



Him
Again?

A Girl's Bestie
Rom Com Novel

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALI PARKER

HIM AGAIN?

A GIRL'S BESTIE ROM COM NOVEL #2



ALI PARKER

STAR KEY PRESS

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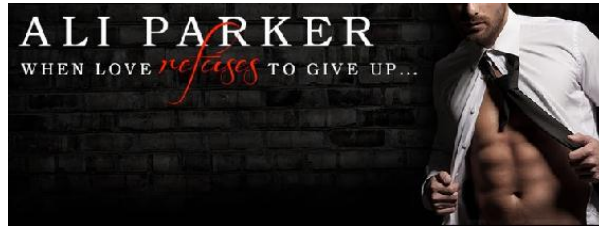
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FIND ALI PARKER



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DESCRIPTION



I should have known I'd run into him eventually.

But at our friend's wedding with nowhere to hide?

Ugh.

I wish he didn't look so good in a suit.

Or board shorts.

And come on. Nobody looks good in board shorts.

But he does.

Double ugh. And triple trouble.

We had our shot when we were young and in love, and what did he do?

He chose my ex best friend instead.

The kicker?

She's at the wedding too, and like always, she has ulterior motives.

He's also a single dad.

Guess who his baby momma is?

You got it.

The ex best friend.

After all that you'd think I'd know when to turn tail and run the other direction.

Except he's not the boy he used to be.

And I'm not the same girl, either.

If I let him back in, I might get hurt.

If I don't, I might regret it forever.

I already know what everyone is going to think.

Him again?

Introduction



Well hey there! Thank you so much for grabbing one of my books. I sure hope you love it.

I'd hate to part ways once you're done though. How about we stay in touch? We have a great family of readers on my Insiders

Newsletter Group that you just can't miss out on.

We do exclusive giveaways, facebook parties, Christmas cards, event invites and sneak previews for this amazing group.

And as a HUGE thank you for joining,
you'll receive a free book on me!

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CHAPTER 1



JENNY

Lauren and Jameson slowed again, and I prodded my best friend in the back to keep moving. We were going to clog the aisle if they had to pause at every little detail and launch a commentary. I should've known it might be like this.

Jameson had proposed to Lauren a few days ago in Florida. We all knew it was coming. Despite the ups and downs of all they went through to reach a happily ever after, they were such a solid pair of perfectly matched souls, they were bound to make up, move on, and seek marriage.

Maybe it was because of the newness of Lauren *just* becoming engaged that she was obsessed about all things to do with weddings. When she returned from Florida and showed us the ring, she was excited. Since then, she was one hundred percent on the wedding train, all thoughts and ideas and questions revolving around *her* wedding.

Bridal magazines, sample brochures, and countless wedding-vendor business cards lay scattered on the coffee table in the big house we shared with our three other friends. It was going to take over our lives. So of course, she'd be a guest with a hardcore critical eye on *this* wedding.

"Are you kidding me?" Lauren lifted her face with a not-so-hidden and wide-eyed expression that implied to Jameson she was thinking, *are you seeing this?* "Seriously?"

I leaned around the tall man and poked my head closer to see what was holding her up this time. "It's a peony." I shrugged. Was that specific flower a faux pas in the world of

wedding décor? She'd be the one to know. It was pretty. It wasn't in season, but then people who paid for weddings held at snazzy places like this could afford whatever bloom they wanted grown in a greenhouse somewhere in the world.

I narrowed my eyes, peering at it closer. "Oh. It's silk."

"It's *fake*," Lauren whispered in that scandalous tone again.

I pushed her hand down, setting the "flower" back into the arrangement tied to the post at the end of that row. "We're going to be late."

Jameson chuckled and took Lauren's hand. "We're not late."

"Oh, we are. By her standards."

I glanced behind us, smiling quickly at the people trying to get a seat in the row we blocked. "Sorry," I mouthed. Ushering my friends further ahead, I leaned close to whisper. "We're not late." *Yet*. "But you're walking around like a freaking art critic."

"Just be happy I talked her out of bringing something to jot notes."

Lauren smirked at her man. "Ridiculous. Making us check our phones in back there." She pointed at him. "We're not doing that. Nor are we having any fake flowers."

He pecked a kiss to the top of her head. "Whatever you want, Lauren, you can have." He'd said that so many times since he asked her to be his wife that he needed it tattooed on his forehead. What an easygoing guy.

"I want people to be able to take pictures," Lauren said as we strolled along the aisle. "Just not right during the ceremony. It's not nice to deprive people of their phones. They can just agree to not take pics during it all."

"That's a fair approach," I agreed. But I bet she was itching to reach for her phone and snap pictures of how our friends Naomi and Colby had done their stuff. Lauren and I both knew the couple from high school. Naomi wasn't too

close, more of an acquaintance, and with so many years between graduation and now, we had all drifted apart. It happened. In fact, I spotted many familiar faces here. I couldn't put a name to each one, but I recognized them as other classmates I'd lost track of over the years. Some of them, I hadn't seen since the day we tossed our caps in the air and said farewell to school.

Lauren was correct in teasing me about punctuality. I loathed being late. If any of these former classmates were asked, they'd know I hated it back then as a teen too. Being tardy was a grievance I never allowed, and we *were* here. We weren't late. But the longer we searched for a row of seats for all three of us, the more I felt like we were in the spotlight, standing above the gathering crowd already seated.

Under a spotlight was the last place I wanted to be. I wasn't afraid of being seen. I wasn't that introverted and shy. But I wanted to mark my nemesis before she could get a first look at *me*.

"How about here?" Jameson asked, indicating a row with several seats available.

"No." Lauren rolled her eyes. "That's the groom's side. We have to go over there." She raised her brows. "Groom and bride guests and family seating on opposite sides of the aisle? No. No thanks."

He smiled. "Duly noted."

"There are some chairs." I pointed ahead, and we moved over to claim them. Jameson sat closest to the aisle, Lauren sat next to him, and I claimed the furthest in.

The outdoor reception area was filling up fast, and as we settled into our seats, I continued to scour the crowd.

"Look at this," Lauren said in that judgy yet casual tone. She lifted the bouquet that was strung around the back of another post to my left. "Real flowers, so they get points for that. But white?" She shook her head. "Boring. I want color, Jameson."

“Okay.” He nodded, catching my eye and holding back a laugh. I doubted he cared about the colors. He was just happy to have his girl.

I rolled my eyes, joining him in teasing Lauren behind her back as she leaned forward to push the flowers back into their tie. She used too much force though, and the bunch fell to the ground.

“Shoot.”

“Lauren!” I hissed.

“Oh, they haven’t even started the music yet. Switch with me.”

We shuffled, her taking my chair and me sliding over to sit at Jameson’s left.

“What about those cups at the entrance?” Jameson asked as she tried to cram the flowers back in place, frowning when they wouldn’t cooperate.

“What about them?” I asked.

“The cider?” Lauren said.

“Yeah. Well, I was wondering if they had alcohol in them.” He shrugged. “To take the edge off.”

Lauren giggled. “Only the bride and groom would have to worry about needing to tame their nerves. It’s their big day.”

Uh, speak for yourself. I’m not so sure I agree. I was more than antsy here as a guest, anxious about who else would come and attend this ceremony.

“Besides,” Lauren added. “Naomi and Colby have practically been married since seventh grade. They’ve got no reason for nerves. Now that tray of cider you’re thinking of?” She grinned wide. “I *love* that idea for a cold-weather wedding.”

“But I thought we were leaning on a summer date,” Jameson argued.

By *we*, he meant *she*.

She growled lightly. “I’m not sure. Maybe waiting until the fall would make it more romantic.”

“You’re going to smash it,” I warned, leaning over to help her with the flowers. I was used to handling plants, always in the garden, but an artistic floral display was something else. I furrowed my brow, trying to stab the stems back in the mess.

“See what I mean? Why won’t this thing just stay up?” Lauren lifted her face, checking that the wedding wasn’t about to begin. When she faced forward, she narrowed her eyes.

“It think this ribbon is in the way. *Ow!*” I reared back from her, rubbing my side where she suddenly dug her elbow in hard. “What was that for?” I hissed under my breath, already slightly embarrassed over how loud I reacted.

She exaggerated opening her eyes wide as she pointed ahead at the front entrance, where Colby would soon stand with Naomi at the altar. I followed her gaze and froze.

A blonde bombshell had just arrived. She was still just as tall but not in a gangly way. All her curves fell in the right spots, her boobs so huge and high, her waist so thin above slender legs. With a slight tilt of her head, she sent her loose golden waves back from her shoulder, revealing flawless tanned skin.

“I can’t believe it,” Lauren whispered hotly.

I did. I had been worrying about this woman showing her face here, and now that she had, dread set in. My stomach knotted and my shoulders rose in a slight hunch. I wanted to curl up and hide. Facing her wasn’t high on my list of things to accomplish. Most of the people here were familiar in a forgotten way, but not this woman.

“She’s wearing *white* at someone else’s wedding?” Lauren hissed.

“I think it’s actually a little pink,” Jameson said. “Maybe?”

“I swear, if someone shows up to my wedding in a dress like that, you’ve got my permission to spill red wine on them,” Lauren muttered.

My stomach tensed even more as the woman paused and scanned the other half of the seated crowd. Like a model posing. Like a star soaking up all the attention. Right on the aisle, in a dress that would be an insult to Naomi and steal her thunder.

“I’m not surprised,” I whispered. “Gwen always had to be the center of attention.”

Lauren gasped. “No.”

“Yeah. That’s Gwen.”

Lauren leaned forward, squinting. “Holy shit. That *is* Gwen. Did you know she was coming?”

“How could I?” I had worried she might be here, though. I had counted on the possibility of it. And now I had to suffer through it.

She smiled sweetly as an usher hurried up to her, urging her to move along. If he hadn’t asked her to be seated, she probably would’ve stayed there. With a practiced strut, she came down the aisle. Closer to us. Closer.

“Lean forward,” I hissed at Jameson. Even though I tried to prepare myself for seeing her again, I just wasn’t ready.

He chuckled but obliged. “Jeez.” As he slanted forward, I ducked behind him, angling my legs toward Lauren. She lifted her hand to her face and hurried to cover it and glance away, also trying to hide.

Behind Jameson, I spotted Gwen strolling down the aisle like it was her runway.

“Should I call her over?” Jameson joked. His back moved with his chuckle. I tucked behind him as Gwen ambled closer.

Lauren reached over to swat his arm. “Don’t you dare.”

“Jameson, don’t even think about it,” I warned.

He tugged at his collar. “Damn. My bad. What did this girl do to you?” He glanced at Lauren, then me, and I sat up slowly, still hunching my shoulders. Gwen had found a seat a couple of rows up.

Jameson looked at me expectantly, brows raised, and I hesitated to answer.

My stomach rolled. The ceremony was about to start. Colby showed at the altar. This wasn't the time or place to explain my history with that blonde, and the thought of speaking about it gnawed at my insides. "It's not what she did," I said quietly.

It's who she did it with.

Lauren grabbed my hand and squeezed. "She made Jenny's final years of high school absolutely terrible."

I gestured for her to reclaim her seat next to Jameson. Once we sat again, I glanced at Jameson and noticed the sympathy and pity on his face. "She never apologized. For any of it."

Jameson frowned, turning to see her again through the crowd of heads.

"Don't." Lauren grabbed his sleeve, stopping him. "She thrives on attention. And we're not giving her that."

I wanted to burrow into my seat and hide. At least Lauren and Jameson were here with me. I didn't have to face her completely alone.

"She's a bully," I whispered as a final answer as I eyed the back of her very blonde head. "Nothing but a bully."

CHAPTER 2



WARD

I grabbed my tux jacket and glanced at the clock. “We’re not going to be late.”

“You’re right.” My daughter crossed her arms and tapped her foot. “We’re not *gonna* be late. We already *are* late!”

I frowned at her, wondering how she could have this much sass and sound like an adult at six years old. My mom watched her when I worked, so she was the only other influence that could make Sunny sound so with it, like an adorable know-it-all. My mom sure had attitude in spades. But she was wrong this time.

“No, no, no.” I wagged my finger at her as I pulled my sleeve on. “I learned my lesson at the kindergarten graduation last year.”

She giggled. “Daddy, you’re never going to learn how to be on time.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Did Grandma tell you that?”

“She’s not wrong!”

I rolled my eyes, taking her teasing in stride. “I learned my lesson with your kindergarten graduation,” I repeated.

She shook her head, no doubt remembering how I ran in there ten minutes late. Her teacher told me that Sunny had stalled it from starting by doing the “I have to pee” dance over and over and running to the bathroom. She’d tried to delay the first song, which she had a big line in, knowing I’d be behind schedule.

I wasn't sure why I couldn't be on time. It was just my quirk.

I tried though. Being a single dad wasn't easy, and if my mother wasn't here to help me raise this smart girl, I'd be late even more than I already was. The last couple of weeks had been nothing but crunchtime as I prepared to open my flagship store, but I wouldn't be late for my best friend's wedding. This time, I applied my mom's advice from the ill-fated kindergarten graduation delay.

Last night, I double-checked my texts and emails. I verbally repeated to Sunny what time we would have to prepare by and when we would need to leave. She had been so helpful, reminding me of the list of steps we had to cross off. Breakfast, shower, hair, finding her things to bring. She'd be dolled up with the bridal party, but we still had to bring her a change of clothes and such for later.

She had the bag sitting on the stool next to her. *She* was ready, as always. Still, she shook her head in disappointment.

"Naomi said to make sure you're in the room by ten. To get ready." We had twenty minutes to spare.

"*No*, Daddy. She said the bridal party needed to be ready to *leave* the dressing room by ten."

"But the wedding doesn't start until twelve."

She thrust the invite up at me. "Eleven!"

I stilled and glanced at the invite in her hand. Then the clock on the oven. Then back at her as I tried to remember the too-many texts from Caleb and Naomi, who always knew how I struggled with tardiness.

Shit. "Let's go!"

We ran, her before me with her tote bag slapping her side. She giggled, but I growled, rushing after her as we hurried to get in the car. As soon as she closed the backseat door, I opened mine and slid in to start the new car. Or the newest car. I had several, but this sporty SUV was Sunny's favorite.

“I can’t believe I’m going to miss it,” she chastised from the backseat.

I glanced in the mirror, checking she was finished buckling in on her booster seat. Then I put the car in drive and sped off. “You’re not going to miss it.”

“What if the bridesmaids line up and go because they can’t wait for me?”

“They can’t start a wedding without a flower girl. It’s a law.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Not having a flower girl isn’t illegal.”

I grinned. I’d never tire of her wit and sass. She was a smart girl, only six, but some days, it seemed like she was six going on twelve. “I promise we’ll be there soon.”

“With or without a speeding ticket?”

I shrugged. “Either works for me. Whatever it takes to make sure you won’t miss your big walk down the aisle.” It was all she’d talked about for weeks, so excited to be involved in a wedding like this. It was only her and me in my big house, plus my mom who was just a short drive over. It was a small circle, though, and I noticed she liked to people-watch at larger gatherings.

Because she feels like she’s missing out? I hoped not.

“It would be a shame if I missed it.”

“You won’t miss it!”

“I’ve been practicing so much.”

She had been. I’d never forget the memory of her setting up bath towels to make an aisle, then tossing cut-out flowers of construction paper from a popcorn bucket that she glued a ribbon to for a basket.

“And you will do fine, Sunny.” Moments later, I pointed ahead. “See, it’s right there.”

“Wow.” I heard the marvel in her voice as she gazed out the window. The tall building of the country club looked

antiquated, like a castle, and I could only imagine what she was thinking.

“I’ll be like a princess in there!”

Be still my heart. Sometimes I wished she’d stay innocent and cute like this forever.

Naomi and Colby had chosen this venue after much debate, and I could see why they did. Turrets and towers lined the front, and I knew the back lawns would be immaculate. Best of all, the weather was cooperating too. Bright blue skies without a cloud overhead. It would be a wonderful day.

A valet waited out front, shaving off a couple of minutes for my rush. I urged Sunny to get out of the car, and it would’ve been easier if she looked where she was going. Eyes up and mouth open, she gazed at the building in awe.

“Sunny, come on.” I caught her just as she nearly missed her step out of the SUV, and I was half-tempted to carry her the rest of the way inside.

“This *is* a castle!” she gushed.

I took her bag and grabbed her hand. “Country club.”

She dutifully ran inside with me, but I caught the way she scrunched her nose. “People golf here?”

“Not inside.”

She groaned, unamused. “Well, *duh!* Not inside.”

I pushed open the doors and hoped it wouldn’t be hard to find the room where Naomi and her bridesmaids would be waiting for Sunny. For as huge as the building looked outside, I’d probably be out of luck. I wasn’t a negative guy. Luck and optimism had treated me well in life so far. Places this big and grand were confusing labyrinths with too many halls and an abundance of wrong turns.

“*Wow.*” Sunny dragged it into a whole sigh’s worth of a reaction.

I turned my head this way and that, seeking where to go. No signs? No arrows? *Help a guy out!*

I chose the left hall and started to jog, but it wasn't until a few feet further that I realized her small hand wasn't in mine anymore. Doubling back, I realized she was awestruck again, staring in the foyer.

"There's a fountain," she replied dreamily.

I returned to take her hand. "Yeah." I glanced at it now, raising my brows. That was a hell of a fountain. Multiple layers of cascades over ledges and all kinds of sculptures. "A drinking fountain?"

"Daddy!" She giggled and pointed. "No. I think that's supposed to be Ariel. And Flounder!"

"Then *they* won't want to see you be late as flower girl either."

Reminded again, she jogged with me, only to pull my hand to slow again. And again. Just how many sculptures, ornate arches, freaking murals, and fountains did this place have? She wanted to pause and gawk at every one of them. Half my effort was in keeping her running to the wedding while the other half was scrambling to figure out where to go.

"We went down this hall," she said. "We already passed the sculpture of two people wrestling to the ground."

I glanced at the artwork and frowned. They weren't wrestling, but she didn't need to know that. I hadn't counted on worrying if the décor in the hallways was NSFW. And I sure hadn't noticed it last night.

Maybe because we were running late to rehearsal too and came in another way.

"Oh, look!"

I groaned lightly and firmed my hold on her fingers. "No, Sunny. Keep your eye on the prize. You can explore and look at all of this later."

"But it's all so pretty," she argued as she tried to keep up.

"Hey, Uncle Colby might be a patient man, but the bride? Well, she shouldn't have to wait on anyone."

“I know. Hey! I remember that door. We’re supposed to go there.” Sunny tugged on my hand, redirecting me to run to the right at this corner, not left. I let her claim the lead. Her knack for punctuality was better than mine. Maybe her navigational skills would be too.

I’d take her word for it. Those closed double doors looked the same as all the others we passed, but when I knocked then opened without waiting, we hit jackpot.

Naomi and the bridesmaids stood in the dressing room. They all glanced up at us bursting through the room. I only had the bag for Sunny on my arm, but I felt like we had been rushing through the airport like when Kevin’s family left him behind.

I panted and grinned.

“About time!” the maid of honor said first.

“Ward,” Naomi said lowly as she shook her head. “You need a babysitter.”

“I tried.” Sunny shrugged.

“What was it this time?” Naomi asked. “Forgot to set his alarm?”

“Nope. He thought the wedding was at twelve.”

I shot my daughter a frown for throwing me under the bus like that. “Hey!”

“Well, you did.”

Naomi rolled her eyes. “After all the reminders we texted.”

“Aw, come on. There’s no need for that today. You look gorgeous.”

That lost some of her annoyance. She never could stay mad for long.

“Like a princess,” Sunny piped up.

“You’ve come a long way from the cargo-pant-wearing tomboy you were in junior high,” I added.

She smacked my arm. “Thanks for *that* memory. Now go.”

I stepped back, setting Sunny's bag on a chair.

"Colby's probably waiting for his best man at the damn altar."

"Okay, okay. I'm going." I paused long enough to lean over and kiss Sunny's cheek. "Have fun, all right? Don't be nervous. Keep your chin up and look for me if you need support."

"Dad." She drawled it while rolling her eyes. "Just go."

"Yeah, beat it, Ward," the maid of honor said as she reached for a garment bag.

"Go!" the others chorused.

I wasn't going to dally here, but as I backed up, I did so slowly so I could watch her reaction. That small container held her dress, and for as much as she loved her princesses, I knew she'd gaze at this with glee too. The further I backed up and left, the more the women took over and made a big deal about Sunny. They were all ready to go, and now it was time to glam up the flower girl.

She was all smiles, living up to her namesake as she glowed with excitement. At the sight of the shoes Naomi found for her, Sunny gasped. Her hands flew up to cover her mouth. "Those are really for me?"

"Sure are," Naomi said around giggles as she and the maid of honor held up her outfit.

"And *this* too," another bridesmaid said as she held out a tiara.

I grinned at her squeal of shock and joy. She was in good hands, and I knew she would remember this day forever. As I hurried to find the door to take me to the wedding altar, I grimaced at a pang of guilt that hit me.

Sunny didn't have a mother to do these kinds of things with her. I tried my best at tea parties but it wasn't the same. My mom was a figure of female authority in her life, but still, every little girl needed a mother.

I sighed, pushing open a door and finding that bright blue sunshine again. It warmed me, chasing away the slight pain of regret, and I headed out on the green to find my spot as best man.

CHAPTER 3



JENNY

“**W**hen is the wedding supposed to start?” Jameson whispered to Lauren.

“Any minute, now.” She turned to peer down the aisle, as more than a few did.

“Maybe they want to be fashionably late,” I whispered.

“Or maybe they just *are* late.” Lauren gasped.

I started, flinching at the loud sound of her suddenly sucking in air. “What? What is it?” There was no way Naomi was running away. She and Colby were just such a solid couple.

“Don’t look now,” Lauren said. Jameson turned, making me want to look even more. “But you-know-who is running down the aisle.” Lauren winced as she faced me for a second.

“You-know-who?” I whispered. I wasn’t sure why she was talking in code, but given the tardiness of the ceremony, that nagging suspicion in my gut turned into a full-blown hunch.

Of course, she’s talking about him.

Naturally, I had to look. I turned slightly to peek around both Lauren and Jameson to spot the latecomer.

Ward Emerson.

He easily jogged down the aisle with a smooth athleticism that was a sharp contrast to his gangly-armed frame when we were younger. Muscles filled up the tuxedo that fit him to a T,

and the black-on-black effect was a sharp, dashing look on him. Literally, as he *dashed* down the aisle, true to his nature.

It seemed no matter the time that passed, he'd never grow out of his inability to ever be punctual. His brown hair was still thick and short, and those brown eyes still shone with enthusiasm and good humor.

I couldn't remember the last time I saw him. Sure, I'd thought about him plenty, but I couldn't recall when I'd actually seen him in the flesh last. I came up empty, and no wonder I did. I'd never seen him looking like this. Ward had those classic, all-American-boy looks and the charm to match. He'd always been handsome, but never seriously sexy like this kind of handsome.

Lauren gently reached over to tap the bottom of my chin. I wanted to hate that she'd caught me ogling him so blatantly, but I wasn't mad at her. I was mad at myself.

My stomach tensed as I realized it really was him. That he was here and looking so fine. After such a long time of not having him in my life at all, it was a shock to my system.

I exhaled a shaky breath and ducked as he came closer, then passed by. Jameson was no slouch. He and Lauren were a buffer, but Ward didn't slow to find a seat. He didn't glance to the side. I was safe, so to speak, until I watched the guy continue up to the altar.

He's not a guest. Ward was the best man, and he'd be standing up there with a chance to look out at the crowd.

