of my family.”

What?

“Jess, Mad, and Banks all have a thing for you,” he says.

They do?

“It would be hilarious if they thought that their little game backfired. That their fucking with us on that stupid app somehow got us together.” He grins. “It’s perfect.”

“Well, I do want to get them back for this ...”

“I know. It’s foolproof.” He laughs, looking around the room. “My mom thinks that you and I would be the perfect couple.” His gaze settles on me again. This time, it’s heavy. “So let’s make her think we’re really giving it a go so she gets off my back.”

Damaris thinks that?

I blow out a breath. “I’m not sure. What if she found out and fired me?”

“My parents would fire me before they fire you.” He presses his hands together in front of him. “Besides, it’ll be for what? A week? Two? Until the Excellence Awards? That’s not long enough to do anything more than screw with them a little. Clearly, they enjoy a joke.”

Clearly.

I can’t argue this. It makes sense.

“But what if it makes things weird between us?” I ask. “It’s a great plan until we *break up* and awkwardness spills into our work.”

To my surprise, he considers this. He exhales roughly and then pulls his bottom lip between his teeth.

I grab my phone and pretend to look at the screen. In reality, I’m trying not to panic.

This could work. He has a point. But it could also not work too and, until he convinces me that’s not a possibility, I’m out.

“Two things,” he says. “One, do you have any desire for a real relationship whatsoever?”

“No. Absolutely not. They ruin my life.”

“Me either. So two—are you willing to just throw shit on the table here and be honest with me?”

I nod slowly. “I think. Maybe. Depends on where you’re going with this.”

“Well, I’m going to be honest with you.” He runs his tongue across his bottom lip. “You’re hot. And sweet. And kind.”

Holy shit. I set the phone on the booth so I don’t drop it.

“And the idea of getting to have some fun with you with no strings attached—no expectations—isn’t a terrible thing to consider,” he says.

Well, okay.

I clear my throat. “You obviously know you’re handsome, and you say you’re charming ...” I pretend I’m not sure. “But you are kind, and I appreciate the nice things you’ve said to me tonight.”

“And ...”

I laugh again. “And pretending to be in love with you wouldn’t be that hard, I guess. Knowing, like you said, that there’s no way this would ever develop into something else helps.”

“I’m just telling you flat-out that if you do this with someone else, they’re actually going to fall in love with you. Period.”

What do I say to that?

His compliments make me feel good, especially because I know they come from a good place. He’s not screwing with my head or saying stuff to get in my pants like most men. He’s Moss. He’s my buddy. My co-worker. *He’s one of my best friends too.*

I take in his sharp jawline and high cheekbones and feel my resolve wane.

This might be a mistake. I’m sober enough to see the possible hurdles down the road, but I trust Moss. I trust our friendship to make it through this crazy endeavor.

“Fine.” I throw my hands up before I can change my mind. “Let’s do it.”

His grin splits his cheeks. “We both need a date to the Excellence Awards, anyway. This is the perfect excuse to get Courtney off my back. It’s a win all around. Then we can just say we didn’t work out and be done with it.”

“Oh, Courtney. Now I see your true intentions.”

We laugh as Jazzy brings our plates to the table. Thankfully, Moss deals

with her because all I can do is stare at him. *We're really doing this.*

Once the server is gone, I sigh.

"I think we need to think about this," I say. "And then reconvene tomorrow. Just to give ourselves a second to live with it before we commit."

"Agreed."

"Want to come over tomorrow? Around two?"

"Perfect." He slides out of the booth. "I'll go find the server and tell her we'll take our food to go. And I'll pay our bill."

"You aren't paying for my dinner, Moss."

"You have a lot to learn." He looks around the room until he spies Jazzy. "See you tomorrow, princess."

"No. No pet names."

He winks and walks to the front of the room with a cool confidence that I wish I had.

Jovie is in his seat before I can get my bearings. "Brooke Bailey, did what I think just happened just happen?"

She's too excited. Too energized. Too happy about this whole thing for me at the moment. *I need a minute.*

"Yes," I say, holding up a hand. "But breathe."

My suggestion is completely disregarded. "I want all the details. *All of them.* Don't leave anything out."

I look over her shoulder and spot Moss by the hostess stand. He smiles at me before he disappears out the door. *What about his food?*

"Tell me," she insists.

I pull my gaze to my friend.

"Jovie, that was either the best or worst thing to ever happen to me. And I'm not sure which."

Let's just hope I'm as good of an actress as you.

THIRTEEN

MOSS

I set my empty to-go container on the table beside me. Then I stretch out, extending my bare feet beyond the edge of the ottoman.

“What a wild fucking day.”

The moonlight reflects off the pool, creating a soothing ambiance that has my ass sitting in the lanai most evenings. There’s something about the fresh—cooler—night air, the sound of the hot tub trickling over the edge and splashing lightly into the pool, and the peacefulness of the hour that helps me transition from an intense workday to a restful night.

Even though tonight won’t be too restful. Not after Shade House.

I consider the events of the evening for the hundredth time and smile. The slideshow is stopped by my ringing phone.

I glance at it, ready to ignore whatever bullshit is on the other line, only to see that it’s Mom.

“Hi,” I say, the word clipped as tightly as it can be.

“You didn’t call me when you got home.”

“I think I stopped doing that once I moved out years ago.”

“You know what I mean.”

I roll my eyes and blow out a breath. “Oh, *I know what you mean*. You wanted me to call and offer up all kinds of details about dinner.”

“Of course I did.”

I run a hand down my bare chest and work my neck from side to side. I still haven’t been able to put everything that happened tonight in a mental box.

Am I pissed at how things went down? Yes. And not because my brothers were fucking with me.

Clearly, I'm used to that.

What irritates me is that they dragged Brooke into their games. They fiddle with her here and there at jobsites, but never on this level. That could've gone horribly wrong and I would've killed them.

But am I mad at how things ended up? No. Not even a little bit.

"I'm quite disappointed in you, Mother," I say, placing one foot over the other.

She sighs. "Oh, Moss."

"I am. I held you in a *much* higher regard than someone who would stoop to Banks's and Maddox's level and get involved in their shenanigans."

"I didn't mean to."

"Um, I think you did. I think you heard something about *Brooke* and *date* and jumped in with both feet."

"I don't have all of the information, but Maddox and Banks said that Brooke needed a date and, they needed to get you to Shade House tonight at seven—wearing a black hat of all things—so I offered to lend them a hand. I was just being helpful."

I roll my eyes. *Right.*

"What do you want me to do?" she asks. "I'm only a mother that wants what's best for her children. Paige is doing so, so well. Foxx is ... Foxx. There's hope for Jess. *Eventually.* Maddox might settle down but there's a good ten years before that happens, and one of you will have to take care of Banks someday. Your father and I are trying to figure out how to bribe one of you with a bigger slice of your inheritance to care for him."

I chuckle.

"But you, Moss David, you are *the one*. All of my hopes and dreams about becoming a grandmother before I'm in a wheelchair are invested in you, my boy."

Hate to tell you, Mama, but this is where I'm going to disappoint you.

"Wow. The dramatics are at play tonight, huh?" I ask.

"You know what I mean."

I groan as I get to my feet. The tile is cool and damp.

"Yeah," I say. "What you mean is that I'm the best looking out of all of your spawn."

She scoffs. "You've been spending too much time with Banks."

"Coming from you tonight, *that's rich*, Mother."

Mom laughs. "Okay. All joking aside—how did things go with Brooke?"

The smile that touches my lips appears out of thin air.

I wrap my free hand around the back of my neck, toying with the edge of my hair. *Fucking great, actually.*

Brooke and I are a lot alike in many ways. We enjoy our work. We share the same sense of humor. We don't get bothered by much.

Lucky for my brothers.

So the fact that Brooke thinks she needs a date to run interference with her family bothers me.

A lot.

Mixed in with my amusement of being Brooke's accomplice—and all that might entail—and my frustration with my brothers is a deep concern about Brooke's familial situation.

Is she okay? Because as much as I get frustrated with my family, we'd never hurt each other. Not like Brooke's mom seems to hurt her.

"Moss?" Mom asks, bringing me back to the present. "How did things go?"

"You'll be happy. You are speaking to Brooke Bailey's boyfriend," I say, testing the sound of those words out loud for the first time.

She gasps. "You're kidding me."

"No. I'm not. We sat down and decided it's time we stopped pretending not to be into each other and just do it."

"You see?" she says, sounding pleased with herself. "Without my meddling, this would've never happened. I'm just ... I'm beyond happy for you. It's time you got out there again."

All levity erases from my face.

"Mom."

The line stills. I stop walking next to a portable basketball hoop that Jess and I got for a bar-be-que last summer.

My mother never goes *there*. No one does.

The knot that used to pull through my insides every time I thought about my last relationship doesn't tug anymore. The boulder that used to present itself right in the middle of my throat seems to have disappeared. The burn in my chest—as if a hole had been eaten through my heart by a vat of acid—doesn't hurt anymore. Time doesn't heal all wounds. We just learn to live with them.

But that doesn't mean I want to talk about it.

Or that I want to go there again.

When she speaks again, her voice is softer. “Did I overstep?”

“Oh, a little. Seems to be par for the course for you today.”

“I just want you to be happy, Moss. You are such a good man, have so much to offer a woman, and you deserve to be loved too.”

“Would you like to see a list of the women who have *loved me* in the last six months?” I joke.

She hisses at me—something about using my manners. I can’t be sure. I can’t hear her over my own laughter.

“I’m kidding,” I say.

And I am. Besides Courtney—who I didn’t fuck, surprisingly—I’ve only seen one other person in the last six months. That wasn’t for more than a couple of weeks because she started talking about the future. Things six weeks from then.

I’m not into that.

Dating isn’t my thing. I can’t connect with women on a level deep enough to warrant a relationship. Is it because I don’t want to or I’m emotionally unable? I don’t know. Both, maybe. But the fact remains that having a relationship isn’t in the cards for me.

Except my new fake one.

“Let’s circle back to safer topics,” she says, trying to hide her amusement. “When are you bringing her over for supper?”

“I mean, this just happened. Can I get a second?”

“That’s what you do, Moss. You bring your girlfriend over so we can get to know her.”

I make a face. “Um, you work with her. Pretty sure you know her.”

“Not on that level.”

I knock a knuckle against the basketball pole. The sound rings through the lanai.

“We’re going to her hometown in a couple of weeks,” I say, muddling my way through this. “I guess we’ll be integrating her into our family soon too.”

“I like where this is headed.”

“I’m glad.”

She laughs. “I’m so glad we have this relationship. I love how close we are. That you’ll talk to me about things and let me be involved in your life in little ways.”

I glance at the windows at Jess’s house. All of the lights on this side of his house are on. *Every single one of them.*

How much is Dad paying him to be able to afford his electricity bill?
Damn.

“I felt bad for you,” I tease her. “If I don’t humor you and your motherly instincts, you’re really fucked.”

“On *that* note, I’m going to let you go in case you need to call your girlfriend or maybe go see her. I know how new relationships work. They need time and room to bloom.”

“Right. Time and room to bloom. You got it.”

“And it’s getting late and I’m pooped.” She laughs.

“Manipulating people is hard work, isn’t it?”

“Much more than I anticipated. Good night, Moss. I love you.”

“Love you. Good night.”

I end the call. But, before I can put the phone down, it buzzes with a text.

Foxx: Do you still have binoculars? If so, may I borrow them tomorrow through mid-week next week? I have ordered new ones but the shipping is delayed.

I laugh out loud.

Me: I think they’re in the garage. Any other day, I’d tell you to come find them yourself. But, because you are currently the only brother that I have that I don’t want to strangle, I’d be more than happy to find them and let you borrow them for as long as you need.

Foxx: Yes would’ve sufficed.

Me: I apologize. I’ll endeavor to be more antiseptic next time.

Foxx: Sorry would’ve worked.

I roll my eyes, grinning.

Me: Will put in your truck in morning to negate interaction.

Foxx: Better.

I wait for him to say something else but he doesn’t. I’m not surprised. That’s Foxx. I might not hear from him for another month.

With my phone still in my hand, I scroll down my text messages until I find Brooke’s name. The little picture saved to her contact card was taken late

last summer. We had been pulling all-nighters for four days straight in hopes of making our completion date on a project that had stretched both of us thin. She was sitting on the tailgate of my truck. Her hair was wild—piled on top of her head in a tangled mess. There were bags under her eyes and mascara smeared like a rock star after a night out.

We were goofing off, definitely slap happy. I don't know what I said but she stuck her tongue out at me and I saved the picture to her contact card that day.

It's been that way ever since.

Me: Did you make it home?

Brooke: If not, my kidnapper would've had an hour head start on you.
LOL

Me: You underestimate my skill set.

I imagine her smile—maybe even a laugh. She's definitely rolling her pretty blue eyes at me right now, and I wish I could see it.

Brooke: Since you're here, I want to admit something because I think it'll make things easier.

My interest is absolutely piqued. There are a hundred ways this could go and one way I'm kind of hoping it does.

Me: Oh, do tell. *winking emoji*

Brooke: I'm a little nervous about seeing you at the office now that we're an "official" item.

Yeah. Not what I was hoping for.

I run my thumb down my jawline and think.

I'll open the door and let her lead the conversation.

Me: Why would it change anything?

Brooke: I don't know. Maybe it won't. I just don't want anything to be weird between us.

Brooke: Maybe this was a bad idea.

Me: It was definitely not a bad idea. It was a great idea, in fact.

Brooke: It was a great idea. **winking emoji** But it's the idea WITH YOU part that I'm worried about.

Me: **thinking emoji**

I don't know what else to say. *Is she looking for a way out of it? Does she not want to do this with me? Would she rather do this with some random guy?*

What's wrong with me?

My face scrunches up as I fire off another text.

Me: Here's the thing. As your friend, I can't just sit back and watch you do this with another guy. I know guys. They're touchy-feely. They're selfish. And they're unimpressive compared to me. So let me help you out of this bind.

Oh!

I shoot another text to her.

Me: And we'll have tomorrow to work out the kinks. We'll have it all ironed out by Monday.

Brooke: And this will not affect our friendship, right?

Me: Never. You'll always be my Brookie.

Brooke: **eye roll emoji**

I laugh.

Me: We're friends. We're doing this as friends. So sit back and let me fake-date the hell out of you.

Brooke: True. But we're co-workers, too. And that means a lot to me. Like A LOT. I don't want to lose my job.

Me: You won't.

Brooke: Promise?

What?

Me: Do you really think I would let that happen? No joke—I'm kind of

hurt by that.

Brooke: I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen. I'm just super nervous now that I've had a minute to think about it. I guess I got cold feet.

Me: Well, put some socks on, sweetheart. I got you.

Brooke: NO SWEETHEART.

Me: You've already ruled out princess.

Brooke: No dumb names. I hate them.

I stick my tongue in my cheek. "That's too bad."

Me: We just haven't found the one you like. I'll keep trying.

Brooke: Moss ...

Me: Night, sugar plum.

Brooke: I'm going to break up with you.

Me: *heart emoji*

Brooke: *heart emoji in black*

"This is going to be fun."

I walk to the chair and pick up my to-go container. Then I throw it in the garbage can in my kitchen.

My phone alerts me that it's going into my Bedtime Routine. *How is it this late?*

I yawn, turning off the lights and making my way upstairs—all the while thinking about Brooke.

I turn on the bathroom light and set my phone down by the sink. Planting my hands on the counter, I check my reflection in the mirror.

"Just have fun with it," I say, the words echoing around the room. "There's no need to analyze this too much. She needs my help and I can get a little something out of it too."

I would've helped her just because she needed me.

I grab my toothbrush and run it under the tap.

Even though my brothers can be assholes, I know our family is lucky. Mom's words earlier about how close we are is a good reminder of that. Maybe Brooke's family has communication problems. Lots of families do.

"This party is a big deal to Brooke or she wouldn't be going to such extremes. So make her happy. Show her that in spite of whatever her family does to her, she's still a great person."

Because she is. She's truly a woman who I'd pick for myself if I was looking for a long-term relationship.

Which I'm not. And I won't be.

I slide some toothpaste on the brush and start working it around my mouth.

Just remember she's your friend and co-worker and don't get in too deep. That's all she is to you.

Who am I kidding? Brooke is the girl who I'd do anything for. The girl who I know hates nicknames and whose mood I can read in one look. She's the girl who takes up the most rent in my brain.

But ...

She's my friend

That's all she'll ever be.

FOURTEEN

BROOKE

“I just can’t tell if it’s going to work with Charlie or not.” Jovie’s voice streams through the speakerphone. “He thinks my time at the theater is a waste of time.”

“He’s a waste of time, if you ask me.”

“I am asking you.”

I empty the dustpan into the trash and then put it back in the closet. The hinge squeals as the door shuts.

Bright afternoon sunlight fills the kitchen. It’s happy weekend sunshine, which is a completely different sunshine than weekday sunshine. It hits different.

The scent of banana bread that I stress-baked while overthinking my new relationship with Moss last night lingers in the air. I stand next to the sink and feel the warm rays hit my skin.

Today is a good day.

“Theater is such a large part of who you are,” I say. “How can you be with someone who doesn’t get that? I mean, how can he get *you* if he doesn’t get that part of you?”

She sighs. “I know. Working for the tourism board pays the bills and spending time at the theater fills my spirit. Why can’t he understand that?”

“I don’t know but you can’t make someone understand things that they don’t want to comprehend.”

I know firsthand. *Thanks, Mom, for understanding exactly nothing about me.*

“Ugh. Thanks for the therapy this afternoon. I was high on your dating life—”

“*Pretend* dating life,” I correct her, rolling my eyes. “Stop romanticizing this.”

“How? I was romanticizing this before ... *this*. I was shipping the two of you together the day I met him at Mugger’s two years ago.”

I lean against the counter and laugh. “Well, that ship was never in the dock to sail. I have absolutely zero desire to seriously date anyone—least of all Moss Carmichael.”

“But why?” she whines. “He’s so fucking cute.”

I laugh. “He is. He’s a catch. But since my divorce ... I want to enjoy *me*. I like myself for the first time in my life. Where I live, work, the people in it. A relationship with anyone can only complicate things and I’m here for uncomplications.”

“And this thing with Moss isn’t going to get complicated?”

I can hear it in her voice. Jovie thinks this is going to get muddy.

She just doesn’t understand us.

“I’ve thought about this all night,” I say. “It really is the best-case scenario. He knows me surprisingly well and I know more random factoids about Moss than I should. And we can be goofy together and have fun without thinking it’s going to be anything more because we’re such good friends.”

“*Uh-huh.*”

“Whatever,” I say, sighing. “I trust him. He’s the only person I could trust to see this ugly side of my life besides you and no one is going to believe we’re dating.”

“That’s hilarious.” She laughs. “But I need to go. I’m pulling into the theater.”

“You’re auditioning today, aren’t you?” I ask. “For the lead in ... *Brambleberry Boys*?”

Jovie laughs. “Close. It’s *The Brambleberry* but I’ll give it to you.”

“See? I listen.” I laugh too. “Break a leg today. I know you’re going to wow them with your talent and beauty and they’ll pick you for the lead.”

“Ah, thanks. I love you.”

“Love you, Jovie. Have fun,” I say, sure not to tell her good luck. Apparently, that’s a bad omen for actors. “Call me later and tell me how things go.”

“For sure. Bye!”

“Bye.”

I turn to set my phone down when the doorbell rings.

My heart leaps in my chest as my head whips toward the foyer. *Moss.*

I adjust my sweatpants—the kind that hangs low on the hips—and straighten my white shirt. It clings to my body in a way that makes me look curvier than I am and gives me a boost in confidence.

Which never hurts a thing.

I blow out a shaky breath, throw my shoulders back, and walk to the entryway. Then I tug open the door ... and melt.

Fuck. Me.

“Hey,” I say, leaning against the doorframe for support.

“Hi.”

I’m graced with a lopsided smile that makes my knees even weaker.

Moss’s thighs are muscled beneath the denim covering them. His shoulders are broad under the yellow T-shirt that makes his eyes even more crazily beautiful. And I’ve never seen him in sneakers before now and I’m here for it.

“No flowers?” I tease, moving to the side so he can come in. “What kind of boyfriend are you?”

“*Oh.* Okay. I won’t make this mistake twice.”

“I’m just kidding,” I say, closing the door.

He looks around the foyer. I give him a second to take it in and adjust to being in my space before leading him down the hallway.

“Want a drink?” I ask him as we enter the kitchen.

“Sure. What do you have?”

“Cherry Coke. Lemonade. Water.” I shrug. “Vodka.”

He laughs. “I’ll take water. *Please.*”

I grab two bottles out of the fridge and hand him one, making a point not to touch him. Contact with Moss on a normal day feels like getting zapped by an electrical current. There’s no need to see if it’s worse under these circumstances.

“Let’s go sit down,” I say.

Moss follows me into the living room and takes a seat on the sofa. I sit on the other side with a cushion between us.

“What kind of flowers do you like?” he asks. “Just so I can file that away for later.”

“You aren’t bringing me flowers.”

“You shouldn’t have said anything,” he says as a half-grin, half-smirk

touches his lips. "I'm going to be the best fake boyfriend of all time."

I roll my eyes even though I laugh.

"So?" he asks.

"I don't know."

He wrinkles his brow. "What do you mean you don't know?"

I shrug. "I don't know what kind of flowers I like. Pink ones, I guess."

"You were married."

"Yeah," I say, not sure where this is going.

He just looks at me blankly.

"Geoff didn't give me flowers."

"Ever?"

"Nope."

Moss sits back, stretching his long legs out in front of him. "My dad used to bring my mom flowers every Friday. He wouldn't come home unless he had them for her. I remember once when I was little—ten or eleven, maybe—he came home with a bunch of flowers he picked out of a roadside ditch because the shops were closed." He grins. "There were a bunch of ants in them and Mom woke up to that in the kitchen."

"I bet that wasn't a good morning," I say, chuckling.

"Nope. Not even a little."

I can just imagine Damaris getting angry, but secretly smiling because of Kix's thoughtfulness. I can also see my own mother going ape-shit crazy if my dad ever did anything like that. Come to think of it, there's never been a need for him to buy her flowers. She buys her own monstrous bouquets every week.

One for each room, dear. It's a must.

I curl my legs under me and twist so that I'm facing him. He's watching me intently as if he can figure out the problems of the world if he stares at me long enough.

"Geoff wasn't a flower type of guy," I say. "Actually, he wasn't really an anything type of guy, which is why I divorced him."

"You don't talk about him much. I actually don't even think I'd ever heard his name until last night."

"There's not much to talk about. We got married when I was twenty. Married almost seven years. I woke up on my birthday and realized I was ... making do. Getting through days. Basically, I wasn't doing anything remotely like living. I was so unhappy in every area of my life and I just

couldn't do it another year."

"Seven years is a long time."

I nod. "It is. That's the worst part of it all. I'm not sure there was ever *real* love there. I spent *seven whole years of my life*—if I live to be eighty, that's almost ten percent—with a man who didn't even smile at me on a regular basis. Now that I look back at it ..."

I stare beyond Moss, focusing on a sunburst decoration with a small mirror in the middle.

Looking back at it, I was wondering through life. Surviving. Accepting Geoff's disinterest in me. In us. And that's no way to live.

"If you don't want to talk about this, that's fine," Moss says. "I am curious though. It'll help me know how to handle him next week."

I shift around. Finally, I pull my knees up to my chest and settle. *I'm squirming like a child.*

"Geoff is not a terrible person," I say. "Our definitions of life and love just didn't match. There were a lot of strings with him. His love came with conditions. He wanted me to look a certain way, act like this, speak like that. If I managed to tick all of those boxes, I would be rewarded at the end of the day."

"What?"

"It's not like it sounds. It wasn't some dominant-submissive thing."

The idea of Geoff being a dominant makes me laugh. Moss is not entertained, so I move along.

"It was like ... if he was happy, I got more physical interaction. A kiss on the cheek, or he might let me cuddle against him while he watched sports when we went to bed. Or he'd go to bed with me instead of staying up until I fell asleep. And, you know, if things were just so, then maybe we would have sex. And I needed those little moments between us, and he just didn't."

Moss flinches with his mouth hanging open.

"That's the most fucked-up thing that I've ever heard," he says, disbelief thick in his voice. "You know that's not how marriage works, right?"

"Yeah. That's why I left him."

He runs a hand through his hair. "You are right, though. That doesn't sound much like love."

"Do you know what love is?"

I ask the question without thinking about it first. I'm not sure if I would've said it if I had, but now that it lingers in the air between us, I can't

take it back.

His face falls. He fiddles with the cap on his water bottle before taking a long drink.

“I’m sorry,” I say, uneasy. “You don’t have to answer that.”

He screws the cap back on. “No. It’s fine.” He swallows. “I do. I know what love is. At the end of the day, it’s a willingness to have your life destroyed just to have a moment with her.”

His voice softens at the end. But his face tells a different story with his clenched jaw and averting eyes.

What happened to him?

I watch him for a few long seconds until I can’t take his discomfort any longer. His sadness. His suppressed anger.

“Which is why,” I say, cheerfully, “we aren’t going there. Love is off the table—not that you and I would fall in love anyway.”

When his gaze meets mine, he grins. “Right.”

“Situations over relations,” I say, getting up and stretching. “That’s our motto.”

“I can get behind that. I don’t have a committed bone in my body.”

I laugh. “Me either, pal.”

Moss stands and stretches too. I think he does it to annoy me—*those damn abs*.

“Oh,” he says, biting back a smile. “I saw your wanted ad last night. I had to make a Social account and jump through a ton of hoops, but I wanted to see it.”

My cheeks heat.

“No offense, but it needed some work,” he says.

“It did not. Did you see all those comments? *It clearly worked.*”

He gives me a look. “Any man who’s ever seen you or talked to you was foaming at the mouth at the opportunity to do *anything* with you—real or not. That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Then humor me. What were you talking about, smart-ass?”

He grins. “You don’t even own a pair of heels.”

Bastard.

“And you never wear red lipstick,” he says, his smugness more than a little obvious.

“It was a ... I was painting a picture. It was a metaphor. An example of the lengths I would go to in order to fulfill my end of the deal.”

“So you’ll wear red lipstick for me?”

“No.”

He shifts his weight, clearly amused. “You owe me a date in heels and red lipstick.”

“Um, that wasn’t our deal.”

“Hey, I answered your ad. That was the deal you offered.”

“*You* didn’t answer shit. Maddox did.” I bite my bottom lip, seeing an opportunity to get him worked up. “Maybe I’ll wear red lipstick and heels for Mad.”

His brows lift to the ceiling before he narrows his eyes. “You’re *my* fake girlfriend. Not Mad’s.”

I giggle. “Are you jealous?”

“*Yeah*,” he says, pouting. “That would really hurt my feelings.”

“*Fine*. I won’t make you jealous. Not on purpose, anyway.”

He looks at me like he won a victory. *Silly man*.

“Speaking of Maddox,” he says. “Mom wants you to come over for supper sometime. But then she made a point today of telling me she’s cooking this afternoon and would really like *me* to come—which is code to bring you.”

“You’ve already told her?”

“I had to.” He shrugs. “She knew what was going on. Hell, she helped put it together and wasn’t about to let it go.”

Okay. True.

My stomach wobbles as this charade really kicks off. People know. His family knows. My boss knows.

Yikes.

“This is real, huh?” I say, laughing off my nerves.

“That it is. Are you still okay with it?”

I take him in with his kind eyes and sweet smile. The thoughtfulness to ask if I’m still okay with the decision we made last night. The way that I know he’d stop this in its tracks if I balked at all.

“*Any man who’s ever seen you or talked to you was foaming at the mouth at the opportunity to do anything with you—real or not.*” Not that Moss is foaming at the mouth, but I can definitely see how much our friendship means to him. And I’m fucking lucky to have him in my corner.

“I’m perfect with it,” I say. “When do we go to your mom’s?”

“They’re having dinner in an hour ...”

Might as well get it over with.

“Will your brothers be there?” I ask. “Just wondering if it’s our first attempt at getting back at them for this whole thing.”

He chuckles. “Probably. They come and go.”

“Cool.”

We watch each other. His cologne—all fresh and laundered-smelling—perfumes the air. His energy hits me in waves, causing a rush of goose bumps to flutter across my skin.

Whatever he’s thinking has a smirk flirting with his lips. And his lips cause an ache to form in my core.

“We have one more thing to discuss before we go,” he says.

I raise a brow in response.

“What sort of boundaries are we setting here?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Am I grabbing your ass? Holding hands? Kissing you?”

My heart skips a beat as the smirk breaks out into a full-blown smile.

Damn.

The thought of his hands, his mouth, his fingertips on me sends a shiver down my spine. *Why did I not think about this earlier?*

“Well,” I say over the lump in my throat. “We have to make this believable if we’re going to sell it. If it looks like we’re playing pretend, then it’s all for naught.”

“It would actually be worse.”

“Absolutely.”

“I need you to tell me what’s okay and what’s not,” he says, his voice lower. “I’m not the kind of guy who’s going to assume anything or put you in a position you don’t want to be in. No pun intended.”

I grin. “Let’s just say we’ll do whatever the situation calls for. I mean, if we should hold hands, then let’s do it. Kissing? I mean, we’ll have to kiss. There’s no getting around that.”

Breathe, Brooke.

“Just treat me like you would a girlfriend if you had one,” I say as casually as I can. “That should be natural enough.”

He takes a measured step toward me. “Are you sure about that?”

“I think so.” But suddenly ... *I’m not.* “Unless you’re mean or super kinky.”

“Oh, so we’re going that far—”

I cover my face with my hands. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

I don’t want to look at him, to see the salacious expression that I know damn good and well is written on his face. But as I cover my eyes and pray for a way out, he laces his fingers through mine—his palms covering the tops of mine—and tugs my hands down.

His hands are warm, easily encasing mine. And before he draws them away, his fingertips drag along the thin skin from my fingertips to my wrist.

A full-body shiver overtakes me, and I visibly shake at the contact.

“That looks like the first time I’ve ever touched you,” he says, his tone gravelly.

“Well, because it was.”

He laughs. “I’m sure that’s what it will be like for me the first time I kiss you.”

“*Please.*”

“What? You don’t think I’m going to enjoy kissing you? I mean, have you seen you?”

“This is pretend,” I say, blushing. “We’re not kissing as foreplay.”

“I know. Trust me. But I have to believe it in my head while we’re doing it. It’s called method acting.”

“You’re so full of shit,” I say, laughing.

He exhales as if he’s been holding his breath in for years. I notice that I relax right along with him, letting the tension go.

“So we’re going to your mom’s or what?” I ask.

“Yeah. If you want to.”

I shrug. “We might as well have our big debut as a couple.”

He chuckles. “Might as well. We’ll have to do it sooner or later.”

“Right. And they know how we normally behave around each other, so it’s not as if we have to make miraculous changes tonight.”

“True,” he says slowly. “But we need to look convincing—like our eyes have been opened and we see the light.”

I laugh, but he’s right. We do need to look a little different around them.

“Okay,” I say. “I hear you.”

“Great. Are you ready to go then?”

Now? I look down. “I need to change.”

“I think you look great.”

“It’s sweatpants, Moss. I can’t show up for the first time as your girlfriend in sweatpants.”

He shrugs and walks away. I'm happy with the added distance. But as soon as he turns around, it's like the distance is gone—evaporated into thin air.

Our eyes lock somewhere in the few feet between us. It's as if two puzzle pieces are snapping together, locking me in place.

I no longer hear the neighbor's dog. I don't smell Moss's cologne. I don't taste the mint from the gum that I chewed while sweeping the kitchen.

The only thing that I'm aware of is the sensation of being pulled toward him. That I have temporary permission to take what I want.

My heartbeat quickens as I ponder that.

"We're able to keep this all separate, right?" I ask. "Work. Friends. Fake dating."

"I can. I know what this is and what it isn't. That's the beauty of it. We both want and don't want the same thing."

"Right."

In that case ...

I give in to the draw and walk slowly toward him. He meets me in the middle, his hand reaching for me. Without a second thought, I step into his bubble, just inside the bend of his arm, and look up.

Every system in my body goes on high alert. I can almost hear the bells chiming in my head, warning me that I'm in danger.

Except I'm not. There's nothing dangerous about this. We're just having a little fun. We don't *need* to practice because his family will believe that this is new.

But why not?

Why not just enjoy it? Why not find out what he tastes like? If his lips are as soft as they look ...

"Let's see what you got," I say. "Kiss me, Carmichael."

He licks his lips. "Damn. It's so much sexier when you're bossy outside the office."

I laugh as his head lowers to mine.

Moss wraps his arms around my back and hauls me into his chest. I melt into his body as if I've been there a hundred times.

His embrace is gentle yet firm. His grasp is tight yet free. His hold feels exactly the way it should feel when a man holds you in his arms.

I've missed this.

And it feels insanely right to be in his arms.

It's so freaking good.

Just before our mouths touch, I gasp. And then his lips are on mine. They're so soft, exactly the way I imagined them in my dreams. He leads me in some kind of dance that I already know the steps to.

He flicks his tongue against my mouth in a command to open. I part for him, sinking deeper into his frame. I'm vaguely aware that his hands slide up my side and cup my face. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I register the way his scruff feels against my skin. The heat of his mouth. The sturdiness of his body.

Both far too soon and far too late, we break the kiss. Our foreheads touch for the briefest moment before we pull apart.

Unsure what to do or how I feel, I giggle.

"Not bad," I say, sucking in a lungful of air. "Not bad at all."

"That's it? *Not bad?*" He grins, trying and failing to look insulted. "I guess I'm going to have to practice. A lot. I mean, I did promise to be the best fake boyfriend ever."

"I love your dedication."

"Speaking of dedication, are you going to get ready to go? Or do you want another practice round?" he asks, grinning even bigger. "Because if you stand there much longer with those just-kissed lips, you're gonna get it again."

Yes, please.

"I need to change my clothes before we go," I say, smacking his chest as I walk away. "Calm down."

"I'm going to kiss you at my parents' house, too," he calls after me. "*For practice.* I have to perfect this before we kiss in front of that fucker Geoff. And your aunt too. She deserves to see that your castoffs are castoffs for a reason. That you traded up."

I stop at the doorway to my bedroom and hold his gaze for a moment. His smile is sweet and playful, and it washes away the burst of anxiety that shot through me when I walked away.

"I'll just be a second," I say before closing the door. Once I'm alone, I slump against the wall.

This might be easier and harder than I ever imagined.

Because that practice kiss? It was one of the best in my life.

FIFTEEN

BROOKE

Moss turns off the radio.

I shield my eyes from the sun as we make a right-hand turn onto Honeysuckle Lane.

“That’s the cutest street name of all time,” I say.

Trees and shrubs line both sides of the road, making it feel like you’re entering a special cozy neighborhood. I settle back in the passenger seat of Moss’s truck and watch as we approach a spattering of houses.

Six homes and one empty lot are situated around a cul-de-sac. Each yard is manicured. All of the structures are neat and tidy. It’s a little nest off the road, and I love it.

“That’s Maddox’s,” Moss says, pointing at a small home on my right. “And that’s Banks’s next to it. Mine is over here.”

I look over my left shoulder to the house Moss points at. It’s white with black shutters and a porch with a swing swaying in the breeze.

“That’s cute,” I say.

“*Cute*. That’s the word a guy wants to hear about his bachelor pad.”

I roll my eyes, letting that go. “So who lives beside you?”

“Jess.” He points to his left. “Our parents will stop at nothing to keep us close.”

I don’t know what warms my heart more—his words or his smile.

You can’t manufacture the unconditional love in this family. I’ve thought many times over the years that it would’ve been amazing to grow up in such a close-knit, supportive environment. *What would it be like to have a mother who adores you, champions you, and makes you her priority?*

Hell if I know.

He pulls his truck to the curb between two beautiful brick homes. Then he turns off the ignition with the push of a button.

“Who will be here?” I ask, a butterfly taking flight in my stomach.

“No clue. We usually do dinner on Sundays, but this weird-hour lunch-dinner thing on a Saturday is new. It might be just us. It could be everyone. Who knows?”

“*O-kay*,” I say, scanning the area. “We’re just diving in headfirst, huh?”

He twists in his seat. The leather squeaks with the movement.

“We see each other every day with them around—well, most of them. *Some of them*. Whatever,” he says, shrugging. “What will really be the difference?”

“Your lips.”

They twitch at the mention.

“Honesty?” he asks.

I nod.

“Full disclosure—I’ve wanted to kiss you for two and a half years,” he says unapologetically. “And I’m not even a little sorry that this situation presented itself, and kissing you is a part of the job description.”

My insides burn a dozen degrees too hot as he looks at me.

“Honesty?” I ask.

He nods.

“Full disclosure—I’ve wanted to kiss you for that long too,” I say, shrugging as well—as if my admission didn’t just send a streak of panic through my body. “And now that we’ve had our practice run and things didn’t get weird, I’m really glad you’re my fake boyfriend and not a stranger off the internet.”

“I told you. *Best fake boyfriend ever.*”

I laugh, letting my head fall back against the seat. “This whole situation is so absurd when you really think about it. Like, what are we even doing? Are we really going to do this?”

“Yup. And we’re going to have fun with it. We’re going to rub it in my brothers’ faces. Show your mama that you’re the biggest catch in Florida. Show my mama that we tried to have a relationship, and for some reason, it just didn’t work out.”

I turn my head to the side to look at him. “That part will be the most believable of all.”

“Which part?”

“That we didn’t work out. Can you imagine?”

He laughs. “No. By the time this is over, I’m pretty sure that we’ll be ready to kill each other. Our breakup will be the best thing that ever happened to us.”

“Until then, we’re going to enjoy the perks of a relationship without the strings. Situations over relations, right?”

“Situations over relations.” He leans across the console. “But when we go back to just being friends, you can still kiss me whenever you want.”

I snort, pulling my gaze from his and glancing at the house in front of us. Damaris and Banks are standing on the porch, watching us.

Here goes nothing ...

“Your mom and Banks are watching,” I say.

“Want to have a hot make-out session like we’re sex-deprived teenagers?”

I laugh. “No. Let’s have more class than that.”

“You’re no fun. I’ve wanted to get to first base ever since you walked out in that sexy shirt.” He winks, then runs two fingers across my collarbone, his palm lightly brushing the tops of my breasts. “Don’t even think about moving until I get over there, sexy fake girlfriend.”

He’s such a fucking flirt.

Moss hops out of the truck and closes the door with one hand. He jogs around the front of the truck, his muscles flexing under the thin fabric of his shirt.

This is going to work better than I ever imagined.

Banks yells something that gets him smacked by his mother.

My laughter fills the truck. I unbuckle myself and wave at Banks. Whatever he says to Damaris gets him smacked again.

When Moss opens my door, his smile is contagious. He takes my hand and helps me not land on my face as I practically fall out of the lifted truck.

“Is that necessary?” I ask, smoothing out the simple black V-neck that I absolutely spent way too much time picking out.

“Is what necessary?”

We face each other. We’re so close that we’re practically chest to chest. And I know, without a doubt, that I shouldn’t like being this close to him.

But I do.

“Your truck,” I say. “Is it necessary to have it so tall? What’s the point?”

“I might want to take it off-road. Look at all that clearance.”

I narrow my eyes. “And how many times have you done that?”

“*And it looks cool.*” He wrinkles his nose. “Don’t make fun of me. I have a complex.”

“Why?”

“You know, it’s really rude to come over and ignore people,” Banks shouts from the porch.

I laugh. “Is that why you have a complex?”

“Yup.”

I take a long, deep breath. I don’t like lying, and the only reason I can do this with my bosses and their family is because they instigated it. Hopefully, we can all have a long laugh about this later. But, for now, we begin the game they started.

“Okay,” I say. “Are you ready to start the show?”

“Let the games begin.”

He takes my hand, lacing his fingers through mine.

“You should be super sweet,” I whisper.

“Aren’t I always?”

“No, like *really* sweet,” I say, smiling at Damaris.

“Why?”

“Because we just started dating, so we’re still in the honeymoon phase of the relationship. We should still be high on the newness of this.”

“Good to know because I know what else happens on honeymoons,” he says just loud enough for me to hear it.

“*Moss!*”

He chuckles as my face heats.

We turn toward the house. Beautiful shrubs with the most vibrant magenta-colored flowers grow along the sidewalk. I focus on them and not the way my hand is pressed against Moss’s and how stupidly easy this feels.

“Oh, Brooke,” Damaris says, practically beaming. “I’m so happy you came today.”

“Thanks for having me,” I say.

“Hey, if you needed a ride, you could’ve called me.” Banks shrugs. “I could’ve picked you up in my ’57 ’Vette and—”

“Stop it.” Damaris gives her youngest son a look that only a mother can give. “I’ve already warned you to behave.”

