



FREAK SHOW

WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LANI LYNN VALE

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WALL STREET JOURNAL AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LANI LYNN VALE

Freak Show
Slone & Caristonia
By Lani Lynn Vale™
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Sometimes I try to think about who I haven't dedicated a book to, and then I realize that I've written so freakin' many that nearly everyone I like has already had three dedicated to them.

It's funny when you grow up and you finally stop giving a fuck about what people think, that your friend group dwindles down to a very select few who mean the world to you.

Anyway, maybe this one should be dedicated to the people that fucked me over. Without you, I wouldn't have anywhere near as much to write about.

Acknowledgments

Golden Czermak—Photographer

My Brother's Editor & Ink It Out Editing—My editors

Alyssa Garcia—My PA

My mom—Thank you for reading this book eight million six hundred seventy-eight times.

My betas. Seriously, I don't know what I would do without you.

Other titles by Lani Lynn Vale

The Freebirds

Boomtown

Highway Don't Care

Another One Bites the Dust

Last Day of My Life

Texas Tornado

I Don't Dance

The Heroes of The Dixie Wardens MC

Lights To My Siren

Halligan To My Axe

Kevlar To My Vest

Keys To My Cuffs

Life To My Flight

Charge To My Line

Counter To My Intelligence

Right To My Wrong

Code 11- KPD SWAT

Center Mass

Double Tap

Bang Switch

Execution Style

Charlie Foxtrot

Kill Shot

Coup De Grace

The Uncertain Saints

Whiskey Neat

Jack & Coke

Vodka On The Rocks

Bad Apple

Dirty Mother

Rusty Nail

The Kilgore Fire Series

Shock Advised

Flash Point

Oxygen Deprived

Controlled Burn

Put Out

I Like Big Dragons Series

I Like Big Dragons and I Cannot Lie

Dragons Need Love, Too

Oh, My Dragon

The Dixie Warden Rejects

Beard Mode

Fear the Beard

Son of a Beard

I'm Only Here for the Beard

The Beard Made Me Do It

Beard Up

For the Love of Beard

Law & Beard

There's No Crying in Baseball

Pitch Please

Quit Your Pitchin'

Listen, Pitch

The Hail Raisers

Hail No

Go to Hail

Burn in Hail

What the Hail

The Hail You Say

Hail Mary

The Simple Man Series

Kinda Don't Care

Maybe Don't Wanna

Get You Some

Ain't Doin' It

Too Bad So Sad

Bear Bottom Guardians MC

Mess Me Up

Talkin' Trash

How About No

My Bad

One Chance, Fancy
It Happens
Keep It Classy
Snitches Get Stitches
F-Bomb

The Southern Gentleman Series

Hissy Fit
Lord Have Mercy
KPD Motorcycle Patrol
Hide Your Crazy
It Wasn't Me
I'd Rather Not
Make Me
Sinners are Winners
If You Say So
SWAT 2.0

Just Kidding
Fries Before Guys
Maybe Swearing Will Help
Ask Me If I Care
May Contain Wine
Joke's on You
Join the Club
Any Day Now
Say it Ain't So
Officially Over It
Nobody Knows
Depends Who's Asking

Valentine Boys

Herd That
Crazy Heifer
Chute Yeah
Get Bucked

Souls Chapel Revenants

Repeat Offender
Conjugal Visits
Jailbait

Doin' A Dime
Kitty, Kitty
Gen Pop
Inmate of the Month
Madd CrossFit Series
No Rep
Jerk It
Chalk Dirty to Me
Battle Crows MC
Always Someone's Monster
Make Me Your Villain
Rattle Some Cages
Not A Role Model
Get Tragic
Strange and Unusual
Never Trust The Living
Gator Bait MC
Nobody Cares Unless You're Pretty
Good Trouble
Cute But Psycho
Annoyed At First Sight
The Voices Are Back
Special Kind of Twisted
I'll Just Date Myself
Clown World
Fun House
Freak Show
Show Off
Clown Motel
Sold To The Circus
Killing Booth
The Fool

Blurb

Slone Day, defensive end for the Longview professional football team, has a lot on his plate.

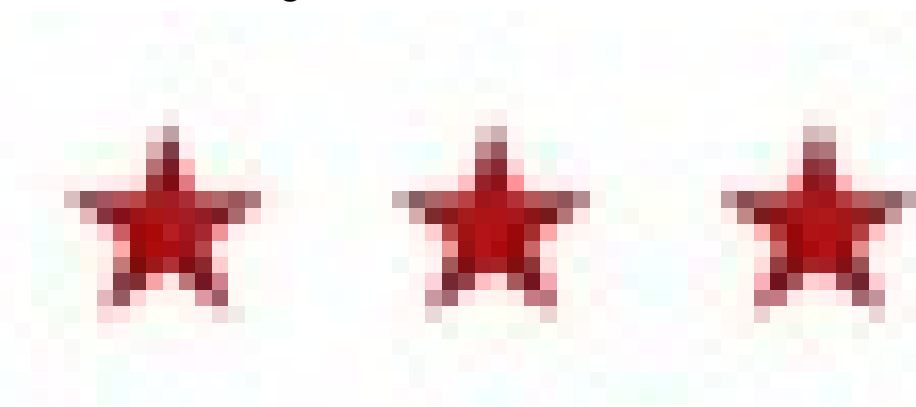
He's at the peak of his career, he's a single father raising a girl that's border line genius and can't seem to find the time to date. Let alone see someone seriously.

He's perfectly content living his life as it is.

Then he goes to a circus.

There, he meets a woman that literally takes his breath away.

And in one bold, crazy, *this is probably going to backfire* move, he not only asks the woman out. But he invites her to spend the next two weeks with him while she's recovering from an incident.



There she is, a practical invalid who can't go anywhere without being babysat, experiencing a crisis in the middle of a public setting, when she spots him.

The moment that Caristonia Singh meets Slone, she realizes her life is about to change.

Meeting men when you work in a circus is practically impossible. That's why she's the inexperienced girl that doesn't know how to act around a hot guy.

A really big, really sexy, *holy crap he could toss me over his head and make it look easy*, guy.

From the moment he comes to her defense—family can be dicks sometimes—she starts falling.

But nothing good ever lasts when it comes to the circus life.

People come and go. No one ever stays.

But Slone is dead set on proving her wrong, but she's learned firsthand that nothing good ever lasts.

PROLOGUE

*There's something about a speed limit that just doesn't sit right with my foot.
-Slone to Caristonia*

CARISTONIA

Six Months Ago

I grimaced at the package.

“Who’s that from?” I asked.

“That’s from a fan,” Jarvis, a worker, said as he struggled to get a tent pole securely into the ground.

I watched his muscles strain but didn’t make a move to help him.

There would be no point.

Putting those tent poles up would take way more strength than I possessed.

It’d taken all five sisters to get one up when we were younger. And to be completely truthful, now that we were adults, our strength hadn’t really improved. We’d gotten breasts and ass, but we’d all been the same size since we were twelve.

“Great,” I grumbled.

I had a lovely admirer that liked to go to as many of our shows as he could. Often times he liked to leave me gifts.

The only problem was, his gifts and my twin sister’s gifts that she was bent on sending me were sometimes the same, so it was likely that I would open the gift thinking it was from Hades when in fact, it was someone else. We had weird people in the audience that stared or leered at all of us. It was uncomfortable but I’ve never had the sense that there was a stalker among them.

“Just open it and stop being a little bitch,” Jarvis ordered.

I sighed and did just that, opening it.

I grimaced when I saw the box inside of the box.

“Gross,” I grouched.

“You got my present!” Hades cried.

I looked over at her and said, “You got me a dildo that leans heavily to the left?”

Hades blinked. “No. That one must not be mine.”

The box felt like it was burning my hand the longer I held on to it.

“Mine’s actually a pair of panties.” Hades looked at Jarvis. “Did you see who gave you this one?”

“Listen.” Jarvis finally got the pole in place and turned to us. “I’m not a mail carrier. I’m not anything that sits there and runs errands for you and pays attention to who gives me what. I was in the middle of putting this big ass fence up. Jesus fucking Christ. And you want me to fuckin’ pay attention to who gives it to you?”

So Jarvis was a little bit of an asshole.

But he was a hard worker and sometimes you had to deal with the attitude even if you didn’t want to when you were already short on workers.

“Thanks, Jarvis,” I muttered as I walked the box to the trash.

If Hades was asking Jarvis that, she knew damn well who it was giving it to him.

Well, we knew it was my “admirer.” We just didn’t know who that admirer was.

“What’s that?”

I looked up to find my brother, Keene, looking at me with narrowed eyes.

I tossed him the box and he caught it.

One look inside the box had him turning a glare onto Hades.

She really did send me weird shit, so it wasn’t super surprising that she was getting blamed.

She’d been doing it for years. Meanwhile, my admirer had been sending me weird, sketchy gifts for about four months.

“It wasn’t me!” she immediately denied. “It has a note,” Hades said as she plucked it out of the box. “Male handwriting. It has to be your dude.”

“Don’t call him my dude,” I mumbled. “He’s not my anything.”

Hades flashed me a leering grin then ripped it open.

Her face turned a little green as she said, “It says ‘so you can have something that’s like me.’ Gross.”

Double gross.

“It also says ‘see you next week,’” she read.

Keene took the note and the box and dumped them both into the trash.

“At least he’s giving you a few days off,” Hades tried to reply helpfully.

“I think we should try to go to the police again,” Keene said.

I was already shaking my head. “What’s the point?”

We’d tried that several times now. Other than giving weird gifts, he wasn’t hurting me in any way. I also couldn’t give them anything more than “he’s probably a man” and “the gifts are suggestive.”

“The point,” Keene said, looking annoyed, “is that maybe a cop from this town will do something about it.”

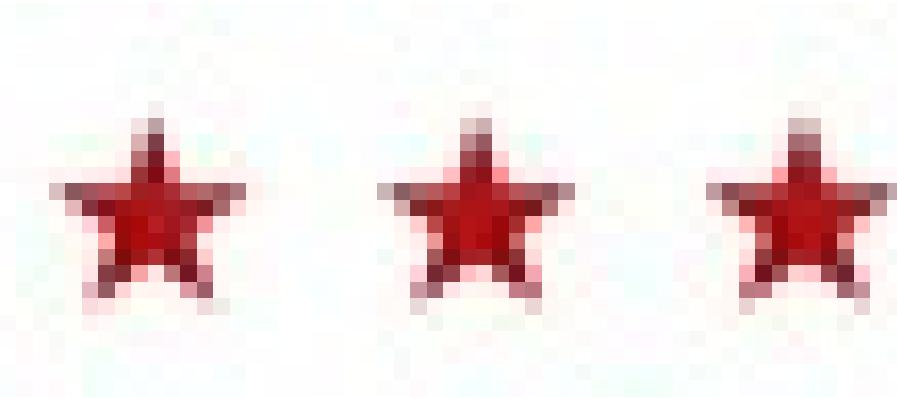
I snorted indelicately. “Yeah, right.”

Keene sighed. “You’re right.”

I knew I was.

We’d actually tried this four separate times, and each time the police officers had been understanding, but hadn’t been able to do a damn thing about it. It also didn’t help that we were moving around so much that I couldn’t go to the same police officer each time.

“Take a picture and then toss it,” I muttered. “I’m going to bed.”



One Month Later

“What is it this time?” I asked, looking at the box like it held venomous snakes.

“It looks like a pair of underwear.” Keene tossed the box.

“Oh!” Hades clapped. “That one is mine!”

Moving around so much, getting mail was hard. Sometimes, if we missed

a certain stop, we had to have mail forwarded to our next address. And, even then, it might not make it before we left again.

She'd been waiting for it for a month.

She pulled the underwear out of the box, then grimaced. "Oh, these aren't them."

She then started to frantically wipe her hand on the box with a horrified look on her face. "There's something sticky on them! Oh my god!"

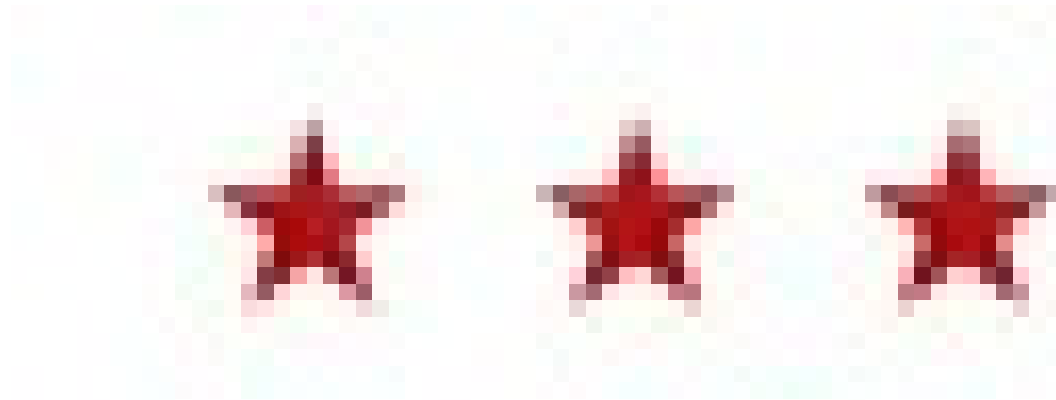
Yet another gross gift.

Yay.

"Who the fuck took this anyway?" Keene tossed Hades a shop rag that he'd had in his back pocket. "I thought they were supposed to start refusing any gifts."

"They are," I grumbled. "But this one was delivered by the mail carrier."

"Fuckin' awesome." Keene sighed.



Two Months Later

"If one more fuckin' gift finds its way onto our bus, you're all fuckin' fired!" Keene yelled.

My sisters and I stared at him. "Keene, honey. You act like we can just stop taking mail. Not to mention, it was us who brought it in, not them. And you can't fire us. We all equally own it."

"What is it this time?"

Keene looked toward Hades. Hades now refused to open anything after what happened last time.

“I’m not opening it,” Keene complained.

“I swear I didn’t buy her anything this time.” Hades held up her hands.

That had happened the last time Keene opened one. Hades had purposefully bought the one thing she knew he’d hate. He had a thing about spiders after spending some time overseas, and now literally went anywhere they weren’t.

Then there was my sister, sending him a package that had fake spiders exploding from the box.

My sister was a dick like that.

“You open it,” he suggested.

I rolled my eyes at both of them and ripped open the box.

In the box was a note laid on top of something.

I read the note and felt my stomach turn.

“I want to pull this out of you when it’s full of your menstrual blood. With my teeth,” Keene read.

“That’s disgusting,” I griped, not bothering to look any further.

Keene took the box and threw it away.

I walked to my bunk and said, “I’m not opening anything anymore.”

And I didn’t.

But my admirer kept right on sending them anyway.

CHAPTER 1

*Always fuck me good night.
-Wall Sign*

CARISTONIA

Shit had hit the fan last night.

Literally.

Well, maybe not the fan. Maybe more literally, shit hit the mirrors.

That'd been what happened when violent men walk into a Fun House to find your sister—your pregnant sister—about to get the shit beaten out of her by a crazed sheriff.

A sheriff that, at one point in time, had an altercation with said sister's mother, and had killed her, too.

My name is Caristonia.

Well, actually, my name is Caristonia Blue, but my siblings called me "Tony." My fraternal twin, Hades Pearl, had dubbed me Tony when she'd been unable to say my name.

"What are you even doing right now?"

I looked over at said twin.

"I'm getting dressed," I told her.

"You're wearing a swim dress." She eyed me up and down. "You have the body of a literal goddess, and you're going to wear a swim dress to a water park?"

Well, when she put it like that, it made me sound like I was a prude.

And, I guess, I kind of was a prude.

I just didn't see the point in wearing revealing clothing. There was absolutely nothing in the world wrong with that.

The "swim dress" was actually a *tighter* fitting cover up that I could wear into the water to cover my actual bathing suit. It'd been something I wore to every single family outing that'd been in the water for years.

It drove not only Hades, but all of my sisters nuts because according to them, I had the absolute perfect body.

Sadly for them, I was not a person that wore tight clothes, or revealing clothes at that. I was a girl that loved everything about men's hoodies, men's

sweatpants, and practically anything that would swallow me up.

I spent too many of my working hours in tight clothes—being in the circus required a certain attire to allure and wow—that I didn't want to wear them in my non-working hours, too.

"I'm wearing something that's comfortable," I disagreed. "And unfortunately, that is this."

Before she could degrade me anymore, or point out that I looked hideous in it, there was a knock on our bus door.

You heard that right. Bus.

I shared a bus with my family. There used to be seven of us shoved in tight like sardines, but now there were only six of us.

And that was thanks to the man that was currently knocking on the bus's door.

I yanked it open and beamed at Coffey, Simi's man, and also the cook for our circus family.

"How's my sister?" I asked the man instead of offering him a greeting.

The man, also known as my sister's likely about-to-be fiancé, softened.

"She's fine," he answered. "She's sleeping. I just thought I'd come down here and grab some of her stuff and move it into the RV."

My sister and Coffey had a whirlwind relationship. Two months ago, they'd met in one of our show's towns. Our show being the Singh Circus.

After the event, my sister had gone to Coffey's dad's funeral—yes, she was freakin' weird like that—and had struck up a conversation with Coffey. The day after, they'd met at a bar, and from there, one thing had led to another.

Eight weeks later, Coffey was living with us, my sister was pregnant with Coffey's baby, and he was our new cook. Chef. Whatever he was called.

All I knew was, his food was divine.

As in, I could eat it all day and night, and never tire of it.

"Oh." I pulled the door open wide and swept my arm out in an "after you" gesture. "Come on in."

He did, his eyes moving curiously around the area.

We shared what was considered a tour bus. It was made for ten people to

share—though likely not as permanently as we did. There was a large living room/kitchen-like area. Then there was the long hallway that housed all of our beds, leading back to a spacious, yet still rather cramped bathroom/shower area. And the main bedroom that we all shared as a closet instead of using as an actual bedroom.

It was filled with racks of clothes, anchored in shelving units with bins to hold our individual things that couldn't be hung up, and shoes. Lots and lots of shoes.

“Come on, I'll show you to her shelves,” I called to him.

I moved quietly down the hall, used to tiptoeing so I didn't wake anyone up, and pointed out the bunks. “Mine.” I pointed to the first one we got to. “Keene's below mine. Then there's Val's, Simi's, Crimson's, Hades's. Then Zip's. The rest of these bunks are for guests and Keene's things. He doesn't get to be part of the closet orgy.”

“Why not?” Coffey asked as I passed.

“Because it's weird seeing your sisters' tits,” Keene called from his bunk as we passed.

I slapped him on the forehead for his comment, then moved away before he could catch me, placing Coffey in between us.

Coffey chuckled and followed me to the room we used as our closet. “Are all of your boobs put away? Coffey wants to come get the rest of Simi's stuff.”

There were a bunch of “yeahs” and then I pushed through.

The room was a wreck, like usual.

The only clean thing about that room right now were the clothes hanging up.

I think more littered the floor than were on the racks.

“Whoa,” Coffey said as he looked at the room. “Y'all are pigs.”

“This is life.” I shrugged. “You get over needing to keep stuff organized and spotless when you have so many wardrobe changes like we do.”

“I can imagine.” He eyed the explosion of clothes on the floor. “Is any of this Simi's? I won't have a clue where to start.”

“Some,” I agreed. “Though we're really good about keeping our clothes to

our section. This is her section.” I led him to it. It looked a little less disaster-like than the rest because she’d been staying with Coffey for the last week since he’d arrived. “This is all hers. Do you have a bag, or do you want to borrow some laundry baskets?”

He eyed all of the empty ones around the room and said, “Laundry baskets for now. I can get them back to you once I dump everything in the RV.”

Ahh, I wished I knew how to drive a truck and a trailer. I’d so totally be out of here if I did.

Not that I didn’t love my sisters and Keene. But damn, would it be nice to just have a freakin’ break.

Which I did.

I had about a month of breaks coming up, actually.

In a few days, it would be my month off.

And soon I would be taking that break and flying the hell to almost anywhere that wasn’t here.

I’d be on the first flight that was to a fairly nice location—my hope was it being somewhere with a beach—and I wouldn’t look back until I was forced to come back.

“Is everyone ready to go?” I heard Zip call. “The bus leaves in ten minutes, whether you’re on it or not!”

“Y’all are still headed to the water park?” Coffey asked.

“Unfortunately,” I grumbled as Crimson appeared from between the racks of clothes.

“Why do you sound like you’re going to your death instead of to a fun place?” Coffey asked as he started to shove clothes off the floor into the first basket we’d given him.

“Because it might be the death of me,” I pointed out.

It wouldn’t.

Hopefully.

Right?

“It’s a water park, loser,” Hades grouched as she came into the room. “It’s not that bad.”

Said the person that didn’t have a fear of heights.

“Actually,” a small voice said from the other side of the room, where, I didn’t know. “According to Google, in 2016 there were twenty-two deaths and thirty-thousand injuries at amusement parks.”

I looked around for the owner of that voice but came up empty.

“Who was that?” Hades asked.

“I’m Briley.”

Briley.

The football player’s daughter.

I went around a few racks of clothing and finally found Briley.

She was tucked up in a corner, munching on an apple, and flicking through her iPad.

My gaze went to the iPad in her hands and my gaze skirted over the screen.

“What’s that one about?” I asked curiously.

It was an article that had a crying woman on the cover of it.

“Ninety minutes after the debut opening of the Emerald Plunge, a ten-year-old boy zoomed down one of the park’s slides. Three stories. He flew off the edge near the bottom, scraped across the concrete on his back, and was rushed to the hospital,” she read to me.

I shook my head. “Wow.”

“This one is worse,” she took another bite of her apple, chewed, then swallowed. “A cable broke at an amusement park in Kentucky. One of those ones that plunges down, you know?”

I nodded at her. “Yeah.”

“The cables were whipping this way and that, and one girl said she started smelling something burning. When she looked down, she saw that her feet had been amputated by the whipping cable, and the burning was her flesh,” she explained.

“All right.” Hades came to a stop beside the girl. “No more reading those, or I’ll never get my twin sister to do anything fun again.”

Briley looked at me as if she was asking if I wanted her to stop.

Damn, I liked this kid.

“Where did you come from?” I wondered.

“I invited her,” Crimson answered. “She was about to go on a run with her dad and to save her from that torture, I told her she could stay with me.”

I looked more closely at the girl. “Do you often go on runs with your dad?”

She shrugged. “Well, I do run. Sure. But I can’t run nearly as fast or as far. So when I’m done running—my dad feels very highly about young kids being active—I sit on the bleachers or something and wait for him to get done. Me staying home means that he got to go run where he wanted, not at a track so he can keep an eye on me.”

That was actually kind of sweet.

The man, Slone, I’d learned was a professional football player for the Longview Liners, one of the newest teams in the NFL. Though, they weren’t so new anymore. It’d been about a decade since they’d formed, from what I’d overheard my brother say yesterday upon meeting him and his teammate, Titus.

Titus and Slone couldn’t be more opposite.

Slone was big. And when I say “big” I mean, holy hell, he’s massive when you even look at him from ten feet away, big. I imagined standing next to him would feel like standing next to a tower.

He wasn’t fat, though.

Far from it.

I could tell by just looking at him that he was in shape. Really good shape.

When everything had gone down with my sister, he’d been off like a bullet from a gun. Something I hadn’t expected from such a large man.

Then there was the tanned skin and his dark brown hair that was in one of those Viking style braids down the back of his head—something I found extremely sexy. I had a thing for the show *Vikings*, and other than the missing blonde hair, Slone could totally pull off the whole medieval lettering tattoo on his forearm that said “Briley” in cursive letters.

Meanwhile, Slone’s best friend, Titus, was the exact opposite of everything Slone was.

Tall, dark, muscular and trim everywhere. The man looked like a walking,

talking muscle, yes. But he also looked like more of a bullet to Slone's battering ram.

He was loud and boisterous and doted on his daughter.

But it wasn't a quiet kind of love like Slone doted on his daughter with.

In the hours that I'd known them, I'd been unable to look away from Slone and his daughter all night.

The girl sitting in front of me now, looking up at me with brown eyes the color of melted chocolate, with her same-colored hair falling into her face and partially covering her eyes, looked nothing like her father.

In fact, she had more of a paleness to her that signified some sort of Irish or Slavish descent.

Then there was Slone. He had a perfectly tanned skin tone that denoted him of Italian descent. That forever tanned look that I usually had, too.

Though, I couldn't be any further away from blonde if I tried.

I had curly black hair, pale green eyes that I was told on a daily basis was creepy by my family, and a body like a dump truck. At least, that was what my first boyfriend, who just so happened to still work for the circus, told me.

"You have very green eyes," Briley noted.

I smiled. "I do."

"She has creepy green eyes," Hades corrected. "Our mother has those creepy eyes, too. I'm just glad that we don't share the same eyes."

"You have creepy blue eyes, dirtbag," I called out.

"You do," Briley agreed. "And they look a little odd on you, too. I didn't know Native Americans had blue *or* green eyes. I thought they had brown or black eyes."

"We're actually only a quarter Navajo," I admitted. "And my mom looks nothing like us. She was very surprised that we took up so much of her Navajo genes. She likes to joke that she passed all of hers to us. That's why people always wondered if we were related at all when we were growing up."

"And your dad?" Briley asked. "I look nothing like my dad. I'm all my mom, or so everyone tells me."

I sensed a story there. One that she tried really hard to act like didn't matter, but actually did.

“Our dad was Irish. He came here from Ireland when he was seventeen with a hope and a dream,” I explained. “He was blonde-haired. But he had brown eyes and the only one of us sisters that looks like him is Zip.”

“Ah.” Briley nodded. “Are we leaving soon? Dad said that he would be back before then, but if y’all are ready, I can call him and tell him to hurry up.”

I held out my hand for her and said, “How about we go wait outside for him. Do you need to use the restroom before we go? I hear the water park is a solid hour drive.”

“No, I don’t need to go,” she answered. “Dad says I have a bladder of a man.”

I smiled at that. “Is he trying to say that women have poor bladder control?”

“Women need to not drink a gallon of coffee before we go places, and their bladder would probably be a non-issue.” Coffey laughed as we walked away.

I flipped him off as we left, causing him to laugh.

When we got outside, it was to find everyone waiting for us.

Even a sweaty looking Slone.

I nearly swallowed my tongue at the sight of him.

His eyes came to me, then went down to his daughter who was trailing behind me.

His shoulder tension went out completely, and I had the urge to reach over and rub his trap muscles.

“You ready, baby?” Slone asked.

“Ready, Dad.” Briley walked up to him. “What was your time?”

Slone grinned down at his daughter. “Forty-eight minutes. Kept it slow today.”

“Ouch,” Briley said. “Six miles in that time? That’s weak, Dad.”

I thought about my slower than slow ten and a half minute miles—I loved running, but I just wasn’t fast at it—and thought she’d really be disappointed in my times if she was so disappointed in her dad’s.

“Not everyone can have a cross country ability like you, kid,” Slone said.

“I run on flat stuff. Not uneven earth that is bound and determined to kill me at every chance.”

“Yes, Dad.” Briley smiled. “Let’s go.”

“I’m taking my truck if anyone wants to ride with me,” Slone offered.

“I’m there. Ron, the bodyguard went ahead in my truck to scope out the park.” Titus clapped his hands. “But my kid wants to ride in the van with the pretty people. That okay?”

He looked to Keene when he said that, and everyone agreed.

But by the time I went to get into the van, I found it completely full.

“Oh, man,” I said, sounding bummed but being anything but. “I guess I’ll have to stay here. There’s no room.”

“There’s plenty of room over here,” a smooth, velvety deep voice said from behind me.

I felt shivers dance across my skin as I looked at the sexy man that was now wearing a shirt.

Though, that shirt was now stained with sweat.

“Um…” I hesitated.

“Just my girl in the back seat,” he said, his eyes taking me in.

“No excuses now, loser.” Val planted her foot in my stomach and shoved me backward. Right into Slone’s surprised arms. “Peace out.”

Then she slammed the door.

I, bent over double with my ass now pressed against the man behind me, wheezed, “You bitch.”

“You okay?” Slone asked, helping me stand upright.

“Great,” I replied. “Just peachy.”

He didn’t say anything, but he did open the back door of his truck—a fancy bright red one that just screamed ‘fast’ to me—and waited for me to climb inside.

Which I did have to do.

I was five feet five inches and had to have looked silly as I clambered my way into the behemoth.

“This thing is huge,” I said as he gently closed the door.

“This thing is stock,” Briley answered my comment. “The wheels are a bit bigger. Thirty-three inches. But they’re not huge. Uncle T has one that is huge.”

Slone scoffed from the front seat.

I couldn’t see anything past his huge shoulders, so I guessed I was going to be looking at nothing the entire trip.

I hated not being able to see.

CHAPTER 2

Spank me. It's the only way I learn.
-Caristonia to Slone

SLOANE

“Do you think she’s scared of heights?” my daughter asked me.

I had no doubt the woman in front of me was afraid of heights. No, afraid would be too calm of a word. Terrified. Unaltered fear.

Even though she hadn’t said it, she definitely was showing signs of panic.

“You said this one didn’t have a drop!” she said accusingly to the woman beside her.

Hades. Hermes. *Something*.

It was an odd name that I definitely couldn’t nail down.

Then again, all the circus sisters had weird names.

Now the woman currently freaking out in front of me? I definitely knew her name.

Caristonia. Though everyone called her Tony.

“I did no such thing!” Hades/Hermes said.

“Hades, you lying cow,” Caristonia grumbled. “You damn well knew this was a drop one.”

Hades was snickering now.

The name was obviously fitting.

“I’m sorry.” She wiped her eyes. “But you should see your face right now.”

Caristonia flipped her off, then started marching back down the stairs.

“If you go down to the second level, there’s another water slide that is much smaller than this one,” Hades called to her. “They even let the babies ride it.”

Caristonia barged past us, then paused right beside Briley.

My daughter looked up at the woman and said, “I’ll hold your hand and go to the other one with you if you want.”

Caristonia wilted slightly. “Thank you, dear heart, but I can’t allow you to stoop to my level. Be brave and go on this one.”

She moved past us in her hideous one-piece swimsuit and marched down

the stairs with anger in every step.

“She’s going to murder you one day,” Keene, the ladies’ we were currently with brother, said. “Like no joke, Hades. You knew she wouldn’t like it. Her fear of heights isn’t something new. You need to stop being such a jerk all the time.”

“You let her come up here, too,” Hades pointed out.

“I thought she was working through her fears. Not being lied to. You know she would’ve been catatonic the rest of the day if you let her go on it,” Keene argued.

Catatonic?

What?

I looked back toward the stairs thinking someone should warn her that the slide she’d gone down two levels to was just as bad, but I could no longer see her at all.

The line moved, and I was forced to go forward, getting my first good look at the slide that Caristonia had fled from.

It was pretty gnarly looking.

“Wow,” Briley breathed. “That’s intense.”

“It is,” I confirmed. “You’re sure you want to go on this one?”

“I’m sure,” she promised.

That was my daughter.

A literal badass. Nothing scared her. Not heights. Not airplanes. Not arenas. Not loud crowds. Not anything.

Hell, not even me.

“I think her sisters are mean to her,” my daughter whispered. “I’m kind of glad I have no other siblings.”

I wanted to laugh at the statement, but I somewhat agreed with her observation.

I was A, also glad she didn’t have any siblings, and B, agreed that Caristonia’s siblings were rather mean to her.

Then again, maybe that was what siblings did to each other? I didn’t know.

My sister, Rain, and I were nice to each other. Well, after we'd grown up, we were nice to each other. When we were younger? Yeah, it'd been on like Donkey Kong. But now that we were both mature adults? Let's just say that other than fighting over whose Easter basket was whose on Easter—I mean the one with the massive amounts of Reese's Eggs was always the more desirable Easter basket—we didn't fight much at all.

Now the Circus Sisters as I'd dubbed them in my head?

They'd done nothing but fight.

Even traumatized from last night, the pregnant sister, Simi, hadn't been spared from the ribbing.

Though, that might've been a survival instinct.

They'd all been very scared last night for their sister, and it'd shown on every one of their faces.

Especially Caristonia's.

"Oh, Dad," Briley whispered. "Do you think she can hear me?"

I looked down over the edge to where she was pointing with her finger to see the object of my thoughts on her butt in the middle of a blue water slide, her hands on the railing.

She was doing this shimmy shake thing as a lifeguard talked to her at the top of the slide above her head.

He gestured to her with his hand to lay flat, and I realized that due to the water pressure around her, it was likely she couldn't hear anything even he was saying. Let alone what we were saying.

"No," I told her. "She likely can't even hear what the lifeguard is saying. He's having to use hand signals, see?"

Briley nodded, looking worried and sick.

That was my Briley girl.

Always thinking about everyone and wanting everyone to be happy.

She was a kind soul that I'm not sure should've been blessed with parents like me and Abilene, but I was so glad that she'd been given to us.

Well, to me.

Abilene, Briley's mother, hadn't wanted much to do with her from the moment she was born.

In the hospital on the day she was born, Abilene hadn't even wanted to hold her after Briley had been pushed from her body. I'd taken her that day in my arms, and Abilene hadn't held her ever again.

Though, we'd all tried to get her to pay attention to Briley. To give her just a single chance to change her mind.

Hell, Boz, Abilene's brother, was a significant part of Briley's life, which was odd since Boz and Abilene had been so close.

But honestly, I thought it might be because Briley looked so much like Abilene. He saw pieces of his sister in my daughter, and he missed her dearly.

Abilene had been killed by a serial killer. A serial killer that just so happened to be the principal of our old high school.

The man had something against teenage mothers who gave their children away as if they were unwanted.

If he found out that they'd given their child away in a way he didn't like or think was acceptable, he stalked them and murdered them, then delivered them along a stretch of highway that was known as the 'Highway to Haughton.'

"Daddy, this is going to be bad," Briley said, interrupting my thoughts.

And as if he heard her, Keene started to notice a few of the same things we'd already realized.

"That one has a drop, too," Keene said in horror.

"I know." Hades snickered.

I refrained from calling her a bitch underneath my breath.

Not because I didn't want to curse in front of my child.

I was a single dad and a professional football player. Literally every other word that came out of my mouth was a curse word.

No, I refrained from saying it because I didn't want to bring their attention to me.

We'd come with the "Circus Sisters," a.k.a. the Singh family.

Sloan, Titus, Banner, and I had all grown up together. We were the best friends that you could have. But now that Banner was in the Navy SEALs, he had a new set of friends, and because we all loved Banner, we hung out when

they all had time off.

Now being one of those times.

We'd originally come up to spend time with Banner. But shit had gone down last night at the circus that Banner had asked us to come to with our kids, and that'd gotten his whole team the day off the next day.

So they'd all requested we go to the water park.

Honestly, I was fine with that.

I liked spending time with them all, and my kid was now entertained for the day.

It was a win-win situation for me.

But it didn't look like the woman I couldn't take my eyes off of all day cared for the water park.

"Well, I guess we'll see how this goes," Hades admitted.

We all watched in fascination as she got situated on the slide some more, shifting her butt forward inch by inch as if she meant to go over the top while sitting up.

She closed her eyes and started to breathe deeply.

"What is she doing?" Hades asked.

"She's shimmying to the edge," Keene said.

I looked over with Briley at my side to see she was doing just that.

She had no clue that the second bump launched you straight into the air then dropped six feet.

The lifeguard said something to her, and she reluctantly laid down.

She pushed herself forward with her hands, looked like she was whispering something to herself, then the lifeguard got tired of the holdup.

He pushed her, and she went flying and screaming over the top.

The first drop wasn't the problem.

It was the second one.

It was a straight drop down that left you airborne for at least five seconds.

But, as if she knew the drop was coming—but likely didn't because when you were on the slide itself it looked innocuous—she sat up.

Which was the complete wrong thing to do.

Sitting up changed the trajectory of her drop.

Eventually, the fall forced her to lie back, but the move also caused the ill-fitting swim dress she was wearing to fly up and completely cover her face.

“Oh, god,” Briley said, echoing my thoughts.

Seconds after her swim dress covered her face, she slid sideways as she finally made contact with the slide beneath her back. Seconds after that, she was then facing backward on her back as she barreled down the rest of the slide headfirst and backward.