Shit! He might see me, and if the stomach-dropping and heart-racing sensations I felt were any indication, I simply wasn't ready for that to happen. Seeing him felt like a blast from the past, and more. He looked better than before, and it was difficult to connect this hot guy with the kid from years ago.

Sliding my butt forward on the seat, I slunk down to hide behind the taller man seated in front of me. Thank goodness for giants like this one. A slant to the side allowed me a secret

view of Ward at the altar, and I lurked like that, watching the men up there as my mind raced in panic.

Ward likely hadn't spotted me or anyone else because he had been rushing to Colby. He clasped the groom's hand, shaking his head and muttering. Even though he looked apologetic, he couldn't shake the shit-eating yet sheepish grin off his face.

"Sorry I'm late," he told Colby.

Even his voice is the same. I held back a whimper at hearing his deep baritone.

Colby laughed, all smiles and as easygoing as his friend. "The bride is supposed to make a late entrance, dude. Not the best man."

Ward chuckled, as did several others within earshot. "As long as she shows up at all."

Colby shot him a look, and they took their positions and spoke more quietly.

Lauren leaned toward me to whisper. "Did you know he would be here?"

I swallowed hard and shook my head. Just how long would it take for me to get over the shock of seeing him again? "No, I didn't. But I guess I should have."

Ward and I both knew Colby and Naomi. Lauren, too. We went back all the way to high school, even junior high. Naomi and Colby were the couple everyone wanted to be. They were a perfect match, and many envied them. Including me.

During those impressionable years of leaving childhood behind and becoming an adult, they represented relationship goals. For a hot minute there, I thought Ward and I were another young couple who would go the distance. That we were also a pair of sweethearts who would last past graduation. With a pang in my heart, I thought back to those naïve days when I figured Ward and I could start adult lives together and get married.

Yeah, look how that turned out.

Bitterness crashed over me again, and I furrowed my brow as I tore my gaze from Ward. Reminded of how we didn't last, not even to the end of high school, I sought out Gwen again. Her blonde waves stood out. I zeroed in on the back of her head, wishing she could feel the burn of my dark glare. Like laser beams.

Now that I had the relative distance to gauge where she sat, I noticed how far up she was. She'd taken a seat up near the front, in the area where the first row was reserved for the closest family members. Ribbons with fake flowers indicated the area, but that hadn't stopped her from claiming a spot wherever she pleased.

I agreed with Lauren about his and hers halves of the space. Making families of the bride and groom sit apart was old-fashioned, but I thought the first rows should be respected as places for the family to sit.

Not her, and no one had even called her on it yet.

Typical Gwen. Taking what isn't hers. It seemed like she hadn't changed over the years either.

Before I could return my secret attention to Ward, hiding behind the tall man, the music grew louder.

Lauren patted my leg, excited. I didn't remember her being this big of a fan about weddings, and I suspected she was eager to see this one start because she could so easily envision *her* big day coming up.

With a mob-like effect, heads swiveled and people stood. Even the tall guy, who'd been so nicely serving as a wall to hide behind, twisted to look back at where the bride would show up. The music rose and swelled, marking the official beginning of the bridal procession.

I got to my feet and turned as well, giving Ward my back so he couldn't spot me in the crowd. I smoothed down the fabric of my emerald-green dress and I tilted my head side to side to spot the women as they came down the aisle.

My attention was drawn to the bridesmaids paired with groomsmen. Each couple was dressed well, and every detail

had been tended to. It had been a while since I'd gone to a wedding, but this looked so flawless, I wondered if Lauren could top it.

Not that weddings are a competition, anyway.

A girl, not a woman, came last. A short girl with a wide, confident smile tossed flower petals from a dainty basket. Like a little queen, she held her head high and grinned so sweetly that it was infectious. I couldn't help but smile in return as she passed, dutifully tossing petals with an almost perfect precision. She sure took her role seriously, and that made it all the cuter.

Once she walked by, all thoughts about Ward, all annoyances with Gwen, and all insecurities about facing the people from my past all fell to the backburner. Naomi glided forward, her face radiant with joy as she looked ahead to find Colby waiting for her at the altar. I was swept away by the beauty of this wedding. Naomi was absolutely gorgeous in her gown, and tears came to my eyes as she walked down the aisle to reach her groom.

"Oh, that dress is just breathtaking," Lauren whispered to me as she got situated at the altar.

I nodded, taking my seat again with my attention squarely on the couple who'd made it from childhood to adulthood. Naomi and Colby couldn't take their eyes off each other, not even once, and it was that show of true, deep love that stole my breath.

Witnessing them complete this ceremony and vow to be husband and wife made it so much more meaningful. They weren't just the couple from the past whose relationship I once wished I could have myself. They were also strong partners in the present, ready to grow old with each other.

Lauren and I wiped tears from our eyes during the ceremony, and both of us had teary smiles as the new Mr. and Mrs. walked back down the aisle. Among applause, hoots, and hollers, Naomi and Colby laughed and held hands as they headed toward the back.

I glanced around the noisy crowd, trying to determine how near I was to danger. Or safety. After seeing both Gwen and Ward here, it would be dumb to stick around. Spotting them was difficult enough, but putting myself in the position to have to talk to them would be hell.

I should just go. I didn't want to deal with a confrontation at a friend's wedding. Naomi and Colby deserved a drama-free afternoon and evening.

"I think I'm going to head out," I told Lauren as we walked with the mass to exit.

She shushed me. "No way."

Holding her head up high, she seemed to be on the lookout. I wasn't surprised that she would know who to look for or why I'd want to bolt. The girl knew me too damn well to miss anything.

"Don't you dare let those jerks run you out of here," she said firmly.

"Who?" Jameson asked.

Lauren patted his arm as we neared the doors at the back. "Gwen," she replied, giving him a half-answer.

"Eh, I don't know. I'd rather just go." My stomach tensed with every step we took. The married couple would be out here in the receiving line, but would Ward? Coming closer to having to face him felt like I was walking the plank. I wasn't ready, and I wasn't sure I'd ever be. I hadn't gotten over the shock of seeing him yet.

"You deserve to be here as much as anyone else does. And Jameson and I will back you up." She glanced at him. "Right?"

He nodded. "Right."

"Thanks," I told them. But I still dreaded the moment I would encounter him face to face.

CHAPTER 4



WARD

Years ago, I had taken one of those online quizzes that told me I had a tendency to be late to everything because I liked to take risks. That I enjoyed the thrill of potentially being on time. That I flirted with it. It sounded like bullshit. I still thought it was. I didn't really care why I was late. It was just the way I was.

It had been thrilling to hurry Sunny here on time, though, and as the ceremony carried on, it wasn't thrilling. Sure, I was happier than hell for my friends, but damn, those vows were long and wordy. Colby had to refer to an AI program for help, and I cracked up when Naomi admitted she'd done the same.

Hey, not everyone was a wordsmith, after all.

I tried to wink at Sunny during the ceremony, but she was a rule-follower. She sat and listened to each word. I wouldn't say I was bored. I wasn't, but none of this was new to me. I saw every day how much Colby and Naomi loved each other. I'd witnessed it for years, so hearing them fluff it up in fancy vows seemed pointless.

Needless to say, I was excited for the ceremony to wrap up. I couldn't wait to find my daughter and tell her how proud I was of her. She hadn't missed a single step, and I swore the whole congregation fell in love with her. No one liked a parent who bragged, but Sunny was that damn cute, and I wasn't shy to say so.

The wedding was great, but it was what followed that I looked forward to. Having Sunny here as my "date" would be

memorable for both of us. And as for Naomi and Colby, they had their whole future ahead of them to do this “right.” Colby had confided in me how eager he was to start a family despite Naomi’s worries about fertility, some family genetic thing she was concerned about. He was eager to move up at work too.

As we exited the wedding area, I mused at how I had done it all “wrong.” Unmarried, a single dad, and financial success to a degree I never could have imagined. Still, I wouldn’t change it for the world. Sunny *was* my world.

As the entire wedding party greeted the guests when they filed out of the rows they’d sat in, Sunny soaked up the attention of everyone commenting on her flower-girl role.

“Hey, we’re going to head inside for a bit,” Colby said after a while.

I nodded. I’d already noticed how Naomi was faring under all the spotlight. I knew her cheeks had to be hurting from all that smiling. Mine were.

“No problem.” I patted his back, ready to have his. That was what a best man was for.

“We’re just going to step aside for some quiet time before the photos,” Naomi added.

I nodded again, but not before Colby’s groomsman, a cousin, angled closer. “Yeah, we all know what that means.” He finished his tease with a crude gesture with his hands and a thrust of his hips. I didn’t think. I just shoved. I blocked him from the new couple.

“Seriously?”

His goofy expression fell. “Well, come on. They are totally going to get a quickie in.”

I rolled my eyes and turned back to my friends. “Go on.”

They headed off, and when I faced the crowd again, I was pleased to find the bulk of them on their way to the reception area.

“Dude, you were so much more fun before you had a kid.”

I slanted the groomsman a hard look. “Shut up.”

I wasn't in the mood for his crap. He didn't know what he was talking about, and the way he said it implied I was lacking. I had more money than I could ever spend. I had a great daughter. I had a booming business. And I still had fun, dammit.

I turned away from him, seeking out my little sunshine. She'd snap me out of this mood. I was too pensive for such a beautiful, festive day of celebration, but deep down, I suspected that was just it. Colby and Naomi getting married was a stark reminder of the one thing I didn't have in my life.

Although the crowd was mostly dispersed, several throngs of guests lingered. I couldn't find Sunny at first, and I figured I should just look for one of the bridesmaids. Her daughter was in a grade above Sunny, so if she wanted to go find someone, I bet she was with that other girl.

She wasn't, though. Once I headed further toward the path leading to the reception area, I spotted my daughter, and she was *not* alone. I'd been so eager to tell her that she'd done a great job, but her mother had beat me to the punch. I hadn't even considered that Gwen might show up.

Wait a damn second. I knew she wouldn't be here. When I realized how many of our former classmates might be on the guestlist, I asked Naomi if Gwen had RSVP'd to the event. She confirmed that she hadn't.

But there she was. And there was no mistaking the blonde who smiled down at my daughter.

I sighed as I shoved my hands in my pockets and headed toward them, hoping she wouldn't ruin the whole night.

“You just look so mature and pretty,” Gwen gushed. “Like a mini-me.”

She's six. She's not mature.

“Too bad you didn't get my hair,” she mused, brushing her gold locks back.

And now on to backhanded compliments.

From the day Gwen learned she was pregnant, I suspected she wasn't mother material. It was unfortunate that Sunny's birth proved that she wasn't. Still to this day, without any custody, she showed how poorly she had ever connected with the girl.

Sunny glanced at me, almost smiling as though she wasn't sure if she *should* smile.

"You've grown so much since the last time I saw you," Gwen cooed, like she was now talking down to an infant.

A blush covered Sunny's cheeks and I loathed how uncomfortable she had to be feeling at the moment. I doubted Sunny would know how to behave around her estranged mother. They never saw each other, so it was anyone's guess how old Sunny was the last time they had been in each other's presence. I didn't waste my efforts attempting to recall their previous meeting.

As I came closer, Sunny turned to me, seeking my comfort.

"Oh. I didn't see you there, Ward. I wasn't sure if *you* would be here."

I narrowed my eyes at her. Confusion didn't cut it. The woman just made no sense.

"Uh, Gwen?" Sunny said as she sidled up to my side.

"Sweetie, call me *Mom*."

"He was up at the altar. With Uncle Colby. How could you not see that my dad was here?"

I wanted to grin. Leave it to Sunny to cut through the bullshit and call her own mother out on it. Sunny was brilliant and very smart for her age, but she wasn't so attuned to the fine art of what Gwen mastered in which was manipulation. Gwen saw me, but she wanted to play this narrative to her benefit, and playing dumb and pretending to be surprised wasn't working in her favor.

"Oh, was he?" Gwen giggled, and the sound grated on my nerves. "So much to pay attention to." She gestured at Sunny.

“Especially you, sweetie. You were the prettiest junior bridesmaid. You’re practically a teenager already.”

My heart seized. *No. Don’t make her grow up.* Gwen only cared about looks, about partying. She wouldn’t see the charm and fun in the innocent youth of childhood. It pissed me off every time she made a comment about how old Sunny *almost* was. As though she was lacking in the current moment. As if she wasn’t good enough now. The woman just couldn’t relate, so no wonder.

“She’s not a teenager,” I replied dully. I didn’t want to rush Sunny’s childhood or try to make her feel like she should want to be anything but the ray of sunshine she was.

“And I’m not a junior bridesmaid,” she corrected. “I’m a flower girl.”

“Aww.” Gwen smiled so quickly it had to be fake. She was simply clueless about how to interact with our daughter.

Sunny didn’t try to respond. She turned to me and wrapped her arms around me in a tight hug. I knew that expression. It almost looked like doubt, and I recognized it as a sign that she wanted real praise.

I lowered to one knee, coming down to her level so she wouldn’t feel like I was looking down at her. Keeping things more friendly on her perspective was only being courteous. “Sunny, you stole the show.”

Her lips lifted in a smile as I stroked her hair.

“You didn’t forget to keep walking. And there is no better petal-tosser in all of Dallas.”

She smiled wider.

“In all of Texas,” I amended.

“Thanks, Daddy.”

I pulled her in closer, hugging her tight and hoping she knew how much she mattered no matter how much her mother seemed to undermine that effort. I could never stand the way Gwen obsessed about Sunny’s looks, making them a priority over anything the child might *do*.

“I love you,” she said as I released her.

“I love you, too.” I kissed her forehead before I stood again, holding her hand.

Gwen looked away, avoiding eye contact.

What’s it going to take to make her leave? She clearly took the time to show up, so I doubted she’d go anytime soon. This woman thrived on attention, and she wouldn’t exit until she felt she got it. Sunny and I excluding her would only make her try harder.

I looked back at Sunny, spotting the bridesmaid in the distance. She waved at us, and I pointed. “Hey, I think Josie’s mom is looking for you.”

Sunny perked up. “Can I go play with her?”

“What if you get dirty?” Gwen asked. “That dress is cute.”

I shot her a look to shut up. “Have fun,” I told her instead. “You remember where your seat is?”

She nodded, then took off to play with someone her own age.

As soon as she was gone, Gwen stepped closer. “You look good, Ward.”

I wasn’t in the mood for her games, so I stayed silent.

“Better than good.”

If she was fishing for a compliment in reply, she would be waiting a long while. I couldn’t believe she’d wear a damn-near white dress to someone else’s wedding. “I didn’t think you’d be here.”

She shrugged. “My calendar allowed for it, so I came.”

I scoffed. Knowing Gwen, she would fail to RSVP and then force the wedding planner to scramble and make room for her in their tight seating plan for the reception.

Predictable.

“But here we are. Together.” She batted her eyelashes and sighed as she leaned closer.

I angled further back. “I’m not here with you.”

“Bummer. You should find me at the bar at the reception though.”

“Go away, Gwen.” It never mattered how direct I was with dismissing her. She never got the hint, or if she did, she ignored it and did as she pleased.

She left me, though, sauntering off and glancing back at me over her shoulder. I watched, wishing she would leave entirely, but it seemed unlikely. I shook my head and tried to tamp down the feeling of uneasiness that opened up inside of me.

Dealing with Gwen always dragged me down, and without Sunny to chat with, I resorted to my other foolproof companion in life— my work.

I ducked out, heading toward a side path to respond to some emails. The massive corporate retail chain I purchased last year, The Cozy Company, was opening its flagship store here in Dallas within a week. My assistants and marketing team members had been up my ass about ensuring I would make an appearance. I told them I would, and although I might not be on time, I would be true to my word and show up. Right now, though, I skimmed through their requests for approval on marketing materials.

Instead of mingling or hovering over Sunny, I killed time and approved it all, giving them the go-ahead. Done with that, though, I had no other choice but to head toward the area outside the indoor reception area.

Colby and Naomi would be there shortly, and after that, Sunny would make the night worth it.

As I watched all the guests pair up, all the couples who came to celebrate, I regretted how much I wished I wasn’t so alone in life.

CHAPTER 5



JENNY

Lauren was always the outgoing one between us. I figured it was why she was so successful with her businesses. Between Watson Wicks, her candle company, and her newer endeavor that I helped bring to life, she relied on reaching out to investors and having that extrovert approach in life. While I could put myself out there and manage small talk, I preferred to have a few close friends than a bunch of so-so acquaintances. Unlike what Lauren did now.

After the ceremony, we moved to the indoor reception space which was just as grand and enormous as the rest of the country club. In here, Lauren took off to greet some old friends from school. I had never been too close with them, and honestly, I had forgotten half of their names, so I lurked by the bar.

Jameson really meant it when he said he'd have my back at the wedding because he stuck with me, sitting on the stool next to mine. He was either trying to make sure I didn't feel alone or avoiding small talk with Lauren. The billionaire was easygoing himself, but sometimes I wondered if he preferred quieter moments instead of being on point all the time.

"Want do you want?" he asked me after he perused and dismissed the drinks menu on a leather-backed stand.

"To go home," I muttered.

He chuckled, raising his brow at me. "I thought Mary Ellen was the homebody."

I shrugged at his reference to the roommate Lauren and I shared the house with. Well, soon only *I* would be roommates with Mary Ellen, Karen, and Rylee. The day Lauren would move into a new house with Jameson loomed closer and closer, and I wasn't looking forward to the reminder. "We're all homebodies at some point."

"Even Rylee?" He laughed again. "I can't see it."

He had a point. Our bartender friend was often the life of any party, and she didn't exactly fit the stereotype of a homebody. Karen didn't either. She was more of an *officebody*, addicted to perfection at her workplace. And more often than not, Mary Ellen was at the library, probably because her book hoarding had special limits in her bedroom.

"Okay, fine," I conceded. "I want to go home just to hide."

He made a show of scanning the place. "We haven't even had dinner yet."

"I'm not that hungry."

"Okay, then *I* need you to make it through dinner. I'm not sure I can handle Lauren's analysis of the meal, among everything else here."

I grinned. She was becoming too much, but I knew he said that in good sport. "So long as she doesn't turn into a bridezilla."

"I want to assume she loves me too much to go that far, but I'm not sure."

I giggled, shaking my head. Leave it to this guy, one I once swore I'd never forgive for hurting my friends, to amuse me when fear and dread still hung over me like a bad cold I couldn't shake.

"What do you want to drink?" he tried again.

I checked the reflection in the mirrored surface of a mixer cup behind the bar. No one had come close yet, but I had to stay diligent. It would already be awkward enough if and when I saw them, so I wanted to at least be prepared for when the moment came.

“Jenny?” Jameson looked around again. “You’re acting like the boogeyman’s coming for you.”

That’d be a better option.

“Um, a peppermint tea,” I answered.

He scrunched his face and laughed. “Seriously?”

I nodded. A good peppermint tea could solve many problems, and I bet it would soothe my upset stomach. Stress had it tied in knots. I couldn’t count on my staple choice of tea to erase the dilemma of having to face my past here, but it couldn’t hurt.

“A hot tea?” he asked incredulously. “Here?”

I sighed. I was off my game and no damn tea would change that fact. Leaning forward to rest my elbow on the top of the bar, I rubbed my temples. “You’re right. They wouldn’t know how to make it. They’d probably nuke the water in the microwave to brew it.”

“You’re not supposed to microwave water?”

I lifted my head to shoot him a harsh look. “For tea? *No.*”

He raised his hands in surrender. “Easy.”

“Nothing about being here is easy, Jameson. I didn’t expect Gwen to be here, and I definitely didn’t expect Ward to be here either.” *Although I should have. He and Colby were good friends back then.*

“Who’s Ward?” Again, he scanned the crowd of strangers.

“The best man. Which makes it even worse.”

“How so?”

I wasn’t sure, exactly, but it made him more noticeable. If Ward was just a guest, he wouldn’t have been so front and center at the altar for me to see him.

“It just is. And now it’s only a matter of time before he sees me.”

Jameson arched a brow. “Then that’s even more reason to opt for whiskey.”

I grimaced. “No way.”

“You’re opposed to liquid courage?”

“I’m opposed to GMO booze.” I had studied too long in agriculture sciences to be able to turn away from the prevalence of chemicals and preservatives on menus everywhere.

He shrugged, lifting his hand to signal the bartender, who approached immediately. “She would like a hot peppermint tea, and I’d like a—” He paused, nodded once to something to my left, and canceled his drink order. “Never mind.” To me, he said, “Lauren’s waving me over. You want to join me?”

I glanced at where she stood, spotting several people she likely wanted to introduce Jameson to. I still couldn’t remember their names, and they had that “business” look that warned of boring conversation. “Nah.”

He hesitated after he stood. “You sure? Will you be okay over here? Maybe you should come.”

I shook my head, although I did appreciate his concern. He was all right in my books. “Thanks, but no. I’ll sit here and wait for my tea, then join you in a few.”

“A *hot* tea?” The bartender surveyed the contents behind the bar. “I suppose I could microwave a mug of water and ask the caterers if they have a tea bag in the kitchen.”

What did I say? Nuking the water. And a tea bag from a box? I resisted a gag.

“Do you have a cold or something? I could whip up a nice hot toddy for you and that’ll do the trick.”

I shook my head. “No. No thanks. In fact, just never mind.” I regretted asking for my preferred drink. It was a bar. Of course they couldn’t brew me a tea, not one to my standards.

“Oh, they’re serving coffee though!” The bartender smiled brightly.

“No. That’s all right.”

My drink order wasn't all I wanted to take back. A peppy, voluptuous blonde moved up next to me, taking the stool Jameson vacated. I mentally cringed, wishing I hadn't sent Jameson off now.

"Hey there, handsome."

I fought the urge to recoil at her sultry voice.

"Rye Manhattan, up."

"You got it," the bartender said with an equally seductive tone.

Gag.

I turned slightly to face Gwen. Her bold red lips twisted in a slight smirk as she deliberately glanced past me. She pretended not to notice me, moving her gaze to the side as though I was a nameless stranger.

Are you freaking kidding me? She totally swooped in here right after Jameson left, so she wasn't pulling a mind game of bullshit like this. She came here to approach me. I rolled my eyes and cut it short.

"Hi, Gwen," I said dryly. I tried not to sound dull but there was no helping my tone when the woman peevied me so much. "How've you been?"

My nana and mom taught me to have manners even if it killed me, and I was testing that theory now. Being polite to her had me wondering if a lightning strike would smite me.

"Oh!" She turned back toward me, surprised. "Jenny?" Squinting her eyes, she tried to act like she wasn't sure it was me. "Is that you?"

"One and only." *Stop sounding like a bitch.* I wanted to be the bigger person. I truly did. But it wasn't easy.

"Wow. You look, uh, you know."

Now I narrowed my eyes, daring her to say something nasty.

She gestured with her hands. "You look just like what I'd expect."

What the hell does that mean?

“You must be a tree-hugger still if you’re not trying to update your appearances.”

I turned fully, resting my elbow on the edge of the bar to get a good look at her. “*What?*” *I’m not a computer system.*

“I heard about this new dermal filler that’s probably earthy enough for you.” She giggled. “Are you *still* playing in the dirt? What was that degree you got again?”

“Agriculture.”

She scoffed. “You were always all gross and sweaty in the gardens. I guess some things never change. I have. I mean, obviously. Just this year I’ve tripled my followers. Show biz has completely reinvented my life!”

“Show biz?” I hadn’t seen her anywhere. Lauren hadn’t either, and she was on social media more than I was.

“Yeah. I’m an influencer.”

I’d never agree with her, but it looked like some things didn’t change after all. Her *duh* tone was the same as it had been in school.

“My life has turned out so well,” she gushed. “All my dreams came true.”

Her dreams? That was a stab in the back if I’d ever heard one. After her breathy sigh, I gave in to a moment of weakness. I had to ask. I needed to know. “How’s Ward?”