“You can’t give her the ride she needs, little boy,” Moss says, sticking his tongue in his cheek.

“*Oh, please,*” Banks says just as I elbow Moss in the side.

“I was a little worried about coming over,” I say, testing the waters. “I was afraid it would be awkward since I work for you and now”—I look up at Moss—“*this.*”

“*This* should’ve happened before now,” Moss says, taking the verbal baton. *Well done.* “I thought you were out of my league.”

“Because she is,” Banks deadpans.

I smile at Moss, pretending Banks isn’t there. Ignoring Banks is the worst thing you can do to him.

“You both are crazy,” Damaris says. “I’ve known this day would come since the day Kix teamed the two of you up.”

I twist around to face her. *Is she serious?* “Really?”

“Yes. Mothers know these things. We can sense them.”

Huh.

“Now let’s go inside and eat,” she says, turning and walking inside the house.

“Well, you do that. I’m heading home,” Banks says.

“You’re not gonna stay and eat?” Moss asks. “Talk about being rude.”

Banks rolls his eyes. “I already ate.”

“*So did I.*” Moss winks at his brother.

My core tightens at the innuendo. I try to slide my sweating palm out of Moss’s grip, but he just grasps my hand harder.

“*Why?*” Banks looks at me, his hands held in the air at his sides. “Why did you pick him? Why didn’t you pick me?”

“Careful,” Moss warns him. “That’s my girl you’re talking to. Gonna need to nip that shit in the bud.”

Even though we’re playing—and trying to rile Banks up on purpose—the tone Moss used in that warning bites a little harder than I’d expect. *It was also ridiculously hot.*

“Yeah, yeah,” Banks mumbles, stepping off the porch.

“I can’t help it, Banks. Moss started messaging me on Social, and we just clicked in a different way. It took all the work stress out of it, and let us be ourselves.”

Banks stops and turns around. He narrows his eyes as if he’s unsure whether I know that it was him and Maddox or not. He’s considering that he and Maddox practically handed me to their brother. I don’t give him any help in figuring it out.

“Yeah,” Moss says. “*Thank God for Social.*”

Banks shakes his head and takes off across the lawn. “Luckiest motherfucker alive.”

Moss and I laugh, earning a finger in the air from him. Once we’re alone, we both exhale.

“That went well,” I say, giggling. “You did great.”

“It really was everything that I hoped it would be.” He opens the door. “Seeing him get put in his place—*jealous* ...” He sighs. “It might be a little petty, but I thoroughly enjoyed that.”

“I think it’s too late to be worried about being petty.”

“Yeah. You’re probably right. I ought to just go all in on it, huh?”

I give him a look, warning him to stay in his role, and enter Damaris’s house. Moss steps in behind me, the door snapping closed.

I’ve never wondered what Damaris’s house looked like, but this would’ve been exactly what I pictured if I had.

Hardwood floors, which I bet are original, run through the foyer and living room. They appear to extend into the kitchen as well. The walls are the perfect shade of blue-gray—one I know Damaris loves. Every time I incorporate anything similar into a house, she raves about it.

Loads of pictures decorate the walls, the bookshelves by the fireplace, and a small, round table. Beside the table is a chair with a pillow on it that reads *We’ve had sex here*.

I burst out laughing. “Um, what is that?” I point at the pillow.

“Jess got that for Dad for Christmas last year. Dad is always teasing us that he’s had sex with our mother in every place in the house just to get a reaction. So Jess leaned *all the way in*.”

“I love it. It’s hilarious.”

Damaris comes into the living room, wiping her hands on a towel. “That’s the one thing I hate about this house.”

I furrow my brow. “The pillow?”

“No.” She shakes her head. “That thing makes me laugh every time I look at it. I was talking about the kitchen. I can’t see in here when I’m in there,” she says, sighing. “Well, and that sofa. I hate it too.”

“What’s wrong with the sofa?” I ask, taking in the gray piece of furniture with its back against the wall.

I try to ignore Moss’s arm as it slides along my back. I hold my breath steady as his hand wraps around my waist. It takes my breath a second to

catch up.

“That sofa has been through five children, Maddox’s baseball cleats—why he wore them into the house is beyond me.” She scoffs. “Banks’s SpaghettiO’s. The Gatorade that no one ever took credit for.”

“I told you that was Foxx,” Moss says.

Damaris narrows her eyes and points at Moss. “*I think it was you.*”

“Can we not talk about this in front of my new girlfriend?” His fingers dip into my side a little deeper. “I don’t want her knowing that I’m capable of screwing up.”

“I work with you. I know this already,” I say, laughing.

Damaris laughs too. “While we’re on that note ... I promised Kix I wouldn’t bring up work with you here. He thinks we have to keep work at work and family at home—and he’s right. But could I get your opinion on knocking this wall out?”

My head spins at both being called family and the fact that she would want my opinion in her home. That’s different from having it at work. This is *her* private space, *her* sanctuary. There’s no greater compliment than asking me to help design it.

“You have the best sense when it comes to this kind of thing,” Damaris says. “I’ve wanted to ask you to come by a hundred times but didn’t want you to feel like I was taking advantage of you and your skills.” Her eyes widen, and she points at me. “Even though I’ll absolutely pay you for your help.”

“I will absolutely help you, and you are absolutely not paying me.”

“We’ll see.” She smiles at me before turning toward the kitchen. “I’ve thought about this for years, and it’s just time ...”

I glance at Moss, not sure what we do in this situation. *Is Damaris my boss or Moss’s mom?*

My heart starts to pound in my chest as I stumble over the first hurdle of our situation-ship. Thankfully, Moss already has it figured out.

“Go,” he says, nodding toward the kitchen. “I know you love that shit. I’ll go find Dad and see what trouble he’s causing elsewhere.”

“Are you sure?”

He grins. “Go tell my mom how thankful you are that I finally saw the light and begged you to be mine.”

I laugh and head toward the kitchen too.

SIXTEEN

MOSS

The sun hangs low in the sky, creating a host of shadows across the neighborhood.

Brooke and I stroll down the road toward my house. Mom had to take a call in the kitchen, and Dad was on the phone downstairs. We slipped outside so we didn't disturb either of them.

A light breeze ripples through the trees and flirts with the edges of her hair. She takes a deep, contented breath and looks at me over her shoulder.

"I haven't eaten that much in a long time," she says, covering her stomach with her hand. "Does your mom ever stop cooking?"

"Not really. She's always puttering around in the kitchen. It's like she walks into the room, and all of a sudden, a whisk is in her hand. Like magic."

Brooke laughs softly. "I love how she just cooks for an army regardless of who is there. I've never seen someone just whip up that amount of food so effortlessly. I'd panic."

"She does it because someone will eat it. She'll stick whatever is left in the fridge, and it'll be gone by morning."

"That must be nice. My leftovers don't disappear until they've had time to properly mold in a container."

I chuckle.

Brooke glances at Jess's house as we walk by. "Where is everyone? I expected to run into more Carmichaels today. I was really ready to wow them with my acting skills."

"I don't know. Jess was going to a brewery with a guy we work with, I think. But Maddox is probably out doing Maddox things—which means he could be doing anything under the sun."

Brooke laughs. "I believe that."

"Banks is probably licking his wounds somewhere after having the two of us flaunted in his face," I joke.

"And the best part was that he wasn't sure whether I knew it was him on the messages or if I really thought it was you. He was standing there thinking that he really did bring us together."

I smile, relishing the moment again. *Fucker.*

"I know," I say. "Let him wonder. It'll make him think twice before he does something like that again."

She stops to tie her shoe. "What about Foxx?" she asks, looking up at me. "I think I've seen him twice in all the time I've lived here."

"Who knows? He texted me the other night, so I'm not due to hear from him for another month at least."

She stands up, absorbing the information I tossed her way, and starts walking alongside me again. "Where would you be if you weren't here? Like, if this was a normal Saturday night—what would you be doing?"

I kick a rock and watch it roll down the asphalt. *What would I be doing tonight?* It seems like a perfectly simple question, but ... I don't know.

"I might've gone with Jess," I say. "I might've driven around and looked for properties. I do that when I'm bored. I usually spend the weekends catching up on stuff at home. You know, landscaping shit or fixing a leaky faucet. Whatever."

She hums.

"I've been into movies lately," I say. "I might've just sacked out and binged something. Who knows?"

"What kind of movies?"

We turn down the walkway that connects the road to my porch. Brooke pauses and gives the house a quick once-over.

I watch her inspect it in the same way she takes in a location for the first time at work. Carefully. Curiously. I love to watch her brain work.

She's so incredibly talented, and I doubt she fully understands how lucky Laguna Homes is to have her. She could work anywhere she wanted. Mom cornering her within minutes of having her inside her own home to ask her opinion didn't surprise me a bit.

And Brooke's confidence? *Sexy as fuck.* I should probably avoid thinking about that when she's about to enter my house.

"Movies, Moss?" she prompts as she starts walking again.

“Oh. I don’t know. I like watching things blow up. Action stuff. If there’s a little mystery in there, that’s good. What about you?”

“Romantic comedies.” She makes a face as she takes the stairs. “Cliché, I know.”

I reach in front of her and open the door. She smiles at me before she steps inside my house.

“I don’t think it’s cliché, exactly,” I say. “But it *is* ironic since you’re Miss No Relationship.”

She shrugs. “I’ve never said that I didn’t like romance or the idea of love. I just said it wasn’t for me. Not right now, anyway. Maybe someday.”

“Oh, I know love exists, and it’s a nice thing for some people. Just not me.”

Never again. Never fucking again will I allow my heart to be tied to someone else’s.

Brooke glances around the entryway that leads into the living room. “Most people don’t get it. Jovie thinks there’s something wrong in my brain. But I like knowing that I don’t have to be someone I’m not to earn a spot in someone else’s life. If someone doesn’t want me in theirs, cool. I’m good.”

I’m not sure whether to touch that or not. I’ve already said my piece about Geoff and her family but hearing her talk like this bothers me. A lot.

“You did a pretty good job with this place,” Brooke says, winking at me. “It does scream *I’m a guy who lives alone*, but all in all, it’s not bad.”

“You do realize that I am a guy who lives alone, right?”

She laughs. “Yes, I remember. I just thought maybe some of my talent would’ve rubbed off on you by now.”

“Is that innuendo?”

Her laughter grows louder, and she shoves my shoulder.

Damn this girl.

“Come on. Wanna see my lanai?” I ask.

“Is that code for something?”

“It is if you want it to be.”

“You’re such a flirt,” she says, laughing. “But, yes, *I’d love to see your lanai.*”

We make our way through the formal living room that I converted into a billiards area and then deeper into the house.

“Did you have a chance to talk to your mom about the budget?” she asks.

“No. But I will before Monday.”

I slide the door to the lanai open and watch Brooke's eyes widen.

"Wow, Moss," she says, gasping. "This is amazing."

I don't usually blush, but this is an exception. Having someone I respect immensely when it comes to design and architecture say that I did a good job means a whole hell of a lot.

"Do you like it?" I ask.

She moves to the middle of the room and pivots in a circle, taking in all that the lanai has to offer. I stand in the doorway and watch.

"I'm in awe," she says, walking to the edge of the pool. "This is fabulous. Like, really, really good. I'm impressed."

I press off the doorframe and head her way. "I probably spend three-quarters of my time out here."

"You'd be crazy not to." She runs a finger along the bar along the wall. "I can imagine getting a book and curling up on one of those lounge chairs and reading until I fell asleep."

"I've done that a time or two."

She stops and looks at me with skepticism. "Really?"

"Yeah. There are brains under this brawn, baby."

"Sure. I've seen your brains at work, *baby*." She looks around again. "How much of this was here, and how much did you redo?"

"The lanai wasn't on the house at all when I moved in," I say, sitting in my favorite chair. "This whole area was patchy grass and sand. Pretty much shit. So I designed this, and we built it, and it's the best thing I've ever done. Felt like I was going to live here forever so I might as well make it mine."

"It must be nice to feel settled, huh?" She sits on the ottoman at my feet. "I feel that way a little bit where I live now. I like it there, but I know eventually I'll move. I can't rent that place forever."

"You could buy it."

Brooke shrugs. "I guess I could. While I love it, it doesn't feel like my forever home. I haven't found the glue that will stick me to any one place yet." She looks at me. "Does that make sense, or do I just sound super dramatic?"

"Makes perfect sense to me. As long as that doesn't mean you plan on leaving work."

She holds my gaze. Something in her eye—a twinkle—warms my soul in an unexpected, *almost* uncomfortable way.

"I mean it," I say, teasing her. "If you leave, I'm going with you. Just

know that. You can't get rid of me. We're a team."

She laughs, throwing her head back. Her blond hair catches the sunlight. "We have to be a team. We've won an award together. Next stop—reality show."

Our laughter fills the lanai, mixing with the sound of the water trickling from the hot tub into the pool. It feels like I've had a shot of tequila and am settled in for the night.

It's nice.

I enjoy my space—the quiet of it, the peace. Coming from a large, loud family, it's rare to simply *be*. But this space is mine. My respite from the noise. My solitude. I've had women here before, though it's been a while, and hated the way they seemed to poke a hole in my bubble.

But Brooke? I like having her here.

"What about you?" I ask her, lifting my legs and laying them on the ottoman next to her. "What would you be doing if you weren't here with me right now?"

"Probably deciding on the paint color for Parasol Place. Maybe having drinks with Jovie. Sometimes Smokey's has live music on the weekends, and I go sit on the beach and listen." She shrugs, watching me happily. "I do all sorts of fun stuff."

As much as I've thought about Brooke, I've never pictured her having a life—doing things like a normal person. She's always been Work Brooke, coming at me with designs and prices, or Fantasy Brooke. In that case, she's usually naked or in my T-shirt and bent over a piece of furniture.

Her doing normal people stuff is an interesting concept.

"What are you thinking?" she asks before biting her bottom lip.

Your peach-shaped ass up in the air while you watch me pound into you over your shoulder.

I roll my tongue around my mouth. "You don't want to know."

She lifts a brow, toying with me. "I asked, didn't I?"

Your lips wrapped around my cock while I thread my fingers through your hair and come down your throat.

"Trust me," I say. "You don't want to know."

She turns toward me in a way that makes me place one of my legs on the other side of her, effectively boxing her in. I watch as she swallows hard but tries to play it cool.

She's so beautiful.

I make every effort to stay calm. *Control my breathing. Keep my hands locked on the armrests. Don't move a muscle.* Because seeing her like this—in my house, between my thighs—is more than I was expecting to have to deal with tonight.

It feels a bit more than a game of pretend.

Her hands rest just above my knees. She smirks.

Damn this woman.

“Fine,” she says, squeezing her fingertips into my jeans just hard enough for me to feel it. “Don’t tell me. That’s fair because I’m not telling you what I’m thinking about either.”

You little fucking minx.

I’m not sure what she’s doing, but I’m not against it.

I sit up and scoot to the edge of the chair. She’s now trapped between my knees.

Her eyes go wide as I stare into them. The warm notes of her perfume dance around me. She looks far too natural sitting here like this.

She lifts a brow in a gesture that I’m not sure is a challenge or a question. But the mischievous grin on her lips leads me to believe it’s the first.

Fuck.

The air between us is hot. Thick. Humid. As the sun graces the tops of the trees on the horizon, filling the lanai with reddish-orange rays, I wonder just how far we should push it. How far we *can* push it before we blur the line we set in stone. Because while I’m all about this scheme, I’m not about to take it far enough to ruin our friendship.

Kissing is fun. Fake dating is temporary. Brooke will be in my life forever.

I can't fuck that up.

“Are you messing with me, Miss Bailey?” I ask, lifting a brow right back at her.

“Why? Because I won’t tell you what I’m thinking?”

We exchange a grin we’ve never shared before. It’s just for the two of us—a private moment that I’ll think about later. But, for now, I stay present. Stay in the moment with her.

“Among things,” I say.

She presses both palms on my knees and stands. But she doesn’t move. She just looks down, watching me without saying a word.

She brushes a lock of hair off my forehead, letting her hand drag against

my skin.

I look up at her as a streak of something—*fear? Uncertainty?*—passes through her eyes. Maybe reality's hitting her like it is me.

Her hand drops to her side, and she leans back. "Let's make a deal."

"What kind of a deal?" I ask, peering up at her.

She takes a long, deep breath. "That we don't ask each other stupid questions." She exhales sharply as if that took every bit of her energy.

I pull my brows together.

"You know what I mean," she says in response to my confusion. "Honesty is the best policy between us—like admitting we've wanted to kiss for a long time. But let's agree not to lure each other into gray areas."

"You did the luring."

She nods, frowning. "I know. And I shouldn't have. I just ... I stopped thinking for a moment."

I know the feeling.

I stand, causing her to take a step backward. The ottoman is in her way, so she doesn't get far.

Her breath is as rapid as the air going in and out of my body. *This is new. Unexpected.* Her eyes tell a tale much like the one rolling through my head.

Want.

Need.

Desire.

But I don't ask her about it. That's our deal. Even though it physically hurts right now—my cock is throbbing—it'll keep us both from hurting later.

"Makes sense," I say, forcing a swallow down my throat. "None of this is real anyway."

"It's just a means to an end."

"A means to an end," I repeat.

She takes a quick, tight breath and then steps over the ottoman. "Let's go talk to your mom and see if she'll allow us to talk about work outside of work for a moment. See if we can get the budget increased for the lanai. Maybe she'll have happy vibes tonight and be more willing to give in."

I sigh, a grin ghosting my lips. "That's a great idea. Let's go."

SEVENTEEN

BROOKE

“I got the part!” Jovie’s voice barrels across the parking lot. “They called on my way here. I got it! Ah!”

I climb out of my car, bracing myself both for the Florida heat and Jovie’s incoming tackle hug. Laughing, I catch her mid-launch. She bounces around, squealing.

“We have to celebrate!” I say, letting her go.

Her face is lit up with the force of a thousand suns. “Yes. We do. Let’s go all out next weekend. We can celebrate me getting the part and you surviving Honey’s party and the Excellence Awards. We’ll just make a night of it.”

“I can’t wait.” I link my elbow through hers. “I’m so proud of you.”

We walk toward Brinkmann’s. It’s our favorite boutique in Sunnydale, the town across the Causeway from Kismet Beach. Sunnydale has big box stores and shops, something that Kismet Beach refuses to allow in their city limits.

“I’ll be honest,” Jovie says. “I was getting worried. I knew I did well in the audition, but I also expected a call before now. They usually make their decision the next day. I was starting to panic.”

“Well, I knew you’d get it. You’re the most talented actress I know.”

She looks at me. “I’m the only actress you know.”

“But if I knew a hundred of them, you’d still be my favorite.”

She leans her head on my shoulder as we step under the awning. “That’s why you’re my best friend. You have faith in me when I don’t.” She pulls the door to Brinkmann’s open. “Actually, I always have faith in myself, but I like having that little ego boost that you give me too. Makes me feel less arrogant and more factual.”

I snort, shaking my head as I enter the store.

Scents of lavender and vanilla overtake us as we head straight for the blown glass.

“When is opening day?” I ask. “You know I’m going to be there holding a sign that says My Best Friend Is The Star.”

“Love the sentiment, but that’s not allowed.”

“Oh. I’ll put it on a shirt then.”

She grins. “I don’t know when we’ll open. We have our first rehearsal tomorrow, and I should know more then.”

“Keep me apprised so I can get a front-row ticket. But pull some strings so I don’t have to sit by Charlie.”

She holds up a piece of glass blown into a heart. “How’s this? It’s cute. And a heart.”

“Honey has so many trinkets. I’d like to find something she might be able to use or get some worth out of instead of something that she’ll just stick in a drawer for my mom to clean out someday.”

“So what you’re saying is that we could buy her a huge glitter bomb so your mom will have to sort that shit out someday?” She smiles. “That would be fun.”

“Keep looking, you little savage.”

She puts the heart back down. “Back to Charlie, that won’t be a problem.”

“Why? What happened?”

“You’ve been too busy with *lover boy* that I haven’t had time to tell you.”

I let the insinuation go and focus on the end. The *I haven’t had time to tell you* part.

“You haven’t told me what?” I ask.

“We’re on the outs,” she says as we round the corner to a different selection of goods. “We had a conversation the night that you helped me interiorly architect my bedroom into a *bastion of romance*.” She flings her hand through the air, using an accent that I think is supposed to be French. “Anyway, I’m not sure how we even ended up talking about kids because we were nowhere near that stage of things. But he looked at me as calm as a cucumber and said he would have to think long and hard before he procreated with me.”

My jaw drops. “What does that even mean?”

She shrugs, picking up a crystal that I’m not cool enough to identify.

“You should consider the person you might have kids with. I get that,” I say. “But that doesn’t feel like what he was saying.”

“It didn’t at the moment either.”

“So what did you say?”

Jovie grimaces. “Well, in my defense, I was a little ... shall we say, emotional? And defensive. And he had just orgasmed, and I had not, and I was pissy about that.”

I laugh. “*What did you say?*”

“I said that would be the first long and hard thing he had ever done. He left shortly after that.”

My laughter gets louder. “Jovie!”

“*What?* He didn’t consider my feelings when he was dumping his load all over my ass while I yelled at him to wait.” She frowns. “I was *this close*.”

I shake my head, taking the crystal out of her hand and setting it back on the shelf.

“I just need to remember this when he calls me again,” she says, following me to a different display. “I’m just so busy, and he’s so easy. He always knows when I’m sitting at home alone and horny. I wind up thinking, *well, easy is better than nothing*.”

“Disagree. I’m all team nothing over here.”

She presses her shoulder against the wall and angles her body toward mine.

“Really? Because you sure seem like you’re team something these days.”

“You’d be wrong.”

I turn to the display behind us and become very interested in organic soaps.

This whole thing with Moss, which is what Jovie is getting at, has been a whirlwind. I woke up this morning and lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. *This is happening*. That’s all I could think about.

This. Is. Happening.

I know this is fake. That’s all I want it to be. But if I let myself forget that significant piece of information, I could believe Moss and I are real.

But that’s a good thing. If it’s believable to you, everyone else will buy it too.

“How are things going with the two of you?” she asks, making no effort to hide her curiosity.

I start to say that they’re fine. That Moss and I are getting along, and

things are *fine*. For some dumb reason, that's not what comes out of my mouth.

"He came over yesterday," I say.

Jovie picks up a vase decorated with shells and stares at me. "What?"

"We just talked." I hesitate. "And kissed."

"*You kissed him? Already?*" She gasps. "How did I not get a call immediately after that?"

She sets the vase down with slightly more force than necessary. It earns her a stink eye from the shopkeeper.

I grab her arm and yank her to another aisle with fewer breakable items.

"I didn't call you," I say, knowing this will wind her up even more, "because we went to his mom's for lunch."

Her jaw drops. "You went to Damaris's house?" She puts her hands on her curvy hips. "You kissed Moss Carmichael. You met the parents as his girlfriend. *All in the same day*. And I don't find out about it until twenty-four hours later? It's like ... it's like you don't even like me."

She looks hurt. Devastated. *Dramatically pained*. It's no wonder she's an actress.

"I've been with you in this thing since the beginning. Since before the beginning, when it was all a stupid idea I tried to talk you out of." Jovie's hands fly through the air so quickly that I'm worried she will hit something. "I was there when you messaged Maddox back. I chaperoned your date so you didn't end up as pig food, and you can't even loop me in for the good stuff? That's betrayal, Brooke. *Betrayal*."

"Wow," I say, golf clapping. "That was Oscar-worthy."

"Thank you." She smiles smugly, but it fades in a moment. "Now, give me the goods."

"I don't ... what do you want to know?"

She lifts her hands again—because apparently, she can't talk without moving her hands today. I grab them and place them at her sides.

"I haven't found Honey a gift yet," I say. "Let's not get thrown out of here."

"Okay. Yes. Good point."

I snort, turning to a stack of beautiful hand-printed cards.

"So was he a good kisser?" She giggles. "I bet he was. No, *I know he was*."

"How do you know?"

“He has all of the attributes of a good kisser. There’s that smolder he gets when he looks at you.”

I suck my cheeks in so I can’t smile.

“And his lips are ...” She brings her fingertips to her mouth and kisses them. “And his confidence. That man walks into a restaurant, and every head in there turns—mine included.”

My head whips to hers.

She shrugs. “I can’t help it. He’s hot.”

“That he is,” I grumble, going back to the cards.

“So you’re kissing and family-ing it up. Does that mean—?”

“No.” I pull a card with yellow lettering on the front out of the stack. “Nothing means anything. The family thing ... I’ve already met them. It’s not a big deal. And the kiss was a practice kiss.”

When I say it out loud, it doesn’t sound as smart as it does in my head.

“That is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” she says. “And I’ve heard some dumb shit.”

Next to the cards is a stack of handmade pillows. The sign above them says they’re herb-infused and able to be heated or cooled.

Okay. Those are cute.

I sort through the different shapes and colors and ignore my friend.

“Let me ask you a question,” she says.

“Can we not do this?”

“That’s what the question is about.”

I look up to find her grinning.

“Have you considered what happens *if ...?*” Her voice trails off. I think it’s for effect.

I sigh. “*What if* I take one of these pillows and smack you in the face with it?”

“Violence is never the answer.”

“Says the girl who threw a glass of water on a guy’s lap because he told her that she had a nice ass.”

“That wasn’t violence. It was actually *non-violence*,” she says, lifting a brow. “Violence would’ve been if I punched him in the face—which is something that I considered since the look he gave me was as skeezy as they come. If you want to get particular, it was an act of self-control.”

I spot the perfect reddish-orange heart at the bottom of the pile. It takes a second to grab it, which I don’t mind. It gives me a reason to ignore Jovie,

and maybe if I ignore her for a minute, she'll move this conversation along.

"I'm being serious," she says, leaning against a table. "What if this thing between you and Moss turns into something else?"

"It's not going to."

"You don't know that. I want to make sure that you've thought this through because I've seen the two of you together, and I just—"

"I don't care what you think," I say, my defenses up. "I've tried to love people before. I tried to love Geoff. Michael before that. Hell, I've tried to love my mother, and it never works out for me. Do you really think I'm going to allow myself to love Moss Carmichael? The guy I work with? The guy who I'm really close friends with? Because I'm not. I'm not stupid, Jovie."

"But you are human."

I clutch the pillow a little tighter than necessary and remind myself that she's on my side. She's looking out for me. She's a good friend.

And I have a feeling that she knows that I'm reminding myself of this just as much as I'm telling her.

"What do you think I'm going to do?" I ask. "Fall in love with him and ruin everything I've worked for? Yes, he's amazing. I'm not ignorant. But I've worked with him for two and a half years and managed not to fall for him."

She wrinkles her brow.

"You want to know how I managed that?" I ask, my face getting heated. "Because I refuse to make myself emotionally available to anyone—least of all a man who has made it abundantly clear that he doesn't have a committed bone in his body. He said that. *Verbatim*. So for me to fall for him, I would have to absolutely disregard my own wishes and put myself out there in a way that I haven't since my divorce. *In a way I'm not ready to*. And I'd also have to convince myself that he changed his heart and decided that he was suddenly a monogamous, happily-ever-after type of guy. So again, I'm not stupid, Jovie."

I drag in a lungful of air.

She pretends to hand me something. "Here's your Oscar. I almost believed that."

I roll my eyes. *But I almost believed it too*.

I think I could fall for Moss much easier than I'm letting on. He's a damn fine man, extremely attractive, loyal, funny, stable—easy to be with. Basically, he's everything I'd want in a man should I wish to take that risk

again. *That could be a big problem.*

“And don’t think that I didn’t catch that you didn’t mention me in that string of names earlier,” she says.

“What string of names?”

“Of the people you love.”

“You know I love you,” I say. “That goes without saying.”

“Oh, I know. I just want to make sure *you* know. Gina’s just waiting on us to have a break.”

And, just like that, the tension is gone. *Gosh, I love her.*

“I’m going to go back and get that glass heart,” she says. “I like the vibe.”

I turn back to the pillows and exhale.

A lump settles in my throat once Jovie’s words have time to filter through my mind.

What if things with Moss turn down a path that we don’t expect them to? Need them to? *Want them to?*

I’ve already felt the ripple of different energy surge between us a couple of times—namely last night while I was sitting on the ottoman. We almost slipped into something else without even realizing it.

“Got it,” Jovie says, walking toward me. “Are you ready to go?”

I look down at the heart pillow. “Yup. I’m ready.”

My heart clenches in my chest, and I feel bad for being so defensive. I know she meant well.

I pluck the heart out of her hand.

“How about this,” I say, ignoring her silent protest. “I’m going to buy this for you as a congratulations present, and then we can go to Smokey’s and grab a margarita. Just a quick celebration before the big shindig next weekend.”

She grins. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

“Cool.”

We head to the cash register. As I look at my phone and see Moss’s name on the screen, I smile. But when my thoughts from a few minutes ago echo in my head—*but I almost believed it too*—I send him to voicemail.

EIGHTEEN

BROOKE

“I’m turning off the coffee maker,” Gina says. “Are you going to want any more?”

I look up to the doorway where Gina stands.

It’s been the Monday-ist Monday of all time. My phone started ringing before I even got to the office. Muggers was out of chai—it’s like they don’t even care about me—and the light fixtures that I ordered last week with a delivery date of today was changed to a delivery date ... in six weeks.

Which will absolutely not work.

I sigh.

“Um, no. I’m done. It’s ...” I glance at the clock on my computer and groan. “*Holy crap*. It’s four o’clock? Where did the day go?”

“Don’t second-guess it. I need every day this week to fly by because it’s a short week, baby.”

I laugh even though I’m groaning inside. “No short week for me.”

“Sucks to be you.” She laughs too. “I’m out of here at five on the dot Thursday for a long three-day break. What about you? Do you have any big plans for the weekend?”

The question feels like a lead ball being dropped into my stomach. *Plop!*

One minute, I’m excited to head to Honey’s on Saturday. The next minute, I dread it. Then I remember Moss is going with me, and it becomes this intense push and pull that makes me dizzy.

We texted off and on last night about nothing in particular. He sent me a picture of himself washing his truck. *Shirtless. Good lord*. I sent him back one of my feet sticking out of the bathtub.

It took him a while to respond to that message.

We chatted about work and what we were having for dinner. What's best—sunrise or sunset? It was the typical nonsensical topics that we usually banter back and forth about randomly throughout the day.

Only last night, it felt a smidge different.

I told myself it was just the glass of wine that I had. When that didn't ring true for very long, I justified it as nerves because we had to work today.

What would that be like? How would that go?

Turns out that it's fine. I haven't even seen him today.

I don't know how I feel about that.

"I'm actually going out of town," I say in response to Gina's question. "It's my grandma's birthday."

She sags against the doorframe. "I miss my grandma."

My heart tugs in my chest. "I don't even want to think about the day that Honey isn't here anymore."

"Enjoy her while you can." She frowns. "But, on a happier note, because I don't want to get all misty-eyed at work, we're going to Seachella this weekend. Have you ever gone?"

"No. I see it advertised every year, but I've never done it."

"*You have to.* It's the best festival around. I know everyone loves Tide Fest in these parts, but Seachella is where it's at."

"I'll try to make it next year."

"Why wait? Come this year after the party. You can crash with Bud and me for a night. He won't mind." She leans backward and surveys the area before stepping inside my office. "But only one night because *hotel sex.*"

My laughter comes quick and hard. It's just what I needed to lighten the mood.

"Oh, you're laughing now," she says, giggling too. "Just wait until you're with the same man for five years. You'll look forward to hotel sex too!"

"What are you talking about? I'd take some hot hotel sex right now."

She raises a brow. "Are you seeing somebody and I didn't know about it?"

I lean back in my chair and fight against the bubble of nerves in my stomach. *How do I answer this?*

The thing with Moss is only until after the Excellence banquet next week. *There's no sense in getting into it with anyone that won't know the difference.*

"No ... *not really,*" I say, dancing around the specifics. "Hence me taking action anywhere I can get it."

“Gotcha.”

The bells on the front door ring, and Gina looks over her shoulder.

“Okay. Break over. I’m dumping the coffee in five minutes. Get it if you want it,” she says.

“Thanks, Gina.”

She scurries to the front desk, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I turn back to the drawings Cala sent me this morning for the project she and Jess are working on. She’s right—the layout of the master bedroom is off. But with every click of my mouse or repositioning of my head, all I can think about is Moss.

Maybe I should just call him. Hear his voice. Scratch the itch.

I turn to pick up my phone when a knock sounds through my office. I look up to find Damaris standing at the door.

Her pretty smile greets me before her words ever do. “Hi, Brooke. I hope I’m not interrupting.”

“No. Not at all. Come on in,” I say.

She takes a seat across from me.

Her auburn hair is cut into a bob. The ends curl under, bringing attention to her face. She has high cheekbones like Moss and deep-set eyes like Maddox. A flurry of freckles across the bridge of her nose makes her look a lot younger than I’d guess her to actually be. It’s funny that I’d never noticed so much about her until I spent time with her yesterday.

“I was just at Parasol Place,” she says, smiling warmly at me. “I adore the fact that you’re keeping the sink.”

“*Ha*. I had to fight your son about that. I had to pull the ... what did he call it? The *mom nuke* on him and threaten to call you as the tiebreaker.” I wink. “He gave in shortly after.”

She chuckles. “This is why you’re in charge of the design, and he’s in charge of the build. The boy can build anything, but his taste in aesthetics is absolutely terrible.”

“Oh, I know. Trust me. It’s a process. But I do love that he gives his opinion. And I love even more that he defaults to me. Usually, anyway.”

“You two are quite the team.”

My cheeks heat.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist to get what she’s insinuating. “*You two are quite the team.*”

I see you, Damaris. I see you.

I sigh. “Let’s take the blanket off the baby.”

“Yes. Let’s.” She wiggles around in her seat as if she’s getting comfortable. “I want you to know before anything else that I will not interfere.”

“Damaris—”

“And I apologize for my ... hand in things, so to speak. Just in case Moss told you what happened. We didn’t have a chance to get into it yesterday and it’s bothered me all night.”

“It’s fine.”

She looks relieved.

“I’m happy to pass the blame onto my two youngest—mostly because that’s where it belongs. But also because I thought it was quite adorable that the two of you could ... work together in this new way.”

I raise a brow. “Your word selection is on point.”

“Isn’t it?” She laughs, throwing her head back. “I needed that laugh. It’s been *a day*.”

“What’s been going on with you?” I ask, happy to pivot this conversation toward the not-me ground. “Is everything okay?”

“Yes. Just first-world problems. I talked with Kix last night about the plan we came up with to knock out that wall between the living room and kitchen. He wasn’t against it like I thought he’d be. We are supposed to reconvene about that tonight.” She leans in. “I plan to use every tool in my toolbox to convince him if you know what I mean.”

All I can do is giggle.

“But the problem will be the couch of all things,” she says, rolling her eyes.

“The couch? Why?”

“I have no idea. I told him that I was coming by today to see if you had any couch suggestions, and he said if I Prime’d a piece of furniture to the house that he would divorce me. After all these years. Can you believe that?”

I hide my grin. “So what are you going to do?”

“Apparently, I’m going to be single soon. Know any cute guys?” She winks at me. “I’m just kidding. We can’t get divorced. We have too many kids, and I’m not splitting time with our grandchildren over a couch.”

“Seems like a good idea.”

“That’s what I keep telling myself.” She smacks her palms on her thighs. “Now, I know you’re an interior architect and not an interior decorator, but

your eye is impeccable. I'd love for you to help me decide what couch we're getting. *Because we are getting one.*" She leans forward conspiratorially. "Don't tell Kix about this, if you don't mind. I need to work my magic before I spring this on him."

"Gotcha."

She lifts a brow as she stands. "Send me a list of the time you spend on my house. We'll pay you separately."

"You already pay me, Damaris. Well, I might add. We went over this yesterday anyway."

"You're a talented young lady. Never forget your worth, then add a little tax." She grins. "Just for good measure."

"Thanks." I smile at her. "I'll email you some couch options."

"Sounds great." She heads for the door. "I need to see if Kix is still here. He sent an email about that house he looked at for your team, and we heard back."

"And?" I laugh. "I love that damn house. I want to know too!"

She winks. "It's good news. That's all I want to say so I don't get your hopes too high before it's a done deal."

"Yay! Have fun," I say.

"You too."

She closes my door behind her, leaving me scrambling in her wake.

"I thought it was quite adorable that the two of you could ... work together in this new way."

I grin, shaking my head.

Satisfied with the encounter and feeling more settled, I turn to Cala's drawings again. But before I can even get situated, someone knocks on my door again.

"Yeah?" I call out over my shoulder.

Gina swings the door open and bebops inside ... *carrying a vase full of fresh flowers.*

What the hell?

I'm frozen in my chair—heart racing, eyes bulging—with too many thoughts flying through my head to be able to grab any one of them.

"And you told me you didn't have a man," she says, setting them next to my phone. "I overshare with you. Why don't you overshare with me?"

"They're probably from my mom, Gina."

She scoffs. "Pink roses and ranunculus and dianthus. That screams *love*,

Mom.”

True. My mom’s display of affection would be removing one of the knives she shoved in my back.

Although, Mom wouldn’t know where to send flowers because she thinks all I do is hang curtains. “*Well, I hope for your sake that you stay so happy because no one is going to want a middle-aged divorcee that tells people what curtains to hang.*”

Why can I not let go of that nasty barb? It’s not as if she hasn’t said many other demeaning things since I moved here. My guess is because I’ve seen how Damaris treats her kids, it makes my mom’s jabs at me more painful.

“My mother is a unique individual,” I say, rolling my chair back.

She glances at me out of the corner of her eye. “When you’re ready to give me details, I’m ready to listen.”

“Gina, I swear I’m not hiding some secret lover from you.”

“Well, I did see your Social post.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I did and I thought it was brilliant. But I also want to be kept in the loop. If he’s sending you flowers already—he might be a keeper.”

She winks and swings the door shut behind her.

I stand, my heart pounding so hard that I can feel it in my neck. I lift the small white envelope from the mass of blooms in different shades of pink.

My fingers fumble with the paper. It makes removing the card ten times more difficult. Finally, I get it out and look at the inscription.

You said you liked
Flowers that are pink
Now try
Not to overthink.
It will be fine.
-The best fake boyfriend of all time

My laughter fills the room, mixing with the sweet scent of the flowers.
“Damn you, Moss.”

I press my nose into the arrangement and breathe in the deep, heavenly scent. It instantly raises my spirits and makes me happier.

And he remembered that I said pink. I’d almost forgotten that I said that.
I smile.

“This is one way to make sure I call you,” I say, grabbing my phone.

I press the picture of him posing for the camera on a half wall by the beach.

“Hey,” he says, his voice bright. “How’s your day? I was going to call you, but it’s been crazy out here.”

“It’s been nuts in here too.” I glance at the flowers. “So the wildest thing just happened.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Can you believe that someone just dropped off a massive and gorgeous bouquet? Pink ones, to be exact.”

I grin as his amusement fills the line. It’s in the way he breathes, the tone of his chuckle—the happiness in the vibrations.

“Why did you send me flowers?” I ask. “I love them. Don’t get me wrong. But what about not fake dating at work?”

“Um, I don’t think I ever said that.”

“I thought it was assumed.”

“Assumptions are the root of all evil.”

“I think that’s money.”

He laughs. “Fine. We’re not fake *dating* at work. We’re real co-workers at work. I ordered those during my lunch hour when I wasn’t on the clock. So the situation-ship part of it—*that’s what you called this in your ad, right?*—was done during non-work hours.”

“But delivered during work hours.”

“That’s a minor discrepancy. I think it can be overlooked.”

I walk around my desk and make sure my door is shut.

It feels like I’m walking on air. I can’t deny the spring in my step from the flowers and, quite frankly, the sweetness from Moss. But it’s also impossible to ignore the knot in my stomach.

“Moss, I love them. This was the nicest thing anyone has done for me in a long time, even if it was totally unnecessary.”

“I’ll be the one to decide what’s necessary, thank you very much.”

“Thank *you* very much.” I take in the arrangement again. The pinks that are pure pink. The ones that are almost lavender. The buds that lean into orange just enough to make them pop. “*I absolutely love them. You have no idea.*”

I know I’ve said that already, but I can’t help it.

“You’re welcome, doll.”

I laugh. “No *doll*.”

“Hey, I’m just trying all the cutesy names until we find the right one. We’ll get there.”

“Trust me, we’re not going to get there,” I say with a laugh.

He sighs through the line, and I know he’s smiling. *I wish I could see it.*

“The flowers surprised you, huh?” he asks.