The scream that left her mouth would’ve been comical had she not sounded so terrified.

Keene laughed with the rest of his sisters as she finally hit the bottom where the pool met the slide.

She went under and didn’t come up.

I was the only one not laughing. Well, me and Briley.

Though, I’d done just about everything I could to ensure that Briley wouldn’t be a bully.

Because when my daughter was newly born, Briley’s mother had tried to take her own life thanks to bullies at our high school.

From the moment Briley became mine and mine only, I made it a point to always ensure that Briley would know about her mom.

“Dad,” Briley said. “Let’s go on the lazy river with her.”

Briley pulled my hand, and we went down the stairs fast.

Finally, we made our way to the bottom, and we were heading toward where we saw her sitting at the edge of the steps right outside of the slide she’d just launched herself down.

“Did you see that?” one of the moms whispered.

Yeah, I’d seen it.

“Leave,” I snarled as I passed them. “She’s embarrassed enough, I’m sure.”

The mom who’d said it held up her hands. “Hey, I’m sorry. Your wife was hilarious, though. That video’s gonna be viral in an hour.”

I gritted my teeth.

“Hey, aren’t you Slone Day?” someone called out.

I ignored it and everyone else who started whispering about something else—i.e., me—and walked to where Caristonia was still sitting.

Briley walked up to her and sat down next to her, catching Caristonia’s hand. I walked up to the other side and took a seat.

I didn’t take her hand, even though I really wanted to.

“Um, since when did you get married, man?” another dude holding a toddler asked. “I thought you were single.” His eyes narrowed in on my daughter. “Oh, is this her child?”

I gritted my teeth.

I went out of my way to keep Briley out of the spotlight.

I’d seen what it’d done to Titus’s daughter, Annabelle, when shit had gone down with his own baby mama. Annabelle was splashed on every single gossip rag in the world.

Which fuckin’ sucked, because people were gross and disgusting.

I’d paid attention to how it had affected Titus when he found his daughter’s photo shared on one of those Saygram websites. It’d been shared by a sick fuck who had a hundred thousand followers. Every single one of those followers being a fuckin’ perv.

Titus had sued the fucker and won, but the damage had already been done. His daughter’s photo—an innocuous one of Annabelle in her diaper holding a football—had been just a fun little photo op picture with Titus’s game ball.

It’d ended up being sexualized by the perverts of the world, and Titus had been sickened—as had we all.

Needless to say, Briley was in a bathing suit today. I went out of my way to make sure that she was always covered—but I’d thought that it being some random hole in the wall water park, paired with no phones being allowed and my disguise, that it’d be enough to keep attention off of her.

“Baby,” I said softly. “Stay with Ari.”

I wasn’t sure where the nickname had come from, but it worked for me because one of the men who were crowding around asked who Ari was, and what her real name was.

I gritted my teeth, stood up and walked closer, before saying, “I’m trying

to enjoy a day with my family. Please respect that.”

I turned to leave, catching the eye of Ari, and jerked my head toward our cabana.

Titus and I had gone and bought all of the private cabanas to ensure that our privacy was respected.

I hated that we fucking needed it.

Ari, sensing that I was about to lose my shit, squeezed Briley’s hand and started whispering to her. Meanwhile, I jerked my head toward the security guard that followed Titus and I around and gave him a “take care of this” look.

He stepped in behind me and stopped them before they could follow.

“Fuck,” I grumbled as I passed through the cabana.

Annabelle and Titus looked up when we entered.

“Were you run off, too?” he complained.

“Yeah.” I nodded at Ari. “Ari was luckily there to help save the day or I might’ve lost my shit.”

“Ari?” Titus asked, looking confused.

I jerked my chin toward Caristonia. “Ari. She’s gonna have to go by a nickname when she’s around us. They think that we’re married.”

“What?” Titus asked with a laugh at the same time that Ari said, “I’m sorry, but what?”

I sighed and jerked my chin toward them. “We were headed your way when they stopped us. Assumed we were married. And now I’m fairly sure that it’ll be plastered all over the world by noon.”

“Why would that be the case?” Ari asked. “I’m no one.”

“You’re a beautiful woman that is suspected of marrying one of the most eligible bachelors of football,” Briley muttered. “Dad and Uncle Titus made it to the *Sports Page Magazine*. Apparently, they’re football’s most eligible bachelors because they’re hot.” Briley paused. “Though, I don’t see it.”

Titus pretended to stab himself in the chest. “Damn. Solid burn branch.”

Briley shrugged.

“I...” I paused in my next statement when Banner, the third to our high school best friend trio, walked in with his wife and baby.

Perry looked annoyed. “What did you do, Slone? It’s a madhouse out there.”

Banner walked up to me and planted his baby in my arms before saying, “Hold Jett. I have to go take a shit.”

Perry rolled her eyes as Banner walked away.

I looked down at Jett, who was stuffed into the cutest little pink swimsuit I’d ever seen.

“Hello, beautiful,” I said to her.

Jett, with her blue and green eyes that matched her grandfather and grandmother, looked at me with wonder.

“If you don’t want to hold her,” Perry said as she took a seat. “I’ll hold her.”

“I’m good,” I murmured quietly. “How’s motherhood treating you, Perry?”

Perry groaned and sat down. “It’d be treating me a lot better if Banner didn’t have to leave tomorrow.”

I grimaced.

A long time ago, Perry was wholly against the military, and her man being a part of it.

She’d hoped that Banner would go into professional football like Titus and I had.

Only, Banner’s dream had been becoming a Navy SEAL like his uncles.

It’d almost broken them up, but Perry had persevered, and had decided that her and Banner’s love meant more than her fear of him dying like her father almost had.

“How much longer do you think he plans on staying in?” Titus asked curiously.

“Until he’s physically incapable of staying in anymore,” Perry answered. “He loves it. And I love him. So I’ll be a big girl and miss him.”

I curled my finger around Jett’s tiny fist.

“She looks nothing like you, Perry.” I pointed out the obvious.

“I know,” Perry sighed. “Hey, Ari. Do you want children?”

Ari looked up from her spot beside me. I had been trying my hardest not to pay attention to how close she was.

“I want lots of them,” she answered. “Four or five. Enough that I can fill a car of them.” She grimaced. “But not as many as my dad had.”

“Do you plan on putting them to work in your circus?” Perry asked.

There was an immediate shake of her head. “Absolutely not.”

I looked over at her insistence. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t even want to be in the circus. Why would I allow my kids to be?” she asked.

She had a point when she put it like that.

“Why don’t you like it?” I asked. “Are they forcing you to stay?”

Ari shrugged. “Not really, no. More like it’s an obligation. My dad asked us all to stick together, and I don’t want to be the one to break it up. Even Keene’s home now. So...”

“You’re scared of heights?” Briley asked. “My mom was, too. She couldn’t stand heights. Or so my dad tells me.”

Ari’s eyes met mine before she looked to Briley. “Yes, I’m scared of heights. That’s why I deal with the cats and the snake, because I don’t want to have anything to do with the height aspect of all the acts.”

“Cats?” Perry asked, sounding affronted. “Wait, did I miss cats?”

“Ari is the big cat tamer,” Briley answered for Ari. “She has two cats. Coco and Melon. She also has a ten-foot albino boa constrictor. His name is Razzle.”

I grinned.

“How big of cats?” Perry asked Ari.

Before Ari could answer, Briley was there with the answer.

“She has a white tiger and an orange tiger.” Briley paused. “Though, I don’t think that you categorize them as ‘orange.’ I think they’re just ‘tigers.’” She looked to Ari. “Right?”

“Right,” Ari answered.

“I missed a lot by not coming to the circus.” Perry sighed.

“You missed a lot, sure. But at least you weren’t there when shit hit the

fan, and I didn't have to worry about you and the baby." Banner came back and took a seat next to his wife. "Give me my kid back."

I ignored him, snuggling her even closer.

I hadn't realized how much I'd missed Briley being a little tiny baby. I forgot how cute they were. And how sweet they smelled.

"Slone," Banner grumbled.

"You passed her off of your own volition," I pointed out. "And, just sayin', but I'm leaving tomorrow. You get to stay with her."

Banner sighed as if he was put out beyond belief by my refusal to give her up.

But a wicked smile came over my face as I stood up and passed her off anyway.

"Then again, I have access to a private jet, and I can get to her anytime I want to," I pointed out. "When you're gone for a month and a half straight, I'll come visit her then."

Banner's scowl was ferocious.

"Didn't think about that when you were knockin' her up, did you?" Titus chuckled. "Us visitin' her while you're over there savin' the world. She'll love us more by the time you get back."

Banner narrowed his eyes, then whipped his head toward Perry. "Don't let them in the door. I want her to love me the most."

"Banner," Perry pointed out. "I'm literally going to be a married single mom. If they take a private jet to come see me, they're not only going to be let in the door, but they're going to be playin' babysitter for hours while I get a nap or leave to run errands without a child in my hands."

"You can call your parents..." He sounded slightly panicked now.

"Banner, my parents aren't millionaires. And neither are yours," she reminded him. "Though, I could move back home."

That was an immediate no.

"Absolutely not," Banner disagreed.

"Just because they're not around, doesn't mean that they won't love you," Ari murmured quietly, bringing everyone's attention to her.

CHAPTER 3

*Until your unsolvable murder do us part.
-decorative plate*

CARISTONIA

All eyes came to me, most of them questioning how I would know such a thing.

“What?” Banner asked.

“Just because they’re not around, doesn’t mean that they won’t love you,” I repeated.

“What do you mean?” Banner wondered.

“Well.” I shrugged. “My mom and I have a great relationship. But, saying that, she didn’t live with us. She hated the circus. She hated the constant moving and seeing my dad with other ladies. But my dad loved us and wanted us with him, and my mom decided that her happiness was more important than staying in the circus and a legal battle. She chose to find a more permanent home in the Florida Keys and left us behind. But that didn’t mean that she loved us, or we loved her, any less. When stuff happened that was bad, like my first break-up, she was the first person I called. And if she could, she’d fly to me, and we’d spend the weekend together. But she was always my constant.” She gestured toward the water park at her back. “My family is great. Most of the time. I could talk to them about anything. But she’s always there anytime I need her, and I know it. Whether she’s physically there or not, she’s always my first call.”

Banner placed his hand to his heart. “That took the edge off of thinkin’ she’d love someone more than me.”

“Trust me when I say, you know who your family is.” I stood up and started gathering my things.

I was still so freakin’ mad that I couldn’t see straight. If my sister were over here right now, I’d rear back and punch her right in the mouth.

“Where are you going?” Briley asked curiously.

“I’m leaving,” I said. “I have the next month off. And I’m really not supposed to leave for a couple days. I was going to sneak out early anyway and leave yesterday, but then my sister begged me to come here. And so I came. But I’m not staying here after she almost killed me.”

Maybe if I got out of here before they all came back, I wouldn't want to murder them.

Titus raised his brows. "She almost killed you?"

I allowed my eyes to fall onto the football player and, in turn, his daughter.

Titus was a big dude. He looked even bigger sitting next to his tiny daughter.

The two of them together, though? They were cute as hell.

He had on a black t-shirt and swim trunks that matched his daughter's swimsuit. His daughter, Annabelle, was playing on her tablet at his side, but periodically glancing up to check out her surroundings. Titus had his bulky arm wrapped around her, and Annabelle was using his arm as a rest for her head.

"My sister knows that I don't do heights, and I don't do drops on slides. She told me that the last one I was on was a normal slide, which is the only reason I did the height." I paused. "And heights literally scare the absolute bejesus out of me, and now I want to kill her. If I don't leave now, I might very well do it." I looked at the two little girls. "Sorry."

Titus grinned. "They've grown up the football life. They actually travel with us twenty-four-seven, three-sixty-five. Other than the month that's about to come up that they're spending with his mom and dad"—he pointed to Banner—"they've never spent any time apart from us. And let's just say, we didn't shelter them at all. It was rather impossible to."

Slone started gathering his own things. "We might as well all get out of here. Y'all said y'all were going to leave anyway at noon." Slone jerked his chin toward Banner. "And we've been outed and I have no doubts that all those sneakily brought in phones will start making an appearance soon."

"I already packed up our shit. This place is for the birds," Titus grumbled. "You ready, Freddy?"

Annabelle looked up at him. "Only if you carry me. I'm exhausted."

"You went on three slides," he countered as he picked her up like she was a doll and tucked her underneath his arm.

Annabelle, obviously used to this, continued to watch her silent tablet.

My eyes went to Banner who started tucking his kid into the car seat.

Seconds later, we were heading out, not bothering to leave any of my family a note.

Maybe they'd think I was dead and not try to contact me.

Then again, that would be too easy.

My sister would try to resurrect me just to have someone to torture for the rest of her life.

"I'm riding with you, Uncle T," Briley said as she walked to Titus's free hand and caught her hand up in his. "Daddy said that I can have the front now that I'm tall enough not to be blown away by the airbag. And he has this rule that adults have to have the front if it's me or them."

"Right on, darlin'," he said. "Later, losers."

He veered off toward his truck that was parked a few rows over from where Slone had parked.

A few seconds later, Banner and Perry veered off with a promise to see Slone tonight, leaving Slone and I awkwardly alone.

"Um," I said carefully. "Could I get a ride from you to the airport? It's like ten minutes from the bus."

"What about your things?" he asked.

"I'll buy more," I blurted.

I was really annoyed right now. To the point that leaving was better than staying back for World War III to happen.

If I saw any of my family, I might very well lose my shit.

His eyes came to me, and he said, "Who deals with your cats when you're gone?"

I rubbed the back of my neck. "The cats don't belong to any one of us more than the other, to be truthful. My act may be with them, and the majority of my time is spent with them, but all of them know how to take care of them and do. Zip is usually the one that takes care of all of that."

"Ah." He nodded. "That makes me feel a little better that you're not leaving them totally high and dry."

"I would never do that," I admitted. "If I wasn't certain that they'd be taken care of, and I hadn't already planned on leaving today, I wouldn't. But

I have a plan in place with all of my sisters. Granted, it wasn't supposed to be straight from the water park, but that's fine. I'll just look for a different destination."

He opened the truck door and shoved all of their stuff in it before catching my door before I could reach for it.

I got in, feeling all of a sudden embarrassed, and started to swing my legs in when he stopped me.

"Whoa," he said as he caught the inside of my knee with one big palm. "What's..."

He trailed off as he got his first good look at my newly forming bruise.

I had the largest bruise on the backside of my leg that I'd ever had before, and it was going to be a doozy in the morning.

I'd hit it on the slide at some point and I couldn't tell you how it'd happened, other than the blunt force trauma of me hitting the slide one of those multiple times.

I felt shivers dance up along my thighs as he rubbed the bruised area with a sweep of his thumb.

"That's going to be really bad in the morning," he murmured. "I have some cream that you can put on it. It doesn't stop the bruise from forming, but it helps with the lifespan."

I smiled and said, "I plan on being well away from here before that."

He eyed me speculatively, then nodded as he let my leg go and closed the door once I'd swung my feet in.

I tried to forget about the strength and heat of his hand but was having a hard time doing that.

I'd had all of one lover in my life. He was small and meek.

I had a feeling that Slone wouldn't be either of those things, and it was doing something to me to be alone with him.

"As for you going to the airport," he said. "How about we go and get your clothes? You said they were already ready to go, right?"

I nodded.

"And then you can show me your cats," he said. "Because I'm super interested in them. I've never been close to any tigers before."

I blinked, turning to face him as he started his truck and shifted to put his seat belt on.

“And then, when we’re done with that and ready to go, you can come back with me to the mansion. I’m staying there for the night, and we’re really close to the airport. The way you’re talking, you don’t actually have a flight yet, right?”

I shook my head.

“Well, I’m going to the airport in the morning. I’m flying with Briley and Annabelle to Louisiana to drop them off with Banner’s mom and dad, Trance and Viddy. From there, I’m going back to Longview...” He paused. “Longview’s not much, but then we’re flying to Pittsburgh, then Seattle, then California. And I have a double room because Titus and I usually pair up together with our kids. You’re more than welcome to stay. There’s always a pull-out couch that we throw the girls on...”

“You’re not offering to give me the room?” I asked him.

He snorted. “No offense, but you’re like a quarter of my size. What are you, a buck ten?”

“I weigh a hundred and thirty pounds, thank you very much,” I countered.

He grinned as he pulled out of the parking lot, heading toward the main road that would lead us away from the water park.

“Regardless of whether you’re twenty pounds heavier than I think you are,” he said as I watched his hands and forearms as he merged into traffic. “The couch would fit you, and not me. Not to mention, I need to be in top shape for the games, since, you know, that’s my job.”

I grinned at him, but again he had to maneuver the wheel to get us turned onto the next road, and the flexing of his hands caught my attention.

He had really big hands. His fingers were the only thing wrapped around the wheel.

Whereas when I drove, I had my fingers and my palm wrapped around the wheel.

He placed his hand on the rearview mirror then, covering nearly all of it when he did.

“So say I did go with you,” I murmured softly. “What if you got tired of

me?” I asked. “You don’t even know me. I could be the most annoying person in the world.”

He glanced at me with a small smile on his face before looking back toward the road.

“I am a pretty good judge of character,” he replied. “Plus, Briley likes you. She has this thing with new people, and even existing people in her life. She doesn’t get along well with others. She has a hard time socializing and making friends. Though, that’s got a lot to do with me sort of keeping her isolated thanks to my job and how I’ve raised her. That’s the reason for the month with Trance and Viddy.”

I nodded at him in understanding.

“Anyway,” he flicked on his turn signal and pulled into the turn lane, behind the row of cars intending to turn right. “She’s an exceptionally great judge of character. And I knew as soon as you talked to her that you were a good person.”

I looked over at her. “What’s y’all’s story?”

His face turned down into a very large frown. One that almost had me backpedaling the instant I saw it.

The big man was definitely scary without even trying. I doubted he even knew how scary he looked right then.

“Briley’s mom and I met in high school. Abilene was troubled from the day that I met her. Being the stupid youth that I was, I thought with my dick and not my head. She asked me to...” He paused. “Abilene was abused in some way that she never talked about. Not even a little hint. A bit came to light later. We can only assume at this point that Abilene was taken advantage of from our school resource officer. I don’t know if she was trying to forget or what, but the night that we conceived Briley—our one and only time together—which I might add we used protection for—she all but begged me to sleep with her. I was thinking with my little head and not my big one, only seeing Abilene for how pretty she was and not how broken, and I did it. I don’t know why. We never really even liked each other to be truthful. But that night...yeah. It was stupid. But we did it, and about six weeks later I found out that Abilene was pregnant.”

Eyes wide, I stared at him in shock. “You were in high school?”

He nodded.

“What did you do?” I continued.

“What I did was convince her to have the baby.” I shrugged. “I’m not exactly sure why, to be honest. I just felt like this missing puzzle piece finally slid into place, and I knew that Briley would change my life. The only problem was, Abilene wanted absolutely nothing to do with her. From the moment she had the baby, she let me know in no uncertain terms that she wanted absolutely zero to do with her. Not even her brother could convince her otherwise.”

“Wow,” I said, the gears in my mind spinning. “How did you do it?”

He smiled then, the ferocious look on his face giving way to pure happiness.

“My mom,” he answered. “She’s the best person in the world. When I found out, I went to her, and my mom switched to nights so that she could help. She’s an anesthesiologist. Or was. She doesn’t work anymore. I made more than enough in the first year to buy her a house and give her enough money that she could live life comfortably doing whatever she wanted to do. So she chose to live life on the ocean.”

“As in, cruising? Or sailing?” I wondered.

“Cruising,” he replied as he pulled up to a stop outside our bus. “Your phone’s ringing.”

I looked at the phone that was sitting in the cup holder.

My brother’s name flashed across the screen.

Yeah, he felt bad.

“I’ll answer later,” I said as I got out and gestured for him to follow me.

Once I inputted the code to get in, I invited him to have a seat while I finished grabbing all of my things.

“I’m not saying that I’m going to head wherever you are going...” I said. “But I will take that ride to the airport after you’re done at Banner’s place.”

His eyes twinkled as he took me in.

I’d changed into jeans and a t-shirt.

They were simple, yet I didn’t miss the look of interest that flared in his eyes when he took a good long look at my body.

I knew what he saw.

I was curvy—though not in a true curvy girl way—an “I have large hips and round tits” kind of way. There was no extra meat on my bones at all. Then there was the long, curly black hair that I’d allowed to fall down to dry around my back and shoulders.

“Has anyone told you that you look exactly like Pocahontas?” he wondered.

“Yes,” I smirked at him as I shouldered my bag. “Ready?”

“Yep,” he answered. “Why do you not look surprised by my question?”

I allowed him to close the door to the bus and lock it as I trudged down the stairs toward his truck.

We were in the truck before I answered him. “Because I think I get that at least once a night from one random stranger or another. It’s definitely not original anymore.”

“Your eyes are different than hers,” he said as he put it in reverse and backed out of the field where our bus was sitting. “Pale blue eyes... Pocahontas had brown.”

I felt the corners of my lips go up at the thought of him knowing Pocahontas so well that he could remember the color of her eyes.

“You watch Disney movies that much that you remember that insignificant of a detail?” I wondered.

“I have a young daughter. Let’s just say, it would be sacrilegious if I didn’t know some details about the movies we watched over and over again,” he replied in answer.

“So how does one get caught up in the circus when she doesn’t like it?” he asked curiously.

I thought about that question for a long moment before saying, “Well, I guess it all started when my mom met my dad. My mom was young and influenced easily, and my dad had this weird grand notion that he was hot shit. That everyone wanted to be with him, and everyone loved the circus as much as he did. Which my mother did not. She just loved him.”

Pausing in my story as we headed to the tiger area, I pointed to the large bunny that took off like a shot, and his eyes followed it as he kept rolling.

Seconds later, Coco appeared chasing after it. She took one large leap toward it, and seconds later the poor bunny took his last breath.

“Um...” Slone came to a rolling stop. “Are we sure they are allowed out?”

He sounded somewhat alarmed, so I stopped my original story and explained.

“See that collar around Coco’s neck?” I asked.

He studied the big cat that was now enjoying his meal. “Yeah.”

“That isn’t a shock collar. It’s a perimeter collar. When they get too far away from home base, which is in the bus, it starts emitting a very high-pitched sound which they hate. Their ears are very sensitive.”

“Do they roam free like that when there are people here?” he asked curiously.

“They do sometimes.” I shrugged. “It really depends on how many people. If there are just friends, like Banner’s friends and y’all, we let them go out. But we do tell those people that they’re out. Today, the others let them out after we left, so that’s why we didn’t ask y’all first.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “Do you want to say goodbye to them?”

I clicked my seat belt in place.

“No.” I shook my head. “Coco’s eating. I do not interfere or stop her from eating, even to say bye. The prey drive is high when she’s in hunting mode, and I know better than to mess with her. I don’t want her to confuse me with prey.”

“You sound knowledgeable in the subject,” he surmised.

“I am.” I shrugged nonchalantly. “I have a degree in zoology.”

His brows went up high, as if he was surprised to hear me say that.

“You have a degree in zoology, and you’re working at a circus?” he asked. “Is that what you want?”

I was already shaking my head.

“Back to my story from earlier,” I said as I pointed to the top of a tree where Melon was snoozing. “There’s Melon. Very top branch.”

“Wow,” he breathed. “Still freaky to see them out, though. Do you want to see her?”

I giggled, then said, “Melon’s sleeping, and I doubt I could get her to

come down at all, even if I wanted to. She's stubborn and has a will of steel."

He nodded, looking slightly bummed.

He wanted to see them up close.

I would get him to them one day, even if I had to take them to him myself.

Everyone loved the idea of tigers, but actually getting out and interacting with them was a no-go.

"My mother was under the impression when she first met my father that she was in love with him deeply, and him her." I rubbed my temple. "But the problem is, my dad was a roamer. He didn't love anyone or anything but himself and his kids. Not a single woman that he knocked up was the love of his life. They couldn't be when the circus was the love of his life."

"Wow." He winced. "I'll bet your mom didn't handle that well."

I again watched his muscular hands and forearms as he started to pull back onto the road and head toward his friend's place.

"My mom didn't know about the other women—just like those women didn't know about the previous women—until he moved on to the next one. My mom only found out that he definitely wasn't in love with her, and in fact had already been seeing Zip's mom, when she was a few months pregnant with Hades and me," I said. "And needless to say, she didn't take it well. When she tried to leave and never look back, my dad hired investigators and threw money at his problem until she came back. She tried to stay with us, tried to ignore my father, but my mom's a very emotional person. She freakin' hated being put on the back burner, and eventually, after a bit of time trying to stick it out, she decided that for her happiness and emotional wellbeing, she needed to leave. She was unfortunately stuck with leaving us behind, though. Again, my dad had a lot of money and power, with tons of friends in high places in his back pocket. She left, leaving us behind. And my dad guilt tripped us all into staying despite the majority of us wanting to find something beyond the circus life."

"Oh," he blew out a breath. "Why don't y'all leave now?"

I gestured toward the circus behind me, even though it wasn't in sight.

"My dad made a stipulation in his will when he died," I finished explaining. "We all had to stick with the circus, every single one of us, for two years. If we didn't, then the circus, capital, and every single penny went

to charity. Whereas I couldn't care less, the rest of them didn't want to let that kind of money go to waste. I'm doing it for them."

"Huh." He nodded. "That sounds like a good enough reason to stick with it. How long has it been?"

"Nine months," I answered. "Dad passed away from a heart attack. Then it took a while for Keene to get home. He had to finish his time in the Marines before he could. Our countdown clock didn't start until he joined us."

"That's...unfortunate," he murmured, his eyes going to the side to the Dairy Queen we'd just passed.

I looked where he was looking to see the truck from earlier—Titus's—in the parking lot.

"Looks like they're getting ice cream," I murmured.

"You want to go?" he asked.

I thought about it for all of half a breath before saying, "Absolutely. I'm on vacation and don't have to watch my weight starting now."

CHAPTER 4

*I'm humble. But I'll smack a hoe.
-Ari to Slone*

SLONE

“You don’t have to watch your weight?” I raised an eyebrow at her with skepticism and a little bit of indignation. I had a young, influenced easily, girl.

If Ari thought she was fat, what hope did my kid have? Briley was huge for her age. She looked like she would be taller than most women shortly, and there was no way in hell she would be known as the petite one.

She’d struggle with body image for the rest of her life already. Just to think that someone like Ari did when she was so small was quite honestly terrifying for what I had in store for me later in life as Briley grew into her body.

“I have to fit in all the cute, way too revealing costumes. Another stipulation of my father’s will.” She rolled her eyes. “No joke, he has a list of what we are and are not allowed to do, wear, say, and execute when it comes to Singh Circus. You would not believe the kind of stipulations we have.”

I didn’t like the sound of that at all.

“Which is?” I asked curiously as we pulled into the Dairy Queen and parked.

“Well,” she said as she unbuckled and reached for the door.

By the time I rounded the hood of the truck I’d rented, she was out and standing beside the front door that was closer to her than it was to me.

“For starters.” She looked at the door handle that was really just a massive spoon. “I’m not allowed to be over a certain body fat percentage. That’s something that is nonnegotiable to him—he abhorred anything out of shape when it came to his circus—and we’ve fought tooth and nail with the lawyer. But apparently, the rules and regulations were set in stone, and we haven’t been able to get around them yet. But we will.”

“What else?” I asked as I opened the door for her.

She walked inside as she answered. “I can’t dye my hair weird colors. I have to wear makeup on stage. All uniforms have to be bought through a certain company. That company has first and only say in the designs of said

uniforms—though I don't know why. We haven't figured out the connection yet. We're working on it.”

“Wow,” I grumbled. “That's no fun.”

“Daddy!” Briley called and waved frantically. “How'd you find us?”

I rolled my eyes at my daughter. “Well, there are only a few places in town that Titus would take y'all to before dinner, and since he's such a pushover, I knew it'd be here.”

“I resemble that comment,” Titus grinned around a mouthful of ice cream.

I jerked my chin at him and moved to the counter where Ari was already standing studying the board.

“Whatcha' getting'?” I wondered.

She looked at me with sparkly blue eyes filled with mirth. “Wow, that sounded really Southern.”

“Well, seeing as I'm from the South, that makes sense,” I pointed out. “Where are you from?”

She pointed at the board. “I'm going to get the Oreo Cup Confection.”

I ordered and turned to her with a raised brow, clearly letting her know I wanted to know the answer to my question.

“I'm not 'from' anywhere,” she admitted. “I was born somewhere in the middle of a field in Alabama. At the circus. I was the first to come out, Hades was second by about two minutes. Before the night was through, my father was already moving us toward a new location in Arkansas...hence the reason I said I'm not from anywhere.”

“That sounds like torture,” I pointed out as I leaned a hip against the counter next to the register and studied her. “Did you like traveling?”

“I hated it,” she confessed. “I wanted to live a normal life so bad. I would've killed to belong to an actual school and not a homeschooling co-op that my dad had going on. But alas, that life wasn't for me.”

“And college. How did you get your degree in zoology?” I questioned.

“That...” She reached for a stack of napkins when she saw our ice cream being delivered. “Dad let us go off and do whatever we wanted once we graduated. My brother went into the Marines. I went to school in San Francisco, and even Val went to medical school. At least, she finished the

schooling side of it before she was forced to come back.”

“I’m not sure if going only to have to come back is a good thing or not,” I admitted. “It sounds like torture to me.”

“I think a lot of people think that way because they can’t get behind the idea of spending so much time with your family in so little space, day in and day out. Most people need their space and freedom. But with a family like ours—we’re close. Closer than I think any other family would ever be because of how we were raised. Keene practically brought us up from infants since he was the oldest. And every one of our mothers left us behind in some way and moved on, except for Simi’s mom. She was murdered in the Fun House.”

I already sort of knew that story.

“And what about all the other mothers?” I asked as we made our way back to the girls and Titus with our food. “Did they have the same issues as your mom did with how your father liked to play the field?”

“No and yes.” She sat down, her eyes going to the children that were happily eating away at their ice cream. “But that’s a story for another time without little ears around to hear me complain about him.”

“I feel like this is a story I need to hear, also,” Titus said as he looked at both of us. “Don’t forget to call me into the huddle when it happens.”

She smiled, and damn that made my heart skip a beat.

The woman really was beautiful.

“I’ll be sure to share it when little ears aren’t around,” she said. “It’s not the prettiest of stories.”

And, as if they knew that there was a story that was about to be told, Briley gave us her full attention.

My little shit starter.

“What’s the plan, Stan?” Briley asked me.

“I don’t know, other than we’re going back to Banner’s place...our place...and staying the night before our flight in the morning,” I explained, taking my first bite of ice cream.

I didn’t like ice cream all that much. If I was lucky, I’d eat half of it before it’d start to melt.

“What time is the flight?” she asked, calculating something up on her fingers.

“We go when we want to go,” Titus answered her question. “It’s a private plane. What time do you want to go?”

“Well...” She hesitated. “Long story short, I have sleep issues. Big ones. As in, narcolepsy, cataplexy, and I sleepwalk.”

Titus’s eyes went wide.

“Narcolepsy and sleepwalking I know,” I said. “What is the last?”

“Cataplexy is a disorder that has sudden onset of muscle weakness. Normally, muscle weakness like that occurs while you’re sleeping. In my case, sometimes strong emotions—laughter, witty conversations, and pleasant surprises. Like a dog runs up to me and then my knees get weak,” she explained. “That’s what happened today at the water park. The suddenness of the drop kind of threw me in a tailspin. It triggered my cataplexy, and when I got down to the bottom of the slide and went under, I almost died because I couldn’t physically get myself up out of the pool.”

My anger at her family sharpened.

“Does your family know you have these issues?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered. “I was actually performing in an act when I was around fifteen when the muscle weakness hit me. I was on a tight wire and fell—luckily we were only practicing so the net was underneath of us—and ended up catching my throat on the wire below me.” She made a gesture with her hand across her throat. “You’ll see when I laugh, or when I get really tired, my voice starts to go due to the vocal damage I received from blunt force trauma.”

The anger was only rising. “So if they knew that it could be dangerous, why the fuck did they send you down that slide?”

I could practically see the wheels turning in her head as she tried to explain away her family.

“Honestly,” she admitted, “my family is great. They love me. I love them. But when you spend a lot of time with your family, like we do, you start to kind of hate them and all of their problems. They knew there’d be a lifeguard down there to help me if my issues kicked in. That’s why they allowed it.”

“That’s not an excuse,” I all but snarled. “That’s abuse.”

“That’s living with five sisters and a brother.” She shrugged.

I leveled her with a look that clearly portrayed my feelings without having to utter a single word. “I have a sister, and I can guarantee you that I would’ve never done that to her when I knew that she had issues.”

“I locked my sister in a closet for hours,” Titus offered.

I looked at him incredulously. “You did not. You put her in there because she was drunk off her ass, and she kept trying to climb onto the roof and jump off. I think it was more like a drunk tank than ‘locking her in a closet.’”

“Anyway,” she said as she shrugged as if that was just life. “I have two things about me that need to happen in order to keep myself safe. One, I need to make sure I get enough sleep, no matter what. Two, I need a nap mid-day, regardless of the day’s activities. I’ve already pushed my day as it is. I got very little sleep last night, paired with a very stressful night before due to Simi’s attack. Stress and anxiety are a very big no-nos with my issues.”

I just shook my head, unable to come up with what to say. “So what exactly are the ‘signs’ that this is about to happen?”

“About what you would think. I start to nod off. I do nod off. There’s no rhyme or reason to it. But it looks like I’m about to fall asleep. Then I do,” she explains. “These episodes usually don’t last for more than two minutes—though there are the rare ones once in a blue moon where I fall asleep in the middle of a conversation for hours.”

That was amazing. And really fuckin’ dangerous.

To the point of it being rather freaky and terrifying for *her*.

“Anyway,” she said. “I just wanted to cover everything with y’all if I’m about to be spending any length of time with you.”

“That’s why you don’t want to come with me for real, isn’t it?” I asked. “You don’t want to make us responsible for you.”

She smiled at me, her teeth a white flash before she said, “That’s part of it. And the other part of it is that I’m vulnerable. It’s...no offense to you guys. Like absolutely none at all, because I can tell you’re great people after the way you helped us with Simi during and after her attack. But I’m guessing y’all are constantly with a whole bunch of men. And men tend to be a little...” She paused as if searching for the best word to fit.

“Entitled?” I supplied. “Thinking that they can have what they want?”

She flashed me a fast smirk. “Maybe. Women are, too, to be honest. They’re mean and revengeful. They can’t be trusted any more than men can now-a-days. I think it’s just basic human nature at this point. Kind of like how you can’t trust your kid alone in a neighborhood walking to their friend’s house. The world just isn’t the same as it used to be. And... sometimes I’m just completely out of it. Being in a safe space at all times, or with someone that I trust to take care of me at all times, is paramount to my safety.”

Titus tapped his lip quizzically as he said, “You know, we could make sure you’re safe. We have the means to protect you.”

Titus said it, but it was her looking to me that made something swell inside of my chest as she looked for the same words of affirmation. When I nodded and agreed, her shoulders slumped.

“I usually go to my mom’s,” she admitted. “But Mom’s out of contact because she’s backpacking in Europe somewhere, and I don’t want to spend my entire time traveling around looking for her.”

“Let us help,” I said.

“Daddy won’t let anything happen to you,” Briley said, interjecting herself into the conversation for the first time.

A long time ago, I’d explained to her that children should be seen and not heard. I hadn’t said it in a bad way, but there were a lot of times that she was stuck in adult conversations. If she was there and listening, she could take in the discussions, but not say anything, because that was the only way that people would have real and honest communication with a child around—when they forgot that the child was there.

And since she was always with me no matter what, she’d had to learn quick to blend into the background, or she never got to find out anything juicy.

Ari smiled and then shared a small smile with her before she said, “I’ll think about it.”

That was good enough for me.

CHAPTER 5

*Why don't hedgehogs just share the hedge?
-T-shirt*

The need to run away from the circus and never look back was an all-encompassing feeling with me.

Peopling was not my thing. In fact, it was so much not my thing that at times I was awkward and uncomfortable to be around because I was just that hard to talk to.

It wasn't that I didn't like talking or listening, per se, it was because I just took a really long time to warm up to people.