I swallowed and waited for her enthusiastic reply about how rosy their lives were together.

Instead, she raised her brows and scoffed. Then laughed. It wasn’t a cute giggle of bragging but a cackle like a villain. “Ward?” She rolled her eyes. “You mean the biggest asshat of all times? He’s his usual rich, stuck-up self.”

Rich? I was stunned by more than her rude opinion of his wealth. *They’re not together?*

“There he is.” She cupped her hands around her mouth. “Ward!”

No one could've missed her yell. The songs just *had* to be changing then, leaving the room quiet.

Oh, shit.

I didn't wait to see if he turned. I bailed.

I spun away and ran as fast as I could until the room became a blur. People and tables whirred into a spread of no details. I didn't know where Lauren or Jameson were. I couldn't tell if I passed the doors to the restrooms, hell, even the exit. I still wasn't sure I had the guts to quit and run, but I needed a moment.

I ended up at a table instead. Eyeing a group of kids, I turned and claimed a chair. They had to be safe. Children weren't mean.

They all blinked up at me. I had hurriedly sat with such a rush, I might have startled them.

I quickly grinned. "Hi."

"Are you lost?" a young boy asked.

Yes. "No. I'm Jenny."

"He was asking if you *are* lost," a cute girl with a tiara said diplomatically. "Not if that was your name."

Smartass. But she looked so damn precious in that dress. *Oh!* She was the flower girl. I recalled her from the ceremony. "I'm not lost. I'm just hiding from someone."

She nodded carefully. "I'm Sunny. I like your dress."

I smiled. "Thank you."

"It reminds me of a forest."

Another girl piped up. "Sunny, we don't have no forests in the city."

"That's a double negative, and so what? I see forests on TV and in books," Sunny argued good-naturedly.

Double negative. She's not a smartass but just smart.

"Who you running from?" the boy asked.

“Someone who’s mean.” *I can’t call her a bitch.*

Another kid sat up straighter. “Did your husband tell you that you can’t eat cake later cause it’ll make you fat?”

I frowned. “No.”

“My daddy told my momma that and she threatened to castrate him.”

I widened my eyes at his comment. *Damn.*

He furrowed his brow. “What’s castrate mean?”

I am so not answering that.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” another asked before I could respond to the other.

“No.” *Crap, this was a bad idea.* I didn’t realize how blunt kids were.

“That’s not polite to ask,” Sunny scolded. “Besides, she’s so pretty, she’s gotta have one.”

Aww. “Being boyfriend and girlfriend isn’t just about looks, though,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s about castration and cake,” the other one said.

Okay, kid, moving on. “No. It’s not. I mean, there’s more to it than superficial appearances.”

“How so?” the youngest girl asked.

“People have to fall in love,” Sunny replied.

That’s a start. But I knew firsthand that wasn’t enough to make it last.

“Are you going to have cake?” the boy asked.

Enough about the cake, kid! “Probably not.”

“Because it’ll make you fat?” he checked.

“No. Eating cake isn’t going to make you fat overnight. It’s more complicated than that.”

A girl scoffed. “Complicated. Ha. That’s what adults say when they don’t know how to answer something hard.”

I inhaled deeply for patience. “Um, *no*, actually, it’s just a complex topic. Being ‘fat’ is derogatory to begin with, and it’s not a mentally healthy way to view yourself or anyone else. People come in all shapes and sizes. What you eat and how you move determines the shape of your body, along with your metabolism and other genetic factors. All of which is a complicated and complex topic.”

They all stared at me. No one spoke. Did I break them by launching into a lecture?

“So, why won’t you eat the cake?” the boy asked.

“Because it’s too pretty?” another child guessed. “It’s taller than me!”

“And it’s got sparklers on top,” another boy said with a pyromaniac-like glee in his eyes.

“Um, sure. It’s too sparkly for my tastes,” I hedged.

He rolled his eyes. “Duh, they take the sparklers off when they cut it.”

I shrugged. “Okay, then I won’t eat it because it’s too tall.”

A girl giggled. “They’ll lower it from the stands.”

Still, they stared at me, waiting for my final reply. *Jeez, stop about the cake.* It was cute, too, that they could be so worried about the wedding cake. The blissful ignorance of youth. They didn’t have to hide from exes and bullies. All they had to stress about was dessert.

Still, they waited for a reply. “Okay, I don’t want to eat the cake because I don’t know if the dyes used in the frosting are organically sourced.”

Once more, silence greeted me.

“Huh?” The chattiest boy gaped at me.

“What’s organic mean?”

“Who died?”

“They killed someone to make the cake?”

I shook my head. “Not *died*. A *dye*. With a *y*. It’s a coloring.”

“I bet the sparklers killed the baker!”

“It’s a zombie cake!”

I held my hand up as they got louder, everyone speaking at once. “No one died!”

“Maybe they put bottle rockets instead of sparklers.”

“I don’t want the sparklers on the cake. What if it melts?”

“I know. Organic must mean it’s got organs.”

“From the baker?”

“Eww! Like a brain?”

“Maybe Joey meant organs like pianos.”

“I don’t want a sparkler brain-cake. I don’t like zombies!”

I covered my face and groaned as they all spoke over each other.

I should’ve gone home when I had the chance.

CHAPTER 6



WARD

After the reception started, I didn't have another chance to check my phone. I wasn't alone, either. Naomi and Colby were keeping me busy in my best-man duties. We did our grand entrance, then some speeches, and dinner. It wasn't until we were seated at the head table that I thought I'd have a moment to peek at my phone.

Being a workaholic wasn't my norm, but this was a tense time for my career. One of the bridesmaids scolded me, and I figured I should put my phone on silence anyway. Once the dinner was served, it would be dancing and partying anyway, and Sunny would be with me throughout it all.

A groomsman returned right then from checking with the kids' table where Sunny had a seat. He frowned and shook his head.

"What's wrong?" Colby asked.

"Nothing. Just weird."

"What was Penelope crying about?" Naomi asked.

"Um, nothing. She was worried about turning into a zombie if she ate the cake." He shrugged, dismissing his kid's spontaneous tantrum. "Only five years old and she's got a wild imagination."

I chuckled. I could relate. Sunny kept me on my toes.

The groomsman's wife, who was a bridesmaid, leaned her cheek on his shoulder. "We'll have to talk to her later about making up tall tales."

Now that, I can't relate to. Having a partner to parent with. It sounded like a tall tale itself. Maybe the whole vibe of the wedding was getting to me because, throughout the dinner, I couldn't dismiss this sense of envy. It was a small thread, and I wasn't sulking around hating that I couldn't have a relationship like everyone else seemed to, but it was on my mind.

As soon as the plates were cleared, I headed toward the bar and lingered there, nursing my woes and trying to get over my mood.

What difference did it make anyway? Colby and Naomi were a couple before they made it official in marriage, so it wasn't a new development to get used to. The more I stayed in a funk, the more I hated that I was letting it get to me. It wasn't like I'd lose Colby as a friend. Nothing would really change.

Except that they're making it permanent now. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. They were so damn happy about it, too, and witnessing it was a painful reminder of what I'd never find.

The emcee called for the bride and groom's first dance, and I had to stifle a groan. They looked so excited, in love, and obsessed with each other. But I knew it was real. They weren't faking it for the sake of pictures and videos. They were an example of a match made in heaven, and I wondered how they were so lucky to have found each other when others, like me, had no such fortune.

Get over yourself, dude.

Becoming a scrooge at their wedding wasn't in my plans, so I turned back to the bar and asked for another drink. This would be it, for a while at least. I could have someone drive me and Sunny home tonight, but it wouldn't be fair to her if I leaned heavier on the numbness alcohol allowed. I was her "date" tonight, and I wouldn't fail her there.

As soon as Naomi and Colby finished their solo dance as a Mr. and Mrs., they began to invite others to the floor. First, they called up partners who'd been together for a few decades, then couples who'd lasted fewer years, then the newest ones.

By the time everyone shared the dance floor, I was halfway done with my drink.

Sunny appeared, beelining straight for me with a wide smile on her face. She aimed for me with a clear intention of my company, and I knew she wanted to dance.

“Would you care to dance?” I asked her, holding my hand out and bowing a bit like she was royalty.

“Come on, Dad!” She giggled and took my hand, leading us toward the crowded space.

We found a spot, and I held her hand as we danced. She beamed up at me, and that high, that hero worship, was far better than any burn of alcohol down my throat. Why did I need a woman again? Why did it matter when this little girl lit up my world?

“Dad? Why do you think people even wanna have a girlfriend or boyfriend?”

Of all the freaking things to ask. And now. I sighed but refused to lose my smile for her. “Um, maybe because people like having a partner in life. You know, to pick the yucky stuff off their salads.”

She giggled. “Like how you eat my tomatoes.”

“And how you like onions.” I grimaced and exaggerated a disgusted expression.

“But you’re my dad. Not a boyfriend.”

“True.”

“So, if we’re partners like that, then why would you even need a girlfriend?”

I sighed again, hoping she wouldn’t catch on to my mood.

“No one *needs* a boyfriend or girlfriend.” I always vowed to be as honest as possible with her.

“Okay, then why do people want them?”

“You’re going with the hard questions tonight, huh?”

She giggled. “I’m wondering.”

You're always wondering. I loved her curiosity, but these specific questions felt like she was kicking me when I was already down.

Because you'll grow up and be too cool to even eat dinner with me, let alone take the onions off my salads.

Because you'll find your own people to spend time with instead of me.

Because you'll be curious about falling in love and find someone I might accept as good enough for you.

“Well, sometimes people get lonely and want close companionship like that.”

She glanced at the married couple we were celebrating tonight. “Like Uncle Colby and Naomi?”

“Yeah.”

She peered up at me. “Are you lonely?”

Damn, Sunny. Why are you putting me on the spot like this? I couldn't blame her though. At a wedding and singling out couples who had stuck together for a long time, the whole theme of it all was right in her face. And Gwen. She was here too, and that was another reminder of how her own parents weren't so lonely that they would stick together.

“With you lighting up my life?” I hugged her close. “Never.”

As she clung to me tightly, I saw Colby looking at me. He was smiling, but I saw the concern on his face as he and Naomi approached through the dancers.

He tapped on Sunny's shoulder. “May I cut in?”

Sunny giggled and glanced at me.

“Just be careful he doesn't step on your toes,” Naomi warned playfully as she took my hand.

We changed partners just as the song shifted to another.

“I saw Gwen,” Naomi said as we danced away.

“Uh huh.”

“Is that why Sunny looked so pensive?”

I chuckled. “Excuse me, ma’am. This is your wedding. A night to celebrate and have fun.”

“But that doesn’t mean I will stop noticing if Sunny seems bothered.” She furrowed her brow. “Or was she worked up about that zombie-cake thing too?”

I laughed. “She’s too smart to believe in zombies.”

That was my cue though. No more long looks. No more frowns. The alcohol kicked in, and I let loose. Songs changed and everyone switched up partners. It kept it fun. It kept things flowing and easy, but when a gorgeous woman placed her hand in mine a few songs later, I noticed the strength in her fingers.

I spun her out and then in, catching her in a closer hold.

My heart raced as recognition kicked in.

It wasn’t every day you came face to face with your first love.

“Jenny?”

Her hair tumbled over her shoulder, longer and deeper red now. Sun-kissed and glowing, she looked like the outdoorsy smartass I knew so long ago. Her green eyes blinked rapidly, clearly as stunned as I was.

She lost the moment of shock. Wincing with a deep annoyance, she carefully regarded me as we danced. “Hi, Ward.”

She swallowed hard as she gazed at me. Then she tried to clear her throat, and again, was too uneasy to manage it. Her feet moved, and her hands stayed locked in mine and on my back. She dragged back way too many memories too quickly. Of when we’d danced as kids. And when we hadn’t at prom—when I noticed her sitting off to the side back then.

Jenny was just a kid back then, but she’d more than filled out. She was a late bloomer, but now, she was all gorgeous woman, curvy *and* toned.

Is she noticing the same as me? That I've filled out?

Back in high school, I'd been a gangly kid without muscles. My home gym made that physique a thing of the past. Just like how Jenny, the scrawny flat girl, was *all* woman now. It was impossible to look away, even more ridiculous not to look my fill. She commanded my attention, and while it was surreal to see a newer, mature version of her, that was all that hit me.

She was still sun-kissed, making me wonder if she worked outside like she used to love doing. She was still standing straight, a confident and bold woman who knew how to use her voice.

Maybe not right now, though.

Her eyes still looked panicked.

“Still hate me, huh?” I asked.

I gazed at her face, and when her hand twitched like she wanted to flee, I knew she was too flustered to be under my focus like this. She'd always called me out on my shit, including when I hoped to get my way with a mischievous smile. Right now, she had nowhere to run, no chance to hide and avoid this confrontation.

It wasn't like I had sought her out. If I'd been paying closer attention, I might have realized she would be here as one of the many classmates who'd come to this wedding. I'd been too worried about keeping my distance from Gwen that I hadn't seen how Jenny was right there.

“Hate is a strong word,” she replied instead of answering my question.

Hmmm. She might not hate me, but she wasn't eager to convince me that she felt anything much better toward me. I couldn't read her, but she seemed unsure of what she felt about me now. I preferred to keep life as laidback and fun-loving as possible, but I struggled with this reunion. A guy couldn't face a blast from the past like this and not be blown away.

I chuckled. “Careful with your words, as always.” *And not generous with them at the moment.* “How've you been?”

She shrugged.

“What have you been up to?” *Other than a life without me.* I furrowed my brow, loathing how *that* was the answer I almost blurted.

Nervous and frazzled, she shook her head. “I, uh, I need to, uh, check something.”

That was a piss-poor, flimsy excuse. She freed her hand from mine and turned. All I could do was watch, dumbfounded as she tried to get the hell out of there. Weaving around couples and dodging catering servers with trays, she escaped, not stopping until she disappeared into the bathroom.

She had come back into my life for a fleeting moment, but as I stared in the direction she ran in, I hoped it was only the first of many encounters.

CHAPTER 7



JENNY

One week after the wedding, I whiled away the weekend deep in avoidance mode. I wasn't going to think about Ward and how easily he got under my skin with just a smile and a direct look. After I ran from him at the reception, the first wave of anxiety had hit hard. Being so close to Ward and experiencing that tongue-tied stupidity had left me unsettled.

Would I ever learn with him?

He messed me up. As I had paced in the bathroom until I got the courage to tell Lauren and Jameson I was leaving, I cursed the butterflies in my stomach, how sweaty my palms got, and how looking into his eyes *still* made my head spin.

Just like before. In junior high, I fell head over heels for him, and it was daunting to realize he still had that effect on me. It took me forever to get over him back then, and here I was, days after seeing him again, feeling out of control and wanting to make another mistake with him.

But this isn't before. This is now. You're not the same girl you were back then.

I wasn't going to think about how Lauren was moving out in a few weeks either. It would change the dynamic of how the four of us had lived here in this house, and I wasn't ready to face it.

Finding another girl to rent that room was out of the question, but what were we supposed to do when she was gone, moving in with Jameson?

“Oh, that flower girl is just so *cute!*” Mary Ellen gushed. She leaned over the back of the couch, watching as Lauren scrolled through pictures on her phone. I wasn’t on social media much, but she was, and right now, she made it awfully damn hard to avoid thinking about that wedding, who I saw there, and how much I couldn’t stop recalling our past.

Seeing Ward was like having a phantom wound open all over again. I *knew* it was dumb and dangerous to go down the path of wondering what if and wishing for things to be different, but that was also a stubborn and direct route that led to nowhere but misery.

“Look. Look at this one.” Lauren leaned toward me, thrusting her phone forward so I’d have to give up on mine as I checked the weather. This far into fall, I had to keep an eye on nightly lows for my plants at the gardening center. Not according to Lauren, though. Now was the time to check the images Naomi had shared.

They were stunning. I blinked, gazing at the wide-angle shot of the centerpiece of flowers and ribbons while the image of Naomi and Colby dancing in the background was blurred.

“That photographer does good work,” I said as I scrolled through more.

Ward.

Ward.

Ward.

I tried to go faster past the shots that included him, but he was in so many as the best man.

“Hold on. Jeez.” Rylee leaned over my left shoulder while Karen pressed against my right. Mary Ellen’s arm reached over my head. All three of them stood behind the couch, checking out the photos.

“You’re going too fast,” Karen said.

Mary Ellen slowed her finger on the screen. “I wanted to see that one guy.”

“The tall one with the moustache?” Karen asked.

“No.” Mary Ellen paused on one. Ward and Colby were featured, laughing with their arms around each other. “That one.” She sighed.

“Colby?” Lauren asked. “He was the groom.”

“No, the other one,” Rylee said. “Ooooh, look at him.”

I kept my face expressionless.

“He’s so handsome. He looks like fun,” Mary Ellen gushed.

Rylee snorted. “Uh, your idea of fun is reading a book together. *That* guy looks like he’s good at a different kind of fun.” She leaned over, almost boob-grazing me. “Look at those hands.”

Karen hovered closer too. “Hands. His hands are sexy? Not his sexy smile? They’re hands!”

“Oh, no, no. Those are capable hands.”

“Ry, you’re full of it!” Mary Ellen giggled.

“Hands are sexy,” she insisted.

I drew in a deep breath, locking down on the scream that wanted to escape. I had to agree. Hands *were* sexy. But these were Ward’s hands we were talking about and that was just different.

“She’s got a point,” Lauren agreed.

“Don’t tell me. You think Jameson’s hands are sexy?” Mary Ellen asked with giggles.

“Well, yeah. I mean when I watch him sometimes and…” Lauren trailed off, blushing. At first, I worried she didn’t want to talk about her sex life around Mary Ellen, given their history. But when she looked at me, I saw the awkwardness. She knew how hard this had to be for me, hearing about Ward like this.

“Any. Way.” I dragged my finger up in a sure stroke, moving past Ward’s hands, face, or anything about his undoubtedly sexy self.

“Hey!” Karen protested. “I wasn’t done checking him out.”

“Don’t deprive us of the eye candy,” Rylee whined.

“You mean hand porn?” Mary Ellen teased.

“Wait, that sounds like a catchy thing that could take off. Hand porn.”

I craned my neck to peer at her upside down. “Like a foot fetish?”

“I think you’re getting mixed up with *one-hand porn*. Like books?” Mary Ellen guessed.

“There he is again!” Karen stabbed her finger to the screen, pausing on Ward again, a single shot of him at the altar.

“Ooooooh,” Rylee gushed.

“Who is he?” Mary Ellen asked.

“No one,” I replied at the same time Lauren said, “The best man.”

“What’s the deal with him?” Karen asked.

“Or more like what’s *your* deal with him?” Rylee asked as she tugged on my ponytail.

Lauren whistled. “Don’t ask.”

“Uh oh.” Rylee rounded the couch and sat. The other two followed until they faced me.

“We want to know,” Karen said.

I exhaled long and hard, then launched into it as fast as I could to get it over with, like a dry movie pitch. “I fell for Ward in junior high. He promised that I had his heart. Then he got bored. Dumped me. And dated my best friend at the time, a real ‘winner’ named Gwen.”

A trio of gasps followed my summary.

Rylee slapped her thigh. “What a jackass!”

“I hope you kicked him between the legs,” Karen muttered.

Mary Ellen furrowed her brow. “What happened with you and Gwen?”

Leave it to her to worry about the long-lasting friendship part. She was the most sensitive of our group. I sighed, grateful when Lauren spoke up and explained. It still hurt to talk about it.

“Their friendship was ruined. Gwen didn’t care that she took him.”

Rylee shook her head. “That’s cold.”

“She almost lorded it over Jenny that Ward chose her instead.”

I shrugged, wishing I could go back to the whole attempting-to-move-on thing. It helped having my friends all in one place together like this for these kinds of conversations, but I was done with this topic. “This is stupid. It was a long time ago.”

“Clearly, it still hurts, though,” Mary Ellen said gently.

“I was a kid then. I’m a grown woman now. None of it matters.”

Even Lauren looked at me with doubt, like she wasn’t convinced.

Having their pity or worry honed on me got me feeling frazzled really fast. That sense of wanting space and privacy came back full force. I handed Lauren’s phone back and headed toward the coat rack.

“Hey. No. Don’t run off,” Karen protested.

“I’m not.” *I kind of am.* “Okay, fine. I need some space. It’s not your fault. It’s just the whole thing. Seeing him again. Seeing her at all.” I tugged my coat on. “I’m going to head out and get those tea satchels for my new blends.”

Rylee nodded. “Stress shopping. Maybe that’s a good idea.”

“You don’t want me to come?” Mary Ellen asked. She was too sweet, not wanting me to be alone, but right now, it was

pushy.

“No, I’m good. I can stop by and pick up my new business cards too. Run errands and such.”

“Shopping sounds less stressful than errands,” Lauren joked.

I smiled and shrugged, eager to just get out of here and move. Sitting there with Ward’s sexy smiling face within reach on that phone taunted me. I thought about him too much. I saw him in my dreams. I was in a loop that spun in a connection with the past and present and I wasn’t sure where I could get off that ride and know what to do in my future.

If I was destined to be stuck in my head with thoughts of Ward, though, I may as well wear them off while doing something out of the house. And best of all, I knew the girls would understand.

I slid into my car and rubbed my hands together. Dallas never got bitterly cold in the fall or winter, or if it did, the chilliest stretches didn’t last long, but anything under sixty was abominable for a sun worshipper like me.

I started the car, trying to mentally think through where I’d go first, but all plans halted as the radio came on.

Rylee had borrowed my car last, and she blared her music. Which meant “Our Song” crooned deafeningly loud.

“Oh, come on!” I threw my hands up, vexed by the world. Of all songs, this one had to be playing? The song Ward claimed was “ours” when we were teenage sweethearts?

I glowered at the dashboard as I stabbed the button to silence it. It was bad enough I couldn’t stop thinking about him. It was worse now that all my friends were aware of the situation.

But I really didn’t need the universe teasing me about my heartache too.

CHAPTER 8



WARD

I t's game time. As soon as the thought filed through my mind on opening day, I grinned. I used to hate it when my football coach would say that in a huddle. Today, it applied.

The first inaugural day for the flagship store of The Cozy Company was electric, and I thrived in the action of it all. Hours of being on my feet and smiling and schmoozing wore on me, like it would any other human, of course. I wasn't ready to quit, but I was definitely looking forward to a chance to sit and breathe, to just be and relax after the constant and steady rush.

From morning till the afternoon, I did my part. I mingled and made sure to be on the move as customers flooded in. When I got a message from my mom, though, I indulged in a selfish moment to look at it.

Mom: Look who's been busy in the kitchen.

She attached a picture of Sunny grinning with chocolate lining her mouth. Before her was a tray of cookies, and it was obvious she had helped make them. The pink apron tied over her outfit was splattered with flour and dough.

Warm memories hit me. My mother used to bake cookies with me when I was little. It was one of the many activities she insisted on as she raised me herself. "*Being familiar in the kitchen is something everyone should accomplish.*" She'd told me that when I was young, and as a hyper boy more interested in playing and running around, the lure of making something

relatable like cookies was the gateway she used to get me interested in baking, then later, in cooking.

Much of my success as a single parent came from her example. When my father divorced her and left without another word, I was only a week old. She never looked back, and she was my living proof of knowing I could be a single dad and not ruin Sunny's life.

Ward: I'm missing out!

Mom: I promise to save you some.

Mom: Or one. That depends on how gluttonous Sunny is today.

I chuckled. *So much for not ruining her appetite for dinner, huh, Mom?* As I thought about the taste of freshly baked cookies, my stomach growled. I glanced at my watch, realizing I'd already skipped lunch. It was no wonder I was so hungry.