“Yeah. They really did. It was a sweet surprise, though.”

“You gave me shit on Saturday about not bringing flowers, so I had to make up for it. I’m no chump. I promised to fake-date the hell out of you, and I’m gonna live up to my word.”

I can’t help but laugh even though it’ll only fuel him.

“Hey, while I have you here, can we talk about the flooring in the garage conversion?” he asks. “I think I foresee an issue, and I want to know what you want to do about it.”

“Sure. Go for it.”

I listen to him go into depth about the garage floor. The simple switch of topics—from flowers to floors, personal to work—relieves the knot in my gut. And the flowers? They fill my soul with a warmth that I’d forgotten was possible.

NINETEEN

MOSS

“Yes, I’m coming,” I say. “Give me a fucking minute.”

Banks breathes into the phone, expressing his displeasure. “We’ve been here for twenty minutes.”

“I can’t help you got there early. I told you that I’d be there at seven thirty. I’ll be there at seven thirty.”

The light turns to green, and I step on the accelerator. I only go a few feet before I cut it back left and hit the soft dirt of the alleyway.

“I’m almost there,” I say.

“Come in the side door. We left the front one locked.”

“See you in a minute.”

“Later.”

I press the button on my steering wheel to end the call just as I pull behind Maddox’s truck beside Harvey’s.

Harvey’s was a full-fledged gym years ago. For decades, wrestlers from the surrounding area would come here to practice their skills under the guidance of one of the best wrestlers to ever come out of Florida. But as time wore on and Harvey’s health wore out, he let the gym go. Now it’s open to a handful of his old students to use at our disposal.

I start to climb out of my truck but pause when a text chirps on my phone. My gaze snaps to the screen to see if it’s Brooke. It’s not. I don’t recognize the number.

Unknown: Penguins can swim at over ten miles per hour.

“What the fuck?” I say, confused and disappointed.

Me: Who is this?

I wait for a few minutes, but no response comes.

“Whatever,” I mutter as I climb out of the truck. I grab my bag from the back seat and head toward the side door.

I’m embarrassed that I’m stooping this low—willingly wrestling with Maddox and Banks—because I can’t stop thinking about Brooke. It’s like I’ve been poisoned, and I can’t bleed out enough to get well.

I haven’t seen her face-to-face since Saturday night. She wasn’t in the office by the time I had a second to swing by. She didn’t visit Parasol Place either. We chatted about the flowers and have exchanged texts—and that fucking bathtub picture. *Fuck my life*. But the fact that I haven’t actually seen her bothers me more than I care to admit.

I have to relieve some of this pent-up energy.

“Hopefully, these assholes will take my mind off it for a while.”

The door hinges squeak as I enter the room. The light is hazy, the smell a mix of mildew and years of sweat. I toss my bag on a chair and slip off my shoes.

“We thought you punked out,” Maddox says, his arm around Banks’s head.

I lift a brow. “*Right.*”

My wrestling shoes are tight. They’re the same pair I wore my senior year over a decade ago. The seams are busted where the cloth meets the rubber, but they hold too many memories to get rid of.

Banks yanks his head from Maddox’s grip and pants.

“Get warmed up so I can kick your ass,” Banks says, running the back of his hand over his sweaty brow.

“You better grow a few inches before you go talking like that.”

I move along the mats, getting my muscles ready to go. My brothers continue to fuck around in the middle of the mat—Maddox getting the best of him. Per usual. *Damn, Mad’s good.*

“Besides,” I say, loosening up my shoulders. “I still owe you for that car bullshit anyway.”

Banks makes a face. “You’re still pissed about that? I thought it was water under the bridge.”

“It will be after I beat the shit out of you tonight. I’ll feel completely

better about it.”

Maddox laughs. “*This is gonna be great.*”

“You,” I say, pointing at Maddox. “I owe you one too. Less than I owe him because at least your antics got me Brooke.”

The sound of her name threatens to grip my thoughts again. The fact that I like saying, or even implying, that she’s mine is irritating too.

Because she’s not mine. I don’t even want her to be, really. But being able to say that Brooke Bailey chose me makes me proud in a stupid, goofy way. Because she’s such an amazing woman.

I’m such an idiot.

“I still can’t believe that shit,” Banks says, shaking his head. “She chose you. *Over me.* What. The. Fuck?”

“It drives you nuts, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, it does. It’s like Mad and I handed her to you on a silver platter.”

I smirk. “I haven’t had her on a silver platter yet, but I might give that a try tonight.”

Don’t imagine that in detail! Not here. Not now.

Banks throws his hands up in the air. The satisfaction that I get from that is unparalleled.

“You know, that’s unnecessary,” Maddox says. “You don’t have to shove it in our faces.”

“I’m not shoving it in your faces.” I grin mischievously. “You better believe that I’m shoving it in mine, though.”

Stop! You can’t wrestle with a hard cock.

They both erupt in a show of irritation, making me laugh. It distracts me from envisioning Brooke naked.

“Okay. I came to fight. Who is up first?” I ask, rolling my neck around.

“Me. *Pick me!* I need to reclaim some of my manhood that you took when you stole my girl,” Banks says.

“And here I thought we were just wrestling,” I say, looking him in the eye. I know he’s kidding, mostly, but the fact remains the same—hearing him call Brooke *his girl* makes me actually want to fight him. “But if you keep talking like that, we’ll throw hands too.”

Banks looks surprised. But he’s not really. He’s putting it on for my benefit—to irritate me even more. “I didn’t realize things were so serious so soon. You work fast—”

“Okay. Okay,” Maddox says. “That’s enough. Banks, you’re red. Moss,

you're green. I have the stopwatch. Three two-minute rounds. Good?"

"Good," Banks says, walking to the other side of the circle.

"It won't take me that long."

Banks snorts. "To get pinned. You're an old man now. Wait until Brooke realizes she could have the young stud instead of the degenerate senior citizen."

"She's with me. Not Foxx."

Banks and Maddox both laugh.

"Also, good use of degenerate," I say, jumping up and down to loosen up a bit more. "I didn't know you knew big words."

"How about you fuck off?"

Maddox laughs again. "Both of you—shut up and line up."

Banks and I stand across from one another with our toes on our starting lines.

He grins at me. I wink at him.

"If it comes to punches, none to the face," Maddox says. "I'm not explaining this to Mom. *Again.*"

Banks and I chuckle, remembering the last time we fought, and things got out of control. I had a black eye for a week. Banks's lip was split. Mom was pissed.

Maddox puts his hand between us, letting it dangle in the air.

My heartbeat starts to quicken. Energy courses through my veins as I wait for the motion to begin. *Banks will attack first with his overconfidence. I need to be ready.*

"Ready ... wrestle!" Maddox's hand drops through the air.

Just as I expected, Banks tries a low outside single off the whistle. I meet him in the middle and grab an underhook on one side and an overhook on the other. Sensing his surprise, I step through with one leg and throw him over my hip.

His back smacks against the mat.

"Well, lookie there," I say, towering over him. "The *young stud* got tossed on his ass."

"You know that you got no points for that," Maddox says, laughing.

I back away. "I know. I want him to get up so I can do it again. That was cathartic."

Banks gets to his feet, keeping an eye on me. "You just fucked up."

"We'll see about that."

We line up with our toes on the line again. A bead of sweat drips from my forehead into my eyes. I wipe it off with my forearm.

I attack this time. His eyebrows shoot to the ceiling in surprise. I tie him up, change levels, and shoot my right hand behind Banks's right leg.

He goes sailing over my shoulder.

"Fuck!" Banks yells as he crashes against the mat.

He tries to roll to his stomach, but I pounce on him—this time, earning my points.

"Two points—takedown," Maddox says, watching Banks's shoulder blades to see if they're both touching the mat.

But they're not. Not because I don't want them to be, but because Banks is a squirrely shit.

"How the fuck did you get so strong?" Banks growls as he works not to get pinned.

"It's called a day's work," I mutter, trying to keep him from escaping. "You should try it."

"One ... two ... three ... four ... five," Maddox counts as he watches for a pin. "Three points—near fall."

Just as Maddox awards my points, Banks slides his arm between our chests and somehow fights his shoulder through. I'm too winded to keep him from rolling onto his stomach.

"Shit," I say, breathing heavier.

I realize that I'm up by five, and the round is about over anyway. I get to my feet and just let Banks up.

"One point—escape," Maddox says, his hands out to his sides and looking at me like I've lost my mind.

The stopwatch beeps.

"Here I come," Banks says, clapping his hands. "I let you wear yourself out. I'm coming for you now."

How the hell does he have so much energy?

"It's five to one," Maddox reminds us before flipping the coin in the air.

It lands on green. He looks at me.

"Your call. How are we starting?" Maddox asks.

There's no way I can outlast Banks on the ground. He does this with Mad all the time, but I only wrestle here and there these days, so my skills are a bit rustier than his. My best course of action is to stay on my feet as long as I can—especially since I'm up four points.

“Neutral,” I say.

Banks comes to the line. “You don’t wanna roll with someone better than you, huh?”

Nope. “I just like throwing you around.”

“If this was a game of shit-talk, you both would win,” Maddox says, sticking his arm between us. “Ready ... wrestle!”

I try to reach out and tie him up, hoping to kill some time with some hand fighting. Banks grabs my right hand before I know what’s happening. He pops his hips and pulls me by him.

“Ah, the sleazy slide by,” Maddox says, laughing.

“Shit,” I say through clenched teeth. I try to turn around, but Banks locks his hands around my waist. “Fuck!”

I know what’s coming a few seconds before it happens. Unfortunately for me, there’s not a damn thing I can do about it.

Banks lifts me just high enough to pull off his trick and slams me to the mat, covering me from behind.

“Two points—takedown,” Maddox says.

I don’t have time to process the way my back feels like it just broke in half. Instead, I work quickly to pop up on my hands and knees.

It would’ve been easier to sit at home and drive myself crazy over Brooke. How did I think physical punishment was going to be easier?

“Turns out,” Banks mutters as he tries to keep me from getting up, “that I like throwing you around too.”

“Oof,” I say as my body is shoved forward.

Somehow I manage to turn into him. He grasps wildly, trying to gain wrist control. I work just as hard but less efficiently to get to my feet.

In a frantic chain of events, I wind up standing. My lungs screaming for air, my muscles begging me to stop, I pivot toward Banks and shove him away.

“One point—escape,” Maddox calls out. “Thirty seconds left.”

Banks eyes me from the other side of the mat. I try not to let him see how tired I am.

“What’s the score?” Banks asks.

“Six to three. Moss is ahead,” Maddox tells him.

Sweat burns my eyes while I wait on my brother to make the next move. Defense is better than offense for me right now.

Sure enough, Banks reaches out with his left hand. I throw an underhook.

“You gave me that,” I say, laughing at him. “Are you getting lazy on me, Banksy?”

“It’s all a part of my plan.”

“Looks like it.”

He clamps his arm down on mine just before he takes a step on the inside of my left leg. *Shit.* Banks throws an underhook, sinking it deep. He falls to his back, arching all the way through.

“Dammit,” I shout, my voice echoing through the room.

My body flies over Banks’s in a lateral drop, and I land on my back with a thud. Banks covers me, getting his points.

“Two points—takedown,” Maddox says.

I try to move, but I’m so damn tired. My legs are dead. Sure, I haven’t wrestled in a while, but my job is physically demanding. I build muscle all day—sometimes for nine or ten hours at a time.

It’s like I’ve spent so much of my energy thinking about Brooke that I can’t even make it a full three rounds.

“One ... two ... three ... four ... five,” Maddox says. “Three points—near fall.”

“That’s six to eight, big guy,” Banks taunts me.

“Time!” Maddox says.

Thank God.

We stand back up. I wipe my face with the end of my shirt. *I think I’m getting my second wind.* Banks, however, looks beat.

“I want the top,” Banks says as we walk back to the circle. “That’s how your girl likes me. *On top.*”

“I’m gonna fucking kill you.”

“Banks, do you want to die?” Maddox asks. “Shut the hell up, my boy.”

Banks laughs as I drop to my hands and knees. Then he gets into position behind me.

I look up at Maddox. “I haven’t forgotten you. You’re next.”

“You aren’t going to be able to move after this.”

He’s probably right.

“Ready ... wrestle,” Maddox commands.

I groan as I fight to my feet. Banks hangs on me like a monkey, trying to keep me down.

“Is this about Brooke or about the car thing?” Banks asks, trying to distract me. “I’m not sure. I thought it was the car thing, but you’re being

awfully aggressive.”

“Maybe it’s both.”

I manage to get my left elbow between us. Bursting around, I get squared up with him again.

“One point—escape,” Maddox says. “It’s seven to eight. Banks leading.”

We hand fight, attempting to gain the better position. We’re both so tired that neither of us can do much.

“You have twenty seconds left,” Maddox says. “It’s now or never.”

I’m so drained. It takes me dipping into the bottom of my reserves—the thought of listening to Banks’s mouth if I lose—to beat him.

I make contact, and he ties me up. I snap his head down in a front headlock and shoot my arm across his body for a leg. I drive through Banks, catching him off guard, and take him down to his side.

I get on his back and don’t even work for more points. I take what I have—it’s enough to win.

“Two points—takedown,” Maddox says. “Nine to eight, Moss. You better work, Banks.”

“I’m trying,” he says, squirming beneath me.

“Lay down and relax,” I say, my voice way cooler than I feel. “Just take your whipping, little boy.”

“Three ... two ... one ... done!” Maddox says.

I roll off Banks. He flops over beside me. We lie on the floor, heaving for air. After a few minutes, we both start chuckling.

I needed this. I needed to work off some of this energy and give my head a moment to relax before I do something really fucking stupid.

“You wanna know something?” Banks asks, still catching his breath.

I manage to turn my head to face him. “What?”

“You’re my favorite person to fight.”

“Why is that?” I ask, licking my dry lips.

“Because if I can beat you, it’s a real victory. Maddox is too easy.”

Maddox sticks the toes of his shoe in Banks’s rib, making him yelp.

I chuckle, but the movement hurts. Wincing, I put my hands on my chest and close my eyes.

“You know what, Banks?” I ask him.

“What?”

My brain chooses this moment to think about Brooke, just like it has every time I didn’t intentionally think about something else over the past two

days. I remember what she said about her mother and how her aunt is dating her ex-husband—all the dysfunction that she has to deal with.

And even though my brothers are royal pains in the asses, I know they would have my back. No questions asked. I appreciate that.

But what I don't appreciate is how often I think about her. Imagining her in bed with me at night. Looking up every time someone comes to the jobsite, hoping it's her. I shouldn't be thinking about her this much.

We. Are. Not. Dating.

Because we don't date.

Friends, asshole.

That's all you are and all you need to be. Remember that.

She's not yours.

I clench my teeth, grinding them together to rid myself of the irritation that just sparked through my body.

"Never mind," I say, getting to my feet. "I was going to say something nice to you, but your ego doesn't need that."

Maddox laughs, giving Banks a hand and helping him up.

"Who's up next?" Maddox asks. "I'll take either one of you."

"I'm out," Banks says.

"Same," I say, heading toward my bag.

Maddox throws his hands up in protest. "You've got to be kidding me!"

"Want to go get a burger?" I ask Banks as he catches up with me.

"Sure."

"You two are serious?" Maddox asks. "Please tell me you're joking."

"If you stop complaining, we'll let you go with us," Banks teases him.

Maddox growls. "I hate you both."

They get into a debate about where to get a sandwich. I allow myself one moment to think of Brooke without lambasting myself about it later.

I feel better about the whole thing now that I've almost died. Wrestling is good for things like that. You can't think of anything else, or you'll get hurt.

Brooke Bailey, I don't know what you're doing to me, but you're gonna have to quit it.

I grin and strip out of my shirt and shoes. I put on the sneakers I wore earlier. "How about we order pizza at my house?"

"You paying?" Maddox asks.

"Yeah," I say as we head toward the door. "I'll pay. Just because I feel sorry for you guys."

“Whatever,” Banks says.
Maddox switches off the light as we walk out.

TWENTY

BROOKE

“Is this my sweet little Bee?” Honey’s words whisper through the phone as if I caught her asleep. “I was hoping you’d call.”

“Were you asleep? I hope I didn’t wake you.”

“Oh, no. But even if you did, I’d rather spend my time talking to you. I can sleep whenever. I’m old, you know. It’s nice to have someone, especially you, wanting to talk to me. No one has time for the old folks anymore.”

My heart cracks at her words.

“I hope you don’t really feel that way,” I say, sitting at the kitchen table.

The sky is dark. I can’t see beyond the back patio. The whole evening has felt heavy. Brooding. I thought talking to Honey would be a spirit lifter. Apparently, I was wrong.

“When you get to my age, you become a hassle. It takes me longer than I care to admit to get around these days,” she says. “But let’s not talk about all of that. Let’s talk about *you*. Are you okay? What’s happening over there?”

I pull my legs up, balancing my heels on the edge of the chair. “I can’t let that go without telling you that you aren’t a hassle to me.”

“Well, I am whether you want to say it or not. We can think about that later. I want to talk about you right now.”

Her concern, her genuine curiosity, and her care for me warm my heart. It amazes me sometimes that this woman birthed my own mother and Aunt Kim.

“I’m coming to see you this weekend,” I remind her. “I can’t wait to hug your little neck.”

She laughs. “I’ve been putting an x on my calendar by the coffee maker every morning. I have a countdown to seeing you.”

“I’ve been counting down the days too. But you should be counting down to your party. It’s going to be so much fun.”

Honey scoffs through the line. “Now, Bee—you know damn good and well that my daughters are putting that party on for them. Not me.”

“Honey ...”

“Well, they are,” she says, defiant. “I’m going along with it because I’ll take any excuse to get my friends—what’s left of them, may the others rest in peace—and my family to come to see me. But we all know what this really is. A way for my Catherine and Kimberly to strut around like little peacocks and pretend to be the best things since sliced bread.”

I can’t help it. I giggle. *She knows the real them.*

“Hell, it’ll be nice if they even remember I’m there,” she says, a laugh in her tone. “I’ll be the one in the corner with a little birthday headpiece on waving in the dark.”

I laugh. “You’ll do no such thing. I’ll get you by the hand and make you dance with me.”

“With these hips?”

“Then I’ll push you around in a wheelchair and force-feed you cake. This party is about you. I won’t let anyone there forget it.”

She sighs into the line. “You know, sometimes it’s hard to believe that you came from your mother. And I know that’s awful to say. Catherine is my child. But you truly got every shred of kindness and empathy that your mother didn’t.”

“What do you think happened to her?”

“I don’t know,” she says, resolved. “I love her. I’ll love her to the day I die, but she does a lot of things that just make me so mad I could spit.”

I feel that deep in my bones.

“Spitting isn’t very becoming of a lady,” I say, grinning.

“And that’s precisely why I won’t do it. I’m much more of a lady than that. Now, when I was younger and not as privy to the world, I preferred to spit, if you know what I mean.”

I snort, but it blends into a chuckle.

“Well, I wasn’t always eighty-five years old with a bladder control problem,” she says. “I used to be young and fun with that hourglass shape like you have.”

“I bet you turned all the heads.”

“You bet I did. But then I met your grandpa. It was him who turned the

heads then. We'd go to the beach or to a show somewhere, and men would turn and look at me. And your grandpa would give them a look, and they'd turn their heads right back around." She giggles. "It was the funniest thing. Oh, how I miss him."

"I wish I could've known him."

"I wish you could've too. He wasn't perfect. The man snored like a lion, and he had a penchant for spending money at the old Back Room Bar down in Sunnydale playing poker. But he was patient and kind. He made me laugh harder than anyone ever has. I just always felt so safe with him around. From the moment I laid eyes on him. There was a dance at the girls' school, and they let boys from the boys' school down the street come up for the occasion. He walked in with his hair all slicked back and a toothpick hanging out of the side of his mouth like he was hot stuff." She sighs. "He asked me to dance, and we did, and I felt it immediately."

My feet slip off the chair and hit the floor. "You felt what?"

"You'll know it when you feel it. I was sixteen years old when I met your grandpa, and I knew it. I looked into his eyes, and I knew right then and there that this man was it. He was smitten with me, I could tell. He was sturdy in his body, sure, but also in his character. He never forgot even the smallest things. Your grandpa took absolute pride in making sure that I was taken care of, that I had what I needed, and most everything that I ever wanted."

I stand and walk around the kitchen. My bare feet slap against the cool tile.

"You take your chai hot in the winter, iced in the summer. You like oat milk and a little cinnamon dolce syrup unless you're on one of your health kicks and then you leave the syrup out. That lasts two days—three tops, and then you can't live without the syrup and abandon your plans."

I toy with my bottom lip, mostly to keep from smiling.

"Your mother told me that you'll be bringing a boyfriend to my party," Honey says. "Now, I know better than to take what she says as the God's honest truth. She can twist a piece of steel into a candy cane if it suits her purpose."

I laugh. *That's the truth.*

"But she didn't have that twinkle in her eye," she says. "So I thought maybe she was right. I'd like her to be right."

My breath hitches in my throat.

Should I tell her the truth? Explain that it's a ruse to get the vultures off

my back?

I lean against the cabinet and cross one arm over my middle. “She is right. I *am* bringing a guy who I just recently started seeing.”

“*You are?*”

“Yeah. I mean, we’re not totally serious or anything, but I thought ...” I roll my eyes. *There’s no use in lying to her.* “Mom was all over my case per usual, and I mentioned that I had a boyfriend, which was stupid, and here we are.”

“Good. I’m glad. Even if you’re not totally serious about him, it’ll be enough to make Geoff look like a bloody fool.” She scoffs. “I just found out about him and Kimberly. Of course, they didn’t mention that to me because they knew what I’d say. *It’s outrageous.* That’s what it is.”

I shrug. “I can’t say I disagree.”

“That won’t end well, and we all know it. Sit back and watch the fireworks, Bee. It’ll be a show for the ages.”

“I don’t even care. I just want to forget Geoff exists.”

She taps her tongue on the roof of her mouth. “I was going to tell them that he better not come to my party, but I thought twice about it. I figured—let him come. If Kimberly is stupid enough to bring that rat and parade him around like he’s some kind of catch, let her get what she deserves. Because he is a rat if he’d do this to you. Nothing good will come out of him attending for anyone except for you. You’ll look like the genius that moved on to bigger and better things.”

“Yeah. Moss said the same thing. He said it’ll show them that my castoffs were a castoff for a reason. That I traded up.”

“I like him already.”

The smile that touches my lips feels nice. “It means a lot to me that you considered my feelings. I don’t think anyone else did.”

“Well, of course I thought about you. You’re my favorite. You know that. And I know I sound hateful and spiteful. But I’m at a point in my life when I just don’t care anymore. I’m too tired to pretend. If someone wants to act like a duck—let them quack. What do I care? You’re always going to have a duck that won’t stay in line. I’ve stopped trying to be the duck patrol.”

A soft laugh escapes my mouth while I think about that. *You’re always going to have a duck that won’t stay in line.*

What does that mean? Is she talking about her children? Or something else?

“So tell me about this boyfriend of yours,” she says. “Is he handsome? Polite? *Sexy*?”

I smile at her choice of adjectives, but my brain is hung up on the whole duck parade.

“Can we ... can I ask you something else first?” I ask.

“Sure.”

“What do you mean when you say that you’ll always have a duck out of line?”

She groans, her chair squeaking in the background. I imagine her in one of her floral gowns with lace on the collar, sitting in her chair by the door. It makes me smile.

“What I meant is that you have to work with what you’re given,” she says. “You’re never going to have all the cards. One or two will always be missing from the hand you were dealt. So you do the best you can with what you have. Stop trying to get all the ducks into a nice, neat line. Let the ones go that want to go. Enjoy the gap in the line. It’ll be fine.”

Huh.

Honey yawns. “Bee, I love you to the ends of the world, but it’s getting late for this old lady.”

“I know. I’m sorry for waiting so long to call.”

“You can call me anytime.” She laughs. “I might not be able to stay awake long if you call after seven, but I’ll answer and chat until my eyeballs close.”

I giggle. “Go to sleep. I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Sounds like the best news I’ve gotten in a while. I love you, sweet girl.”

“I love you, Honey.”

“Good night.”

“Night.”

I set my phone down on the counter and stare out the window.

My chest rises and falls smoothly. There’s a peace in my soul like there always is after I talk to my grandmother. But below the calm is a raw, rough-edged heaviness that I can’t get a handle on.

“You have to work with what you’re given.”

Her words roll around in my head over and over.

I know she didn’t mean it in any specific way; it was simply a piece of advice she uses when dealing with things. But there’s something wobbly about it, something hefty, that I can’t wrap my head around.

My shoulders slump as I lift away from the cabinet.

Suddenly, I feel alone.

I pick up my phone. I'm not sure if I should do this or not, but it feels like the right answer.

My fingers fly across the keyboard.

Me: Hi.

Moss's response comes right away.

Moss: Hey. What are you doing?

Me: Not much. You?

Moss: Trying to watch a movie with Banks and Mad, but they won't stop talking.

Me: *laughing emoji* Okay, I won't bother you then. Have fun.

Moss: YOU ARE NOT BOTHERING ME.

His shouty cap response makes me smile.

Me: I was just bored. Thought you might be bored too and we could go driving around to look at houses. But you're busy, so I'll talk to you tomorrow.

Moss: I'll be there in ten.

Me: No. Don't do that.

I wait for his response. I wait so long that my phone screen darkens. But his reply never comes.

Because he's on his way.

Whether that was the right or wrong answer for me, or for him, I don't know. We'll see.

TWENTY-ONE

BROOKE

“I think I pulled a muscle,” I groan, shutting the door behind me. “Getting in this thing is like climbing a mountain.”

Moss looks at me, brows tugged together, from the driver’s seat.

I buckle myself in. “What? It’s not like I’m going to sue you or something.”

His eyes are super clear, sparkling in the glow from the dash. There’s a curiosity there but also a lot of irritation.

“What are you pissy about?” I ask. “That I pulled a muscle or complained about your truck or made you come over here so late?”

“You didn’t *make me* do anything.”

Okay, then. I twist my lips, so I don’t smile.

“I’m not *pissy* about you pulling a muscle. I have compassion for that, actually, and am willing to massage it.”

I can’t stop the grin this time.

“What I am bothered about is how you ran your little ass out here without giving me time to park and walk around to open your door.”

“I’m capable of opening a door, Moss.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t.”

Instead of arguing that point, I redirect the conversation. “I was looking out the window and saw you coming up the street. What was I supposed to do? Make you walk all the way to the house, knock on the door, and act surprised? I called you to pick me up to look at houses.”

He drapes an arm over the steering wheel and tilts his head to the side. “We’ll get into that in a minute.”

“We’ll get into what?”

“The real reason you called me.”

He faces forward and puts the truck in drive. The diesel roars as we take off down the street.

Music plays softly from his speakers. It always cracks me up when I hear what he's listening to. It could be literally anything, but this time? Sheryl Crow.

He stops at the stop sign and then takes a right, pulling slowly out onto the road. His headlights sweep across the houses in my neighborhood. Most of them are dark.

“So ...” he says.

“So ...”

“Come on, Brookie. We both know that we're not going to look at houses.”

“Why not? That’s what you said you did when you got bored.”

“Yeah. When the sun is out.”

Oh. I didn't really think that through.

I fold my hands and put them in my lap, a tinged embarrassed that I called him with such a bullshit excuse.

“Truth?” I ask.

“Always.”

“I panic texted you.” I wrinkle my nose. “I feel really bad about it right now because you left your brothers for me, and I didn’t even have a good reason to call.”

He fires a look at me. “First, any reason you have is a good one to call me. Second, don’t feel bad.” He pulls his attention back to the road. “I’ve been with Mad and Banks all night. They were getting on my nerves. You are basically my hero.”

“I think I would be a heroine.”

He laughs. “I don’t know. You have a lot of big-dick energy.”

“You’re damn right I do.”

His fingertips tap against the steering wheel. “So talk to me. What made you panic text me?”

I shift in my seat, unsure what to say. I don’t really know the answer. The idea of being alone and ruminating about the things rolling around in my head didn’t seem like fun.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he says. “Your panic texts might be my favorite.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve never done this before.”

“Ha. What about the time you sent me a thousand messages in a row because you couldn’t remember if the paint you ordered was dove white or feather white or whatever it was?”

I point at him. “That was for work. That doesn’t count.”

“Then let’s talk about the time you texted me at one in the morning because you didn’t know if you could take Benadryl with wine?”

“In my defense, I had a lot of wine that night.” I shrug. “I must’ve if I thought you were the one to call in that kind of a situation.”

“I did worry about you a little bit after that.”

We laugh together as Sheryl’s voice comes to an end.

I slip off the flip-flops that I put on while waiting for him to arrive. Somehow I manage to curl my legs beneath me in spite of the seat belt. Moss just looks at me and shakes his head.

Once I’m comfortable, I give in.

“I called Honey tonight,” I say. “I wanted to check on her and say hello. I call her every week but missed last week because it was a shit show—*as you know.*”

He grins. “Keep going.”

“And we were talking, blah blah blah, and then she said something to me about ducks just before she hung up—”

“Ducks?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes. Patience. I’ll get there.”

He takes his hands off the wheel to briefly hold them up in defense.

“Anyway, I hung up, and my brain started working, overthinking stuff like it does. I knew if I sat home tonight that I would drive myself crazy. Jovie is at the theater or something, and I basically had no one else to text.”

“*Great.* I’m the last option.”

My shoulders slump. “Okay, that’s not true. I don’t know what Jovie’s doing. I texted you first.”

A rush of heat flows to my face, and I’m glad the truck is dark so he can’t see. He turns his head just enough for me to catch a glimpse of his lopsided smile.

“I’m as surprised by that as you are,” I say, trying to worm my way out of that a bit.

“I’m not.”

“You’re not?”

“We’re best friends. I should be your first call. Or text, as it was.”

My laugh is quick and loud. “Best friends? When did that happen?”

He drops his right hand from the steering wheel and looks over his shoulder. A sly smile touches his lips. “When you kissed me.”

Whether it’s from the reminder of our kiss or the way he’s looking at me that makes my stomach turn into a pool of lava, I’m not sure. All I know is that if I was standing, my knees would threaten to give out.

“Did I kiss you, though?” I ask, the flush on my cheeks even hotter. “Or did you kiss me?”

“Oh, you definitely kissed me. But I’m not saying that I wouldn’t have kissed you, though. It was a baller move. Take credit for that. I would.”

“I will. Thank you,” I say, lifting my chin in a show of pride.

It makes him laugh. “You’re great at distracting me, but we’re going to circle right back to that part about the ducks.”

Dammit.

I sigh, letting my head rest on the seat. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I’m sure you don’t. But you reached out to me, and I’m here to help. So let’s work this out together. Talk to me, baby.”

I stare at him.

“What?” he asks.

“I’m not sure if that baby thing was a term of endearment or a slang phrase.”

He smacks his lips together. “You can take that any way you want.”

The water is dark and choppy as we cross the Causeway. The engine’s steadiness and the truck tires’ rhythmic turns settle me. I lean back against the seat and relax.

“Honestly,” I say softly. “I’m not sure what she said that bothers me. Just that something isn’t sitting well in my stomach, and I didn’t want to sit with it all night.”

“What did she say? Let’s start there.”

I twist my head to the side and take him in.

Moss is a big flirt most of the time. He’s funny and engaging and light-hearted. Even a little goofy. But it’s times like these when I remember how much *more* he is.

And how much I rely on it.

“She said that you have to work with what you’re given,” I say.

It sounds so simple when I put it like that—like such a basic, classic line. But when I think about the context and all the other stuff said around it, I

know it wasn't so simple. There was more there. And I'm not sure if I'm ready to decipher that.

"And?" Moss prompts me to continue.

"And some stuff about ducks, but that was really the main point."

He's amused. "You know I really want to get into the whole duck thing because you've brought it up twice now."

"No. Forget the ducks," I say, running my hands through the air as if it will somehow wipe it out of his brain. "It's not about the ducks. It's really just ... she said you'll always have a duck out of line, and you have to enjoy the gap. What does that even mean? Is my grandma losing her mind? Is this one of those signs that I'll think back on later and wish I would've paid better attention?"

He pulls his bottom lip between his teeth and focuses on the road.

I turn away from him and huff. "I don't know why it's bothering me. I can't decide if I should take it at face value or start picking it apart for a life lesson. Maybe I'm reading too much into it." I sigh. "I do that sometimes, you know."

"You think?"

I smack his arm. "You're supposed to be helping me here. Not making me more self-conscious."

"Right. Sorry. Continue."

I roll my eyes again. "I guess ... I guess what's bothering me is that I've always felt like I could have all the ducks in a row. Especially lately, since my divorce. Is Honey saying that I can't have that? That my life is always going to be a mess so I better learn how to live with it? Is that what she was saying? I mean, if I should give up now, please—let me know."

My arms fall across my stomach. *Maybe they'll catch my spirits as they sink.*

"I didn't talk to her or anything," Moss says, rubbing his thumb back and forth on the top of the steering wheel. "But I don't think that's what she meant."

"Then help me here. Save me from myself."

He grins. "Before we get too deep, do you want anything to eat? Because we're passing all of these places, and I don't know where we're driving or how long we'll be out and about. I might not be able to feed you twenty-nine seconds from your stomach growling, and I don't want you turning into an animal in the middle of nowhere—"

“I’m not hungry,” I say, laughing.

“But are you not hungry tonight or not hungry for thirty minutes?”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Hey, just making sure.” He steps on the gas again. “So what I think she meant is that you have to define what *having it all* means to you.”

Huh? “I don’t understand.”

He takes a deep breath. “Okay. Think of it this way. All of the things we want, the things that matter—the things that are in our lives—they’re ducks. Right? And you try to collect them all and put them into neat little rows so you have them all right where you want them.”

“Yeah ...”

“Well, they’re ducks, Brooke. They do duck shit.”

I giggle.

“They’re going to waddle all over the place, and if you run after one, another will take off the other way. You’ll spend all of your time chasing ducks because how in the hell can you keep fifty ducks in a line? They’re fucking ducks.”

“*They’re fucking ducks.*”

We exchange a smile. Then he turns back to the road.

“I think you just have to figure out which ones are most important to you and focus on them. Keep them alive and healthy, so to speak. But the others ... Take your mom. She’s a duck.”

I burst out laughing. “That’s hilarious.”

“Well, she is. She’s a thing in your life. And maybe it’s important for you to keep trying to tap her back into place so she stays in your duck line. *Or* maybe you realize that she’s a duck asshole and she’s always going to cause problems. Maybe she’s a duck you let wander and only give attention when she’s staying in line. Maybe Mama Duck—only as an example—isn’t worth you taking attention away from the other ducks.”

“That’s a lot of ducking.”

He chuckles. “You know, it was worth picking you up just to hear you say that.”

“I need to find my duckies and name them. I might even put a collar on the ones I like.”

He makes a face of appreciation. “Okay. Kinky, but I can get down with that.”

“You are such an asshole,” I say, laughing.

“So what about you?” I ask, dropping my feet back to the floor. “Do you know all of your important ducks?”

He sighs, regripping the steering wheel. His shoulders grow rigid, and his jaw is taut.

I lean away from him, partly to get a better look and partly to give him space. I’m not sure what I said, but I clearly said something.

I’m fairly certain he’ll either ignore me or deflect the conversation. He surprises me when he does neither.

“I do know what’s important in my life,” he says, his voice rougher than before. “I also know that changes over time. What having it all means to me now is very different than what it used to mean.”

My mouth goes dry. “Like what?”

I’m pushing, treading into much deeper water. I know that. But Moss is talking, and despite the risk, I want to take the opportunity to get an insight into the man. Sure, I know him—I know him as the guy I see at work. The brilliant contractor by day who I collaborate with, and the goofball by night who texts me funny stories.

But what else is he? I want to know. I want to know *him*.

He runs a hand over his mouth and then over his chin. He never looks at me. It’s the longest stretch of time he’s gone without glancing at me since I got in the truck.

“I was in love once,” he says, his voice hollow. “We had plans. I was supposed to become a doctor. Can you believe that?”

My breath catches in my throat. A chill races down my spine despite the warmth of the truck, and I wait and pray he continues.

“All of that changed. *Having it all* now doesn’t mean what it meant to me then.” He pauses, his eyes narrowing. “Now it means enjoying my life because it’s too fucking short. And not exposing myself to things that will ultimately kill me.”

I have no idea what happened to him, but I do know he’s hurting. The corners of his mouth drop. His lips form a tight line. His eyes have a forlorn look about them that kills me.

Without thinking, I reach out and take the hand resting on his thigh. He shifts in his seat but doesn’t resist. He lets me lace our fingers together.

“She broke your heart, huh?” I ask.

“She didn’t,” he says, his voice gravelly. “But it broke nonetheless.”

I swallow. “And you’re never going to try to fix it? Just write off the

possibility of having that in your life ever again?”

He shrugs. “What about yours?”

“Mine wasn’t broken. Just disappointed.”

He turns on the signal to take a sharp left. We drive down a narrow street that I’ve never been on. To my right is a line of homes that look to be in the middle of a remodel. There are no lights, just a glow of a street lamp halfway down. To my left is a beach berm.

“Isn’t it funny?” I say, starting to slip my hand from his. He clamps down, squeezing it and not letting me go. “For all my talk of not wanting to be in a relationship, the only duck that I’ve ever really wanted was for someone to love me just as I am. And that’s the one I can’t find.”

He brushes a thumb over my palm. It sends a ripple of goose bumps over my skin.

“I just have *love potential*,” I say, trying to lighten the mood by taking the focus off him. “If I can morph into this other person or do x, y, z—I can get it. I can earn it. But maybe Honey is right, and that’s the gap I have to figure out. How to enjoy it—”

“No.” He slips his hand from mine. “That’s not what she meant.”

“Oh, okay, Mr. My Heart Will Never Be Fixed. Why don’t you take some of that optimism and apply it to yourself?”

He starts to smile but stops himself.

We arrive at the end of the street. Moss drives the truck over a hump and into an open field.

The headlights glide over the sand and then over the dark water of the ocean. Moss parks the truck and turns off the engine.

“Come on,” he says, climbing out of the truck.

Okay.

I’m caught off guard. *What are we doing? Is this even legal? And is he not going to open my door?*

It’s such an area of contention for him, but maybe he’s over it after I didn’t let him earlier tonight.

When he opens the back door, I go ahead and get out and walk to the back of the truck just as he’s nearing the tailgate.

Moss doesn’t look at me. Hell, he practically ignores me as he takes a blanket and spreads it out on the sand. His shoes come off before he steps onto the material.

My heart thumps in my chest as I follow suit.

We sit side by side in the middle of the blanket, our shoulders touching. The waves roar, crashing into the beach in front of us.

Moss doesn't speak, so I don't say anything either. Instead, I close my eyes and listen to the sound. My lungs fill with the cool night air while the salty breeze brushes across my face.

"I really hate that you think you're unlovable just the way you are," he says out of nowhere. His voice is so soft that if I wasn't sitting so close to him, I wouldn't have heard it.

"It's okay. I have a lot of other amazing qualities. I guess you can't have it all."

I bump his shoulder with mine to drive home the fact that I'm only kidding. Except he doesn't move. Doesn't reply. He doesn't even act like he heard me at all.

The wind picks up, whipping over the water and into us. I turn my head toward Moss and brace myself against the cold. He wraps an arm behind me, pulling me into his side.

His heartbeat beats against my cheek. His fingers dig into my side. I wonder if he can tell how quickly I'm breathing as I try to figure out what to say.

We stay like that for a long time—well after the wind diminishes. Finally, he clears his throat.

"I never said it'll never be fixed."

The sentence is out of nowhere. *What did he not say will be fixed?*

As it dawns on me what he's talking about—his broken heart—a sting rips through me.

I still.

What do I say to that?

His hand flexes against my side, almost as a prompt to talk. So I do.

"Well, that's good ..." I say.

He angles his body toward mine. The motion causes me to lift my head off him. He stares at me, shadows dancing across his handsome face, with a vulnerability I've never seen on him before.

I'm afraid to say anything else—afraid to ruin the moment. If I push him too hard, he'll retreat and we'll never get back here again.

He reaches out, brushing a strand of hair off my face. His finger drags across my cheek.

"I wrestled Banks tonight," he says. "I never willingly do that. But I had

to try to work out some stuff in my head.”

“Like what?”

He drops his hand. “It meant a lot that you called me tonight. Even though you lied about it at first.”

I grin.

“I want you to know that I’m there for you, Brooke. This idea of you not being worthy of someone’s affection is just ... it drives me crazy.”

It does?