But I could count on one hand the number of people that I'd clicked with, allowing me to talk openly and without any awkwardness.

Even Simi's husband, Coffey, still made me uncomfortable.

But there was just something about Slone and his daughter, Briley, that made me feel so...relaxed.

That was why being in the middle of their tight-knit gang didn't set me on edge.

There I was, hanging out with four people and a baby that I barely knew—the older kids had gone to bed over an hour ago—and loving it.

Oh, and I'd already had two episodes from laughing.

I was tired as hell but less stressed out than I had been yesterday.

Luckily I'd been sitting down for these episodes, and they couldn't see that my legs had gone completely limp there for a few seconds. Oh, and the other good thing was I was plastered on the most comfortable couch I'd ever sat on in my life, in the biggest mansion I'd ever been in.

"Was that one?" Slone asked from my side.

He was sitting in the sectional on the seat closest to my corner seat, but he wasn't actually touching me.

"Yeah," I murmured. "Cataplexy. Muscle weakness. Only last for about two to five seconds and then I'm good to go."

Mostly.

There were the rare times when it started right before I fell asleep and kept happening even when I woke up.

“What are the plans for tomorrow?” Perry, Banner’s wife, asked.

She looked great for just having a child. As in, “didn’t even look like she’d had a baby a few months ago” great.

“I guess we’ll leave when everyone wakes up and is ready to go.” Slone shrugged, making his large shoulder bob. “Why? Plans to kick us out soon?”

Perry rolled her eyes. “You could straight up move into my house with me, and I wouldn’t hate it. Actually, it’d be kind of nice to have a live-in babysitter.”

Banner snorted. “Just because our kid can fall asleep instantly on his soft stomach doesn’t mean that he’d make a good permanent houseguest.”

“Hey,” Slone called out, barely jostling the baby that was once again in his arms. “Just because I have a bit of padding doesn’t mean I’m soft.”

“He can beat you in a forty-yard dash right now,” Titus countered.

“No he couldn’t,” Banner instantly disagreed.

Slone raised his eyebrows. “Want to bet?”

“I can’t afford to make bets with you,” Banner said. “I don’t have a couple hundred mil contracts in my back pocket.”

My eyebrows raised at that statement. “Couple mil? As in a couple hundred million? Plural?”

Slone shrugged. “I have a few shoe contracts, a contract with the Big and Tall Store, and my football contract on the table right now. There are more smaller ones, but those are the big hitters.”

“He has more fans than I do,” Titus said as he patted his belly. “And he doesn’t have to maintain abs to keep the contracts he fulfills.”

Slone batted his eyelashes at him.

“And,” Titus continued, “he gets to eat way more than me.”

Slone wasn’t fat. In fact, I would say he was the fittest person in the room—and that was saying something about him seeing as Banner, who was a Navy SEAL, and Titus, who was a professional running back, were also in the room.

Both of them were way overly fit. There was no doubt about it.

But I knew that if shit hit the fan and strength needed to get us out of our pickle, then Slone would be the one I’d go to. He’d have zero problem

hauling my ass around if needed.

Titus and Banner could do it, too. But it was kind of like comparing a Ford Ranger to a Ford Super Duty. They were both trucks, but only one of them would be pulling a backhoe.

“Let’s do it.” Banner stood.

Before I could protest, Slone was placing the baby in my arms and leaving, heading out of the house with the three men yammering up a storm about who would win and who wouldn’t.

Perry looked at me once the door slammed shut, then said, “Not that I have a problem with you holding her, but if you’re interested in passing her off…”

I loved holding the baby.

She was so small and tiny and sweet.

But I couldn’t think about my own selfishness—God, what was it about the sweet baby smells and squeaks that were so awesome?—I had to think about the baby that was in my arms, and her safety.

“As much as I’d love to,” I said as I held her out to her mother, “I don’t think now’s a good time to hold her. I’ve had very little sleep and I’ve already had muscle issues tonight as it is.”

And I’d die if I dropped her.

Perry walked over and took her daughter, then said, “Would you like me to show you to your room?”

We’d come right into the living room where Perry and Banner had ordered pizza for us all.

After the kids had eaten, Slone had taken them to take a shower and to go to bed, where I’d then spent the next twenty minutes telling Banner and Perry about my issues.

The only reason I had was because as I was coming in the door, my knees had gone out from under me, and Banner had been the one to catch me before I’d hit the floor.

“I’d love one.” I paused. “Are there any on the first floor, though?”

“The sleepwalking thing doesn’t agree with stairs?” she asked.

I was already shaking my head. “Nope.”

“Well then yes, there are a few downstairs. Though I’m not sure any of them have sheets. But I can fix that. There’s a linen closet right...” She walked to the hall closet and pulled out a sheet set. “Here. And, since they’re all king-sized beds, one size fits all.”

I followed her to the room, then walked inside to see opulence.

“When they bought this place, it was from an older couple that had been trying to sell it for a couple of years. They were looking for just the right people—or hell, dollar sign—and sold everything. Beds, linens, furniture. You name it, Slone and Titus bought it,” she explained as she dropped the sheets onto the mattress. “All the things you see in here are their old things. And all the ‘opulence’ as you murmured earlier? All them. If it were up to Titus and Slone, this place would be a freakin’ hovel with mattresses on the floor.”

I snorted out a laugh.

Typical male.

I helped her put the final touch on the bed just as I heard laughing outside my window.

Perry set Jett down in the middle of the bed, and the two of us walked to the window and pulled back the shades.

There, right outside the window, were the three men racing each other across the grass.

And low and behold, Slone was winning.

Banner was third, Titus was second, and Slone came in first.

Banner fell on the ground and started laughing. “It’s because you have more muscle!”

“It’s because I’ve been working my ass off over the last six years, meanwhile you’re over there playing hide and seek,” Slone replied, not looking winded in the least.

Geez, these men were competitive.

“I guess we’ll just have to settle with you protecting our asses, and not racing them.” Titus grinned as he pushed Banner with his toe. “And he did it shoeless, too.”

He had.

Slone was wiggling his toes in the grass, grinning manically.

“Whatever,” he held out his hand, and Slone lifted him to his feet with very little effort. “You’re still a little bitch, though.”

“Maybe,” I heard Slone reply.

“They’re still just as much children now as they were in high school,” Perry murmured as she went back to the bed and picked the baby up before curling Jett into her arms. “Come to the kitchen tomorrow when you wake up. I get up super-duper early with this one most days, and there’s no doubt in my mind that I’ll be awake.”

After promising her I would, I closed the door behind her, then finally picked up my phone that’d been blowing up.

Keene’s number was the last one to pop up showing he’d called.

I pressed redial and placed it to my ear.

It took Keene three rings to answer. “I’m sorry.”

I rolled my eyes. “Sure you are.”

“I really am. I didn’t know that she was sending you to your death. I thought you agreed,” he promised.

I snorted. “I agreed to go down something that was sure as hell going to make me go all limp and possibly drown? Yeah, I’m sure that’s it.”

There was a muffled ‘fuck’ on the other end of the line.

“I promise that it won’t happen again.” I didn’t reply to that, and instead Keene asked, “So where are you going this month?”

I believed him. At least, he wouldn’t allow any of that to happen again if he was present.

He was used to me taking off to random beaches by myself.

But this time I wasn’t going to a beach.

I’m not sure when I decided to take them up on their offer, but when I hit my room and saw them running their race barefoot, I’d already known it would be a fun month with him.

“I’m going to see when I get to the airport in the morning,” I shamelessly lied.

I wasn’t too sure why I’d decided to not tell my brother exactly where I was going and with who. Maybe it was because I was wanting to keep him a

secret. Or, possibly, it was because I knew my brother would freak if I just decided to head out with a stranger.

Whatever the reason, I didn't tell him, and I was okay with that after what he'd done to me earlier in the day—or hadn't done. IE protect me.

He mumbled another few words under his breath, then blew it out in frustration.

"She's scared, you know."

I blinked. "What?"

What the heck was he talking about? Who was scared?

"Hades," he answered. "She just wants you to be normal because you're her best friend. And she's traumatized from having to watch you fall like you did and almost die. This disease is her worst nightmare. And not because of what it does to her, but because of what it does to you. She can't function in this world without you, and it's already tried to take you away from her once. So today was more like her ignoring everything about you that she can, and force you into doing something normal that she feels you should be doing."

I sighed. "That doesn't change the fact that she still did it, and that it really hurt."

"No," he agreed readily. "But it does change how you might view her actions, doesn't it?"

Kind of.

Hades came off as shy and bookish at first—though she was those things—but she was also a complete and utter asshole once you got to know her and she got comfortable around you.

But I wasn't about to admit that.

She'd been a rebel for the last few years, daring me to come along with her on her ride to hell. But I just wasn't adventurous like her.

I also wasn't sure why the heck she'd gone off the deep end, but his words might explain it somewhat.

"She needs a boyfriend to focus all her craziness on," I muttered darkly.

"Yeah, that would be nice for all of y'all to have boyfriends—hopefully like Coffey and not like that psycho that Crimson dated last year—and I no longer have to figure out a way to protect all of you," he grumbled.

That ‘psycho’ that Crimson dated last year was kind of a psycho.

Like, really, he was the worst.

The only saving grace we had in her departure from him was that we didn’t stay in one place too long. The guy would have totally been stalking her if he had a way to leave and follow us everywhere.

That was one good thing about having a traveling circus.

“Did you know they’re saying you’re married to Slone?” he asked, changing the topic.

“Uh, yeah.” I paused. “I heard something about that as we were leaving the water park after y’all almost allowed me to drown.”

He snorted. “And why would they think that?”

“Well, to be truthful, I think he was protecting me vocally, trying to explain away my absolute freak out as I went down the waterslide, and people just jumped to conclusions,” I explained. “Then he allowed them to think whatever they wanted because they kept looking at his daughter, and he would rather have the focus more on me I assume than his child.”

“Understandable,” he said. “Okay. Let me know where you wind up going tomorrow. If you don’t, I’ll start to look for you, and that won’t be as fun of a vacation for you.”

I knew he’d look for me, too. Possibly show up.

And I certainly didn’t want that.

“I’ll send you locations as I get to them. Then let you know when I leave.” I paused. “Love you, Keene.”

And I did.

He may be an annoying, overprotective big brother, but he was still my family.

Still one of my best friends.

“Love you, too, sis,” he said before hanging up.

“See you found your room.”

I whirled around to find Slone leaning against the door, staring at me.

I allowed the curtains to drop back into place and turned fully to him.

“Perry showed me,” I murmured quietly. “I see you won your foot race.”

Slone grinned wickedly. “If I want it bad enough, I can win anything.”

With that cryptic comment, he turned around and left, closing the door softly behind him.

My heart was racing when the latch clicked into place.

I licked my dry lips as a thought occurred to me.

Why did that sound like a promise? Like it was geared toward me?

CHAPTER 6

*I'm just WTF-ing my way through life.
-Caristonia to Slone*

“Do you think that she’s having one of those episodes?”

A whisper of a movement and then, “What episodes?”

Annabelle and Briley.

“Never mind,” Briley murmured. “Should we try to wake her up? Daddy said to knock and tell her that breakfast was ready through the door, but I got all worried about her after what she said last night.”

That was sweet.

And, sadly, I was having one of those episodes.

Though, this one wasn’t that bad.

At least, not for them to witness.

I was awake, but my body was still fully paralyzed.

Though it was normal, and something I experienced almost every single time I was woken from sleep by something that wasn’t natural, I still abhorred it with every fiber of my being.

There was nothing quite like wanting to move and not being able to.

Slowly, that feeling of helplessness started drifting away, allowing me the ability to blink open my eyes and turn my head.

What I saw were two curious little girls staring at me from only a foot away.

“You’re alive,” Annabelle said quietly.

I’d heard her talk all of two times. Once to say goodnight to her father, and once at the water park the day before.

Both of those times were barely above a whisper.

Apparently, that was a trend coming from her.

“I’m alive,” I murmured quietly. “What kind of breakfast are they having?”

Annabelle wrinkled her nose as Briley blurted, “Daddy and Uncle Titus like to eat healthy. And since Aunt Perry is trying to lose weight, and Uncle Banner is a go with the flow kind of guy, we’re having bacon and turkey

sausage. Can you believe that?"

No.

I was not eating any type of turkey sausage on vacation.

"What would you like to eat instead?" I wondered, reaching for my phone and rolling so that I was on my side in the bed, hand fisted at my head.

"Why?" Briley narrowed her eyes. "Are you going to order us something?"

"If Uber Eats delivers it, I'm gonna order it," I confirmed. "I'm feeling something like donuts or bagels. What about y'all?"

"Donuts!" both of them cried. "Bagels are boring."

I was already smiling at that. "Bagels aren't boring if you find the right kind. You could get cinnamon swirl crunch with icing. Or Fruity Pebbles one with sweet cream cheese. The possibilities are endless when it comes to bagels."

"Oh," Briley frowned. "Can we get both?"

"What kind of question is that?" I teased. "Of course we can."

The next two minutes were spent looking through which bagels and donuts we should order.

In the end, we got multiple breakfast sandwiches, lots of donuts, and more than enough bagels to hold us over until next week, let alone the end of the morning.

I just hoped that the private plane they were using to fly us to Benton, Louisiana allowed us to bring food onboard, because we'd have plenty.

Once we ordered I said, "Y'all head out there. I'm gonna catch a shower. If the food gets here before I'm out, don't eat all the donuts!"

The girls giggled and left, leaving me alone thinking about which bagel I was going to start with first.

When I was finished with my shower and my hair was wet and hanging along my shirt, soaking it, I headed outside just in time to hear the doorbell ring.

Titus walked to the door and opened it.

"Sorry, bro. But we didn't..." Titus began to say, but I interrupted. "Nope! That was me. Don't send him away!"

Him ended up being a her, and she waved as she handed off all the food.

I might or might not have overdone it.

“Sorry,” I smiled as Titus stood there with the armful of food. “I was hungry, and I don’t eat healthy when I’m on vacation.”

Titus just shook his head and walked to the kitchen. “There we were waiting for you to come out so we could start turkey bacon and eggs, and you went and ordered out the whole donut shop.”

“Donuts?” Slone frowned. “From where?”

Slone was at the table shirtless with a sweatshirt in his lap and a wet towel on his bare shoulder.

He had sweat staining the front of his pants, and he was in tennis shoes with no-show socks.

I’d never seen a man as big as him have attractive ankles before, but Slone pulled it off.

Though he didn’t have visible abs or anything, and might have a little extra padding than Titus who was also shirtless, there was only one man in the room that was drawing my eye at that moment in time.

I licked my lips as I watched him come up to me out of the corner of my eye.

“Donuts are here, Annabelle!” Briley came charging in. “Yes!”

The girls pushed their way in past their fathers, and the three of us stared into the boxes as we tried to choose which one to grab first.

“I think I’m going with the purple sprinkles one,” I said. “What about y’all?” The two girls reached for the pink with sprinkles, and we all took a bite at the same time.

I groaned as I said, “Wow. This is one of the best donuts I’ve had in my life.”

“Oh, man!” Perry whined. “How am I supposed to be on a diet with donuts like that? Now I have to know if they’re good or not.”

“You live here,” Banner said. “How do you not know if they’re good or not?”

“Because we’re on a fixed income, I don’t work, I’m going to school-full time and we’re paying for my masters out of our own pocket. Do you

seriously think that we can afford donuts all willy nilly?” Perry asked as she got up and headed our way.

I offered her the box, then said, “There are also breakfast sandwiches in this bag,” I said around a bite of donut. “And some bagels. They said that they were the best in three states. People drive here from New York for them, which is saying something seeing as New York has their own bagels that are to die for.”

She cursed and reached into the bag with one hand while fisting a donut in the other.

Slone sighed along with Banner, and the two of them reached into the boxes and pulled out their own donuts.

Banner pulled out a gallon of milk and some cups and brought them to the table.

I took a seat between the two girls and we dove in, and I was proud to say ten minutes later that I had both of them absolutely loving bagels.

“Okay, this is a slight miracle,” Titus said as he bit into his own breakfast sandwich.

It was made with a bagel, too.

And I had to say, it was really yummy and I was glad that he was eating it, even if he was breaking his diet to do it.

“What’s a miracle, Daddy?” Annabelle asked.

Titus sighed, then defined what a miracle was, and why he’d used it in his sentence.

I could hear him talking low to his daughter, but my gaze went across the table and stayed there.

Slone had finished his fourth donut and he was slowly rubbing his belly as if he’d had enough and was full. Every time he moved his arm, his muscles bunched and flexed. Bulging biceps, strong shoulders, large traps.

Being the introverted person that I was, I tended to be a people watcher.

Sure, I’d talk if I was comfortable enough, but people watching was the thing that I did when I was trying to decide if I wanted to talk in the first place.

Needless to say, I’d seen quite a few men in my time. Tall and short. Big

and small. Fit and unfit.

The list went on.

To be completely truthful, I'd seen men in better shape—appearance wise anyway—than Slone.

But there was just something about the single dad, from the very beginning, that drew my eye.

And right then, he had a flake of glazed donut on his chest that I wanted to lick off.

And, to make matters worse, as if he was listening to my inner thoughts, he looked down and spotted the fleck of glaze.

He licked his finger, pressed it to his chest to pick the fleck up, and then brought it to his mouth when he had it on his finger.

That's when he looked up—when he put his finger in his mouth.

I hastily looked away, picking up my own donut that I'd never finished, and ate it even though I wanted to do anything but.

"You look like you're miserable," I heard him say.

Instead of looking at Slone, I answered my plate. "When we were little, our father made us clean our plates." I set the donut down and glared at it. "If we ended up not being able to finish something, he punished us for it. Like this half a donut would definitely make me have to go outside and do a hundred pull-ups and a hundred push-ups."

The donut slid off my plate, one large hand doing the taking.

I turned to watch him shove the entire thing in his mouth before a grin flashed at me.

I felt a warmth in my belly start to bloom.

I looked away when Titus stood up and began brushing the crumbs onto the floor.

"Ever heard of a napkin, loser?" Banner asked as he stood up and did the same.

Perry punched him in the arm. "Hey!"

"They pay a cleaning lady four times what they should to clean this place after they leave. Which is later this afternoon. I'm giving the poor woman something to do," Banner defended himself.

I grinned. “What does this cleaning lady get paid?”

“Well,” Titus said as he walked to the box of donuts and checked into it before sighing. “Damn, there’re no more pink ones. Those were great.” He closed the box and went to the bagels, pulling out one of the cinnamon crunch ones. “She only cleans the rooms that were used, which ends up saving us a bunch of money. But to be truthful, we pay her so much so she won’t take pictures of the inside of our home and sell them to the assholes that like to publish our photos once a week.”

That made sense.

“A while ago, Annabelle’s photo of her in a diaper was leaked on the internet. And somehow it got sold to the sick fucks on an Instagram page that act like they’re sharing cute babies. When in reality it’s just a sick way for them to share young children for the pervs that like to look at them and do disgusting stuff to those pictures.” Titus grimaced.

“Every single one of the comments on her photo was from some adult male that ranged from ‘Beautiful girl’ with those squirt emojis to ‘bet she’d feel like a dream.’” Slone sounded as disgusted as I felt. “From that point on, we have gone out of our way to keep our children out of the spotlight.”

“And Daddy said if some sick fuck ever tried to do that to me, he’d break him in half then chop off his dick and feed it to him.” Briley pushed her plate away from her. “Though, he did say that once he died an agonizing death, he’d find the closest pig farm and offer them some dinner.”

There was a slight pause from Slone as he tried to decide how to downplay that comment, but I soothed him before he could get defensive.

“I would hope he would, darling girl. It’s great when you have such a fierce protector,” I told her.

Just the idea of anything happening to her filled me with fear, and I didn’t even know her that well.

“Well, I’m glad that we had that talk.” Perry gave us all big eyes. “I hate to run, but I left Autry with Jett at the house, and I think he might never forgive me if I leave him with the baby too long.”

Autry was one of Banner’s Navy SEAL friends. I’d met him at the circus when he was there with his SEAL buddies. He was a tall hulk of a man that had a ready smile and a teasing personality that set my teeth on edge.

It wasn't that he wasn't friendly to me or anything, but it was almost as if he saw too much and I wasn't too sure I liked anyone doing that, let alone someone I didn't know all that well.

"Take him some donuts," I urged. "Actually, you can probably take everything. I don't think it's a good idea to be taking this with us. I might very well eat it all, then I'll be miserable."

Perry rolled her eyes, but she did end up taking all the food, leaving only the empty boxes.

"It's time for us to all get ready," Slone announced. "We've eaten, we're up, it's time to go."

Banner sighed and stood as well. "I guess I'll go play the responsible parent and help. I'm fuckin' exhausted, though. That kid sleeps like utter shit."

Slone chuckled. "Imagine doing that all by yourself, dude. Then you'll know how we feel."

That was right.

Both Titus and Slone were single fathers, though Slone was a single father that'd been extremely young at the time.

"No comment," Banner walked up to Slone and hugged him tight, slapping him hard on the bare skin of his back, causing me to wince.

"Ow, you shit." Slone shoved him away with a grin.

Briley walked up to Banner and circled her lanky arms around his midsection, pressing her face into his gut.

Banner picked her up and hugged her tight. "Have fun with my parents, girly. And if you want, I'll tell you where my dad hides all the good snacks."

Briley beamed at him and leaned back so that she could see Banner's face.

"Where?" she asked. "And are these good snacks? Or old people snacks?"

Banner burst out laughing. "I don't think there's much of a difference between young and old people snacks, unless you're talking about toddlers, and in that case, they're normal snacks. Little Debbies, powdered donuts, candy. It's all in a black box on the counter that says 'Flour' on it."

"Okay, good." Briley pressed her hands to both sides of Banner's cheeks then said, "Be safe, Soldier."

Banner choked and turned to Slone with a narrowed gaze. “You put her up to that, didn’t you?”

Briley squirmed out of Banner’s hold before saying, “Actually, Aunt Perry did.”

“I’ll kill her.” Banner shook his head and reached for Annabelle next.

Annabelle hadn’t been paying attention, but she didn’t protest the different position. All she did was lean into his chest and continue playing with her tablet.

“I’ll miss you, Anna Banana,” Banner cooed into her soft curls.

Titus grinned like the proud father he was, then took his kid when she said, “Bye, Ban.”

Ban.

That was sweet.

“See you when we see you,” Titus offered his hand to Banner, who pulled him into his chest in one of those man hugs that had a lot of back slapping and chest bumping. “Be safe.”

“I will. I have way too much to come home to to ever stray too far from safety,” Banner said.

After he let Titus go, he turned to me. “All right, Sleepy Head. I hope you have an excellent vacation with these two knuckleheads...and just know that Martina, Slone’s mom, loves Titus, but she likely won’t ever want him as a son-in-law in a throuple.”

I blinked at him as he said this, then turned to Titus before saying, “I hope with all that’s inside of me that I never gave you the impression that I wanted that.”

Titus grinned. “I know.”

I turned back to Banner with a narrowed look that clearly relayed my thoughts on that issue.

Not that I had a problem with people that chose to have more than one person in their life, that just wasn’t for me. I was selfish and had done enough sharing in my life with my twin. I wasn’t going to share with my significant other.

“I notice that you didn’t tell Slone you weren’t interested,” Banner teased.

I opened my mouth and then closed it, unsure of what to say.

In the end, I settled on nothing as my phone started to ring in the other room.

And seeing as I would rather do anything but talk to my sisters right now—I knew it was Hades—I just couldn't stay in this room one more second longer. I didn't do well with pressure, eyes on me, or discomfort of any kind.

Yes, Hades was definitely the lesser of two evils.

I raced into my room and answered just in time to hear her cursing at me for not answering.

"I answered," I told her with a roll of my eyes. "What did you want?"

Hades blew out a breath. "I'm sorry."

Then she hung up.

If there was one person in this world that did discomfort worse than I did, it was my twin sister.

She wasn't sorry in the least, of course, but it was the thought that counted, right?

I started packing up what little I'd taken out of my bag last night, then made the bed.

Once I was done, I tucked everything where it belonged and started to drag it all out into the hallway.

Thank God for rolling wheels.

I arrived in the long hallway to find it lined with a sparkly pink one, a dark purple one with kittens wearing spacesuits, and two non-descript black ones.

The girls came pouring out of the kitchen with waters in their hands, and Slone followed behind now fully dressed.

I tried to hide my disappointment, and failed miserably.

He caught me looking at his t-shirt-covered chest and winked.

I felt my face flush and decided to go ahead and turn away in time to see Titus walking out in bright pink pants that looked great against his lightly browned skin.

"Wow," I said as I looked at the fuschia shorts in wonder. "Those look amazing with your skin tone."

I should get some.

“I know, right?” Titus patted them. “And they dry like super-duper quick.”

I looked away from his pants and noticed out of the corner of my eye that Slone was scowling.

Hard.

I stiffened and frowned, looking around.

“What is it?” I asked, my heart beating a thousand miles an hour now.

I could already feel my knees getting weak.

Excitement? Surprise? Extreme mood swings? Those were all a big no-no for me.

But there wasn't anything that I could do about the shot of adrenaline that was coursing through my veins at the sight of his ferocious scowl.

My knees started to turn to jelly, but before I could hit the floor, a strong arm was around my hip.

“Nothing's wrong,” Slone soothed. “Sorry, sorry.”

I instantly felt the feeling start to fade, and found my bearings before standing up and pulling away.

“Okay,” I blew out a breath. “Thanks for the catch.”

“Sorry for causing you to freak,” he scrunched up his face, causing me to smile despite the feeling of moments before.

“What was it?” I asked again, this time with my hand now firmly on the handle of my luggage.

“Nothing, nothing.” He held up his hands placatingly. “I was thinking about other stuff.”

Titus snorted and called for the kids. “Let's go, children!”

When had they left?

When I looked around, they were nowhere to be found.

I heard them giggling, though, when Titus left the kitchen to look for them.

“Okay.” I pressed my free hand against my aching chest. “I...the last few days.” I blew a stray curl out of my face. “I think my brain is set on fight or flight after what happened with Simi, and I don't know how to turn it off.”

“I imagine,” he said as he gently moved my hand off my luggage and pulled it toward him as he gestured with his head for me to follow, “that it’s going to take you a while to get over what happened. It’s not every day that you have a crazed sheriff set out to kill your sister.”

I shook my head. “Whatever the reason, it’s getting kind of old. I expect to see some screwed up person over my shoulder every time I turn around.”

He caught up the cat astronaut bag along with a duffle he threw over his shoulder, and then he rolled everything out in one large hand.

Titus followed with the two giggling girls, and then we were in a four-car garage with two trucks in it.

“This place is kind of magical,” I said as I eyed the area. It was old and outdated, but it was quaint and welcoming at the same time. “If you only put a little bit of effort into making this place your own, I’ll bet it’d be captivating.”

“We’re not really sure how long Banner will be here, to be honest,” Slone said as he slowly hefted our luggage into the back of the truck. Again, I watched as his shoulder muscles bulged underneath his tight t-shirt. “We don’t really want to put the money and effort into this place when it’s good enough for now. Maybe if we find that Banner wants to move here permanently, we’ll update it...but in the meantime, it’s just not something we’re interested in doing.”

“That makes sense,” I murmured as I opened the back door.

Briley was in the middle with Annabelle in her booster seat on the far side. I got in beside Briley and smiled at her.

“I’m betting that I’ll be taller than you one day,” she said to me the moment I got settled.

I couldn’t help the snort that left me. “Darling girl, there’s no doubt in my mind that you’ll be taller than me. Heck, when you hit your growth spurt around twelve, you’re gonna surpass me. Your dad is six foot fifteen.”

“Six foot fifteen isn’t real,” Briley pointed out helpfully.

“She said it as a joke, baby,” Slone said as he slid into the passenger seat in front of me. “Which you knew.”

Briley grinned unrepentantly. “That’s true.”

“And for your information, Ari.” I felt my heart swell at his use of my new nickname. It sounded so normal. I loved it. “I’m six-foot-five.”

“And two hundred and eighty pounds of pure muscle,” Titus supplied helpfully. “He’ll flatten you like a pancake.”

What if I wanted to be flattened like a pancake?

The trip to the airport was uneventful.

In fact, it was honestly quite surprising to say the least.

We arrived and drove straight onto the tarmac.

Titus handed his keys over to a man standing there with a rental car agency’s name on his polo shirt, handed him some cash, then was helping Slone unload all the luggage.

Seconds later we were being ushered inside a plane.

It wasn’t big. It wasn’t small. It was just...normal.

“Gentlemen,” the man who must be the pilot said. “Just wanted to make sure y’all are all ready to go.”

“Give us five to strap Annabelle’s car seat in, Gervin, and then we’re ready,” Titus replied.

Slone had it in fast, and then Titus was putting Annabelle in it.

“Is this y’all’s plane?” I wondered as I took a seat and strapped in.

Our luggage was stowed by Titus, and then Slone was dropping into the seat beside me to answer my earlier question.

“It’s one we rent,” he replied. “Gervin is our usual pilot.”

“Nice,” I said.

Then we were taking off and Gervin was informing us that we had a four-hour flight ahead of us.

Did I spend my flight catching up on my missed sleep? No.

Did I spend the entire flight talking to the man at my side while his kids and Titus did other things on the plane? Yes, yes I did.

CHAPTER 7

*I'm blunt because God rolled me that way.
-Ari to Slone*

SLONE

“Do you work out?” I asked.

She snorted. “Does this body look like it works out?”

She actually looked like she was blessed with the genetic lottery, and likely never had to lift a finger in her life.

She was cute.

I liked her a lot.

She was delightfully grumpy, but also one of those girls that was still rather interesting to be around.

“I’m not commenting on that,” I chuckled. “With Briley growing up and turning into someone that’s resembling a little woman these days, I’ve learned to be very careful with my words.”

She snickered as she said, “I don’t work out. No. I guess you could call being on your feet all day every day for five days straight as a workout, though. If you count that, then yes, I do work out. If you don’t, then no.”

I repositioned my ass in the seat.

That was one problem with being as big as I was.

I didn’t fit in a normal airlines seat.

Even these bigger ones in our private jet were still rather snug.

Poor Ari was having to lean slightly away from me to avoid touching me. Though she’d stopped doing that about thirty minutes ago. Now our arms were touching, and I liked the touch.

A little too much.

“Dad!”

I turned to find Briley in her seat, turned slightly toward me.

“What?” I asked.

“My tutor wants me to write about a few things,” she said.

I raised a brow at her. “What are those things?”

“Well, I was hoping you’d read the text out to me, then I’d write the answer down,” she said.

I pulled up the text thread between Briley, her private teacher, and myself. In the thread was a list of writing prompts.

I read the first one aloud to her.

“You’re supposed to write about five things that you like. What about—what’s your favorite animal?” I asked.

She scrunched up her nose and then blurted, “For eating?”

I closed my eyes as a bubble of laughter started to form in my stomach.

This kid.

“No, you serial killer.” Titus snorted. “Animals that you like. Admire. Etc.”

“Oh,” she frowned. “I watched a documentary yesterday on cats. Sometimes they eat their young because they’re messed up.” She tilted her head all cute like, despite the words that were coming out of her mouth. “I think I’d go with a cat, then.”

Titus snorted.

“What do you love?” I moved on to the next suggestion.

“I don’t love anything,” Briley said.

“What about your family?” Ari suggested helpfully. “Your dad? You like him, don’t you?”

Briley paused as she considered Ari’s suggestion.

“I’ll go with tacos.” Briley looked down.

Ari covered her face with her hands as she lost her shit beside me.

Briley was my genius child that literally had no idea how to be nice. Other people’s feelings were irrelevant to her.

“I do like my gummy probiotics, though.” Briley nodded. “Okay, I think I got this.”

She turned away from me, and I caught Titus’s gaze as he widened his eyes at me and mouthed, “Serial killer.”

I flipped him off just as Ari finally composed herself.

“That was worth the muscle weakness,” she breathed as she tilted her head back. “Wow.”

I rolled my eyes. “She sure knows how to stroke my ego.”

“She’s a cute kid,” Ari murmured. “You did very well with her.”

I smiled as I watched Briley twirl a piece of her hair on one finger, and her pencil in the other.

“My mom had a big hand in that,” I said. “I might’ve raised her, done all the stuff like getting up with her at night when she was a baby, caring for her when she was sick, stuff like that. But my mom was a powerhouse. She watched Briley for me during the day, then went and worked nights. And supported me financially until I could take that task over when I was first drafted.”

“How did your mom take you becoming a teen dad?” she asked.

I crossed my arms over my chest as I closed my eyes and imagined that conversation.

“The day that I found out, I told my mom almost the moment I walked in the door. The thing you’ll need to know about my mom and me, we’re close. Mostly because we had to be. It was just my mom, my sister and me when I was growing up. My dad had died in Afghanistan when I was twelve, and from then on we had each other’s backs. That day, my mom was pissed as hell. We barely had enough money to keep food on the table for me, yet I was adding another mouth to feed to the mix.”

“My dad could barely afford to keep the circus running when we were younger,” she told me. “So there were nights we were eating leftover funnel cakes and dried turkey legs just to survive.”

“Seven kids is a lot to support,” I admitted. “Your dad sounds like he made it, though. I barely made it with one, let alone half a baker’s dozen.”

Just the thought of having more children right now made me break out in hives.

Not that I didn’t want more kids one day, but I wanted them when I was ready. When my boss wouldn’t shit a brick when they were around.

“Not without sacrifices,” she admitted. “Child labor laws should’ve eviscerated him. But everyone who came out to the circus to watch didn’t see the shitty conditions behind the scenes. They saw what they wanted to see.”

“Where was your mom throughout all of this?” I wondered.

“Like I told you earlier, my mom was a bit of a selfish person. Which, understandably, she had a right to be selfish when it came to my dad.” She

paused. “However, when she moved on, she left me with my dad because Dad fights dirty. He threatened a lot of things to ensure that she had no other choice but to leave me. But we maintained a healthy relationship and bonded over our hate of the circus.”

“And what’s your mom doing now?” I asked.

“She’s livin’ life.” She shrugged. “She’s out of the country right now, visiting Europe. Her next stop is Australia where she’ll hang her hat for a few years. Then, after that, who knows.”

“So she has the traveling bug,” I surmised. “She just doesn’t have the circus bug.”

“She had the circus bug until she realized that my father wasn’t going to allow her to be with him. And she’d have to witness his rather copious dalliances with other people.” She sighed. “But yeah, she loves traveling.”

Something in which I could tell she really didn’t like. Not even a little bit.

“Me and you definitely wouldn’t work.” I laughed. It sounded sort of bitter to my ears. “I travel half the freakin’ year.”

She looked over at me. Then shocked the holy hell out of me. “Then I guess we’ll have to make the best of the next month, won’t we?”

Was she saying what I thought she was saying?

Before I could ask her to confirm said thoughts, the pilot came on and told us we would be landing soon.

“One last thing!” Briley cried.

I looked at her, even though I had to peel my eyes off of the side of Ari’s bright red face.

“Yes?” I asked.

“If you had to guess what my least favorite thing in the world was, what would it be?” she asked.

“Um...” I hesitated, my brain still not thinking past what Ari had said thirty seconds prior. “If I had to guess? Me leaving you to play a game.”

She looked back at me with a disbelieving face and said, “That’s hilarious. But no, really, what do you think?”

Titus covered his mouth with his hand.

“Um...” I didn’t know what to say.

I was dumbfounded with how little she cared.

“I’m going to go with cilantro.” Briley started nodding, as if that made the most sense. “I think sometimes it tastes like soap.”

With that, the fasten seat belt sign came on, and I sighed.

Briley put everything away, shoving it into her laptop bag.

I turned forward with a groan and said, “That kid’s gonna kill me one day. I know it.”

I looked over to find Ari silently laughing, shoulders shaking, as she tried not to let the dam burst on her hilarity.

“You’ve got a good kid there, Slone.” She wheezed. “Don’t ever let the world tell you anything different.”

CHAPTER 8

*Pretending to be polite is exhausting.
-Ari's secret thoughts*

ARI

Trance and Viddy, Banner's parents, were everything that I'd wanted my family to be growing up.

Even them being a part of a motorcycle club was the greatest.

At first, I'd thought that the big bad biker was intimidating. Then I saw him start to interact with Annabelle and Briley, and I realized that he was just one big softy.