Food could wait. I went back into business mode, slipping my phone in my pocket. As I shoved away thoughts of missed opportunities to eat, I focused on chatting with customers. When I wasn't talking with someone eager to splurge, I pushed products to those who wanted to know more.

I was guilty of being lazy and buying stuff online, but there was something different about holding a product and seeing it in 3D. I leaned on that advantage, and it helped when my employees not only saw what I was doing but also copied my behavior.

They were the real troopers of the day, and I made sure to engage with as many as I could. Although I would fail spectacularly if someone were to give me a pop quiz on their names. I couldn't possibly remember all of them this quickly, and with this being the big first day of sales, I knew the store was overstaffed. If I were to pop in for a check-up on any random shift, it would be a normal staff load, but still, I intended to familiarize myself with them all.

I had always believed that my retail employees were my most valuable assets. Sure, every department mattered, but

retail team members were the bread and butter. And I compensated them as such.

Before my grandfather gave me the money that would enable me to become a billionaire store owner, I scraped by on a paltry income from several part-time, dime-a-dozen jobs anyone could get. At each one, it was the manager who made me leave.

Happiness with management was one of the biggest reasons that made or broke employee retainment, and I never lost sight of that. I paid my retail team well, and it was continuous proof that rewarding positive behavior led to an upward trend of success. Many of them were eager to get a word in with me. While I wasn't sure of their names, they all knew who I was, and I'd set it up for that to happen. Before this first day came, I made a habit to stop in for trainings and such. I had no intention of being a stranger around here.

Eventually, I ended up in the scents department.

Crap. That reminds me. I need to follow up on that email from Watson Wicks.

We had a solid branding of Cozy Co. candles and scents, but I wasn't so closed-minded to shun competitors' products too. They'd reached out soon after I purchased the chain, and according to a more recent email I received from their sales manager, their company was located locally, here in Dallas.

I strolled the aisles, feeling overwhelmed with too many different fragrances, when I spotted someone familiar. Her lean body stretched with a graceful athleticism, and my mind immediately went in the gutter. That kind of flexibility had to be fun to exploit under the sheets, but thinking about that particular activity with Jenny was extra thrilling.

She rose up on her tiptoes to reach for a bottle of essential oils. I didn't remember her ever being overly short, but maybe with us both fully settled into adulthood, the contrast stood out to me. I'd grown taller since junior high. I'd bulked up a bit too. She, on the other hand, had definitely left adolescence behind in her own respect. I stared at her tits for a second too

long. She slipped on her toes and canted toward the shelves of products.

I snapped to attention and reached out to catch her. Placing my hand on her side brought back a flood of memories. Earlier ones from the past when we were in seventh grade. Then fresher ones too, as I recalled how soft and warm her curvy body was when we danced at the reception last week.

Reaching over her, I grabbed the bottle she was aiming for.

“Interested in this?”

She glowered at me as she stood flat on her feet again. “In *that*, yes.” Her stare didn’t lighten up as she took it from me, implying the clear message that she was *not* interested in me.

I grinned. Getting her riled up was too damn fun to resist. I watched as she sniffed the scent. “Like what you smell? That one there was inspired by my high school cologne.”

She gave me a scathing onceover as she pushed the top back onto the small vial. Her expression suggested fury, as though I’d just spat into a thermos of her tea instead of preventing her from falling into a shelving unit holding hundreds of dollars’ of essential oils.

“What are you doing here?” she asked hotly instead of answering me.

Wishing I could hold you again. “I own the place.”

She rolled her eyes and laughed. “Yeah, right. Okay.”

“Seriously.” I nodded. “I do. Google it.”

A long moment passed between us as we stared each other down. I bit my lip to keep from smiling wider. She narrowed her eyes at the idea of a challenge. “Fine.” She set the vial down on a shelf and rifled through her purse. “I will.”

I shoved my hands into my pockets and waited.

“Huh.” That was all she vocalized after seeing the browser’s confirmation. “I’ll have to stop shopping here now,” she muttered.

Had I not been so attuned to her, I would've missed the quiet remark.

She turned to leave, making good on her statement, and I followed after her. I wasn't a quitter in anything. "What did you think of the name of the oil you were considering?"

"I wasn't *considering* it. I was merely curious."

"What did you think of it?"

She smirked at me. "The name? *Jock*?" It sounded like an insult from her lips.

"Yeah."

Stopping short, she peered up at me. "You should call it *Mistake*. Or *Regrets*."

Burn. I laughed, though, too happy to see her to care that she was being harsh.

No giggles came from her, though.

Awkward.

I opened and closed my mouth, stalled on what to say next. I didn't want this to be the end of seeing her. If she intended to boycott my store, I wasn't sure when I'd run into her next. "Would you like to catch up, Jenny? We didn't have a chance at the wedding."

Her eyes opened wide. "*Now*?" She laughed, giving me that sweet sound I wanted to hear. "Are you for real? What on earth do you want to catch up about?"

Everything? I couldn't understand this pull I felt toward her, but I sure as hell wanted to explore it. I shrugged. "I want to hear about your life. Come on. Let me buy you a drink. Or a tea. Are you still a die-hard for teas?"

She eyed me suspiciously. "Don't presume to think you still *know* me."

I shrugged again. "Fine. Let's say I don't. Give me a chance to get to know you then." I reached into my pocket and pulled out a few gift cards for the store. "How about I buy

your time with these?” I glanced, checking what I had in hand. “Five hundred dollars to The Cozy Company.”

A scowl covered her face. “I’m not for sale.”

I rolled my eyes. “Still dramatic as ever.”

She stabbed her finger at her chest. “*I’m* dramatic?”

“Just buy yourself some nice throw pillows on me. If you have the worst time getting drinks, then at least you can walk away with some nice things for your house.”

Still, she eyed me like I would bite. Then she snatched them out of my hand. “Fine. When do you want to meet?”

I couldn’t believe it was that easy. She wasn’t easy, but I had expected more of a fight. When Jenny was mad, she held grudges. I wanted to assume she was giving me a second chance because she was curious about me, but I wouldn’t get my hopes up like that.

I glanced over my shoulder, knowing this was my chance to bolt and finally get a break from the day’s chaos. Over there near the linens department, I spied my assistants. They all had that hopeless, searching expression, and I had a hunch they were looking for me. Again.

Before I thought twice, I grabbed Jenny’s hand and ducked to sprint down the aisles. I made a run for it, impressed she didn’t wrench her hand free and demand to stop. Just before we reached the wider aisle that would bring us to the exit, she growled.

“What the hell are you doing?”

I shushed her, sending her a stern look to stay quiet. “You’re going to get me in trouble.”

But that was a lie.

Having her at my side felt like nothing but trouble itself. *She* was trouble for me in the best way, and even worse, I couldn’t recall the last time I felt so alive.

CHAPTER 9



JENNY

This is crazy. But I didn't let go.

I left the girls at the house wanting to stress shop and spend time at my favorite store. I'd always loved The Cozy Company and it should've been a good place to try to stop thinking about Ward Emerson.

And now my hand was in his as we bolted through the parking lot.

Talk about a one eighty.

He glanced at me over his shoulder and laughed that rich chuckle. It was the same as before, yet not. Back then, he didn't have that manliness that woke me up. Now, he was a bigger, bolder, and sexier force to reckon with, but that devil-may-care spirit remained unchanged. Fleeting memories of the time he coaxed me into playing hooky and skipping a pep rally returned, and I fought back the bitterness of losing him then.

Only when we reached an obnoxiously expensive-looking car did he release me. It was low and sleek, gleaming shiny black in the Texan sunshine. I'd never been in a sports car before, but somehow, it was fitting that the time I took that risk, it would be with the risk-taker I couldn't get out of my mind.

Without a word, he opened the passenger door, covered my head with his hand, and guided me into the very low passenger seat. The second I slid across the buttery-smooth leather, he shut the door and rounded the car to reach the driver's side.

“Buckle up,” he said once he got in.

Before I could finish slipping it in, he started the engine. The furious, throaty rumble of the car excited me, and again, I tried to shake off the incredulousness that claimed me. This was me riding in this fancy-ass car. This was my turn to spend time with this man who ditched me so long ago for my supposed friend. This was really happening.

I couldn't process it any further. He stepped on the gas and peeled out of the parking lot. “Crap.” I wasn't prepared. It seemed I would *never* be ready for this man. Sliding across the seat, I hurried to grip the oh-shit handle. He chuckled, and I scowled at him.

“You still drive like a reckless teenager,” I observed dryly.

He grinned. “Being as rich as I am has its advantages.”

I rolled my eyes. *Barf. Maybe you and Gwen deserved each other after all.* “What, so you can pay off all the speeding tickets?”

“I don't get that many, actually.” He rubbed his chin. “They never catch up to me to ticket me in the first place.”

“Hardy har har.” I shook my head. “I can't believe I'm doing this.”

“What? Playing hooky?” He scoffed. “I mean, *I* am.”

“I can't believe I drank the proverbial Kool-Aid and got in a car like this with *you*.”

“*Proverbial* Kool-Aid? What other kind is there?”

“I don't know. I never drank that crap.”

“Kool-Aid?” He exaggerated a wound to his chest. “No way. You can't be so stuck up with your tea that you'd never drink the greatest thing of childhoods across the country.”

I shuddered. “You mean the nastiest concoction of high-fructose syrup addled with red dye number forty? No thanks.”

He smiled despite my harrowing words, and I couldn't help but want to grin with him. He'd always had that effect on

me, never succumbing to stress and clinging to being in a good, positive mood.

Damn you. I didn't feel like he was mocking me with that smile, just amused.

He pulled up behind an industrial building, and I groaned internally.

It was all a joke. I should've known.

"Ready?" he asked.

I furrowed my brow. "What fresh hell is this?"

He only smiled. "Come on. I'll show you."

I kept my eyes narrowed on him until I gave in and got out of the car. "What, you feel so guilty about missing out on the high-school experience of drinking shitty booze in a questionable parking lot that you're trying to make up for the missed time now?"

He sighed. "Don't be so—"

I pointed at his face as we walked side by side. "If you say *dramatic*, I'll scream."

"That would be another definition of dramatics." He eased up, chuckling. "I was going to say quick to judge." Once he opened the door to the establishment, I blinked back surprise.

"I like to support small businesses when I can. I found this whiskey distillery a year ago and I like to think it's a hidden gem."

Am I supposed to feel impressed that you're choosing me to show something so secretive?

"A brother-and-sister duo own it." He pointed as he led me to the bar, since it was apparently a seat-yourself place.

While a server approached and Ward spoke with her about us both trying a flight of drinks, I glanced around. Not too many customers were here. I was impressed with the interior. It was modern, inviting, and surprisingly pleasant in such a way it wasn't a forced vibe.

As we waited for our samples, I wished I was still having my tea. Having options, period, was always nice, but when I perused the menu, I was glad they offered several that I could get on board with.

“You want to change anything?” Ward asked.

He’d earn a point for checking with me, but it was still after the fact. I relayed to the server that I wanted the organic drinks.

“You were serious then,” Ward said once the woman left us. “In the car, about Kool-Aid and all that stuff.”

I shrugged. I’d be damned if he judged me.

“I can’t say I’m surprised. You were always into earthy stuff. Hell, I *am* surprised. I kind of figured you’d move out west and work in a park or something once we graduated.”

“I briefly considered it,” I replied. I wasn’t sure why I told him that. I’d never confided in Lauren about that fleeting plan. “But I stayed here and got my degree in agriculture.”

“Yeah? Where do you work with that?”

“I manage a gardening site. Almost like a co-op but not. We offer trainings and lessons, but mostly it’s for growing the essentials for tea products.”

He smiled again, and I tried not to let it get to me. *He* was getting to me, and I had to brace myself.

“I imagine you noticed how Naomi cut corners with fake flowers at the wedding then, huh?”

I laughed. “I did. Well, Lauren did. She’s engaged and all about everything to do with weddings.”

“She wanted to shave off some expenses and Colby assured her he didn’t care.” He shrugged. “Hell, I hardly noticed the flowers.”

“I’m so thrilled for them, real flowers or not.”

“Me too.” His smile, again, was genuine. “It was a long time coming.”

I glanced at the bar, breaking eye contact before I overdosed on his attention. “I should’ve known you’d be there, being Colby’s best friend and all.” I sighed and glanced at him. “But I didn’t even think about it.”

“Are you trying to say you haven’t thought about me since high school?”

I swallowed hard. *Are you trying to avoid admitting you haven’t?*

“I haven’t had time to think about much lately. I’ve been preoccupied with my tea business. I started something on my own from the gardening center. Then I’ve been working alongside Lauren with her company. Well, companies plural. Her kids’ décor store is taking off. Then helping her pack to move.”

He laughed. “I can see why a wedding would slip your mind with all that going on.”

“And seeing Gwen there?” I paused and arched my brows, immediately taking a sip of the drink that came. “Well, that was a super unpleasant surprise.”

He accepted his glass and sipped longer than I did. “I agree.”

Now, that charming smile was gone. He meant it. He hadn’t been looking forward to Gwen being there. I was elated to hear that and see how sincere he was about the sentiment. “So, things ended badly between you and Gwen?”

He eyed me for a long moment. “You could say that.”

Without his smiles or chuckles, I got the hint. He didn’t want to talk about it, and I didn’t either. I was fine without details.

“What’s your relationship status?”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t resist a smile. He clearly wanted to change the subject, but to go there? “Why do you want to know?”

He held his hands up and laughed. “No ulterior motives here. I just want to know if there’s any guy who’s lucky

enough to call Jenny Halsey his girl.”

I hid my smile. Praise like that from *him* made me light up with a thrilling energy I hadn't felt in forever. But then I recalled how he had called me his girl once, then rejected me. “I'm single.” I sipped again, then added, “And happy about it.”

I bit my lip, amused that his question was like *déjà vu*. At the wedding, those kids were so upfront about asking me this same thing, but hearing it from Ward, I knew his curiosity was different.

And exciting.

He sighed and nodded in acknowledgment before he lifted his glass. “Cheers to being single and happy about it.”

Funny, when he says it, he doesn't seem to agree. For once, his smile didn't reach his eyes.

“Not that Naomi and Colby are doing anything wrong with starting a lifetime of anything but being single,” I said to lighten the mood.

He laughed. “Eh, they've been married unofficially for years now.”

It was all he needed to break the ice, and as he told me about some of the funnier things about the events leading to the beautiful wedding I was a guest at, I fell into the easygoing good time. *Just like before.*

I struggled to shake off his charm. He was always like this as a teenager. Dashing handsome. Quick to laugh. Eager to make others smile. I swore this man would forever be savvy with his words and humor, and before long, I realized just how flustered he was making me feel. A blush warmed my cheeks at his hints of praise. My face hurt after all the smiling, like I was coming out of a shell to be so entertained by someone who still knew me so well after years apart. And I felt out of sorts from laughing so much.

Being in Ward's company wasn't a shabby place to be, and I had to wonder if this giddiness I couldn't escape was solely from him or from the whiskey.

I sighed and shook my head.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just need to slow down on the drinks.”

“Lightweight?” he teasingly asked.

I nodded. “Definitely.”

He glanced down at the table for a moment, and if I didn’t know this guy so well, I would’ve said he was hesitant. Not shy. *Shy* and *Ward* didn’t belong in the same sentence.

When he looked back up at me, I held my breath at the seriousness in his eyes.

“I hope that doesn’t mean you want to go yet.”

I opened and closed my mouth, unsure how to reply. “No. Um. No. Just no more drinks.”

His grin was slow and smooth. “How about we go for a walk instead? I can drive you home.”

More time with him? That was a tricky decision. This was no simple date. This was, whether I wanted it to be or not, a dive into all those *what-ifs* I’d always wondered about.

My heart raced at the prospect of devoting my whole afternoon to him, but way back in my mind, I wanted to remain guarded.

It lost.

I nodded and hoped he couldn’t see my blush in this low lighting. “Yeah.” *No, that sounds too eager. Be cool, Jen.* I shrugged. “Why not?”

CHAPTER 10



WARD

Jenny. Freaking. Halsey.

I leaned back in my seat as she chatted with the owner of the distillery. When Jenny told the server she was most interested in the organic line of their offerings, then explained that her bartender friend advised her what to look out for with “so-called” organic brands, the owner came over to talk more, truly curious.

An agriculture degree. That doesn't surprise me one bit. She was always earth-conscious and green, even before it was a trend or cool to think like that.

Hearing her talk about something she was so passionate about pulled me deeper into her spell. She was just as cute as she was back in junior high, but also sexy now as a woman. I'd go so far to admit she was drop-dead gorgeous, and I mused again how crazy it was that she was single. She hadn't sounded down about it. Jenny was proud to be single, but I was stunned that no one had scooped her up. A woman like Jenny, a knockout with curves in all the right places, simply didn't go unnoticed for long.

Her quick wit hadn't disappeared either. If anything, it seemed like it had seasoned because she still had that sharp tongue, especially for me. Before the owner came over to speak with her, I enjoyed Jenny's attitude. It was refreshing and exhilarating at the same time, and I loved how she wouldn't stand for my shit. My mom grew tired of trying to change me long ago. She'd come to accept that I was a jokester, that I liked to push buttons. Maybe it was all part of

that supposed risk-taker side of me that I was supposed to embrace. Jenny recognized it too, but she wasn't a pushover. She called me out on my bullshit, and instead of seeing it as an insult or annoyance, I took it as a challenge. It was such an attractive quality, and that take-no-nonsense feature of her made me more intrigued and turned on than I had been with any other woman.

Jenny wasn't like the other women I'd dated. Those socialites and gold-diggers knew me as Ward 2.0. To them, I was just a man with a billion-dollar label and a bachelor reputation to conquer. Not Jenny. She knew me from before. I bet she could still recall what I was like in junior high, the lanky, still-finding-my-footing version of me that I'd matured from. The *real* version of myself that came with vulnerabilities and flaws I'd worked hard to either correct or accept.

I frowned, looking down at the bar as she laughed with the owner.

Jenny loved that real version. Back then, she'd not only gone after me with all my flaws, but she'd also enjoyed me.

And I fucked it all up. Gwen turned my head and I was a world-class idiot to chase her instead of holding on to Jenny.

"I'm so sorry," the owner said after I sighed.

I hadn't intended to exhale with such a hint of frustration or weariness. It simply came out with my thoughts spiraling about my loss. I'd missed out on so much with this woman, and it was a hard fact to come to terms with.

"I'm crashing your date."

Jenny giggled. "No, no. You're fine."

I was quick to smile, amused. "This isn't a date."

Jenny lifted her gaze to me. "It isn't?"

I chuckled. "Oh, you'd know it if it was."

A blush spread over her cheeks and I wanted to growl at how sexy she was when she lowered her guard.

“Yeah. It’s not.” Jenny nodded. “We’re just old friends catching up.”

“Oh.” The owner stepped back from the other side of the bar. She pursed her lips together, hiding a knowing smile. Perhaps she’d read it as a date between us, but if I really wanted to ask this beautiful woman out on a bona fide date, I wouldn’t bring her here. It would be somewhere fun. Spontaneous. Food would be involved, and a hopeful wish for sex too.

“And we’re about to head out for a walk,” Jenny said, reminding me of my offer to spend more time together.

“That, we were.” I stood and took her coat from the back of her high-back stool. As I held it up for her to slide her arms in, I wondered when I’d get the memo this wasn’t an official date.

My bad.

We crossed the street and aimed for the entrance to a small park located across from the distillery. A gravel trail provided ample paths for us to consider, and with few runners and walkers in the area, we finally had a chance for some privacy.

“I’m sorry I got carried away back there,” she said.

“No worries.” I drew in a deep breath of the chilly air, savoring the bite. It wasn’t freezing, but the fresh air out here was clearer than inside the distillery. “I enjoyed listening to you.”

“About organic beverages?” She arched one brow at me.

I shrugged. She could lecture and debate about any topic in the world and I wouldn’t tire of her voice. Intelligence had never been more of a turn-on. “You know your stuff. Smart is sexy.”

“Even if it’s only about—”

I cut her off, bumping my hip to hers. “Don’t sell yourself short. You’re an educated woman, Jenny, and it’s a pleasure to hear you talk about your passion.”

She scoffed. “Not just a passion. It’s my career.”

“And I find all of that interesting too. Congratulations on starting your own business, by the way.”

“Thanks.” She smiled, and I wished she could understand how much I meant what I said. This was no empty praise or blanket compliment. Starting a business was hard, and with her approach of reaching a niche market of tea drinkers, she was taking a bigger risk. That was a commendable effort.

“It’s still new. I spend a lot of time at the gardening center but I hope my products will take off so I can one day shift my time and focus.” She wrapped her arms righter around herself in a hug.

“Do you still hate the cold?” I asked. I wore a coat that I was glad to have found in the backseat of my car, and she still wore the coat she had on in my store.

She shook her head. “I told you. *Hate* is a strong word.”

I chuckled. “Fine. Do you still dislike the cold?”

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug. “No, not completely. Februarys are the worst. I don’t like snow at all, but that’s probably more because I’m eager for the spring and its season of growing and sprouts. If it’s above fifty to sixty, I’m all right. In fact, I’ve grown fond of the chillier days here and there. There’s nothing better than curling up with a book in my living room with—”

“A cup of tea?” I cocked my head to the side with a smirk.

She smiled. It was slow and sweet, a more vulnerable and honest expression compared to the ones I’d been seeing since encountering her at the wedding. This was one of her *real* smiles, an unguarded show of her true self.

“Am I that predictable?” she asked around laughter.

I shrugged. “Consistent more like.” I hadn’t seen her for years, but still, that detail was consistent for her. “I don’t drink tea often.”

“I failed to convert you?” she teased.

“Epic fail. I’m a die-hard coffee junkie. But whenever I have tea, I think of you.” I spoke the truth, but it felt too big to

wield here and I wanted to avoid making this conversation too heavy too soon. “I remember you showing up to class with a giant thermos of whatever tea had your heart that week. You’d mix teabags for different flavors and always make me try them.”

She laughed. “Sorry, not sorry.”

“I hated at least fifty percent of them, but I didn’t want to hurt your feelings. So I’d get stuck with a second thermos when you’d bring me more.”

When she didn’t reply, I regretted my confession.

“Why didn’t you pour it out when we were in different classes?” She smirked at me. “I was wasting perfectly good tea on you that I could’ve had myself!”

I chuckled, glad that she was looking at it that way instead of feeling hurt. “The thought never even occurred to me. You went to the effort, so I drank it.”

She blushed again, and it was more prominent with her cheeks already rosier from the cool air.

“My mom raised me to be polite and grateful,” I added.

“How is she?” she asked quickly, eager for the new topic.

I couldn’t blame her for wanting to leave memory lane for the moment.

“She’s great. She’s doing really well. I bought her a new place a few blocks from my home and she’s content to be living mortgage-free. She’s got her own art studio and a plant nursery.”

“Ooooh.” She rubbed her hands together. “That’s nice. I remember when she volunteered on a field trip at a park. She pointed out all the trees better than the park guide did!”

That sounds like her.

“And she and her sister do a lot of traveling together.” *On my dime*, I didn’t add.

“I’m glad to hear that. I always adored her.”

The urge to take her hand became harder to ignore. Everything was just clicking between us, like no stupidity and time apart had been wedged between us. If I did that, this would definitely be a date and not catching up. I recognized the difference, but I struggled to understand if and why I should care.

“Well, she’s always loved you too,” I told her. “She saw a fellow sun-worshipper in you. I’m not surprised you two enjoyed each other’s company.”

And I was the one who put an end to it all.

Regret filled me as I tried to move past that truth. It stayed in my mind and I couldn’t dislodge it. I was an optimistic guy. I hated to ever feel down, but seeing Jenny again was a huge reminder of what had been beyond my reach.