“I think about you all the damn time,” he says. “I hit the mats with Mad and Banks just to try to take my mind off you for a minute. Because while you’re sitting around thinking that no one loves you for who you are, I’m sitting somewhere else thinking ...”

I force a swallow down my throat. The sound pelts my eardrums.

“Thinking what, Moss?”

“When I’m around you,” he says softly, his eyes never leaving mine, “I think maybe my heart can be fixed someday.”

Oh. My. Gosh.

I suck in a quick breath, the air wobbling around in my lungs. I can’t unlock my gaze from his.

I’m not sure I could even if I tried.

TWENTY-TWO

BROOKE

“You, Moss Carmichael, have rendered me speechless with that one.”

The intensity of the moment begins to fade from his face. The corners of his lips begin to curl toward the black sky, pulling mine up right along with them. But that doesn’t diminish the impact of his words on me and the shock they gave my heart.

What does that mean—when he’s around me, he thinks that his heart could heal?

Does that mean that I’m a good friend? That I give him hope? Or ...

I gulp.

“I will reciprocate your ... openness,” I say, shifting around until I’m sitting on my knees facing him. “Sometimes you make me feel like there’s hope for me too.”

He leans back, planting his hands on the blanket behind him. His long legs are stretched out, making him look bigger and leaner than usual.

“I only make you feel that way sometimes?” He lifts a brow. “*Huh.*”

“You make me feel lots of ways. One can’t dominate it.”

He licks his lips, letting his head fall to the side. “You make me feel lots of ways too.”

The breeze picks up again, but this time, instead of cooling me off, it seems to swirl the heat between us.

“Do I?” I ask.

There’s hesitation—a lot of it—embedded in my tone. I’m playing with fire. I’m definitely breaking the deal we made not to ask each other these types of questions. But *he* shifted this tide. Not me. I can only go with the flow, and right now, the flow is leading straight to him.

“We said we weren’t going to do this,” I say, studying him.

“I know.”

“But here we are.”

He grins. “But here we are *again*. We keep winding up here.”

My stomach clenches in an attempt to ease the ache deep inside my body. I know where this is going. I know all the reasons it shouldn’t. *So why am I not interested in hitting the brakes?*

We should stand, get in the truck, and go back to my place. He should drop me off and then go home so we can see each other tomorrow at work with no complications.

That’s what we should do.

That’s not what I want to do.

I hear the conversation that I had with Jovie and remember the list of reasons I said that Moss and I would never evolve into anything more.

Neither of us wants a relationship. We’re friends. We work together.

But as I look into those amazing eyes of his, I don’t see a man who’s unavailable. A platonic pal. A guy who I have to work with and hate most days of the week like most co-workers do.

I see a man who has never been anything but good to me, a man who’s been there every time I needed him—in the office or out. A man who I trust. That I know, without a doubt, would rather walk away from a situation if it got messy rather than lose what we have altogether.

A burst of adrenaline shoots through my veins, and I rock back and forth to ease the rush of energy.

“We have two options,” I say, my words picked up by the breeze.

“Okay. Give them to me.”

“One—we get up and leave. Right now. Put our shoes on, climb into that monster of a truck, and you can take me home.”

He lifts a brow.

“That’s the simple answer,” I say. “We get up in the morning and go to work, and everything is the same as it was today.”

“Give me option two.”

I heave a breath, and my insides come to a complete standstill. “Two—we accept that we’re adults, that we know what we’re doing ... and *that we don’t know what we’re doing.*”

“Yeah. I feel like option two isn’t very clear.”

“You’re an asshole,” I say, laughing.

He smirks. “You and I have always been on the same page. Right?”

This is true. “Right.”

“So I’ll put it to you like this. I know what I want, but I’m not going to do a damn thing until I know that’s what *you* want,” he says. “The ball is in your court.”

“Not yet, it’s not.”

He laughs, shaking his head.

A confidence that I didn’t know I had sparks through me. I drag in a shaky lungful of air and sit tall on my knees. My eyes meet his with a steadiness indicative of the assuredness I have over my decision.

“Okay,” I say, my mind made up. *It was made up long before now, even if I didn’t realize it.* “I want you to fuck me.”

His eyes go wide—wider than I’ve ever seen them.

“Is that clear enough for you?” I ask. “Or would you like me to draw you a picture in the sand?”

Slowly, a smile touches his lips. “Hearing those words out of your mouth —”

“What?”

I scoot beside him and then straddle his lap. He grips my ass, palming my cheeks in his strong hands. I’m caged in by his arms on either side of me. His turtle tattoo on his bicep brushes against my shoulder.

So many things are happening that I’m almost dizzy.

Thoughts. Surprise. Disbelief.

The absolute ache in my core.

How hard he is through his jeans.

That we’re really doing this.

I grind my hips down on him. “I want you to fuck me. Just in case you didn’t hear that the first time.”

He chuckles, bringing his mouth to mine as he jerks me closer to him. My gasp is captured by his kiss.

My hands go to the back of his head—to those silky strands that I’ve thought about touching a million times. I wind one hand through his hair and run the other over his shoulder and back up the side of his neck.

My God.

“You,” he says, as I continue to kiss him, “are a giant pain in my ass.”

I giggle against his mouth.

He nips my bottom lip with his teeth, sending a wave of heat through my

body.

His hands dig into my ass, holding me in place like there's a chance in hell I'm going to get up. His lips slide away from my mouth, across my jawline, and down the side of my neck.

I tilt my head, giving him all the access he wants. *Right now, I'll give him everything.*

I moan into the air as he presses kisses across my collarbone. My eyes flutter closed, my hands gripping the tops of his muscled shoulders. Each new contact sends a bolt of desire right to the apex of my thighs.

How I've made it this long without getting to this point with Moss is beyond me. *Someone should give me a medal for self-restraint.*

He drags his tongue up the front of my neck. I shiver wildly as the breeze whips over the wetness he leaves behind. After a sweet kiss is left against my lips, he pulls away.

"I don't know what to do," he says, his eyes twinkling.

"Okay. You want me to believe that you're a virgin?"

He laughs. "No. I think we both know that's not true."

I play with the back of his hair, relaxing my back against his arm.

"I want to rip your clothes off and bury myself in you," he says.

"Sounds like a solid plan."

He laughs again. "But I also want to take my time and savor this."

"I'm not a piece of cake."

"Stop it," he says, smiling wide. "You know what I mean."

I shift on his lap, making him groan. The fact that he's as turned on as I am—that he wants me as much as I want him—makes me giddy.

"Question," I say, biting my bottom lip. "Is this a one and done?"

He brings his hands up to my waist, locking them behind me.

"What do you mean a *one and done*?" he asks.

"Like, are we just doing this once? Because, if we are, that might change what I want from you. But, if we're doing this again, then ..."

I tug on his hair hard enough for his chin to tilt backward. It gives me a clear view of his face. I just want to see the look in his eyes when he answers me; I want to know what he's really thinking.

He forces a swallow down his throat. "How about this?"

I hum.

"Let's enjoy this next week," he says. "We're going to be together anyway. So let's go all in. Have fun. No worries. And after the Excellence

Awards ...”

“We can talk again.”

“Yup.”

I grin. “So what you’re *really* saying is that this isn’t a one and done and —*ah!*”

My squeal breaks through the air as he moves one arm around my back and rolls me onto my back in one swift movement. A clap of thunder booms overhead as Moss’s mouth crashes on mine.

A dam has broken, releasing the urgency we were both holding back.

He rips my shirt over my head. I shove his sweatpants over his hips.

I shrug the fabric off to the side, and he kicks his pants somewhere in the darkness.

We breathe heavy and fast, our fingers working too fast to really be efficient.

“Of all the fucking days for you to wear jeans,” he grumbles, fiddling with the button.

“I’m sorry,” I say, batting his hands away and doing it myself. “I didn’t expect to get naked on a beach tonight.”

I kick my legs until they’re free, vaguely worrying about getting sand in my pants for the ride home.

Moss knees beside me, ridding himself of his shirt.

Even in the moonlight that’s dimmed by the dark clouds rolling in, he’s still a sight to behold.

Tanned skin. Rounded muscles. Lines cut deep into his side and across his stomach.

Fucking hell.

He looks down at me, lying in my bra and panties and waiting for him to cover me with his body. But instead of doing that, he shakes his head.

“What now?” I groan.

He laughs angrily. “I don’t have a condom.”

“You have to be kidding me.”

“I wish.”

The air washes over my skin that’s not typically exposed like this. It’s freeing in a weird way.

I close my eyes and do some quick math and an internal evaluation. Then I look at him again.

“Statistically speaking,” I say, “I have a very low chance of getting

pregnant right now. *And* I'm on the pill. I also have no diseases to speak of. So as long as you're clean ..."

"Of course, I am."

I narrow my eyes, even though I know he's telling me the truth. "You realize everyone says that, right?"

"Like I'd ever put you in a bad situation. I mean, *fuck*—I've waited this long. What would be twenty minutes for me to find a store?"

"I think I would die in those twenty minutes." I grin. "Now, let's go."

He laughs. "I do like your enthusiasm."

"I'm always enthusiastic."

He makes a face as he sits down.

I raise my arm and point at myself. "Excuse me?"

"*Come here.*"

I sigh so he hears my displeasure. Then I get to my feet and stand in front of him.

He looks up at me with a reverence that I wasn't expecting. It makes me feel beautiful. *Treasured.*

Without his eyes ever leaving mine, Moss hooks his fingers through the sides of my panties and slides them down my legs. *His hands feel so good on my skin.*

I hitch a breath as I discard the garment and then again when he grips the backs of my thighs. He caresses the skin just beneath my ass, guiding me toward his lap.

My legs wrap around him as I get seated, and I nearly moan when the head of his cock teases my opening. The inside of my thighs is wet and sticky, and I know he can feel it against his skin. *Does he like that? How ready I am for him?*

I shift my hips forward just enough to brush my clit with the head of his cock. A soft gasp escapes my lips as his mouth touches mine. His tongue sweeps through my mouth, taking possession of it before he sucks my bottom lip and pulls away.

My chest heaves. Every cell in my body is on fire. I rock against him once again, needing relief.

He smiles—almost shyly. "Hold on."

"For what?"

Oh, that.

Moss twists around, holding me tight to him until he's lying on his back. I

straddle him again but this time, there's nothing between us.

Seeing him at this angle—under me, waiting for me—is more than I can take.

“You have to be on top so we don't get sand anywhere it shouldn't be,” he says, clenching my thighs. “Okay?”

My heart squeezes at his thoughtfulness, even at this moment. “Okay.”

I palm his cock. It's thick and heavy in my hand. I line it up with my opening.

He grips my waist as I sink down, filling myself with him. He hisses as he parts me. His hands grab me so hard that it burns.

“*Fucking hell, Brooke,*” he says through gritted teeth.

My eyes close as I release a breath, pausing to adjust to his size.

He lifts his hips and dips into me even farther.

“Moss,” I groan, fighting for a breath. *This feels so good. He feels so good.*

“Move, baby.”

I open my eyes and do as he asked—I move.

It doesn't take long to find a rhythm that suits us both. He runs his palms up my sides to the cups of my bra. Another long, hard clap of thunder echoes across the beach as he frees my breasts.

“If you touch my nipples, I'll—fuck!”

He rolls them between his thumb and forefingers, delivering a sensation that is my weakness. I stick my chest out, needing more, as I ride his cock.

Moss meets me with every stroke, pumping himself as deeply as he can inside my body. The first licks of an orgasm begin to tease me.

My pussy is lit up, *on fire*—coming alive with every thrust. I tilt my head back and greet the cold rain that assaults us from the sky.

“Ah!” I shriek, laughing as we become drenched.

Moss grins and uses the water to glide his hands over my skin. “You can't get any wetter, pretty girl.”

I swivel my hips in the way I've discovered makes him crazy. He lifts his shoulders off the blanket, clenching his teeth.

“You're so fucking gorgeous,” he yells over the sound of the thunder.

I blush despite the rain. “You feel *so good.*”

“*You* have no idea.” He growls into the air. “I'm having a hard time not coming.”

I plant my palms on his chest and take him inside me at a different angle.

This way, his cock slides against my clit.

And it's game on.

My hands ball, my nails scraping against his skin. He lifts his hips, meeting me pound for pound.

"Moss," I say, my teeth chattering against the wave of my climax coming toward me. "I can't ... I'm coming."

He squeezes my hips, keeping me from stalling as I'm overcome with my orgasm.

I scream.

My chin to the sky, my breasts bouncing—I absorb the sensation of being torn into a thousand glorious, amazing pieces.

It's too much.

The rain soaking us from above.

My tight, beaded nipples.

My swollen clit.

His Adam's apple bobbing as he finds his release, and the pulsing of his come inside me.

Why is that so hot?

"*Fuck it,*" he groans, physically shaking as we soak up the last vibrations of our high.

I collapse against his chest. We lie quietly, fighting to breathe. I start to sit up, but he wraps his arms around my slippery back and holds me to him.

He presses a kiss on my forehead.

"Thank you," he whispers into my ear.

"For what?"

"For sharing you with me."

I tuck my chin to my chest and smile. "It was truly my pleasure."

His chest moves as he chuckles. "Why don't we get you dressed and cleaned up a little bit? And then get you home."

I climb off him and then we get to our feet. I'm both reluctant to leave this moment but I'm also starting to feel chilled. *Strange since my insides are more heated than they have been for a very long time.*

We search in the darkness for our clothes and get the soaked items back on as well as we can. I forgo my underthings. There's no point.

He picks up the blanket and then we make a mad dash to the truck. He tosses the blanket in the bed as I climb into the passenger seat.

He's in the driver's seat in an instant and turns the truck on to help us get

warm. I look at him—all wet and rosy with a glob of sand stuck to his face and smile.

“Ready to go, lover girl?” he asks, smiling cheekily at me.

“No.” I shake my head. “No lover girl. What even is that?”

He laughs as he puts the truck into gear and pulls away from the beach.

TWENTY-THREE

MOSS

“Why are you parking on the road?” Brooke looks confused. “You aren’t coming in?”

I pop the transmission in reverse and hammer the gas. She laughs as she’s thrown forward, caught by her seat belt. Just as quickly, I throw it into drive, tossing her against the seat, and park in the driveway.

“I didn’t want to be presumptuous,” I say, turning the truck off. “It’s also really late. I wasn’t sure what you wanted me to do.”

“I mean, if you want to go home, be my guest.”

“Shut up.”

She giggles. The sound is like music to my ears.

Despite her matted hair and the black streaks running down her face, she’s the prettiest I’ve ever seen her. It could be that I’m on a postcoital high, or it could be the bright smile that touches her eyes.

It could also be the absence of the hole that I always have in the pit of my stomach. *Not sure what that’s all about.*

“Let’s make a run for it,” I say. “You ready?”

“Ready.” Her eyes flicker with amusement. “One. Two. Three—*go!*”

We jump out of the truck and slam the doors behind us. Our steps splash the puddles of water on the sidewalk. Brooke screeches as she runs through a downpour flowing from a clogged gutter.

“That’s so cold!” she shrieks, laughing.

“Then open the door. Hustle, woman.”

She shoves the key in the lock and turns it. A blast of even colder air pummels us as we step inside her house.

“*Fuck,*” I say, shivering. “What do you keep the thermostat set on?”

She whines. “It does feel rather chilly right now, huh?”

“You think?”

We kick off our shoes and face each other, water dripping onto the floor. The mirror behind Brooke gives me a glimpse of my own situation. It’s not good.

“This is a look,” I say, laughing.

“I think there’s sand ... everywhere.”

I can’t help it. I laugh harder at the pout on her lips.

“Was it worth it, though?” I ask, brushing a strand of hair off her face.

“Yeah. It was.”

We exchange a grin, one that’s quickly becoming my favorite thing in the world. It’s like the two of us have a secret—a small piece of the universe that’s just hers and mine. Nothing else matters. Not the past. Not the future. *Only right now.*

“Want to warm up?” she asks, her voice soft.

“What do you have in mind?”

Her coy smile tells me that she’s up to something—something probably no good. *Something I’m probably going to love.*

She takes my hand and pulls me through the house. Water trails behind us. We round the corner into the living room, and then through the doorway she disappeared into the day we went to Mom’s for lunch.

The light comes on with a flip of a switch. I realize I’m in the Brooke-iest bedroom ever.

“Could you have made this more girlie?” I ask, taking it all in.

There’s a fluffy white rug at the foot of her bed. The bed itself is covered in white—white blankets, white pillows, and a white headboard. There might be touches of gold in the pillowcases, but I can’t be sure.

There’s a lamp with a pale pink shade on a bedside table. Books are stacked in a neat pile, and I can’t tell if she’s actually reading them or if it’s for the aesthetic. She does that in the houses we stage to sell sometimes.

“I mean, I could’ve added some more sparkle,” she says. “But I didn’t want to overdo it.”

“You really showed some restraint.”

She elbows me in the side. I catch her arm before she pulls it away and guide her to me instead.

Her arms wrap around my middle instantly as if they’ve done it a million times before. She rests her head against my wet shirt.

“Did we cross a line tonight?” she asks.

My insides tighten. “Do you feel like we did?”

I thought we talked about it. I thought I held myself back until I was certain this was what she wanted. If she’s regretting it now, I don’t know what to do.

She lifts her chin, her eyes finding mine.

“No,” she says. “I thought I might feel that way, but I don’t. Do you?”

I kiss her forehead, letting my lips linger there. My eyes close.

It doesn’t feel that way. Not even a little.

All of this feels like it just happened in the most natural way. There’s a surprising peace inside my soul. It’s as if we *did* finally cross a line—like we got where we were meant to be.

I’m not shocked that I feel this way. I’ve always known this is exactly what would happen if Brooke and I chose to entangle ourselves. She’s too ... *everything*—too smart, beautiful, funny, *sexy*. There would be no way for me not to fall for her.

Which is why I haven’t done it.

Until now. Maybe.

It’s a lot to sort through while I’m standing in Brooke’s house and holding her in my arms. There are a lot of things to compartmentalize and rationalize.

Could I take the next step with her once this fake shit is over? Could I really do that?

If I could do it with anyone, it would be Brooke. I’ve always known that. It’s been clear by how easily we’ve clicked as friends. It’s so ... easy with her. Effortless, actually. We don’t even have to try. Now that the time might be here to try something real, presumably, do I have it in me to do all of that again?

Even when I said I wouldn’t.

Even when I promised her that I would never love anyone else again?

Tears dripped down my cheeks, blinding me in the one moment that I couldn’t afford not to see. I needed to see her. Needed to see her face. Needed to remember her cute button nose and the mole on her right earlobe. The stupidly long lashes that she constantly complained about falling into her eyes. The sharp widow’s peak that we performed Mendel’s pea plant experiment about to see if our offspring would inherit it.

“I will never love anyone else. You have my heart, and you always will.

Do you understand? Do you hear me? Don't leave me, Allie. Please."

I squeeze Brooke harder, resting my chin on top of her head. She nestles against me again.

I'd forgotten this feeling. That it was even possible. Sure, I've had other women's arms around me since Allie—I didn't take a vow of celibacy. But not one of them has remotely made me consider the things that keep creeping into my mind now. I've never once contemplated risking it all to love again. The benefits have never come close to the potential consequences.

Tonight, I'm not thinking about whether I can let her go after the Excellence Awards. I'm wondering if I can survive and be happy if I do.

Fuck.

"No," I say, kissing her forehead again as I pull back. "I don't feel like we crossed a line either."

"It feels like things between us are exactly the same but completely different at the same time." She swallows. "At least to me."

"Yeah. To me too."

She presses a kiss to my sternum before turning away. I don't want to let her go, but we need to get these wet clothes off.

I follow her into the bathroom. It's a small room with an arched doorway that's open to the bedroom. There are two sinks and a mirror covering the wall behind them. To the left is a closet that, at first glance, is packed with clothes. An oversized walk-in shower and a small door that I bet is for the toilet are to the right.

"I'll put your clothes in the dryer if you want me to," she says, slipping off her clothes.

"Yeah," I say, getting undressed. "I just realized that I have nothing to put on."

She smirks. "Oh, darn. What will we ever do?"

"You," I say, pointing at her and laughing, "are much dirtier than I ever would've guessed."

She rolls her eyes, picking up my discarded garments off the floor.

My cock gets hard at the sight of her bent over in front of me. The peach shape, the touch of cellulite on the backs of her thighs. The way her ass jiggles as she stands back up.

Fuck me.

She spins around and catches me with my dick in my hand. Her brows lift.

“Don’t blame me,” I say. “You bent over.”

She winks. “I’ll save that bit of information for a time when it’ll benefit me.”

I grab the end of her hair and tug her head back. A flash of excitement shoots across her face. Hovering my mouth over hers, I smile.

“It’s gonna benefit you in just a minute.” I let go and smack her backside. “Get those in the dryer and get back here.”

Brooke laughs, racing out of the room. I hear her footsteps on the tile and then the sound of a door closing. The distinct rumble of a dryer gets to me seconds before she arrives.

“Shower,” I say, taking a step away from her.

She pouts. “You said—”

“I know what I said. But I want to clean you up first and get you warm. I can’t go anywhere until my clothes dry anyway, so I don’t know what you’re worried about.”

“And I think I accidentally put it on the longest setting. *Darn.*”

She takes my hand and pulls me toward the shower. She turns on the water, and we wait for it to heat before stepping inside.

Brooke rests her head on my shoulder, yawning as the room fills with steam. “Sorry.”

“For what?”

“For yawning,” she says as she does it again.

I shove my hand under the water. It’s warm. “In you go.”

She moves slowly beneath the water, shivering as the warmth descends on her head. Her eyes close.

Despite how badly I wanted to fuck her again, I can’t possibly instigate it with her so tired. *Sweet, sleepy girl.*

I grab a bottle of shampoo off the bench and squirt some of it into my hands. When I look back up at her, her eyes are still closed.

“Turn around,” I say.

She looks at me. “What? Why?”

“Your hair. It’s a mess.”

She makes a face. “I’ll just rinse it tonight.”

“Will you just cooperate before you fall asleep in here? Please?” I ask, chuckling.

“Dammit,” she says, yawning again. “I don’t want to be tired now.”

I turn her around so her back is to me. She surprisingly doesn’t fight me.

I massage the product into her hair, using my fingernails to lift bits of sand stuck to her scalp. She leans her head back, moaning softly, letting me rinse the strands clean.

“That feels really good,” she says, her voice soft.

“I’m glad.” I spot a bottle of conditioner behind us. “Do you use conditioner?”

She nods with her eyes closed. “You can use it too, if that’s what you’re asking.”

I try not to let her hear me laugh. “Thanks.”

I make quick work of coating her locks with the conditioner and then rinsing it out. *Do you leave this shit in?* I have no idea. But she’s not leaving it in tonight.

Unfortunately, I won’t be either if she doesn’t wake up.

The body wash smells like cherry blossoms, whatever those are. It’s not my favorite thing, but it’s also my only choice. So I plop some of that in my hands and rub it across her back, around to her front and over her breasts, and down her stomach.

The slipperiness of the gel against her skin—the way my hands slide over her body—gets me so hard that I wince. I run my soapy hands down her legs. She widens her stance so I can get to the tops of her thighs. My wrist hits her pussy, and I feel the contact in my core.

“That feels good,” she says, her voice low.

“I’m glad, baby.”

When she doesn’t come back at me for the *baby*, I know she’s exhausted. I get washed and rinsed and then turn off the water.

“Where are the towels?” I ask her.

“In the cabinet. There are a bunch of them. I love towels.”

I laugh. “Good to know.”

She gets wrapped up in an oversized orange one, and I dry myself off quickly with a gray one. Then I pick her up and carry her to her bed.

“I like this service,” she says, smiling at me.

“I’d service you in another way if you weren’t so tired.”

She yawns a third time. “I am so tired. But I’ll stay awake for you.”

“Okay,” I say, even though I know she’ll be asleep as soon as her head hits the pillow.

I get her covered up and then race back to the cabinet to get an extra towel. When I’m back in the bedroom, I lay it under her head. *All that wet*

hair on a pillow can't be comfortable.

She gives me the sweetest grin. I bend down and kiss her softly.

What the hell am I doing?

I go back to the bathroom to finish drying myself off. Then I hang the towel on a hook behind the door. When I get back to the bed, she's out cold.

She's so peaceful, so perfect asleep. And quiet. She's never quiet.

I stand at the side of her bed and stare at her like a lunatic. There are a ton of reasons I should find my clothes and go home. *So many reasons.*

But the pull to climb into bed beside her and drag her up against me outweighs logic. Besides, the thought of leaving her when I just got her—at least for now—is unfathomable.

I flip the bathroom light off and climb into her bed. The sheets smell like her—fresh and clean.

Brooke curls up beside me and throws her arm over my chest. Her leg crosses over mine. I tuck my arm under her neck and hold her tight.

What am I doing?

I stare at the ceiling and listen to her breathe. Each inhale of air is smooth and steady. If it's to be believed, then she's happy right now. *With me.*

And maybe, just maybe, I'm happy with her.

It's a terrifying proposition. I'm standing on the edge of the one thing that nearly killed me before—that left so much damage in its wake. Yet I'm considering falling.

Maybe I'm not considering it. I'm not sure I have a choice.

TWENTY-FOUR

BROOKE

Fucking alarm.

I open one eye part way and stick my arm out to swipe for my phone. Instead of hitting the bedside table, it smacks against something else.

It's warm to the touch. Just as hard as the table. And moves beneath my palm.

He's still here?

I lift my head off the pillow and find Moss lying beside me. His hair is tousled, his eyes bright, and his smile sweet.

Dear Lord.

"Morning, sunshine," he says, handing me my phone.

Fumbling with the screen, I finally get the alarm to stop blaring.

I drop my head to the pillow and roll my face into the fabric. I blow a lungful of air out of my mouth and then sniff. *I don't think my breath stinks.*

Please don't let my breath stink.

"So we're going with sunshine?" he asks.

I lift my head but lean away from him just in case. "It's too early for this."

"Well, that sucks. If it's too early for conversation, you'll definitely think it's too early for what I had in mind."

My stomach clenches at the look in his eye. Suddenly, I'm aware of the ache between my legs.

Memories fill my mind of last night. How his head pressed against the blanket as he moaned when he came. The way his cock swelled just before he released himself deep inside my body and how he gripped my hips so hard that I might have bruises today.

“I thought you didn’t like to be presumptuous,” I say, laying my cheek against the pillow again.

He chuckles.

The blanket is bunched at his waist, revealing a set of abs that must have been carved by God himself. His shoulders slope up to his thick neck. And his face is as handsome fresh from a night’s sleep as it is midmorning.

It’s even hotter since he’s in my bed.

I grin shyly.

“Don’t be bashful now,” he teases me. “It’s a little late for that.”

“I have this feeling that I’m going to have to reacclimate to you every day.”

He sets his phone down on the bed beside him. “Why is that?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I say, realizing that I’m naked. *What the fuck?* I tug the blankets around me, much to his amusement. “I’m not used to waking up with ... you in my bed.”

He lifts a brow, grinning. “I thought you were going to say you weren’t used to waking up with a man in your bed, and I was going to feel really good about that.”

I laugh at him. *Well, that either.*

“So Miss Sunshine, what’s the plan for the day?”

“Um, *work*. We have jobs, remember? And today’s, what ... Tuesday? Wednesday?”

“Tuesday. *But*,” he says, touching my nose with his fingertip, “it rained all night long. We can’t do much at Parasol Place, so Dad sent my crew to Jess.”

“Oh.”

“That means ...”

He leans over, puckering up. I say a quick prayer again that my breath isn’t bad and meet him halfway.

I could lose myself in his kiss—in his arms, his body—but I pull away just in case. *Let me brush my teeth first.*

“I effectively have the day off.” He furrows his brow. “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing.”

I roll over and pull the blankets back. My orange towel from last night is wadded up beside me. I make quick work of fastening it around my body and hop out of bed.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

“To brush my teeth.”

His laugh is animated. The sound follows me into the bathroom.

I do a once-over of myself in the mirror. It’s not nearly as bad as I feared.

“What?” I ask, putting toothpaste on my brush. “What’s funny about not wanting to have a nasty mouth in the morning?”

I run the brush around my mouth and then rinse. *Not the best job I’ve ever done, but it should suffice.*

Moss tears the blankets back as I approach the bed again.

“Lose the towel.”

The heat in his eyes gets me. My knees turn to Jell-O as I drop the towel and climb in beside him. He wraps an arm around my middle and pulls my back to his front.

He sighs as he rests his chin on top of my head. I do the same as I nestle against him.

This is so nice.

I close my eyes and relax, trying super hard not to overthink all of this.

“Let’s enjoy this next week. We’re going to be together anyway. So let’s go all in. Have fun. No worries. And after the Excellence Awards ...”

My stomach knots. I try to avoid it—try not to let it wind too tight. But I can already feel what I knew would be inevitable if Moss and I got this far.

I’d catch a case of the feelings.

How could I not? Looking back, I can see the two of us teeter-tottering back and forth, flirting with the edges of friendship. Maybe I didn’t want to see it. *No, I know I didn’t.* There was too much on the line for me to even mentally go that far.

But as I lie here with his arms around me, holding me like I’m his treasure, all of those things seem so far away.

“Want to take the day off with me?” he asks softly.

I grin. “I wish.”

“Please?”

My body shakes as I chuckle. “Moss, I can’t.”

“I know the boss. I’m pretty sure you can.”

“No.”

I feel him frown against the back of my neck just before he places a kiss against it.

Relationships have never made me truly happy. Perhaps *happy* isn’t the

right word because, as a general rule, I'm a pretty happy person. It's *contentment* that I've never really found.

I've never experienced a relationship that lets me relax. A situation where I've been both free and supported, no matter what I choose to do. Who I choose to be. I've never felt good in my skin when I allow myself to be subjected to someone else's opinions—and care what they say.

But that's not necessarily true with Moss.

He's made me smile more in the last two and a half years than anyone ever has. Even though we haven't been in a sexual relationship or a coupledness, we've connected in ways that I've never connected with another man. Even my ex-husband. Moss has helped me see glimpses of myself that I've hidden from everyone. He makes me believe that the constant thought in the back of my brain that *I'm not quite good enough* or *there must be something wrong with me* is a lie.

So what if my reasons for resisting this thing with him are all null? What then? He hasn't wanted a relationship with me, but does he now?

What if he does walk away after the Awards?

Moss rolls me over onto my back. He lies on his side, facing me.

"Tell me the truth," I say. "You didn't worry about morning breath?"

He tries not to smile but fails. "Fine. I got up before you and put some toothpaste on my finger and brushed with that."

I giggle. "I was so confused. And self-conscious. I thought I was the only one worried about that."

"You should never be self-conscious."

He barely kisses me. His lips sweep gently over mine. It's just enough to make me want more.

"What day do we need to leave for the party?" he asks.

"*Ugh*. I don't know. The party is Saturday evening." I sigh. "Knowing my family, there will be food and drinks and dancing. It'll be a late night. Originally, I planned to go Friday and come home Sunday, but I don't think I have it in me anymore."

"You sure?"

I nod. "I'm sure. I can't handle all those fucking ducks."

He laughs.

"Maybe we can go Saturday morning and come home on Sunday? Would that work?" I ask.

"Sure. Whatever you want."

I pick an invisible piece of lint off his chest. “And the Excellent Awards are Wednesday ...”

Why did I say that? Stupid!

I refuse to look up at him even though I can feel his eyes boring into my face. Embarrassment creeps over my skin. I’m sure my cheeks are red.

He clears his throat. “Are you thinking about that?”

“The Awards?” I ask, trying to play it off even though I know that’s not what he meant. “It’ll be fun. Nancy is supposed to call me at some point for an interview and—”

“Brooke.”

Fuck.

I sigh. “Let’s forget I brought that up.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not? We’ll just change the subject like we always do when we hit on something we want to avoid and go on about our morning.”

He tips my chin with the pad of his finger until I have no choice but to look into his eyes. The greens and blues swirl—one eye slightly more like an emerald and one just a bit more like the sea—creating an alluring image I can’t look away from.

“Look,” he says, his gaze unwavering. “We’ve always been honest with each other, right?”

I nod.

“I mean, except the whole *we’re just friends* thing. Because I think it’s safe to say that we were both tiptoeing around what we really wanted to happen.”

His grin makes me grin.

“And now that it’s happened ...” He pauses as if to consider his next words. “I *really* need you to be honest with me now.”

“I am honest with you, Moss.”

“Usually when we just change the subject, I let it go. It’s easier that way. But now ...” He shakes his head, laughing at himself. “I’m so dumb.”

“You are not dumb.”

He smiles. “I am.”

“What were you going to say?” I hook a leg around him. “I’m not letting you out of this bed until you tell me.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time. I’ll never leave.”

I laugh. “I didn’t really think that through very well, did I?”

He drags a finger down my shoulder. "I want this to be as easy and fun as we said it would be last night."

"Me too."

I wait. I want to know what he was going to say. *But now what?*

He sighs, falling onto his back. "The Awards are when? Wednesday?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." He swallows. "Wednesday night we go to that together, as a couple, and then afterward, we have a conversation."

It's my turn to swallow.

"All right," I say softly, unsure what that means.

As if he can read my mind, he grins. "I know you're wondering what happens after that. When our ... whatever this is now, expires."

"Maybe a little."

"Good. Because I am too."

My shoulders fall forward. I sit up, losing my grasp on the blanket. It falls and drapes around my waist. My nipples are beaded from both the cool air and the heat of Moss's eyes.

I start to pull the blankets back up ... but I don't.

Much to my surprise, I like this. I like watching his reaction to my body. *To me.* The way his face lights up and the vein in his neck pulses. How his hands clench as if he's fighting himself to reach for me. The way his lips part and he draws in a quick breath as if I'm the one who stole it.

But it's not just that.

It's also the ferocity buried in his gaze. The confidence he gives freely by openly admiring me, not worried that he has to manage the power that I think I have. *Like Geoff.* The look tells me he'd protect me if someone walked into this room and hold me if I cried.

He licks his lips, tugging his brows together. "Brooke, I don't know ..."

"It's okay. I don't know either."

He gives me a lopsided smile. "Well, I do know. I think. And that's the problem."

My heart pounds. *What does that mean? What does he know? How do I rectify being a problem with that smile?*

There are so many ways that could go. He could mean so many things. I'm afraid to ponder them too deeply because what if I'm wrong?

"I don't want to cause you any problems, Moss," I say softly.

"Strangely, I think you might be the problem and the solution."

Okay ...

“I’ll tell you what,” he says, picking up my hand and lacing his fingers with mine. “Let’s do what we said and enjoy the hell out of the rest of this week. And then we have a date Wednesday night after the Awards—just me and you.”

I nod. “All right.”

“And call off work next Thursday.”

I smirk. “What should I tell your father?”

“Tell him I’m going to fuck you senseless, and you’ll be no use at the office.”

“Should I copy your mother on that email?”

“I don’t give a shit. Maybe she’ll have Jess get us a pillow for Christmas.”

He catches the implication as soon as it’s out of his mouth. Just like I do. *We’ll be together at Christmas.*

“You’re rotten, Mr. Carmichael,” I say, skirting around the situation.

He jerks the blankets back. His cock is solid, standing at attention. A bead of precum glistens at the head.

My mouth waters. My pussy clenches, already wet and ready to be filled again.

I climb on top of him, straddling his waist. I place my hands on the pillow on either side of his head. My breasts hang in his face.

He cups them both, squeezing them until it hurts in the best fucking way. Then he lifts up and sucks one nipple into his mouth.

“*Fuck,*” I moan, leaning my head back as my body fully awakens.

I reach between my legs. He raises his hips. I grab his cock and position it at my opening.

The head parts me, teasing me until I can’t take it anymore.

I sit down and fully seat him inside me.

“*Dammit,*” I hiss, the burst of pleasure more than I was expecting. It hits me hard, dizzying me, as he pulls my other nipple between his teeth. “I’m going to be late today.”

He chuckles. “Maybe a little.”

I start to move, riding his cock at the slowest, most maddeningly delicious pace.

Or maybe a lot.

TWENTY-FIVE

BROOKE

“Is it a pie day or a no pie day?” Rebecca asks, stopping at our table.

Smokey’s is pretty empty for a Thursday afternoon. But it has been pretty rainy all week, which tends to keep the patrons away.

Except Jovie and me. A little rain has never stopped us from food.

“It’s a pie day. And I don’t even care what kind it is,” I say. “Just bring me whatever you have.”

Jovie rolls her eyes. “You get a little action, and all of a sudden, you don’t care about calories.”

“Okay, reality check. I’ve *never* cared about calories. I probably should, but I don’t.”

Rebecca leans against the table, curiosity written across her freckled face. “Forget the calories. You’re getting action? From where? How did I not know this?”

“Moss Carmichael—”

“Really, Jovie?” I fire her a look.

“What?” She holds her arms out, palms up. “If I was banging that son of a ___”

“*Moss Carmichael?*” Rebecca’s eyes go wide. “*You are having sex with Moss Carmichael*, and no one thinks to tell me? Are you guys even my friends?”

Jovie manages to glare at me out of the corner of her eye. “I would’ve told you, but I didn’t even know until *yesterday*.”

I throw my hands up.

Rebecca jerks out a chair and sits. Her jaw is sitting on the table. “Details, please.”

“I don’t ... There are no details ...” I glare back at Jovie. “She’s being dramatic. She’s an actress, you know.”

“Whoa. *Wait*,” Rebecca says. “Is this a result of your Social thing? Because if you can catch the likes of Moss Freaking Carmichael with a wanted ad, I’m copying yours verbatim right now.”

I laugh.

“Is that a yes?” Rebecca asks.

“It’s a yes.” Jovie shrugs. “She’s the only person on the planet who would literally snag the hottest guy I might have ever seen—the guy she gets to spend every day with anyway—”

“Not every day,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“Whatever. My point remains.”

Rebecca nods as if she’s just processing this information. “Well, okay then. *An ad it is*.” She gets up from the table. “This is just highly unfair, but I’ll be happy for you.” She fake smiles. “This is my not jealous face.”

I laugh. “Pie?”

She waves her hand through the air like she’s done with me and scampers off to the kitchen.

Once we’re alone, I pivot the conversation before Jovie can really start digging. *I’m not ready for that today*.

“How’s the play coming?” I ask.

“Good. I love the cast. Sometimes there’s chemistry there, and sometimes there’s not. I hate forcing it. I know the audience can feel it, and it really takes away from the performance.”

I nod. “Makes sense.”

She leans against the table. “So since we’re talking about chemistry ...”

We’ve managed not to talk about Moss too much during lunch. Jovie hit on it first thing, asking me follow-up questions from our brief conversation last night when I filled her in on the latest developments.

Basically, that we’re fucking.

Other than that, she’s danced around the topic much more than I imagined she would. Or that she’d be able to.

“Obviously, I’m happy for you,” she says. “I’m your biggest cheerleader.”

“I know.”

“But I need a quick check-in. How are you doing?”

“Very well, thank you.”

I look down at my plate and pick up one of the remaining fries. I shove it through a dollop of ketchup on the edge and make a heart out of it.

“I mean it, Brooke. You were telling me on Sunday that this wouldn’t happen. You had a laundry list of reasons you would never, and could never, fall for Moss. And although I knew you would because I’m not stupid or blind—and I know he’s not either—I just want to make sure that you’re good with all of this. Because your reasons were valid.”

Yes, they were.

The back of my neck tightens.

“They were valid,” I admit. “They also mostly still exist. But ...”

A part of me is afraid to say too much out loud. It’s silly to think that voicing my hopes will somehow jinx it. Proponents who even think you should speak everything you want into the world.

The world hasn’t really worked that way for me.

But I do have some things on my mind, and Jovie is my best friend.

I take a deep breath. “I have been with him every night since Monday. Monday at my house, Tuesday at his, and last night at my house again.”

“Okay.”

“And that’s why I didn’t call you before yesterday. I partly didn’t know what to say, and then I’d look up, and it would be late, and I didn’t want to call and start that kind of a conversation at midnight.”

“That’s appreciated.”

I grin. “I mean, I’m still not sure what’s happening. We’ve agreed to just have fun until the Awards thing next week and then reevaluate it.”

“And you think ... what will happen then?”

“I don’t know.”

Rebecca sets the pie in front of me and lays the bill on the table.

“I’d love to sit and chat, but a party of ten just came in, and I need to work on that tip,” she says.

“Go. Get that money,” Jovie says. “We’ll leave our money on the table.”

She gives us a thumbs-up and hurries off to the new customers.

I sit back in my chair without touching the pie. Suddenly, it’s less appetizing.

“I think,” I say slowly, “that he’s as into me as I am him.”

Jovie smiles. “Of course he is. You’re amazing.”