In fact, since the moment that we'd walked into the compound that The Dixie Wardens MC called their home away from home, he'd taken Briley and Annabelle with him, and hadn't looked back.

That was two hours ago, and I was still reeling from what I'd said on the plane right before we'd landed.

I was studiously trying to avoid him, but I realized rather quickly that that was easier said than done.

"And who might you be, little lady?"

I turned just in time to see Santa Claus waddle his way up to me.

"Um..." I hesitated. Normally I had a hard time talking to new people, but this was Santa Claus, after all. "My name is Caristonia Singh. I think Slone's introducing me as Ari to everyone, though."

"His wife?" he asked in surprised.

I was already shaking my head. "No. That's the media's doing. We're just friends. Brand new friends at that."

"Ahh." He nodded. "I actually heard him talking about you. That's why I came over here to introduce myself."

I studied the old man.

"And you?" I asked. "Unless you want me to keep referring to you as..."

"Don't say it," he pleaded. "I'm Dixie."

"Dixie." I nodded. "Nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you, too," he said. "You know my grandsons?"

I looked over to see where he was looking and shook my head. Though I

saw the men and the women at their sides, I hadn't been introduced.

"Actually, no, I don't," I said. "Who are..."

"Dixie," Slone said as he sidled up to my chair. "What's up?"

Dixie smiled slyly as he said, "I was going to take your girl that you left all alone over there to meet my grandsons."

"I didn't mean to do that." Slone sighed. "But it's like everyone and their brother wants to ask me how the season's going. And I'm not rude enough to just walk away."

"You're just rude enough to leave your friend all by her lonesome," Dixie countered.

Slone sighed. "It appears so."

Dixie grinned and stood up. "Take care of her. She seems like a sweet one."

Then Dixie was gone, leaving Slone and I alone.

"You got yourself a drink, I see," he said as he took a seat at my side.

He had his own fresh beer in his hand, along with a wine cooler for me. One that I'd gotten for myself after waiting for him for a solid fifteen minutes to come back.

I'd seen him talking, of course.

But I wasn't brave enough to just walk up to him and stand by his side.

Especially not after the blurted words that'd slipped past my lips on the plane.

Like, of all that was holy, how the hell did those words slip out?

Feeling my lips form words, I second guessed myself and paused with my mouth open in a small o.

He chuckled as he said, "There's not a wrong answer here. You can say 'yes, I did' or 'you weren't around to hand me one, so I got my own.'" He paused for dramatic effect. "It was me who should've been here to get it for you. I'm sorry I left you alone for so long."

He'd promised he wouldn't.

And in reality, it was only five minutes.

I could see him the entire time.

“It’s okay,” I lied.

It wasn’t okay.

I didn’t know any of these people.

But I also wasn’t in the business of making people feel like crap on purpose.

“Being known by everyone is exhausting,” he admitted. “Plus, had I known that this was a club party day, I definitely would’ve waited until tomorrow. But what’s done is done. I’ll try my best not to seem too down.”

“You don’t like parties?” I asked in surprise.

He was so personable.

I’d yet to see him be around someone that he couldn’t hold a conversation with—people who knew him and didn’t know him. All of them liked him, it was obvious.

“Hey, Slone.”

We both looked over, surprised to see someone right next to us when neither one of us had witnessed this person move closer.

The blonde. Viddy. Trance’s wife.

“Hey, Viddy.” Slone smiled, looking relieved to see her standing there and not some random person.

“I’m gonna take the kids back home with me.” She smiled. “And don’t worry, I have a driver.”

She pointed at a man who was casually flipping his keys around on his keyring.

“Tell Pace hi for me,” Slone nodded. “Briley shouldn’t give you any trouble, but if she does, give me a call and I’ll take care of it.”

Viddy rolled her eyes. “Your child has never given me any trouble and we know it. Bye, baby.”

Then she was gone, heading over to the man with just as many prosthetics as real limbs.

He’d make a good circus act.

Not saying that he was a freak or anything, but kids loved all things different. They’d definitely get a kick out of the stoic looking man.

“Who’s that driving Viddy home?” I asked curiously.

“That’s her son-in-law, Pace,” Slone answered as he turned to wedge himself in between the bar stools, which also ended up getting him closer to me, as a couple of women sidled up to the bar. “He’s married to Viddy and Trance’s daughter, Oakley.”

“Oh,” I said simply, mostly because the closeness of his body to my own was making me feel weird. Tingly weird. All over.

The women behind him started to crowd Slone, and he cursed.

I got up out of my stool and patted it, pushing as far into the wall as I could without actually becoming one with it.

Slone took the seat and I realized my mistake immediately.

By putting myself where I did, I’d effectively blocked my exits. I’d also underestimated his size.

He took up a lot of room, meaning that even though I was trying to give him space, it wasn’t working very well.

The man could have two bar stools, and his shoulders might still be touching me.

Well, not really. He wasn’t quite that big, but the man definitely wasn’t small.

If my sisters were here, they’d all be making jokes about whether or not his upper body matched his lower body, and they wouldn’t be meaning his legs, that was for sure.

Sadly, I’d been around my sisters for so long, that their bad thoughts were rubbing off on me.

All I could think about was whether his hands were anything to go by.

Seriously, though, the man could wrap his entire hand around a beer bottle, and his fingers were overlapping.

The closer I studied the bottle, the more my thoughts raced.

“There was this one time,” he said as he took a swig of his beer. “That I was at my first post-game NFL win.”

I gave him all my attention then.

“I was twenty-two, my mom had Briley for the weekend, and I was free to be a twenty-two-year-old.” He tapped the lip of his beer bottle against his lips

as he sighed. “I got drunk and started flirting with this gaggle of women, and my teammates were egging me on, urging me to ‘go for it.’ But that night Titus had gotten fouled really hard and had been taken to the emergency room for X-rays to make sure that he didn’t hurt anything. He hadn’t, and he came back with a limp to find me not in my room. When he called me to find out where I was, I told him I was down in the lobby, about to hook up with the most beautiful ladies in the room.”

“Oh, boy,” I snickered. “Were they prostitutes?”

“Worse,” he winced. “They were men. Gay men that had really long hair, and talked softly like women. Somehow, we’d wound up in a gay bar and the guys thought it’d be funny to haze the new guy since he was usually with his best friend for backup. Titus got down there, realized how shit-faced I was, and took me up to our shared room. The next morning, thousands of pictures started to show up, and a fuckin’ newsletter went out detailing the encounter and how Slone was now ‘questioning his sexuality.’” He tipped his beer up and finished it, and that’s when I realized he wasn’t drinking at all. He was having a root beer. “That’s why I don’t drink anymore.”

I snorted.

“Nothing against gay men—because good for them following what they know they want—but seriously. I like vagina. The smell. The taste. The woman it’s attached to.” His eyes came to me.

“Why are you telling me this?” I wondered.

Because it felt like a statement.

Like maybe he was trying to hint at something that I should be picking up on by now.

I sat my drink down and stared at it.

“Do you have a problem with other people drinking?” I asked curiously.

He was already shaking his head. “No. In fact, I encourage everyone that’s around me to act normally—sometimes it’s really nice to be looked at like I’m just a normal everyday guy, not some football player that has millions and doesn’t drink because he’s scared.”

I frowned. “I wouldn’t say that you’re scared. More like cautious.”

“Overly cautious,” he allowed, placing the bottle to his lips and downing the rest of the contents. “People think I freak out too much. The kids. Their

being recorded freaks me the fuck out. And I really fuckin' hate when the guys on the team give me shit for not drinking, when most of them are the reason that I don't. Then there's the constant bullshit I take from some of them because they don't have the same perks that I have with my daughter coming to games with us... Every year I consider quitting, then I decide to give it one more year so I can win the Super Bowl. But then we get knocked out in the first round, and I wonder why I agreed to play another year."

I felt my stomach tighten at the thought of him hating his job.

What kind of life would that be?

Oh wait, I lived it myself.

"Have you ever considered looking for a trade?" I asked.

"Yeah." He nodded. "Except my contract holds me there. Then I think about leaving Titus behind, or the town that I grew up in, and I stay."

"Does Titus like it there?" I wondered.

He leaned forward and placed his glass on the table in front of us before saying, "I think Titus needs the consistency right now. His daughter was a huge surprise to him, and he's still recovering from that. Not that he dislikes being a parent or anything."

I waved Slone off. "I knew that wasn't what you meant."

"Plus"—Slone smiled then—"Titus has a thing for a girl we graduated with. I think he's holding out hope that if he hangs around the area, she'll finally see that they're made for each other."

That was the sweetest thing I'd ever heard.

"I feel like there's a good story there," I admitted.

"Titus and Blue." He looked at me with those beautiful eyes that he'd given to his daughter. "That's her name. Blue." He grinned. "They have a complicated dynamic. Blue is deathly allergic to talking to people unless she's extremely comfortable with them. And Titus isn't one of those people."

"Because she has a thing for Titus," I guessed.

"Likely," he agreed. "But the thing is, no one will ever know unless Titus gives it a go...and who the hell knows if he'll ever be brave enough to do that or not."

I grabbed our empties and said, "Where do these go?"

He got up, quickly towering over me, and pointed toward the bar. “There. The Dixie Wardens MC have some cleaners come up after their parties. They clean up all the trash and empties, but I’ve never been one to leave my shit for others to pick up after me. My mom would’ve murdered me in my sleep if I’d done that to her.”

I snickered. “We had to learn from a young age as well. Our dad was a stickler for us taking care of our uniforms and performance stuff. If we didn’t, our dad made us work the circus outside of what he already forced us to do.”

“Needless to say.” He laughed. “You learned to keep your shit cleaned up.”

“I learned to keep my shit cleaned up.”

“Wow,” I heard said from my side. I looked to see a young woman there. “I hear congratulations are in order.”

The woman looked like she wanted to murder me.

Slowly.

And record it so she could watch my torture over and over again.

Slone sidled closer to me, not quite touching me, but getting close enough that he could if he wanted to.

“It’s nice to see you again, Rochelle,” Slone said through a tight smile.

My brows rose at his obvious reticence to this woman.

“And who are you?” I asked curiously.

Because obviously I needed all the answers right then, right there. Why did Slone look like he wanted to run? Why did she look like she wanted to murder me? Why, why, why.

“I’m Rochelle Brummel,” she answered, as if stating her name was plenty of information for me to ascertain who the heck she was. “When did y’all get married?”

We didn’t.

“Oh, not too long ago,” I lied.

Slone blew out a breath of relief.

“Ah.” She huffed out a breath. “I just guess I wanted to confirm if it was true or not.”

She whirled around in a cloud of Chanel No. 5 and all but stomped in the opposite direction.

Slone groaned. "That was close."

"What was close?" I asked.

Then he was all but pulling me in the direction of the door.

"Dixie has a granddaughter," he murmured. "I met Rochelle when she was around fourteen or fifteen, I guess. I'd just gotten drafted, and I swear it was like Rochelle saw me and thought we would be perfect together. She told everyone that day that I would be her husband, and has gone out of her way to make me feel as uncomfortable as possible. Though, I imagine that she doesn't see it that way. But still."

"Have you mentioned it to Dixie?" I asked curiously.

That's when we got to the parking lot and I remembered how we'd gotten here.

Viddy had picked us up from the airport.

Well, Viddy had picked the girls and me up from the airport. Meanwhile, a couple of the Dixie Wardens had driven Titus's and Slone's motorcycles to the airport for them to ride around.

I hadn't remembered that was the case until now.

"Um..." I hesitated. "It's not that I refuse to get on your bike or anything, but I'm not one hundred percent certain that I won't go all." I threw my hands up and went wobbly, pantomiming the act of falling down to my knees. "I'm not sure I can stay on."

He contemplated that for a long moment and then said, "Let's put you in front then. We can't stay here."

The urgency in his voice had me turning around to see what was making him want to move so fast.

Rochelle.

Again at the door watching us with an assessing look on her face.

Well, shit.

CHAPTER 9

*Question: How do you get blood stains out of clothes.
-things not to ask a police officer*

SLONE

I wasn't sure what it was about Rochelle that had me so uncomfortable. But from the very beginning, even when she was a teenager of fifteen, she'd given me the creeps.

There was just something about her that had me so on edge that I didn't want to be around her for any length of time. I certainly didn't want her around Ari, either.

"Hop up," I urged.

She twitched her mouth up at a cute angle, and then twisted her leg to the side and swung it over.

I caught her hips when she went to tottering to one side—my bike was custom made for me, so it was rather large and she wouldn't be able to touch her foot down to the other side—and helped her get situated on the bike.

I followed up behind her seconds later, then pulled her back into my chest and the cradle of my crotch.

If I hadn't felt the urgent need to get the fuck out of there already—I just knew if I stayed much longer Rochelle would be making her way over to us—I would've loved the feeling of her body in mine.

I would've loved how she fit so perfectly between my thighs and against my chest.

She was so small that I could see over her head without looking around it.

I started up the bike with a kick of my heel, and then started out of the parking lot in just enough time to see Rochelle take her first step out of the Dixie Warden Clubhouse in our direction.

I saw her throw her hands down at her sides in frustration and anger and knew that we'd barely dodged a bullet.

Laughter from the woman in front of me caused me to switch my focus to what I was doing and not who I left behind.

"Wow, this is great!" she called out.

We were barely going thirty miles an hour.

When they'd dropped the bikes off, they'd forgotten to leave any helmets,

so I'd resigned myself to going slow until I could find where my helmet had been left. Oh, and until I could get to the store to buy one, because it wasn't like my big-headed helmet would stay on her head.

I let go of the left side of my handlebars and squeezed Ari's ample hip—God, did she have the perfect body—and said, “We won't go any faster than this until we can get some helmets.”

Before she could reply, I felt her body go completely limp.

I cursed and put my arm back onto the handlebars and caught her body as she slumped sideways.

She wasn't in danger of falling off or anything, but she was definitely making it rather awkward to turn to the left.

Luckily, the ride to where we were staying was a short one.

We were pulling into the driveway just as she seemed to come out of the episode.

“Shit, sorry.” She groaned as she sat up straighter. “This is such a pain in the ass.”

The way she sounded so sad and upset had me wanting to squeeze her into a bear hug the way I did Briley and never let go.

I squeezed her hip again instead, then got off.

Before she could choose one side of the other, I bodily lifted her off the bike and made sure she was steady before letting her go.

I kept my hands there ready to catch her, just in case.

“I'm fine,” she assured me. “I saw the whole thing happening, though. It was still fun to experience, but I know it couldn't have been that great for you.”

I snorted. “It was fine.”

It wasn't ideal, but I made it work.

“I'm sure it wasn't, but okay.” She looked around. “This place is huge.”

“Trance and Viddy live right there—” I pointed across the pond toward a two-story house. “Ford and Ash right here when they come stay—” I pointed to the next cabin on the lake, which was directly next to where the RV we were staying in for the night was parked. “That's Oakley and Pace's cabin. Then there's Banner and Perry's cabin. This is Ford's RV he was staying in

when they came down for a visit before the cabins were finished.”

I walked up to the RV and opened it up using a code to get in, then swung it wide and said, “In, hurry. There are bugs all over the place out here.”

She hurried as fast as she could up the steps after picking up her suitcase, and before she could haul it even partially inside, I had it out of her hand without another word.

She followed inside, giving me a fantastic view of her ass as she did, and I had to fist my hands to keep from reaching out and touching it.

“Wow,” she breathed as she took a look around. “I’ve lived in RVs my whole life, and this one is by far one of the nicest ones I’ve ever stepped foot in.”

I grinned. “That’s because Ford is a little glamping queen,” I drawled. “He doesn’t like camping when there are modern-day amenities he could be utilizing. He paid a lot of money to make sure that he didn’t remotely feel like he was camping.”

She giggled and walked forward and touched a lightbulb that looked like a perfectly shaped penis.

I was fairly sure that Ford hadn’t had that thought, otherwise the lightbulbs would be gone.

But Titus and I liked to joke every time we stayed in here that they resembled rather phallic-shaped objects.

“It’s nice,” she said. “And spacious. It looks like it would be a bear to pull around.”

“I don’t think it’s moved since they bought it.” I walked up the two steps to the master bedroom and shoved her suitcase across the floor. “There’s only one shower, though. So we’ll have to share the master bedroom.”

She looked at the shower, which was directly behind the living room, peeking her small body around the corner but in front of my body so that she could see within the small space.

“A full shower,” she mused. “That’s awesome, too.”

“You don’t have a full shower in the bus y’all use?” I asked.

“Oh, we do.” She nodded as she moved away and looked throughout the rest of the RV, taking a long look in the back where there were lots of toys—

dirt bikes, mountain bikes, blow up paddle boards, and other outdoor things that cost a whack. “But it’s shared between seven people. It doesn’t matter how big it is, it would never be big enough.”

“I take it you don’t like sharing?” I asked.

“I don’t like doing a lot of anything,” she flashed me a smile as she fell onto the couch, then slumped over. “Wow, this couch is nice.”

She wasn’t lying.

I could sleep on that couch most of the night, too.

I started to turn on lights. “Would you like the shower first or should I take one?”

She shrugged. “It’s whatever. I was thinking about having one of those s’mores on the counter, though. I should probably go second so I can brush my teeth when I’m done.”

I grinned as I headed up the stairs. “Your wish is my command.”

I closed the door mostly behind me, then took a quick shower.

When I was done, I got dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a black t-shirt, then headed back down into the kitchen in time to see her completely destroying a s’more.

She had chocolate and marshmallow on her chin, with pieces of the graham cracker attached to it. And I wanted nothing more than to lean over and lick it right off.

“Good?” I asked.

She nodded, her eyes wide. “It’s been so long since I had one of these.”

It’d been years for me.

But man did she make it look good.

I couldn’t stop myself from leaning forward and catching the line of chocolate from her chin, then bringing my thumb to my mouth and licking it clean.

Her eyes flared, and I knew that if I wanted her, I could have her.

And boy, did I want her.

I wanted her so bad that I didn’t see her move until she was standing right in front of me, staring straight up with a dollop of chocolate still at the corner of her lips.

“Slone?” she asked quietly.

I licked my lips. “Yeah?”

She licked the corner of her mouth clean then said, “Are you going to kiss me or what?”

It took my brain half a second to compute what she’d just said, and another point one second to close the distance between us.

My mouth slanted down over hers, and I finally got what I wanted after days of staring at her and wanting.

She was short, so the awkward angle made our kiss hard to accomplish comfortably, and without a second thought, I picked her up and she curled her legs around my waist.

The moment we were face to face, she wrapped her hands around my neck and deepened the kiss.

She tasted like chocolate and marshmallows, and I knew that I’d forever associate that taste with her.

So sweet and so perfect all rolled into a tiny bottle of perfection.

Her tongue touched mine, and I moved until I felt the backs of my calves hit the couch.

When I knew that something was there to catch me, I collapsed, pulling her down into my lap in one swift move.

She squeaked, her hands clenching onto my neck in the cutest way that had me grinning.

“You think that’s cute?” She pulled her hands away from my neck.

I caught those hands and put them back into place, then placed my hands on her hips and moved them up to just below her bra line.

With one long sweep of both thumbs I said, “I think you’re fucking adorable.”

She flicked her hair out of her eyes, and only accomplished causing it to move onto the other side of her face.

Finding that cute as well, I lifted one hand and curled the stray locks around my fingers before clenching my fist around them and pulling her forward.

She came, her mouth hovering over mine, and said, “This could get kind

of sketchy.”

“How so?” I asked, my breath becoming hers.

“I have five sisters and one brother. They’re very interested in everything and anything that has to do with my personal life.” I paused. “And the internet already thinks we’re married.”

“So?” I pushed.

“So…” She shrugged, causing her breasts to jostle against my chest. “So I think that we should really sell this marriage thing.”

I blinked.

“For the next month,” she continued, her gaze now solely focused on my lips. “And when that month is over, you don’t hate me for having to go back to the freakin’ circus.”

I pulled her to me, crashing her lips against mine, and told her without words that I could never hate her.

In fact, I felt like I could probably love her.

I’d known her for less than a week, but I already knew that I wanted her around for longer than just a month.

I’d start with tonight, though.

“I’m on birth control,” she started the moment I let her up for air.

I felt my dick thicken at her words.

“I’m clean,” I said. “I just did the yearly physical required for the Liners. One hundred percent clean bill of health.”

And thank God for that. Because had I not had that done, and she’d told me she was clean, I would’ve had to go with my moral compass and tell her that I needed to get tested first before I did her bare.

Not because I had anything wrong with me, but because I felt that was a courtesy she deserved to have.

“I’d just like you to know this isn’t my norm.” She breathed heavily, her hands now on my collar bones.

I trailed the backs of my fingertips along the base of her throat, then trailed it down until my hand met fabric. “I know what kind of person you are.”

Her eyes that’d been trained down at my collar bones where her hand had

been resting flashed up to meet mine.

“I’m unexperienced as hell,” she added.

The corners of my mouth twitched up into an almost smile before I said, “Guess it’s bad that I’m not either?”

She scoffed, and I grinned wickedly at her.

“I may look like I should be, but I’m not,” I admitted. “I’ve had all of two people in my life since my baby mama...and let’s just say, none of those were lasting or quite memorable.”

She sighed and melted into me a little bit deeper, the movement making her lap shift so that I was pressed directly between her legs.

That “melting” went to “stiffening” as she resituated herself, or tried to. I caught her hips before she could move then said, “Are you sure about this? I can wait.”

I didn’t want to wait.

In fact, that sounded like the cruelest form of punishment, if I did say so myself.

“One last thing.” She nibbled on the edge of her lip, letting me know that this was very serious, what she was about to say.

“Yeah?” I asked, loosening up on the downward pressure I’d been forcing her hips into.

“I...might fall asleep.” She cringed.

I froze, thinking about that.

“Um...” I hesitated. “What?”

I mean, now that she brought up the possibility, it did make sense that it would be something that could happen. She did have narcolepsy, after all.

“Getting overly excited...” She blushed profusely. “It’s just...it happens. That’s why I’m not...experienced. The one and only time I tried to have it, I fell asleep during it, woke up and the dude was gone. I don’t even know if he...we...hell. I don’t know if he finished. Or I finished. Or any of that.”

I licked my dry lips. “What do you want me to do if that happens?”

She slowly brought her face up to mine. “I honestly don’t know. For this time...maybe stop until I’m awake. For all others? If this time works out? Maybe I’ll wake up before you finish.”

“That sounds slightly...morbid,” I admitted.

She giggled at that. “My whole life is morbid. Why do you think I only go places non-excitable? What do you think would happen to a woman like me passed out for any man to take advantage of her? I’ve had to live with this since I was a young kid. That’s why I’m the most inexperienced woman on the planet. I have the best career ever to love ’em and leave ’em. Yet I’m not taking advantage of it because I’m slightly terrified of how life will look for me.”

I kissed her then, unable to help myself.

The thought of her being hurt in any way...that was the worst feeling in the world to me.

Just knowing that was a possibility made me want to wrap her up in my arms and never let her go.

The possessiveness that rolled through me felt like fire to my gas-filled veins, and before I could stop myself, I was reversing our positions and falling down onto the couch with her underneath me.

Her hands went beneath her and she started to wiggle, causing me to go up on one elbow to look down.

What I saw—her yanking hastily on her t-shirt—had me grinning.

I went all the way up, stood beside the couch, and started to strip myself.

When I got down to just my boxer briefs and she was down to nothing but her bra, I couldn’t take it anymore and went back into position.

And since I wanted this more than I wanted to breathe my next breath, I slowly shifted her up and myself down until we were both at awkward angles.

But it did serve a purpose.

It put me face to face with her pussy.

I growled low in my throat at the dark black pubic hair shaved into a landing strip.

I smirked as I drew a long finger down the length of it, not stopping when that digit fell between her pussy lips, hit her clit, and kept going to her wet entrance.

She made a sound in the back of her throat, something between a whimper

and a squeak, which caused me to look up at her.

“You okay?” I asked.

She swallowed hard and nodded as she folded her lips between her teeth and thinned her lips.

“You’re sure?” I asked as I breached her entrance.

Her breath left her in a rush, and I couldn’t stop the hint of satisfaction that left my throat at the way I affected her.

The look on her face, paired with how wet she was?

Yeah, those were two really great things that made me want to keep doing exactly what I was doing.

She blew out a shaky breath, then said, “More.”

I gave her more, bending down to place my lips on her needy clit.

When I did, she all but clamped her knees around my head and squeezed with surprising force.

One that took regular hits to the head, though not necessarily by beautiful women, I let her squeeze all she wanted. Instead, I focused on curling my finger in a ‘come hither’ motion while simultaneously giving her the best tongue lashing she’d ever experienced.

“Oh, Slone.” She breathed. “Oh, god.”

I smiled against her pussy, my eyes trailing up the length of her bared torso and snagging on her bra that was still in place.

“Get it off,” I urged as I came up for air.

She did, her movements causing her clit to bump against my lips.

She was so hasty in those movements, and she kept pausing to grind herself into my face, that it took her longer than it probably should have. Not that I’d be complaining.

I liked that she enjoyed what I was doing to her, and I liked even more that I was affecting her brain to the point where she couldn’t accomplish simple tasks such as taking her bra off.

When her breasts were bared, I had to practically force myself to stay where I was.

Those beautiful tits of hers weren’t big. In fact, they were so small that I could fit both of them in my hand with laughable ease—I did have the second

largest hands in the NFL according to *Football Today Magazine*.

But her nipples. God, those were perky and stiff and dark. I wanted to bring them to my lips and worship them for days.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asked, covering her breasts with her hands.

“Like I can’t decide which piece of you to devour first?” I asked, going back to tonguing her clit. “Because I can’t decide which to focus on.”

She laughed breathlessly, letting me know that it was the exact answer that she needed.

She let her breasts go, and then those nipples were once again garnering my gaze.

But I kept my work up with her clit, wrapping my lips around it and sucking softly while pumping first one finger inside of her, then two.

My gaze on her breasts and her eyes must’ve been doing it for her, because she snaked her hand upward and caught one nipple between her fingers and started to twist it.

She tugged softly, and I knew that before this night was through, I’d make her come by sucking those nipples alone.

“You’re making me hard as fuck here, baby.” I groaned, digging my dick into the couch.

“I’m not doing anything but...”

All muscle tone left her, and I saw the look in her eyes go from ‘present’ to ‘not there’ in the blink of an eye.

One second she was awake with her eyes on mine, and the next she was eyes closed and dead to the world.

I sat up and groaned, my hand going to my cock as I took a seat beside her and helped her close her legs.

Squeezing my cock hard, I prayed that she’d wake back up sooner rather than later, because otherwise this was going to be torture.

She woke with a gasp, and then was sitting up and staring at me in horror.

“I’m so sorry,” she breathed.

I curled my hands around her armpits and dragged her to me.

She came willingly, though her eyes were apologetic as she repeated, “I’m

sorry.”

I kissed her apology away and said, “We take this at whatever speed you want, honey. You want to do this, we do it. And we’ll keep trying, even if we take all night.”

She straddled my hips and placed those delicious nipples directly in front of my mouth.

Grin widening, I did what I’d been dying to do all along.

Smearing one nipple with her wetness still coating my finger, I sucked it into my mouth.

She gasped, her hands going to my hair, and she tugged.

Hard.

“Ow,” I said around a nipple. “Nicely, woman. Or I stop.”

She hissed out a breath and tried to drop her hands, but I caught them and put them back where they belonged—right where she’d had them.

“No,” I ordered. “Keep them there.”

“I can’t promise I won’t pull,” she breathed, urging her other nipple into my line of sight.

I pulled away from one to go to another, grinning wickedly when she started to grind herself down on my length.

“Can you come like this?” I asked her.

She was shaking her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Let’s try,” I suggested.

She keened, her hands once again tightening in my hair, tighter than before.

I allowed it, loving the way I was working her up so fast and hard with nipple play alone.

“Come,” I urged.

“I ca...” Then she was coming, the denial still on her lips.

It was at this point that I thought about how much I wanted this. How much I wanted her.

But there was something that I needed to warn her about.

“Honey,” I said carefully. “I’m not small.”

She lifted her head, her eyes still ripe with lust, when she burst out laughing.

In my face.

“Oh, I have no doubt about that, darling,” she teased before she slammed her mouth down onto mine. When we were both panting for breath she pulled back and said, “Now take those underwear off.”

They were off in seconds—at least, what felt like seconds, but was more like a minute because we never stopped kissing long enough for me to get her up off my lap to get them off. Eventually I was able to work them down just far enough for my cock to pop free and my balls to not feel like they were being constricted to death.

“Condom,” I asked.

We’d had the birth control talk, after all. We were both clean. But I still wanted her to have that option if she wanted it.

She was already shaking her head. “Like I told you, I’m on birth control. I have been since I was young, so I feel like I should really get my money’s worth, you know? Like I’m not taking it for nothing. My dad insisted all of us get on it...because he didn’t want to be having any babies running around that he didn’t want to take care of. Needless to say, when I was old enough to make decisions for myself, I got on the implant.”

She then held her arm up in line with my face, and I saw the small scar there on the inside of her bicep.

“That’s...” I didn’t know what to say.

“Overcontrolling. Overbearing. Annoying. Smart?” she offered.

I was aghast. Like truly.

“Did y’all show signs that y’all wanted to be on birth control?” I asked.

“My dad was...crazy. He was convinced that we were all going to get pregnant at the same time and start popping out babies, forcing him to take care of us for longer than he wanted to,” she grumbled darkly as she dropped her arm. “None of us were even old enough to know what sex was when we were put on birth control. I think we were all thirteen at most.”

“Jesus.” I was already shaking my head. “That’s...”

“Like I said. I have that covered.” She pursed her lips. “And I’d rather not

talk about my dad right now.”

I’d rather not be talking about him, either.

I was sort of glad he was dead so I didn’t have to meet him and pretend to like him.

Was that really bad to think?

Maybe.

She looked down then and drew in such a quick, deep breath that I knew she’d finally seen my dick.

Damn.

I’d been hoping to get it inside of her before she’d had a chance to fully take it in.

“I…” She was looking at it with such rounded eyes that I didn’t know what to do about it.

Should I stop?

“Should I stop?” I echoed my words.

“I…God no.” She was already shaking. At what I now realized was anticipation. “I’ve never wanted to get something inside of me more in my life.”

I threw my head back and laughed.

“God, you’re fucking perfect,” I murmured.

Her eyes were liquid heat as she pulled up and poised herself above me with my cock at her entrance.

Then she started to slowly work herself up and down onto the tip, taking it slow.

Too slow.

I felt like I was about to burst, and she’d only managed to get the tip in.

I groaned, squeezed her hips, and prayed to the gods that were listening that I lasted long enough to get inside of her.

By the time that she was halfway down, I was losing it.

“It’s been a while,” I wheezed, feeling like I needed to explain what was about to happen.

I heard the smile in her voice that clearly let me know how amused she

was with the situation.

“Oh, yeah?” she asked. “How long?”

“Long,” I said. “I haven’t even been bleeding any pressure valves lately. I found that I play better when I’m...full.”

She slammed herself down the rest of the way, and I swear to all that was holy, my eyes fucking crossed.

My release started to climb up my shaft before I was even aware that I’d blown.

Then I was filling her up with weeks of untapped come.

She rode me through my release and then rolled right into hers.

It was the weirdest fuckin’ thing.

I mean, I’d felt someone coming around my cock before.

But her?

It was like her whole body got into it. Like she was putting everything she had into exploding around me.

I fucking loved it.

“Why don’t you have more experience? Even better, if you have no experience, how did you know how to do that thing at the end where you angled your hips just...so?” She panted. “My god...if you had more, I might’ve died.”

I was already shaking my head in denial.

“Anything there at the end when I was coming was purely happenstance,” I admitted. “I wasn’t firing on all cylinders. That was just pure, animalistic exploding at its finest.”

“Well you can animalistic explode on me anytime you want to.”

I freakin’ planned on it.

CHAPTER 10

*I don't know who needs to hear this, but the kitchen scissors STAY IN THE
FUCKING KITCHEN.*

-Slone to anybody who would listen

SLONE

“If the trailer’s a rockin’, don’t come a knockin’.”

I felt my eyelid twitch at his words.

Last night’s session had turned into an all-night bender.

There wasn’t a single second that we hadn’t spent either having sex, recovering from having sex, or working up to having more sex.

It was the best night of my life. Or, at least, the best night of my sex life, anyway.

“Whatever you do,” I said to Titus. “Don’t repeat that in front of her, or she’ll get to the airport and take a completely different flight than us.”

And I’d never see her again.

Why the thought of that happening sent me into a slight panic, I didn’t want to delve too deep into, but suffice it to say, her coming on the plane with us was imperative to my mental health.

We were only a couple hours away from Kilgore. We could totally make that drive home. But instead of driving away from the airport, we decided to just skip the team bus and meet the team *at* the airport.

It would cause us both to get fines, but it was worth it not to have to make any extra trips.

That, and I wanted to get some alone time with Briley before I took off on her for a month.

Briley assured me this morning as we were sitting down for breakfast at a diner in Benton that she would be fine and was actually looking forward to not spending a few days in multiple different hotel rooms.

Which was when I started to feel bad, because I hadn’t realized that she felt that way.

“I heard a bit of Briley and your conversation,” Titus said, reading my thoughts.

We’d been best friends for years. Sometimes it felt like he knew me better than I knew me.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Titus groaned. “And I hate to say it, man, but I think I agree with her. We need to find a more permanent solution.”

My brows rose. “How do you expect to do that?”

He was already shaking his head. “An arranged marriage with Blue would be nice.”

A breath of shocked laughter had me grinning wickedly.

Blue was his high school crush. A high school crush that’d turned into a life-long crush, it seemed.

Hell, I’d had my own crush in high school. Her name was Tempy, and I thought at one point, when my life was a little less busy, I’d go back to her and see if we could try things out.

Only, things had never calmed down in my life. They just kept getting busier.

But after meeting Ari...yeah, I didn’t think that Tempy was going to even be a glimmer in the back of my mind anymore.

Blue was it for Titus, though.

One day, they’d be together.

I had the utmost confidence in that prediction.

“We’ll figure it out,” I grumbled. “Even if I have to quit and stay home with them.”

Titus whipped his head around in shock. “What?”

I twisted my neck left, then right, hearing a few pops before I turned back to Titus. “I don’t want our kids to be unhappy. And just sayin’, but being away from them, as well as having to be here, do this, or get fined, is the fuckin’ worst.”

“Fined?”

I turned to look over my shoulder and found Ari on her way to us, a ticket in one hand and her carry-on in the other.

“Yeah,” I sighed as I shrugged. “We got fined for not arriving with the team.”

Her mouth fell open.

“How much did you get fined?” Ari asked with wide eyes.

“Ten grand apiece,” Titus murmured as he studied whatever was on his phone.

“What?” she screeched. “They charged you ten thousand dollars apiece because you didn’t ride the team bus? What the hell is that?”

I loved that she was so defensive.

I loved even more that the way her chest was heaving was making me hard.

“What the hell that is, is a joke,” I replied. “The league and the team itself makes it a fuckin’ point to fine us for the stupidest of stupid things. Last year, Titus was fined for wearing a jersey that he’d applied a pink breast cancer banner sticker to in memory of his mother’s breast cancer journey being over. The league fined him, and then the team turned around and fined him.”

Eyes wide, she stared at Titus, then me.

“Last year,” Darnell, a tight end on the Liners, and another good friend of ours, said from behind us, startling us all, “I got fined for wearing my socks too low during two games. I’d also like to point out that those were the only socks that fuckin’ fit, and they were assigned to me by the goddamn Liners.”

Ari whipped her head around and stared at Darnell.

“I was fined two seasons ago when I had to call my wife when I was pulled from a game. I used the team doc’s cell phone to tell her that I was okay, and that it was just a precaution. The league fined me ten grand for it.”

That was Tweety, another defensive end.

“We were all fined ten grand three seasons ago when one Troy Paramount was murdered. We wrote his number in our eye black,” Ashton Sane, our QB—quarterback—said.

“I got fined twenty-five grand when I gave that little kid the football who was there for a Make-A-Wish campaign. Kid was dying, and I gave him the game ball, and there the league was, fining my ass for making him happy.” Darnell shook his head.