I was happy walking and talking with her. It was a simple pleasure, and it was only natural to wonder how much more we could’ve been sharing all this time.

She didn’t speak up, content to stroll next to me. It seemed she was sinking beneath the weight of her thoughts, too, and I wanted to break the silence. Was she musing about what might have happened if we stayed together? Was she wishing for another chance? Did she want to try this again on a *real* date, not catching up like she could with any other acquaintance from school?

Because I did. I couldn’t stop thinking about what might have been. My thoughts were all wrapped up with her. I remembered the past. I considered the future. Being here with her in the present was rewarding, but it was a stark sign of how much better it could have been if we’d only stayed together before.

CHAPTER 11



JENNY

“I know you said you’ve grown fond of the cold,” Ward said after a long stretch of quiet between us on our walk, “but the warmth from that whiskey is gone.”

“Getting cold?”

“Kind of. How about I drive you home?”

I glanced at him, appreciative of his offer. I didn’t think I was buzzed to the point I didn’t want to risk driving, but better safe than sorry. Besides, I wasn’t quite finished with him. I felt silly when Ward told the distillery owner that we weren’t on a date. I assumed it was. Looking back, though, I realized it wasn’t. We really were just catching up. It wasn’t easy to scold my heart and insist that this wouldn’t turn into anything, but the temptation of wondering what if, in terms of what could happen next instead of regretting what didn’t occur in the past, was addictive.

I wasn’t done with Ward yet, today, so I nodded. His companionship was too easy and exciting to pass on. It had always been like that with him. “What about my car, though?”

“Shoot. It’s at the store.”

I held up my hand as we headed toward his car. Already, I looked forward to the heat. He’d started the vehicle with the remote and I bet the heaters would be full blast. “Never mind. I’m sure Lauren could swing by and drop me off to get it on the way to work tomorrow. I’d love a ride home. A warm one.” I wouldn’t take back my comment about the temperature, but we had been walking for quite a while. The

sun would set soon, so it made sense that we'd be feeling the bite in the air more now.

"Perfect. Me too." He opened the door for me again, and I hurried inside to sigh at the brutal blast of heat forced through the vents. It wasn't cozy like snuggling into my favorite chair at home, but it thawed me out. At the idea of that scene, though, the chair near the corner that Mary Ellen and I always fought over, I looked forward to going home to the girls. Saturday night meant Karen would likely be making a hot meal. Then maybe the girls would be interested in trying out my new blend I created. I'd been testing it diligently and I was convinced it was almost perfect. My mistake had been adding too much jasmine, but I was confident it was balanced now.

"Where to?" Ward asked.

I gave him the address and he headed that way. "You've got a place in a nice, older neighborhood," he commented. "Near the college but not too close to the frat houses."

"It's not *my* place. We split rent among the five of us, well, soon to be four. Lauren's moving in with her fiancé. Then Rylee, Karen, and Mary Ellen, and I will figure out what to do with the other room."

"You live with your friends?"

I grinned. "It's great. Never a dull or boring moment."

"You don't step on each other's toes?"

I thought back to the whole thing with Lauren and Mary Ellen. That was more than a mere step on toes, but like I knew they would, they got over it. "Sure, we do. But I wouldn't change it for the world."

"You all get along?" He huffed a single laugh. "I only ask because I heard horror stories about dorm life from Colby."

"We've got our ups and downs, but yeah, we're like sisters."

Before long, he pulled up to the big house. Even though I was quick to tell Ward that we got along and everything was great about our residence, I knew it would be hard when

Lauren left. I didn't expect her to stay. She was marrying Jameson soon, and it wasn't feasible to think he'd move in to our place. It was a shift, a big change, and I already struggled to adapt.

What will we do with her room? Finding someone to replace her as a roommate was out of the question. Mary Ellen wanted to use it as a library. Karen thought it should be a huge closet for more organization. Rylee hadn't suggested anything, and I felt too uncomfortable thinking of a solution for the room. It would be hard to imagine anything and anyone but Lauren there.

"That's me," I said lamely as I glanced at Ward. He stared up at the house and smiled.

"I think your esteemed housemates are spying through the curtains."

I leaned forward to see the fabric slide again. "Looks like it."

An awkward lull filled the car, and I tried to tamp down the rising flare of panic. I had no clue what to say. Too many things were on my mind and I didn't want to blurt any of them out. At the same time, I wanted to hear what he might tell me, so I gave him the chance to speak first. The whole afternoon had gone so smoothly, but now, I felt tongue-tied.

"Thanks for—" I clamped my mouth shut as he started at the same time, saying, "If you would—"

He laughed at the interruption, and I shook my head, giggling. *Go figure.*

"You go ahead," he said in the same beat that I said, "You go first."

Groaning good-naturedly, he dropped his head back on the headrest. I couldn't stop laughing, charmed by him and amused that we were overlapping like this. It was simply so easy to be in his company. We were literally on the same page, the same line.

Reaching over, he covered my mouth with his hand. "This afternoon was just what I needed." Then he removed his hand,

taking the warmth away.

I nodded. I wouldn't disagree. I hadn't gone out looking for him or even thinking my day would have ended up like this. I set out to *stop* thinking about him, but in hindsight, the opposite wasn't so bad.

"It's been a long time since I could sit with an old friend who knew me before I had all the bells and whistles."

"Hey, it wasn't as terrible as I expected either." I shifted, digging into my purse. "In fact." I held up the gift cards and waited for him to take them.

He shook his head and curled my fingers back over them. "I refuse to take those back."

I waited for the tingle to course through me. First, he took my hand running out of the store. Then he covered my mouth with his hand. Now his fingers gripped mine so I'd fist the cards. When we were walking, I'd wondered about how I'd react if he took my hand again. Then I had to remind myself he didn't think this was a date, so that nixed that silly hope. Now, though, I bit my lip and sighed, worried about how much I yearned for his touch.

"Seriously? No."

He shook his head. "I had them in my pocket to give to customers at the flagship opening. You're a customer. Or you were before you vowed to never return. Regardless, you were a customer at that moment. No ethical lines were crossed."

"Well, if I keep the cards, I kind of have to be a customer again."

He grinned. "Shortest boycott in the history of mankind."

I rolled my eyes. "Funny. But thank you." I put the cards back in my purse and reached for the door handle to exit the car.

"Can I see you again?"

I paused and slowly looked back at him. I bit down on my lip again. "Is that such a good idea?" I had fun, surprisingly, but what was he after? He was so sure and swift in telling the

distillery owner that we weren't on a date. We had caught up quite a bit. So, what did he want my company for again? I refused to let that hope fly too high. He'd hurt me too much in the past to lower my guard that fast.

He shrugged. "Why not?"

I almost rolled my eyes again. He was tossing my words back at me. I could think of several reasons why not. He could be playing me. He could get bored again. He could dump me and pick someone else again.

No. This isn't high school anymore. Those reasons wouldn't make or break me now, right?

It was my answer to why we should do this again that had me so cautious. Yeah, I would like to see him again because he made me feel alive and wanted. Ward incited a dangerous addiction to having fun and wanting more of it, of him.

How easily he charmed me was worrisome. I had to be smart about this.

"I'm not so sure."

He leaned back in his seat and nodded, letting me off the hook. "Fine. But I'll see you at Colby and Naomi's housewarming party next weekend, right?"

A giggle threatened to break free. A housewarming party. They'd been living together at a rental house for years, but now that they were married, they bought another place right down the street. Technically, it *was* their first house, in ownership at least.

"I'll be there," I replied before I got out of the car. By the time I walked around the monster of a machine, he rolled his window down.

"I'll watch to make sure you get inside safely."

I did giggle then. "My friends are already looking out."

"Humor me."

Well, that's kind of sweet. Unnecessary, but sweet.

Knowing he was watching me walk away filled me with a sense of pride. And fear. I never put too much stock into the way my body was. I sometimes worried I had more muscles than cushion, but I knew I was still feminine. My body was toned from all my gardening work, but I wouldn't give any of that up for a sleeker body.

As I headed toward the door, I *felt* the burn of Ward's stare on me, and I just knew he was checking out my ass. I bit my lip harder, trying my best not to giggle at his attention.

The door opened before I gripped the knob.

Karen greeted me, hand on a hip. "And where have you been?"

Lauren leaned around her, peering at the driveway. "Where's your car—oh, whoa. What? Is that *Ward*?"

Mary Ellen shoved closer to see out the door. "Ward? The best man?"

I entered and pushed them all inside

Rylee furrowed her brow. "You're consorting with the enemy? I thought you said you were going out to buy tea satchels or something."

"You've been gone for *hours!*" Karen said in her typical mother-hen style.

I sat on the ottoman in the living room as they gathered around me, taking seats on the couch and chairs. "I went shopping then ended up having drinks and going on a walk. My car is in the parking lot at his store. Yes, that was Ward. And I'm not sure that I am consorting with the enemy." *There. I think I answered them all.*

Rylee gaped at me. "What? A couple of drinks and a walk changed it all? Just this morning you said you were still bitter about him."

I pointed at her. "I said I'd moved on from junior high."

"By moving back to something with him?" Karen asked.

"No. I mean, well, no. It wasn't a date."

Lauren frowned. “I don’t know. Drinks and a walk sound like a date.”

“We were catching up,” I argued. “Old friends who were catching up.”

Jameson entered, bringing takeout bags. The scent of greasy beef filled the air and I moaned in hunger.

“You’re a hero.” I got up to help him set out the food on the coffee table, ravenous to eat and spill what happened.

“Hey,” Lauren said to him. “Is getting drinks and going for a walk a date or a way of catching up?”

He furrowed his brow as we all arranged the food. I hadn’t noticed it when I entered with the way they ambushed me, but it looked like more efforts to help Lauren pack had been underway.

“Um. Is this a trick question?” he replied.

“No. It wasn’t a date. He said so.”

Jameson handed me a plate. “Who?”

“Ward,” Mary Ellen said. “But how did you even see him?”

As we got food and settled in for dinner around the coffee table, I told them how I saw Ward at The Cozy Company. They didn’t interrupt me as I talked, but afterward, they had conflicting comments to offer.

“I think he sounds sweet,” Mary Ellen said.

“But he was sweet on her before and burned her,” Lauren argued.

Mary Ellen shook her head. “No, it seems like he still genuinely cares for her as a person.”

“Yeah,” Jameson added. “If he didn’t try to cop a feel, maybe he really did just want to catch up.”

Karen nodded. “I agree.”

“Hang on.” Rylee lifted her hand. “No. You’ve gotta kick this guy to the curb, Jen. He did you wrong once. Don’t give

him a chance to do it again.”

I don't want that reminder after being in his company though.

“Just be careful,” Lauren said and glanced at Jameson. “Second chances can work out.” He leaned over to kiss her temple. “But this is *Ward*.”

I sighed, knowing she'd react like this. Lauren had seen how it destroyed me in high school, and she wouldn't be eager to witness me suffering through a repeat of heartache.

It wasn't every day a first love would show up like this, but now that mine had, I had to find a safe landing for going forward.

Should I let him in?

Or stay guarded?

CHAPTER 12



WARD

I would probably be late to my own funeral, but the one thing I always did manage to do on time was leave the house for dropping off Sunny at school. That didn't mean she made it to school with room to spare before the first bell though.

The private school she attended was only a five-minute walk from our home, but our tradition was to pack up in the SUV she liked, grab Starbucks, then park at the school and talk before she rushed inside.

It seemed like a lot, or more like going over the top to treat a kid to a franchise frou-frou drink. She ordered the same thing every time, a hot chocolate with whipped cream and caramel drizzles crisscrossed over the fluff.

I was careful about what I gave her. Mom hadn't raised me to be an entitled brat. I learned lessons of gratitude when she gave me the best she could as a single working mother. Even though I had money now, I was diligent with how I raised Sunny as a single working father. My time was too limited to always be with her, and I swore her childhood was zooming by in a blur at the speed of light. I would always indulge my daughter with my presence. I couldn't be there for every little thing, but I tried to. My mother helped pick up where I slacked. Our morning ritual wasn't about her wanting to arrive at school in the snazzy expensive car. She liked it because it was so up high and reminded her of a princess carriage. And she wasn't eager to go through the drive-thru to get a pricy and unhealthy drink for the hell of it. She enjoyed the precious moments we could hang out and talk.

“Do you like tea, Sunny?” I asked as we waited in line.

“Eww. No. Grandma let me sip her iced tea and I hated it.”

I nodded. *Same, kid, same.* I couldn’t stop thinking about Jenny, though, and as I waited for my highly sugared-up coffee, I wondered when I started to dislike tea. Was it before or after Jenny?

“It’s too bitter,” Sunny added.

“Yeah. I know. All right.” I glanced at the paper I printed off. All it showed was her list of sight words she would be tested on today. “From.” Then I repeated it slower, sounding out each letter.

“F-R-U-M.” She gasped and held up her hand. “Wait!”

I glanced in the rearview mirror as she scrunched her face, thinking hard.

“Oh, I know this one! I know I know it.”

“Sound it out in your head.”

“My teacher wants us to *tap* it out.” She held up her hand and demonstrated by tapping her fingers.

“Same thing. Whatever works. Try again.”

“You gotta move up, Dad.” She nodded and sighed. “Okay. From.”

I paid attention to the line and moved up a place.

“F. R. O. M?” she guessed.

“Yep. That’s it.” “

She pouted. “But it sounds like a *u*.”

“That’s why they call it a trick word.”

“My teacher calls them sight words.”

I held back a groan. “Same thing.”

We were up to get our drinks, and several minutes later, we were parked at her school.

I sipped my coffee while she read off the list, practicing more. I zoned out, watching the car line, thankful I never messed with that mess.

“Dad?”

“Hmm?” I turned toward her. She’d moved up to the passenger seat after I turned off the car.

“Look.” She pointed out the window. “Is that Mom?”

I frowned, checking where she pointed. Too many people blocked my line of sight. “No. It shouldn’t be. It’s probably someone who looks like her.”

“No. It *really* looks like her. She kinda stands out.”

I craned my neck to see, and there she was.

Gwen stood at the bottom of the front steps and it was immediately clear what Sunny meant. Gwen was unmissable. Dressed in a tight, cleavage-revealing, and form-fitting magenta dress, my ex looked like she was ready to go on a sexy date, hit up a nightclub before bar-hopping, or meet a booty call.

I groaned. *What the hell is this about?*

“I think Principal Warner is staring at her boobs.”

I growled mentally, hating that Sunny would have to make that observation. Then wonder about it. Or worse, if she would worry about how that connection would matter to her reputation too.

I was all for women doing what they wanted. But at school, some decorum was expected. It was, whether Gwen cared or not, a place for professional attire, and her outfit fell far short of any standard dress code.

She spotted me, knowing the make and color of the SUV. With a bright grin, she waved. Not a usual lift and side-to-side motion of her hand. She raised both arms and turned it into a full-body shimmy, garnering even more attention before she strode toward us.

I don't even want to know.

I got out of the car and waited for Sunny to climb out with her backpack. I held it, helping her hoist it on.

“Hey, you’ve got this trick word test, Sunshine.”

She grinned at my nickname. “They’re called sight words.”

I smiled back. “Same thing. Good luck, okay?”

“Thanks, Dad.” She hugged me, then took my hand.

We approached the crosswalk that would bring her toward the school door she was supposed to enter through.

Gwen intercepted us on the sidewalk. “Aw, there’s my pretty girl.”

As she leaned over to give her a hug, Sunny tilted her head to the side so she wouldn’t be smothered by the cleavage.

Stop calling her pretty. She is. But she’s smart too. Then again, this woman wouldn’t know it. I bit my tongue, though, refraining from telling her to pound sand.

“Bye, Dad.” Sunny skipped off to join her classmates, who were climbing the steps. She paused, turning to Gwen awkwardly. “Bye...” She didn’t finish, letting her farewell trail off without calling her anything as she faced forward and waited to get inside.

I hated how awkward this was for her. It shouldn’t be.

“Look,” I said without scowling since others were around. “Just because you saw us at the wedding doesn’t mean you can spontaneously show up like this.”

The bell rang, and the kids all hurried to enter the building.

I crossed my arms, staring at Gwen. “What do you want?”

She rolled her eyes, like I was being a hard-ass for no reason.

I wasn’t in the mood for this. “You had your chance to be an involved mother. I even gave you a chance to have split custody. Or even partial. I offered you only weekends or every

other weekend, but you couldn't get your shit together. You didn't want her any time. Remember?"

"I was there, Ward. Yeah, I remember."

"If you're here to negotiate new custody terms, I won't hear you out."

She popped a piece of bubble gum. "Jeez. Relax, papa bear. That's not why I'm here."

Relief washed over me. The mere idea of Gwen taking Sunny from me was a nightmare I didn't want to ever face. I was pissed though. Gwen didn't care about being in Sunny's life at all and that was an awful thing to face. My little girl deserved the world, but having a damn mother would be a start.

"I'm just here to invite you to an event." She handed me a sleek, glossy invitation, and I took it from her fingers before she could try to brush them against mine.

I frowned, skimming the contents of the card. Then I laughed, hard.

"A *wedding*?"

I choked on another bark of laughter. *Is she serious?*

"Yes." She tipped her chin up and grinned. "Mine."

Who the hell is delusional enough to marry you?

"And I'd like Sunny to be in the bridal party."

All laughter faded. My expression fell as I considered what she said.

"After seeing her so cute at that other wedding, I figured she'd look so cute at mine, too."

About the looks. Again.

My gut reaction was to tell her hell no. Sunny didn't need to be used like this. She wasn't an ornamentation or prop. But she did enjoy being Naomi's flower girl. She felt included in a special group. I could tell that she felt like she mattered with such an important task and role. No doubt about it, Sunny was

all about princesses, and I had to admit that when she walked down that aisle with that dress, she looked like one.

Maybe she would want to have a chance to participate. After all, letting her be in Gwen's bridal party didn't mean anything past that day.

"I'll talk to her after school."

Gwen brightened. "You will?"

"Yeah. It's her choice. I'll ask her what she thinks about it."

She clapped and grinned wider, elated.

I held up my hand. "That's not a yes. This isn't an answer. But I'll ask her after school today."

"Thank you. And you have to RSVP as soon as you can. This is gonna be the wedding of the year. A wedding to end the year!"

"Huh?"

"It's on New Year's Eve."

Dammit. I gritted my teeth. Sunny and I usually spent New Year's Eves with my mom. We always made a big deal out of it. A feast. Games. A jump in our indoor pool. I always tried my hand at fireworks and found more duds than not.

Now we have to go to this instead?

"New Year's Eve?"

"Yeah! It'll be so much fun."

Yeah, right. It sounded like a bad omen, to be near this woman at all and ring in the brand-new year with her idea of fun.

CHAPTER 13



JENNY

Before I learned that Ward owned The Cozy Company, it was my favorite store. When I was in high school, I fell in love with Bed, Bath & Beyond. Then when I was in college, my tastes matured and I was more a fan of Pottery Barn. Ward's store was a blend of those two places, but now, it held an entirely different meaning for me. It was a location where I hoped I might be able to run into Ward again. Which was why Monday, I spent a good hour or two procrastinating there after work. I'd hoped to run into him or even hear a mention of him, but it was ridiculous. He was probably only there Saturday because of the big opening.

It wasn't a total waste. I headed there to spend the gift cards he gave me to "con" me into drinks. Much to my disappointment, he didn't pop out from behind a display stand, but I did find some pillows that looked pretty darn cute on my bed.

I fluffed them and stood back to admire the overall look. Peaceful. Soothing. Green tones. *And a reminder of Ward.*

I rolled my eyes at myself and rearranged them again. What I should have done with those gift cards was find something to give Naomi and Colby for their housewarming party this weekend. I intended to get them *something*, but I was positive they didn't need anything. They couldn't be lacking another cheese board, new linens, or any kitchen appliances. I already knew they had plants because I ran into Naomi at the local greenhouse and she admitted to being a plant hoarder.

As if there's anything wrong with that!

Their wedding registry was slim and tame, too, so much so it seemed like they'd only thrown one together because they had to, not that they wanted to. That was fodder for Lauren's critique, but I dismissed it.

I have to get them something. I can't show up empty-handed.

I had three days to think on it, and if I was being honest with myself, I was just making an excuse to return to The Cozy Company to find a gift I could settle on.

Too funny, though.

When Lauren started her current business, Room Up, I joked that she would be a direct competitor with The Cozy Company. That wasn't true, though. My friend focused on online sales, and that was the whole convenience of it, that parents wouldn't need to go from store to store and shop in person for multiple things. I knew she had reached out to the company though, not for Room Up but her first candle business, Watson Wicks.

Maybe I can ask if he saw her pitch. I wasn't sure how long he'd owned the chain. Perhaps he wasn't aware of her email. Still, I could put a good word in for her so she could sell her candles in the stores.

Better yet, I could pitch my stuff to him too. The Cozy Company would be an ideal place for customers to broaden their horizons of tea and try new blends. Specifically *my* blends. My business was still in its infancy, so it was wiser to push those ideas to the backburner and ask another day. I had only just been reacquainted with him. I couldn't bombard him with business ideas from the get-go.

I drew in a deep breath and stepped back to admire my pillows again. My whole room smelled like my newest blend, a mixture of citrus, cinnamon, and cloves.

I wrinkled my nose.

Eh, maybe too strong on the cloves yet.

“Are you looking forward to the house-warming party?” Mary Ellen asked, jarring me from my thoughts. She lounged on the window seat in my room, skimming through a book. I would never trade rooms with her. That window was coveted because she swore it was the best seat to read on the second floor, and I argued that I needed it because it had the best facing sunlight for my plants on the ledge. She wasn’t suffering in her room anyway. It had the most shelves for books.

“Yeah. I’m just undecided about the housewarming gift. It’s not like they need anything.”

“I’m sure it’s the thought that counts.”

I turned and smiled as I sat and faced her. “Yeah. I know. I’ll think of something.”

She closed her book. “Do you think there will be any cute guys there?”

I raised my brows. That was a very un-Mary-Allen-like question. She was a hermit.

She shrugged and blushed. “I’m ready to get back out there.”

I almost laughed. *Back* out there? She never put herself out there much to begin with, instead waiting for someone to find her.

“Now that I’m no longer bothered about Lauren and Jameson being together, well, I’m thrilled for them. I see how good of a fit they are together and I hate how I almost ruined it for them. I just see how well they click, and I hope I can have that for myself someday.”

“They are a great match.”

She nodded. “And how can I ever hope to be half of anyone’s match if I don’t go out?”

I’m not sure going to a housewarming party qualifies as going out, but for you, it probably does.

I shrugged. “I’m not sure who would be there. I’m not in touch with many of Naomi’s friends anymore. But Naomi and

Colby always host a good event, so I bet plenty of interesting people will be there if you want to take Lauren's place."

"Really? You'd let me come with you?"

I sighed at her hopeful tone. Mary Ellen and I never saw eye-to-eye much. I could be too honest and blunt, according to Lauren, whereas Mary Ellen was sensitive to the core. When she meddled between Lauren and Jameson, I thought our friend was being too dramatic about it all. But that never meant I valued her any less. She was the baby of the group, and I often lost sight of how she might assume she wasn't welcome sometimes.

"Sure. Lauren said she's too busy with planning. For the move. For her wedding. I think they've got preliminary cake tasting already."

"Preliminary?" Mary Ellen giggled. "How many rounds will there be?"

I laughed too. "With Lauren? Who knows?"

"Well, if I'm coming with you, we've got to bring a housewarming gift. In fact, *two*, one from each of us."

I laughed again. "You're too sweet for your own good. You don't have to *pay* to come with a gift."