“Stop. I don’t need you to hype me up right now.”

“Too bad. I’m your hype girl. I can’t just turn it off.”

“Everyone should have a best friend like you.”

She makes a face. “You’re damn right. But I’m yours. You’re so lucky.”
I laugh.

Jovie has no idea how right she is—how lucky that I am to have her. I thought I had friends who would last a lifetime, friends who I grew up having tea parties with and who played summer volleyball every year in elementary and middle school. But those friends faded over the years. Some abandoned me when I married Geoff. Others ended up marrying into my mother’s social circle and seem to look down on me now too. Still, others just had children and moved on to another part of their lives, leaving me in the dust. It’s not that I blame them. I’m happy for them. But I know that whether Jovie or I change life paths, we’ll still be best friends.

“So you’re good with just having fun?” she asks. “You’re not driving yourself crazy?”

“There hasn’t been a lot of time to do that. I get up, go to work, come home or go to his house, and the day is over before I know it.” I shrug. “But now that you mention it ...”

She reaches out and puts her hand on top of mine.

A rush of emotions that I’ve been a pro at keeping buried over the last few days hits me. I slip my palm out from under hers and set it on my lap just in case she can feel it start to sweat.

I exhale hard and loud, allowing myself to go *there* mentally.

“I’ve been so adamant that I didn’t want anyone in my life since my divorce,” I say. “And for good reason. I needed that time to myself. My fear of getting back into something that would hurt me or bring me down was totally justified.”

“Absolutely it was.”

“But ...” I sigh. “Should I have known that this thing with Moss would go this way? I don’t know. Maybe. Did I really think we could avoid it? Yeah. I think I did. But I honest to God didn’t realize what was happening between us.”

Jovie smiles softly.

“I’ve thought about it, and I’m not sure when things changed. Because, in a way, nothing between us has changed at all.”

“He’s just sticking his penis in you a couple of times a day?”

“Seriously, Jovie?”

“Okay. And his tongue.”

I look at the ceiling while she laughs at herself.

“I’m sorry,” she says, getting herself together. “Proceed. It’s all the same between you ...”

“It is. I mean, our texts are a little dirtier. But when we’re at work, it’s all business. And when we’re at home, it’s just like it was before. We laugh and joke and talk about dumb shit. But then I fall into his arms, and even that feels like something we’ve always done. Except we haven’t.”

“That’s super surprising,” she says, teasing me.

My anxiety grows.

“So what if it just snaps back to the way it was?” I ask. “What if after the Awards thing, he decides that our trial run didn’t work out, and we’re going to just default back to the old Moss and Brooke?”

“I take it that you’re admitting that you don’t want that?”

Damn her.

I blow out a breath, frustrated with myself.

“It’s okay, you know,” she says. “You’re allowed to change your mind about stuff. It’s perfectly fine to decide that this person is now important to you in a different way than they were before. Or vice versa, this person is not. Whatever.”

A slow grin tickles my lips. “The fucking ducks.”

“What?”

“Never mind.” I shake my head.

“Life isn’t stagnant, Brooke. You don’t have to make a choice or go down a path and just hold tight to it because you made it.”

“I know.”

She leans back. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think Moss is stupid enough to let you go. I think he’s kept you at arm’s length all of this time because he knew that this would happen between the two of you too.”

I hope so. I really do. Even if I don’t want to, and even if I’m scared to—*I hope so.*

“But, if for some reason it *snaps back to the way it was*,” she says, using my words from before, “you’ll be fine. One hundred percent.”

I nod, still unsure. “So I shouldn’t get inside my head about this?”

“No. You absolutely shouldn’t. You’re going to trust the guy you trusted enough to go on this journey with in the first place.”

Well, put some socks on, sweetheart. I got you.

I take a deep breath. *Okay, Moss. I hope you’re right.*

I dig into my purse and get enough cash out to cover the bill plus a tip.
“Okay,” I say, setting the cash under my glass. “I’m taking your advice.”
“Finally.”

We laugh together.

“Now, fill me in on you,” I say. “You’ve been all up my ass about my situation. Tell me about yours.”

She groans. “Charlie is still out of the picture—much to his dismay.”

“Oh, really?”

“He showed up at practice Monday night. Said he wanted to watch.” She rolls her eyes. “It’s closed to the public, obviously, so we didn’t let him in. But I did go into the parking lot and asked him what the fuck?”

“What did he say?”

“Just that he missed me, and he needs to be more supportive. Blah, blah, fucking blah.”

“Nice.” I laugh again. “So just no Charlie? You don’t have someone else on the hook?”

She rolls her eyes so hard I think she might break her eyeballs.

“Of course I have someone on the hook,” she says as if it’s the most ridiculous question she’s ever heard. “Girl, it’s like you don’t even know me.”

“Clearly, I do. I asked you, didn’t I?”

“Yes. *You did.*” She smiles from ear to ear. “His name is Hank, of all things. I met him on Tuesday at the gym.”

“*You were at the gym?*” I blink twice. “I’m so confused.”

She runs a hand through the air, brushing away my confusion.

“I was hanging a flier for work,” she says. “Don’t panic. This isn’t one of those things where you should call for help because I’m acting out or something.”

I giggle. “Whew. You had me worried for a minute.”

“You had me worried by even insinuating that I’d be working out.” She shivers. “So gross.”

“So tell me about Hank. What’s he like?”

We stand and gather our things. After a quick wave to Rebecca, we head to the door.

“I don’t know a lot about him yet other than he’s a solid seven inches, from Kentucky, and likes gummy bears,” she says.

“*What?*”

“Don’t ask. Long story that will probably make you judge me, and I’d rather not go there ...”

Jovie continues about her new love affair while my brain floats back to mine.

They say that good things come to those who wait. I’ve waited a long time to find someone who loves me without strings attached. I waited so long that I almost gave up on ever finding it.

Wouldn’t it be wild if that person was under my nose this whole time?

I grin. *He’s under a lot more than that these days.*

I shiver and step out into the sun.

TWENTY-SIX

MOSS

“Don’t do it. Don’t call her.”

I stare at my phone like it’s a cobra ready to strike. I’ve never felt so at odds with an inanimate object.

It would be so easy to call her. To text her. To show up at her house and ask her to dinner.

Or make dinner with her.

Or have her for dinner.

The thought makes me smile.

“I need to give her some space,” I tell myself. Again. “I’ve been with her every night this week. We need some air to make sure this doesn’t speed out of control.”

That’s so dumb that I roll my eyes at myself.

This is already out of control. It’s been out of control for a while. From the moment I kissed her, this was a done deal.

We were a done deal.

Except we’re not.

I keep thinking that eventually, I’ll panic and need to back off. I’ve built in the exit ramp just in case. But then the presence of the exit ramp—because that fucker works both ways—pisses me the fuck off.

When the landscaper stopped by Parasol Place while she was there for five minutes Wednesday morning and ogled her like she was a piece of meat—I wanted to kill him. When I thought I saw her at Mugger’s talking to another guy this morning, I almost had a heart attack. When Jess gave me shit this afternoon about her, I wanted to tell him to back off because she’s mine.

But I didn’t. Because she’s not really.

Except she is.

That's the truth, and I know it. And there's nothing I can do about it.

I've spent all week living with the idea that I'm doing this—that I'm in a relationship again. I've let it sit in my stomach. Percolate into my heart. Weave together with my past.

They are two different situations. Two different women. Too different parts of my life that are able to end in two different ways.

I know that. I'm rational.

I'm just afraid.

“Oh,” I say, swiping my phone off the counter when it buzzes with a text.

The number is from out of state. It's one I don't know.

Unknown: A group of penguins in the water is called a raft. But on land, they're called a waddle.

“What the fuck is this?”

I type out a response.

Me: Who is this?

While I wait for an answer, I scroll back to the other penguin text.

The numbers are different.

“What the hell is going on?” I ask.

Me: Hey. Did you text the wrong number?

I lean against the counter and wait. No more texts come.

My foot taps against the floor. The phone is in my hand. It's convenient.

I look up at the clock on the microwave. It's still relatively early.

“Fuck it.”

Me: I'm bored.

I hit send.

This time, a response comes right away. *Thank God.*

Brooke: Me too. *smiling emoji*

Me: Want to come over?
Brooke: Depends.
Me: On what?
Brooke: What do you have in mind?

I chuckle as my fingers fly across the keys.

Me: I don't want to go look at properties, if that's what you're asking.
Brooke: Good. Because I want to suck your cock.
Me: If you're not here in fifteen minutes, I'm coming to you.
Brooke: Oh, you'll be coming for me all right.
Me: FUCKING HELL.
Brooke: *laughing emoji*
Me: Fourteen minutes.
Brooke: *kissing emoji*

I set the phone back next to my keys and stare at the clock. *Fuck.*
She's my worst nightmare and my wettest dream.
It's why I've resisted for so long.
But what if it's time?
What if it's our time?

What if these questions are actually redundant because my heart already knows?

She's mine.

I crave her—need her for both her smile and her touch. I love her laugh, her feistiness, and her sense of fun and joy. The way that being with her feels like a new life, a new opportunity to live without all of the baggage of the last.

Even though I'll carry that with me forever.

She was always meant to be mine.

Maybe it's time I face reality: I've already fallen for her.

I've already fallen for Brooke Bailey.

And if we take it slow, this might just work.

TWENTY-SEVEN

BROOKE

I don't even think my knuckles touch the door before it's pulled open.

Damn.

Moss stands on the other side with one palm pressed against the wall. The angle of his shirtless body is a model pose if I've ever seen one. Every muscle in his delectable body is on full display—for me.

It makes me downright giddy.

“Well, *hello*, handsome,” I say.

He wraps an arm around my waist and hauls me into his chest. I giggle as our bodies collide and he captures my mouth with his.

Somehow the door is shut behind us moments before my back is against the wall. My hands are pinned over my head.

I'm completely vulnerable, absolutely indefensible—totally open to attack. *And utterly enthralled.*

He kisses me until I'm breathless. Runs his tongue along my lips until I'm moaning. Tilts his hips—and his rock-hard cock—into my groin.

It's as if Moss knows my body better than I do. He drags his lips across my jaw and presses a kiss behind my ear. Just as my legs threaten to give out in response to the fire melting me from the inside, he pulls away.

His smirk does nothing for my intoxicated state.

“That was one hell of a hello,” I say, struggling to steady my breathing.

“I was gonna say the same thing.” He gives me another lingering kiss before letting my hands fall to my sides. “You had ninety-four seconds left.”

“For what?”

“To get here.”

I laugh as we walk through the billiards area and into the kitchen. “Shut

up. You were not timing me.”

“You underestimate my need for you, my lady.”

“Okay,” I say, hopping up on the island. The stone is cold against my thighs. “*My lady* isn’t so bad.”

“Ah. So we found *the one*.”

“I didn’t say that. I just meant that it isn’t nearly as cringe-worthy as some of the others.”

He plants his hands on either side of me. I run a finger across his bottom lip. We watch each other for a long time, letting our heartbeats settle.

“I like *my lady*,” he says. “It’ll make me sound sophisticated around your family.”

“So that’s what you’re going for? Sophistication?”

He nods. “I’ll come up to you when you’re talking to your mom and aunt and say, *Would you like me to usher you upstairs and eat your pussy, my lady?*”

I smack his shoulder, laughing. “Don’t you dare.”

“Say that? Or eat your pussy?”

His eyes twinkle with mischief.

I wrap my legs around him and haul him closer. He makes no effort to resist.

“I just want you to know,” I say, “that I’m happy you showed up at Shade House.”

“Me too.”

“Because no matter what happens after ... *this*, you’ve really changed a lot of things for me.”

His head tilts to the side, causing his hair to flop on his forehead. I reach out and brush it off.

I ignore the hit of adrenaline that runs through my veins.

“You’ve changed things for me too,” he says, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. “And one day, I’ll tell you about that. I’m just not ready yet.”

His words are quiet. Reserved. But also, they’re hopeful. I think.

I press a soft kiss just beneath his chin. “You don’t have to tell me anything.”

Even though I want you to.

“I can’t ...” He takes a quick breath. “I never expected to ever be in this position.”

What position? I'm curious but too afraid to ask. Too worried that I'm reading into it what I want to hear.

"Honestly," he says, "I never wanted to be here. I've avoided it. I've sort of ..." He looks over my head and sighs. "I guess I've probably kept one foot out of every entanglement that I've had with women because I didn't want to wind up like this."

His eyes drop to mine again. A ghost of a smile settles on his lips.

"But I looked down the other day, and both of my feet are already in," he says, smiling softly.

I don't know what I see in his eyes. I can't read the emotions swirling around there.

I'm also not sure what he'll see in mine.

So I wrap my arms around his chest and curl up against him. He wraps one arm around my waist, and the other hand cradles the back of my head.

His heartbeat is steady. It's not at all like mine. My heart is racing in response to my overthinking brain trying to make sense of what he's just said. *Does he want me ... for the long term too?*

"It's good to have both of your feet," I say and then wince at the stupidity of the words.

His chest shakes with his chuckle. "I'd say that's true."

"You know what I mean."

His body stiffens, and he blows out a breath. I still, unsure what's happening. *What did I say?*

"I think you know what I mean too," he says with the slightest wobble in his voice.

If my heart was racing before, it's spiraling into a crazed windmill pattern now. It's hard to keep it from flailing out of control.

I think I know what he means. *I hope I do.* But he's not elaborating, and I'm not about to push him.

His body is rigid even as he holds me tight. I close my eyes and wait for him to continue.

"I just need a minute, Brooke," he whispers. "I wish I could just ... I don't know. I wish I could say the things I want to say to you."

Oh, my sweet Moss.

My strong, capable, amazing Moss. Don't be afraid.

Even though I'm a little afraid too.

He runs his fingers through my hair. "Let's take this in steps. Let's go and

put on a show for your family and then get through the Awards.” He scoffs at himself. “It’s really fucking stupid, I know. Who cares—”

“It’s not stupid.” I pull my head back and look at him. “I’ve had a million reasons not to do this too. And sometimes, I sit around and remind myself of those and wonder if I need to rein in my feelings. It’s so easy to get swept up at the moment and forget all the things you knew to be true before you fell ...” I gulp. “Before we did this.”

He grins knowingly. “I’ll make you a deal.”

“Is this like the *don’t ask each other stupid questions* deal we had? Because I think we’re barely skirting that one now.”

He laughs, running his thumb over my cheekbone. “How about this—I’ll trust you if you trust me. I’ll give you some space if you have a little patience for me. This is new to both of us, and let’s just kind of settle into this whole thing before we have *that conversation*. The conversation we’re both vaguely referring to so we don’t freak each other out.”

My cheeks flush.

“Deal, *my lady*?”

“Deal.”

We exchange a secret smile that warms my heart.

This is going to be okay. This is going to work out.

I have no reservations. Not anymore. He’s all but given me his word that he wants things to solidify between us ... just like I do. And he’s asked for space because he needs it like a grown-ass man.

I’m surprised that I don’t feel exposed. Or anxious. Or like I have to get a grip on reality and hold on tight because I’m so high that the only option is that I fall. *That it can only go backward from here.* All I can do is fall.

It’s not like that with Moss. It wasn’t like that in our friendship either. He’s not that kind of a man.

“Now,” he says, guiding my back onto the countertop, “let’s move on to more ... well, maybe not important but definitely *pressing* things.”

I force a swallow down my throat. I have no idea what he’s planning exactly, but I have a decent idea.

Holy shit.

He takes my shoes off and drops them onto the floor. Each one hits with a thud.

His eyes never leave mine as he hooks his thumbs into the waistband of my shorts and tugs them down my legs.

“Pull your shirt up,” he says, his tone completely changed into something darker. Something more commanding.

I shiver—both from the cold countertop and from the heated look in his eye—as I pull my shirt over my head. Then I throw it at his face.

He smirks as he bats it to the side.

His fingertips drag up the insides of my legs until they meet in the middle.

I’m already so wet for him that foreplay isn’t needed. Not for that, anyway. But I know I’m about to get it all the same.

And I’m not mad about it.

His left hand pulls the thin strap of material away from my opening. The other tugs my breasts out of the confines of my bra. He wastes no time rolling my nipples around, pinching them hard enough to make me arch my back.

“You know,” I say, trying not to moan already. “We could’ve started with this and talked later.”

He laughs. “I like the way you think.”

“I’m always here for suggestions.”

My core aches as he slides a finger through my wetness. The intensity of the throb in my belly physically hurts.

I wince, bending to the side and reaching for his hand.

“Do you want to feel how wet you are?” His fingers lace with mine. He brings them between my legs and drags our knuckles through my slit. “*That’s* how wet you are.”

My face flames as he brings our hands to his mouth and licks them. His eyes bore into mine, telling me things that words never could.

Things that make me combust.

“How does it taste?” I ask, feeling cheeky.

He smirks, bringing our hands to my face. “Want to taste for yourself?”

“No!” I laugh, moving my head side to side so he can’t touch my lips. “Stop it!”

“You asked.”

“I didn’t really want to know.” I giggle, stopping my movement when he releases my hand. “Don’t fuck with me.”

“Oh, *I’m about to fuck with you.*”

I pull my legs up and set my feet on the counter. I relax my knees to the sides, opening myself up to him.

“Promise?” I ask.

“Promise.”

He scoops my bottom up with his right hand. The back of my head grinds into the stone counter but the bite from it goes unnoticed.

My panties are pulled to the side—*why doesn't he just take them off?*—just before he lowers. He blows gently on my swollen clit. It's almost enough to make me fall apart.

“I kind of just want to watch you come like this,” he says, making small circles with the pad of his thumb.

I groan, lifting myself higher to get more contact. “I don't care how you do it as long as you do it.”

“But I also want to torture you a little and make you wait.”

I drop my hips into his hand. His fingers dig into my skin. The burn makes me want him worse.

“If you don't get busy, I'll never let you do this again,” I say. It's a hollow threat. We both know it.

“You'll also not get off. That would suck for you.”

He stops touching my clit.

I raise my head to look at him. “Sir, I don't need you in order to get off. How do you think I've spent the past three years?”

“For your sake, I'm going to assume that you meant that you've taken care of that yourself.” He stares at me, his jaw set. “And not the alternative.”

“You mean, you don't want to think that I've had some other guy getting the job done?”

I'm pushing where I shouldn't push. But I'm desperate. My body is dying for a release.

“This really isn't the time to talk about this, *Brooke*.”

“Then you better start touching me again, *Moss*, or I'm going to start saying all kinds of crazy stuff.”

He slips one finger, then two, inside me. They sink into my body and send a wave of pleasure rippling through me.

“That's better,” I say, squeezing my eyes closed. “And since you're being nice, I will too. I totally meant that I was masturbating.”

He slides his fingers out, flicking my swollen bud.

“Good,” he says, not even a little contrite.

I look at him.

He's smug. *The bastard is smug.*

He shifts his weight, pressing down on my stomach with one hand and

fingering me with the other. I let out a moan that takes even me by surprise.

“I take it you like that,” he teases.

“Clearly—*fuck!*”

“You wanna fuck or like *oh, fuck?*”

“Don’t fuck with me,” I warn him, my eyes rolling back in my head.

“So don’t do this?”

He stills.

“Moss, so help me—*God!*”

He twists the two fingers deep inside me and pulls them out. The sensation has me teetering on the edge of an orgasm.

“So you’re into nicknames all of a sudden?” he says, laughing.

“I hate you.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.”

Just as I’m about to say a lot of mean things, his tongue slides through my seam.

“Oh, my ... *shit,*” I hiss, my legs trembling. “If you stop doing this before I get off, I will never *speaktoyouagain.*”

The last words fall lazily from my mouth as I try to keep my eyes open.

He toys with my clit, flicking his tongue against it and watching me.

I thread my fingers through his hair, frantic for an orgasm. There are too many things happening—too many flicks, swipes, plunges—that I can’t make sense of them all.

Moss sucks my sweet spot, taking me by surprise. It sends a bolt of fire through my veins. I yelp in pleasure, holding his head steady and grinding my pussy against his face. He takes pity on me and doesn’t retreat.

He reaches for my breasts again, palming one and squeezing so tight—adding another layer to my already overstimulated body that has me starting to fall ...

“*You home?*”

I stiffen. My eyes go wide.

Moss pulls back, a mixture of surprise and terror stretched across his face. He bends down, grabbing his shirt, and covering my lower half as I frantically struggle to tuck myself back into my bra.

“Banks, if you take another step into this house, I will fucking murder you!” Moss booms. He grabs my hand and helps me off the island.

My heart pounds as I duck below the cabinets in case Banks comes into the room.

“I just need—”

“*Now is not the fucking time,*” Moss yells, his tone a warning without the words.

“*Oh,*” he says. “I follow you. Okay. I’ll leave, and I’ll lock the door behind me. You could’ve just said something.”

Moss looks at me and shakes his head. “I’ll be saying something to you, Banksy. *Later.* Now get the fuck out.”

The door slams shut.

I slump against the cabinet.

Moss walks around the island and peers into the foyer. “You’re right,” he says, coming toward me. “I need to get new locks.”

“I told you.”

He takes my hand and pulls me to my feet. Then he sweeps me off them, cradling me over his arms. “I’ve never needed them until now.”

“Well, that I can appreciate.”

I smile at him. He grins back.

“I’m taking you to bed,” he says, marching out of the kitchen. “And locking that damn door.”

I laugh all the way.

TWENTY-EIGHT

BROOKE

“No, thank you. I appreciate being asked to be included in your next edition,” I say, antsy to end the call.

“It’s truly our pleasure. If we need any clarification, we’ll shoot you an email,” Richard from the Florida Excellence Group says.

We could’ve done this whole thing by email.

“Please do,” I say, glancing at the clock. “I’ll see you at the banquet next week.”

“Absolutely. Have a great weekend, Brooke.”

Not likely. “You, too. Goodbye, Richard.”

“Goodbye.”

I end the call and then double-check that it disconnected. Then I sigh.

“*Why did that take so long?*” I whine.

My stomach rumbles from missing lunch. A migraine licks at my temples because I got two hours of sleep last night—thanks to Moss and his ability to make me orgasm multiple times and my inability to turn another one down—and had the busiest day that I’ve had in months.

Every single thing that could’ve gone wrong did, in fact, go wrong today.

The day Gina isn’t here to help relieve some of the task-y stuff.

The day before we leave for Honey’s party.

I look down as my phone buzzes.

Moss: Gonna be here late. The wrong lumber was delivered this morning, and it’s still not here. Pete’s home sick today so I’m managing the crew. Not sure what time I’ll get home.

I stick out my bottom lip and look at my desk.

Me: I'm going to be here late too. Then I need to pack.

Moss: Did you ever eat?

Me: No. Maybe I'll have something delivered.

Moss: You should've done that two hours ago.

Me: I know.

I turn to my computer and find the draft email I started hours ago to Damaris. I copy and paste a list of sofa links that I like and then hit *send*.

Moss: I'll call you when I get home. I need to pack too. What do I need to bring?

Me: Yourself.

Moss: Besides myself.

Me: Clothes, but I prefer you without them. *winking emoji*

Moss: You'll definitely need clothes for the party but don't bother packing anything to sleep in.

I grin.

Me: I might have ordered two things today for later that I think you might like. Maybe.

Moss: Well, it wasn't lunch. *unamused emoji*

Me: Nope. It was *red dress emoji* *high-heeled shoe emoji*

Moss: You know what else you'll be getting?

Me: No.

Moss: *eggplant emoji* *peach emoji*

I burst out laughing.

Me: Gonna need a lot of *water emoji* for that.

Moss: *overheated face emoji* I need to go before I have to "do some paperwork" in my truck.

Me: *kiss emoji*

Moss: *winking emoji*

I get to work, blocking all thoughts of Moss and anal sex out of my head. I check my email to find a message from Damaris, thanking me for the links, and one from Halcyon with the receipt for the red dress and heels.

The layout of our new project is pulled up on my computer screen, and I get to work tinkering with my proposed changes. They'll have to be approved by Kix, Damaris, and Moss before they're final, but I think I'm on the right track.

"Knock, knock."

I look up to see Jess standing in the doorway.

"Hey." I click the side button on my phone so my screen darkens. "What are you doing here?"

"I come bearing gifts. Or lunch. Or maybe lunch is a gift. Fuck if I know."

He sets a white box on the corner of my desk.

My brows pull together. "What is that?"

"Lunch." He rolls his eyes. "I called Moss to see if he was coming to the office today because I need some tools from the back of his truck. He's not, but he asked me to bring you lunch."

My heart.

"That was so sweet of him," I say, touched by the gesture.

"Of him?" Jess drops his jaw. "I bought it. I picked it out. He didn't even tell me where to go or what to get. Yet he gets the credit." He rolls his eyes. "Typical."

I laugh and pull the box to me. I lift the lid and peer inside.

A grilled chicken sandwich is nestled next to a bunch of crinkle-cut fries from Shade House. All of the toppings—lettuce, tomato, onion, and pickle—are on the side.

"Jess Carmichael, you are the sweetest," I say. "Thank you. Let me pay you back."

"Funny. Moss will kick my ass if I take your money. Besides, I'm still trying to get on his good side since the whole Betsy thing."

I flinch. "Who is Betsy?"

"Banks's Corvette. He named it Betsy."

I snort. "*Okay.*"

"I know. Make sure you drop that into a conversation with Banks at some point. Hell, that's enough of repayment for lunch and then some."

"You guys are so funny," I say, laughing.

He grips the back of the chair across from my desk and grins.

Jess is handsome. All of the Carmichaels are. But he's nowhere nearly as attractive as Moss.

He's a bit taller than his older brother by an inch or two. He's just as broad and muscled. Jess's hair is lighter, though—probably the lightest out of all of the brothers—and he has the brightest, most dazzling green eyes that would stop me in my tracks if I hadn't seen Moss's.

His eyes twinkle. "Between me and you, I happened to come upon some intel that Banks is ..." He makes a face and looks at his phone. "What the hell?"

"What?"

"I just got a text that says—*never mind*." He sticks his phone in his pocket. "So you and Moss are leaving tonight or tomorrow? I can't remember."

"In the morning. We'll be back on Sunday."

"Cool."

I point at him. "I know that look, Jess."

"What?" He holds his hands out to the side. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Whatever you're planning while Moss is away—don't."

"Don't what?"

It's not just the cheeky grin on his face. It's also the innocent tone he uses that tells me he's lying like a dog.

"Okay," I say, shrugging. "Have it your way. But I'll warn Moss—"

He gasps. "Don't be a snitch."

I laugh and pick up a fry.

"Come on, Brooke. Don't ruin our fun. Pretend it's a few weeks ago before you were banging my brother—"

"Hey!"

He glances over his shoulder, his grin stretching farther across his face as he turns back to me. "Well, you are. Or am I wrong? Because if you're not a thing with Moss, then I'd be happy to shoot my shot—*fuck!*"

Moss comes out of nowhere, wrapping an arm around Jess's neck. They scramble around for a few seconds before they separate and laugh.

I laugh too.

"Your instructions were to get her lunch, take it to her, and leave," Moss says, walking by Jess. "Not hit on her."

“Sorry. I got confused.” Jess winks at me. “Why are you even here?”

Moss ignores him, walks around my desk like he owns the place, and leans down. “Hi.”

“Hey,” I say, unable to keep the smile off my face.

He presses a quick kiss against my lips. “You look beautiful today,” he whispers.

“You do look stunning today, Brooke,” Jess says.

Moss kisses me once again, even quicker this time, and then joins his brother by the door.

“I love when you wake up in the morning and decide you want to fight,” Moss says, looking at Jess. “It really keeps me in shape.”

“Then I don’t do it nearly enough. I heard Banks whipped the shit out of you.”

Moss rolls his eyes.

“Kidding,” Jess says. “I mean, he did say that but he always says that.”

“Banks?” I ask. “No way.”

Everyone chuckles.

Moss puts his hand on Jess’s shoulder. “You need to go get whatever out of my truck. I need to grab the crew’s paychecks from Dad and then get back to the jobsite.”

“Sounds good.” Jess waves at me. “If he doesn’t treat you right, call me—*ouch!*”

Moss punches his shoulder.

“Thanks for lunch, Jess,” I say.

Jess walks backward out the door. “She said I was the sweetest ...”

Moss shuts the door.

“I didn’t think you were coming in today,” I say, taking in the slope of his powerful shoulders beneath his black T-shirt.

“I wasn’t. But Dad called and asked me to run in and get Pete’s crew’s checks and sign off a stack of purchase orders so they can get them paid.”

“Oh. I see.”

“I’m going to have to walk out of here before I start touching you. Otherwise, I’ll lose my day and I can’t afford to do that.”

“Go.” I flick my hands toward the door. “You’re entirely too sexy with that layer of dirt on your neck and smelling like sweat.”

He screws up his face.

“I can’t help it,” I say. “You emit pheromones.”

“If this turns you on, it’s amazing you were able to avoid me for so long.”
You have no idea.

“Text me later,” he says hopefully.

“Of course.”

“I’ll call you when I finally get home. Maybe there’ll be enough time in the day to hook up.”

He winks.

“What’s that all about?” I ask.

“Nothing. Just thinking about you, that red dress, and lube.”

My face heats up.

I thought we were playing around earlier with the emojis. If he was being serious about anal sex, then I got a little too big for my britches.

Maybe.

The way my thighs clench together makes me wonder if I might be willing to try it.

“Are you into that?” he asks, his eyes searching mine. “If not, it’s fine. Just curious.”

I pass a swallow down my throat.

I’m an adventurous person, but I’ve never gone down that road with another guy because it takes trust for anal play. But ... this is Moss. *And I trust him implicitly.*

“I think I’d be into just about anything with you,” I say.

His eyes widen. “Good to fucking know.”

I exhale, my body trembling.

My gaze travels down his face, over his throat, and past the place just between his pecs that I love to rest my face at night. Then it slips farther, winding up at the bulge in his pants.

I imagine him behind me, spreading my ass cheeks, positioning himself at the rim—

“Brooke?”

I look up to catch him smirking.

I clear my throat. “Red dress date night. Bring the lube.”

“You’re gonna be the end of me.” He adjusts himself. “I gotta get the hell out of here. Call me tonight, you little vixen.”

“What happened to *my lady*?”

I lift a brow as he opens a door. “There was nothing ladylike about what just went through your head.”

“Is that a turnoff?” I ask even though I know it’s not. *I just lit his libido on fire.*

He licks his lips, letting his gaze linger on me for a long, sizzling moment before he turns to leave.

My face has to be red. It’s hot to the touch. There’s also a buildup of heat between my legs, begging to be extinguished.

“Close it behind you,” I say, my voice thick with need.

He stops, looking at me over his shoulder. “Stop it, or else I’m going to say fuck it to the rest of this day.”

I grin. “Go. I’ll behave. Promise.”

His mouth opens as if he’s going to say something, but he catches himself. Instead, he shakes his head, half-laughing to himself.

“Bye, Moss.”

“Bye, my lady.”

And with a wink, he disappears—shutting the door behind him.

TWENTY-NINE

MOSS

Brooke shifts in the seat next to me.

The closer we get to our destination, the more stressed she becomes. The trip started off fun—singing, telling stories, her teasing me with that low-cut shirt. But as the mileage crept up, so did her fidgetiness.

“I want you to be prepared,” she warns me for the third time today. “My mom isn’t like yours. This might be a huge shock to your system.”

I make a turn and flip my visor down to keep the sun out of my eyes. “I understand.”

She groans. “I don’t think you do.”

I reach across the middle console and grab her hand. She squeezes mine in return.

“Look,” I say, resting my wrist on the steering wheel, “your mom is your mom. She’s her own duck.”

She grins. “*Those fucking ducks.*”

I laugh, happy to see a bit of the tension leave her body.

“I’m here to support *you*,” I say, shaking our entwined hands. “I’m not here to judge your mom’s mothering competence. If we were doing that and you were looking at my brothers, you would’ve bolted by now.”

She smiles.

“And not into one of their arms either,” I joke. Kind of.

“Thank you. I just ...” She sighs. “*It’ll be okay. It’s gonna be okay.*”

“It is. I promise. And if it’s not, you give me our safe word, and I’ll get you the hell out of there.”

She frowns. “We don’t have a safe word.”

“Pick one.” I wink at her. “You’re gonna need one when that red dress

comes in anyway.”

“Ha.”

I glance at her out of the corner of my eye. “I wasn’t kidding.”

“Fine. I pick ... chocolate.”

I laugh, taking my hand away from hers so I can turn. “Chocolate?”

“Well, it was that or pizza. I thought chocolate was a bit sexier than pizza—although, on second thought, I’m not sure that’s true.”

“You’re a trip.”

“What? Pizza is damn sexy. The *hard* crust. *Sticky* cheese. *Hunks of meat* that lay in the *sweet sauce* that *squirts* out the sides when you take a bite.”

I adjust myself. “Pizza it is.”

She smiles proudly.

We take an exit and drive a mile before turning onto another street. Large trees line the median strip that separates the two narrow lanes—one on each side.

Homes sit on double and even triple lots with guest houses off to the side and speed boats in the driveway.

We’re not in Kismet Beach anymore.

“Your parents live here?” I ask. “You grew up here?”

She sags against the seat. “Unfortunately.”

“I don’t know. It looks like there’s a lot of fortune here.”

“He went to prison for money laundering,” she says, pointing at a house on my left. Her finger slides to the house beside it. “She was fucking her daughter’s boyfriend when I was in high school. I don’t know whatever happened with that.”

“Okay ...” *Wow. That’s some shit.*

Brooke sits back and points at a brick house on the right. “That guy left his whole family for someone in Africa. He went on a safari and never came home. His wife got everything—I don’t know if he just let her have it or what—and she eventually got remarried to one of the tennis pros at the tennis club.”

“A tennis club?”

“Yup. And then she did to him what her husband did to her. She met some guy and just never came home.” She laughs at the ridiculousness of it. “Her daughter stayed at the house. Come to think of it, maybe that was the original divorce agreement. Maybe the daughter got it? I don’t know. Anyway, the daughter stayed there with the second husband—the tennis guy

—and they ended up getting married.”

I balk. “This is a fucked-up community.”

She holds out her hand. “See?”

Yeah. I see all right. I see why you don't want to come here.

My navigation system tells me to make a left in five hundred feet. I take in the structure five hundred feet away.

Holy shit.

“That’s your house?” I ask.

“No. It’s my mother’s.”

I blow out a breath and turn into the circular driveway. An angel statue sits in the center, pissing water into a basin below. *Interesting.*

“Do I park anywhere in particular?” I ask, feeling a bit out of my depth.

“Just pull up there.” She motions toward the bend of the circle before the stairs. “That’ll be fine.”

I do as instructed and then turn off the engine. Brooke doesn’t move, so I don’t either. She just gazes up at the house like she’s seeing it for the first time.

“You okay?” I ask her.

“Yeah.” She looks at me. “I’m fine. Just appreciating the calm before the storm.”

“The storm won’t get too bad. I won’t let it.”

She reaches out and touches the side of my face. Our eyes connect in the way that they do, saying all of the words that neither of us has said.

“I’m going to open your door.” I take her hand and kiss her palm. “Sit tight.”

She nods.

I hop out and walk slowly around the front of my truck. It’s probably because she’s said so many negative things about this place and these people, but my stomach is in a knot already.

She’s waiting when I open her door and take her hand. I help her to the ground and then close the door behind her.

Instinctively, I wrap her up in a giant hug and kiss the top of her head.

“Pizza,” I remind her.

“Pizza.”

I let her pull away.

We get our luggage out of the back. I carry both of the bigger bags, and she takes the smaller one with her toiletries.

The steps to the front door remind me of the ones Rocky ran in the movies, but we manage to make it to the top. To my surprise, Brooke's mother is waiting at the front door.

She's quite beautiful with long hair and the same bright blue eyes. Her nose is sharper and her cheekbones higher, and I'm pretty sure her lips are plumped with some doctor-assisted material.

"There you are," she says, stepping out onto the porch. "I've been wondering when you would make it."

"Hi, Mom."

Brooke gives her mother a tight smile that doesn't quite make it to her eyes. I wait for them to embrace or at least kiss each other's cheek as we do with my mom if our hands are full. But nothing happens.

"Mom," Brooke says to me, taking a deep breath. "This is my boyfriend, Moss Carmichael. Moss, this is my mom, Catherine Bailey."

Catherine turns her head slowly to mine, her eyes holding a glimmer of something that makes me uncomfortable. I've seen this look many times before. It's a good thing to see if you're a single man on the prowl. It is not a great thing to see if you're with your girlfriend and it's her mother.

She moves toward me as if she's going to hug me. *Not a chance, lady.*

"It's nice to meet you, Catherine," I say, shrugging to draw attention to the bags in my hands. "You have a beautiful home."

This replaces the flash of shock that I'm not going to set the luggage down to say hello with an air of pride in her house.

"Thank you, Moss. This is where my daughter grew up. We've had many amazing memories here through the years, isn't that right, Brooklyn?"

Brooklyn?

I look at Brooke. She's pointedly ignoring me.

"Oh, *of course*," she says, using the voice she uses when she's placating me. "So many wonderful memories."

If her mom knows she's being facetious, she doesn't show it. Catherine just lifts her chin.

"Let's go inside," Catherine says, turning to the doorway. "I'm sure you two would like to freshen up after your trip."

It was two hours. I make a face at Brooke, making her giggle.

"Is something funny, dear?" Catherine says, shutting the door behind us.

"Thank you for allowing me to stay over this evening," I say, trying to drag Catherine's attention away from Brooke. "I know how important it was

for Brooke to see her family, and I was thrilled to be able to get the time away from work to accompany her.”

Man. That was good.

Catherine seems to think so too. She lifts a thin brow in surprise.

“What do you do for a living again? I must’ve forgotten,” she asks. “I’m sure Brooklyn’s told me in one of our many conversations over the past few weeks.”

Right.

“I work on the same design and build team as Brooke,” I say, setting the bags on the marble floor. “It’s how we met.”

“Is it now?”

“Yes. I had to work for months to get her attention. I couldn’t get a second look.”

Catherine makes no bones about looking me up and down. She also doesn’t bother to hide her appreciation for what she sees.

I wrap an arm around Brooke’s waist and pull her against my side.

“I have a hard time believing that she made you work that hard,” she says, looking at me like she just called me out on a lie.

Brooke’s shoulders stiffen against me. “Mom—”

“I wish she made it easier,” I say with a laugh, ignoring Catherine’s innuendo. “But when you’re trying to attract someone as beautiful and intelligent and talented as your daughter, you have to bring your A game.” I look down at Brooke and smile. “Now I just have to worry about being interesting enough to keep her.”

“*Right,*” she says, laughing.

I press a kiss on her forehead.

Catherine looks amused but also ... bewildered.

“I’m happy to get this peek into her life,” I say. “I’ve always wondered where her creativity and talent come from. Everyone does. She’s certainly made a name for herself in interior architecture. But I’m sure you know that.”

“Yes. Of course, I do.” She glances at Brooke, confused. “I’ve always been proud of my daughter.”

Brooke shifts from foot to foot.

“Well, I’m glad to have you both here.” Catherine clears her throat. “I have an appointment at the salon in a few minutes.” She gives Brooke a smug look. “Would you like to accompany me? It appears it’s been a while since you had your color done.”

Brooke's jaw hits the floor.

What the fuck kind of jab is that?

"Catherine, you are hilarious," I say, pasting a smile on my face even though I want to light her up. "My mom always teases Brooke about how her hair is the perfect shade of blond. She says her friends spend hundreds of dollars trying to duplicate it, and it's natural for my girl. But most of them turn a dishwater color, whatever that is."

I know what dishwater blond is. *It's the color of Catherine's hair.*

"My friends do the same." Catherine presses her hand to her chest, regrouping. "I will leave you two be. I had Reva get your room ready for you, Brooklyn. There are fresh towels in the bathroom."

"Thanks," Brooke says.

"I'll be back shortly. We can ride to the party together."

"Can't wait," Brooke says.

Catherine presses her lips together and starts to leave. She stops before she makes much headway.

"It was nice to meet you, Moss."

"Likewise."

She nods, letting her eyes undress me before she disappears around the corner.

I pick up the bags and turn to Brooke. She looks as discombobulated as I feel.

It's no fucking wonder she doesn't ever want to speak to her mother. *How the fuck did someone so warmhearted and wonderful come from someone like Catherine Bailey?* She needs and will receive even more reinforcement from me this weekend, that's for sure.

"After you, my lady," I say.

She gives me a soft smile and leads me up the stairs.

THIRTY

BROOKE

The Lodge comes into view. It's an old log structure that sits on a bluff overlooking the valley below. A massive rock fireplace goes up the center, creating a cozy space for parties and get-togethers.