Ari looked up at all the huge men surrounding her, telling her about their fines, and said, “Uh, hello.”

My lips flashed into a quick grin when I pulled her into my side.

“Hello,” all of them said at once. “Who are you?”

As if they'd all been wondering as they'd walked toward us.

The nosy little shits.

"I'm Caristonia." She held out her hand to the first man, Darnell.

Darnell took it, shook it, then said, "Darnell."

"Nice to meet you, Darnell." Ari blushed.

She repeated this process for the other two, then shook her head when she was done. "I feel like y'all are all very huge and very impressive. My brother's big and all...but wow."

That was the thing about professional football. All of us were the cream of the crop.

Then, when we got into the professional league, we were fed, worked out, and taken care of. Meaning, we only grew stronger and bigger.

Became better.

"And what are you doing here, Caristonia?" Darnell teased.

"I'm..." she started to say, but I interrupted with, "She's coming with me. We're married."

They all blinked slowly, and Ari elbowed me in the side.

Hard.

"Ooof," I said with a laugh.

"He's lying," Ari started to explain. "See, we were at a water park..."

By the time Ari was done, they were all sufficiently mad at Ari's sisters, like they should be.

"That's fucked up," Ashton murmured. "You should really get that figured out."

"Yo," Joe called out. "Plane's loading."

I turned to look where Joe had indicated to see that the plane was sure enough loading.

Ari followed us onto the plane, her eyes wide as she shuffled along with everyone else.

When we got to the first set of seats on the left of the plane, I pushed her in gently and pointed to the chairs.

She took in all the people she was passing as well as giving back smiles to

their curious stares.

In all, I wasn't surprised when she took the window seat and put me between her and the rest of the team.

Her eyes were wide and intense as she stared around the airplane.

We had a nice plane. One that really resembled some of the planes that you took for the long haul that had the individual compartments with the sides that moved up offering privacy. The seat looked like a pod of sorts and went from a normal looking chair to a bed with a few clicks of a button.

"Where to first?" she asked curiously once she was seated, wiggling her butt in a very cute way. "I forgot."

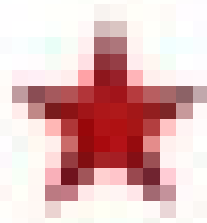
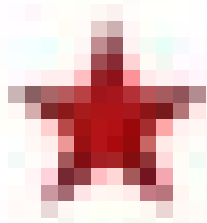
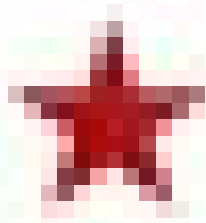
"Pittsburgh, Seattle, then Oakland, California," I answered.

We took my usual seats, and Titus took his across from me before putting his headphones on and blocking everything out—he didn't do well on planes.

Ari watched with wide eyes as everyone loaded into their chairs, her eyes straying to Joe time and time again.

"Who is that?" Ari asked, eyes wide.

Joe had his infamous scowl on his face. Something in which he never used to have before what the team liked to refer to as the 'incident' occurred.



CARISTONIA

“That’s Joe Hoyt,” Slone murmured. “Don’t talk to him. He’s in a perpetual bad mood after his divorce.”

I looked at this ‘Joe Hoyt’ dude.

He looked like he was angry.

Angry, and hella sexy in his suit.

“I feel like there’s some really juicy story about this divorce,” I murmured, studying the older man who looked like he could peel paint with his glare.

He was tall. Really tall, with silvering blonde hair that made him look amazing.

In the last few years, I’d really transitioned from thinking that older men were gross, to thinking they were super-hot.

And Joe Hoyt really had it going on.

Then again, so did Slone.

When he’d walked out in that suit earlier, I’d nearly had a heart attack. Hell, I still wasn’t convinced that I didn’t have a heart attack seeing as how my heartrate had skyrocketed when I’d gotten my first glimpse of the sexy man in all black.

Dressed down, he looked great. Dressed up? Wow.

Just wow.

“Joe Blow, you’re in my chair.”

I looked up to find every single man that’d come in wearing a suit earlier now openly changing out of said suits into shorts and a t-shirt.

I sank down until the only person in my line of sight was the woman standing up next to Joe’s extra seat that was open beside him.

The woman was around his age standing at the edge of his chair glaring at him.

“Jolene,” he said carefully, almost as if he was trying to control his temper. “I swear to Christ, we go through this every single time. Your chair is in the front with all the other personnel.”

Jolene was a tall woman with fake blonde hair you could tell she dyed so she didn't have any gray hairs showing. She also looked like she'd never seen a Snickers in her life.

Wow, she looked great for her age.

"That's his ex-wife," Slone whispered, his eyes on the two who most definitely had the attention of the whole team. "Watch."

Oh, I was watching all right.

I couldn't not watch.

It was like watching a car stalled on a train track with the blockades coming down and the dinging going off all around you. You knew the train was coming. You knew that car was about to be hit.

And you couldn't look away.

"But this has been my seat for seven years," she pouted.

Joe didn't look up from his phone as he said, "That ended when you decided that you'd rather test out a younger model of me last year."

Oh, boy.

"Joe, you know that was a mistake," Jolene tried.

So this was the reason for Joe's bad mood.

"I know our entire marriage was a mistake, and I never should've pursued you," he amended. "However, we can't take back previous mistakes. We can only learn from them. And what I learned is that this is my last year, and that I want nothing to do with you. I am literally retiring so I can get the hell away from you."

"Whoa," I breathed.

"Yeah," Slone agreed as he, too, started to undress. One second he was completely clothed, and the next he was in sweats and a t-shirt, sans shoes. "I'm sure you can see why he's mad."

I could see why Joe was mad. Yep.

"Personally, I think that she should've been fired. Because Joe's now retiring even though he still has some great years left in him," Slone muttered.

"How old is he?" I asked.

"Thirty-eight," Slone answered. "They met right when I started. Or, more

accurately, they started dating right when I began with the Liners. They got married really fast, and they've been together for the past six and a half years. Until last year when he walked into the bathroom on this very plane and found her fucking our backup quarterback."

"Whoa," I said. "Is that backup quarterback Ashton?"

I was almost beside myself thinking that it was. I'd liked Ashton upon first sight, but I didn't do cheaters. Not after all that crap with my mother and father.

"No," he answered. "He's gone. The Liners' manager and owner felt that it was going to be something that they couldn't contain. The dude was transferred out two months after we picked him up in the draft."

Yowza.

That sounded like a mess and a half.

"But Joe..." Jolene tried.

Instead of arguing with her, Joe put his headphones on before putting his seat belt on and closing his eyes.

Jolene stared at him aghast that he'd just dismiss her like he did, and I couldn't help the small smile that lifted the corner of my lips.

"That smile is the kind of smile that gets you in trouble," Slone murmured.

I twisted in my seat and pulled out the blanket that was in the plastic baggie.

On the blanket it said 'Longview Liners.'

The headrest said the same thing.

And apparently, the team's colors were brown and yellow because that was the color of the seats. And all of the seats were 'first-class' style.

Two seats to every row, and every row had enough leg room that all these hulking men could fit comfortably.

The last to get on the plane was a scowling woman in her late fifties that looked like she'd had so much work done on her face that not a single piece of it was natural anymore.

I mean, more power to you if you wanted to do that to yourself, but she looked like an alien with her face permanently etched in stone. In fact, in the few seconds I'd been watching her, she hadn't even blinked.

“Slone,” the woman said when she came to a stop next to his chair. “I see congratulations are in order?”

I could see the anger practically vibrating her tiny body.

“Sure thing,” Slone said. “How are you doing, Kay?”

Kay, who I assumed was the owner, looked angry that she’d been addressed as “Kay” and said, “My name is Ms. Druthers. Make sure you get that fine paid by the end of the day.”

“Usually, when the fine is issued,” Joe called out from behind us. “You have four days to pay it. And that’s business days. Seeing as today is Friday, and end of day at that, he has until next Friday to pay it, as per Liners by-laws.”

Jesus, I knew that I liked him.

Slone’s brows rose at Kay as he said, “I’ll get it to you when we get back.”

That would be Wednesday, if I remembered correctly.

“Titus, you, too,” Kay snapped.

Titus didn’t look up.

In fact, he was so in his zone that he didn’t even stir at her snapped words.

“You’ll tell him,” she ordered Slone.

Slone shrugged. “I’ll try to remember. But I have a PA that does all this for me, so my poor brain doesn’t get overwhelmed.”

That was the first I was hearing about a PA.

That didn’t mean that he didn’t have one, of course, but I felt like maybe I would’ve heard her mentioned over the last several hours when we’d talked about anything and everything under the sun.

Kay stomped away toward the back of the plane, leaving us in the very first seat with no one in front of us but a few flight attendants that immediately went to mid-plane and started closing overhead bins.

“I didn’t see any flight attendant seats as we were coming in,” I said. “Do they sit back there?”

“Yeah,” Slone said as he narrowed his eyes. “Why?”

I shrugged, then said, “These are very spacious seats. The way they’re situated, you have to actively look in the cubbies to see anything.”

His eyes went from narrowed to assessing as he said, “I feel like you’re going somewhere with this line of talk.”

I was.

I was thinking about how nice it would be to do a little heavy petting on the plane after we took off and there were no more flight attendants walking around.

Because right now, the man was wearing a pair of sweatpants and he looked deliciously hot in those and the tight black t-shirt he was wearing. Oh, and that hat pulled down low? Even better.

Not to mention, I was a horny bitch.

I wasn’t quite sure what was wrong with me.

After last night, and this morning, all I could think about was doing it again.

And again.

And again.

Hell, he hadn’t even made it out of the RV and I’d wanted to pull him back down and ravish him.

What did it say about me that I was thinking about doing what I was thinking on a plane where anyone could see?

“This is a red-eye,” he said. “It’ll take six hours to get there.”

Why was he telling me this?

That answer became clearer the more he elaborated.

“The attendants will come by and help turn beds down.” He gestured toward our seats. “These pods both turn into beds if we all want them. When that happens, they’ll let everyone sleep unless they’re paged to come back.”

A grin started turning up the corner of my lips.

“I...”

I didn’t get to finish my words because the attendants came by and said, “We’re about to take off.”

Then they were gone, leaving me and Slone alone.

I could just barely see Titus above Slone’s seat, and he was already pulling his hat down low over his eyes, likely trying to go back to sleep.

I buckled myself in and closed my eyes, waiting for takeoff.

All the while, that little seed Slone had planted in my head about how long the flight would be was churning up ideas, making me want to do things I probably shouldn't do.

CHAPTER 11

*To do list: ~~Your dad.~~
-Coffee Cup*

SLONE

I was hard.

So fucking hard.

Some switch had flipped, and now I couldn't get it under control.

Hell, my dick was so hard it was tenting the front of my sweats, and the only thing holding it under control at this point was the hand I had firmly placed over the top of it.

The woman at my side suddenly twisted so that she had her feet up on the seat, and her arms around her raised knees.

She stared at me intently as I uncrossed my legs and repositioned myself in my seat.

Her eyes went down to my lap when she said, "I think you should hold my hand."

I looked at her with a knowing look before saying, "Why don't you just let me hold your hand in my lap?"

She giggled then reached for it, leaning on the armrest as she did.

That's when I remembered the armrests moved out of the way, and I did just that, causing her to fall deeper into my body.

The plane started to move, causing the cabin to become louder, and I used that time to grab her blanket and pull it over the top of both of us.

She pinched her tongue between her teeth, then snuck her hand underneath my own and palmed my erection.

"Awfully bold of you, darling," I teased.

Her eyes twinkled as she said, "I don't know what's wrong with me."

I didn't either. Not with her, and not with myself.

But I was going to milk it for all it was worth.

My cock throbbed against her hand, and unable to stop myself, I forced it to jerk in her hand, causing her to giggle.

The plane took off, slamming us against our seats, and I closed my eyes as pleasure coursed through me as she squeezed it tighter.

“Slone.” She turned her face and spoke directly in my ear.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“This mile high thing...are we actually a mile high?” she wondered.

I had no clue.

In fact, if I had to guess, I’d say it was more than a mile high when they got to altitude.

But I couldn’t articulate any of that because she’d slipped her fingers from over the top of my sweats, higher. Her hand smoothed over the waistband, then higher to just above it, right above my pubic bone.

“Do it,” I grated.

She slipped just the tip of her pinky finger underneath my waistband, then swept it side to side as far as her finger allowed across my pubic hair.

It wasn’t much.

Honestly, in the grand scheme of things it could’ve just been nonsexual... but my god. One would think she’d straight up stuck my dick in an electrical outlet with the way my cock jumped at the touch.

“Wow,” she breathed. “You moved the blanket.”

I allowed my head to fall back and huffed out a silent laugh.

Her hand moved lower, not quite to the root, but closer.

“Lower,” I rasped.

She snickered. “If I go any lower, I’ll touch something important, then I’d have to stop when the lady came around to turn your bed down.”

She had a point.

Stopping sounded like the worst thing in the world right now...but currently I was experiencing such intense need for her to touch me there that I felt like it was already the worst thing in the world.

“Ari...” I ground out, unable to stop the growl from entering my voice.

She leaned over and bit my neck, momentarily distracting me.

“If I didn’t know better, I would say that you were trying to torture me,” I muttered darkly.

My hips lifted, trying to get her to touch without forcing her hand farther down my pants.

“We have reached cruising altitude,” the captain came over the loudspeaker.

I heard some belts unbuckle around me, but Ari’s mouth started to slowly tickle the skin of my neck, right above my shirt collar.

“Mr. Day,” I heard called from behind me.

My eyes blinked open, and I looked over my shoulder to see the flight attendant heading my way. The same flight attendant that liked to accost me with her unwanted touches and her laughter every flight I had to take.

The one that never seemed to take a hint.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Would you like help getting your bed ready?” she asked sweetly as she came to a stop at my side.

Which was when the woman at my side decided to finally give me what I’d been asking for.

Her bare hand closed around my cock, and I had to shift my leg so that one foot was resting against the other leg’s calf to hide her movements with the blanket.

“I’m good,” I said. “I can do it myself.”

She smiled, or started to, but it fell away almost instantaneously when she spotted the woman at my side.

“Where’s your daughter?” she asked.

“With family,” I told her.

“And who is this?” she asked. “Your mother?”

My mother.

Jesus Christ.

There was no way in hell that Ari could pass for my mother and she knew it.

Ari also looked like my complete opposite.

Ari squeezed my dick. Hard.

“Uh, no.” I cleared my throat as I tried to think past the pleasure of her hand being wrapped around me. “This is my...”

“Wife,” Ari finished for him. “It’s a very new thing. He gets confused.”

She started to work my cock then with slow, precise movements.

Yes, I was definitely confused.

“Uh.” The flight attendant looked shocked.

I kind of liked the way it looked on her face, if I was being truthful.

I mean, Jesus Christ. Me being married was what it took for her to get the hint?

“Anyway, no, we don’t need help converting the seats to a bed. But thank you, that was kind of you to ask,” Ari said as she swept her thumb over my cock and collected a bead of precum that was gathered there.

I barely stopped my knee jerk reaction to saying “it’s her job.”

Likely the only thing that caused me to stay quiet at this point was if I opened it, even for that kind of comment, a moan would follow.

“Uh, sure.” The attendant left without another word.

She was gone less than ten seconds before we were all but launching ourselves at each other.

Her mouth clashed with mine, and hands went everywhere.

Eventually, with her tongue in my mouth, I got her under the blanket and in my lap. Shortly after that, she was shoving my sweatpants down and forcing her dress up.

I helped her along, pushing her dress so high that I revealed her lower belly.

“Not too high,” she hissed at me as she settled herself on my lap.

The one good thing about her being so damn small was that when she got into my lap, and slowly lowered herself down onto my thick cock, she couldn’t be seen over the top of the chair.

Her hands found my neck, and together we breathed through the sheathing of my cock inside of her slick pussy.

“Jesus Christ,” she whispered.

My hands clenched on her sides, right below her ribs, her dress still firmly fisted between our two fleshies.

“Do you think...oh, no.”

Before I could ask what the ‘oh, no’ was, her eyes went wide, then they

closed altogether.

I closed my own eyes in reaction, praying that I could hold on and not move while I waited for her to wake up.

I was just about to pull myself out of her heat when I saw movement out of the corner of my eye.

Titus.

“She fell asleep on you?” Titus asked as he walked past us to the bathroom.

You have no idea, friend.

“Yep,” I wheezed.

She woke up thirty seconds later, then immediately started moving.

“Sorry,” she whispered in my ear.

I moved my hand up the length of her spine and said, “You are gonna have to chill for a second. Titus just got up to go to the bathroom.”

She stilled, coming to a complete stop with me embedded deep inside of her.

The position itself wasn't too comfortable. In fact, even with the two beds combined like they were, my six-foot-five self was already taking up more than my fair share of the room.

And due to the size discrepancy, I couldn't reach her mouth easily without bending my head to an awkward angle.

But uncomfortable positions aside, we were making it work. And I was seconds away from coming, and we hadn't even gotten to the actual sex part yet. I mean, sure, I was deep inside of her. But other than the fifteen seconds I'd allowed her to move after Titus got up, we'd both been completely still since I'd gotten inside of her.

“This is your captain speaking,” the captain came over the intercom again. “We're about to hit some turbulence over Arkansas. They have a whopper of a storm, and we're catching the tail side of it. It might be a rocky thirty minutes or so. Flight attendants, please take your seats until I turn off the fasten seat belt sign.”

I clenched my hand on to her hips as we hit the first patch of turbulence.

And wow, he wasn't kidding.

The rocking and bumping of the plane had me pushing deeper inside of her.

“Whoa,” Titus said from the hallway that led to the bathroom. He appeared a few seconds later, looking quite pale, and making a beeline for his seat.

Ari buried her face into my neck as she said, “Sweet baby Jesus. Just a few more minutes of this and I’m going to explode.”

Same.

Fucking. Same.

Normally, this turbulence might’ve freaked me out. But the act of it shaking us while I was inside of her...well, that would be another highlight of my life.

Miles fucking high, and deep inside of her pussy, not having to move an inch because the world was shaking around us.

As if the fuckin’ earth was listening to my needs and giving me what I wanted.

“We’re all gonna fuckin’ die,” I heard someone say behind me. “My fuckin’ god. I should’ve stayed home.”

“You would’ve gotten fined,” someone replied helpfully.

Ari’s leg lifted and hooked itself to the back of my thigh, then she pulled me impossibly closer as she said, “I’m gonna come.”

I said a silent prayer of thanks that she was close right along with me, because I would’ve hated to go without having her come along for the ride.

A distinct bump of the plane had the world tilting all around us.

We all shifted and went right. My body hit the side part of my chair that was designed to keep me inside of it in case of this exact instance. Ari followed, but I caught her before she could wind up on the floor.

Pulling her into me tightly, I started to fuck her back, unable to stop myself from doing it.

The plane dipped the other way, and a couple of hard, loud curses filled the air.

Though, mine joined it, but for an altogether different reason.

“I’m coming,” she breathed against my lips.

Then she was clenching all around me, her slick heat getting even wetter as she followed me over the edge.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I heard someone else say.

“I’m going to die,” I breathed against her lips.

And I was, in the most unimaginably great-feeling way possible.

“Little deaths,” she agreed, watching me go now.

At one point in time, that might’ve felt a little too ‘real.’ A little too intense for my wary soul.

But with Ari? It was completely different, almost as if this was the way it was always supposed to be. All those missed connections I felt like I had with other women? They were absolutely not missed with Ari.

Her hands once again clenched down on my neck, and then I was seeing nothing but stars as my orgasm hit me like a three-hundred-pound linebacker.

I shot my release deep inside of her, filling her full with my short, forceful thrust.

“We’re all gonna fuckin’ die!” I heard someone say.

“We’re not going to die,” I heard replied to the outburst. “Now shut the fuck up and act like you’re the thirty-year-old man you actually are, not the inner pre-teen who can’t handle a dark room.”

Then the lights went dark and the oxygen masks fell from the ceiling.

CHAPTER 12

*He's a ten, but in pesos.
-T-shirt*

SLONE

“I’m sorry, sirs.” The woman looked at us, her gaze bouncing back and forth as if she was ready to throw up. “But there are no double rooms at all. Our hotel doesn’t even have them.”

Honestly, that worked out really well for me and for Ari. I’d love to have us in a single room together.

But for some reason, I felt like I sort of had to hide what was happening from Titus.

Not because I was ashamed or anything, but the more time Ari spent with us, and the closer she seemed to get to me, the more Titus looked a little bit hurt.

“I can stay in my own hotel room,” she murmured quietly.

“We do have suites, though,” the woman behind the counter continued. “A bedroom with a separate living area with a pull-out couch.”

“That works,” Titus said, answering for us both.

“Okay, great!” the desk lady said jovially, as if her entire world was now fixed. “Great! Perfect. I can get that done for you now.”

The three of us shared a few glances.

There were times when you looked at a person and you knew they didn’t know who you were. But there were other times, like right now, when you just knew that this person knew who you were and was acting differently because they knew you were a famous person.

And the front desk girl wasn’t hiding it well at all.

“It’ll be nice to have a room to myself,” Titus sighed. “Not that I don’t love my daughter or anything, but holy shit.”

I knew what he meant.

Briley was literally my best friend.

We did everything together.

But as she got older, and started turning from that baby she used to be into the girl she was now, I knew that our time sharing a room and doing all the fun stuff together would come to an end.

She'd need her own space soon, and I decided over the last few hours since I'd left her behind, that her having time to herself was also something she needed to be independent. She didn't need her old man hanging around, watching her every move.

I just wished I could offer her something at a real home, where she could spend time and not have to travel twenty-four seven.

Hell, even an RV where she had her own space would be ideal compared to the situation I currently had her in.

"I know what you mean," Ari sighed. "Though not because it's a little girl watching my every move, but because it's my sister hounding my every step."

"Your twin?" I asked curiously as the lady handed us our cards.

I took them, then handed Titus his.

"All of them," she answered. "None of them know what privacy is, and if they do happen to remember it from time to time, it never lasts long."

"Thanks," Titus muttered as he looked down at the card. "What floor are we on?"

I looked down at the card in my hand and said, "Fifty-fifth."

Joe, who'd been sitting somewhere near the potted plant on the other side of the check-in desk, entered into the conversation then.

"I'm on ninety." He rolled his eyes. "Of course I am."

I offered him my card. "Want to switch? You can room with Titus."

He was already shaking his head. "Thanks, but no thanks. Jolene has already made working for this organization a nightmare since her and Kay are best friends. I don't really want to deal with the hissy fit she'll throw if she found out we'd switched rooms."

He then turned to Titus.

"Yo, T," he called. "Want to grab a drink with me?"

Titus slapped his hand down on my back then looked at the two of us. "Don't think you're hiding anything."

I knew I wasn't hiding anything. He'd already commented on how the trailer had been rocking last night.

That didn't mean I needed to throw it in his face.

I shrugged at him and said, “Don’t want you to think I’m replacing you, Titus.”

“You can’t replace me. You can only try to fill in the gap I leave behind,” he countered then disappeared.

Ari looked at me with raised eyebrows and said, “Do I sense a little...”

“Nothing,” I scoffed. “I have never, and will never, lean on that side of the fence. Nothing against it for anyone else that wants to do it, but as I’ve already told you, I’m a vagina lover.”

Ari’s laugh followed us into the elevator as the doors closed behind us.

“Why didn’t the rest of the team have to check in?” Ari asked as she leaned casually against the other side of the elevator.

I watched with amusement as she tried her hardest to stay on her side of the elevator without touching me in some way.

Which was probably a great idea.

There was no way in hell she wasn’t sore at this point.

Hell, even my dick was sore, and it hadn’t been penetrated by a massive cock like her vagina had.

“Why didn’t y’all just get a single hotel room?” Ari asked curiously. “Why the suites?”

I looked down at her just as I reached for the button of the elevator and hit the 55th floor.

Before the doors could close, though, Joe and Titus slipped their hands inside and pushed in.

“What the hell?” I asked.

“There’s like a throng of people in the bar waiting to see us. I can’t handle that shit right now,” Joe grumbled.

He pulled out his hotel key card and slapped it absently against his thigh.

Ari watched him warily for a few seconds before turning to me. “Well?”

“Well what?” Titus asked.

“She asked why we didn’t just get a single hotel room like the others did,” I answered him then turned to her. “Mostly because the new owner of the Liners thinks that we don’t need to be bringing our children with us. She

hates it that we're allowed, and tried to put a stop to it when she first took over. But when we both threatened to quit and drop our millions of dollars contracts as if we couldn't care less if we played for her or not, she relented. But at this point in time..." I heaved a sigh.

"Pretty much," Titus picked up from where I left off. "She's just searching for excuses to refuse us bringing our daughters with us. She also hates that she has to pay for our 'extra' hotel rooms. And our nannies that were also written into our contracts."

"That was a stipulation for me when I first signed on with them," I continued the explanation as we continued going up. "When I was drafted my junior year of college, I really liked the rhythm of my life. Briley was with me twenty-four-seven unless I was on the field. A nanny followed me around everywhere I went, and the school allowed it because they wanted me so badly. In turn, when I was negotiating my contract with the Liners, I made sure to put into my contract that they allowed the same. When I renewed last year, it was also a stipulation. And when the new owner came in, she had to honor those contracts for the next three years."

"When my contract came up after I had Annabelle, I made sure to have that stipulation in place, too. That she was allowed to all functions with me. They agreed since Briley already did it with Slone." He expounded on my explanation. "None of the other players do it because they're not single dads. But I think there's been some mutterings with a few of the new players, mostly because they want the same courtesies. So when the new owner says no, they get mad and blame her. Which she really doesn't like."

The elevator reached the fortieth floor when my ears decided that they weren't okay anymore. Opening my mouth, I popped my ears.

I watched out of the corner of my eye as Ari did the same.

"And you're allowed to have me here?" she asked worriedly.

"Technically," I said, "I have no stipulations on who I can and can't bring. It says 'family members' and 'companions I see fit.'" I paused. "Plus everyone already thinks we're married, so there's that."

She snorted.

She'd gotten a firsthand account to the craziness of our world today at the airport.

Kilgore and Longview were usually pretty chill with us, as was Banner's hometown of Benton, Louisiana, where we'd dropped Briley and Annabelle off with Trance and Viddy.

But there must've been an influx in fans heading to the airport to watch our game or something, because literally every single person we came into contact with today knew who we were.

"Y'all aren't married?" Joe asked as he watched the floors go by one by one.

"We're not married," Ari explained. "It was just something that happened when we were at the water park, and we never corrected them."

"Ah." He lifted the keycard to scratch his forehead with it. "Well, just know that Kay fuckin' hates everyone and everything that goes against her. Likely, she won't be the nicest person in the world."

Ari shrugged as if she couldn't care less. "Oh well."

"Oh well, is right," Titus grumbled. "That bitch has gone out of her way to make our lives a living hell since she came on. Do you remember that one time she screamed at Annabelle? I've never wanted to tackle a woman before, but goddamn if the thought didn't cross my mind when I caught her cursing at her."

"What?" Ari asked, outraged on his behalf.

"Exactly!" Titus nodded.

"Briley had taken Annabelle to the trainer's room to get a pack of ice because she'd fallen down a few steps on the bleachers. Titus was watching them go, and when they got to the trainer's room, Kay came barreling out and ran them both over. Annabelle hit the ground and started crying again. Titus was heading toward them when Kay started cursing at the two of them that 'they shouldn't be allowed to roam free.'"

"So how bad do you three love the Liners?" Ari looked like she was mad on Annabelle's behalf.

All three of us said, "Enough to deal with a bitch for an owner."

It was like we'd rehearsed it or something.

The elevator dinged, signaling our arrival at our floor.

Ari and I got out, but Titus pointed up but didn't make a move to get off

the elevator. “I’m gonna go grab a drink in his hotel room before we have to be at practice this morning.”

We’d gotten very little sleep after the incident on the plane.

When the oxygen masks had deployed, the skies around us had been rough.

After hastily cleaning up and reaching for the masks, the captain had come on the speaker and said he’d ‘accidentally deployed them’ and ‘he was sorry.’

In the meantime, the few of the men on the plane that absolutely despised flying had lost their shit. Titus included.

The flight hadn’t been great. Everyone had been irritable.

Needless to say, when we’d landed and the coach had said we still had to come to practice, none of us had been happy.

Though, he did say that he would end practice early to allow us to catch up on our sleep.

I gave them both a chin lift before the doors closed, and then followed Ari to the end of the hall where our suite was.

“This is huge,” she said when she entered.

“Probably not any bigger or smaller than usual,” I guessed.

She pushed through the doors to all the areas and said, “When you sleep in a ten-by-three-foot space, let me tell you, anything is ‘huge’ in comparison.”

I laughed.

“You’re right,” I said. “You sleep in a bunk?”

I was only assuming that was what she meant by ‘ten-by-three-foot space.’

“We do,” she confirmed. “We have a master bedroom on our bus, but we actually use it as a closet. We all have a shit ton of clothes.” She paused. “At one point, that was where our father slept. But when he died, we turned it into our walk-in closet.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a bit of a ‘fuck you’ to him,” I pointed out.

She shrugged. “It was. Our dad was...”

“Was...” I waited as I pushed into the closest room and dropped our bags onto the floor at the end of the bed.

“A force of nature,” she finished as she followed me into the room. “How

long until you need to leave?”

I looked at my Rolex.

“An hour,” I said. “We need to meet down in the lobby, and the bus will take us to the stadium.”

“I’ll shower fast.” She clapped her hands. “I’m so excited to use a real bathroom.”

Then she was gone, leaving me alone to my thoughts.

I collapsed onto the bed and threw the crook of my arm over my eyes.

I was fast asleep in less than a minute.

When I next woke, it was to wet hair trailing along my cheek.

I blinked open bleary eyes to find her hovering over me with her face, the tail end of her Dutch braid in her hand as she dragged it along my cheek.

She must’ve braided it while it was wet.

“Hello,” I said gruffly.

“I woke you up with like nine minutes to spare,” she said. “Do you need to get changed or anything?”

I leaned upward and caught her lips with my own before falling back down. “No. I’m ready.”

And I was.

I’d change at the stadium in the guest locker room into clothes the team provided for us.

The only thing I needed to bring was myself.

And her.

“Let’s go,” I grumbled.

When I didn’t get enough sleep, I was grumpy.

And, seeing as we now had to go work out on top of no sleep, I wasn’t in the best of moods.

I probably shouldn’t have gone to sleep.

In fact, I knew I shouldn’t have.

But telling myself that and actually keeping my eyes open were two different things.

I stood up and watched as she stood, too, and headed for her Birkenstock

sandals.

Once she was dressed, she caught my hand up and said, “Ready.”

We walked down to the lobby like that hand-in-hand.

When we arrived it was to find about half the team already in the lobby waiting on us, Titus and Joe included.

They both looked a little worse for wear, and I had to laugh silently to myself thinking about having to practice with alcohol in my system.

“Whoa,” Ari whispered. “I didn’t think they were small before or anything, but when they’re dressed in normal clothing, they look taller.”

I hadn’t bothered changing.

There was no point.

The rest of them looked like they’d taken the time to change into casual clothing, which made me the odd man out still in my sweats and t-shirt.

“They’re all tall,” I pointed out. “You have the cream of the crop here, if you remember. All of them are tall and built. Most of them have spent their entire lives training for them to be right where they are right now. So yeah, they’re all tall and shit...but they haven’t suddenly grown in height since you saw them last.”

She looked up at me. “You’re tall.”

“I’m tall,” I agreed, wondering where she was going with that line of thought.

“Well.” She frowned. “What does it look like from up there?”

Without thought I lifted her up, causing her to laugh and squeal. The noises coming from her drew the attention of the men from the team, including the three men getting off the elevator.

They were the last ones to arrive, and I could tell that Kay was pissy that they’d taken so long, even though they’d arrived ten minutes before our shuttle was set to take off.

Pretty much, if she was ready to go, you were late. And she would go out of her way to find a way to fine your ass for it if she could manage it.

I didn’t pay them any mind as I twirled Ari around and allowed her to see life from my height.

She was giggling and latching onto my head as I twirled her.

“I know that you have a clause in your contract that says you can’t perform any dangerous activities,” Kay snapped at me as she walked past to the shuttle.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked her, walking with Ari in my arms.

“It means that she weighs too much for you to be swinging around and chancing an injury. I pay you to play football, not play the bitch,” Kay snapped.

Then she was moving onto the shuttle to the back of the bus.

“God, she’s worse than I thought,” Ari whispered as she wiggled to get down, no longer smiling at all. “I weigh nothing compared to my carry-on that you lifted up over your head earlier when we got on the plane.”

I had noticed her bag was overly large.

But again, it wasn’t something that I would comment on seeing as I had a daughter, and girls just naturally gravitated toward having a lot of shit.

“She’s an asshole,” Titus said as he climbed the steps in front of us. “Don’t question her or take anything she says personally. She’s like that person from every single TV show you watch—the ones that they purposefully make horrible so you’ll hate them—in real life form.”

Joe snorted. “She really is. I now understand why my ex-wife wouldn’t give her friend up. They’re two evil peas in the same fucked up pod.”

I urged her on in front of me, and really fuckin’ hated how quiet she was getting on the shuttle.

I urged her to sit in the front seat again, forcing her to take the window seat and crowding in beside her.

“I’m sorry,” I told her when we got situated.

She looked over at me and shrugged. “I guess, possibly, I should’ve anticipated her being mean to me. You did say she wasn’t very nice.”

I hadn’t exaggerated.

In fact, if I had to admit the truth, I’d underexaggerated because I’d wanted her to go with me that badly.

CHAPTER 13

*A good place to put your opinions is up your ass.
-Text from Caristonia to Hades*

CARISTONIA

Two solid hours of watching them practice later, I was exhausted for them.

They were all looking mighty tired after having very little sleep the night before, and even the young, upbeat looking ones that'd looked like they rallied after the plane ride now looked worn down and over it.

The coach, sensing this, called it a day.

As I waited for them to start dispersing, I felt my phone buzz in my hands.

Hades: I can't believe I'm reading this. You slept with him?

Twice.

Me: Why is that so hard to believe? And I never said I slept with him. I said that I liked him.

Hades: You saying you like him means that you slept with him.

I rolled my eyes, even though she did have a point.

Me: Why do I even bother texting you?

Hades: Because I'm your twin, and you love me despite my failings.

She was right about that.

No matter what she did or how she did it, I would always love her.

That was the crux of the matter at hand.

Hades was an asshole.

To the point that sometimes I couldn't stand her.

Then again, all of my siblings were assholes. That was just the thing that happened when you had to fend for yourself for your entire life, were forced into child labor, and had to raise yourself from an early age.

Our dad had definitely done us all a disservice, and to be completely truthful, he'd turned us all into fucked up versions of the people we could've

been had we been raised in a loving, stable home.

“Hey, sunshine.”

I looked up to find Slone looking at me from five rows down and a jump over a short fence concrete wall.

“Yes?” I batted my eyelids at him.

His mouth turned up into a smirk at the corner as he gestured with his finger in a “come here” motion.

Eyes wide, I shook my head.

“Come on,” he urged, calling me from where I was sitting in the bleachers.

I was already shaking my hand. “No, sir. That sign very clearly says ‘athletes and staff only’ and I’m neither of those.”

I’d contemplated hopping it earlier when I saw him bent over stretching his hamstrings. I’d also questioned whether I could get there and smack his ass before I either A, got caught by his horrible owner, or B, got caught by him.

Deciding I’d never make it either way, I’d resolved to stay in my seat.

And, to torture myself, I’d decided to check in with my family after radio silence for the last few days.

His eyes were fairly twinkling as he pushed yet again. “Come on. No one is out here but us. We’re the last ones here.”

That was true. The majority of the team had left.

However, Titus and Slone had agreed to stay with a young boy that looked so fresh and new that there was no way he wasn’t *just* picked up by the team.

I’d sat across from him on the way to the arena on the shuttle that’d been provided for the team.

Now, two hours after arriving, I was overly bored and wondering what we could do the rest of the day...if he was even allowed to go out and do anything.

I sure hoped so, because I’d never been to this particular area before, and what I’d seen so far was gorgeous. Pittsburgh was captivating, and I couldn’t wait to get out and do something other than sitting around and waiting.

I felt like I was practically wasting my vacation.