She dismissed me with a wave. "Do they like books?"

Of course, you'd ask that. Just like I thought of a plant first. "I think so. Naomi definitely does. Colby, I'm not so sure."

"Let's build a box together. I could get a coffee table book."

I snapped my fingers. "How about his and hers mugs? With my teas?"

"A towel," she said. "One of Lauren's candles."

"Yes, this will be perfect. I can get the mugs and towel from The Cozy Company."

She nodded. But when she smiled wider, I could tell she caught on to my enthusiasm. "Ward's store?"

Shoot. Busted. I shrugged.

She moved over to the bed to sit beside me. “I’m guessing he’ll be there too, huh?”

I nodded, not trusting my voice if I spoke. I would definitely sound overly giddy.

“Tell me about him,” she insisted.

“What about him?” If she was looking to start a debate about if I should open up to him again or keep him at a distance, I wasn’t in the mood. I tried fielding that debate from both angles within my own head, and I got nowhere. I *still* had no clue how I should approach Ward being back in my life, and I felt pressured to somehow be confident about my intentions toward him and what he might be thinking and feeling about me, too.

She smiled. “I’m curious what he was like when you dated.”

Oh. A trip down memory lane? That’s easy. I’d been doing that frequently lately, since the wedding.

“He played football, a wide receiver, actually.”

“Why do you say *actually*?”

I grinned. “Because Ward is—or was—never, ever on time. He was born to be late for any and everything, so he got a lot of teasing from his teammates that he had to be on time to catch the ball when it was thrown.”

“Did he?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he was pretty good at it, too. I would go to all his practices and games. Just to be there, you know? I’d read or do homework, but I showed up, and it was our little thing. He’d set up a spot for me on the bleachers before his games. I’m talking the whole setup. He’d bring a cozy blanket, a hot tea.”

Mary Ellen giggled. “Duh.”

“One of my books out of my locker. He was a sweet boyfriend, offering to carry my stuff in the halls, but he’d

think ahead for those setups at his games. Sometimes he'd leave a gift for me too. When he was old enough to have a job, just simple parttime things, he'd treat me. He loved buying me trinkets and candies."

She pressed her hands to her chest and fell back, proving she earned that dramatic label. I smiled at her exaggerated swoon.

"I can only imagine." She sighed dreamily. "I never had a boyfriend like that in high school. Ever, really."

"It was wonderful," I confessed. Thinking back to those blissful times of just *knowing* he loved me warmed me up inside out. Those feelings didn't last long, though, and the loss still stung. Just as quickly, the radiance from my memories dulled. "Until it wasn't."

She rubbed my back. "Because he saw Gwen and jumped ship?"

I nodded. "Yeah. That sums it up."

"I can't believe she did that. She must not have been a good friend. Or a real friend at all."

"Looking back now, I doubt she was ever sincere in our friendship. When we were kids, yeah, we got along. We were kids. Boys weren't even on our radar then. But once they were, she sure changed her tune toward me."

"I'm sorry you had to go through that," she said softly.

"But hey." I slapped my hands to my thighs. "Everyone got their heart broken in junior high."

She furrowed her brow. "I didn't. I never had a chance to fall in love with someone to lose it."

"Well, it's still stupid to hold on to my first love."

"I don't think you're being stupid about it. I can tell you're undecided, but I think if I were in your position, I'd feel the same."

"I'm not undecided," I argued weakly.

"Then overly cautious about it all?" she guessed.

“Yeah. I don’t want to make the same mistake twice. I let him matter *so* much one time, I should be smarter to prevent that from happening again.”

“But I saw you, Jenny. When you came home last weekend, I saw how hard you fought to smile. Deny it all you want, but thinking about Ward makes you somewhat happy in the present. The past can’t be erased, but right now, don’t you feel excited about seeing him again?”

Hell yes. “That doesn’t mean I should.”

“Just go with your heart.”

I smirked at her. “That was what I did back then, when I didn’t know any better.”

She cringed. “Wouldn’t you think you’re wiser about it all now?”

I laughed once. “It’s not like I just *know*. If anything I’m more conflicted than ever.” I shook my head. “Back when we were kids, what happened, happened. I can understand that now, in hindsight. Going forward, though, it’s up to me to *make* something happen, if I even want it to, and I just can’t tell if that’s a good idea or not.”

CHAPTER 14



WARD

“All right, you behave, Sunshine.” I kissed my daughter’s forehead before I went to leave my mom’s house.

“I always behave for Grandma.”

I winked at her then faced my mom. “Okay, then make sure Grandma behaves.”

She rolled her eyes. “Ha. You’re silly.”

I pointed at her. “Which means no more glitter. *Please*. For one week, no glitter.”

Her reply was a not-so-sheepish shrug. “I make no promises there. Glitter makes the world sparkle. And we sure love our craft time.”

“And I also have yet to find a cleaning service that actually removes all of it.” I gave her as stern of a look as I could manage, even though I wanted to laugh.

That shit got *everywhere* and reappeared like a curse when I least expected or wanted it. For example, when I was at a meeting yesterday with local investors. I gave up in the middle of it and asked an assistant who stood in for his boss what the hell was so funny. They were all failing to hide their chuckles and I hated being in the dark.

“You’ve got glitter.” The guy had pointed at his cheek. “And pink just isn’t your color.”

I rubbed at my skin until he confirmed it was gone. “Thanks, Andy,” I told him afterward.

“It’s *Andrew*,” he corrected firmly.

“Same thing.”

He’d rolled his eyes at me and I wondered if I said that too often.

“Just one night of no glitter,” I told my mom and daughter. “That’s all I ask. Please.”

My mom glanced at her watch. “What did you say you were going to again?”

“Naomi and Colby’s housewarming party.”

She laughed. “They’ve already been living together in a house for how many years now?”

I shrugged. “Hey, I’ll take any excuse to have a party with them.”

“I thought you said it started at eight,” she replied. “It’s seven thirty now.”

Shit. “Yeah, so I gotta go!” I hurried to open the door and jog to my car.

She hollered after me. “But it’s only a ten-minute drive!” Then in a lower voice, she asked, “Sunny, is he feeling okay?”

I got the same treatment when I arrived at my friends’ new house. I wanted to arrive *before* eight, but being on time really was like going against the grain. I arrived at 8:01 thanks to construction I hadn’t counted on.

“Dude, are you all right?” Colby asked.

“Perfectly fine.” *If too excited to be here.* I thrust a bottle of whiskey at him. “Since you don’t need any more shit.” I shrugged. “No one turns down booze.” I grinned wide. “Happy housewarming.”

Naomi furrowed her brow and laid her hand on mine. “Are you sure you’re feeling all right? Did you hit your head?”

She was checking for a temperature, and it was silly anyway.

“I feel fine.”

“But you’re on time,” Colby teased.

“Funny.” I entered the house. *So this is how many people come to parties right on time.*

“He’s got a concussion,” Naomi concluded.

“I didn’t hit my head!”

“He can’t even remember it,” she mused.

“I said I’m fine.”

“But you’re *never* on time, man.” Colby cracked up when Naomi tried to check my brow again and I swatted her hand away.

“Well, first time for everything, huh?” I could take a joke as well as I could give them. If they were looking for an answer, they wouldn’t be hearing an explanation from me. I wasn’t going to come clean and tell them that I wanted to be here at eight o’clock on the dot because a certain someone would be here and I was looking forward to another reunion.

I spread my arms out. “So this is it. Welcome to homeownership.”

Colby nodded. “Yeah. It’s a lot.”

The house wasn’t, but I knew he meant the responsibility of it all. “Well, show me. I want the whole tour.”

I was already impressed. Not everyone paid attention to homes, but I did. When I was little, I dreamed about having a huge house with an even bigger family. Mom never remarried or even dated, so I was out of luck in the sibling department. And it wasn’t until I lucked out and got my obscene wealth that we could pick and choose our homes to our hearts’ delight.

When I pulled up here, though, I knew it was a solid start for my friends. The exterior was charming with unique but not bizarre landscaping. I’d rolled my eyes at the red door and knew the cliché welcome mat was Naomi’s doing. The interior of the traditional two-story colonial was gorgeous too. They led me from room to room, which wasn’t necessary. I had come with Colby for the inspection, and I’d helped them

consider the pros and cons of several properties. It was different seeing it in person now, though. They'd already made it their own with personal touches, and I smiled as they listed the rooms' purposes. Neither labeled the bedroom adjacent to theirs, but I knew they likely hoped to turn that into a nursery soon.

We ended up in the dining room, in front of the liquor cabinet where Colby made us drinks. Guests continued to arrive and those already here mingled. Jenny wasn't among them, but standing here with my friend while Naomi greeted the newcomers, I had a perfect vantage point to see when the woman would show up.

She has to.

I could tell she was hesitant to make plans with *me* last weekend, but she wouldn't skip a general party invite.

"Naomi and I already had our first fight as a married couple," Colby confided once his wife walked away.

Uh oh. I lowered my glass and raised my brows, immediately concerned. "What? No. No way."

He nodded and laughed. "She tried to convince me to put up the Christmas tree in time for this party."

I balked. "What? It's not even Thanksgiving yet."

"That's what I said!" He chuckled some more, and I joined in. "My wife sure loves the holidays."

I lifted my finger from my glass, pointing at him. "You love saying that, don't you?"

"Dude, I can't stop. My wife this. My wife that." He shrugged.

"But it's not like it's new. You've been together for how many years?"

"Doesn't matter. Just tell me when it gets annoying."

I will do no such thing. "Eh, you're fine."

"No. It's addicting. I was on the phone with her dad, talking about when he can come over and help set up some

stuff with me, and I called her *my wife*. To her dad.”

I laughed harder. “You’ll remember her name someday.”

I wasn’t done ribbing him about it, but I stopped mid-conversation the moment she arrived.

Even if I wasn’t looking out for her specifically, I would’ve noticed her arrival. Jenny entered and looked fucking stunning. A sleek dark green skirt covered her toned legs, and the cream-colored sweater tucked into it accentuated the red in her hair somehow. I didn’t understand colors and themes. Like the assistant at that meeting told me, pink wasn’t my color, and that was news to me. I didn’t care, either, but Jenny looked fabulous in a timeless way, and I struggled to look away.

“Naomi, this house is incredible,” she said across the room.

“Thank you!” Naomi hugged her and accepted a gift basket before Jenny smiled toward the pretty woman who’d come with her.

Damn, that smile. I could soak up her radiance forever and still need more.

A hand swept through my vision, blocking me from staring as Jenny introduced whoever her friend was. I flinched and stepped back and Colby ceased waving his hand in front of my face. “Earth to Ward?”

I blinked and shook my head to clear the spell. Jenny was magnetic, pulling me toward her, but that was no reason to be rude.

“Ward?”

I cleared my throat. “Sorry. But, uh, I gotta go.”

Fortunately another guest approached Colby, giving me a way to escape and beeline straight for Jenny. Naomi turned to Colby when he asked a question, leaving me a direct path to her.

“Hello, Jenny.”

“Oh. Whoa.” The timid woman next to her widened her eyes. “Does he *always* use a bedroom voice like that?” she whispered, perhaps not as quietly as she intended to.

I chuckled.

Jenny sighed as mock irritation danced in her eyes. “Ward, this is Mary Ellen. Mary Ellen, this is Ward.”

I took the woman’s hand to shake it, and as soon as that common gesture was complete, she turned bright pink. Boy, she was easily rattled.

“I, uh,” she stuttered, glancing at Jenny. “Excuse me.”

I didn’t turn to watch where she ran off to.

Jenny frowned slightly. “She doesn’t get out much.”

“By design? Or fate?”

Jenny furrowed her brow, thinking it over. “You know, I’m not sure right now.” She faced me again. “She’ll be all right. Have you been here long?”

I held up my glass. “Long enough to know where to find this.”

“Smart man. I always wondered if you were more brawn than brains.”

“Haha.” I loved how easily we fell into each other like this. No awkwardness. No bitterness. “Want me to make you one?”

She glanced at my drink. “Sure.”

“Even if it’s not organic?”

She grinned. “That bottle you ordered at the distillery was. I called it a hunch when you asked what they’d recommend for a housewarming whiskey.”

“Aha. Smart woman. How was your week?” I asked as she joined me in the dining room.

“It was all right,” she said, and she began to share how she’d been since I last saw her. Small talk usually felt like a chore, but with her, I was entertained by her take on life. I wondered if she was downplaying how she felt about Lauren

moving out tomorrow, and I was curious what she had chosen for herself with the gift cards I'd given her.

We didn't stay in one place like losers. Together, like the old friends we were, we walked around the house. Both of us nodded in acknowledgment or said hello to familiar faces, and I couldn't believe it when we passed the clock and I saw that an hour had gone by already.

"How about you? How was your week?" she asked.

I sighed, dreading the obligation to be honest. "Well, it could have been better."

"Trouble in paradise?" she asked.

"It started off with the biggest skeleton in my closet catching me off guard."

"That doesn't sound fun. Halloween was weeks ago, so no skeletons should be hanging out any longer."

I wish. Gwen showing up with that invite at Sunny's school was worse than the creepiest masks I saw while trick-or-treating with Sunny, who dressed as a princess warrior.

Shrill laughter cut through the room, and I stopped in my tracks. I'd recognize that sound anyway. *You've got to be shitting me.* "It can't be."

We turned in unison to spot Gwen striding through the front door in a red silk dress befitting a gala, matching bold lipstick, and sky-high heels. She paused and tossed her golden locks back like this was her runway. She looked good. She was, as always, dressed to glamorous perfection, but I knew the perfected outer shell hid the wicked soul inside. No amount of cosmetics or fine clothes could change the bitch she really was.

A tall man stayed glued to her side. Her arm was draped over his with a possessive grip. He had to be at least twenty years her senior without the plastic surgery to hide that gap.

That's got to be her fiancé.

"Speak of the devil," I muttered.

Next to me, Jenny shifted her weight and sighed. “I’m going to need a much stronger drink.”

I glanced at her and raised a brow.

“Organic or not,” she added dryly.

CHAPTER 15



JENNY

Ugh. *Gwen*. I wasn't sure who I pissed off in another life but this stretch of karma sucked. Two encounters in two weeks. *Why are Naomi and Colby still friends with this witch?*

"If Naomi's cousin wasn't friends with Gwen's cousin, I bet she'd never feel like she had to invite her to anything," Ward said lowly.

That explained that, but we were still stuck here near her.

"Come on." Ward tipped his chin toward another room.

I wasn't shocked he wanted to leave and play another version of hooky. "To the bathroom?"

He chuckled. "Kitchen."

Whoops. I hadn't been paying attention. Actually, I had been, just not to the house the new couple bought.

I followed him to the large and open room that smelled so warm and welcoming. Apples were brewing in a concoction of something sweet and spicy, the essence of a fall harvest in a crockpot to make the space fragrant. We made ourselves scarce here while Gwen lorded over the guests in the living room.

"Your skeleton?" I guessed, although he'd already implied he meant Gwen already.

"Yep. Biggest one."

I grinned as I helped myself to one of the mini quiches. Under normal circumstances, I would've been pickier about

checking if organic and clean foods were used, but right now, I lowered my standards for the sake of sating my empty stomach.

“I can’t imagine Gwen would like to be called *big* in any way.”

“Except her fake tits?” He rolled his eyes. “The boyfriend after me purchased them, or so she said.”

I shook my head, but even as he spoke with such clear disdain for his ex, I struggled to understand. He’d had something good with me and left to pursue her. A small part of me was so damn gleeful it hadn’t lasted, but I couldn’t turn off the curiosity about what had happened between them.

Switching to red wine, we resumed our usual banter and easy small talk as we went to town on the appetizers spread out on the counters.

“This reminds me of how we used to hide out at my parents’ big Christmas bash every year. Remember?”

He groaned. “Oh, man. I miss those little deviled-egg things your aunt made.”

I knew exactly what he was talking about. They weren’t deviled eggs, but something so close and more delicious.

“And those cookies your mom made.” It was my turn to groan.

“She still makes them. She loves to bake with—” He cut himself off, smiling wider. Then he chuckled. “I recall how I used to avoid your father at those parties.”

“My dad?” I giggled. “He always dressed up as Santa for the younger kids.”

“Yeah. He always wanted to ask me what my intentions were with his daughter.”

And you never wanted to own up to a chance of breaking my heart, didya?

“How are your folks? You asked about my mom but I didn’t follow up with your parents.”

“Oh, they’re fine.”

“Still close?”

I shook my head. “They moved to Tennessee a couple of years ago to be near my mother’s mother. Her health has been failing.”

“Nana?” he guessed, surprised.

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. I know how much you adore her.”

It was sweet that he remembered that small detail. Or maybe it wasn’t such a minor fact about me. “It’s the circle of life.” It wasn’t an easy one to accept, but it was true. “And I’m glad my mom is there for my nana. I visit often, so I get a chance to stay as close as possible.”

“That’s good.”

“She was the one who first turned me on to tea. She introduced me to how it can be used for ailments and different concerns.”

He snorted. “Tea. Here we go.”

I drew in a quick breath. “Sorry. I can’t help it.”

“You’re obsessed,” he teased.

I shrugged, smiling. “It’s in my blood.”

“Oh, there you are.” Naomi entered the kitchen, her gaze on the appetizer trays as she rounded past Ward. “I wondered where you took off to—hey!” She set her hands on her hips. “Where’d it all go?”

She pointed at the mini quiche tray. “You demolished them,” she scolded. “Get out of here.” She growled and made a shooing motion with her hands. “Go on. Go on. Get away before they’re *all* gone.”

I giggled, bumping into Ward as he chuckled and exited with me. We were caught red-handed like kids. It was too much fun laughing with him that I didn’t look up. It was too

late to notice someone else was heading down the hall, and I smacked right into Gwen.

Shit. Just who we wanted to avoid.

Ward caught me by the upper arm as I bounced back a step. I couldn't register the feel of his hand on me. I was stuck under the glowering focus of my long-ago friend. With a slow, deliberate sweep, she dragged her gaze up and down me. She didn't say anything, but then, she didn't need to. The lack of consideration chilled me, and the smirk she wore made me feel less than.

I couldn't help but feel unsexy in comparison to her. She'd always been such an obvious bombshell, glaringly gorgeous in an in-your-face way. I always tried to reassure myself that I was a natural, more reserved beauty, but next to her, I couldn't ignore the damning sensation of being judged and found unworthy.

Beauty was only skin deep. I knew that. But it was so damn hard to believe that when in her proximity.

Her only reaction was a blunt snort, like she spotted something that would be a waste and disgrace to her time and effort.

How could she have been my friend?

Way back when the innocence of childhood could rule us, I thought we were buddies. I remembered coloring in Lisa Frank books with her. She'd come over to play Barbies with me, and I enjoyed going to her house and playing the video games she had. Back then, we were just kids and we got along.

If I dug deeper, maybe I would've noticed how she always had to claim her pictures were better than mine. That she kept the tip of her crayon in the lines more than I did. That she was the one who put her initials on the best-of-all-times lines for scores in the games. When I was younger, it hadn't mattered. Sure, I was competitive. Children usually were. But I'd perceived her as a friend, not a foe, and I'd overlooked her constant comparisons and need to always be the best.

If I hadn't met Lauren over those same years and befriended her, I wouldn't have had anyone. Lauren had many interests back then. She was a busy, extroverted girl who always surrounded herself with others. She also had two siblings, whereas Gwen was an only child like me, so we clicked a little better.

Thank goodness Lauren stayed true. She became my best friend, witness to the hell Gwen put me through.

I never counted on seeing Gwen again, much less going out of my way to talk to her, but here and now, it was inevitable.

"Well, hello," Gwen said wryly. It sounded like a purr yet not. Sweet but deceptively so.

Ward only glared ahead, almost deadpan. I lifted my hand in a feeble reply of a greeting as I sipped my wine.

"This is my fiancé."

I choked on my drink, damn near spitting it out on her dress.

"Hey!" Gwen scowled, wiping at the fabric.

"At least it'll match," Ward quipped of my wine on her dress. Only a few drops of spray came close. He was right. It wasn't noticeable, but I turned to shoot him an incredulous look, hoping he'd get the memo to behave. I couldn't believe he'd said that.

"Can't you control yourself?" Gwen snapped at me.

I wiped my mouth and stalled for what to say. Nothing came to mind. I seriously thought she'd brought her father to the party, but I wanted to reserve judgment and not assume.

Fiancé? Holy shit. Where'd she find him? Age was just a number, but this man gave off creepy-uncle vibes more than any silver-fox ones.

"This is Kenneth Crown," Gwen said, beaming up at him.

"Kenneth Frown?" Ward asked dryly, deliberately messing up his surname.

I bit my lip not to laugh. The older man *was* frowning. Like an Eeyore. Or Scrooge.

“Kenneth *Crown*,” Gwen said between clenched teeth. She fashioned the scowl she showed us to a brilliant grin as she looked at her beau again. Hanging off his arm, she clung like she couldn’t bear to lose him in the crowd. “My handsome stud.” She reached up and smoothed her hand over his cheek.

He was tall, broad-shouldered like a linebacker but without the bulk of an athlete. What bothered me the most was how impossible he was to read. As I nodded at him for a silent, awkward hello that was made weirder when Gwen didn’t introduce us to him, I resisted a shudder. He creeped me out in an inexplicable way, and if anyone were to ask, I’d have to admit that I found him intimidating.

As I glanced at him again after facing Gwen, I wanted to recoil. He was checking me out. Gwen had given me a thorough onceover and I’d failed to impress her, but this weirdo seemed very happy to be eyeing me so closely.

“Really?” Ward asked, too amused. “This is your handsome stud?”

Kenneth looked at him like he was a spider to squish. A pest that wasn’t welcome here. Instant antagonism was clear.

“That’s what I said,” Gwen replied testily. She used a sing-song voice but it was too forced, proving the woman still disliked being challenged at all. Her word was supposed to be law, but I couldn’t understand why Ward was questioning her. Gwen was clinging to the man. Obviously he was her *something*, if not her fiancé, so why was Ward acting so strange about it? Did he still have feelings for her deep down, and seeing her with another guy bothered him? I hated to consider that possibility.

Ward grinned like a little devil and held out his hand. “Nice to meet you, Kenneth. You’re a brave man.”

I shot him a look. *You did not just say that!*

Gwen reacted by digging her fingers into Kenneth’s arms to the point he winced. Her claws weren’t all that came out.

She glowered at Ward like a feral cat ready to attack.

Oh, shit. This is going downhill fast.

“Hey, congratulations,” I said quickly. “Congrats on the engagement.” I hoped my words would defuse the situation, but I still wanted to get out of it myself. Beyond the still-fuming Gwen, I spotted Mary Ellen.

Bingo.

“But you’ll have to excuse me. I see my friend over there.” Even if I wasn’t desperate to get away from this tense interaction, I had to check on Mary Ellen. With an untouched drink in her hand, she stood near a bookcase. She looked a little lost in the sea of people she didn’t know.

Since I arrived, I’d spent all my time with Ward. I didn’t expect him to stick with me, but I was a little surprised he lingered back with his ex and her new “handsome stud.”

Whatever.

Ward made no move to walk away, and while I enjoyed the relief that rushed over me at getting out of that situation and confrontation, I glanced back to see if maybe he was coming with me after all.

Nope. He stood there, still giving Kenneth a shit-eating grin, ready to tease them some more.

I rolled my eyes.

Once a troublemaker, always a troublemaker.

CHAPTER 16



WARD

I wasn't strong enough to resist glancing at Jenny's ass as she walked away. That skirt was dangerous, showing off her curves and strength. Some men might not care for women with any muscles at all, but I always thought that was just another sign of needing to feel like they were in control. Jenny was toned, likely from her work outside in the garden, but she was also feminine in such a tempting way that I almost considered giving up on teasing Gwen and her fiancé.