Of course, you have to be a member of the country club to rent it.

"This is amazing," Moss says, pulling up behind a Jaguar. "You would never know this place is up here."

"I know. When I was little, I thought this was where Santa lived so he could watch all the boys and girls. I had no idea that you couldn't see the whole world from here."

Moss smiles but looks away quickly.

"Thank you for getting us out of riding with my mom," I say, running a hand down my black dress. When I picked it out, I chose it to reflect the mood I knew I'd have tonight. Little did I know then that it would match my handsome date so perfectly.

"No offense, but that wasn't for you. That was for me." He turns off the truck. "That woman ..." He whistles through his teeth.

"Tell me about it."

I cringe as I recall every dig she's given me today and the many thinly veiled come-ons to Moss. I would absolutely lose my shit on her if I didn't know he thought she was as atrocious as I do.

Makes me wonder if there is something wrong with the Bailey sisters. Both my mom and my aunt seem to like the men I like. Ew.

Still, it's embarrassing to have him see what she's like. I'd hoped that by having him here, she'd act right. Or, at the very least, be too prideful to show her ass.

I was wrong. But I've been wrong about her many times in my life.
Just get through tonight.

I reach for my purse and Honey's gift when Moss stops me. He cups my chin in his hand and looks me in the eye. From his gaze alone, I feel better. More settled. Not alone.

"I'll tell you about one thing," he says softly. "It's the only thing I care about and the only thing I can think about."

I don't have to ask him what it is because I know. All I can do is smile.

"You are *abso-fucking-lutely* beautiful, Brooke Bailey. It's no wonder your mom acts the way she does. She's so damn jealous of you."

"Moss, stop."

"I mean it." He lets go of my chin. "I don't know her well enough to know why—and, honestly, I don't want to know her any better than I have to—but she's so envious of you that she can't stand it."

Is he serious?

"I'm serious," he says, grinning. "I have theories, but we need to get in there."

He gestures with his head to the front of The Lodge, where people stream in and out.

I wait for him to come around the truck and open my door. My palm rests in his, and he helps me to the asphalt below. He reaches over my shoulder and grabs my purse and the present for me.

"What?" he asks as he notices me staring.

"I can't decide."

He takes my hand and leads me toward the building. "Can't decide what?"

"I can't decide which Moss I like best. I mean, obviously naked Moss is my favorite. But do I like sweaty, dirty Moss? Or sweatpants and T-shirt Moss? Or this Moss?"

I take him in beside me. In pressed black dress pants, which fit his thighs *just so*, and a black button-up that shows off his shoulders like they're a highlight reel—he looks delicious.

"It's no use," I say, grinning. "I can't decide."

"Well, at least you tried. I'm not even pretending I can figure out which Brooke I like best. To be honest, I like whichever you I get—even morning breath Brooke."

My mouth hangs open.

He chuckles. "I'm kidding."

"You just gave me a complex."

"I was joking."

I shrug. "Too bad. I'm not kissing you in the mornings until I've been up, showered, brushed my teeth, used mouthwash—the whole bit."

"That's cute."

"What?" I ask as we step inside The Lodge.

He grins. "You think there's any way in the world that I'm letting you out of bed before you kiss me. That's adorable."

I have never known a man to be such a ... caregiver. He's not pretending to be anything but himself. All of his comments to my mother weren't just for show.

And just now ...

"I'm not even pretending I can figure out which Brooke I like best. To be honest, I like whichever you I get."

I doubt he could possibly understand what his affirmation, his unconditional support, means to me right now. He believes in me. I feel it. That gives me the confidence that I need to get through this night.

For once, I am not alone.

I open my mouth but am cut off by my cousin, Aria, shouting my name.

Thrown off for a moment, I look up to see her walking toward me. She's beautiful, as usual, with her tawny hair pulled up in a fancy twist on top of her head.

"Oh, my gosh, Brooke. It's so good to see you," she says, pulling me into a hug. "I was worried that you wouldn't come."

"I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

She looks up at Moss. A flicker of surprise flashes in her eyes.

"Aria, this is my boyfriend, Moss. Moss, this is my cousin, Aria," I say.

"It's so nice to meet you," Moss says. "I've heard a lot about you."

Aria flushes. "It better have been good."

Moss laughs. "Of course, it was. I've never heard Brooke say a bad word about anyone."

Aria leans back and laughs too. "Now I know you're lying. I'm a part of this family, remember? Even I say a cross thing here and there."

I clear my throat. "On that note, is there anything I should know going into this whole thing?"

"Well," she says, choosing her words carefully, "I'm sure you know that

Geoff will be here.”

“I heard.”

Moss’s hand takes mine immediately.

“I want you to know that I made a fuss about it,” Aria says. “I don’t approve of any of this—of the ... whatever he and Mom are doing or that she had the gall to bring him tonight. I think it’s shitty, and I told her as much.”

My heart swells. “Thanks, Aria. You have no idea how much that means to me.”

She looks up at Moss and grins. “But if I had known you were bringing him, I would’ve encouraged Mom to bring Geoff. You *clearly* won that contest.”

“*Thanks*,” Moss says, making Aria and I both laugh.

Aria looks over her shoulder and nods. Then she turns back to us.

“I need to go,” she says. “My husband can’t seem to find his wallet. Which, as you know, is my problem. Do you make Brooke find your keys and wallet and shoes, Moss?”

“No. She has too many things going on to be keeping track of my ass. I try not to be a thorn in her side so she’ll keep me around.”

I swoon. Even though it’s not totally true, I swoon anyway.

Well played, Moss.

“Damn. I’m sending Hunter to you for lessons.” She winks at me. “Keep that one.”

“I plan on it,” I say, wrapping my arm around Moss’s waist.

“Do you want me to take the gift and put it on the table?” Aria asks. “It’s a madhouse over there because someone—meaning your mom—thought it wasn’t a good visual, so she stuck it by the buffet.”

I hand Aria my package. “Sounds like Mom.”

“You know it.” She frowns. “I’ll see you later.”

And with that, Aria turns to find her husband.

“That went well,” Moss says, surprised. “So there’s one person in this family that’s not an asshole?”

I snort.

“What? Your mom is clearly ...” He hums. “I’m not going there. And your aunt seems to be cut from the same cloth if what you and Aria say is true. But Aria was nice unless it was a façade.”

“No, it’s not. She’s the only one out of them, besides Honey, who has a shred of decency about her.”

I look around the room. Most of the faces I recognize vaguely from Mom's and Kim's social circles. A few of Honey's friends are in the mix, but not many.

Honey was right. This party really isn't about her.

That pisses me off.

"Let's find my grandmother," I say.

We make our way through the throng of people, stopping every now and then to say hello to someone I used to know. A third of the people we speak to are already sloshed—glassy-eyed and overestimating how funny they are.

At each stop, Moss is right by my side and touching me in some way. Whether it's a light touch at the small of my back, his hand around my waist, or if he's standing behind me with his hands on my arms, he makes sure I know he's here.

His presence allows me to breathe easily, to relax a little and actually converse with the two or three people I'm happy to see. It feels like he repels any negative energy that comes my way—like the energy that rolls off Geoff from the corner of the room.

Fuck you for being here, bastard.

I spot Honey standing in the front of the room next to two giant ferns. She has a Shirley Temple in her hand and looks happier than I've seen her in a long time.

"It was nice seeing you, Sherrie," I say. "I'm going to say hello to Honey."

"Sure. Go right along."

I grab Moss's hand and lead him to my grandma. She sees us coming and gracefully exits her conversation and walks toward us, arms extended.

"My Bee," she says, pulling me into a hug. She smells like Listerine and blueberry muffins, a combination that shouldn't be comforting, but is. "How are you, sweet girl?"

Tears fill my eyes as I take her in.

Every time I see her, she looks older. And frailer. And less vibrant.

It breaks my heart.

I remember sitting on the curb while she pruned her roses and playing Frisbee with her in the backyard. She was always so much fun—my respite from my gloomy life. Seeing her as a shell of her previous self is hard.

"I'm so happy to see you," I say. "You look beautiful."

She rolls her eyes. "You are as beautiful as I've ever seen you. And this

man ...” She reaches up and pats Moss’s chest. “You’re a looker.”

Moss chuckles. “Now I see where Brooke got her beauty from—and her wit.”

“Every damn thing she got that’s good, she got it from me,” Honey says.

“You know what? I believe that,” Moss says, smiling.

Honey winks at him.

“Happy Birthday, by the way.” Moss reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small box. “This is for you.”

What the hell is that?

I look at him, but he won’t look at me.

“You didn’t have to get me a gift,” Honey says, clearly touched.

She takes Moss’s hand and pulls him to a chair at the front. I follow along, confused but also speechless.

He got her a gift? When? Why?

Honey sits and lets go of Moss. Then she carefully unwraps the yellow bow around the white box.

“I was going to put it with the others,” Moss says. “But I thought you would open it and not know who it was from.”

Honey chuckles. “You are as stupid as you are sweet.”

Moss’s brows tug together, and he finally looks at me. I shrug.

“You are as sweet as a tomato in July. But if you think I could see your face and not remember who you are ...” She laughs to herself. “I think they’ll be talking about you around here for a *long time*.”

Honey’s face falls. “Oh, Moss. This is ...” She looks up at him. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome. I hope you like it.”

“Like it? *Here*.” She lifts something out of the box. “Help me fasten it on my blouse.” She hands whatever it is to Moss. “Left side. A lady always wears a brooch on the left side.”

“Okay,” he says.

A brooch?

I stand back, in awe, and watch my boyfriend pin a piece of jewelry onto my grandmother. As he pulls his hands back, I see what it is.

Tears fill my eyes.

It’s a honeycomb with a tiny bee perched at the top. *Honey and Bee*.

He glances at me, and I shake my head. *If you touch me, I’m gonna cry*.

Honey takes one of my hands and one of Moss’s and holds them together

in hers. There's a look on her face that I know so well. It's amazing that he's responsible for both of them.

I have so many questions for him; there are so many things I want to say. But amongst all of these people isn't the right time or place.

"Bee," Honey says, "you've picked a good one. And not just because he bought me jewelry—but that didn't hurt."

I grin at her.

"Remember what I told you about your grandpa?" she asks.

"He was smitten with me, I could tell. He was sturdy in his body, sure, but also in his character. He never forgot even the smallest things. Your grandpa took absolute pride in making sure that I was taken care of, that I had what I needed, and most everything that I ever wanted."

"Yes," I say. "I remember."

"That." She nods definitively as if the single word is all she needs to say.

And maybe it is.

Maybe it really is.

"Excuse me." Aria places her hand on my arm. "I hate to interrupt, but do you remember Maggie DeLoche?"

"Oh, yes, I do. She hooked up with her mom's tennis pro, right?"

Moss raises his eyebrows and stifles a laugh.

"She's here, a little tipsy, but wants to say hello," Aria says. "Do you mind? I'd rather you come to her than have her come in here and make a scene."

"She's at the party?" I ask.

"Uh, *no*. No, she's not. She's, well, that's a long story and one I don't want to repeat in front of our grandmother."

Honey sighs. "I wasn't born yesterday, Aria Elizabeth."

"Clearly, Grandma. This is your eighty-fifth birthday party."

We all chuckle.

I look at Moss. He nods.

"Go ahead," he says. "I'll find someone to talk to."

Music begins to play overhead as servers appear, mixing in through the crowd with glasses of champagne.

Such a Catherine Bailey touch.

I roll my eyes, knowing Honey doesn't give a damn about the optics.

"Maybe Honey will be kind enough to give me a dance," Moss says.

Honey's eyes light up. "Bee, child, if you don't leave me with this man,

I'll never forgive you."

Aria and I laugh.

"Don't hurt him," I tease.

"I promise nothing. It's my party. I'll hurt him if I want to," Honey says.

"Get out of here," Moss jokes.

We exchange a grin, my heart bursting with happiness—a feeling I didn't expect to have tonight—and walk away with Aria.

THIRTY-ONE

MOSS

“You are quite charming,” Honey says, letting me lead her slowly around the area near the stage. “I think my granddaughter is quite taken with you.”

“I’ve tried very hard to make that happen, I assure you.”

She taps her palm lightly against my bicep. “I bet.”

I look over her head and take in the gaggle of people milling around. Brooke is nowhere to be seen, and although I know she’s with her cousin, and she wanted to go, it still unnerves me.

She was absolutely right to feel like the hen in the henhouse because foxes are lurking everywhere. Even the women who stopped to *say hello* were really feeling out her situation. It’s disgusting and makes me feel filthy. I can’t imagine what it was like for Brooke growing up—or what it’s like for her to be here now. I’m just fucking glad I’m here—and that she didn’t end up with some random guy she barely knew—as I know I’m the only one who could support her the way she needed.

Boyfriend or friend, I would have been here for her.

“My instincts about people are usually right,” Honey says, swaying to a Sinatra tune. “And I have a good feeling about you. You are a lot like my Jimmy.”

“Oh, so he was dapper as well as charming?”

Honey laughs. “Yes, actually, he was. Just like you. Which is why I think Brooke made a great choice in you.”

“Getting the grandmother’s stamp of approval is always a positive thing. But in Brooke’s case, I think it means more than usual. I know how much she values your opinion.”

She rolls her eyes. “Well, if we’re taking the blanket off the baby—who

else should she listen to? Her mother? Kimberly?” She scoffs. “Those two ... I’m almost embarrassed to admit they’re mine half of the time.”

“I think my mom thinks that about my two youngest brothers,” I joke.

“Your mother obviously did a damn good job.”

“I’ll tell her you said so.” I twirl her around slowly. “So do you have any tips on how to make Brooke happy? Any little tidbits that will help me later?”

She smiles. “I think you’re doing an excellent job doing whatever it is that you’re doing.”

“I’d tell you what that is, but it’s your granddaughter, so that would get weird.”

Honey’s eyes light up. “Do you want to know something? It’s refreshing to have someone talk to me like I’m still a human being. Yes, *I’m old*. I know. I get it. But I used to be young and sexy and knew all the tricks that lovers do.”

She pauses and shakes her hips side to side.

I laugh. “Who says you’re not sexy now?”

She laughs too. “Okay. There is one thing that I’ll tell you, and then I have to sit these old knees down.”

“Shoot.”

Honey slows, her hand regripping mine. “If you’re going to love that girl, love her with everything you have.”

My heart stills in my chest. I wonder if Honey can feel the sweat that coats my palms.

“Bee deserves to have someone in her life who will put her above all else, like my Jimmy did me. That’s my biggest wish—the only thing I’ll think about when I blow my candles out later.”

My throat goes dry, but I try to deflect from it.

“You’re not supposed to tell your wishes, you know,” I say, winking at her.

“You won’t tell, will you?”

“Never. Not a word.”

She stops moving and clenches one of my hands with both of her own.

“Can you help me get back to my chair? This was the highlight of my year, I’ll have you know. It’s been quite some time since the most handsome man in the room asked me to dance.”

“Then I’ll be back next year, and we’ll do it again.”

She smiles up at me.

I guide her to her chair and get her settled. Too bad I can't settle myself.

"Would you like a drink?" I ask her. "I'd be happy to go get you one."

"No, I'm okay. Gotta watch my liquid intake these days. You'll know what that's like someday."

I press a kiss on her cheek. "Happy Birthday, Honey."

"Thank you, Moss."

I slip away as a partygoer approaches to say hello.

"If you're going to love that girl, love her with everything you have."

Fucking hell.

I avoid eye contact with everyone and attempt to find a bottle of water. I decline a glass of champagne offered to me because I need to keep a clear head.

My heart beats entirely too fast as Honey's words roll around my head.

I do love Brooke.

It no longer freaks me out to think about it. *I love Brooke Bailey.* It's a part of me, a fact like anything else.

And, without a doubt, I will love her with everything that I have. I don't know any other way. That's how love has always been shown to me by my parents, my gran, my brothers, and Allie.

Allie.

"I love you, Moss. So much. And I know you love me too. I'll call you tomorrow, and we'll submit our applications to Chapel Hill together."

I told Allie that I'd never love anyone the way I loved her. And even though I know Brooke now has my heart, I'm not sure I can say those words. Not yet.

There are so many things attached to those three words for me—so many emotions, so much fear—that I never really believed I would ever say them again. I never thought I'd feel this again.

I never wanted to.

If I'm going to tell Brooke that I love her, I'm going to have to tell her about Allie. I need her to see this part of me. *I want her to.* I just don't know how.

My stomach roils as I wade through the crowd. Sweat paints my skin underneath my clothes.

If I tell Brooke that I love her—if I put that into the universe—there will be no going back for me. It will be forever.

Am I ready to set myself up for the potential to get decimated? Again?

I'll never survive that kind of pain a second time. Especially not with Brooke involved.

"*Fuck,*" I mutter, my head starting to spin.

I turn a corner, desperately needing a cold drink, when someone steps into my path.

"Hey," he says, his voice reminiscent of one of those cold-case hosts on television. "You must be Moss."

"Yeah. Who are you?"

He sticks out a hand. "I'm Geoff."

This should get interesting.

His black pants are slightly wrinkled, and his yellow tie is crooked. His smile is smarmy and gets under my skin. It would even if I didn't hate him already.

"Hey, Geoff. It's nice to meet you," I say, shaking his hand. I squeeze it a little tighter than necessary—just enough to see a pinch of pain roll through his eyes. Then I let go. "I've heard a lot about you."

"Have you? That's nice. I've heard a lot about you too."

"That's nice."

A woman appears out of nowhere in a gray pantsuit. She looks like a slightly younger and a bit wilder version of Catherine.

"Moss," she says, her voice as insincere as her sister's. "I'm glad I finally got a chance to say hello."

Oh, fuck.

I don't want to be doing this with either of them at the moment. *I just need a drink of water.*

I take a deep breath and remember this is why I'm here.

"You must be Kimberly," I say.

She's flattered that I know her name. "Why, yes. I am. How did you know?"

"Well, Brooke said her mother had an older sister. You two look so much alike. It's impossible not to see the shared DNA."

"*Oh.*" She blanches. "I'm her younger sister and—"

"I met your daughter earlier," I say, cutting her off. "She and Brooke ran off to say hello to someone. Have you seen them?"

"I haven't." She takes a moment to get her bearings. "How long have you and Brooklyn been seeing each other?"

Does she really think she's going to get me to say something that she can

use against my girl?

“Long enough to know that she’s my forever,” I say. “I just can’t believe that someone as gorgeous and talented as Brooke would want anything to do with me.”

Geoff’s jaw clenches. “I can see your reasoning behind that.”

Kim shoots daggers at him and then turns to me. “Maybe you’ll save a dance for me, Moss?”

Oh, and kill two birds—Brooke and Geoff—with one stone?

“Not likely, Kim,” I say, lifting a brow.

Her eyes narrow. She leans in toward me, her lips inches from my ear. “We all know you aren’t really dating her. We saw her post. So give it up.” She pulls back and smiles. “And if you want to give it to me, I’ll be around.”

What. The. Fuck?

Although I’m blindsided by this whole thing—*what’s up with saying that in front of Geoff?*—I can’t let her get the best of me.

Or the best of Brooke.

I motion between the two of them. “I don’t know what in the hell is going on between the two of you, and I don’t care. I—”

“Don’t tell me you’ve never heard of swingers before,” she says, lifting her chin. “I could have a lot of fun with you.”

“Yeah. No, thanks. Fuck whomever you want to fuck—be my guest. But it’s not gonna be me.” I look at Geoff. “I’m not fucking you either. Don’t ask.”

“You’re hilarious,” he says, unamused.

Kim laughs. “You know how to find me, Moss.”

Wow.

She moseys down the hallway, leaving me with her pathetic excuse of a man.

I let my gaze rough him up a little before I start to turn away. But the man is as dumb as he looks because he can’t let it go.

“She still loves me, you know,” he says.

I chuckle. “*Okay.*”

He stands up taller. “She does. Things didn’t work out between us because she was too lazy in the sack. Hell, she was lazy at home too. That bitch isn’t worth the money it cost me to divorce her.”

What the actual fuck?

My blood boils. I step toward him, clenching my hands into fists so I

don't break his face. I look so far into this motherfucker's eyes that I can see his black soul.

It's safe to say by the way he gulps that he sees mine too.

Leaning in just past his shoulder so, if he was feeling froggy, he couldn't land a punch, I growl a piece of advice. "You got your one."

"What?"

"You got your one," I say calmly. "But that's all you get. If we were anywhere else, you'd be picking your teeth up off the floor right now."

He tries to step backward, but I just move with him.

"I'm not going to fuck you up in front of all of these people because I promised my lady I wouldn't do that," I say. "But if you say anything else—*one fucking word*—I'm going to fucking destroy you right here, right in front of God and everyone, and that's *really* gonna piss me off."

"Moss—"

"*Listen, motherfucker,*" I say, my anger continuing to build. "Fucking say another word, and I will end you. Got it?"

He nods.

"*Great.*" I step away from him and straighten his shirt. "Now run along and go watch your fucked-up cougar get fucked by some other man tonight. That man won't be me. You're welcome for that too."

He looks at me, completely frazzled.

I walk away. *I'm so fucking angry.*

"Things didn't work out between us because she was too lazy in the sack. Hell, she was lazy at home too. That bitch isn't worth the money it cost me to divorce her."

Give me two minutes with that bastard outside of here, and he'll never speak again.

I nod, smiling like nothing ever happened to a couple standing near an exit, and make my way back into the throes of the party.

Who the hell are these people?

I scan the crowd, music pumping through the speakers overhead, and look for Brooke. She's still nowhere to be seen.

My irritation mixes with a profound concern that I left her alone with these fucks.

I walk faster, sweeping the crowd, looking for my girl.

Where the hell are you, Brookie?

THIRTY-TWO

BROOKE

“Brooklyn—a word. *Please.*”

My mother is standing outside the restroom when I walk out. I don’t even have to see the look on her face to know that she’s been waiting for this. Her tone gives her away.

“Sure,” I say, trying to keep it light. “Go for it.”

“Not here.”

Oh, shit.

I’m sure The Lodge isn’t shrinking. Yet it feels like the walls are starting to collapse around me, sucking all of the air out of the room.

I don’t want to do this. I want to find Moss.

“Mom, I really need to find my boyfriend. He’s out there mingling with people he doesn’t know,” I say, appealing to her pragmatic, *it matters what people see* side. “I probably need to rescue him.”

She glances down the hall to ensure we’re alone. “I’m sure the last thing that man needs is you rescuing him.”

The good vibrations that I’ve carried so far tonight are gone.

“Let’s duck in here for a moment and have a quick chat,” she says, opening a door to a room with various decorations and a Christmas tree strewn about.

I sigh. “Okay.”

There’s no way out of this besides just walking away from her. But if I do that, there’s a chance she’ll humiliate me in front of Moss when we get back to her house. That won’t be her first choice of how to handle things, but she’ll do that before she bites her tongue.

Catherine Bailey will be heard.

I step inside the small room, a mustiness thick in the air. It smells like old Christmas ornaments in the back of the basement and the scent makes me nauseous.

Mom tries to close the door, but it won't stay flush. I try my hand at it, but it keeps popping back open for me too.

Wanting to get this over with, I give up and turn around to face her. "What's wrong?"

"What on earth are you doing, Brooklyn?"

"What do you mean?"

My voice is almost robotic—so controlled that it doesn't even sound like me. The words slip into the air and then fall like bricks.

Mom's hands fly through the air. "I don't even know where to begin."

"Pick a spot. Any spot."

She narrows her eyes. "Do you think this is funny? Because it's not."

"It depends on what we're talking about."

"You're such a comedian. Everything is a joke to you, isn't it?"

I'm flabbergasted. I have no idea what she's talking about. The only thing remotely funny about this whole situation is that I had the audacity to believe, if only for a moment, that maybe *this* wouldn't happen. That my mother would actually have the respect for her own mother and not corner me to berate me at her birthday party.

What the hell is she cornering me about, though?

"I tell you what," I say, reining myself in. "Why don't you be a little clearer about what you want to discuss, and then we can have a conversation about it? Because right now, you're just throwing paint on the wall, and I can't do much with that."

"Fine." Her voice shakes with unbridled fury. "Let's start here—I know why I wasn't allowed to ride here with you and Moss tonight." She takes a step toward me. "Because of you."

No, it was really because of you.

But I don't say that because it won't help. It'll add fuel to the fire, and I just want to stop, drop, and roll.

"Actually, what I heard is that you hired a driver, and Moss thought he might be more comfortable driving so we could leave early if we needed to."

"Well, I know the truth. I know you have been filling his head with thoughts about me to the point that he will barely speak to me when you're not around."

A slow smile parts my cheeks. “He’s a grown man, Mother. I’m sure he can determine who he wants to talk to and who he doesn’t.”

“Oh, I’m sure he can. And I’m sure he would if you weren’t suffocating him.”

What the hell is she talking about?

I should back right out of this door because she’s talking nonsense. But this is Moss she’s talking about, and I feel protective of him.

“You are out of your mind,” I say carefully.

“I’ve watched you tonight.” She narrows her eyes. “You cling to his side as if he might leave you too.”

What?

“You track him through the room with your eyes as if you think he might talk to another woman,” she says, her voice teeming with hate.

For me.

“Mom, just ... stop.” I blink back tears. “Let’s not do this, okay?”

“I’m trying to help you. I’m trying to guide you. I’m trying to keep you from ruining your life by not knowing what to do to keep your man. Not that you have a chance in hell of keeping that one.”

“What? *What is wrong with you?* Why do you do this shit to me?”

I wince as another knife thrown by my own mother slices me to the core.

How many times can this happen in one lifetime? Does it ever stop?

I look into her face and see the woman who looks so much like me. The one who managed to show me moments of kindness and grace through the years.

When she told me how proud she was of me when I was crowned homecoming queen.

How she beamed when I made the varsity cheer squad.

The way she bragged about me when I dated the quarterback of the football team even though he verbally abused me for six months.

Inside me, there’s a little girl who just wants her mother to love her. And that’s never going to happen.

Tears flow down my cheeks. She doesn’t even flinch.

“I made so many mistakes in my life, Brooklyn. I did so many things wrong. And I’m trying to help you by showing you where you’re messing up.”

“You know how I messed up? *I came here.*”

She takes a step toward me. “Your first mistake was *humiliating me* with

that stupid, godforsaken post on the internet. I have been laughed at and ridiculed because my daughter had to dig so low to get a date.”

I wipe my face with the backs of my hands.

“And I have no idea how you had the nerve to bring Moss here thinking we’d believe that *he’s* dating *you*.”

“That’s funny,” I say. “Because he is.”

“Well, he won’t be for long.” She narrows her eyes. “You’re going to lose him, you know.”

I hold out a hand. “Mom, stop talking.”

“You are. *You’re going to lose him*. You won’t be able to watch the women who will hit on him, and you won’t know where to begin to try to fight for him.”

“I won’t have to fight to keep him. That’s not how it works. Maybe for you. Maybe you had to fight for Dad’s attention, but it’s not that way with us.”

Her laugh is high and tight. “*Okay*.”

“It’s not! He grabs my hand as much as I grab his. He reaches for me at night. He holds me because he wants to. He sends me flowers and—”

“None of that is normal behavior,” she fires back. “Don’t you see? He’s responding to the way you smother him because you’re so damn needy. You always have been, and you always will be, and that’s why your life is in shambles.”

“I ...” The lump in my throat constricts my airway, and I can’t talk and breathe at the same time.

She crosses her arms over her chest. “If you don’t back away and realize what men need in relationships, you’re going to push him away.”

“No, I’m not.”

“*You are going to push him away*.” She shrugs as if it’s a fact. “It’s hard to hear, I know. It messes up this fake little reality that you’ve somehow created. But I’m here, as your mother, as the person who wants what’s best for you, to tell you to stop acting like a child or he’ll find someone else.”

“I don’t act like a child. And *how dare you* tell me that you want what’s best for me?” My voice shakes with anger. “You don’t even know me enough to know what’s best for me.”

She throws her hands up. “Okay. Whatever. Just don’t come crying to me when you have another failed relationship on your hands and have to find another job in another city ...” She smiles almost as if she enjoys this. “You

have embarrassed me enough. If you do it again, I'm done with you."

It's almost a relief in an odd way that she threw down the gauntlet. I've lived my whole life waiting for the next thing with her. But a part of me hopes she'll recant her words and realize that I'm her only child. That she'll realize that she's meant it every time she's told me she's loved me.

But now I know that they are only words she throws out as an afterthought.

She doesn't know what love is. And she *certainly* doesn't want me in her life.

"I'll make it easier for you—you can be done with me now," I say softly. "Just say the word."

We watch each other, waiting for the other one to break. But what she doesn't realize is that she's already broken me.

A wave of sadness erupts from my soul and causes a fresh stream of tears to streak down my face.

"See?" Her voice is as soft as mine. "You're giving me an ultimatum. I have to play by your rules, or you're done with me."

My eyes bug out. "You're joking, right?"

"You said it. Not me."

"Mom ..." I laugh out of frustration. "You realize that your exact words were *I'll be done with you*. Right?"

"And you raised the ante." She takes another step toward me. "Don't you see, Brooklyn—this is what you do. You want everyone to love you the way you want to be loved, and that's not how it works. Love isn't something you just get. It's not this soul-crushing, life-changing thing like you think it is. And watching you walk around thinking that people just owe you that is very difficult for me, as your mother."

"Wow. Okay." I shake my head, trying to make sure I'm not mishearing this. "I can't ... I can't do this with you. I understand you don't love me in the way I define it—which is wrong according to you. I know. I get it. I understand. But I can't ... I can't put myself through this."

She lifts her chin. "Then how are you *ever* going to put yourself through this with Moss?"

"I don't know," I say with a tired laugh. "I don't know, Mom. I just know that I love him, and he loves me."

"Has he ever even told you that? Or are you imagining all of this? Because I have a suspicion," she says, smacking her lips together, "that none

of this is real to him. That he's playing a game you made up like the child you can be. And now you've twisted it in your head to mean something else, and ... *it's not.*"

I can't move. I want to. I want to turn around and walk out of here and never see her again.

But her words get all mixed up in my brain, prickling at my biggest fears. Rationally, I know that's exactly what she's trying to do. It's what she always does. But she hits a very tender spot tonight.

Moss.

This thing between us did start as a game, a joke—to protect me from her. But we are in love. I know it. I feel it. It's tangible to me.

And I won't let her mess that up.

"I'm going to walk out of here," I say, choking back a sob, "and I won't see you again—"

Her face alights with fury. "You are a disgrace to me. *A humiliation.* A little girl who thinks she can walk into my life, into my world, and decide how things work. You will not—"

Mom's eyes go wide as her voice falls.

I'm pushed gently forward by the door. I step to the side, my vision blurred from my tears, and let Moss in.

I want to shrivel up and die rather than let him see me like this. *How did I ever think this was a good idea?*

He wraps his arms around me and pulls me into his chest, not bothering to look anywhere but at me.

My mother is the elephant in the room.

Moss pulls away and wipes the tears off my cheeks. He looks at me, his eyes void of judgment or irritation. They're just filled with concern.

"*Pizza,*" I whisper.

His jaw sets. He locks my fingers in his and sets his sights on Catherine Bailey.

"You are a pitiful excuse for a mother," he says, his voice low and even.

I squeeze his hand while holding my breath. *What is he doing?*

"The only person in this room who should be humiliated is you," he says. "The way you treat your daughter is disgusting. *You're abhorrent.* I have no idea why she would ever even entertain the idea of having anything to do with you."

My lips quiver as I watch Moss defend me. Stand up for me. *Love me.*

“She does that because I’m her mother,” she spits.

“You’re not a mother. You donated an egg.” He shakes his head. It’s its own slap in her face. “A mother loves unconditionally. Supports and encourages. You do none of that. You’re an insult to the word.”

“How would you know? You don’t even know me.”

“It’s a small blessing not to know you, Catherine.”

Her jaw drops.

I just stand beside him and watch, wide-eyed.

“Since you won’t protect her, I will.”

“What does that mean?”

“If you can’t talk to her with respect, with kindness, with the love that she deserves—don’t call. Because Brooke has built an amazing life for herself. She’s highly successful in her career. She has friends who adore her. A boyfriend who thinks she’s the best thing that’s ever happened to him.”

I sniffle, trying desperately not to weep.

“She has my family—a family that knows how lucky we are to have her around.”

I cry silently, so touched by his words.

“Go back to your house because it’s certainly not a home, and look at the walls with no pictures because there are no good memories to share,” he says. “Feel how cold it gets when no one gives a damn about you and remember that someone did. *Brooke*. You pushed her away out of some weird jealousy or whatever it is that makes you act like this. Because I sure as hell can’t figure it out.”

Her face is awash in horror. “Brooklyn ...”

“I told you, Mom. I love him, and he loves me. That’s what this looks like.”

Moss looks down. His eyes search mine. “You ready to go?”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

He takes my hand and guides me out.

THIRTY-THREE

MOSS

I crank up the heat.

It's been the quietest, coldest ride back to Kismet Beach. Brooke and I talked briefly from The Lodge back to Catherine's to pick up our luggage. Since we got back in the truck, neither of us has said much.

Brooke has stared out the window, crying softly every now and then. I can't imagine how she feels after having her mother say that shit to her face. It boggles my mind. It was so unbelievable, so mind-bending.

That couldn't have been real.

But it was.

I've always thought her need for a fake boyfriend was a little dramatic. It was fine, though, because I was all too willing to have a legitimate excuse to *help out a friend*. To be with her. To spend time with her. Now I see that I was wrong. It wasn't dramatic. It was totally fucking necessary.

Fuck those people.

If I'm honest, that's not the only thing causing my head to spin. It's what Brooke said. How she defended ... *us*.

I tap the steering wheel, hoping the monotonous rhythm will help me think. The only thought that rolls through my mind are the three lines that I can't get out of my head.

"I told you, Mom. I love him, and he loves me. That's what this looks like."

My heart beats so hard that I think it might explode, catapulting out of my chest. Because I'm not ready. Yes, I can defend her. Yes, I can stand up to her mom and tell her what a horrible shrew she is. But ...

"I love him."

I bend forward to ease the knot in my stomach. Brooke looks at me over her shoulder but doesn't say anything.

I've only heard those words come out of one woman's mouth. Women have said they loved me robotically because it's what they say after sex. Allie is the only person who's ever said it and meant it.

Until now.

And while I'm honored and almost relieved that Brooke loves me—because I sure as fuck love her—I'm not prepared for this entire conversation.

Not tonight. Not after all of the bullshit we just went through.

I break out into a cold sweat—a bone-chilling, vomit-inducing panic. *Why? Why can I not tell this beautiful, brave woman next to me that I love her?*

“Are you okay?”

Brooke's question cuts through my thoughts and pulls me back to the truck.

Her cheeks are tearstained. Her mascara smudged around her eyes. She's wounded and rightfully so, but she's still worried about *me*.

“I'm fine. How are *you*?” I ask. “You're the one who just dealt with monsters.”

She shrugs.

“I'm sorry you had to go through all of that. I shouldn't have let you be alone with them,” I say, gritting my teeth. “I failed you there.”

“I shouldn't have gone to that party to start with. It was stupid. Of anyone, Honey would have understood if I would've bailed.” She stretches her legs out in front of her, a look of resolution on her face. “It's amazing that you can be thirty years old and still want your parents' approval. I'm an adult. My mom is obviously a psycho. Why do I do this to myself?”

I take a deep breath and try to find the best path through this landmine-filled topic.

“You need to cut yourself some slack,” I say. “I think parental validation goes back to when we were cave babies or something.”

She grins. “Are you talking about Banks again?”

I chuckle, taking her hand in mine. “We're hardwired to want our parents to be proud of us. I think that in normal situations, parents give that validation to encourage their offspring to do the right thing. Kind of like Pavlov's dog.”

“That makes sense, I guess.”

“But when it gets all fucked up, and the parents’ wiring is faulty, that doesn’t mean your wiring goes bad too. You still need the one thing they can’t give you. It’s like ... taking your car to the gas station needing gas. Only the gas pump is releasing lemonade. You still need the gas. It only knows lemonade. What do you do?”

She shrugs.

“I’ll tell you what you do,” I say. “You say *fuck the ducks*.”

“*Those fucking ducks*.”

We laugh quietly. I reach up and turn the heat down a couple of degrees.

“Thank you for going with me,” she says. “You’re the only reason it wasn’t the absolute worst. And watching my mom while you gave her the classiest *fuck you* in the world was amazing.” She grins. “Your mom would’ve been proud.”

“My mom probably would’ve hit her. She’s a pacifist and all, but she’s still our mother. I think she has it in her.”

She laughs. “I can’t imagine Damaris in a fight. Can you? What would be her go-to move? Is she a jabber? Does she have a hook?”

I think about that. “I think she has the spinning backfist. That’s her power move. She’d turn like she was going to walk away and then knock them out without them ever seeing it.”

“Yup. That’s it.” Brooke leans back in her seat. “She would totally have a *bless your heart* blow—sophisticated to the end.”

I squeeze her hand.

We drive a few more miles in silence. We both have a lot on our minds, and the road gives us time to sort it out.

Mostly.

I lift my palm from hers and put it back on the steering wheel. My skin glides against the leather, damp from my perspiration. I want to open the window for some fresh air but I know it would be too cold for Brooke.

Brooke. I look at her again—how beautiful, how resilient.

Let’s hope I can be as strong as her.

“Are you okay?” Brooke asks softly. “I know you said you are, but you’re just ... not yourself.”

“I’m just worried about you.” I clear my throat. “Tonight couldn’t have been easy.”

“Par for the course, buddy. I’ve had variations of that my whole life.”

“It shouldn’t be that way, you know.”

She nods. “Yeah. I know.”

Her shoes come off, and her legs slide under her. She does this every time she’s gearing up for a conversation. She gets settled in and comfortable so she can focus on the words.

There’s nowhere to go to avoid this—the conversation that I know is coming. I see it in her pretty blue eyes. The curiosity. The hope. The love.

I try to swallow the dread creeping up my throat. I make every attempt to stop the panic spreading through me like wildfire.

I shake my head and blow out a breath.

“If you’re going to love that girl, love her with everything you have.”

My insides tighten. *If I tell her I love her, it will ruin everything.*

“Are you thinking about us?” she asks carefully. “Because I get the feeling you are.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because you’ve only held my hand once this entire trip. You always hold my hand in the truck.”

I look down to see her hand on her lap. *Shit.*

“Did all of that stuff that happened tonight ... did it change the way you look at me?” she asks.

“What? No. Of course not.” I reach over and take her hand, squeezing it tight. “Why would you even ask me that?”

She shrugs. “Putting one and one together and getting two.”

“Your math sucks.”

“I’m glad.” She runs her thumb over the top of my hand. “But speaking of us, now that the party is over, what do you see happening?”

Here we go.

I shift in my seat and then drop my hand from the steering wheel onto my thigh. I wipe the sweat off onto my pants before grabbing the wheel again.

The conversation that I’ve gone out of my way to ensure I never had with another woman is on my doorstep ... on the one night that neither of us has the capacity to deal with it.

There’s no need to open more wounds tonight. There’s no need to tempt fate.

“I thought we were going to wait until after the Excellence Awards to talk about this,” I say, trying to circle us back to our original agreement.

Not that I fucking know what I’ll do then either. I’ve just lived in this

bubble and ignored the elephant in the room.

Of course, we were going to get here. I was a fool for ignoring it, for letting this situation get out of control.

For falling in love with her. And letting her fall in love with me.

Now what?

“I mean, we were,” she says, her voice wobbly. “But that was before.”

“Before what?”

The only thing between us is the middle console, but it feels like a hell of a lot more. She might as well be riding in the car behind me.

Don't do this. Don't go there. Not tonight. Please.

I feel her withdraw from me, sinking into the passenger side door. The distance between us—physically and emotionally—kills me.

There's nothing that I want more than to pull over and drag her into my arms and hold her until we're both sick of one another. But that's not practical, and it won't solve anything.

It won't get us out of this conversation.

“Look,” I say, my throat tight. “I know we have some things to discuss. But tonight's probably not the best night. Our emotions are high. We're stressed. Tired. *Hungry.*”

I expect her to laugh at my joke—*she's always hungry*, but she doesn't.

Fuck.

“True,” she says. “But wouldn't having this conversation provide us some relief? Let us relax into ... whatever we are?”

My breath is shaky as I suck in a lungful of air. I reach up and flip the heater off.

Grabbing my collar, I pull it away from my neck. It's scratchy all of a sudden.

“Moss?”

“Moss, honey, wake up. We need to tell you something.”

“Yeah?” I say.

“Why are you avoiding this?”

“Allie didn't make it. No one had any idea.”

I clear my throat. “I just don't think tonight is a good night.”