“Come on,” he urged.

I sighed and got up, making my way toward him down the short flight of steps.

When I got to the short barrier that was separating us, he held up his hands and said, “Come.”

I rolled my eyes and was about to tell him that wasn’t happening when he physically lifted me up and over the fence and sat me unceremoniously on the ground.

“Whoa!” I said, surprised by the sudden movements.

The man was strong.

I kept forgetting *how* strong, though.

To lift me up and over, that took serious strength.

And let’s just say I hadn’t exactly been willing, so that only made it harder.

“Have you ever thrown a football?” he asked as he handed me the ball.

Where it looked like it fit in his hand, it looked like it was double the size in mine.

“Uh, no,” I said. “A, we didn’t go to school with other kids. B, my dad saw ‘play’ as ‘unnecessary’ and chose not to allow that. C, I have tiny hands.”

Slone’s eyelid twitched. The more I talked to him about my dad, the more he disliked him. He didn’t even have to say a word to relay that message to me.

“Want to learn how to throw it?” he asked.

I was about to say no, but then the look of pure happiness on his face made me reconsider.

“Sure,” I replied hesitantly. “But my hand doesn’t fit all the way around it like yours does.”

“Not even mine fits all the way around it,” he said as he came in closer. I could smell him the closer he got, and just that alone made me want to jump him. I was sure that doing it in the middle of the arena might land him a fine, though. “Here, place your hands like this.”

He helped me position my hand on the ball, putting some of my fingers in the laces, while some remained outside of them.

“When you throw,” he said as he came in behind me and positioned my arm as if I was about to throw. “You want to sort of do this.”

He showed me how to throw it, then showed me how it should come off my fingers.

Then he backed up way too far and held out his hands to me.

I threw it.

Perfectly.

It went into this beautiful spiraling pass that I’d never be able to recreate again even if I’d wanted to.

He caught it with the biggest grin on his face, then threw it back to me.

I caught it, bobbling it only a few times, then twisted it around and placed my fingers exactly where he’d told me. Only to throw another really good pass.

This went on for about twenty minutes, us just throwing it back and forth, before Joe called out, “Y’all want to go out to dinner with us?”

Instead of tossing him the next pass, I looked over at Joe and Titus, who were watching with amusement on their faces.

“You know,” Titus said. “Getting him to stay after and hang out with us is like pulling teeth. He doesn’t like it at all.”

My brows rose and I stared at him with curiosity. “Why not?”

“He’s an introvert,” Joe said. “He doesn’t talk to anyone on the team, let alone stay behind after practice. Honestly, I’m kind of surprised that he even talked to you. I would be more inclined to see him stay forever single because he can’t stand making that first move. Or the second.”

Slone flipped Joe off. “Fuck off, man.”

“I’m just sayin’.” Joe shrugged. “And I can’t really even talk, because I’ve turned very introverted myself since going through my divorce.”

I patted myself on my shoulder and said, “Sometimes, when you have issues like I do, you kind of force yourself to be outgoing and personable in case someone has to save you from getting hit in the middle of traffic because you fell asleep.”

Joe blinked at me, as if he wasn’t sure if I was off my rocker or not.

“She has narcolepsy.” Titus took pity on Joe. “She falls asleep wherever

and whenever she feels like it.”

“More like, I fall asleep, and it’s out of my control when I do it,” I said. “Though, I have been able to regulate myself somewhat, to where I know what my triggers are, and if I’m about to do it. Mostly.”

Okay, not mostly.

To be completely honest, I fell asleep whether I wanted to or not, and there were times when I had no clue it was about to happen. But it sounded better when I said it like I did, because people didn’t start freaking out around me.

Slone had handled it quite a bit better than I expected him to.

Most people heard I had issues and looked at me like a ticking time bomb.

Hell, I’d fallen asleep twice during sex with Slone, and he’d handled it like a champ both times.

“Do you ever fall asleep during important things?” Joe wondered, his eyes calculating.

“Important like...” I waited for him to elaborate.

I wasn’t sure where his line of questioning had gone, so I didn’t want to stick my foot in my mouth if I didn’t have to.

“Driving?” he asked.

I was already shaking my head. “I don’t drive. Haven’t even learned, to be honest. There’s no point.”

And there wasn’t.

No state would issue me a driver’s license with my kind of issues. Especially since it wasn’t controlled.

“Oh.” He frowned.

“I fell off a high wire when I was younger.” I pointed at my throat where you could see the impossibly thin line where I’d practically been guillotined. “Sliced my neck open from ear to ear. Almost died. Now I have vocal damage when I try to talk a lot.”

His eyes widened, and I continued.

“Now, if you’re wondering if it happens during sex...” I started, but he held up his hand. “No, I was definitely not going to that line of questioning with a woman that one of my good friends is seeing.”

I giggled.

It was Titus who said, “Well, now you have me really freakin’ curious.”

“You have me curious as well.”

We all turned to find a few men behind us, now dressed and ready to leave.

Ashton, Tweety and Darnell.

I wonder how much they’d heard?

“You’re not getting that information, fuckers,” Slone said as he tossed the ball over my head.

I turned to see it go into the bucket that held all the balls they’d used during practice.

Twisting back around, I smiled at him. “You should’ve been the quarterback, I see.”

“He couldn’t hit the broadside of a barn,” Ashton countered. “Now, me, on the other hand...”

I snorted and walked to Slone.

When I got there, I pressed into his personal space and let my hands come to a rest right above his pecs. I could feel his steadily beating heart pound underneath my hand.

“What are your plans for today?” I asked. “Because I want to go look at about a million things.”

He stared down into my eyes, then moved so that his hand was resting right above my ass, pulling me into his big body.

He really was huge.

Easily twice my size, and probably twice as heavy and as wide.

His hand felt like an electric blanket all the way across my lower back.

“How about you pick one or two things today, then tomorrow, while I warm up and get ready for the game, you find something slightly closer so that you can get to and call me if you need anything?” he suggested. “Game day festivities are extra-long. I will be gone from around seven in the morning ’til at least three in the afternoon.”

“You can go with my wife,” Darnell suggested. “She wanted to go to the Heinz Museum tomorrow.”

“Oh, yes! That’s on my list!” I said, showing him my phone.

While they’d been practicing, I’d used my time wisely and wrote out a list of places I wanted to go while I was here.

The Heinz ketchup museum was on that list. Right at the top.

Because who wouldn’t want to know the history of the only brand of ketchup that was good?

“Then you can do that tomorrow. I’ll feel better if she has someone with her. She’s eight months pregnant, and shit I worry.” He rubbed the back of his head.

I smiled.

“I worry myself,” Slone murmured quietly.

I patted his chest and then said to him, “There’s the Phipps Conservatory, bicycle heaven, and Mount Washington.”

He patted me on the back then said, “Then let’s get there.”

CHAPTER 14

*All men are liars. Pick one that has a boat.
-Text from Hades to Caristonia*

CARISTONIA

Darnell's wife, Sweetie—yes, that was really her name. I finally found someone that gave their daughter an even weirder name than my father—was great.

And, at eight months pregnant, she moved around faster than I did.

What was even more fun was how much we both loved the Heinz Museum.

“If we leave now,” Sweetie said reluctantly, “we can get to the WAG box before everyone else gets there and takes all the good seats.”

My brows rose at her use of ‘WAG.’

“WAG?” I asked, trying to figure out what it was and failing. All I could think of was the dogs of the players getting their own seats in the box.

Her lips tipped up at the corner.

“Wives and girlfriends,” she answered as if she could hear my thoughts. “Nothing too weird. I’m not quite sure what you were thinking over there in that pretty head of yours, but it’s not quite that nefarious.”

I snickered. “I was thinking that the players brought their dogs, and if we didn’t get there early, we might be sharing all the good seats with the pets.”

“Darnell would freakin’ love if we could bring our dog. But alas, that’s not something the mean owner allows.” She narrowed her eyes. “Darnell tried to finagle the same deal that Slone and Titus have with our kid—sometimes we’ll need to have a sitter for him when we’re both working—but Kay laughed in Darnell’s face. I wanted to throat punch her when he told me.”

Sweetie was a travel nurse. She’d gotten started with the travel nurse life around three years ago, and has really enjoyed the life. It let her pick and choose where she wanted to go, and most of the time, if she wanted to, she could make Darnell’s game as long as she did some planning.

I lowered my voice so that only she could hear and said, “Is there a reason she’s so bitchy?”

Sweetie hooked her arm in mine and pulled me along.

Soon we were out the door and she was flagging down a cab.

That was another thing I never really experienced before Pittsburgh.

Cabs.

I'd seen them in movies, of course, but I'd never seen them in real life.

It was super cool walking out of the hotel and getting into a cab and not having to wait for a car to arrive.

We settled into our seats, and the familiar feeling of heaviness in my limbs caused me to groan.

"I'm about to..."

I didn't get to finish my sentence.

When I woke next I was being wheeled into the stadium in a wheelchair.

My head popped up almost as if I'd been electrocuted.

"You're okay," Sweetie said. "I'm glad that you told me before we got started today, though," she murmured. "You want to ditch this wheelchair?"

I did.

After my nod, she pulled over and held it steady while I got up on wobbly legs.

"That's kind of scary how fast you just go out." She snapped her fingers. "I can see now why Darnell said you wouldn't want to go out by yourself. I'll bet that would be scary waking up and wondering if anything happened."

She'd read my mind.

We walked together, and she guided my way by pointing out how to get around tunnels and upstairs.

"Have you been here a lot?" I asked her.

"I have." She paused. "If you say five times is a lot. I guess I'm just really good at following signs, though."

She pointed at a set of signs that indicated where the away team boxes were.

"Ah," I said. "That makes more sense."

We arrived at the box a few minutes later, and my eyes widened when I saw the few people inside.

"I think we're under dressed," I mused.

“You aren’t,” she said. “They’re overdressed. They’re Instagram and TikTok famous, and they post pictures of themselves at the games for likes. Some of them are obnoxious.” She jerked her chin in the direction of a few normally dressed women. Ones dressed like us. “They’re more our style. The one on the left over there is the quarterback’s girlfriend. I think they’re going to make it.”

She moved us toward the girlfriend.

When we arrived, the girlfriend held out her hand to me and said, “You must be Ari. I’m Gladys.”

Gladys.

I loved it.

“I am. Did Ashton talk about me?” I questioned.

“Ashton talks about everyone.” Gladys smiled sympathetically. “But you’re a big deal among the girlfriends. Everyone was talking about you days ago when we all saw you’d married Slone.”

I had to get a good laugh out of that.

“Oh, yeah?” I asked.

“Yep,” Gladys said. “How’d that happen, by the way?”

In our huddle before the game started, I told her the same story I’d just told Sweetie an hour earlier.

Before long, we were all fast friends.

“Where does Briley go during the game?” I asked.

“Usually, she has a nanny following her around everywhere. She comes up here during the game,” Sweetie explained. “But I think that babysitter moved to Dubai because she got a new job nannying some really rich guy’s new baby. And I think I heard Slone say that he was going to have to start interviewing for new ones soon.”

I hadn’t heard that.

But that really sucked, putting your child’s life in the care of someone else.

That must be downright terrifying.

“Game’s starting,” someone called.

I turned in my seat to see the players start coming out onto the field.

My eyes immediately zeroed in on a familiar pair of arms.

Yeah, he didn't have any identifying tattoos. The 'Briley' on his arm was hidden from sight by a plain brown sleeve. And the only thing I could really see since his head was lowered was the bulk of his body.

But I'd know him anywhere.

I'd spent enough time worshipping his body, after all. With my tongue and hands. With the way my body fit around his.

Needless to say, I didn't need to see his face to know it was him.

But then he looked up at the room and smirked.

He knew I was watching him.

"Wow," another one of the TikTok ladies—and yes, they'd seriously been making TikToks the entire time—called out. "I've never seen Slone even glance up here during the game."

Not even to see his kid?

That didn't make any sense.

More likely, she'd never watched him so closely because there wasn't someone in the room that they felt threatened by until me.

I knew I was pretty.

You couldn't have the genetics that I had and not know it.

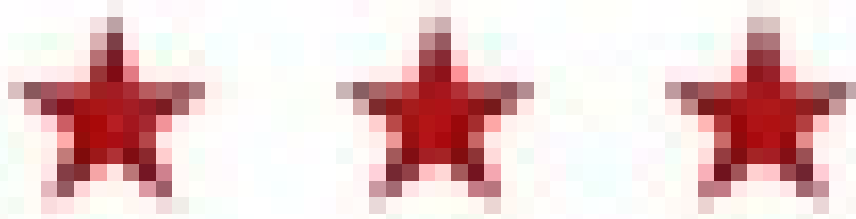
I mean, I had the perfect hourglass shape, long, curly, silky black hair. I was what I'd been referred to more than once as 'captivating.'

"He looks up here all the time, Lidia," someone called. "You forget that his kid's usually in here, and they always wave at each other before the game." The woman paused. "But I suppose it's probably habit. He's likely not looking for her."

Bitch.

"Ignore them," Sweetie sighed. "Now, let's ogle and stare and drool."

I knew there was a reason that I liked Sweetie.



I met him outside the locker rooms.

Sweetie had dropped me off, and her husband had been one of the first ones out of the locker room.

I actually started to get nervous, but then Titus came out with a few others and saw me waiting.

He flashed me a smirk then said, “He’s on his way out now.”

Titus ruffled my hair, then they were gone, leaving me in the vacant hallway.

He came out ten minutes later, looking tired and haggard.

Oh, and limping.

Why was he limping? He hadn’t gotten hurt during the game—at least not that I’d seen.

“You’re here,” he said as he came out, his hair still glistening from his shower.

“I am,” I confirmed, my gaze going down the length of his body to search for an injury. “Ready?”

He caught my hands and said, “I need to run back by the hotel before we head anywhere. I have a hella bad blister on my foot from my new cleats, and I think if I put anything on but my Crocs, I’m going to regret it.”

I nodded and we started back to the exit.

He continued to limp beside me.

“Did you enjoy the game?” he asked as he caught a door before it could close all the way.

“I did,” I said. “Though, I hate to admit this, but I know nothing about football. I tried to apply what I knew about soccer to it...but I failed.”

He snickered at me before throwing his arm around me and saying, “I hate to break it to you, but American football is nothing like European football, also known as soccer here. They’re completely different sports, and the only related thing about the two is the size of the field they play on.”

I sighed, long and loud. “I was afraid you were going to say that. But heck, not even Sweetie knew anything about football.”

“A lot of the wives and girlfriends don’t know much. They’re just there for the good time, or to support their man. I think you’d have better luck sitting down and watching a game with me so I can explain what’s going on,” he suggested.

That actually sounded really exciting. I loved to learn about new things.

I loved even more that he was willing to help me figure it out.

The trip to the hotel was uneventful.

Though it got more and more comical when he started to limp worse and worse.

“Are you going to make it?” I asked.

He grunted out a ‘no’ and kept hobbling.

“Mr. Slone!” the concierge called out as we passed. “Your wife has a delivery!” We both stopped and turned before the concierge all but shoved a box into his hands. “Have a good day now!”

Slone tucked the box under his arm and refused to give it to me as we made our way up to the room.

It was only as he collapsed on the bed that the box slipped free and he asked, “What’s that?”

I moved to read the label and bit back a groan.

I looked up from the package and stepped away.

Hades.

“Well,” I said as I stared it down like there was a bomb inside of it. “If I had to guess, it’s something sexual in manner.”

My admission had Slone grinning from ear to ear.

He didn’t do that often, so when the sight fell upon my eyes, it felt like the sun had come out after forty days of non-stop rain.

Geez, I’d only thought the man’s scowl was beautiful. His smile? Now

that was a sight to behold.

“Let’s open it,” he said. “Who’s it from?”

“My sister,” I answered. “Hopefully.”

“Which one?” he asked as he picked the small, innocuous package up and stared at it.

He shook it gently, and it started to vibrate.

CHAPTER 15

*I believe in holding grudges. I'll heal in hell.
-Ari to Slone*

SLONE

“What do you mean, ‘you hope?’” I asked as I leaned over to the side of the bed and pulled my knife off the side table.

Any self-respecting Texan never left home without one.

I mean, who knew when you were going to need to cut a steak and you wouldn’t have any knife to do it with? Enter the pocketknife.

I’d carried the same one for years.

I was just thankful that the team plane didn’t have any regulations on sharp objects making it onto the plane.

I flipped the knife open and handed it to her hilt first.

She didn’t reach to take it.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I don’t want to open it,” she grumbled. “Best possible scenario, it’s an embarrassing dildo. Worst, it’s blackmail photos or something that I’ll be super embarrassed to open. She knows exactly what she’s doing.” She took a deep, steadying breath. “And this is probably around the time I should tell you that I have some freakin’ weirdo that sends me packages. All of them obscene. And now I don’t open anything anymore. Because it’s either from my sister or the weirdo, and they’re both really bad options.”

I didn’t like her sister. I didn’t like even more that she had some person sending her random gifts that were disgusting.

“Tell me more about this ‘admirer,’” I urged as I glanced at the box.

She’d played it off well, acting as if it was no big deal. But I sensed that it was.

She blew out a frustrated breath, long and loud, her hair ruffling around her face as she did.

“I started getting packages about six months ago,” she admitted. “Hades and I used to do a show together, but I decided to change my routine up and only performed with the cats on my own. That’s right around the time that I started getting these packages.”

“Go on,” I urged, wanting to hear more.

“Well, so...I don’t know when it actually started. At first, I was ignoring them because I thought they were coming from Hades—she’s pretty bad about sending me stuff I don’t like. Anyway, one day I got a wild hair and started opening everything. And each package just got more obscene. The longer I opened, the sicker to my stomach I became. Keene saw everything, threw every single package away, and started monitoring the packages—or trying to. Somehow they still got onto the bus, or given to someone. Then wound up finding their way to me.”

“Did y’all try to find out where they were coming from?” I asked.

“We did. We even went to the police. They said that they couldn’t do anything. That there was no next move for them. Maybe, with time, we could’ve worked with a department had we been able to stay in one spot. But we move around so much that it’s impossible.”

I inwardly cursed. I knew she was right, yet that didn’t make me feel any better.

If she was this hesitant to open it, then maybe we should throw it away...

“Fuck it.” She grabbed the knife and hacked into the box.

I blinked when I saw what was inside.

“Um, underwear?” I asked curiously.

Her face flamed and she threw the box to the side.

“What is it?” I asked as a note flipped free of the box in her haste to push it off the bed.

“Nothing,” she grumbled.

I flipped open the note and blinked at the words.

Tony,

Figured you’d want the period panties since you’ll be gone so long. Let me know if you need anything else.

Hades

“Period panties?” I asked.

She sighed and threw herself on the bed, speaking into the mattress as she explained.

I only got every third word, but I got the gist of it.

“Period panties. Ones...have seen some use...you know what I mean.

Stained...well loved,” she complained.

So ones she wasn't afraid to make a mess in.

Why would her sister send those? Unless that was her sole purpose in sending them—embarrassing her sister.

“Did she send them just to make you squirm or something?” I asked.

“I think we've already talked about how my sister is an asshole,” she countered.

We had.

But seriously...why?

Her phone pinged, and before she could pull it away from where it was settled between us on the bed, I got a glimpse of the screen.

Hades: did you get my gift?

“I should block her,” she grumbled darkly.

She should do more than block her. She should cut and run.

“You should definitely ignore the holy hell out of her,” I challenged. “And I have just the way to distract you.”

She tilted her face just enough so she could see me out of the corner of her eye.

“How?” she grouched.

I twisted so that I was lying on my back, then pulled her into my front.

She came willingly but hid her face in my pec.

I curled a strand of her hair around my fingers, twisting and turning it until it was knotted slightly, causing her to laugh.

Pulling away, she said, “You're not supposed to mess with curly hair, you know.”

I didn't.

But I doubted even though I now knew, I'd control my urge.

I moved my hand up the length of her side, my fingers finding the swell of her backside for a few long moments before I squeezed.

There were just so many features that I loved about Ari. But her ass was one of my favorites.

She sighed and melted deeper into me, making my heart thump hard.

“We have exactly four hours of daylight left,” she pushed up onto her elbows, using my sore chest to do it. “This has to be quick.”

I felt like I’d just won the Super Bowl as I ripped her shirt off her head.

She laughed as she rolled over and started to kick off her leggings.

When she was completely naked, I traveled down her body, my tongue leading the way.

“Just a bit of a taste first...” I said as I took my first lick of her pussy.

She groaned, her head falling back as I feasted on her pussy. Licking and tasting my way until she was a quivering mess.

“Slone, please,” she pleaded. “I’m ready.”

I was, too. More than ready.

But the taste of her was addicting and I couldn’t get enough.

I was so focused on her taste that I didn’t feel her making her move until it was too late.

She twisted with me and pressed me down onto the bed, her body hovering over my own.

I skimmed my hands up the length of her sides, moving until I cupped her breasts in my big hands.

“You know,” she said as she watched me do it. “I always thought my breasts were on the larger side, but when they’re in your hands, they look tiny.”

“A lot of things look tiny in my hands,” I pointed out.

She leaned down and pressed a kiss to my throat.

Then farther down right above my left nipple.

When she got to my sternum, I caught her by the hair and said, “Not this time, sweetheart.”

I wanted it, sure. But I wanted to be inside of that sweet pussy even more.

She gripped my cock with her hand and squeezed.

“Let me,” she whined.

“Maybe later,” I teased. “Remember, you wanted this to be fast?”

She sighed. “You’re right.”

Then she was moving so that her pussy was hovering over my cock.

“Take me in, baby.”

And she did.

With one slow glide down, she was taking me inside of her.

My breath hitched, and my heart started to speed.

Seconds later, she was accepting every single inch of me.

I looked down to see her pussy stretched obscenely around my cock, and I groaned.

“Son of a bitch,” I wheezed. “You’re so tight.”

“You’re just big,” she pointed out. “And maybe I only seem tight because you’re Hulking out down there.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “No, darlin’. I might be on the bigger side of big, but I’m not so big that I would call myself the Hulk down there.”

She raised up on her knees, then sat back down, sliding along my shaft deliciously.

“If you say so, Slone. If you say so.”

Then she proceeded to pull herself completely off of me, then slide back down on me. Over and over.

I watched her tits bounce and her abs squeeze with each downward glide and wondered if this was what heaven felt like.

“You’re not paying attention,” she teased, her breath coming in pants as she slowly fucked me.

I groaned and looked up at her. “Faster.”

She went faster. But it still felt too slow. Too shallow.

Unable to help myself, I caught her hips and started to slam myself inside of her, pulling her down at the same time as I thrust myself up.

Her gasp of delight was enough to encourage me to keep using her roughly, and before I realized it, she was coming apart around me.

I watched as her eyes went wide, almost as if she was surprised, too. Then allowed myself to follow right behind her.

It was as I was coming inside of her that it hit.

She slumped against me, and at first I thought it was because she was

exhausted.

But then the stillness started to make a little more sense.

She'd fallen asleep.

"Fuck," I groaned and rolled her over.

Just as I was pulling out, she came back to me with a gasp. "Goddammit. I hate this."

I looked down at her, brushing the hair out of her eyes.

When she closed her eyes in horror, I reversed our positions once again, pulling her back on top of me and wrapping her up in my arms.

"If that ever happens like that again..." She hesitated, her voice heavy with regret. "I want you to keep going."

The trust she'd just given me.

"Baby..."

"I want to be normal," she murmured. "That's my normal, Slone."

If she could trust me with that...could I give her anything less?

"Seeing as you just gave me that kind of trust, I feel like I need to share with you my deepest, darkest secret."

Her eyes were wide as she went up onto an elbow in my chest and said, "What?"

"There's something I should've probably told you before now," I murmured.

I felt my insides freeze at the seriousness of my words.

"Oh, yeah?" she asked, sounding blissfully tired and lethargic.

I groaned, thinking this day had been perfect and I was about to ruin it.

"Yeah," I sighed. "So a few years ago I got really sick."

She blinked. "A few years ago when?"

"When I was fourteen," I answered.

My mouth went dry as I voiced the words.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I got sick. As in, sick, sick. Like, almost died from fevers over a hundred and seven, sick. I spent eighteen days with a fever over a hundred and three, two with it over one hundred and five." He grimaced. "The doctor flat-out

said that I was going to have a lot of trouble when it came to having kids. Temperatures that high...they don't do well with sperm count."

She looked so tragically hurt by my sickness that I couldn't stop myself from pulling her in for a kiss.

"I think that's why my mother loves Briley so much. She was a miracle that shouldn't have happened." I grimaced back. "And she's not mine."

She whipped her head around to stare at me.

"Though, that's not totally true." I sighed. "In all sense of the word, she's mine. She's my child. I raised her. I love her. I held her when she was sick and I'll continue to do that for the rest of my life."

"I think you have some info to fill in, buddy." She patted my hairy chest.

I shifted us so that she was leaning on my chest, my arm solidly wrapped around her naked ass.

Then started to tell his tale.

"So you know the story about Abilene, right?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Yes, you told me that." She paused. "Though you also told me that you had sex with her and six weeks later she was pregnant."

I rubbed my face along her shoulder.

"It didn't matter if she was biologically mine or not," I admitted. "I... when all the stuff went down with us, with her, and finding out she was pregnant, my brain didn't really go to the whole 'you could possibly not be the father because when you were fourteen you had a fever that boiled all your sperm.' There was this epiphany in the hallway when I was facing off with the school resource officer, when he saw the baby and said it was his, that I finally thought to myself...they told me I'd have a lot of trouble having babies."

I continued, my voice monotone as I did. "Toomey told me he was sleeping with Abilene. He said that she and him had a thing, but something happened and he had to back off. When he went to pursue her again, she'd started hanging with me. I knew that she was fucked up...knew it the second that she asked for me to fu...make love to her. I don't know why I did it. I just...shit. I felt terrible. So I did."

She blew out a shaky breath. “That was when he died? When he was shot in front of you?”

I bobbed my head.

“Hayes, he was the officer that shot Officer Toomey,” I explained. “But he told me after everything happened, he said, ‘She’s yours, man. You can tell by the dimples. Neither Toomey nor Abilene had them. Dimples are hereditary.’” I let my head fall back to rest against the headboard. “That didn’t cause me to feel any better about anything, though. Because what he didn’t know was that Abilene had dimples. Her brother and mom do, too. So me having them...that’s not really reflective on whether or not she was mine or not, you know?”

She pressed a kiss to my cheek.

“And the kid’s a freakin’ genius. God, is she smart. And I’m not dumb, but I’m definitely not MIT material like she is. And though Abilene was smart, she wasn’t just godforsaken smart, either. A few months after the ordeal, I just felt like I really had to know, you know? I had to know. So I went behind my mom’s back, went off to Dallas, and got a DNA test. I found out six weeks later that she wasn’t mine.”

“Oh, hell,” she said, unsure what to say to make it right.

She couldn’t say anything.

“But even though I knew that biologically she wasn’t mine, I decided that it didn’t matter. She *was* mine, no matter what a silly DNA test told me,” I said.

“And that’s all that matters, Slone,” she whispered. “She’s yours, and that’s that.”

I closed my eyes as I felt a weight lift off my chest.

I’d never told another living person that in my life. But it was the most exhilarating feeling ever to know that I didn’t bear that secret on my own anymore.

CHAPTER 16

*Can anyone tell me if the skulls of your enemies are dishwasher safe?
-T-shirt*

CARISTONIA

The alarm on Slone's phone started to ding, and I glanced at him as he turned it off and shoved it into his pocket.

He started to swagger toward me in his suit, and once again I was struck with just how beautiful he was.

He bent down and placed a kiss onto my upturned lips. "Have fun with Sweetie today. She won't be here next week because the doctor said she can't fly past thirty-six weeks. Take care of yourself."

And I did. I took care of Sweetie, too.

We arrived late.

Really late.

As in, ten minutes into the game late.

But not because we'd intended to or anything, but because Sweetie had started to experience what she thought were contractions, and we went to the ER.

Turns out, they were only Braxton Hicks, but it was enough to make us way later than we wanted to be.

Not that I minded.

I would never leave Sweetie alone in a big city by herself.

"Shit, I knew we were gonna be late." Sweetie apologized for the fourteenth time in as many minutes.

I sighed. "Sweetie, I already told you it's fine. Not to mention, you literally rolled me into the stadium last game in a wheelchair, after lifting me from the cab. I think we're beyond apologizing at this point."

She sighed and took a seat in the back, which was the only space available.

My eyes went to the glass wall.

I found him on the field, once again dressed in all his gear, staring at the scoreboard as if he was disgusted.

They were losing. Badly.

I didn't know quite what the issue was, but they were only about ten minutes into the game, and there was some sort of pall hanging over the WAG box that I couldn't quite place.

Everyone was playing horribly. As in, in the minute that I'd been sitting there, they'd dropped the ball twice. And from what Slone had told me, that wasn't a good thing.

"Let's sit over here," Sweetie suggested, pointing to a couple of open seats toward the far wall.

We moved toward it, pushing past a shit ton of women taking selfies, and took a seat.

Sweetie sighed, pressing her hands on her belly, and said, "This is exhausting."

"Living?" I teased.

"Yes!" she groaned.

I had my mouth open to say something else, but my words were interrupted.

"When did y'all get married?"

I turned to look over my shoulder to find an older woman there looking familiar, yet not.

I couldn't place how I knew her, but I knew that I'd place it eventually.

"Um..." I hesitated, not sure I should share the information with her or not. Slone was liking how it was working for us right now, and I couldn't say I didn't like playing pretend, either.

"That's Slone's mom," Sweetie muttered to me under her breath.

My stomach clenched.

"Uhh," I was really winning in this communicating thing.

"Martina," someone called out. "Do you want me to go grab some snacks?"

I blinked some more, my brain firing about a million miles an hour as I tried to think of something to say.

"Martina, who's this?" the other woman who'd called her earlier asked.

Still, I was silent. I'd never met a man's mom before.

“This is, apparently, my son’s wife,” Martina murmured. “Helena, meet Caristonia.”

Had Slone told her about me?

“Oh, hi. I’m Helena. We know you’re not married. Don’t worry.” She cast Slone’s mother a look. “What’s with you?”

Martina sighed. “How am I supposed to come off as a badass if you don’t stop giving me away?”

I couldn’t stop the smile that played at my lips.

Oh, and my skyrocketing heartrate was finally under manageable levels.

“And don’t tell him I was here. I don’t have time to stay until he’s done with his game. I’m here for literally two hours. We have to leave before it’s even over.” She looked at her watch. “I’m traveling through. I have a retreat in Minnesota in the mountains that I have to be there by seven tonight. And that’s six hours away from here.”

I looked at my watch.

It was just barely one in the afternoon. If she stayed for two hours, that would put her at three. Way too late to make it there by six.

But I supposed she knew that and didn’t care.

“Well, where are we getting food?”

So that was how I watched my first almost-full game with his mother.

Turns out, she was great.

Also turns out, Slone was quite disappointed that he hadn’t gotten to see her.

“Can’t say it’s not a good thing, though,” Slone muttered as he met me outside the locker room. “I’m not in the best of moods.”

The game went fast, despite how horrible of a game it was for them, and before long, we were back at the hotel and in the process of trying to figure out what we were doing that night.

We’d gotten in on the flight late yesterday, and sadly, today, Slone was in absolutely no mood to be personable. Whatever we were going to do, it had to be where he had nobody around to tell him how shitty the game was.

Something brown caught my eye on the bed as we entered the hotel rom.

I groaned.

If my life only stopped catching up to me...

“What’s your issue?” Slone asked as he stared at me from across the room.

He was in cutoff sweatpants and a t-shirt.

Nothing fancy, but it was one of my favorite outfits to see him in. Mostly because it showed off his spectacularly muscled legs and his incredible shoulders.

I pointed.

He turned to see the box on the end of the bed, and his shoulders tensed.

“What did you get today?” Slone eyed the box.

“Don’t know, don’t care,” I admitted.

He walked to the bed, opening the pocketknife he carried with a flick of his fingers, and sliced the tape on the box.

Yet again, it was unmarked and had no postage, indicating that wherever it’d come from, it hadn’t come through the mail.

He looked inside and shook his head, then tilted the box toward me.

I gritted my teeth and looked away from it.

Today, it was a monster dildo with tentacles and a note that said ‘Use this. It might help with the small prick you’re dealing with.’

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I grumbled.

He flipped open the flaps again and stared inside at the green monstrosity.

“Maybe you should throw it away,” he suggested. “That way, no surprises come up like they did last time.”

That was true.

I’d tossed most of the underwear but chose to keep a few because they were some of my nicer ones intermixed in with my bad ones.

The only problem was, I hadn’t taken a good long look at the pairs because why would I?

When we’d gotten to cruising altitude, a bottle had burst in my bag, turning everything blue.

I’d only gotten the text when we’d landed reminding me to take it out of my bag before I flew.

Which Hades knew that I’d be on the flight before then.

Hell, if I'd gone through security, they would've confiscated the damn thing and I would've been questioned by TSA as to its contents.

"Is there a note?" I asked.

"None. Just that in the box," he said.

My sister, the asshole.

"That's my sister's doing, I'll bet," I shrugged. "The admirer comes with a note every time."

Jesus, sometimes she annoyed the absolute piss out of me.

"Are you going to text her and ask?" he asked, tossing the box into the tiny trash can at his side.

I really didn't need to.

My sister thought she was hilarious.

The only problem was, she was the only one that thought she was hilarious.

Sometimes, I wondered if she was born with a screw loose.

Though, I was mainly the target of her 'affections.'

"Um, no," I started to say, but before I could finish my 'why,' my phone rang.

I looked at it and saw Simi's name on the screen.

Had it been anyone else, I might not have answered it.

But Simi was pregnant, and she'd just had a hell of a time of it.

I wouldn't be ignoring her call.

Had I known how the call was going to go, I might've changed my mind, however.

I knew the days would come to an end, of course.

I mean, I only had a month. I knew that going in.

But it'd only been two weeks that I'd spent with Slone. Two freaking fantastic weeks.

But why did the thought of leaving Slone behind feel like a rock hanging like a noose around my heart?

"You know that I wouldn't be calling and asking if it wasn't important." Simi sighed. "I know that you use this month to regroup and try to find the

desire to come back...but I physically can't get out of the bed."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "I'll get on the first flight out."

"Thank you," she sighed. "And I swear to God, I'll make this up to you."

Doubtful.

Eventually, she'd have the baby. And that would give her another six weeks off.

I know that, if push came to shove, she'd do the same for me if the need arose. But that didn't change the fact that I was ending my vacation early and leaving Slone in California where the weather was perfect, we were having daily sex—okay, maybe daily was understating it—and I had no worries or problems in life beyond what I was going to have to eat for that day.

"I took the liberty of finding you a flight," she said when I didn't answer.

Of course, she did.

I looked through the glass at Slone who was busy making some sort of smoothie for his post-workout and felt my stomach drop.

So this was it.

"Okay, send me the flight info, and I'll get there as soon as I can."

"You're leaving," he said, eyes intense as he watched me.

"Yes," I said.

"When?" he asked, sounding upset.

My watch buzzed and glanced down at it to see my flight info.

"In an hour and a half," I groaned.

"That's just enough time to get to the airport and get checked in." He looked horrified.

Not as horrified as I felt, though.

There was no time for a goodbye...

"Yeah." I felt my eyes fill with tears.

"Fuck," he said as he came to me and started to wipe the tears that'd slipped from my eyes. "It's okay."

I felt the tears fall faster. "I don't want to go."

He wrapped me up in a hug and held on until I had to force myself to let go.

And forty minutes later, after he dropped me off at the airport and walked me inside, I wondered why my chest hurt so bad.

It was only after I was sitting in my plane seat that I realized the truth.

I was in love with him.

And that chest ache business was actually heartache because I hadn't wanted him to let me go.

CHAPTER 17

*Little Miss is it Halloween yet.
-Text from Slone to Ari*

SLONE

I tried calling her for the third time in an hour, and I didn't have any hope that she'd pick up this time. But god, I just needed to hear her voice.

To my surprise, she actually picked up.

"Slone," she breathed in answer.

"Hey," I rumbled into the phone, finding my first smile since she left me two days ago.

Who knew that I'd come to depend on her presence?

I was such a sad sac.