"Brave?" Kenneth laughed dryly. "More like lucky to have this woman in my life. Look around. She's the most beautiful person in this house."

"You sure about that?" I shrugged and shook my head. "Where'd you get so lucky to find her, anyway?"

"At work."

"Ah. A case of a secretary falling in love with her boss?"

"No. Gwen is too smart to be a secretary." Kenneth rolled his eyes. "She was a patient at the office."

I raised my brows. "Oh. So it's *Dr. Frown*?"

"Crown!" Gwen snapped.

"Right. Right." Pushing Kenneth's buttons was already getting boring, but I would never tire of pushing hers. This was fun.

"She was there for her appointment, and I happened to be arriving for my consultation as well."

Gwen quickly smiled and patted his hand. “He doesn’t need to know.”

“Oh, but I insist,” I said. “I’d love to hear how such a couple met.”

Kenneth nodded. “We’ll need to tell our guests at our wedding too. She was there for a butt job, and I wanted to talk with a doctor about my varicose veins.”

Gwen pressed her lips in a thin, tight line.

“Bummer.”

“My doctors told me it’s from sitting too much. But hey, the real men have to do hard work, and that means long hours at the desk.”

I crossed my arms. “And what do you do?”

“Kenneth, we should just go mingle now.”

“No, no.” I shook my head, loving how uncomfortable she was.

“Oh, it’s all right. She’s so bashful. She’s always so worried no one wants to hear how filthy rich I am.”

I grinned wider. “Oh, yeah?”

Kenneth nodded and leaned closer like he was going to share a state secret. “I’m practically the wealthiest man in Dallas.”

I raised my brows. “Wow, Gwen. You’ve really moved up in life, shacking up with the richest man in the city.”

“Maybe in all of Texas,” Kenneth said, puffing his chest up.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. “Funny. I missed seeing you at the meeting yesterday.”

He tilted his hand. “What meeting?”

“The economic growth forum. You know, the invitation for local investors who—”

Gwen straightened. “Okay, that’s *enough*.” She cleared her throat after cutting me off. “Hey, y’all.” She whistled and

lifted her hand above her head in a wave. “We’ve got a big announcement!”

Her overly enthusiastic voice reminded me of a game-show hostess, and with her raised volume, she was playing a game of stealing all the attention. Voices quieted and conversations dimmed.

Once everyone was turned her way, she beamed wider. “We’re engaged!” She coupled the news with a silly pull on Kenneth, like a child clutching their favorite stuffie.

What the fuck?

I was antagonizing her talking to Kenneth, but that was no reason for her to steal the thunder like this. Once again, she had to make everything about her.

I looked past her, watching Naomi freeze and frown. She was too classy to outright scowl, but Naomi was definitely on her shit list now. The newlyweds weren’t happy that Gwen showed up in a white dress, and now this?

I exhaled through my nostrils, so mad that she’d stoop to a shitty move like that.

Jenny caught my attention as I checked Naomi for damage control. She rolled her eyes and quickly spoke to Naomi, trying to bring her back from Gwen’s stunt.

“Congrats!” Several said it, and after everyone made a hasty toast to the happily engaged couple, Gwen turned her well-rehearsed smile back to me.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked.

She merely blinked. “Huh?”

“That was a low move.”

Still, she maintained a show of innocence, frowning delicately. “What do you mean?”

How dense are you? Wait. She’s not dense. She knew exactly what she was doing. She always does. She acts in her own interest without giving a damn about anyone else’s feelings.

As I fumed, I stalled too long to reply and defend my friends. Insisting that she apologize was first on my lips, but I didn't have a chance to speak at all.

"Have you had a chance to talk to Sunny about the wedding party?" she hurried to ask.

My shoulders slumped as I exhaled. *Dammit*. I gritted my teeth and got a hold on my temper. "I have."

Gwen smiled wider. "And?"

I paused, hating that I'd need to tell her this. Letting Gwen think she was getting her way was like twenty steps backward. "Sunny is excited. She wants to do it." I couldn't lie. That was the truth whether I liked it or not. She was deep into princess mode, and after how much fun she had being involved in Naomi's wedding, she was eager to do it again.

"She does?"

I nodded. "I talked to her about it at bedtime the other night." The opportunity to be in another wedding made her light up.

"Oh, that's perfect! It's all coming together." Gwen was ecstatic, kissing Kenneth and almost bouncing in her step. "So, I'll email you a list of everything Sunny will need. A link to the dress, shoes, jewelry, the color of nail polish for her mani and pedi, how I want her hair styled. It's a lot, but I already have it in a list."

I furrowed my brow, confused. "Wait. What? Why?"

"What do you mean why?" She rolled her eyes. "So everyone in the bridal party looks how I want them to."

I shook my head. *No shit, Gwen*. "Why email it? If Sunny is part of the bridal party, don't they do these things together? That was what Naomi did." That was the best part of all of it, how the women gushed over her and made her feel included. I had to handle her hair before we rushed to the wedding, but it was simple for her, just brushed straight so she could wear her tiara. The rest of those details were tended to as a group in that room at the country club.

Gwen scrunched up her face and snorted. “Um, no way.”

Kenneth chortled. “My bride will be much too busy on her big day to worry about dressing up a kid.”

My temper ignited. I fisted my hands and glowered at the woman I once wanted when I was too stupid to know any better.

“I’ll be, like, way too busy worrying about myself before the biggest day of my life,” Gwen replied matter-of-factly.

That statement spoke volumes. Of course. This woman always worried about herself before others. And the biggest day of her life? Marrying this old dude was the highlight of her life? More than giving birth was?

I clenched my teeth together and wished I could take it all back. Gwen only wanted to have a cute little girl in her wedding party because she saw how adorable she was at Naomi’s. She’d only asked for the sake of how it would make her look, not because she actually wanted Sunny to be an active participant and feel included. I should’ve known better. The woman never cared about what was good for Sunny.

“My parents are delusional to think I’ll give them grandkids,” Kenneth said. “So seeing the girl there will impress them and get them off my back about that.”

My cheek twitched near my eye. I strained my face so hard, I was about to combust. Sunny was not *the girl*. She wasn’t an object or prop. I had half a mind to pull her from the whole fucking thing now. I hated the thought of anyone using her in any way, let alone her birth mother. I wanted to say no thanks now because the need to protect her would always rise up like this, but I also knew it would crush her. I’d already told her about it, and she was eager to have such a big, important role again.

It stank, big time, but I was in a tight spot. “I’ll keep an eye out for your email,” I muttered.

I didn’t wait to hear her reply. I didn’t care, and I didn’t have the patience to listen to her for one more second. Hearing her lay out her intentions like that filled me with so much

bitterness, I lost the willpower or desire to even be here anymore.

I headed outside, hoping a breath of fresh air might help clear my mind. She shouldn't be getting to me like this. This wasn't my first rodeo dealing with the world's most manipulative and self-absorbed woman, but each time she would pull a stunt, it dragged on me.

It had been like this from the beginning. Me doing what was best for Sunny and protecting her, while Gwen flounced away and did as she pleased without a care about how our daughter fared.

How could she not care? At all? I understood now that Gwen just wasn't mother material. She never had been in the first place. But Sunny was her flesh and blood. I couldn't wrap my head around it. *Can't she have anything in her heart for something or someone other than herself?*

Those thoughts plagued me as I paced and drew in deep breath after deep breath. The chillier air cut through me, but I hoped it would act like a cooling balm, a soothing and cleansing effect to get me out of this funk. Once I went there, though, I got stuck in the funk.

I didn't want Gwen in my life, but I understood she was irrevocably a part of it anyway because she gave birth to my daughter. That shouldn't have meant I had to put up with this, though. No one, a parent or otherwise, should have to constantly step back and let another heartless person stomp on someone else.

It wasn't right, and it wasn't fair.

"But when *is* life fair?" I muttered as I leaned against Colby's car.

"Um, never?"

I whipped around to watch Jenny approaching. She shrugged. "Life isn't supposed to be fair, right? What doesn't kill you makes you stronger and all?"

I snorted. "I've always loathed that saying."

“Me too, but I don’t think it makes it any less true,” she said as she leaned against the car with me. “My friend and I are taking off.”

I stared ahead, still zoned out and not myself. Dealing with Gwen always took a toll on me, and I hated how she’d ruined my chance to spend time with Jenny tonight. With the turmoil of emotions pulling at me inside, I wasn’t fit for her company.

“I just wanted to say goodbye.”

A smile almost broke out on my lips. I’d stepped out here to hide, but she still knew where to find me. She only could have known if she was paying close attention, and I liked the fact that I had hers.

“Hey.” She nudged me with her elbow gently. “Everything okay?”

I shrugged. Unloading all this stress on her would be too big of a weight.

“You don’t seem okay.”

“Nah. I’ll be okay.”

She barked a laugh. “Sure. Saying it in that *woe-is-me* voice is totally convincing me.”

I sighed. “No, really. I’m okay.” I wanted to be open and honest. She’d always been a good listener. “Minus my evil ex using our daughter as a pawn to curry favor with her soon-to-be in-laws. Besides that, yeah, everything is fucking great.”

Silence spanned between us for a long moment. I turned my head toward her without moving off the car. Stuck in an expression of utter confusion, her brow furrowed and her eyes narrowed at me.

Her mouth fell open once she saw the seriousness on my face.

“*Daughter?*”

CHAPTER 17



JENNY

A daughter?

I blinked and clamped my mouth shut, bottling the shock inside.

Ward is a dad?

“I, uh, I, what?” I shook my head, trying to rattle it so that the news would slot in and make sense.

He nodded.

“You’ve got a child?”

Again, a nod.

“You’re a *father*?”

“Same thing.”

I narrowed my eyes at his staple smartass reply. “Why didn’t you say something sooner?” I flung my arm up, exasperated. “That date that wasn’t a date. I thought we were ‘catching up’ that day. Why didn’t you catch me up on *this*?”

He pushed out a long and harsh exhale. “I might have withheld that information on purpose.”

I furrowed my brow.

“I might have stalled on telling you this little detail—”

I held my hand up. “Being a parent is not a *little* detail.”

“I didn’t hurry to tell you because of who the mother is.”

The mother. I looked at him, cringing. He'd worn that same expression when I watched him stalk out of the house a half hour ago.

I gagged. "You had a kid with *Gwen*?"

He nodded and lifted his hand. "Hey," he said firmly. "Gwen might be a shitty person, but Sunny is incredible. She's probably the best thing she'll ever do, but Gwen's too self-absorbed to know it or realize it."

Sunny. That name stood out. *Sunny.*

I'd heard it recently, and as I wracked my brain, I was taken back to the wedding reception. *Sunny!* The sweet, clever girl who was so witty and smart to correct the other kid about a double negative. The adorable flower girl who claimed my dress reminded her of a forest and that I was so pretty I couldn't be single.

I almost smiled at the memory, but then it fell flat.

Oh, crap.

I swallowed. "Uh, she's not—she's not traumatized, is she?"

"About having Gwen as a mother?" He barked a mirthless laugh. "My life's mission is to make sure she's not."

"No, no. About the, um, she's not traumatized about that whole dead baker, zombie, apocalyptic cake story, is she?"

His brows shot up. "That was *your* doing?"

"*No!* It was not my doing. I wanted to hide when I saw Gwen at the bar and I wound up at the kids' table. One comment and question led to another and somehow they were all bawling and worried about the wedding cake."

He chuckled, and I was glad it wasn't *at* me. "I have so many questions."

I shook my head. "No. *I* do. You can't drop a bombshell like this and run."

He held his hands out. "I'm standing right here. No running."

I brushed my hair back, still stunned by his news. It was hard to picture this rugged and sexy man as a father. And the kid was what, six? Which meant he had to have had her when he was young.

“Say something.”

“She’s six?”

He nodded. “She was born when I was twenty.”

My mouth dropped again. “Wow.”

“It happened quickly. Unplanned, too, but that was the beginning of the end for me and Gwen.”

“Because she hadn’t wanted to get pregnant?”

He leaned back against the car. “Yes and no. When she saw the positive test and realized she was pregnant and not just sick with a bug, she was excited at first. She *loved* the attention.”

Naturally.

“It was all about her. A pregnant woman. A mommy-to-be. While Sunny was still in her, it was all about Gwen. And she soaked it all up. When the baby came though, when Sunny was born, the attention shifted to her.”

I nodded but dreaded what I suspected he would say. The little girl I met at the reception was so stinking cute and precious. She didn’t deserve to be born into some kind of competition for attention.

“Gwen abandoned ship. Completely. She wanted *nothing* to do with Sunny once it was clear *she* needed the attention. At first, I thought it was something I could help her with. I took over so much. All the night feedings, all the diapers, all the bottles and formula. I dove in head first, and my mom helped too. I was determined to handle Sunny and tend to her needs when Gwen acted like she couldn’t.”

I could see that. Ward wasn’t a slacker, and it didn’t surprise me that he took to being a dad with determination. But it should’ve been a partnership.

“But that wasn’t the issue. It wasn’t that Gwen couldn’t tend to Sunny or bond with her. It was that she didn’t *want* to. My mom helped me understand it a lot, and from the parenting classes before Sunny was born, I was aware. Becoming a mother is a huge shift, even an identity crisis. I thought she needed help and support, so while I handled Sunny, I did everything right. I got in touch with her doctor, got second opinions from multiple practices. I worried it was postpartum or something else that needed to be addressed like that. In the end, after extensive attempts and appointments and therapy sessions, it turned out that Gwen simply realized too late that she just didn’t want to be a mom.”

“Oh, that’s terrible.”

He nodded. “She admitted that she didn’t want to terminate. She never thought about not being pregnant. It was just that after Sunny was born, she disliked not having *her* life anymore. All she wanted to do was party, get her boobs done, travel, and keep living life on her own terms.”

“Damn.” My heart broke for the little girl. And Ward. He spoke so dully, like he wanted to be over it but couldn’t. This man would always get to me, but it was so hard to want to maintain distance right now. Ward looked like he needed compassion and comfort as he revealed all, not my cautious company.

“So, that’s the sad story of how I became a single dad at the age of twenty. Sunny was only six months old when I got full custody, just like Gwen wanted.”

“I can’t imagine being a parent so young.” I did the math mentally. He and Gwen were together until graduation. She was older than me, I recalled, just by a few months. So she must have gotten pregnant right after it, at eighteen. Ward would’ve only been in college.

“How’d you manage staying in school?”

“I didn’t, really. I dropped out. Technically I graduated. I did a lot of online work and I ended up not needing the degree. I only finished it after the fact because my mom insisted. I

invested the money my grandpa left me when he passed away.”

And now you're a billionaire. He was always good at statistics, either lucky or a smart mathematician. If he hadn't become a businessman, I was sure he would've hit a good stroke of fortune as a poker player. Some people just had that innate strength, and Ward was one of them.

“And I gambled big, investing and playing with stocks since I was eighteen. I already had some money by the time I was twenty. Then before Sunny was even a year old, I hit it big. Some investments paid off extremely well, and I gambled again, buying The Cozy Company a few years ago. We planned long and hard with the takeover, and we just opened the flagship store here. It took a while to rebrand and tweak what was wrong with the previous ownership. So, I didn't do too bad for myself.”

I nodded, proud of him. Being a young single dad couldn't have been easy. With Lori Emerson backing up her son, he was ahead of the game in terms of single parenting. That woman was a saint. Yet he didn't sound too proud of himself. He wasn't bragging, and I could tell his mood was still low because of Gwen.

“I made my fortune after Gwen and I split, but even if she hadn't jumped ship and had stuck around, it wouldn't have made a difference. She doesn't love her like a child deserves to be loved.”

I blew out a long breath, venting all the pent-up negativity I'd been holding on to as I listened. Lauren claimed I was an expert listener, and I hoped Ward felt some commiseration now as he spoke about such a hard topic.

“Gwen is such a dick.”

He laughed. “Yeah, she really is. She made a damn cute kid though.”

“Sunny is adorable,” I agreed. “And so witty.”

“You can thank my mom for that,” he joked.

I couldn't imagine Lori had a stellar impression of Gwen. I bet she was glad Ward and Gwen never married and made the woman her daughter-in-law. "Wait. What did you mean about Gwen currying favor with her future in-laws?" I thought back to the tacky way Gwen commandeered the attention at Naomi and Colby's party inside. Now I looked at it with a new light.

What's Sunny's role in it?

"You saw Sunny as flower girl. Gwen did too, and she got it in her head that Sunny's an ideal 'mini-me.' She asked me if she could be a flower girl at *her* wedding now. I was going to tell her hell no, but I saw how excited and happy Sunny was to be included in Naomi's bridal party."

I smiled. I had no trouble seeing that. And this man would bend over backward to see to his daughter's happiness.

"So I asked Sunny and she's all for it. She can't wait to have another big, important role in a bridal party. I saw how she loved getting all the attention. Naomi and the bridesmaids fawned over her and made her feel like a princess. Gwen won't."

"Maybe she'll come around? In the spirit of the wedding?" As soon as the words left my lips I knew that wouldn't be true. Gwen was Gwen.

Ward's deadpan expression told me the same thing. "No. She won't. She said she'd email me a list of stuff to get, not that she'll get it for her. It's not about the money, it's about the experience. Naomi and the girls all got manis and pedis together. Sunny talked my ear off about it for days. They did her makeup at the venue. They even brought her along for picking out and trying on dresses. They included her, and Gwen explained that she can only focus on herself on her big day."

"Gwen focuses on herself *every* day."

"And the wedding is on New Year's Eve, when we usually have a little party with my mom and make it our own little tradition. Now we've got to go to this and I'm annoyed. Sunny

wants to be a bridal attendant, but it pisses me off that Gwen's not planning to go about it the right way."

I shook my head, gazing at him with a dose of hero worship myself. I heard and could see plainly how this man was his daughter's protector. It didn't impact *me*, but it was a hell of a sexy thing to witness. Seeing a man go to such lengths to care for his child was an ultimate turn-on. It ignited something primal in me, recognizing that he was that good of a man, that decent of a father.

It was harder to see Ward as the enemy I loathed from my past. He wasn't a reminder of the boy who so cruelly dumped me for someone else. He was an underdog here, fighting against the injustice he didn't want his daughter to suffer. Laying himself on the line for the sake of someone else wasn't only selfless, it was sweet in a deep-down way.

"I'll make sure she's loved and feels special regardless."

Standing next to him in the cold, I felt pretty damn special just to be near him.

I gazed up at him, admiring how good of a father, of a person, he was.

He glanced down at me, then did a double-take to stay gazing at me. Giving me that dashing smile of his, he laughed once. "What?"

My heart raced with his amused gaze on me. Ward never did anything in half measures, and having his full attention was heady.

With just one look from him, I couldn't think of anything else. All I felt was this overwhelming excitement to fully experience this private moment. Spending time with this man was a gift, and it was one I didn't want to waste.

I reached up suddenly and pulled him down to me. He didn't protest. He lowered toward my face so I could smash my lips to his.

CHAPTER 18



WARD

I'd thought about Jenny's lips often. Since I broke up with her and moved on to Gwen, I had missed the gentle way she'd explore my mouth.

Back then, we kissed with such newness. I was two years older than her, but I had the same naïve, low level of experience as she had, and together, we'd learned what the big deal was about kissing. We learned together and figured out how to please each other like the young idiots we were then.

When I hooked up with Gwen in high school, I quickly realized *she* had a lot of experience already, even though she was the same age as Jenny. Gwen was overeager and too forceful, demanding what she wanted from me. At first, it was exciting. A bolder, more daring girl to kiss and later to sleep with. Still, I felt moments of missing Jenny's gentler, sensual touch.

After Sunny was born and I was thrust into the life of a constantly working single dad, I felt lonely again. I hadn't been. I had Sunny. But I suffered the absence of a woman to taste and explore. During those long nights and even at random moments throughout so many days, I thought back to the first and last girl I'd kissed, and I missed it. I'd wonder what her smart and sarcastic mouth would offer me if she were to ever see me again.

The moment I saw her at the wedding, tongue-tied and shocked, I knew exactly what I wanted from her lips. I didn't want to ever let my hopes get up so high, sure I'd be disappointed and never have a chance again. One look at her

put the idea in my head, and I grew addicted to the idea of pressing my mouth to hers and taking what I wanted.

Fuck. Me.

She was the one taking what she wanted. With a soft groan, she reached up higher, slipping her arm around my neck to pull me lower for her to kiss harder.

My dick woke up immediately, and my already racing heart tripled its beat. I couldn't keep up with the whiplash. One minute, I was drowning in frustration and hopelessness of having to deal with Gwen and protect Sunny, and the next, there was Jenny.

She'd comforted me already, hearing me out in that calm and attentive way she had. The mere fact she stood with me out here in the cold and listened was a help. Just like she was back then, she was a source of support.

And need. She lit me up inside, tapping this low-simmering desire that I couldn't turn off with her back in my life. She stoked the flames of lust and tamed them to the tune of attraction I couldn't resist. This perfect press of her soft, warm lips against mine wasn't a show of chemistry. It felt like kismet. Like fate. She mewled against me and parted her lips, asking for more, and I didn't hesitate.

I gathered her in my arms, relishing the feel of her soft, warm body against mine as she slipped her tongue into my mouth. Having her in my embrace and tasting her sweetness opened up an ache that I hadn't felt in a long damn time.

Not lust. Not attraction. And something a lot more than *like*. We were too young before. We didn't know what the hell we were doing, but now, as an adult, I sure as fuck knew where this was heading.

Jenny didn't give me a chance to speak. She only let me react with my tongue dueling with hers. My breaths panted and mixed with hers, and I picked her up and turned her. Her legs parted so she could wrap her legs around my waist, and I sucked and nipped at her lips. She gasped, breathless, and leaned her back against the car. I pinned her there, staring into

the molten emerald of her wide eyes. The desire in them matched the way I felt.

A moment hung between us, and I didn't dare to think she would think twice about crushing her kiss-swollen lips to mine again. I couldn't bear it. She was all I wanted, and after so long of wondering if she was forever lost and out of my reach, I was wild to have her.

Her tongue peeked out to swipe at her lower lip as she caught her breath. I tracked the motion, growled, and thrust my hips against hers to push her back against the car. I wanted to grind against her, to rip this damn skirt off. I wanted to soak in her presence and fall under the drug of her touch. She drove me wild, gazing at me like this all rosy-cheeked with desire, and I grimaced at the wait. I hadn't seen her for years, and now, seconds apart felt like a crime.

"Fuck," she whispered before she reached out to lose her fingers in my hair and pull my head back to hers. Once more, she moaned into my mouth, making out with me in a way we'd never figured out as kids.

I held her to the car and kissed her until I was so hard I couldn't imagine walking away. If her frantic arches into me and punishing sucks on my lower lip were any indication, she wanted the same thing even more.

I broke apart after a long heady moment of sealing my lips to hers. She chased me, pouting as we caught our breath, and I rested my brow on her shoulder. "We need to take this somewhere private."

The security light came on right then, emphasizing what I said. We weren't alone, but with the way she pecked another kiss on my wet lips, she wished we were. Staying still, and hopefully out of sight, we listened for the sound of recyclables to be dumped in a container near the back door.

She pushed at my hips and I bit back a groan at the pressure against my hard-on. I eased back, though, letting her lower her feet to the ground. I swallowed, still catching my breath as I tried to convince myself this wasn't a dream.

Tipping her head toward the detached garage, she gave me a hint of where we could continue.

I narrowed my eyes, realizing she thought we could find our privacy there, where Colby would set up his wood shop.

“Seriously?” I asked. I doubted he had anything set up at all, nothing horizontal like a work bench.