“And tomorrow will be?”

“Moss, you can't get into college if you let your grades keep slipping. We know this is hard, but your life can't stop.”

I close my eyes and block out the memories. “Maybe. Maybe tomorrow

will be better.”

“You were rejected from Chapel Hill.”

“And a day changes things how?”

“What do you mean you’re not wrestling your senior year? You’ve wrestled since you were four years old.”

I rub a hand down my face.

“What does any of this matter? All of my plans were with her, and she’s just ... gone. She was stolen from me in the middle of the night, and now I have to figure out how to live with this ... with this life that I don’t even know? I don’t give a fuck about wrestling anymore. I don’t give a fuck about anything!”

My stomach twists.

“After all the crap we’ve been through since yesterday,” she says, her sweet voice soft and measured, “I know with absolute certainty that I love you.”

Fuck.

My.

Life.

My mind races, trying to find a way to back the hell up and stop this conversation from happening. But when I look over my shoulder and see the fear in her eyes, I know I can’t do that.

It happened.

And now I have to deal with it.

“I feel that way about you too,” I say, my face burning.

“You love me?”

“Yes.”

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my eyes on the road.

“Why won’t you say it?” she asks.

She turns away from me, crossing her arms over her chest. It’s not in defiance. It’s a self-protective motion that makes me feel like shit.

You don’t have to protect yourself from me. I’m trying to do that for you.

“Does it really matter?” I ask.

Even though I know it matters. It matters so much to her, in particular.

“It does to me,” she says.

We pull into Kismet Beach, and I prepare to go through town toward my road. But as we approach the turn-off to Brooke’s house, she speaks.

“Will you take me home, please?”

“You don’t want to go home with me?”

“I don’t think so.”

Fine. We’ll go to your house then.

I turn down her street, making no effort to hurry. The houses are dark. The road is empty.

She needs the words, but how do I say this? How do I explain to her that I’m too fucking scared to ever utter those words again ... because the cost is too high?

“The last time I said those words to someone, my entire life imploded,” I say, my voice empty of emotions. *It has to be.* “The entire course of my life changed. I’ve never said it again.”

“So you won’t say it?”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t mean it. You know I do.”

She rolls her tongue around her mouth while she thinks.

“Should I have had a better plan to deal with this?” I ask. “Yes. Absolutely. But I don’t. Okay? I don’t. I don’t know what I was going to do after the Awards. I guess ... maybe a part of me was hoping it wouldn’t come up.”

“Good plan,” she says, lifting a brow.

Panic rises in my throat.

“This thing between us wasn’t real. It was fake. And—”

“This was never fake, and you know it.”

Fuck!

“So let me make sure I understand,” she says carefully. “We’re supposed to go on doing what we’re doing?”

“Yes. Nothing changes for me. I don’t want things to change between us at all.”

“But they have changed for me, Moss. I’m in love with you. I’m so in love with you that I’m ready to forget the reasons I didn’t want to be in a relationship because they don’t matter anymore. I didn’t believe I could ever be enough. That I wasn’t enough as I was. You heard my mother tonight. You know why I doubted that love could just come freely, as-is. You said some pretty incredible things about me, you defended me, so I was convinced that we were on the same page. That you can see an ... *an us.*”

Exhale.

“That doesn’t work, though, if you don’t feel the same way,” she says.

“I do. I told you that I do.”

I reach for her hand, but she pulls it away.

My heart cracks, fear packing in the crevices. My head spins so fast that I can't get ahold of it.

"Let's get a shower, go to bed, and talk tomorrow morning. Okay?" I ask.

I pull to a stop in her driveway and look at her. My eyes plead with her to just listen to what I'm saying. *To hear me.*

She tilts her head while she looks at me, her long lashes fluttering like a butterfly's wings. Her finger drags across her lips as she thinks.

"We had a conversation once," she says, staring in front of her. "I don't know if you remember or not. But I told you that I just wanted someone to love me for me."

"I remember."

"With no strings. No conditions." She licks her lips. "So what are you telling me? That you'll never be able to tell me you love me? Is that right?"

I groan. "I don't know, Brooke. I don't fucking know. I say it in my head a hundred times a day. I feel it in every part of me. But when I think about saying those words to you, all I can do is remember the complete destruction that follows them. I can't survive that again."

"And not telling me you love me somehow prevents that?"

"What we have right now is so fucking special. Why risk it? Why tempt the universe into destroying it?" I laugh sadly. "I know it's stupid. And if you're going to leave me if I don't say it, I'll say it. I won't let you walk away."

She sighs sadly. "I don't know what to say. My feelings are all jumbled up, and I can't make sense of them."

"I know. So let's go inside and get some rest."

"But I do know one thing."

I'm afraid to ask, but I do it anyway. "What's that?"

"I promised myself when I left Geoff that I would never entertain the idea of loving someone if they didn't love me back. And before this whole thing with you, I'd pretty much given up hope that finding that was even possible."

No. "Brookie—"

"But then I found you—wonderful, gorgeous you. And you made me feel love in a way I've never felt before. With anyone."

Yes. Lean into that. Know it.

She smiles sadly. "So I'm stuck. I'm stuck between us keeping going with what we're doing and knowing that we might never be on the same

page.”

“We are, Brooke. *We fucking are on the same page.*”

“But are we? Because I need someone who’s ready to tell me they love me. You’re not. And I hear why and I hate that. I do. It hurts my heart so badly. But ...” Her eyes fog with tears. “But I promised myself that I would only get into a relationship with someone who was right for me. That I wouldn’t settle. That I wouldn’t skim or overlook things.”

“Don’t do this.”

“This condition you’re putting on our relationship is a big one for me. I’ve never heard my mother tell me she loved me and mean it. Hell, she’s only ever uttered it half a dozen times in my life. And Geoff didn’t say it, which makes sense because I don’t think he loved me anyway.”

She dries her cheeks with her hands.

“It sounds stupid to you,” she says, “but it’s important to me.”

I grab my door handle. “So let’s go inside. Let me hold you tonight, and we can do this later.”

She doesn’t move. Not a muscle.

“*Brooke ...*” I say, my words dripping with panic.

“I don’t even want you to say it. If you say it right now, it’ll be tainted.”

“I will. I swear. Let’s go inside, and I’ll tell you right fucking now. Because I do feel that way. And I ...” I smack my hand off the steering wheel. “*Fuck!*”

“Let’s just ...” Her voice breaks. “Let’s end this while we’re still friends.”

“*No.* There’s no way. *Fuck that,*” I say, reaching for her. “There’s not a chance in hell.”

She shakes her head.

What the fuck is happening?

“I’ve had a very shitty day,” she says quietly. “I’m going to go inside and go to bed.”

“Can I come with you?”

She searches my face. “*No.*”

Panic fills me. I feel the precipice in front of us and the wind threatening to blow us off the ledge.

“I’d walk into a lion’s den for you—which I just did. Go to jail—which I surprisingly managed not to do tonight. Open myself up to you in ways I never have, in ways that I’m afraid to—*for you.* And you don’t want that?”

You don't want what I'm willing to give you? Because I'll give it all to you, Brooke. *I'll give you all of me.*"

"But you won't," she cries softly, picking up her purse off the floorboard. "You promised me that if things got weird, we'd end it before we blew it up. And I'd like to be friends with you and not lose my job, if possible."

"What are you talking about? I'd never let anything happen to you. You're my lady."

Brooke sits with her purse in her lap and stares at the garage ahead of us. *Maybe she'll stay. Maybe she'll reconsider.*

"There was a reason I didn't want a real relationship," she says. "There was a reason you didn't either. And maybe we got swept up in the moment and forgot all of that." She looks at me and smiles through her watery eyes. "I love you, Moss. And I know you love me too."

A chill rips down my spine. "Then don't let go of me. Let me stay with you."

"I have to do what's right for me. I'm tired of trying to convince myself that people love me just to hold on to them. I just don't have it in me. Not after tonight."

I don't even know what to say. Her words hit my heart so hard—like bullets from point-blank range—that it dies. I'm sure it's dead.

That's what this feels like.

"I'll say it. Just don't leave me."

"If you say it now ..." She frowns. "It won't matter. I'll think you did it because you panicked."

Tears blur my vision as I watch her climb out of my truck. I have no idea what to do. There's nothing more I can say.

I watch her walk up the sidewalk and onto her porch. Each step she takes feels like another nail in my coffin.

I roll down the window and hang my head out. "Brooke!"

"Go home, Moss."

She opens the door and closes it without ever looking behind her.

"Fuck!"

THIRTY-FOUR

BROOKE

“*Oh, Brooke.*” Jovie climbs into bed and lays her head next to mine. “Why didn’t you call me last night?”

“It was late,” I say, my face buried into a pillow. The words come out all muffled and difficult, so I roll over. “It was too late.” *Better.*

“So? I would’ve been here. I would’ve wanted to be here.”

I try to turn my head to see her, but I don’t quite have the energy.

Every time I close my eyes, I either hear my mother saying how pathetic I am or hear Moss tell me he can’t say the three words I need to hear.

This really is becoming a theme of my life.

“I’m not sure where we are in all of this,” she says. “What stage of grief are we in? Are we lying in silence? Eating ice cream? Do you need help burying his body? Because if it’s that, I really need to change my shoes.”

I crack a smile. Barely.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asks. “If not, I’ll get comfy, and we can spoon.”

Do I want to talk about it? No. Do I need to? Probably.

“Tell me about your play,” I say, my voice sounding hollow.

She sighs as if she knows I just need a distraction. “Okay. Well, obviously, I’m killing it.”

“Obviously.”

“I have a scene where I have to sing this little ditty. I don’t know why I’m not in more musical theater stuff. I’m really freaking good.”

My laughter, as pathetic as it is, undoes some of the hardening of my heart from the past twelve hours.

“In all seriousness, the cast is great,” she says. “The director is my

favorite. So creative and fun. It's the best part of my day—except for being here with you, of course.”

“This is *so fun*. I know. Try to contain yourself, will you?”

She pats the top of my head.

I sit up. Whatever liquid left in my stomach sloshes around, reminding me that I haven't eaten since I picked at a croissant at breakfast yesterday. But the thought of food repulses me.

Jovie sits up and faces me, her legs crisscrossed applesauce.

“Is that the dress you wore last night?” She winces. “*Oh, friend.*”

Tears wet the corners of my eyes. *It's amazing I still have tears left to shed.*

I waited until I got inside before I let them loose. My back slid down the wall in the foyer, and I sat there and cried for an hour—until the hard floor hurt my ass so bad that I could barely sit.

I touch the skin around my eyes.

“Yeah. They're swollen,” Jovie says, frowning. “You look like shit. But we'll get to that in a minute. What happened?”

Where to begin ...

“First, Catherine Bailey is an evil human I won't be talking to ever again. Ever. If I bring it up, hit me with a soup can.”

“Hallelujah.”

I sit up a little taller.

The acceptance of cutting her out of my life settled over my soul around two in the morning. I wrestled with it until I realized that if this conversation with Moss had happened on any other day, the result would've been different.

I don't blame our breakup on Catherine. That would give her too much power. But Catherine colored my vision in a way that definitely skewed the way I dealt with Moss.

But it doesn't ultimately change anything. I still need what I need.

And I'm not wrong to want that.

“It shouldn't have taken this long for me to hit the brakes,” I admit. “I just always had this fantasy in my head that someday, things would change. Last night proved they won't.”

Jovie looks at me warily. “Do I even want to know what she did?”

“She said some pretty terrible things to me that, if I repeated them, you would be in your car and on your way to her house. So no, I'm not going to

tell you.”

Her eyes narrow.

“But,” I say, pausing to gather my courage, “Moss put her in her place before we left.”

A smile flickers across my lips as warmth floods my veins—for a second. For a brief, fleeting second, all is well.

Then it’s not.

“What did he say?” she asks.

“I can’t remember all of it now, but he basically told her she was a pathetic excuse as a mom and not to talk to me again. And that I had a great life and people who loved me ...”

Cue the tears.

Dammit.

Jovie grabs a tissue off my bedside table and hands it to me.

“So that’s side A,” I say, wiping my nose. “But there’s a side B.”

“I was wondering.”

“Yeah.”

I rip off my blankets that still faintly smell like Moss and climb out of bed. The movement makes my head pound. I squeeze my temples until I get acclimated to being vertical.

“The quick version of the backstory is that Moss heard me tell Catherine that he loved me and I loved him,” I say. “So I, being the dumbass that I am, asked him on the way home what we looked like now.”

For once, Jovie doesn’t say a word.

“I guess I just assumed that I was right. That he loved me. And that was probably an error on my part.”

“Eh, maybe. Maybe not. Keep going.”

“So I’m like—*hey, the banquet is Wednesday, so why don’t we just talk about it now?* Because I think that we’ve just had this huge bonding experience, and it’s late Saturday night. So the conversation isn’t going to change much in a couple of days.”

“That’s absolutely fair.”

I point at her. “Okay. So he says—*I feel the same way.*”

“Um, okay ...”

My shoulders go up and down. I don’t know what to say either.

Jovie climbs off the bed too. “I feel like I’m missing a piece of the puzzle.”

“Me too. He wouldn’t tell me he loved me. Like flat-out refused. He only said he’d say it when I said not to bother because, at this point, it felt like he’d do it out of desperation. Not because he meant it.”

She looks as confused as I feel.

I pace around the room. The conversations from last night feel a little different in the daylight.

“He kept saying that he felt the same way,” I say, remembering his words. “But he didn’t want to talk about it last night. Let’s talk tomorrow. In the morning. After the banquet.”

“I don’t understand how that is any different than saying it last night.”

“Same.”

Jovie screws up her face. “So what? There has to be a reason he wouldn’t say it.”

“He said the last time he said it, the only time, that his life exploded, and he didn’t want to risk it again.”

She considers this.

“There’s more to that story, I’m sure,” I say, coming to that conclusion late last night. “But I don’t know what it is, and he didn’t offer to share it with me. That story is locked up somewhere with all of his *I love you*’s.”

“Wow. Okay. I hate to start passing judgment without the full story, but surely to God, he knows that this is a big deal for you. A hard limit. Right?”

I grimace. “I don’t know. It was so weird because he’s always so invested in how I feel and how I am, and last night ... this was the hill he was going to die on, you know? He really felt this because I broke up with him and, granted I told him not to say it at the end, but he didn’t. He just drove off.”

She frowns. “Brooke ...”

I know what she’s thinking—that I was impulsive. That I should’ve heard what he had to say, but *I tried*. He balked. He didn’t offer me anything, really, to go off. And sitting there begging for him to say the words I need to hear just wasn’t in the cards.

I won’t do that again.

And if, after the incident with my mother, he thought it was a good idea to put me in that position, then he doesn’t know me at all.

“It got to a point that I didn’t care what he had to say anymore,” I say. “That conversation was going the way I promised myself I’d never go again. The—*I can’t love you like that*. The opposite of a John Michael Montgomery kind of way.”

She smiles.

“I love him, Jovie.” My voice breaks. “I love him more than I’ve loved anyone. But he’s not ready for that. He needs time. He clearly has some shit to figure out, and he needs the space and freedom to do that. Just like I need the space and freedom to be happy too.”

“Can you be happy without him?”

I put a hand on my hip. “Whose side are you on?”

“Yours. *Always.*”

I blow out a breath and pace back and forth across my bedroom. The sound of my feet hitting the floor in a consistent pattern helps me to think. *As if I need to think anymore. I’ve thought this out every which way.*

“I’m either going to do what’s in my best interest and acknowledge that I need to walk away—like I swore I would do. Or I’m going to piddle around with a man who has my whole fucking heart and won’t give me his. That refuses to fully open up to me. I’ve watched my mom do that my whole life. She refused me for me. Geoff couldn’t see beyond his own narcissism to love me either.” I sigh, giving her a sad shrug. “And I can’t live like that, Jovie. I can’t always be on guard, trying to fit some mold or idea of what I should be just so I can get a pat on the head. Never being *loved.*”

Jovie shakes her head. “That’s fair.”

My breaths come easier. The pain in my head is a little lighter. The pride that I feel in myself for walking the talk is comforting.

I did what I said I’d do.

It doesn’t make up for the hole in my heart, but it’s something.

“So where did you leave things?” she asks.

“I don’t know. As friends, I guess. If we can be friends. *Can we be friends?*”

“That’s for the two of you to figure out. But can I make one little suggestion, and you won’t get mad?”

I just look at her.

“Promise me that you know that I’m on your side,” she says. “I’m on your side one million percent.”

I know that. “Okay. I promise.”

“Sometimes ...” She sits on the edge of my bed. “Let me put it like this—when I’m in a play, we have our script. Right? The lines we have to memorize.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

She holds up a finger. “But the reason that plays aren’t just broadcast over the radio is that you learn so much more about the characters and their intentions and feelings and motives by watching the actors on stage.”

I stare at her.

“Maybe it would benefit you to consider his actions and not just his words.”

She looks at me like I might jump down her throat. I don’t have the energy to do that. Instead, I sit down beside her and wish I could redo yesterday.

“Let’s get you a shower and order takeout,” she says, standing and pulling me to my feet. “You smell disgusting.”

“I’m not even pretending I can figure out which Brooke I like best. To be honest, I like whichever you I get—even morning breath Brooke.”

I swallow past a lump in my throat and head for the shower.

“I’d walk into a lion’s den for you—which I just did. Go to jail—which I surprisingly managed not to do tonight. Open myself up to you in ways I never have, in ways that I’m afraid to—for you. And you don’t want that? You don’t want what I’m willing to give you? Because I’ll give it all to you, Brooke. I’ll give you all of me.”

But therein lies the problem. If he can’t tell me he loves me, then he’s really not giving me all of him. There’s a part of him that he’s holding back.

I need it all or nothing.

I wipe my tears off my cheeks and head for the shower.

THIRTY-FIVE

MOSS

“Hey, Moss, honey. I didn’t think you’d be home yet.”

Mom puts a giant spoon down on the spoon holder beside the stove and turns to face me. Her face falls.

“Moss? What’s wrong?”

I pull out a chair at Mom’s kitchen table and sit down.

My whole body hurts. My head. My back. *My fucking heart.*

She sits down across from me, her brows pulled tight. “Talk to me.”

“I have never, in my life, been more grateful for this family than I have been in the last twenty-four hours,” I say.

She smiles, the corners not quite touching her eyes. “I’m glad. Now, what happened?”

Where do I even start?

“Brooke’s family are the vilest, most hateful people I’ve ever met. Period.”

Mom’s eyes go wide. “Really?”

“I don’t want to even” I think about my interaction with Kim and Geoff and laugh angrily. “I didn’t go to jail last night. And you have no idea how close I came.”

She shifts in her seat.

“But Brooke and I decided that you probably would’ve punched Catherine in the face if you’d been there. We had it all planned out—what punch you would’ve thrown. Everything.”

“Catherine?”

“Her mom.”

“Oh.”

“Term used loosely in this instance.”

Mom frowns. “Is Brooke okay?”

I don't know.

The fact that I don't fucking know is what's eating me. I've almost gone over there a dozen times to find out. *But is that the right thing to do?* I don't know.

That's why I'm here.

“We got into an ... argument, I guess, on the way home,” I say. “Well, it wasn't really even an argument. It was more like a conversation that ended in a breakup.”

“No. *Oh, Moss.* What happened?”

I stand and move around the kitchen, unable to sit still. Considering I didn't sleep at all last night—just sat in the lanai and stewed about how fucking stupid I am—it's amazing I still have this much energy.

I walk to the window and look across the backyard. To the swings we played on as kids that my parents won't take down for nostalgic purposes. The tree I climbed in third grade and fell from, breaking my arm. The pool that Banks nearly drowned in because Jess and I thought he was fine to go down the slide alone.

He wasn't.

Mom clears her throat. “Is this about Allie?”

She brings Allie up with a sensitivity that I appreciate. I know she thinks she has to walk on eggshells with this, mainly because she usually does.

But today, I don't feel the same irritability when Mom says Allie's name. I'm not immediately defensive or feel like I've been poked with a hot iron.

Maybe it's because I'm already so irritated that I don't notice.

“The last thing I said to Allie was that I loved her,” I say, staring at the horizon.

The words sound like they're coming from someone else's mouth. Not mine.

“I didn't know that, sweetheart,” Mom says, her voice soft.

“How could you?”

She sighs. “So does that impact your relationship with Brooke?”

“Apparently, it does.”

The chair screeches against the floor behind me. It's not more than a couple of seconds before Mom's hand is on my shoulder.

“I've always wondered if this would happen,” she says. “I hoped not. I've

prayed every night for all of these years that you would be healed from that experience before you fell in love again.”

“Funny. I’ve prayed that I wouldn’t fall in love again at all.”

She rests her cheek against my arm. “In your defense, you did make a good run at it.”

I half-smile.

“Moss,” she says, walking around in front of me. “You are entitled to feel however you feel. I’m happy that you can acknowledge your feelings whether you share them with me or not.”

“That’s me. Mr. Emotional Awareness.”

She laughs. “But you’re also entitled to move on from those feelings. Just because you feel them now or that you’ve felt them for this many years doesn’t mean you have to keep carrying them around.”

“It’s not so much what I feel. It’s ...”

As if she intuitively knows that I need a little space, she moves away. I heave a breath as soon as she’s gone.

What am I doing?

I rest my head against the window.

“Come here and get a glass of tea,” she says.

I turn around to see her fixing two glasses of sweet tea. I make my way to the island and have a seat.

“It’s a little easier to think with some sugar,” she says, grinning.

I take a glass from her and take a long sip.

She comes around the corner of the island and sits beside me. “So talk to me.”

“It’s not what I feel,” I say slowly. “I mean, do I still have a soft spot for Allie? Sure. But do I feel like I’d be cheating on her if I moved on or something like that? No. Of course not. At the end of the day, I mean, I loved her. I loved Allie as much as a seventeen-year-old can love someone. But I have those feelings *times a thousand* for someone else.”

“For Brooke?”

I nod.

“Then what’s the problem? Does Brooke not feel the same way toward you?”

I chuckle at the ridiculousness of the situation and take another drink of tea.

“Then what is it?” Mom asks, confused. “I’m not following.”

I crunch a piece of ice, much to Mom's dismay. "It appears that I have a little hang-up about telling someone I love them."

Mom's face falls. "Moss."

"I froze. Like a fucking chump," I say, shaking my head. "My dream girl is sitting in my truck *telling me she loves me*, and all I can think is that if I say those words back to her, the universe will punish me."

"Honey, no. That's not how things work."

"Rationally, I know that. I'm not important enough in the universe's algorithm that my decisions or whatever the fuck I say causes a butterfly effect. No one can really think that. Except Banks, maybe."

She grins.

I tip my glass and get another piece of ice. It feels good to chomp it.

"I just ..." I growl in frustration between chomps. "I've always known that this would be an issue for me. It's intrinsically tied together—love and trauma. It's tangled in my brain like a cause and effect, and even if I tell myself *this is stupid*, my body has its own reaction."

Mom grips the edge of the counter.

"I just sat there and listened to her tell me how she felt. And I know what she needs. She needs me to say it. *She needs that, Mother*. And I fucking feel it. I do. I think about it multiple times every damn day. But I open my mouth and ... nothing."

"That must've been awful for both of you."

I laugh in anger at myself. "Fuck me. I just did the absolute worst thing to her. I took her wound, the basic human need that she's never had and wants more than anything, and I made her think she was going to get it from me." I hold Mom's gaze. "And then I didn't give it to her."

"Moss—"

"Nah, that's your boy, Mom. That's me. That's what a fuckup I am below the surface." My fists clench. "Can I make this right? I'm never going to be able to override this insanity that's attached itself to my brain. And God knows, I don't deserve to be forgiven."

She sits back and takes in the information I just spit at her. Her fingers play with the heart charm around her neck with all of our birthstones lining the edge.

My mom gets up from her seat. She moves silently to the other side of the island and pours the rest of her tea down the drain. Then she opens the dishwasher and puts her glass in it.

“Hello?” I wave at her. “Hi. Remember me?”

She smiles. “I was thinking.”

“Can you think faster, please?”

“And you think you have nothing in common with Banks.” She smiles wider. “No one can make this right but you.”

“*I can’t.*”

“Then to be perfectly blunt about it, you better get used to living without her.”

My jaw drops. “That’s your answer? Suck it up and move on?”

“Isn’t that what you told me you have to do?”

She gives me a look like she’s got me pinned in a corner. *The spinning backfist is coming.*

The thought makes me grin. Then I want to cry.

“Honey, I am so sorry you feel this way. It breaks my heart. It does. But to be fair—if Brooke needs someone who can tell her they love her and you can’t do that—which is also fair—then the two of you aren’t meant to be.”

I stare at my mother like she’s out of her damn mind.

To that, she shrugs. “I can’t climb in your head and remove your fears. And I can’t tell her it’s okay not to ask for what she needs. But I have faith that somehow, someday, you’re going to figure your way around this.”

I hand her my glass and then climb off the stool. “You have been absolutely no help to me.”

She laughs. “I’m sorry.”

“You tell us to come to you with anything. You’re in our corner. Then I do come to you with a problem and it’s all—yeah, you’re a mess. I don’t know what to tell you.” I roll my eyes. “I don’t even know whose side you’re on.”

She smiles, a twinkle in her eye. “Give me a hug before you storm out of this house.”

“Fine.” I pull her into a hug a bit too tight, making her squeal. “I’m going to go home and be miserable. And you can live with knowing you let that happen.”

She picks up the spoon again and adjusts the temperature beneath the pot on the stove.

“Moss,” she says. “Let me say one thing.”

“*I’m riveted.*”

She waves the spoon at me. “I’ll smack you.” Then she goes back to her

pot. “Out of all of my children, you’re the brightest, and if you ever, ever tell Foxx that, I will disown you.”

“Thanks.”

“But consider this,” she says, enunciating each syllable clearly. “What you’re really scared of is the pain of potentially losing her. Your last memory of Allie is telling her how you feel. It would be logical to consider that you’re fearful of going through losing someone you love again. So your brain has said—*hey, let’s just never take that step again. We’ll never be in love so we’ll never deal with the ramifications of it either.* The words are the trigger. The pain is the bullet. You don’t want to get hit.”

What the hell?

She turns to the side and looks at me. “You’ve already lost her. Think about that.”

I don’t say anything. *What do I say to that? Thanks for pointing out the obvious?*

Instead, I turn and make the short walk home.

THIRTY-SIX

BROOKE

“It’s fine. It’s fine. Everything is going to be just fine,” I mutter, pulling open the door of Laguna Homes.

The eucalyptus-scented air of the office greets me like an old friend.

“Good morning,” Gina says. “I hope you’re ready to hit the ground running.”

Ugh.

“Sure am,” I say, hoping she buys my fake enthusiasm. “What do you have for me?”

“There is a book of fabric swatches that a furniture store sent over this morning. I put them on your desk.”

Weird. “Okay.”

“I’ve sent a lighting guy to your voicemail. Something about a backorder,” she says. “He was adamant that you call him back right away. Kix left to check out something with Jess but said to tell you he needs to talk to you at some point today. He’s afraid he’ll forget so he asked me to mention that to you. You have a stack of mail in your inbox—one letter is marked urgent. So heads-up on that. And you have a meeting at two with the flooring people at Parasol Place. They called this morning to confirm.”

“Cancel that. Please.”

She lifts her brows. “Really?”

“Yes.” I know the smile that I give her isn’t believable, but I give it to her anyway. “I’ll be in my office. If you see Kix, tell him I’m here.”

“Will do.”

“Thanks, Gina.”

“No problem”

She gives me a confused look as I walk away.

I enter my office and flip on the light. Glancing over my shoulder, I secretly hope to find Moss leaning against my filing cabinet. Just like old times. Before everything went to hell.

He's not there. And since we can't time travel, that's for the best.

I close the door and get situated, my hand shaking as I turn on my computer.

If they fire me, I'll just have to go. I'll find another job. On the heels of the Excellence Awards, it should be fine. It will be fine.

I will be fine.

My phone buzzes. I glance down. My heart skips a beat.

Moss: Good morning. The light fixtures showed up. No clue.

Shit.

I thought I'd have a longer adjustment period before having to communicate with him.

I type out my reply.

Me: Were there seven boxes?

Moss: Yes. I remembered you saying you ordered seven, so I checked that.

Me: Thanks.

Moss: I'll leave them in the house so you can check them this afternoon when you meet with Graybel Floors.

Me: That appointment is canceled. I'll swing by this week sometime and look.

Moss: Do you think we could sit down and talk?

My bottom lip trembles. The middle of my chest pulses as if there's a balloon swelling up inside of it. *I miss him so fucking much.*

Me: I'll be by the jobsite this week.

Moss: I don't mean about work.

Me: Let's not. We both said what we needed to say and we're doing what we need to do. Let's just try to forget and move on.

Like I can forget.

Moss: Like I can forget.

Don't cry!

Me: We're friends now. Back to the way it was. You promised.

Moss: I know.

I put my phone on silent and shove it in a drawer.

I can't do this already.

My computer comes alive and I make quick work of answering my emails. I'm about to open up my design program when another one comes in.

My red dress and heels have been delivered.

"Well, that's fucking nice," I grumble. "No, actually there will be no fucking—nice or not."

That thought sours my mood even more.

I open my notebook when a knock raps on the door. My breath stalls in my throat.

"Come in," I say, my eyes glued to the doorway.

The door pushes open, and Damaris sticks her head inside.

"Can I come in? If you're too busy, I understand," she says.

That's it. I'm fired.

I sit up straight. "No. Of course. Come in."

It's your office, after all.

She eyes the fabric swatches as she sits across from me. "I had those sent over. I hope you don't mind. The email you sent with the sofa links was incredible, and I really think one of the two from Bailor's will work." She grins. "I couldn't pick the fabric and was going to ask you to help."

Does she not know what happened?

My palms sweat.

"Yes," I say, stammering. "Yeah. I'll, um, I'll help you. Of course. Do you want to do it now?"

She crosses one leg over the other and watches me closely. It's suddenly apparent she knows what happened between Moss and me. Her eyes don't lie—just like her son's.

"Damaris, I'm sorry," I say, looking down. "I don't know what to say

right now, and honestly, I probably shouldn't have even let things get to this point."

"That's the thing about love. It just takes you on a ride whether you want to be on it or not." She shrugs. "I'm sorry that things fell apart. I really, truly am."

I nod, trying not to let the swell of emotions inside me lead to tears.

"Sweetheart, we love you here," she says softly. "I can see your trepidation all over your face, and it breaks my heart."

Dammit, Damaris.

My eyes burn with unshed tears. "I'm trying to be very professional here. You aren't helping."

"I apologize. But I want you to know that we value you as a part of this team. You know how much we think of you."

I stare at her bright orange shirt. That's all I can make out fairly well.

"Whether you and Moss work things out or not, you have a place here. You are wanted, *needed* here. If you need to not work with my son, we'll figure it out. But, honey, don't look at me like you think I'm about to throw you out on your bottom. That hurts my heart."

Tears slip down my cheeks. I wipe them away as quickly as I can. It's futile. She's seen them. But it still feels wrong to cry.

Damaris leans forward. "May I give you a hug, sweet girl?"

The tears turn to sobs as she comes around my desk. I can't stand up or sit back. I just sit with my shoulders hunched over and feel her motherly arms wrap around me.

My God, I needed this. I needed this physical embrace more than I realized.

Why couldn't Catherine be like this to me?

She pulls back and helps dry my tears. "You have a little mascara smeared on your cheek. I have a wet wipe in my purse if you want me to go get it."

"I have them in my desk. Thank you, though."

"Of course."

She returns to her seat while I find my wipes and take care of my face.

"We will make this work. Okay?" she says. "We'll figure this out as we go."

"Okay," I say, the words sticking in my throat.

"I want you to know one more thing," she says. "And that is I'm proud of

you.”

What?

My hand stalls in the air. I look at her like she’s grown three heads.

“Moss told me a little of what happened between the two of you. And I know, or what he said, anyway, is that you held tight to what you needed. That takes a lot of courage, Brooke. It’s so, so *easy* to take the easy way out and to compromise on things that really matter to us in a relationship.”

I stare at my hands. “I didn’t think it would come to this.”

“I hate that it came to this. Moss does too, between us. But I’m not here to do his bidding. I’m here to tell you that you did the right thing.”

“That means a lot to me, Damaris.”

She sighs. “I don’t know how many of our friends, Kix’s and mine, have completely lost who they are over the years. Some of them are never fulfilled. Some start chasing things that truly don’t matter or take the easy route so they don’t rock the boat.”

“*Those fucking ducks.*” I grin, feeling Moss’s absence all the way to my core.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I say, shaking my head. “But you’re right. I started to lose myself in my first marriage, and I got out in the nick of time. And then after this weekend ...” I pause, not sure what Moss has told her. “Well, I just know what I want, and I won’t accept anything less.”

“And you shouldn’t.” Her nod is a period on her sentence. “I would be disappointed in you if you did.”

I smile at the woman who just restored my faith in humanity. Who showed me, again, what unconditional motherly love looks like.

“You really have no idea how much I appreciate you coming in and saying this to me,” I say. “It’s ...” I chuckle. “It’s interesting and unusual for me to have someone build me up, so I apologize if I’m a little slow to respond.”

“If you ever need a pep talk, you come find me.”

We exchange a grin as someone knocks on the door again.

“Come in,” I say.

Kix comes in wearing the same serious look that I now know Moss inherited.

“Well, I didn’t realize my lovely wife was here today,” he says, smiling down at her.

I love their love.

She looks up at her husband. “I just wanted to stop in and have a little chat with Brooke.”

He grimaces and glances up at me. “Might as well take the blanket off the baby. I heard that you and Moss had a falling out. I’m sure you know I would’ve heard because our family is a gossiping bunch.”

I laugh softly. “For sure.”

“And if you need his ass kicked, I’d love to set that up.” He winks. “I’ll get Maddox right on it.”

My laughter grows a little louder.

Kix sets a binder beside the fabric samples. “What’s this?”

I look quickly at Damaris. She makes a face, shaking her head.

“Oh, that. I was thinking about covering the powder room wall at Parasol Place in fabric,” I say, talking off the cuff. “So I had some samples brought over. I don’t think they’re going to work.”

“Yeah. Fabric in a bathroom doesn’t make a lot of sense. Theoretically. You’re the expert,” he says.

Damaris looks relieved.

“It was just an idea,” I say.

He flips through the first couple of pages of samples. “These look like a couch my mother would’ve had.”

Damaris rolls her eyes behind Kix’s back.

“Anyway,” he says, “this is the info we have on your new project.”

“We got it?” I ask, my spirits lifting. “The one I loved?”

“We got it,” he says, smiling.

I collapse back in my chair. “There’s some good news.”

“I pick up the keys this afternoon,” he says. “I’ll let you know when we’re ready to take a look at it.”

“Perfect.”

Damaris stands. “Okay. I gotta jet. I’m glad we had this chat, Brooke.”

I smile at her. “Me too. Thanks again, Damaris.”

“Anytime.”

She slips out the door. Kix starts to follow her but pauses.

“Hey,” he says.

“Yeah?”

“If you need anything or are uncomfortable working with Moss, don’t worry about it. Just let me know, and we’ll figure it out. You are as important

around here as he is, and I don't want you to worry about anything.”

My lids swell, as they do just before the tears start. I think he notices because he gives me a little wave and leaves, closing the door behind him.

I look around my office and think about what just happened.

“What could've been ...”

I get back to work.

THIRTY-SEVEN

MOSS

“Hey, fucker! You here?” Banks’s voice echoes through the house.

I stand in the kitchen, staring at a peanut butter and marshmallow sandwich, and don’t bother to yell back at him.

He’ll find me. Banks always does.

“There ya are,” he says, coming into the room. Behind him is Maddox.

“Pretty sure I told you that I would beat the fuck out of you if you ever walked in here again without knocking,” I say.

Banks hops up on the counter. His legs swing back and forth like a child.

Figures.

“Welp, you see—I was absolutely certain that I wasn’t going to walk in on you and Brooke because you are a fucking moron and let her go.” He gives me a cheesy grin. “So what does it matter?”

“That’s a little ...” Maddox’s eyes are wide. “Too much, too soon, Banksy.”

My entire body stills while I glare at him. The only reason I stop looking at him is to check my phone.

Unknown: Penguins don’t have teeth.

“What the fuck is this?” I yell, texting back a reply.

Me: STOP THIS SHIT.

I slam my phone on the counter.

“What’s going on?” Maddox asks.

“I get these random numbers texting me about penguins. Just little facts every now and then. Like, what the fuck?”

Banks snorts. “That’s kind of funny.”

“Are you behind this?” I narrow my eyes. “You are, aren’t you?”

“Whoa,” Maddox says. “Don’t waste your energy on this. Wait. He’ll say something else that warrants your outburst. Use it then.”

He’s probably right.

Banks points at my sandwich. “Are you gonna eat that?”

I roll my eyes, my irritation level increasing to dangerous levels.

It has been a long fucking day. Day two of being Brooke-less. She didn’t come to the jobsite today, and I didn’t call her. I don’t know how long I can go on.

Nothing is the same now. My coffee from Mugger’s. Monday mornings. Having someone to text when I think of something funny.

Having her in my bed.

Banks takes a huge bite of my sandwich and grins.

“I hate you,” I say matter-of-factly.

He makes a kissy face at me.

“Did you two come over here for a reason? Because I need to shit, shave, and shower, then go to bed,” I say.

Maddox takes a big breath. “We did come with a reason.”

“And that reason is ...” I say, prompting them to spit it out and get out of here.

Banks hops off the counter and goes to the other side. Maddox joins him.

That’s a red flag.

“What’s going on?” I ask. “I’m not in the mood for your bullshit.”

Banks crams the rest of my sandwich in his mouth. “You go first,” he says to Maddox, the words muffled by the bread and marshmallow.

“Oh, *let me go first,*” Maddox says, shaking his head. “You go first. He already hates you. He said it. You be the bad cop, and I’ll be the good cop. I ___”

“What. The. Fuck. Do. You. Want?” I ask.

“I guess I’m up,” Maddox mumbles. He sighs. “So we’ve been thinking.”

“That’s scary.”

Maddox side-eyes me but doesn’t lose his train of thought. “You’re really fucking up here.”

I throw my hands in the air.

Banks walks around to the fridge and opens the door.

“Take anything from there, and I’ll kill you,” I say.

He takes a bottle of water anyway and retreats next to Maddox.

That little shit.

I grind my teeth together.

Banks takes a long swig and then screws the cap back on the bottle.

“So,” Banks says, “Mad is right. We think you’re royally fucking up.”

“*Royally?* Good word,” Maddox says, tapping him on the shoulder.

“Thanks. Someone used it at work today, and I—”

“Will you two dumbasses shut the hell up?” I rub a hand down my face.

“I need you guys to go. All joking aside. Get out.”

Banks raises a brow and winces. “*This is where it gets tricky,*” he says out of the side of his mouth to Maddox.

Maddox holds his hands out in front of him. “Okay. Serious. We can’t stand here and watch you do this to yourself.”

“So don’t stand here.”

“What my brother here is trying to say,” Banks says, “is that we don’t know why you and Brooke aren’t a thing anymore. But you need to fix that. Like, now.”

I fold my arms on the countertop and rest my head against them.

“If you don’t want her anymore, I’ll ask her out,” Banks says.

My head pops up. I glare at him. “I will throttle you if you ever say that again.”

Maddox nods. “Yup. Good work, Banks. He’s definitely still in love with her.”

“You like how I did that—”

“*For fuck’s sake,*” I bellow, walking in a circle with my chin pointed at the ceiling. “*Shut up.*”

I squeeze my eyes together, hoping that when I open them, they’ll be gone.

“Tell us what happened,” Maddox says. “We’ll help.”

“You can’t help.”

“We are basically lotharios,” Banks says.

“No,” Maddox hisses. “We don’t want to be lotharios right now. We want to be serious, responsible advisors.”

“But if we have a lot of experience with women, which is what lotharios do, then it still works.”

Make it stop.

“Are you trying to drive me crazy so I’ll just tell you to go?” I ask.

They both smile.

“You are assholes.”

“So tell us, and we’ll leave,” Maddox says. “Let us help you.”

“It’ll be payback for all the things I’ve stol—*borrowed* from your house,” Banks says.

I take in these two dipshits, and maybe because I’m weak, I give in.

“Fine. She got pissed and left because I couldn’t tell her that I love her.” I look at them. “There. That’s it. Happy now?”

Maddox climbs up on a barstool. “And why did you not tell her that?”

“She’s lovable,” Banks says, sitting beside Maddox.

I lean back against the cabinets. “What if I tell her and then ... everything changes? My life? Her life?”