"I don't know why I came home," she grumbled into the phone. "Hades has been on an absolute rampage since I got back, pissed as hell and taking everything that happens out on me. She's also mad I didn't keep her gifts, because, and I quote, 'she paid good money for them.' Simi has been throwing up so much that she had to go to the hospital. Coffey's splitting time between the RV they bought and the food trailer. Val has decided that she's no longer going to play nice with men who question her. We lost four children today. I've fallen asleep four times in the middle of my shows, and I miss you."

I missed her, too. Which I told her in the next breath.

"I miss you, too, honey," I replied.

Her words made my heart hurt even more.

Because literally before I'd talked to her, I'd talked to my mom, and she'd told me that her and my sister were going on vacation to the Bahamas, and though they wanted me to come, they hadn't bothered to invite me because they knew that I couldn't go.

I didn't dislike them or anything, I just hated how they always went to these places as a 'family' and didn't bother to wait for me. There was no reason they couldn't wait for two months and go during the off season.

But telling my mom that was like telling the wind not to blow. It was just inevitable, and my sister was just like my mother.

I know that she sacrificed a lot when Briley was born. She'd hated that she

couldn't live her life how she wanted to. And my sister resented me because our mom had to start paying for one more mouth, meaning she didn't get what she wanted.

That was why I funded their trips now.

Every month, I padded my sister and mom's bank accounts.

Well, might I add.

"Hey, are you okay?"

I came to staring at the bed spread I was currently sprawled across.

It was ugly.

Blue and white flowers with red stitching here and there for a decorative effect.

"I'm..." I paused. "It's been so long since I've been somewhere by myself that I don't know what to do with myself. It doesn't help that this is the longest I've ever been away from Briley. And now you're gone after I just got used to having you here..." My shoulders slumped. "And we lost again."

We lost badly, too.

Coach was pissed.

The team owner was pissed.

Hell, I was pissed.

It was as if everyone was in some sort of funk and couldn't see their way out of it.

"Oh." She paused. "I should've asked that the minute that you called."

And now I felt like crap.

There I was taking my bad mood out on everyone else.

"I don't think your news was any less important than my news," I pointed out.

"No," she agreed. "But...I guess that I just felt like it was something I should've remembered. Instead I just kind of dumped my entire day on you."

The little ball of tension inside of me eased a bit.

Fuck, but it was nice to find someone that I could trust with my heart.

Was it too early to tell her how I felt?

I was seconds away from doing just that, from telling her that I loved her,

when she changed the subject.

“The picture of the tux that you sent me. You have a banquet tonight? Did you know about that?” she asked.

I sighed. “I did. Kind of. I’d forgotten all about it. The good thing is, I didn’t forget to order the tux I have to wear. It arrived this morning.” I stopped. “We would’ve been scrambling to find a dress for you to wear so you could go with me.”

“Oh.” She paused. “You don’t have a date. Is that bad?”

“Normally, I take Briley to things like this. Kicking and screaming,” I chuckled. “But Titus usually takes Annabelle. Between the two of us not having a date for this, we’re just going to solo it.”

“That’s sweet.” She sounded amused. “Send me a picture of you in it when you’re all dressed up?” She hesitated. “I have to perform tonight. It might be a little late before I can respond. But tell me everything that’s going on. I wish I could be there with you.”

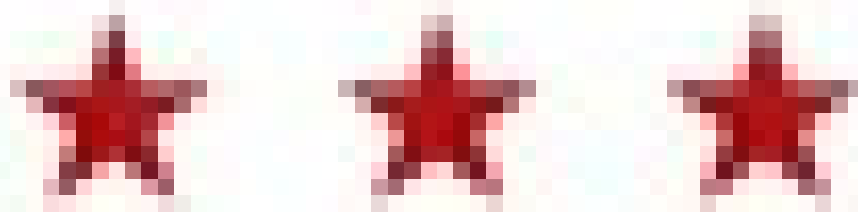
I wish she could be here with me, too.

Tonight was really going to suck.

Too bad I had no idea just how much it would suck. And how much I wished I could take it all back.

“I gotta go, Slone.” She sighed. “I’ll call you back as soon as I can. There’s another crisis.”

Before I could answer, she hung up, leaving that pit in my stomach to grow just a little bit wider.



“This fucking sucks.”

I looked over at Joe and couldn’t stop myself from agreeing.

“We could’ve been at home right now, enjoying a much-needed day off, and instead we’re here playing the owner’s ponies so she can show us off and feel important,” Titus said.

“Tell us how you really feel.” I chuckled.

Titus shrugged one big shoulder.

He looked just as tired as I felt.

I’d bet my right arm that he missed the holy hell out of Annabelle, just like I was missing Briley.

“You know,” Joe said casually. “You’re too old to be this jaded.”

Titus looked over at Joe.

“I don’t think that my age has anything to do with how jaded I am,” he admitted. “I’ve just had a really shitty week. I can’t stand the owner, and it feels like sometimes we have to go to all of these extra events just so she can get a leg up in this world.”

“Amen,” Ashton said as he sat down. “Fuck, I’m tired.”

We all sat at the table in silence for a solid ten minutes before I said, “How long do we have to stay?”

“Fuck if I know,” Joe said.

“I say we leave. What’s she going to do? Fine us? This event wasn’t even in our mandatory event attendance sheet we signed at the beginning of the season,” I pointed out.

“I’ll go ask the coach the time limit.” Ashton stood up and walked away.

Joe got up and walked to the bar, leaving me alone with Titus who’d barely said three words the entire night.

I was so freakin’ bored.

And I almost thanked the stars when my phone rang, giving me something to do.

Ari’s name lit up my screen, along with a photo of her and me in the gardens by our hotel at the last game that she’d attended.

My first smile that night lit my face as I said, “Hey, Ari baby.”

The first thing to register on the end of the line was her sniffing.

“Ari?” I asked, sitting up.

The smile that filled my face quickly fell off the moment she said what she did next.

“Hey, baby,” I said again to the silence.

There was a pause at the end of the line and then, “I thought you’d at least give me a few weeks before you moved on.”

I frowned.

What was she talking about?

“What?” I asked, sounding just as confused as I felt.

My phone beeped, and then I was looking at a picture of myself and a random woman I’d never met before.

The second one came through right on the heels of that. Me kissing the random woman. Deeply and passionately.

In a tux, with someone that I didn’t know in my arms.

Hell, in the photo, I still had Briley’s bracelet that she’d made me before I left on my wrist.

Something inside of me dipped at seeing that photo.

Goddammit, that was just a normal thing for the media to do.

The caption of the photo said ‘trouble in paradise already for defensive end for the Liners.’

I groaned and said, “Baby...”

Then I was listening to her cry.

“I was gone for less than a day, Slone.” She sniffled. “I was...I trusted you.”

I opened my mouth to deny everything, but she hung up before I could.

When I tried to call back, the phone went directly to voice mail, letting me know that she’d shut her phone off.

Or blocked me. Neither one was good.

Well, fuck.

“What the hell was that about?” Titus asked, looking concerned.

I turned the phone to show him the photos and he whistled. “Whomever did that has some excellent Photoshop skills. That looks real as fuck.”

It did.

Which was why it was even more concerning.

“What are you going to do?” he asked.

I looked at my watch. “Looks like I’m about to blow this popsicle stand. I’m not going to stay here a single second more with her thinking that.”

If I left now and flew to her, I could be back in time to meet up with the team at our home game in three days.

“Safe flight, bro,” Titus said as I got up.

“Hey, where is he going?” I heard Kay snarl.

I kept walking, not once looking back.

CHAPTER 18

*I'm not fucking stupid. I mean, I used to be, but we broke up.
-Hades to Caristonia*

CARISTONIA

I'd slept like hell.

Actually, hell was too easy of a word for how I'd slept.

If I had to be completely honest, I'd slept less than a wink, which wasn't a freakin' good thing for the day ahead of me.

Even worse, I had three freakin' shows to do today.

One of which was Simi's aerial show.

The only good thing about taking over her show was that I could do it without worrying about how I might kill myself.

Simi's show had moved from super-duper high up to way lower, and there was now a firm net underneath that she used in case she fell.

Being pregnant changed the rules of the circus.

Though not, I'd like to add, being handicapped like me.

Needless to say, the few days that I'd been home had been hell.

I had to admit, though, the circus wasn't what was on my mind.

Slone was.

Slone's total one-eighty on me.

How had he gone from being the absolute best person in the world, to the worst?

How had I given him my complete and utter trust, only for him to punt it straight out the window the moment I was no longer there?

I mean, let's be truthful here. People didn't usually tell someone their biggest, darkest secret—Briley not being his biologically—and then go and sleep with someone the next night.

Well, even 'sleeping with someone' had been implied by that article.

Plucking my phone out of my back pocket, I turned my phone back on and winced when I saw all the missed calls.

Two hundred and thirty-seven missed calls, sixty-one voice mails, and twice as many text messages.

Shit.

I ignored them all and went to the article that was still up in my web browser.

The one my sister had sent me with a cynical smirk on her face and glee in her eyes.

She liked that I'd given myself over to Slone. What she didn't like was that I'd started to genuinely like him.

She didn't like anyone that would take me away from her.

And to be completely honest, Hades had never been completely 'there' when it came to who she loved.

The only time that her fixation with me was toned down was when she met someone that filled this hole inside of her.

Her first true love, Benji, she'd met when Hades and I were studying for school.

She'd met Benji when she was twenty-one and had become obsessed with him.

Later, when Benji had broken up with her and she'd gone into a downward spiral of texts, calls, random appearances, and physically stalking the poor man, we all realized she needed help.

The professional we took her to for help said that she had obsessive love disorder.

She willingly entered into a six week long evaluation where they helped her find healthy coping mechanisms to deal with her issues. She was also on some meds that were to help her control those behaviors.

My eyes scanned the article, skipping over the picture that was sure to make me sick to my stomach again.

Defensive end Slone Day was seen out this weekend with none other than old flame Tamara Rhodes, celebrity heiress that recently starred in Survivor and brand-new sitcom Traces.

Day and Rhodes spent the entire night dancing and entertaining guests of the Buckner Ball. Buckner Ball is an annual ball for the elite of the elite that sponsors the children of Buckner House. A local nonprofit that is near and dear to Slone's heart.

Overall, the charity raised a hundred and ninety thousand dollars for the

children of Buckner House.

The ex-lovers were seen leaving early in the night, both of them going to the same vehicle where they disappeared into the night.

Slone plays for the Longview Liners, who are well on the way to being contenders for the Super Bowl.

“Hey,” Simi called, pulling me out of the article before I could read to the end. “Are you okay?”

I felt my stomach roil as I stared at my sister.

“I’m alive,” I said softly.

And so tired that I could literally go right back to bed.

But tigers wouldn’t feed themselves. And I had to learn Simi’s routine, which was why she was here.

“I brought you something to eat.” She held out her peace offering, as if food alone would help with this hole in my heart.

“Thanks,” I said quietly, taking the tinfoil-covered plate. “Are you ready?”

She nodded, her eyes serious, as she said, “I wish I hadn’t had to ask you to come home.”

I wished she hadn’t, either.

“Do you like it here, Simi?” I asked morosely.

She eyed the circus that was quickly coming to life all around us.

“I like being here with y’all,” she said softly. “But I think if we all lived in the same town, I would be just as happy.”

Same.

So much same.

My entire soul craved the stability that putting down roots gave you.

Yet...that wasn’t in the cards for me.

Not any time soon, anyway.

“Where to?” I asked, taking a peek under the tinfoil.

“Coffey set up the silk near the food truck because he wanted me to help keep an eye on you,” she said softly. “And the cats are around here...” she trailed off. “There’s Coco.”

I looked up to find Coco in the tree above the food truck. There she was,

staring at a piece of steak that, from what I could smell, was grilling away on Coffey's flat top.

"I feel like maybe I should tell him," she said softly. "But then it wouldn't be anywhere near as entertaining. He should know better."

I couldn't even crack a smile, I was so depressed.

"How would he?" I asked. "He's been here for a very short amount of time. And he's yet to experience how mischievous they are."

"You're right..." she trailed off. "Do you want to grab breakfast before we start? I know that you do better when you eat first."

It wouldn't matter if I ate or not. I was so tired that it was an inevitability—the going to sleep thing was my reality on days like today.

"I guess," I muttered, watching Hades talk with Val.

The fact that she was just so normal right now really ticked me off. Like... how the fuck? Why was she the way that she was? Why was me being home the sign she needed to be okay?

That's when we realized that her behavior with me was also obsessive to the point of worrisome.

When we were separated, I finally realized just how hard it was to breathe when she was around. Not that I didn't love her, but she was suffocating sometimes, and we allowed it to happen.

"Well," I said as I held the plate up. "Didn't you already bring me breakfast?"

She smiled. "No. I brought you a cookie from last night. Coffey made them to try out, and they were so delicious I couldn't stop myself from eating them all." Her face scrunched up into a tortured expression. "Then I threw them all up."

I huffed out a humorless laugh. "Then let's eat, then I'll have my cookie for dessert, then we'll get started." I paused. "Did the cats get fed yet?"

"They did," Crimson said as she came up to my side with an empty container in her hands. One that we usually used for the frozen rats we used to feed the snake. "Snake is fed, too. They miss you, though. That little asshole Coco ate and ran, not even stopping to look at me in thank you."

Together we walked toward Hades and Val who each had a platter of food

in front of them.

Neither one of them had touched it yet.

To say that all the Singh girls had issues with food would be an understatement. Our dad had definitely done a number on us, always making sure that we stayed looking ‘good’ according to him.

“Why aren’t y’all eating?” Crimson said as she sat down and took a giant biscuit.

Hades and Val stopped snickering the moment I walked into the sister huddle.

“What are you two laughing at?” I griped as I shimmied to the coffee that was on the edge of the food trailer.

Coffey gave me a chin lift and went back to manning the grill.

The grill that Coco was definitely looking at and licking her lips.

Val nudged Hades, and then Hades sighed.

“Well...” She looked at me, then quickly looked away.

“Tell her, or I will,” Val ordered, her eyes now narrowed.

Val was our big sister. Generally, we tried to give her what she wanted, because if you didn’t, she was going to make you wish you did.

But I didn’t need the nudge from Val to know something was up. Hades was acting shifty. And that was her lying face.

“Well, what?” I asked.

“I might, or might not have, fibbed a little yesterday.” She looked away, biting her lip. “I was just really mad at you for taking off and leaving us with a shit ton of work because you couldn’t take a joke...and I’m sorry for being how I am.”

I had no clue what she was talking about.

Val nudged me and I looked over to find her holding out an iPad.

On that iPad was a photo of the same girl as yesterday that’d been with Slone. Only this time, she was with a very handsome blonde guy that looked vaguely familiar.

“Who is that?” I asked, not quite understanding.

“That’s Thor’s wife,” Val drawled. “And that photo Hades showed you

was photoshopped.”

“The one of Slone?” I found myself asking very casually.

Meanwhile, inside my chest, I was losing my absolute shit.

If she said yes, I wasn’t going to be responsible for my actions.

“Yes,” she answered, not looking sorry at all.

Maybe if I was in my right frame of mind, I would’ve looked at the photo harder, and realized that it was photoshopped.

Now that I was thinking about it, I remembered Slone telling me that he had a single suit that he wore everywhere, and it was the only one he planned on getting.

The suit he was talking about was black. The one he was ‘photographed’ in was navy blue.

I fisted my hands and stared in rising anger at her, hoping she’d take back what she’d just said, but knowing she wasn’t going to.

“This is the last time this’ll ever happen, because I quit,” I snapped.

Then I threw a punch at my sister.

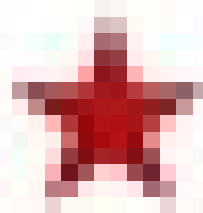
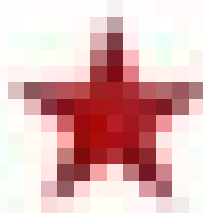
Which, sadly, was about the same time that Coco jumped down to launch herself at the steak that was on the grill.

With one swift move, she had it in her mouth and she was running away.

My fist connected with Hades’s jaw, and then Coco’s hurry to get away upended the table between us.

Coffey yelled, but the very last thing I saw before everything went black was my face getting way too close to the bench that was between us all.

What a perfect time for my narcolepsy to rear its ugly head.



I groaned as the light above my face became the bane of my existence.

I'd arrived at the damn hospital an hour ago, for Christ's sake, and was still sitting in the exact same spot I had been when I'd arrived.

These poor nurses.

I tried to move my neck as much as I could, and realized the only thing that was really hurting was my collar bones where the damn neck brace was digging into my skin.

Now the rest of me? That was a different story.

When I came to, I was having a neck brace fitted around my neck, and two hunky firefighters were leaning over me.

I'd done it again. I'd either fallen asleep or my muscles had gone numb on me, and then promptly hit my head on what I was later told by Keene was the metal bench I'd previously been sitting on.

Fast forward, I was taken to the hospital with the assurance that I needed checked out despite not wanting to go, and the promise that they would contact my family—that wasn't allowed to come. I didn't know why they couldn't come, but at the time I was still partially confused and hadn't thought to ask questions.

When I arrived at the hospital it was to find the entire freakin' thing in a flurry.

Apparently, a popular Chinese food restaurant had served an entire truck of bad chicken, causing about half the county to come in complaining about stomach cramping, diarrhea and fevers.

Which was how I got parked in the hallway under a light with nothing to occupy my time but the thoughts of how much the light above me sucked.

Tired of this shit, I reached for the neck brace and nearly had it halfway off when a nurse happened to catch me—though I'd like to point out that it was the first time that I'd seen a nurse in my entire time there.

Of course she'd come by when I was pulling it off.

"Oh, no, no, dear," she said as she patted my chest. "You can't take that off."

I groaned. "I'm fine."

"You may not be," she said. "Would you like to be paralyzed for the rest

of your life? Because that's exactly how you get paralyzed for the rest of your life."

I sighed. "How much longer do you think I'll have to sit here?"

She looked at me apologetically. "I don't know."

I sighed. "Can you turn the light off above me?"

She was already shaking her head. "No, because if I turn this light off, it turns off the entire hallway's lights."

"What about something to cover my eyes?"

"If I had it to spare, I would." She patted my chest. "I'll go check on the doctor."

I doubted that, but I let her leave anyway.

I was fiddling with the blanket covering my body when an idea occurred to me.

Thinking it was perfect, I pulled it up over my head, and had the first relief I'd had in an hour.

Blissful darkness.

I don't know how long I sat like that when I heard the first mutterings of a dead person in the hallway.

"I can't believe they're so busy that they'll just put dead people in the hallway," someone whispered as they moved in the hallway. "That's horrible."

"That poor person probably didn't have any family. I mean why else would they be left alone in the hallway?" another replied.

Why indeed.

That poor person.

Another person whispered, and then another.

"At least it's only food poisoning," I heard said. "It could be worse. We could be dead like that person."

Was this person close to me or something?

Not that I could look or anything.

I was practically strapped down to the bed.

All I'd accomplish by pulling the blanket up was binding it tighter around

me.

I hummed to myself as to not think about that poor dead person likely only feet away from me, and instead tried to think about what I would say to Slone if I ever saw him again.

I'd broken up with him.

In fact, I'd done it so spectacularly over the phone that I was embarrassed with myself.

My sister had laughed about her antics later—my god, who the hell showed their twin sister photoshopped photos of their possible boyfriend and thought it was a good idea?—but I wasn't laughing.

Instead, I was fuming.

I was also seconds away from leaving the circus and never coming back, and fuck their inheritances.

I loved my sisters.

Truly, I did.

But Hades was pushing my buttons.

In fact, if I didn't see her again for another two months, that would be too early.

I couldn't believe that I'd been played by her.

I also couldn't believe that my rash behavior had ruined a relationship I was really beginning to think might be 'it' for me.

I mean, it took a lot to deal with the things wrong with me, yet Slone had all but shown that he could handle that and more.

It wasn't every day that you could find someone to make love to you with the possibility of you falling asleep on them in the middle of the deed.

There was a rush of whispered conversations, and then a 'Oh my God!' and 'It's him!'

I wondered who 'it's him' was.

The doctor, possibly?

Because I knew I'd been sitting here long enough that I might get excited and say that if one actually acknowledged my presence.

I mean, seriously, it'd been at least an hour of me lying there.

Surely a possibly broken neck trumped someone with food poisoning, right?

“She’s in the hallway, sir.”

CHAPTER 19

*Ari is equal parts 'fuck around and find out' and 'please don't yell at me or
I'll cry.'*

-Slone to his mother

SLONE

The drive to the circus in the middle of nowhere, Kentucky, was endless.

I'd gone over the conversation I was about to have with her about a thousand times on the drive over. I'd rented a truck. I'd flown on a commercial flight for three hours. And now I was here, less than ten minutes away, and nervous as fuck.

Sometimes, I really, really hated the media.

I could see the good it did.

But I also saw all the harm it inflicted.

How many times had I been in the headlines for shit that didn't have anything to do with football? Hundreds.

Why did people care about anything at all that had to do with my personal life?

My phone rang just as an ambulance passed me, flying its way to the hospital with lights and sirens.

I hadn't even had time to get more than two tires off the road before it was past.

I pressed answer on my phone and put it back into the cup holder.

"Hello?" I answered distractedly as I continued back on my way.

"Daddy?"

I got my first smile for the first time in a couple of hours.

"Hey, baby. What were you doing today that you didn't answer?" I asked.

Briley sighed. "There are a lot of kids here. Sometimes, they're so loud that I can't hear my phone."

I grinned. "I think there are six."

"Six is a lot," she said. "When you get married to Ari, I want to have a baby brother. And notice I said 'a' and not 'multiple.'"

My heart landed in my throat.

"Oh, yeah?" I asked in a strangled voice.

"Yeah," she sighed. "I'm sorry she had to go home early. You and I

should go to her circus with her during the off season. Then, when you're traveling, I can stay with her. I've already worked it all out. I found a really awesome motorcoach, too."

I felt my heart swell.

"How do you know it's that serious, baby?" I asked.

She snorted. "Dad, you would've never spent a month with her, or tried to, if she wasn't someone important to you."

She had a very valid point.

"Yeah," I agreed. "How would you feel about me asking her to marry me?"

She paused as she thought about that for a second before saying, "I think she'd say no if you asked her right now. It's too soon. It isn't, but she'll think that, because a lot of women think you need to put a lot of time into a relationship to know if you like them or not. But if you give her another two months or so, I'll bet she'll say yes then."

There was my intuitive daughter.

The red and white circus tents started to come into view, and my nerves started to get the better of me.

"Anyway," she said. "I have to go. We're going out on the boat today. Trance and Viddy just got a brand new sparkly purple one that apparently makes waves and allows you to surf behind it. I'm not too sure about the water here."

Getting a surprised chuckle out of me, we said our goodbyes just as I pulled up into the circus.

When I got there, it was to find all of the Singh family in a tight huddle around the picnic tables except for the one I was looking for.

Gazes swung to me when I arrived.

All eyes looked rather accepting and welcoming of my presence except for one, and that was the one with the face similar to my Ari's.

So much like her, yet nothing alike at the same time.

"Where's Ari?" I asked.

It was the sourpuss that answered with, "Why do you care?"

"Swear to fuckin' god, Hades. I will fuckin' launch you across this

goddamn camp if you don't start acting right," Keene growled.

Whoa.

"I don't know why you're acting like this." Hades rolled her eyes.

"You don't know why I'm acting like this?" he asked, looking at his sister as if he didn't even know her. "You tell your twin, the one person that can stand the sight of you no matter what, that you faked a photo of her boyfriend and some random chick together kissing, let her think that he's cheating on her, and then watch her fuckin' fall and possibly break her neck...and you can't figure out why I'm acting like this?"

Break her neck.

What?!

"Tell me what's going on," I ordered, standing to my full height.

Keene looked over at me, then broke it down completely, starting with this morning when she walked into the breakfast area.

I immediately turned around and headed for the truck.

"They won't let you in!" Hades called out smugly.

I turned and looked at her over my shoulder before saying, "You do know who I am, right?"

Fuckin' watch me.

I'd just about made it to the rental truck when I was stopped by the tiger.

I wasn't sure which one name wise, but it was the white one who looked like she was interested in eating me.

"Hello, buddy." I held out my hand to it.

It licked my hand and, surprisingly, her tongue was extremely rough.

Before I could move around her, though, she walked past me with a rub of her body along my pants, and then moved into the shadows.

The drive to the hospital was uneventful.

When I arrived, though, that was a completely different story.

It was a madhouse, and I could now see why the medics wouldn't allow any of them to come.

Pushing through the doors, I looked around to see if I could spot anyone that looked like they were in a position of authority.

Not spotting any of them but seeing the door to the back slightly ajar—that was a security problem that needed to be addressed—I walked right on through into chaos.

The door I'd walked through led down a long hallway where there were people sitting on cots, a lot of them holding buckets, as they waited, I guessed for it to be their turn.

I passed one particular gurney that definitely had a dead body on it and kept going.

“What in the world?” I heard someone say. “Why is there a dead body in the hallway?”

I silently agreed.

The least they could do was push it to a hallway where it wasn't going to be looked at constantly.

“Sir, can I help you?” a frazzled looking nurse called out.

I moved toward her, my stomach in knots, and said, “I'm looking for my...wife.”

Not quite wife. But hopefully, one day she would be.

“Oh.” She frowned. “There aren't supposed to be any family members here right now. We don't have the room.”

I didn't bother to argue. “She came in with a broken neck.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Oh, yeah. Her.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and said, “Why do you say it like that?”

“Well.” She blew her hair out of her eyes and said, “She's just been very problematic and combative.”

“Problematic and combative,” I repeated. “Are you sure we're talking about the same person? That doesn't sound like my Ari.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks pinked. “I guess I just...”

She didn't finish her sentence as I said, “Where is she?”

“In the hallway on the bed closest to the linen closet,” she answered swiftly.

I blinked. “Okay. What has the doctor said so far?”

She led the way to the gurney she was talking about, and my stomach

sank.

My heart was in my throat when I realized the “dead person” everyone was talking about was her.

Everyone kept casting her quick glances, and I felt my heart start to beat triple time.

“She’s not...” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

The nurse, pissed now, yanked the blanket down and scowled at Ari.

Ari, who was glaring hard as she said, “Listen, Deborah. I know that this is kind of hard to understand but seriously, that light is the freakin’ devil. My head hurts like the dickens, and that light is making me nauseous. Which, might I add, might be a very bad thing when you think I might have a neck injury!”

The nurse turned to me and glared. “See what I mean?”

“I see that you’ve left her here when you could’ve easily pushed this cart down.” I moved the linen cart. Then started to unclick the wheels of the gurney so I could slide it down out of the path of the light. “And everything would’ve been A-okay.”

The nurse glared at the both of us. “I don’t have time for this!”

Then she stomped off.

Holding my breath, I turned back toward the woman in the bed with the big white and blue brace around her neck.

I was suddenly nervous to make eye contact.

Then there was a muted sob, and I could do nothing else but look at her then.

“I’m so sorry,” she bawled.

I instantly felt a great amount of regret. One at not letting her know yesterday—I could’ve found a way, I was sure of it—and two, at how shittily—was that even a freakin’ word?—she was treated by her family.

I cupped her face and leaned down, whispering “shhh” before pressing my lips to her mouth.

She sniffled hard, and I couldn’t help the small smile that graced my lips before I said, “Baby. It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay,” she continued to cry. “My sister is the freakin’ devil.”

I smoothed her hair away from her face and said, “Have you even been seen by the doctor?”

She sniffled hard before saying, “No.”

I bent down and pressed one more kiss against her mouth before saying, “I’m going to find someone to help.”

And I did, coming back within a minute with a doctor that looked haggard.

He saw Ari and looked shocked. “How long have you been here, miss?”

Ari swallowed and said, “At least an hour, if not more.”

He looked horrified, and things happened fast after that.

She was whisked away toward imaging where she would have an MRI on her neck.

I was shown to a room by not the nurse that’d done the bitching earlier, but a new one that looked a lot more approachable.

“You can wait here until they get back,” she said.

Then she too was gone.

I didn’t have a clue how long I sat there fretting, but I heard a male’s voice in the hallway, and was unsurprised to look up and see Keene standing there.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, pissed and angry.

He sighed.

“How is she?” Keene asked, trying to side-step my question.

I didn’t want to answer him.

In fact, I wanted to ignore the absolute hell out of him and never talk to them all again.

“Tell me why you came now, and not earlier,” I suggested.

Yes, I was holding his sister’s health status against him, but I couldn’t help it.

He could’ve tried to come at any time.

Hell, I’d seen plenty of people here with family with them. Sure, they were standing and in the way, but a lot of them hadn’t taken the “no, you can’t come” to heart. Like Ari’s sisters and Keene had.

“Well.” He closed his eyes. “From what Hades told us after they left, it wasn’t an adamant ‘you can’t come’ and more of a strongly worded ‘there

won't be room for you.”

I gritted my teeth.

“They don't know. She literally was just taken to imaging. She's been in this hallway bed for the last hour,” I answered his earlier question. Reluctantly.

Keene rolled his neck. “I should've been here.”

He should've. “You should have.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose and blew out a frustrated breath.

“We should've probably noticed the signs.” Keene winced. “But she's always been like that.”

Just because she'd always been like that didn't make this all okay.

Honestly, it made it worse.

They wouldn't have allowed that to happen with some random person, yet they allow it to happen to their own sister?

Yeah, that didn't sit well with me.

“I'm going to give you a little insight on Hades,” Keene sighed. “From the very beginning, she's always acted a bit different. It's like Tony got all the nice genes, and Hades got all the mean ones.”

I didn't say anything, my jaw set like stone.

“Hades was like a big black hole, sucking up everyone's sunshine.” He paused. “Tony's sunshine.”

Still I didn't say anything.

“So she started to show signs of this obsessiveness for a while. As in, Tony couldn't do a single thing without Hades knowing where she was at, what she was doing, when she would be back, and why she was doing it in the first place.” He shook his head. “She did it to a certain extent against the rest of us as well, but not nearly to the point that she did it to Tony.”

My stomach felt sick.

A feeling that had gotten significantly worse since finding out this information about Hades.

“She has this thing about her, something that she's struggled with from the beginning of time. She hates when people don't pay attention to her. She especially hates it when Tony doesn't,” he said.

I waited.

“It wasn’t until she was an older teen during college that she fixated on this boy that used to volunteer at the same place that they did,” he murmured. “And it’s something that went pretty fuckin’ far, to the point where the dude called the police on her. That’s when we finally opened our eyes and saw the issue at hand. Hades needed help.”

I would fuckin’ think so.

“She saw a therapist and we all decided that the best course of action was to get her into a psych facility where she would then spend some time trying to figure out why her actions were so shitty,” he said. “And we realized we needed to set some boundaries when it came to Hades and Caristonia. Hence her month vacation.”

I frowned. “I thought you all got one?”

“We don’t. We just know when Hades has made Tony hit her breaking point,” he admitted.

Fuckin’ A.

“I’d have to say, man, she’s definitely there right now,” I pointed out.

He was already nodding. “We have someone coming to fill in for Tony as we speak. An old worker that said she needs some time away from her current boyfriend. She’ll be there for a month.”

Giving me a month to convince Ari that she loved me and that she wanted to marry me.

Easy.

And, in the meantime, Ari could help try to convince me that she needed to come back.

Because right now, my head was firmly set on the “staying away forever so I can support you” side.

“You will take this time to figure out what the fuck is wrong with her and get her back under control?” I asked.

“This is usually when she goes to a retreat to help rebuild her defenses and get her meds changed, and then the rest of us work our asses off to make sure that we can cover both of them being gone.” He sighed. “We weren’t ready for her to go, though, so we had no backup in place for Hades. Then Simi got

sick and we couldn't hang."

I should probably feel bad, but I didn't.

"You could also shut the circus down for a few weeks," I pointed out.

He frowned. "We have two sold-out shows."

I looked at him then. "You have three sick sisters."

He rolled his neck. "I didn't even want this job."

"Then why are you doing it?" I asked.

Why were any of them doing it? From what Ari told me, a lot of them were only doing it for each other.

He opened his mouth and closed it, preparing to form an answer. But one wasn't forthcoming.

"We're back," the doctor said, looking haggard as he walked in ahead of Ari's gurney. Seconds later, he was pulling some images up on the screen. "Everything was mostly unremarkable. No broken neck or anything life threatening. Just sore. I would give yourself about three to four days to calm that neck down, then you're free to go back to light work."

My eyes were solely focused on Ari the moment he said she would be okay.

She looked tired and relieved. But also...broken.

I hated that look.

Walking over to the bed, I pulled her hand into mine and held it while the doctor talked about discharge paperwork.

Within ten minutes I was carrying her outside because they didn't have any wheelchairs to spare and placing her in the front seat of my rental truck.

"I'll see you back there," Keene said as he walked to the big ass circus bus and get inside.

The moment the doors closed us into the quiet, I said, "Do you want to go back?"

I'd rather not have to take her, but at this point, I'd do just about anything to see a smile on her face. Even take her back to her jerk face of a sister.

"I need to go to get my bag," she muttered, rubbing her neck. "My head feels weird."

Keene took off in a cloud of dust.

“He’s mad,” she murmured.

I was fuckin’ happy that he was mad.

Even more, I was happy that he was actually realizing that one sister’s mental health wasn’t something that trumped another sister’s mental health.

And that was exactly what was happening here.

“I want to apologize again,” she practically whispered.

I looked over at her, miserable in the passenger seat, and reached over and took her hand.

“There are going to be a ton of bumps,” I told her. “This thing”—I swirled my finger around us—“though it was your sister this time, it will be some media influencer next time. Remember what I said about them being greedy and putting Titus’s daughter on that website? It’s something that will happen, again and again, until I’m dead. All because of the career I chose, and how popular I am.”

She squeezed my hand. “I don’t like it.”

I didn’t, either.

“Why do you think I let the media think we’re married?” I asked. “Life’s easier when they think I’m attached. It’s like they lose interest because I’m not as much fun.”

She sighed, dropping her head gently against the back of the seat.

“My sister is going to be an issue for the rest of my life,” she said. “Unless she finds someone else to love, who doesn’t care that she calls him a hundred times an hour, texts him every second of the day, and ultimately doesn’t care that she has issues. That’s the only time ever it’ll not be a big deal. She will always be there to come between us.”

I thought about what I wanted to say before I said it. Meaning we were almost back to the circus when I composed my words enough for them not to sound so...harsh.

“I want you to know that I’ll deal with your sister as long as it comes with having you,” I told her. “I know that she’ll always be there. And though I’m not quite okay with how your own family handled it, I’ll never allow you to be put on the back burner. If that pisses your sister off...oh fucking well.”

Her eyes lit with amusement when she turned to survey me.

“Am I forgiven?” she asked.

I brought her hand to my mouth just as I turned into the fair grounds.

“There’s nothing to forgive,” I promised.

And there wasn’t.

She was allowed to be mad.

Especially if she saw something like she did, expecting one thing from me and getting another.

If anyone knew how shit was misconstrued, it was me.

“Time to face the music,” I said as I stared at all the siblings, gathered ’round, getting an update from Keene.

As one they all turned to survey us.

“We could just buy more clothes,” I suggested.

She snorted. “I’m too picky about my clothes. Everything has to fit just right...”

I opened the door and got out, rounding the truck to get her out, and hearing murmurings from the family behind me.

When she hopped out, wincing at the jarring motion, I caught her and steadied her before saying, “Easy.”

Together, hand in hand, we walked toward the group.

Her family was extremely good looking. As in, every last one of them could be a supermodel in their own right.

But my gaze focused Ari’s twin.

She had this odd glint in her eye that clearly said she was not happy to see me.

“What are you doing?” she asked us. “Are you okay?”

“Hey, Coco,” Ari cooed.

I looked down to see the white tiger coming toward us, mouth open and panting.

She walked right up to Ari and rubbed along her legs, nearly taking me out in the process.

“Walk me to the bus, baby?” She looked down at Coco.

Coco bumped her nose against Ari's thigh and the two of them disappeared into the bus that was just past the tent we were all standing in front of.

I waited until she was gone to say, "She's coming with me for the next two weeks. She can't do anything strenuous."

Hades's back immediately went up at my words.

"Wait, we have a show!" Hades called out, trying to make it sound like the show was the only reason that we needed to stay.

I ignored her.

Not liking that I refused to engage with her, she stomped off in the opposite direction of Ari.

In truth, it was because she was a selfish little bitch who only wanted her sister's attention for herself and didn't want to share.

"Cancel the shows for the next two weeks. She can't perform anyway," I called back, suggesting to Hades what I'd already suggested to Keene at the hospital.

Fuckin' bitch.

"You're mad."

I looked over to find Simi in a chair sipping water.

"I'm a bit over mad," I corrected her. "Honestly, I'm kind of incensed. Y'all allowed that," I pointed at Hades who was now arguing with some worker that had bumped into her.

Simi stared at Hades for a long second before saying, "Family's family here. We had to rely on each other because our dad didn't like it when we came to him. For anything. Food, basic life necessities. Nothing. So we only had each other." She paused. "I'm not excusing her behavior. It's been atrocious. But I'm saying...we love each other. Faults and all."

I gave her a look that clearly said what I thought about her explanation. "If that child you're carrying had someone do to her what Hades has done to Ari, would you be upset?"

Simi snapped her mouth shut so fast that it made me want to laugh.

"We wouldn't be okay with it." Coffey appeared, holding out a brown paper sack. "Food for the road."

I took the bag just as Ari came back out, lugging her essentials.

I stood up and caught it up before holding out my hand to her. “You ready?”

She leaned into me before saying, “As fuck.”

CHAPTER 20

*Not the worst dad.
-Slone's secret thoughts*

SLONE

It was hours later when we were in the hotel bed, that I broached the subject of her sister again.

We'd had a good night.

We'd eaten until we were so full we couldn't stand it.

We'd watched a movie.

We'd done all the things that normal couples did on a random day off.

But tomorrow everything would change.

I'd have to be back to the real world, meaning endorsement contract discussions with my lawyer, a few game tape watchings with the team, and a few other odds and ends that I had to do before I could be "off" for the day.

The day following that we were flying to Kansas City to play the Chiefs the following night.

Needless to say, as much as I loved doing nothing with her, that wasn't always an option. Not with my work, anyway.

"What's the story here?" I asked. "Are we just going to assume that your sister is going to fix herself up? Are we going to deal with it? I'll follow your lead here but...I need direction."

She sighed and buried her face in between the gap of my pecs.

I pulled her up tighter into my arms and said, "It's going to be okay."

She sighed, long and loud, then leaned her head back and looked at me with her heart in her eyes. It made my own heart start to beat heavily in response.

"I kind of love you, Slone." She gazed at me, her eyes intense and filled with what I now saw was love.

I freed one hand and smoothed the hair out of her face as I said, "I love you, too. More than I ever thought possible."

She closed her eyes, as if she needed to hear those words, before saying, "As for my sister...I don't know. But something needs to change."

"Yes," I agreed.

Either they made it change, or I made it change. And I wasn't sure she would like how I found a way to change it. Not that I knew that way yet...but I'd figure something out. Someone had to put Ari first.

"I'm going to highly recommend to the others that she needs to get professional help, and be in some sort of therapy, for the next couple of months." she groaned. "But I don't know what else needs to happen. I don't have the right answers to this, as you can see. I've been dealing with it for so long that it's just become a part of my life."

I rolled her over so that I was hovering over the top of her and stared down into her eyes.

"You need boundaries for her," I declared.

She licked her lips, her hand coming up and running down the length of my bare collarbone.

Her eyes went a bit glazed, and I grinned.

We'd been playing this game for the last few hours, too. Not actually doing anything overtly sexual, but definitely not shying away from it.

My cock, which I'd been hoping would behave since I'd been lying in bed with her plastered up against me, thickened.

She felt it now pressing between her thighs and smiled.

"I've missed you," she said softly, trailing her finger down the length of my chest, stopping just before she got to the good part.

Grinning wickedly, I said, "I feel like we should reacquaint ourselves real quick."

"Real quick?" she teased. "Why not real slow?"

"Because," I said as I trailed my hand up the length of her thigh, stopping when I encountered only skin underneath the t-shirt of mine she was wearing. "Please tell me you have not been completely naked underneath my t-shirt for the entire length of that movie."

How did I miss that?

Her sly grin was enough to set my blood heating again. "Then I won't say it."

I growled and shoved her shirt up, my fingers going to her very wet pussy.

Looks like I wasn't the only one that'd been wanting this over the last few

hours.

I shoved my underwear down just enough to free my cock, then I was notching the head at her entrance.

No matter how fast I wanted this to go, how much I wanted her, and how badly I needed it, I would always go slow at first as to not hurt her. Plus, it'd been a few days since I'd been inside of her, and that was enough time for her pussy to get unused to me.

Inch by inch, I settled inside, until I was filling her completely.

She panted, her eyes closed, as she held onto my biceps and groaned. "So full."

Yeah, she was.

She felt so fuckin' tight around me that sometimes it was hard to think past the feeling.

"I want you to fuck me," she breathed. "God, I just want it so bad."

And who could stop when that was what she wanted?

I sure the hell couldn't.

My eyes focused on her face for any signs of pain or discomfort, I started to fuck her in long, deep strokes.

Over and over I filled her and backed away, until we were both holding in place panting.

"I'm so close." She groaned. "I just need..."

I knew what she needed.

Me.

My words. My body. My love.

And I gave it to her, bending down and practically collapsing on top of her while I worked my hips. She squirmed beneath me, relishing in the weight of my body pinning her down.

"God, are you close yet?" I wheezed. "Because I'm about to go whether I want to or not."

She dug her fingernails into my bicep, and then came.

She cried out, loudly, and bucked her hips underneath me, trying to get closer but unable to accomplish it.

I all but collapsed on top of her as my own release followed directly behind hers.

Long minutes later, she patted me on the shoulder and wheezed, “Not that I don’t love you on top of me, Slone, but Jesus Christ, you’re heavy.”

Chuckling, I rolled us until I was on my back and she was sprawled out on top of me.

“I didn’t pass out this time,” she teased, placing her small palm over my still racing heart.

My eyes closed on their own volition, and I was reminded that I hadn’t slept the night before, and the long day was catching up to me.

That, and having the shit scared out of me.

“You didn’t,” I replied. “Want to go to sleep?”

She snorted. “What kind of question is that?”

Then we both promptly passed the fuck out.

CHAPTER 21

Some of y'all need to go to church. I don't want you in hell with me.
-Caristonia to her sisters

CARISTONIA

“Hey,” my sister’s sweet voice said. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

I frowned as I sat up in bed, my eyes still filled with sleep.

My neck all but screamed as I turned to look at the clock.

Five in the morning.

“What is it, Crimson?” I asked softly, hoping not to wake Slone.

It was a losing battle, though.

Especially when Crimson told me what she did next.

“There’s something wrong with Coco,” Crimson said. “I went to feed them today like usual, and she’s lethargic and not looking too good.”

I was instantly throwing the covers off of my body and heading to my exploding suitcase on the floor.

We hadn’t woken up a single time last night, and the only thing I’d gotten out of it before we’d made love and then fallen asleep was my toothbrush from the very bottom of the bag.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” I said, my stomach now in knots.

We were on our way back to the circus in under five minutes, Slone and I not even taking the time to brush our teeth or get dressed in clean clothes.

Coco was three, so there was no way she should be exhibiting signs of sickness unless she’d ingested something that was poisonous or rotten.

She did have a stomach that tended to lean more toward sensitive.

Except, when I got there, it wasn’t going to be an easy fix like usual—i.e., putting her on a bland diet.

No, what I saw when I walked in was much, much worse.

When I rushed into the tent where my sisters were gathered, it was to see Coco lying on her side, panting, foam gathering around her mouth.

My stomach sank.

I yelled for my sisters to call a vet and went on my knees beside her. I thrust my hands in the thick fur around her head and softly scratched her. I asked Slone to stay against the side of the tent for now.

“Why do you keep them?” he asked curiously as he backed up, not judging but definitely not understanding. “Is it not inhumane?”

Meaning, were we complete assholes that just wanted tigers for the show aspect of it?

No, we weren't.

“Coco and Melon came from abusive situations,” I said. “When my dad got them, they came straight from a rescue. Apparently, their previous owners thought it would be great to train them like their pets. Shortly after the birth of their child, the tigers were too rough and hurt the kid. Which is to be expected to be honest. They're large animals, not house cats.” I continued to gently stroke Coco's fur as she lay panting beside me. So still. “They neglected them. Shoved them into tiny cages. Tried to pretty much treat them like a parrot and only have them for the 'cool' aspect of it. They tried to take them to a zoo exhibit first, then an outdoor safari, but they don't do well with men at all. That's why I asked you to stay over there. Melon doesn't know what's going on with Coco, and her usual MO when something is wrong is to blame the males in the vicinity.”

“Oh,” he said. “But they do shows.”

“They do,” I confirm. “But, if you'll notice, when they're out there performing, the lights are all really bright on them and they can't see into the audience. Plus, both of them are just such pleasers. They are truly devoted to us sisters, me especially, and go out of their way to get praise when we're around to pay attention to them.”

“But you said you let them roam free. Are you not worried that they'll attack?” he asked.

I thought about that for a long moment before saying, “Not in the least. They're very gentle creatures and are way more wary of you than you are of them.”

He nodded. “The white one rubbed up against my leg as I was leaving to go to you the other day. It was like she was trying to apologize for hurting you.”

My heart melted.

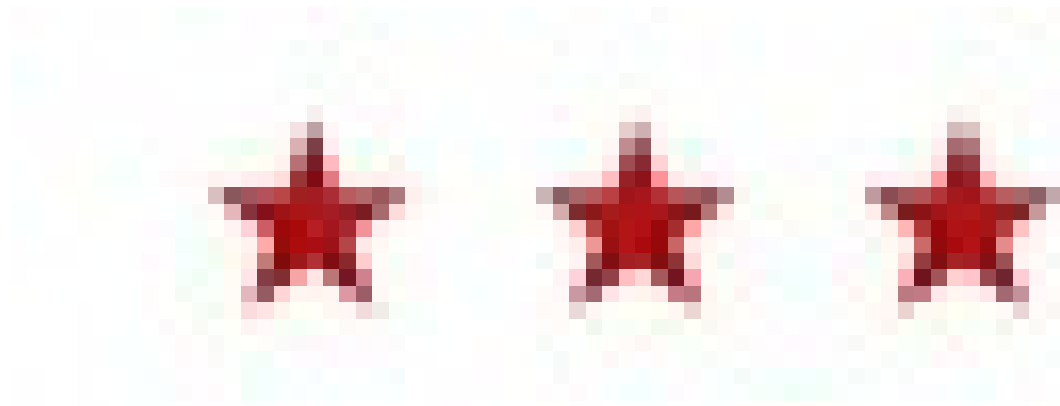
And my eyes filled with tears.

“I'm going to be depressed as hell if anything happens to her,” I

murmured quietly. “If I could move off to a place with high walls, I’d take them with me and let them roam free forever. And feed them whenever they want to be fed.”

Hearing an engine noise, I looked up, wincing slightly at the pain in my neck to see a white and orange van that said ‘Hunter Exotic Veterinarian’ on the side parking at the front of the tent.

Crimson walked in with the vet, filling him in on all of the symptoms and details leading up to the present. As they came to our side, I heard the vet say, “We need to draw blood.”



Three Hours Later

“She was poisoned,” the vet said hours later when they called back with the blood tests. “Radiator fluid.”

Radiator fluid?

“What?” I asked.

“We can try to treat her, but I’m not holding out too much hope here,” the veterinarian continued. “She’s ingested it and had it in her system way too long. Tiger’s...”

I stopped listening, knowing what he was going to say.

“Treat her. Money is not an object,” Slone growled.

My heart, which had already been only his, became his for eternity. In this life and the next.

The vet left, taking Coco with him to his practice, and didn’t look back.

Heart in my throat, I watched them go until I couldn’t see anything but the dust his vehicle left in his wake.

“Where’s Hades?” I heard Slone rumble from behind me.

Surprised he’d be asking about her after all that had happened, I turned and surveyed the group at my back.

All of my sisters except for Hades, and Keene, were standing at my back with Slone.

But it was Slone’s angry face that had me tilting my head in confusion.

“Slone, what is it?” I asked quietly, not sure I wanted to hear the answer but asking him anyway.

Then he shocked the holy hell out of me by saying what he said next.

“Does Hades know that radiator fluid would be enticing to them, but also kill them if they ingested it?” Slone asked.

I felt my stomach sink.

“Fuck.”

She sure would. She knew just as much about the animals sometimes as I did.

“No...” I couldn’t finish the sentence.

“Let’s look for her.” Keene sounded grim when he voiced his request.

So we looked.

And couldn’t find Hades anywhere.

As in, not in the motorcoach. Not in the surrounding area around the motorcoach. Not in the surrounding town.

She didn’t answer calls. Her Life 360 was off. Her phone couldn’t be located.

She. Was. Not. Anywhere.

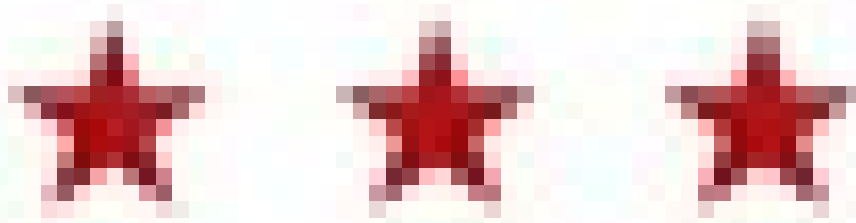
And a little niggle of worry started to creep into my stomach.

Because out of everything that was like Hades, running away wasn’t one of them. She loved seeing her pranks—if you could even call this a prank at this point—through. If she got to see my reaction, even better.

“What do we do now?” I asked softly.

Keene didn’t have an answer.

None of us did.



Three Days Later

“I think she’s out of the woods,” the vet said to me on the phone the next day. “Her stats are all great. I’ve even gotten her to eat a small meal of broth and pureed meat.”

My heart lightened considerably at that.

“That’s great news,” I said softly, my heart still heavy. “When does she get to come home?”

When do I get to see her again? Hug her? Hold her?

“If all keeps going well,” he said, “I imagine tomorrow would be a great time to come see her. Then if she’s continuing to improve, I’ll let her go home at the end of the week.”

My heart lightened considerably.

My immediate reaction after we hung up was to call Slone—he’d had to leave for a game, and I’d chosen to remain behind to keep an eye on Coco and Melon.

The only family members to remain behind and not move on to the next location we’d be at in two weeks were Simi and Coffey.

Coffey had been cooking us food all week, and I was kind of loathe to admit it, but I’d been stress eating.

Anyway, I couldn’t contact Slone because he was in the middle of a football game.

A football game that I was watching on Coffey and Simi’s big screen television.

Coffey was doing something outside on the grill—something that smelled

absolutely delicious—and Simi and I were inside watching the game even though neither one of us knew what was going on.

“Was that a first down?” I asked curiously, watching a particularly brutal hit Slone had given.

“Um.” Simi looked up from her phone, where she was reading an article about “how to understand the game of football.” “I don’t know.”

Coffey came back inside just as something happened. Flags started being thrown, and Slone threw his helmet at a ref.

“Oh, shit,” I murmured.

“What?” Coffey asked, his eyes going to the screen.

He grimaced and stared, obviously understanding what was going on.

“Well?” I asked.

“Well...” He paused. “Slone got a face mask penalty and they’re moving them back fifteen yards. They’re definitely going to have to punt this.”

I sighed.

I would never learn the game of football.

But it looked like I had an extra month or so to figure everything out.

With two sisters not able to work and one on the lam, Keene had no other choice *but* to shut the circus down.

Speaking of the one on the lam...she was still nowhere to be found.

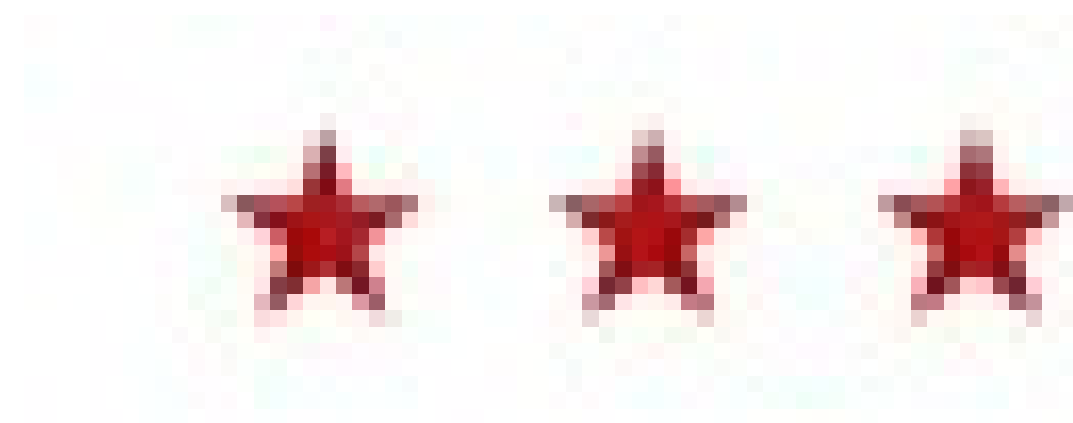
What was found, though, was a note that came in the mail. A letter that actually reached us because we’d been parked in the middle of nowhere, Kentucky for the last seven days.

All the note said was: *It wasn’t me. But I might’ve found out who did.*

Slone wasn’t too sure about her note, thinking maybe she did it to cover her tracks. But again, I knew my sister. She wasn’t the type of girl to not own up to her shit.

Needless to say, we didn’t get anywhere with anything. We were in limbo.

And that kind of sucked.



SLONE

Four days later

The cats were both home. In my home.

After hearing Ari's wishes about wanting the cats with her, I'd had a hell of a fence installed. As in, no one short of a plane was going to get over it without a considerable amount of effort.

I looked like I was trying to mimic Fort Knox.

Speaking of cats, both of them were lying on my couches.

I couldn't wait for Briley to get home.

Not that I'd leave her alone with them, but I'd definitely let her be around them as long as I was in the room.

Speaking of my baby...

My phone rang and I answered it immediately with a smile on my face.

"Hey, baby," I answered my phone. "How are you?"

Ari looked up from her sprawl against me, a huge smile filling her face at the thought of Briley.

Yes, I fuckin' loved her. I fuckin' loved even more that she was excited to hear from my daughter.

"Daddy." Briley sighed. "I think I broke my arm."

My stomach all but sank. "What happened?"

She sighed. "I was jumping on the trampoline. When I came down one time, something happened, and I fell. I stuck my arm out..."

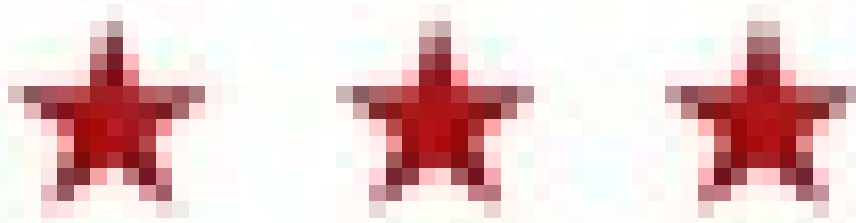
I winced as I listened to the rest of her explanation.

"Are you okay now, though?"

"Yeah, about that..." she trailed off.

After listening to the rest of her explanation, I immediately pushed upward and headed for my shoes.

"Okay, let me talk to Trance."



One Day Later

“It’s a pretty common injury for children that have trampolines,” the surgeon said as he looked at the x-ray. “This and this.” He pointed to the spots on the upper arm right at the elbow junction. “Is the most common break with trampoline injuries. I fix thousands of these a year. Multiple a day at times.”

We were at Children’s Hospital in Dallas.

We’d walked in not ten minutes ago, and the surgeon had already seen us.

The drive to Briley felt like it took for-fucking-ever.

And when we’d finally got to the hospital where they were holding Briley until her upcoming surgery, I’d felt like a live wire with a thousand nerves exposed.

There was nothing quite like having your child away from you, seriously hurt, when you couldn’t get to them as fast as you’d like.

The usual two-and-a-half-hour drive took me less than two, and Ari had looked just as sick to her stomach the entire time.

She moved toward Trance who was leaning against the wall and allowed me to go to my girl. My girl, who’d fuckin’ cried when she’d seen me and promptly broke the rest of my heart.

My girl was tough.

But she was still my little girl.

I’d missed the holy hell out of her, too.

The last month had been torture for me, but I was glad to have her back in my arms after so long away.

“What’s the outlook here?” Ari asked. “How long will she be in a cast? It’s almost the summer, Doctor. We have swimming coming up, and Briley loves to swim.”

I’d never told her that.

But she must’ve been keeping in contact with Briley outside of me.

Which warmed my heart even more.

“She will have a waterproof cast,” he answered Ari. “Are you the mom?”

I fuckin’ wished.

“She’s my dad’s new wife.” Briley beamed, sounding fairly chipper, considering her predicament. “They just got married.”

I squeezed Briley carefully, telling her to shut up without words.

Not that I didn’t fuckin’ love that she was excited, but I also wanted her to quiet down and let the doctor talk. To ease my fears.

“Oh.” The doctor nodded. “In that case, you need to keep an eye on her when she’s swimming, but ultimately, she can do what she wants when she wants. Within reason. No jumping on the trampoline until she’s been out of the cast for six weeks. No motorsports. No trapeze or tight rope walking.”

If only the doctor knew...

Ari shot the two of us a smirk, and I couldn’t stop the responding smile from slipping free.

“If we’re okay with everything”—the doctor looked at his watch—“we can get her in here in about an hour. I need some lunch, she can visit until it’s time while you sign the papers, and then a nurse will come get you.”

Feeling my stomach lurch at the thought of my Briley having to have surgery, I nodded. “Sounds good.”

He jerked his chin so that I would follow, and I gave Trance and Ari a look to stay here with my baby.

Trance gave his nod of assurance, and then I was following the doctor out.

“I know this is going to sound super freakin’ weird but...my son’s a huge fan. Can he have your autograph?” the doc asked.

I heard giggling from the hallway beyond me and turned to see Viddy standing there with arms full of paper sacks.

Lunch.

“Sure,” I said as I held out my hand.

He gave me his prescription pad and said, “His name is Noah.”

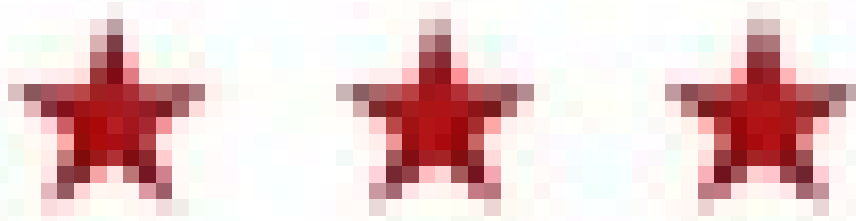
“I’ll treat her like my own.” He promised as he took the signed note.

I offered him my hand. “I’d appreciate that.”

And he did.

Six hours later, Briley was the owner of a bright green waterproof cast, and I was a couple of gray hairs heavier.

But in the end, everyone was okay, and that was all that I could ask for.



Two Days Later

“Slone,” Ari said softly. “You have to go. There are two options. We can go with you, or you can leave us here. I swear to you I won’t even leave the house.”

I waved that worry away. “I’m not worried about y’all, per se. I’m more worried about others.”

Others being her sister that we still couldn’t freakin’ find.

Not that she seemed too worried.

She may not be, but I sure the hell was.

“I’ll be okay with Ari, Daddy,” Briley promised as she wiggled her cast at me. “We’re going swimming.”

I looked over at her where she was leaned up on the couch against Melon. Melon, who didn’t seem to have a care in the world.

Did I somehow just gain two tigers living in my house with Ari? Was this my life now?

I kind of loved it.

“I don’t worry about y’all. I worry about all those weirdos that like to stalk me,” I pointed out.

“Hire a bodyguard,” Ari suggested.

Now that wasn’t a half bad idea.

“You’ll listen to him every step of the way?” I asked.

She crossed her heart with her fingers then held up a pinky.

“If you have the bodyguard, you can go back to working at the circus,” Briley voiced.

I shot her a glare.

“I could...” Ari agreed, looking at me as if she needed me to say yes before she’d even consider it.

So that was how I let my girl go back to work while her crazy sister was still on the loose.

CHAPTER 22

*I love hot dads.
-Text from Ari to Slone*

SLOANE

“How are we going to do this?” Ari asked me.

I’d thought about this a lot in the last few weeks.

Which I told her in the next breath.

“Yeah?” she asked. “So you have some ideas? Because I don’t. I don’t know how we’re going to do this.”

I pulled her in close.

We were lying in bed after a long week of me going back and forth from the house to sponsorship meetings, to games, then back.

There was a very, very high likelihood that we were looking at a playoff run, and possibly even a Super Bowl push come January/February.

So the sponsors were all in an uproar as they vied for my attention.

Needless to say, we were all tired.

And Briley, with her cast and her bad attitude, was one of the ones suffering.

Mostly because my team owner had all but told me that this back and forth, child traveling with the team thing, was over. Because she couldn’t give the same to the other players on the team.

Though I couldn’t fault my team members for wanting the same thing I had, I had it in my contract and told her so.

Which pissed Kay off even more.

And I had a very distinct feeling that she was trying to trade me and Titus now, just to save face with the team.

And if that happened...I was retiring.

I loved football. But I was tired of the back-and-forth game.

I was ready to be at home with my kid permanently.

Even if that home happened to move with the circus.

I explained my thoughts to Ari, and she sat up, her mouth open.

“You don’t want to play football anymore?” she shrieked.

I grinned and wrapped my hand around her arm, pulling her closer to me

so that she was lying on my chest.

When she was close, I said, “I don’t care about football anymore. I haven’t for a while.”

Saying the words felt almost freeing.

“I have a little over a year left in my contract. If they trade me, I’ll take a pay out on my contract and retire. If they don’t trade me, we’ll keep trucking for a year...then I’ll retire once my contract is up.”

She was shaking her head. “But how do we make that work, Slone?”

I curled a stray hair around her ear and said, “How do you feel about keeping Briley with you when I’m out of town?”

Her eyes widened. “I would love that.”

“How do you feel about hiring a driver, and then him driving our motor home around everywhere you go for your shows? Then when we have time, we’ll go home and stay there when there’s a break. We’ll make this work, baby. I don’t care what we have to do. We will,” I emphasized.

She licked her lips. “I think I’d really like that.”

“What about making this official?” I asked.

“As in marriage official?” she asked, eyes as wide as saucers now.

My lips twitched. “Everyone already thinks we’re married, baby. What’s a little engagement?”

She blinked. “Engagements usually come with rings.”

I twisted, taking her with me, then leaned out of the bed to reach for my pants on the floor. I came back up with the ring box out of my pocket to her laughing and wheezing.

“You’re really heavy, Slone,” she teased.

I let her have a bit more of my weight before I lifted up off of her and went up onto my knees in the bed.

She looked at me with wide eyes as she stared at the velvet box.

I flipped it open, and she gasped. “Yes.”

“I didn’t ask you anything yet.”

“Yes,” she repeated.

Grinning wickedly, I slid the ring onto her finger.

And then took a tackle from the smallest woman on earth, who promptly fell asleep in my arms.

Sadly, she didn't wake up until well past nine the next morning.

She had an apologetic look on her face when I blinked my own eyes open.

"I love the ring," she whispered, then kissed my nose.

I pulled her into my arms and said, "Good. It's the only one Briley and I could settle on. If you'd disliked it, we would've had to go with her first choice. And it looked like a ring from a dollar ring machine."

She snickered. "It probably wasn't that bad."

No, it was worse.

EPILOGUE

Watch what you put into your bodies, ladies. Your food and your men.

Quality only.

-Ari to her sisters

ARI

Six Months Later

“You ready to go?” I asked Briley.

Briley and I were on our way to my show, and we’d just finished up her schoolwork for the week.

Briley was so smart that sometimes it was downright scary.

It wouldn’t be long, and we’d have to find her a teacher that could actually keep up with her.

“I’m here, I’m here!”

I looked over to see Slone’s sister and mom barreling into the tent. They came to an abrupt halt when they saw Coco and Melon lounging on either side of Briley.

Grinning, I waved. “How are y’all doing? How was the cruise?”

They hadn’t gotten any better about making their vacations for when Slone and now me—and Briley, of course—could attend. But they were still really great people, and I’d loved getting to know them over the last six months.

“Hey, hurry it up, woman!” I heard called.

Keene appeared moments later in the doorway, snapping his fingers.

Rolling my eyes at his whining, I called to the tigers and said, “Briley, are you staying with your aunt and grandmother, or coming with me?”

“You,” Briley answered as she all but ran toward the tent flap.

Pushing past Keene, she dashed outside, and I tried to follow in her wake, but only managed to see a few bobs and weaves of her bright hair as she darted through the crowd.

I wasn’t worried, though.

Our bodyguard, Van, had her.

Van had become an integral part of our life since we’d made it official, and Briley had started spending time with both me and Slone as we moved from city to city.

We'd had a nice little vacation when his season had ended, but there he was, right back on the grind. And though Briley and I tried to make it to all of his games, some were just impossible to get to.

"Melon," I called as she started to veer off the path.

Melon quietly growled and turned, making me wonder whose scent she'd caught.

She usually only did that when she smelled Slone, but he wasn't going to be home for another two days.

He'd had a game last night that had gone bad. They'd been winning in the first quarter, but after halftime, things had gone miserably wrong, and they'd started losing.

Long story short, he hadn't been in the best of moods last night, and I'd let him be.

Though I did miss him like crazy.

Briley, too, for that matter.

My show went off without a hitch.

In the last six months, we'd definitely missed having Hades there to share the workload.

But it was also very nice to know that she was out there, living her life without latching on to me in an unhealthy way.

We did get monthly updates that usually consisted of 'I'm okay' and 'everything is going good.'

That was enough for me for now.

She'd come around when she was ready, and until then, I'd give her what she never gave me.

Space.

Wiping my forehead free of the droplet of sweat that usually accumulated there thanks to the intense stage lights, I offered everyone a bow and started to head toward the side exit.

Only, as I turned, my gaze fell on a man that was most definitely not supposed to be there.

"Slone." I beamed.

Briley was next to him, hopping excitedly.

The moment he saw I had his attention, he dropped down onto one knee and said, in front of the whole freakin' audience because apparently he was strapped with a mic, "Hey, you crazy cat lady. Will you marry me, right here, right now?"

He then pulled out my ring from his pocket.

Before I could answer, both Melon and Coco ran at him excitedly.

And not even the Longview Liners' soon-to-be retiring all-star linebacker could handle that kind of hit.

He went down with a laugh onto his back, giggling like a girl as he did.

I walked up to him and stood over his downed body, then spied my ring on the ground.

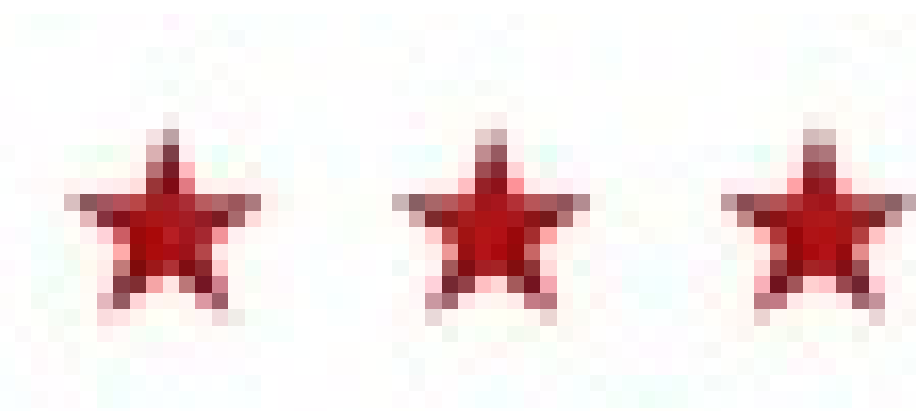
Bending down, I plucked the gorgeous ring—a two-carat emerald—out of the box and slipped it onto my finger.

It fit so perfectly.

That was exactly like him to know what to get me.

I was not a traditionalist by any means, and he got me.

Just as I'd looked down at him again, the telltale lightness started to enter my muscles, and before I could stop myself, I was passing smooth out straight into his arms.



He'd caught me.

Of course he'd caught me.

Blinking my eyes open, the first thing I saw was his lovely face staring down into mine.

"Was it you that Melon tried to head to today?" I questioned, a huge smirk

on my face and my heart so freakin' full it felt like it would burst.

"Yeah." He nodded sheepishly. "I tried to stay away, but that damn cat always knows when I'm near."

That was true.

Melon had all but latched on to Slone since we'd "moved in together."

Now, I no longer had two tigers devoted especially to me.

They were equally Briley's and Slone's, too.

Exactly how I wanted it.

"Next show is in ten," I heard Simi call. "You want to do it or should we go to plan B?"

I pushed up out of my husband-to-be's arms and signaled to her with an 'okay' sign.

"I'll do it," I said.

Though my issues weren't solved, I'd gotten them even more under control than I'd managed before Slone.

"And you're leaving after this?" Simi asked, rubbing her distended belly.

"Yep," I confirmed. "Slone said we're getting married. So we're getting married. Backup has arrived?"

Simi was already pointing behind her.

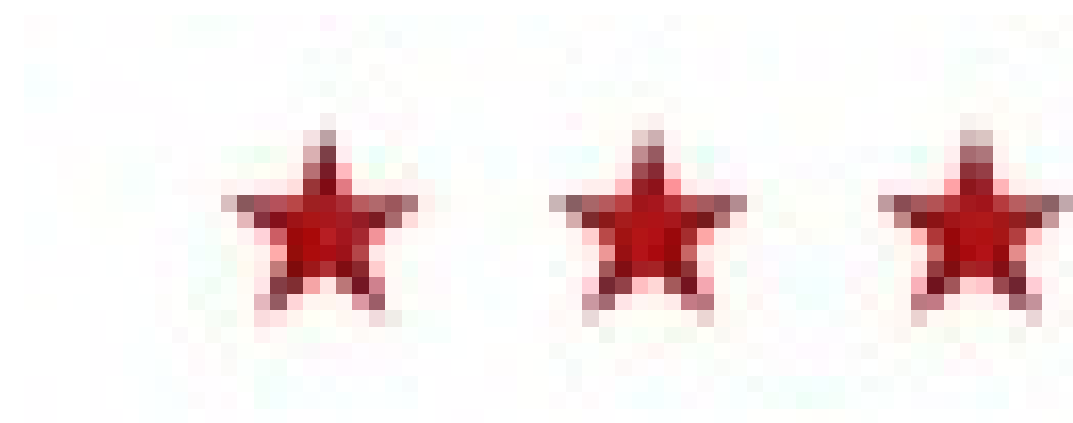
A month after all the excitement with the tigers, we'd decided that the best course of action for all of us was to hire a few permanent workers that could cover for us when we felt like we needed a break.

And even Keene was using that backup from time to time.

Life had gotten a whole lot sweeter since Slone had come into my life.

"You're smiling awfully big there, Ari," Slone said as he wrapped his arms around my waist.

I leaned into him and looked up into his eyes before saying, "I have a lot to smile about."



HADES

Sixty Minutes Later

I watched as my twin sister got married.

She'd just kissed her husband when I turned and walked away.

“You've done the right thing, staying away.”

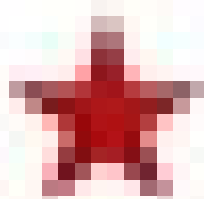
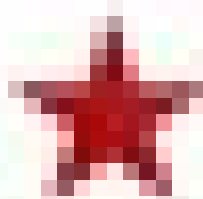
I looked over at the man that I'd fallen in love with—a man that just might get me kicked out of my family permanently—and shrugged. “Maybe. I hope I did the right thing.”

He pulled me into his arms and said, “You found her stalker, sent him to jail, and overcame your issues.”

“I didn't overcome my issues.” I snorted. “You just replaced them.”

He pinched my side. “Good enough for me, baby.”

It was good enough for me, too.



I hope you've enjoyed getting to know Hades and Ari! Next up is *Show Off*.

Grab your copy [here](#).