“It will. That’s the point,” Banks says. “She’d be here right now, and I’d have to knock. You’d probably have your door locked right about now—”

“Don’t.”

Banks nods.

“Is this about Allie?” Maddox asks. “I feel like it is.”

“Yeah. I think so. I just ...” I sigh. “As soon as I told her that I loved her, she was gone. And I lost everything, you know? Her. My plans. My life, for a while. That pain was so fucking bad, and if I lost Brooke ...” My stomach tightens. “I wouldn’t survive that.”

“Okay. So this is more about you thinking that if you open up, you’re too vulnerable. Right?” Maddox asks.

I nod. “I think so.”

“Looks like you’re pretty fucking vulnerable right now,” Banks says.

I hate him. I really do.

He hops off the stool and walks around the island. He stands in front of me, our shoulders squared up.

“Don’t be mad at me,” Banks says, a glimmer in his eye.

“If you say that, I’m probably gonna be pissed.”

“I’m asking her out—*whoa!*”

He doesn’t get the last word out before I throw a right hook at his head. He slips it easily, taking a step back to avoid the body shots he knows will follow it.

“*Animals,*” Maddox groans from his spot at the counter.

I pant from the burst of energy as Banks laughs at me from across the kitchen.

“How’d that feel?” he asks, grinning. “Because I was joking. Obviously. But you know what? Someone else isn’t gonna be.”

Adrenaline pumps through my veins, making me almost come out of my skin.

“You gotta take a risk, big guy,” Banks says. “What happened with Allie was tragic. I’m sorry that happened. But it didn’t happen because of you.”

“But,” Maddox says, hopping off the stool, “whatever happens to Brooke could be because of you. You’d be the best fucking ... boyfriend, husband, whatever to her.”

Banks looks at Maddox. “Mom was kind of telling us a little bit of stuff. Like Brooke’s family is trash.”

“Putting it nicely,” I say, getting pissed all over again.

“So instead of thinking how bad things can go—and they might,” Banks says, “think about how good they might go.”

“How great they might go,” Maddox says.

Banks nods and points at me. “But here’s the one thing that’s for sure.”

“If you don’t take this risk, it’s gonna suck,” Maddox says.

“You think it hurt to lose Allie?” Banks raises a brow. “Imagine losing Brooke to some other guy and having to watch that every day.”

Maddox makes a face. “What if he’s mean to her?”

“I’d kill him,” I say.

“Or if he hurts her,” Banks says.

I glare at him.

Banks grins. “Or if she’s always unhappy because the one guy who could’ve given her the life she always wanted—”

“With a family of dashing brothers who would be happy to welcome her into the family ...” Maddox adds, winking.

“And he didn’t suck it up and go get her.”

“Like the man he’s supposed to be.” Banks nods, then looks at Maddox. “Man, we’re good, Mad.”

“I think we really executed well. We could’ve done one more practice round and really nailed the intro. We got a little off plan.”

“But we finished strong,” Banks says, holding a finger up in the air.

I watch these two nitwits go back and forth. They’re so full of shit. But, surprisingly, what they’re saying makes sense. Mom made sense too, but that

was less surprising.

Having all of them saying the same thing—people who know me, love me, want what’s best for me ... maybe I should listen.

Maybe they’re right.

Maybe I do need to face this head-on.

I do love her. More than I can bear.

If I’m scared of losing her, she’s already gone.

We can’t go back to just being friends. That’s hopeless.

I can’t live without her in my life. That’s already driving me nuts, and it’s been three days.

And seeing her with someone else would be something I couldn’t live with. I’d wind up in prison.

I close my eyes. Please, God, don’t let this be the wrong thing. Please help me do this.

When I open my eyes, my brothers are smiling.

“So are you gonna do this?” Banks asks.

Maddox grins from ear to ear. “Because we have a plan.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

BROOKE

“I don’t want Shade House,” I say, frowning.

“Fine. But their Cajun fries are the best.” Jovie sighs through the phone. “Where do you want to eat then?”

“What about La Pachanga? We could sit out on the roof and have a margarita and just forget this day ever happened?”

I glance at the navigation system and make a right-hand turn.

“When do you want to meet?” Jovie asks. “I’ll be free in about thirty minutes.”

“Cool. I just have to do a quick walk-through of this new house that Kix just purchased. I’ve seen pictures, and it’s incredible. We have a meeting Friday about it, and I told him that I’d go through it today and start brainstorming.”

“See you there.”

“Bye.”

I end the call and spy the house at the end of the cul-de-sac.

“It’s so cute,” I say as I pull in behind Jess and stop my car.

The bungalow is a seashell pink with yellow trim. *That has to be changed.*

I gather my notepad, camera, and keys and step into the early evening sun.

The air is thick and humid, threatening to release a downpour. I make it to the front door just in time. A clap of thunder strikes behind me as I get the door unlocked and step inside.

“Jess?” I call out. “Are you here?”

I set my things down on a half-wall and look around.

“Jess?”

I pull up Kix’s number to ask him if Jess is still here—and *why his truck is here if he’s not*. But as I start typing, something grabs my attention.

I look up and see Moss standing in the doorway.

My stomach bottoms out, and I drop my phone. I place a hand over my heart and try not to cry.

He’s wearing my favorite gray sweatpants that narrow at the ankle. A black T-shirt is stretched across his wide frame. His hair is a mess—still needing a cut—and I’m not sure he’s shaved since we got ready for Honey’s party.

“Hi,” he says softly.

“What are you doing here? Where is Jess?”

“Don’t be mad at Jess. He was a ... willing but hesitant party in all of this.” Moss smiles sadly. “I was a little reluctant myself to get you alone this way, but I couldn’t think of another way.”

“You could’ve asked me.”

He lifts a brow. “You would’ve said no.”

“So tricking me is an acceptable solution?”

He runs a hand over his head, licking his lip in frustration.

I want to be mad about this, but I can’t. Because seeing him is a part of what I need. I won’t get the rest, I know, but I’ll take what I can get.

He doesn’t make a move toward me. I’m both relieved and disappointed at the same time. I want to be in his arms, cradled against his chest. But there’s no point in that. It’ll just hurt worse later.

“Moss, I’m gonna go—”

“Wait.”

I pause, willing to hear what he has to say. There is a sparkle in his eye, and as faint as it is, it makes me curious.

“I am sorry.” He holds his hands to his sides. “You trusted me, and I let you down.”

“What?”

I’m in utter disbelief. *He’s sorry?*

Why bother? What does it matter?

He blows out a breath. “When I was seventeen, I had a girlfriend. Allie. We’d been dating for ... a long damn time.”

Why is he telling me this?

“I asked her in third grade to be my girlfriend with a piece of paper and

two boxes—a yes and a no.” He shrugs. “We didn’t start dating until many years after that, but she and I were always a thing.”

“Okay ...”

He looks at the ceiling. “We had our life planned out. Pre-med. Med school. Our own practice. Maybe some Doctors Without Borders or something. And then one night, we were at a party.” He clears his throat and starts to walk around the room. “We were at a party, and she didn’t feel good. And something just didn’t sit well with me that night, and I told her that I loved her for the first time. In all of those years, that night was the first time.”

A chill snakes down my spine.

“My parents woke me up in the middle of the night.” He stops walking and faces me. His face is resolved. “Allie had a brain aneurysm and died in her bed.”

My hand covers my mouth, shielding him from my gasp.

He blows out a long, heavy sigh. “I was destroyed. My life fell apart for a long time. I said fuck it to my schoolwork, didn’t get into college, ended up just working for my dad because I didn’t have a plan, and Mom wouldn’t let me just sit around home all day.”

“Moss ...” *What do you say to that?* “I’m so sorry.”

He shrugs. “I played the last night we had together over and over for years. And at some point, my telling her that I loved her attached itself to what happened to her. It was the same experience in a lot of ways. I associated that awful fucking pain with those words.”

Poor, poor Moss.

My heart breaks for him. For what he went through. For Allie, and how her life was cut so short.

How awful.

“I vowed to never do that again,” he said. “I wouldn’t let anyone in far enough to destroy me like that. I wouldn’t tell anyone I loved them. The first person I told that died hours later.” He hangs his head. “I know that sounds entirely stupid—”

“It doesn’t,” I say softly. “It doesn’t at all. It makes perfect sense.”

He runs a hand through his hair. “You were right when you said that things between us were never fake. They’ve been real since the first day I ever saw you.”

A faint grin touches my lips.

“I kept a distance between us on purpose because I knew you were my

kryptonite.” He smiles his sweet, lopsided smile. “But when my brothers pulled their bullshit and that whole Social thing happened, I couldn’t let you do that with some random guy. But also, I wanted an excuse to spend time with you.”

My knees wobble. *What is he doing? Where is this going?*

“I guess I didn’t have a plan. I ... I fell in love with you before I knew what was happening,” he says, his gaze catching mine. “I knew I had to come to terms with all of this, but I was just thrown so fucking off with all of that shit with your family, and it just ... I panicked. I knew you needed the comfort of me saying that, and I was just ... afraid, I guess.”

“You could’ve told me this.”

He frowns. “I’ve never talked about this with anyone but my parents.”

I want to hug him—to hold him. To kiss his face and make him smile.

But I can’t. Not yet.

He clears his throat. His beautiful eyes bore into mine as he walks closer.

My breath hitches in my throat, and my heart beats a million beats an hour.

“I’m sorry,” he says earnestly. “I’m sorry that I failed you last Saturday night. You needed me, and I wasn’t man enough to be there.”

He reaches for my hand. I give it to him.

He steps closer—close enough for me to smell his cologne, the smell I find in the nape of his neck.

I missed him so much.

“Moss, I’m sorry too.”

“What are you sorry for?”

I sigh. “If that conversation wouldn’t have happened right after all of that other bullshit with Catherine, I think it would’ve gone differently. I was so vulnerable and hurt. I know now that it wasn’t fair to push you, especially when you’d spent the past few hours showing me how you felt. It wasn’t any fairer for me to expect you to give me what I needed on my timeline than it was for you to expect me to give you the space you needed on yours. And that’s on me. I’m sorry for failing you.”

“Brookie ...”

“It’s true. But also ...” My eyes fill with tears. “I knew you loved me. Jovie helped me see that. You showed me again and again that you do. And for me to sort of demand that you say it instead of just show it—that wasn’t right of me either. And I’m sorry for that too.”

His shoulders slump forward as if a load he's been carrying has been released.

"I'm sorry I tricked you into coming here, but I needed to see you. I needed a quiet place away from everything with negative connotations to tell you—I wanted to tell you ... *I love you, Brooke.*"

My eyes go wide.

"I love you now. I've loved you for weeks—years. I love you so much and so hard that it literally scares the shit out of me. And if I'm going to lose you, either way, I'm going to lose you with you knowing that you mean more to me than anything in the world."

I lunge toward him, wrapping my arms around his neck.

Tears fill my eyes again—happy ones this time—as he picks me up and presses kisses into the side of my face.

"We were never fake," he says, setting me back down on my feet. "We've been real since day one."

"Yeah." I smile at him. "I think so too."

He brushes a strand of hair out of my face. "If you will have me, because I don't want to assume anything ..."

I laugh.

"I would love to and be honored to try again," he says, staring into my eyes. "Build a relationship from the ground up. One that makes us both happy. And if it starts to go wrong—"

"We'll fix it."

He smiles. "Are you up for the challenge?"

"Absolutely."

He holds my face in his hands and brings my mouth to his.

I melt in his arms, my body finding the spot against him that it missed so much.

When he pulls back, he grins. "Can you take me home? Or to your house? Wherever?"

"I have to take pictures of this place for your dad."

He grimaces.

I swat him. "Your dad was in on this?"

"What can I say? The fam loves you."

I can't help it. I laugh. I laugh so loud and so hard. It feels so, so good.

"What about Jess's truck?" I ask as Moss flips off the lights.

"Fuck him. This is for putting Betsy in my garage. He can come get his

truck himself. I'm going home with my lady.”

My lady.

Yes, I am your lady.

Forever.

THIRTY-NINE

BROOKE

“Congratulations to both of you.” Nancy stands with an arm around Moss and another around me. “Say cheese!”

Neither Moss nor I say cheese, but we do smile for the camera. As soon as the photographer indicates he got the shot he was after, Moss takes my hand and pulls me into his side.

He’s made it a point to be touching me every moment we’re together. It’s like he has to have physical contact to make sure I’m still here.

I’m not complaining. Not even a little.

“It’s been a wonderful evening, Nancy. Thank you for everything,” Moss says.

“We are honored to have you both here.” She looks over my shoulder. “Oh, there’s Mark Jones. I need to catch him before he leaves. If you’ll excuse me ...”

Moss smiles, his eyes wide and sparkling with mischief. “Let’s make a run for it.”

I giggle as he takes my hand and leads me through the crowd like a linebacker. It’s hard to keep up with him as I run in my heels.

We make it through the throng of people and to the exit. The evening air is chilly on my bare legs.

“I need to get you home and get that fucking dress off your body,” he says, looking at me like he wants to eat me.

Which he probably will do later.

I shiver.

“You know what you promised me, right?” I ask.

The look he tosses over his shoulder is nothing but *fire*.

He remembers.

We get to his truck. He opens the passenger side door and takes my hand. I hoist myself up into the cab. His free hand slides through the slit that goes up the front of my dress until his fingers tease the very top part of my thigh.

“Keep it up, Mr. Carmichael, and you won’t make it home.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

He smirks and closes the door.

I watch him walk around the front of the vehicle, his suit and tie making him look dapper and sophisticated.

I’ll add that to all of the Moss looks that I know. Still not sure which is my favorite.

He hops in the driver’s seat and turns on the truck. Sheryl Crow croons from the radio. He pops it in reverse and we speed out of the parking lot toward his house.

We drive for a while before either of us speaks. Finally, he looks at me.

“We have a lot to talk about,” he says.

“Ha. The last time we started a conversation like this in the car, it didn’t go so well.”

He rolls his eyes. “That was your one.”

And then, for a reason I don’t understand, he starts chuckling.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.” He looks at me again. “I’m going to tell you where I am with this thing between us, and you can do what you want from there. I’m not going to ask you first and have you lollygag around about it. My mind is made up, so I’ll go first.”

“Then go.”

He nods. “I never want to spend another night without you. I really love my house and my lanai, but if you tell me you want me to stay with you at your house, fine. As long as we’re together.”

“Like ... just stay with each other or ...”

“I want you to move in with me. If I have my way, I’ll get my brothers to bring their trucks to your house this weekend, load you up, and move you in.”

I’m not sure what to say.

For those three days apart, I knew I’d never want to spend another day, let alone another night, away from Moss if we were able to fix things between us. And I realized that our love completes each other. We both have scars. Traumas. But as Moss has opened up to me more, I’m reminded that

I'm safe with him.

He loves me for me. Just as I am. He's not holding back his affection. He's not holding back his head. So there is only one answer ...

"Fine. I'll move in this weekend," I say.

His jaw drops. "It was that easy?"

"You tell me what you want, and I can respond."

"Awesome. I want to take your ass tonight."

I burst out laughing. But my body clenches. *Holy shit.*

"Let's circle back to that later," I say, my cheeks pink.

He grins. "I want to ask you to marry me soon. Thoughts? Issues?"

"Nope."

He looks surprised. "Can I please, please put a baby inside you?" He grabs his cock and adjusts it. "The thought of that makes me instantly hard."

I laugh again. "Okay. On that one, my answer is eventually. I have shit I want to do before I go full-blown motherhood."

"Fair."

"Great."

He grins.

"My turn," I say.

His brows shoot to the ceiling. "Okay. Your turn. Let's hear it."

"I want new locks on the doors immediately."

"*Oh. Done.*" He makes a face. "That's ... yeah. That's family preservation right there."

I giggle. "Okay. I also want our bedroom to be at least a little more girly. I know it's your house, and you like it your way, but I really would like to merge our stuff—"

"Brooke," he says, amused. "I couldn't give a fuck what you do to the house. As long as you're there, you can paint the whole fucking thing pink if you want." He reaches over and squeezes my thigh. "As long as you're there."

I reach over and squeeze his thigh. "I'll be there."

"Great."

"One more thing," I say, heat flooding between my legs. "I'm going to need some kind of assurance that you'll lay me on the kitchen counter and bury your face between my legs at least once a week."

He shifts in his seat so he can reach more of me and slides his hand to my panties.

“You’re wet already,” he says, a growl in his tone. “Damn, Brooke.”
I tilt my pussy toward his hand. “Last thing—get me home, my man.”
He sits back in his seat, smiling proudly. “Yes, my lady.”

I don’t think he could wipe the smile off his face if he wanted to.

I know I couldn’t mine.

Because this crazy flirt beside me, the man who owns my heart, is my
forever.

EPILOGUE

BROOKE

Two months later

“Think we qualify for one of those pillows yet?” Moss nods toward the pillow Jess got Damaris and chuckles.

Before I can say anything, Maddox chimes in.

“You do. Lesson learned,” he says, grimacing.

Moss flips his gaze to his brother. “One, I wasn’t talking to you.”

“But I could hear it,” Maddox says. “If I can hear it, I’m invited.”

“Two,” Moss says, ignoring his brother’s smirk. “If my doors are locked, that doesn’t give you permission to try to break in the fucking back door.”

“We didn’t think you were home,” Banks says.

Moss throws up his hands. “Then you *really* shouldn’t be in my house.”

“Cute.” Foxx lifts a brow from across the room. “You still expect them to have manners.”

The four of them get into a heated conversation. As usual, Banks and Maddox join forces against their brothers.

I sit back on the sofa—the sofa that Damaris has had for years because Kix caught on to her plan and nipped it in the bud—and laugh.

This family has taken me in as if I have always been theirs. In a strange way, I wonder if I have been. *Was everything I’ve been through in my life preparing me for the Carmichael family?*

It’s hard to justify that. I know it’s probably just a nice idea that I’ve created to help remedy my past relationships, but I like it. So I’ll hold on to it.

Moss reaches for my hand and laces our fingers together, never missing a

beat in his back-and-forth with his brothers.

Just like he holds on to me.

Sometimes I look at him or watch him and can't believe this man had a hiccup about verbalizing love. He *is* love. He's the definition of it. Everything that he does in his life is done with so much thought and consideration that it takes my breath away on the regular.

But I guess everyone has something about them. Even the people who seem the most perfect have a wound or insecurity that you don't always see.

"I don't know how you do this all day," Foxx grumbles to me as he walks by.

I smile at the man I'm only starting to get to know. He doesn't smile back. That only makes me smile more.

Banks catches my eye, giving me a wink before he slips out the front door.

"Brooke, honey," Damaris says, passing Foxx in the doorway. Her shoulder bumps the wall and she grimaces. "Kix, I'm getting rid of this wall. I don't care if you like it or not."

He comes up beside her, sinking his hands into her waist. He presses a kiss to her neck.

"I love when you get riled up," he says, nipping at her earlobe.

"Not in front of the children!" Maddox shouts, making everyone laugh.

Kix winks at Maddox and then goes back into the kitchen.

Damaris grins. "Anyway, Brooke—do you mind if I take Honey home?"

"You don't have to do that. I'm happy to run her back to her house."

"Let Damaris take me," Honey says, walking around Damaris. "There's a condo that she knows about that might fit me better than your old place. Don't get me wrong. It's as cute as a button. But it's a little big for me, and I'd like to have neighbors who don't have dogs."

I get to my feet, my heart swelling in my chest. Shortly after the Excellence Awards, Moss brought up an idea. What if we asked Honey to move closer? We had my house sitting empty with six months left on the lease, and there was literally nothing stopping her from moving closer to us. *Especially after she heard some of the things Catherine said to me.* Honey wanted to be happy all the time, she said, and that meant moving to Kismet Beach.

"If that makes you happy, Honey," I say.

"It does, Bee."

Moss stands too and gives Honey a quick hug.

“It’s nice having you here with us,” he tells her, kissing her on the cheek. “I’m glad you took us up on our offer.”

She tosses her head back as far as an eighty-five-year-old woman’s head will go and laughs. “You have no idea how glad I am that you made the offer.” She takes his hand and pats it. “You’re a good man. I’m glad you listened to me.”

I pull my brows together but don’t ask. The look they give each other tells me enough.

“There’s Honey!” The door slams behind Banks as he walks back in. “How are you doing, you sweet little thing?”

Her face lights up. “I wondered where you were today.”

“No one told me you were here, or I’d have been here hours ago.” He looks at me and winks before kissing Honey’s cheek. “You look ravishing today.”

“It’s a new dress. Do you like it?”

“Purple is definitely your color.”

Honey laughs, the apples of her cheeks rosy. “Damaris? Are you ready?”

“I’m ready.”

Damaris takes her elbow. Maddox hops up and holds the door open for them.

Kix pokes his head in the doorway and looks around. “Are they gone?”

“Yup!” Moss says. “You ready, Dad?”

“Paige, I gotta go. We’ll keep you posted.” He pauses, looking at the phone. “I love you too. Tell Ryder as soon as school is out that he’s coming to hang out with me. Okay? Bye, sweetheart.” He ends the FaceTime and looks up. “Let’s work, boys.”

Foxx comes back into the room with plastic. Banks and Maddox begin covering the furniture so the dust from the wall they’re about to take down doesn’t get all over the place.

“Moss, I’m gonna go,” I say, nodding toward the door.

“I’ll walk you out.” He looks over his shoulder. “Be right back.”

We step outside, and Jess goes in.

“Getting out of work already? Typical,” Jess teases his brother.

“Fuck off,” Moss says.

Jess laughs as he enters the house.

We step off the porch into the early afternoon sunlight. I pick at my shirt

to keep it from attaching to my skin with sweat.

Moss doesn't take the hint and pulls me into him anyway.

How can I mind? Being in his arms is my favorite place in the world.

"How long will this take?" I ask him.

"Too fucking long." He bites my bottom lip, pulling it just until it hurts. Then he lets it go. "I'll be home as soon as I can."

"I think I'll take a swim and work on Sweet Street." I pause. "That's going to be my favorite project. I loved it when your dad mentioned it, more since you told me you love me there, and even more that it's named something so adorable."

"My favorite project is you."

My insides turn to mush.

"Go help them so you can get done faster," I say.

"If Banks manages to help and not fuck off, we'll be out of there fast. But if he starts screwing around, he'll get Mad screwing around, and then ... I'll come home and screw around with you."

I grin. "We just got done screwing around before we came here. My ass is still sore."

He growls, making me laugh.

"Okay. I'm going to go because I can feel you getting distracted." I reach between us and cup his cock through his pants. "Take care of that before you go back in there."

"Then you better get the hell out of here. Looking at you isn't going to help."

I press a long, lingering kiss to his lips.

We jump, our heads turning to the house, and Maddox storms outside.

"What's wrong?" Moss asks him.

"I hate fucking social media."

We watch him work something out on the screen for a moment before we turn back to each other.

"I'm going," I say.

"I like you better when you're coming."

"You're such a flirt."

Moss grins, walking backward. "I love you, Brooke."

My heart blooms just like it does every time he says it, which is multiple times every day. For someone who made a point not to say it for most of his life, it comes out easily now.

“I love you, Moss.”

His smile stretches from ear to ear.

I blow a kiss and then turn and walk to our home.

I once lived alone in every way. Sadly, it wasn't the miles that created the distance between me and those I loved. It was the emotional roadblock.

It might've taken me too long to see that I can't fight every battle that comes my way. I shouldn't fight some of them. If something is hurtful to me and has no chance or desire to do better, then I have to let that fucking duck go.

Will my mother ever change? Probably not. But that's her burden to carry. Not mine.

I can see that because the Carmichaels brought me in and showed me that there is more to life, to family than what I knew. They love me. Even Foxx, I think. They fill my heart with joy. They made sure that I found my home. My place. My future.

It's just down the cul-de-sac from them.

WANT A LITTLE BIT MORE? **Grab a bonus scene of Moss and Brooke [right here](#).**

Don't miss Maddox's book, FLING, coming soon! [Preorder here](#).

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hi, reader!

Thank you for reading FLIRT. I hope you enjoyed it.

What should you do now?

I'm glad you asked!

First, I would love for you to **leave a review on Amazon**. It doesn't have to be long or fancy, but I would sincerely appreciate it if you would [click here](#) and say something about Flirt.

Next, the two best places to **stay up-to-date with me** are via my [Locke List newsletter](#) and my Facebook Group, [Books by Adriana Locke](#). (Join us! It's fun!)

And, finally, you should read more books!

Maddox's book, FLING, is coming out soon. You can preorder it [here](#).

In the meantime, if you enjoyed the Carmichael Family Series, you should check out the Gibson Boys too! Start with Crank. **I'll give you the first chapter next.**

CRANK - CHAPTER 1

CHAPTER ONE

Walker

“I’m not taking you to the hospital.”

Peck teeters on the edge of one of Crave’s billiard tables. He sways back and forth, his sneakers squeaking against the cheap wood over the chatter of the patrons of the bar. “You don’t think I can land a back flip off here?”

The truth is I’m pretty sure he could. My cousin has the reflexes of a cat. The problem is he also has nine lives, and I’m sure he’s used up eight of them already.

“The question isn’t if you can land it. It’s how bloody the end result would be,” I say, taking a sip of beer. “And I’m not trying to splint a head wound. Can you even do that?”

“*You* could. Look at my arm.” He holds his left forearm in front of him, his watch catching the light from the new fixtures above. “This is some of your best work.”

Memories of splinting Peck’s arm with nothing but a belt, a bar towel, and a Playboy rush through my mind, as does loading him into the back of my truck for a quick trip to the emergency room.

“I really think I can do this,” Peck insists, working his shoulders back and forth.

Downing another drink, hoping I’m good and hammered before Peck attempts this disaster, I look across the table. My older brother, Lance, is watching me as he brings an Old-Fashioned to his lips. We exchange a look, both of us waiting for Machlan to catch wind of Peck’s antics and throw him

out of Crave. Again.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Peck asks. “Another broken arm? I mean, I think I can get the rotation fast enough to not land on my head.”

“I think it’s your turn to take him to the hospital,” I tell Lance.

He coughs, choking on his drink. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

“Remember how hot that nurse was last time?” Peck asks, wiggling his brows. “Actually, that kind of makes me want to go for it now just in case she’s on duty.”

“She’s not,” Lance chimes in. “I think she was fired after the Hospital Administrator found her fuck-foundered in triage three the night of your broken arm.”

“Peck! Get your fucking ass down.” Machlan’s voice rips through the bar, booming over the crowd.

Everyone quiets a few notches, not quite scared of my younger brother, but not willing to test his boundaries either. His reputation as a man you don’t want to tangle with without a small army definitely helps his cause when it comes to managing his bar. Peck, on the other hand, just rolls his eyes.

“Just one jump, Mach! One. Uno. I got this.” Peck gives Machlan his best shit-eating grin before looking at me and Lance. “If he throws me out, I’ll be back in a couple days. Hell, he threw me out on Tuesday and I was back on Thursday for corn hole.”

“I think that just means you’re in here too much,” Lance offers.

Peck starts to respond but his attention is redirected as Molly McCarter saunters by. The dim lighting does nothing to hide the exaggerated sway of her hips or the way she licks her lips as her sight sets on *me*.

Bracing for what may come out of her mouth, I fill mine with alcohol.

“Hey, Walker,” she says, stopping at my chair. Her hands rest along the top rung, her fingertips sliding across the back of my neck. “Hey, Lance.”

Lance tips his glass her way.

“I was thinking,” she purrs, “my car is way overdue for an oil change. Maybe I could bring it to Crank sometime this week, Walker? Do you think you could *fit it in*?”

“I’m pretty full this week,” I lie, ignoring her thinly veiled offer. “See what Peck has available.”

A huff whispers through the air and she pivots on her heel. “Thanks anyway.”

“I can get you in ...” Peck’s voice drowns into the Crave chaos as he

follows her towards the bar.

He tails after her, all but drooling, as she slides onto a bar stool. Her gaze flicks to mine, her knees spread just a little farther apart than a lady ever should. Then again, no one has ever called Molly a lady.

“Ever fuck her?” Lance asks, downing the rest of his drink as he turns back to me. “I’ve been tempted to a couple of times and did get a decent blow job one Halloween when she was dressed up in this nurse outfit.”

“What is it with you and nurses?”

“Think about it: they’re smart, make good money, work a lot so you have free time, and they’re used to getting dirty,” he smirks. “It’s like a straight shot to my dick.”

“And they’re good with needles, have access to medicines that can make you lose your mind, and I’ve never met one who didn’t have a warped sense of humor,” I counter. “They set off my crazy radar.”

Lance laughs. “Did that radar just start working? Because I distinctly remember you getting balls deep with some psychologically-challenged women. One in particular.”

“Are you feeling froggy tonight? Because if you keep that mouth runnin’ like that, I’m about to knock those glasses off your face.”

I’m kidding. More or less. The problem is Lance knows it.

“Oh, go to Hell,” he laughs.

“Already there, brother. Already there.”

He takes his glasses off his face and places them on the table. “I usually look at your life and think I’d hate to have it. But after the day I had today, I’d trade you places.”

“What? Did the high school kids refuse to learn about the American Revolution?” I laugh. “You have such a cush job.”

“I’m a professional.”

“A professional bullshitter, maybe.”

He makes a comeback, but it’s swallowed in the roar of the crowd as a popular song blares through the overhead speakers.

Crave, an old brick building along Beecher Street, is longer than it is wide, and pulses with the noise of the crowd and music. Alcohol ads, high school sports schedules, and a giant cork board adorn the walls. The latter is a good read and filled with letters and notes from one towns person to the next. Affairs have been called out, coon dogs found, marriage proposals made, and entire conversations about who is working what shift at the factory have

taken place on that thing. It's been a mainstay of the bar since our uncle founded it almost fifty years ago. When our younger brother, Machlan, took over Crave thanks to Uncle George's failing liver, he extended the wall of corkboards all the way to the door.

"That's new," Lance says, moving over one seat closer to me. Motioning to the phallic design made up of yellow rubber duck Christmas lights on the wall between the pool tables, he laughs. "Let me guess: that's Peck's handiwork."

"Naturally. Machlan wasn't thrilled, but Peck rallied the masses and they convinced him to keep it."

"It is nicely done," Lance says, chewing on the end of his glasses. "I can see the art in it."

"Fuck. I should've been an artist if that counts as art."

"Apparently things didn't go well with Molly," Lance says, twisting in his chair.

"She's never gonna give Peck a chance."

At the sound of his name, Peck walks through the front door. He stops just inside, the glow from the exit sign giving his mop of blond hair a pinkish hue.

Peck makes a beeline for our table, a look etched in the lines on his face that sends a ripple of concern up my spine. After growing up with him and then working with him for the last few years, I can read him like a book. Something is wrong.

"What's going on?" I ask, scrambling to my feet as he gets closer.

"Walker, man, you need to get outside," Peck says. "Someone just bashed the front of your truck."

"What?" I hiss, sure I misheard him. "Someone did fucking what?"

"Yeah, man. You need to get out there."

Blood ripping through my veins, I plow my way through the bar. Machlan lifts his chin, sensing something is off, but I shake my head as we pass. I know he loves a good fight, but this one is mine.

Lance is on my heels as we make our way through the crowd. "Who did you piss off now?"

"Someone who wants to die, apparently." My fingers flex against the wood of the door, the warm summer air slamming my face as I hit the sidewalk. "You sure you don't want to stay inside? I think getting into a street fight is against your teacher code of conduct."

“Fuck off,” Lance chuckles. “I’ll have Peck hold my glasses and I’m in.”

“You, my brother, are an intelligent heathen.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment. I think.”

The top of my black pickup truck comes into view, sitting beneath one of the few lamps lining Beecher Street. There are two people standing on the sidewalk next to my truck.

“Do we know them?” I ask Peck through gritted teeth.

“I promise you we’ve never seen them before.”

“So it’s not ...” Lance doesn’t finish his sentence. “*Holy shit.*”

The two women turn to face us and I think all of our jaws drop. The first is tall with jet black hair and a strong, athletic build. It’s the second one who has me struggling to remember why we’re out here.

Long, blonde hair with faint streaks of purple and the brightest blue eyes I’ve ever seen, she assesses me in the hazy streetlight. She doesn’t make a show of looking me over like most women do, batting their eyelashes like some damsel in distress. There’s something different about her, a quiet confidence that makes her almost unapproachable.

Unapproachable, but still hot as fucking hell.

My gaze drifts down her ample chest, over the white lace fabric of the top that hugs the bends of her body. Cutoff denim jeans cap long, lean legs that only look longer next to the Louisville Slugger half-hidden behind her.

It takes a ton of effort, but my eyes finally tear from her body and to the body of my truck. Sure enough, there’s a rip across the grill and a broken headlight that looks an awful lot like a slam from a baseball bat. It’s nothing that can’t be fixed in my shop, but that’s not the point. The point is the disrespect.

“Either of you know what happened?” I ask, leaning against the hood. They remain silent. The only response is a dashed look between them.

Settling my scrutiny on each one individually, watching them squirm, I save the blonde for last.

“Did you see anything?” I ask, turning back to the tall one.

Her weight shifts from one foot to the other as she runs a hand through her shiny hair like we’re talking about coffee or having a beer later. “Me? No. I didn’t see a thing.”

“Really? You were standing out here just now and you didn’t see anything?”

“No,” she smiles sweetly. “Nothing at all.”

Peck steps between us and inspects the damage. When he turns around, he bites the inside of his cheek. “If I were a betting man, Walker, I’d say it looks like someone walloped Daisy with a baseball bat.”

The blonde lifts a brow, something on the tip of her tongue that she holds back.

“You got something to say?” I prod.

“You named your truck ‘Daisy’?”

Her eyes narrow, almost as if she’s taunting me. That she has the guts to challenge me combined with those fucking blue eyes throws me off my game. “I did. Got a problem with that?”

“No. No problem,” she says, twisting her lips into an incredibly sexy pout that I want to kiss off her goddamn face. “Just never met a man who named their truck after a flower.”

“Me either. Now, before I go calling the Sheriff about this, I’m gonna give you two a moment to consider telling me what happened. And,” I say, cutting off the blonde, “I’ll give you a piece of information before you decide what to say. Doc Burns’ office has cameras installed that will show everything. Just let that sink in a second.”

Their eyes go wide as they instinctively move together into a protective huddle. The tall girl points to the blonde who responds with a frantic whisper. She’s guilty as hell.

On one hand, I want to break her down and get inside her in ways she’s never dreamed. On the other, I can hear my brain issuing an alert to back away slowly.

The longer they confer, the more time I have to watch. The blonde controls the conversation, the other deferring to her as they talk amongst themselves. It’s hot as hell.

The light bounces off the wounded plastic of the headlight and draws my attention back to the fact that Daisy is damaged, and in all likelihood, one of these two did it.

“You really calling Kip?” Peck whispers. “He’s not gonna do shit about this, you know.”

“He might throw them in the back of his cop car and fuck their brains out. Especially the blonde,” Lance whistles. “Can you imagine her in handcuffs? *Shit.*”

The thought shoots a flame through my veins that catches me off guard. The vision of her bound up with one of these assholes at the helm irks me.

Bad. “You two stay out of this. Let me handle it.”

The sound of metal pinging against the ground rings through the air. The girls jump, the blonde leaping away from the aluminum bat as it rolls across the sidewalk and lands in the gutter with a flourish. Her eyes snap to mine, guilt etched across her gorgeous face. “It was an accident.”

“How, exactly, does a baseball bat accidentally strike the front of my truck?” I ask. “Did it just hop over there and smash itself into my headlight?”

“Well,” she gulps. “I ...”

“She was imitating her brother,” the dark-headed one says. “So we stop using pronouns, I’m Delaney. This is Sienna.”

“I’m Walker. That’s Peck and Lance.” I rest my attention on Sienna. She’s leaned against the grey car, her arms crossed over her chest. “So?”

“I was swinging the bat,” she says, “while Delaney puked over there and it slipped out of my hands.”

“I think we’re gonna have to see your swing,” Peck chuckles.

Sienna rolls her eyes. “You do *not* need to see my swing.”

Imagining her ass popped out, her body moving for our benefit, seems like a fair trade for the hassle of dealing with this tonight.

“How else do we know it was you? It could’ve been Delaney and you’re just covering for her,” I explain, loving the frustration on her beautiful face. “Gonna need to see the swing.”

“No.”

“Lance, call Sheriff Kooch.”

“Wait,” Sienna sighs. “It *was* an accident. I can cut you a check for the repairs but please don’t call the police. I ... I can’t have a record. You don’t understand.”

Looking away, it takes everything I have not to laugh. The plea in her voice is so damn adorable it almost makes me give in. Yet, she hasn’t shown any remorse, and that’s something I can’t get to sit right.

Swiping the bat out of the gutter, I extend it to her. The air between us heats, our fingers brushing in the exchange. The contact is enough to have her eyes flicking to mine. The light above may be dim, but it’s bright enough to see the way her lids hood, her lips part just barely as she pulls her skin from mine.

A zip of energy tumbles through my veins and I remind myself I can’t tug on the bat and pull her into me. There’s no way I can cover her lips with my own, sliding my tongue across hers, making her attempt at resistance to this

proposed swing futile.

Instead, I step back.

“Batter up.” Peck motions for her to go. “Let’s see it.”

“Are you really going to make me do this?”

“Did you really just smash the front of my truck?” I ask. “The answer is the same to both questions, Slugger.”

Her eyes narrow, but there’s a fire in them that turns me the hell on. She steps away from her friend, zapping all the power I held just a few seconds ago with the flick of her tongue. It darts out, rolling across her bottom lip as the bat comes over her head. Sticking her ass out, bending her knees, her eyes still locked on mine, she slices the bat through the air ... and stops it at the last possible second before impact.

It’s everything I thought it would be.

“Any questions, fellas?” she asks, propping it up on one shoulder.

“I have one,” I say, forcing a swallow, trying to redirect my thoughts. “If you could stop it that fast, then why the fuck didn’t you do that the first time?”

“Very funny.” She tosses the bat into the back seat of the car and crosses her arms in front of her again.

“Can I ask why you have a baseball bat to begin with?” Lance asks. “Do you belong to some softball league or something? If so, I just took a huge interest in women’s softball.”

Sienna laughs as Delaney’s face turns red. “Delaney’s car is like a scavenger hunt. You can find anything in there. So while she got sick, I just rummaged around in the trunk, found the bat, and fooled around.” She looks at me, her eyes softening. “Are you going to be here for a while? I’ll go home and get the money. I didn’t bring my debit card with me tonight.”

It’ll cost fifty bucks to fix the damage and about an hour’s time. Definitely not worth her going out of her way tonight. But it *is* worth making her come around again and say she’s sorry. It might do her some good.

Might not hurt me either.

She clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth, the motion driving me crazy.

“Come see me Monday morning at Crank. It’s two streets over,” I say, gesturing to the north, before I can talk sense in to myself.

“Smart,” Peck whispers behind me, getting an elbow to the side from Lance.

Her jaw sets, a glimmer of resistance clouding her baby blue eyes. “I have plans Monday. I can try on Tuesday.”

The nonchalant attitude cuts through me, like her fuckup is no big deal. I wasn’t set on Monday morning, but I am now. “Monday or I call the Sheriff. Your decision, but make it quick. I got shit to do.”

“Fine,” she huffs. “Monday.”

“Fine,” I mock. “See you Monday morning.”

We start back down the sidewalk, her gaze heavy on my back. I pause at the bumper of their car. “Peck got your license plate number, so don’t think about not showing.”

“I did not,” Peck hisses, catching another elbow from Lance as their car doors open and slam shut.

“What the hell are you going to do with that?” Lance asks once we’re out of earshot. “Because I have a list of suggestions if you need them.”

As we get farther away, the air clearing of Sienna’s perfume, I realize it’s not suggestions I need. It’s a heavy dose of self-control.

[Read CRANK here.](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thank you to my Creator, first and foremost. Always.

Starting a new series is always daunting, especially on the heels of one you loved. There are so many personalities to meet, to understand, to get to know. It takes so much time and energy—and copious amounts of support.

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And, last but certainly not least, thank YOU for picking up this book. I'm honored that you trusted me to entertain you for a little while. I hope you enjoyed the story.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Adriana Locke lives and breathes books. After years of slightly obsessive relationships with the flawed bad boys created by other authors, Adriana created her own.

She resides in the Midwest with her husband, sons, two dogs, two cats, and a bird. She spends a large amount of time playing with her kids, drinking coffee, and cooking. You can find her outside if the weather's nice and there's always a piece of candy in her pocket.

Besides cinnamon gummy bears, boxing, and random quotes, her next favorite thing is chatting with readers. She'd love to hear from you!

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