She replied by taking my hand and pulling on it. We’d just done this running together. I’d led her through the parking lot to my car, escaping the store. This time, she took the lead in escaping the party.

I reached the door first, and I held it open as we hurried inside. My thumb pressed on the lock, but I couldn’t see anything in here. All I had was my sense of touch, and Jenny filled it. She groped up my chest, feeling for me, and I hauled her up close, seeking out her hungry lips.

Stretching up, she slid her arms over my shoulders again. Before she completely circled my neck, I cupped her ass. Without a word, without a chance to even think straight, I picked her up with the intention of securing her somewhere.

Her legs didn’t cooperate and I grunted as she almost toppled us.

“What the hell?”

She was stuck.

Her groan turned into giggles. “My dress is too long.”

“I picked you up outside against the car.”

More giggles, and I grinned in the darkness, addicted to that sound. We snuck in here so frantically, but we were still so comfortable with each other that we could laugh and smile. She was freaking adorable and so damn sexy all at once that she was nothing but irresistible.

“I think you popped off a button.” She gripped the back of my neck, kissing me again as she fumbled with the skirt. I loved how she couldn’t keep her mouth off me. I wasn’t a fan of all this talking either, so I kissed her harder as I found her fingers trying to undo one of the damned buttons. Feeling my

fingers there, she gave up and reached for me. The second she cupped my dick, I lost my footing.

She giggled again at our clumsy staggering, but the moment I popped off two more buttons and lifted her skirt, I gathered her up in my arms again and silenced her with a harsh kiss.

“Hurry,” she begged against my lips as I pushed her back to the door.

“Hurry?” I groaned as she trailed hot, greedy kisses along my neck. She shoved at my shirt, clawing to reach me. “I don’t want to fucking hurry.”

She pressed back against the door, reaching down to stroke my dick through my pants.

“I spent too many years dreaming about this to rush.”

She growled. “I want you *now*.” She’d struggled with her buttons, but she made quick work of unbuttoning and unzipping my jeans. I pushed into her hand as she slipped it under my boxers. The feel of her slender, sure fingers wrapped around my dick nearly had me coming right then and there.

Reduced to grunts and growls, I kissed her harder. I was too addicted to her taste to give up her lips. When I reached lower to shove my hand into her panties, her breath hitched. She dropped her head back against the door as I pressed my thumb to her clit and slid my finger into her tight, wet heat.

She was drenched. Soaking wet and so ready for me. Impatient too. A quick, hard fuck with Jenny wouldn’t be enough, but maybe she was right. Hurrying seemed smarter because, as she bucked against my hand, I felt like I’d come any second.

“Damn,” I crooned against her lips as I leaned her against the door to reach for my back pocket. As soon as I found the condom in my wallet, I let the thing fall to the floor. I ripped the package and Jenny shifted to stand on one leg to begin sliding her panties off.

The package wouldn’t give. A simple fucking square of foil and it was sealed like an impossible challenge.

Jenny growled and took it from me. She stuck a corner between her teeth and ripped it open. Knowing she was so ravenous and greedy threatened to make me lose my load now. I took the condom and slid it on as she framed my face and kissed me harder. Without pausing to catch my breath again, I picked her up and slammed in deep.

“Oh!” She jerked back, rocked against the door, and fuck did that sexy sound hit me hard.

I pulled out and thrust again, not giving either of us a chance to realize this was our first time, regardless of all those months we’d dated. I drove my dick deep into her pussy with a wild, rough need to come apart as fast as we could.

She arched her back and gasped. Her thighs shook and she choked on another breath. At the first clench of her walls around me, I growled and laid my lips on her sweet, slender neck. I sucked hard as I pistoned into her harder. Once. Then twice, and I followed her. I came so hard my knees shook, and as she continued to come, she milked me until I worried I’d never recover.

For as quickly as we’d come together, we stalled and lingered in the aftermath. We’d exploded in lust, and it left me weak and dizzy. I held her in place for a long moment. Her cheek rested on my shoulder as I pressed my forehead to the door. Once I could stand straight again, I winced and backed up, helping her lower her feet.

As she moved, her watch lit up.

“Oh, shit.”

I grunted a dry laugh. “Not exactly what I was hoping to hear following *that*.”

She giggled. In the low light of the garage now that my eyes had acclimated to the darkness, I watched her straighten her skirt and smooth her hands over her hair. A sweet, shy smile curled her lips. “I have to go.”

I removed the condom and tucked myself away. “I don’t want to hear those words either.”

Again, she laughed. “I abandoned poor Mary Ellen in there for too long. I told her I was just going to say goodbye to a few people and...”

“And, yeah.” I grinned and tucked the condom in a napkin I’d shoved in my back pocket when we were devouring the appetizers.

Before she could move back toward the door, I caught her hand and pulled her in for one more kiss. I savored the sweetness of her lips on mine, and only when she sagged against me and sighed did I force myself to let her go.

“Hey.”

She lifted her face to mine.

“Will you come as my date to Gwen’s wedding?”

What?

The idea hit me so swiftly, it left my lips without censor. I’d intended to ask her out. To inquire when I could see her again. It had taken us way too long to give in like we just had, and I sure as hell wanted her again. Instead of asking when I could see her again, I laid out a bigger commitment to an event I hadn’t even considered sticking with.

Shit.

The longer she gazed up at me, I worried I’d screwed up. *She’ll say no. Why wouldn’t she? To Gwen’s wedding?* To my surprise, she slowly smiled. “All right.”

Then she turned and hurried out of the garage, leaving me both hopeful and bewildered.

CHAPTER 19



JENNY

Please don't say anything. Please don't say anything. Please don't say anything.

I repeated the mantra in my head as I glanced at Mary Ellen again.

We were busy this morning, on a Sunday like no other. The five of us were all up and together at the house. Well, six of us. Jameson was here too, helping Lauren move out to live with him in their new house. They were “unconventional” by buying a house before they shared their vows, but it made sense for them.

I wasn't a kiss-and-tell kind of girl. Nor was I a fuck-against-a-door-with-my-former-enemy-and-spill woman. I wasn't ashamed of what I did so spontaneously and recklessly with Ward, but I hadn't had the time to figure out how I felt about it all to feel ready to talk about it.

Being here with all the girls would be tempting. Mary Ellen would probably be bursting to spill the tea, but I really didn't want her to until I had more time to think about it.

She hadn't said anything. And that was the problem. After I found her inside the house, we headed home. All through the drive from the housewarming party, she sat there quiet. *Too* quiet. But I knew she knew. There was no way she hadn't realized I slipped outside and had a hot quickie with Ward.

She has to know.

She wouldn't have been so carefully mum if she didn't.

I wasn't the only one who noticed her silence.

Rylee sighed heavily as she set more boxes by the front door. "Jeez. I feel like I'm about to bawl that the big moving day is here."

"PMS," Karen reminded her.

"But *you're* as cool as a cucumber," Rylee said to Mary Ellen as she taped another box.

Lauren stood up and frowned, propping her hands on her hips.

"Yeah." Karen narrowed her eyes at her. "Last week you were crying that we would never have our Friday takeout nights. Or Thursday game nights."

Jameson breezed through the room, carrying boxes. "Hey. I like takeout and games too."

"It won't be the same," I replied as he walked outside. I glanced at Mary Ellen again.

She shrugged.

"I thought you'd be all sad and teary this morning." Rylee crossed her arms, staring at Mary Ellen.

Oh, no. Please. Please. Don't say—

"Jenny mysteriously disappeared last night at the party." Mary Ellen looked at me as she threw me under the bus. "At the same time that Ward did."

—that.

As one, the girls swiveled to face me.

"Jen?" Lauren asked.

I caved under the pressure. "Fine. We hooked up."

As Jameson's footsteps returned up the path, Lauren reached out without looking away from me. She flung the door shut, almost in his face.

"Hey!" he shouted outside.

“We need a minute,” she hollered. “You did *what?*” She locked her shocked gaze on me.

“Hooked up.” I scrunched my nose, hating this feeling of being judged. Well, not judged. Of being put on the spot.

“With *who?*” Rylee demanded.

“I think it should be with *whom,*” Mary Ellen interjected.

Rylee held up a hand to quiet her, gawking at me. “You hooked up with Ward? Last night?”

I glowered at Mary Ellen. “That’s what she said.”

She smiled quickly, looking like a devil’s advocate.

Rylee shook her head. “Oh, boy. You’re in trouble now.”

“Why?” I put one hand on my hip. “Why do I have to be in trouble now?”

“Uh, sleeping with the enemy?” she sassed back.

Mary Ellen raised her hand as though this was a classroom. “Actually, he didn’t look like an enemy. He was a perfect gentleman from what I saw. Charming, too.”

“Until he banged her in his friend’s guest room,” Rylee countered. “You christened a bed before the newlyweds could!”

I whipped around to face Mary Ellen, begging her with a stern look she missed or ignored. “No, I saw her coming out of ___”

I crawled over the couch to almost tackle her and covered her mouth with my hand.

Still, she gave them a muffled reply from behind my fingers.

“The *garage?*” Lauren asked.

I furrowed my brow and hated the burn that spread on my cheeks. “How the hell did you understand what she said?”

Mary Ellen giggled as I released her.

“The *garage*?” Karen asked. “Like on a workbench? Did you at least put something down so you didn’t get, uh, splinters somewhere not good?”

“We didn’t actually, uh do it on anything.” I made a gesture for a horizontal position then gave up on the visual. “You know what? This is one of those times the devil is *not* in the details. We hooked up. Leave it at that.”

“What does this mean?” Karen asked. She set down the throw she was folding, giving me all her attention and concern. If anyone had to be the mother hen of the group, it was her, but she wasn’t judging or nagging. She sounded genuinely curious. “Are you officially seeing each other now?”

I shook my head. Now that, I could answer. Ward and I didn’t claim any relationship status other than a physical one of his big, hard dick pushing me to a too-fast and so-good orgasm. “No. We’re not official.”

“Listen to you.” Rylee rolled her eyes. “You’re not ‘going steady’ then? This isn’t junior high anymore.”

I crossed my arms, feeling defensive. “I know that. But hooking up isn’t illegal.”

“It was just one time?” Karen asked.

“No. Yes. I don’t know. I don’t think we’re officially doing anything.” *Not true.* “But, I am going as his date to Gwen’s wedding on New Year’s Eve.”

Another eruption of reactions blasted out. Yells, gasps, gaping mouths of shock. Even an incredulous smirk from Mary Ellen with a drawled-out *no way!*

Knocks sounded on the door. “Lauren? Should I just take this load to the house and come back?” Jameson yelled from the other side of the door. “What’s going on in there?”

She ignored him, approaching me. “Jen, I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Ditto,” Rylee said.

You haven't heard all of it yet. “Well, the wedding date could be manageable.”

Karen nodded. “It could even be fun, sticking it to her.”

“It’s his daughter being in the wedding that’s trickier,” I admitted. I expected the following outburst of questions then.

“He has a daughter?” Rylee asked, shaking her head. “Oh, no. This is so not going to end well.”

“Don’t be so negative,” Mary Ellen said.

“Ward has a daughter?” Lauren asked.

“She was the flower girl at Naomi’s wedding,” I replied.

They sat around and listened to my explanation of Sunny and how she came to be. Lauren and Rylee withheld their judgment. Karen didn’t interrupt with questions for clarification. And Mary Ellen gave me woeful looks when I told them about why Gwen wanted Sunny to be in her wedding.

“That poor child,” she said sadly.

“I feel awful for her.” I crossed my arms, wishing that girl didn’t have to deal with such a horrible adult in her life.

“This complicates it all,” Lauren said.

I couldn’t help but think back to when I met Sunny at the kids’ table at the reception. They tried to claim that adults said something was complicated when they didn’t know how to explain it. That wasn’t the case here, and Lauren was partly right. I wouldn’t be going just as Ward’s date. I wouldn’t be showing up at my former friend and bully’s wedding unwelcomed. I would be there with a protective papa trying to make his child happy at the same time he attempted to block her from Gwen’s manipulative ways.

And with me and Ward hooking up, it was more layered and confusing yet.

“A single dad will always be trouble,” Rylee warned. “You shouldn’t get involved.”

“No,” Karen said. “I’m all for it. Jenny is great with kids. She’d help smooth out the situation.”

“Um, hey. I’m not trying to save the day here,” I inserted.

“I think you should definitely go,” Mary Ellen said. “Even if you don’t ‘save the day,’ you can support Ward.”

“No, Jen.” Lauren shook her head. “Going to her wedding is just asking for trouble.”

I shrugged, dismissing her concern. “It’s not up for debate. I already agreed to go with him.”

They all stared at me after my closing statement to that argument. Rylee rolled her eyes and mumbled under her breath. Lauren furrowed her brow. Karen nodded once calmly, and Mary Ellen grinned and gave me a cheesy thumbs-up.

“Any. Way.” I shot to my feet and grabbed the coats I was sticking into a box. “It’s moving day! Yay?”

They didn’t reply with much enthusiasm. We were too busy after that point. Half of the work was finding everything of Lauren’s and the rest was in dealing with Karen’s anal methods of *proper* packing of breakables.

As we worked together to pack, I warred with myself.

Are Lauren and Rylee right?

Am I making a huge mistake?

In the slower moments of watching Karen repack what I already neatly arranged in boxes, I considered how badly Ward hurt me in the past. He was only able to because I had given so much of myself to him. I gave him my heart, and that was a vulnerable position to be in around him. Last night, I caved again. It was impossible not to when I was near him.

But what if I’m just opening myself up to be hurt all over again?

CHAPTER 20



WARD

After the housewarming party, I went home and tried to come back down to earth after the high of having such a hot and fast quickie with Jenny in the garage. She left me so scrambled I hadn't even thought to pick up my wallet. My foot bumped into it and I retrieved it from the floor in an *oh, yeah* moment of realization that it had fallen in the first place.

Jenny drove me so insane that I damn near lost my mind, but in seeing my wallet again, I paused to look for her buttons. We didn't need to leave any evidence of how we played hooky from the party. I gave it ten minutes of crawling on my hands and knees with the flashlight from my phone to hunt for those buttons, but they were nowhere to be found.

After a stop inside to say goodnight to my friends, and carefully avoiding Gwen and her "handsome stud," I went home to decompress.

It was impossible. I found I couldn't relax after the short snippet of having Jenny. After a long, hot shower, I struggled to shake this restlessness that captured me. I paced. I tried to zone out watching TV. I attempted to make a hot cocoa and wished Sunny was here to share it with me. It was then, in the kitchen, that I realized I wanted company. Being alone after spending time with Jenny made me feel so lost.

When my mom called at ten, asking if Sunny's favorite Build A Bear was forgotten on her bed for the sleepover, it seemed like the excuse I had been wishing for.

"I'll bring it over."

“What?” She laughed. “No need. She just wanted to know where it was and that she hadn’t lost it here someplace.”

“No. No. I’ll bring it over.”

“Ward, don’t be ridiculous. I know I’m over the top to spoil her with a late movie night but it’s silly to come here just to drop off her bear.”

I shrugged, even though she couldn’t see it. “Then I’ll stay too.”

She hadn’t questioned me, and five minutes later, I gave Sunny her bear, then fell asleep next to her on the bed as I tried and failed to read a story.

In the morning, I didn’t have a chance to feel regret about fucking Jenny or any neediness to see her again. Breakfast, then shopping, swimming, lunch, and playing board games. I was busy and preoccupied all day, and it was just what I needed to prevent myself from obsessing about the woman I couldn’t wait to see again.

Would’ve been helpful if I got her damn number. After I finished chopping the veggies for my mom’s favorite pot-roast recipe, I texted Naomi and asked if she had Jenny’s number. Making that request was telling, but I didn’t care. Why should I? I only worried that she’d tease me too long and hold out on providing it.

Hours later, we gathered in the kitchen to enjoy the home-cooked meal we all helped make. We preferred the island in the kitchen instead of the dining room, but tonight, that other more formal table wasn’t even available.

“I thought I said—no, I asked nicely—for no more glitter,” I said as I shot my mom a side-eye. Beyond her, in that dining room, were several unfinished crafts she and Sunny did last night when I was at the party.

“Did you?” Mom said. “I thought he said *more* glitter.”

Sunny giggled. “Yeah, that’s what I heard too.”

I rolled my eyes, humoring them as we dug into the meal. My mom was a genius in the kitchen, and this was my

personal favorite. Pot roast with tender potatoes that Sunny cut with her kid-friendly knife. Carrots and broccoli, courtesy of my knifework, and the brownies for later, a combination of my mom and daughter baking together.

“Glitter makes everything better,” my mom said, teasing me further.

“It’s like making the world princessy!” Sunny said.

“Yep. The *whole* world, whether it wants to be glitterfied or not.”

“Glitterfied isn’t a word,” Sunny corrected.

“It should be,” I muttered.

“I can’t wait to be a princess again,” Sunny said between bites.

“You’re always a princess,” Mom replied with an adoring smile.

“No, I mean for real.”

“Are you planning on finding a prince and marrying him or something?” I joked. “How do you plan to make yourself royalty?”

She giggled. “No, silly. At the wedding!”

I shriveled inside, feeling like a grinch.

“What’s this now?” Mom asked.

“Didn’t Dad tell you?” Sunny bounced in her seat, demonstrating her excitement. “I’m going to be another princess because I’ll be in another wedding!”

“Wow!” Mom raised her brows. “That *is* exciting.” She glanced at me. “Whose wedding now?”

“Mom’s,” Sunny answered without missing a beat, oblivious to the way my mother shot me a dirty look over her head.

What the hell? she mouthed at me.

I shook my head before Sunny lifted her face from lowering it for another bite. *Later*, I mouthed to her in reply.

She left it alone for the time being. I didn't have to tell her. She had too much class and common sense to badmouth Gwen in front of Sunny. Her preferred style of tolerating Gwen was to think and speak about her as seldom as possible, but with Sunny blurting out the news of her upcoming nuptials, it was unavoidable.

After dinner, Sunny asked to excuse herself. "I want to see if the glue is dry on my picture."

"Yeah, that's a good idea," my mom said. "If it is, you can do the next sticker part."

"More glitter!" she squealed in delight as she ran off toward the other room.

I helped carry the last of the dishes to the sink, and then I settled in for a scolding. She rinsed and I loaded the dishwasher.

"What are you thinking, going to Gwen's wedding?" She held up her hand and closed her eyes briefly. "Hold on. She actually found someone who'd want to marry her? It's not a joke or prank to manipulate you somehow?"

"Yeah. Mr. Kenneth Crown. A 'handsome stud' who is the self-proclaimed richest man in all of Dallas."

She scoffed, raising her brows.

"I met him last night at the housewarming party."

"Fine. She's actually getting married, then. I don't see why you'd go. That woman is bad news," she warned.

I scoffed. "Tell me something I don't know, Mom."

"Come on, Ward. Be smart. You barely escaped her by the skin of your teeth." She shook her head. "Don't give her a chance to weasel her way back into your lives."

My mother would never be a fan of Gwen because she'd seen it all up close. When I was scrambling to figure out how to burp Sunny properly and survive on minimal sleep, Mom was the one to cover for me. When I was insistent that Gwen might be suffering from post-partum, she shook her head and refused to believe that. She was the first one to suggest Gwen

just wanted out of parenthood. That she was being selfish to want to live her life as though she had no child. It took me a while to realize that was the truth, but Mom had somehow intuited that from the get-go.

Maybe it was a motherhood sixth sense and she never could feel a camaraderie with a fellow mother in Gwen. For that reason, I assumed my mother would cling to a grudge until the grave and always be fiercely protective of her granddaughter.

Still, I was smart. And I was being as wise about this situation as I could. “She won’t have a chance to weasel anywhere with me.”

Her only reply was a lift of her brows.

“I won’t let her, Mom. Nothing will change how I feel about Gwen. I put up with her the best I can and I will always have my guard up.”

“Good.” She nodded once, handing me a plate. “You need to. You deserve to be happy too, and that woman trying to bring you into her life is a surefire way to be miserable.”

“I know. The only reason I’m doing this is for Sunny.”

“Because you think she should see her ‘mom’ be married?”

“No. Because she asked Sunny to be in the bridal party and I thought that should be Sunny’s decision.”

I was smart enough not to explain that wasn’t exactly the case as I’d come to find out last night. If I told my mom that Gwen wanted Sunny to be there as a prop, she’d be so livid she might crash the whole thing.

Although that’s not a terrible idea either.

“That’s true. And she’ll have a blast being glammed up with others again, even if the bride is a witch.”

I hid a cringe. *Something like that.*

She sighed. “You’re a good father, Ward.” She beamed at me. “And a good son.”

Hold on to that thought. “The wedding is on New Year’s Eve, by the way.”

She rolled her eyes. “Now we can’t continue our tradition. Leave it to her to screw things up.”

I doubted Gwen planned to screw up New Year’s Eve on purpose. I bet she had no clue and no care about what Sunny did on the holiday.

“Want to know the other big news?” I asked, eager to distract her. I appreciated her mama-bearness but sometimes she became too bitter about it all.

“Oh, no.” She hung her head as she slowly shook it. “I will forever rue the day you met that girl. What *else* did she do?”

I chuckled. “Nah. No more about Gwen. I’ve got something else to tell you.”

“Shoot.”

“I met someone.”

Sudsy water splashed over the sink as she dropped a heavy serving plate. “What?” She faced me, eyes wide and mouth smiling brightly.

“Someone who makes me laugh.” I thought back to Jenny’s giggle in the middle of a sexy moment. *I wonder if she’s still ticklish.*

Mom clapped quietly.

“Someone who draws a line I can’t cross.” *Her not taking any crap is so hot.*

She nodded sagely.

“Someone who I think will be a positive influence on Sunny if they were to meet.” *Wait a second. They already had met. But I still don’t get the whole zombie cake connection.*

“Uh oh. What’s that look for?” Mom asked. “Don’t tell me she doesn’t like kids either. You can’t strike out with another woman like Gwen again.”

I shook my head. “Um, no. They have met, actually. At the wedding reception.” I chased away my confusion about whatever conversation was held at the kids’ table. Smiling wide, I fell back into the fun of teasing my mom and dragging out the mystery.

“And she likes kids?”

I nodded. “She’d be a great mother.” I held my hand up. “Not that I’m looking for someone just so Sunny can have one.”

She gripped my hand. “No. Of course not. Ward, I just want to see you happy. Sunny *and* you. You deserve someone, too.”

“And this woman would be great for me. And Sunny.”

My mom’s smile returned full force. “Will I get to meet this girl someday?”

I shrugged. “You already have.”

She furrowed her brow, thinking hard, then widened her eyes. “No. That dental assistant I suggested you should call? No! I only said that because it was Margaret’s daughter and she was right there. I didn’t actually want to set you up with her. Ward, she’s so dull!”

I laughed. “Good thing I lost her number then.”

She playfully swatted my shoulder. “Then who is this girl who makes you laugh and smile?”

I leaned closer, dragging out the suspense to tease her. “Jenny Halsey.”

Her eyes widened as she screeched in gleeful surprise. “You’re kidding!”

I shook my head, chuckling.

“I can’t believe it!” She danced in place.

Honestly, I’ve got a hard time convincing myself it’s not a dream too.

CHAPTER 21



JENNY

Late Tuesday night, I yawned as I checked my phone. Today was exceptionally busy at the gardening center, and I felt the aches in my hands and fingers from weeding and collecting herbs for my teas. Sourcing botanicals from the cleanest route possible required a lot of maintenance, and as I waited for the kettle to whistle, I felt every minute of that work I completed today.

As I scrolled past the thread of texts from Ward, I smiled.

When Naomi reached out to me Monday, I was amused.

Naomi: Ward asked me for your number. Should I or shouldn't I?

Jenny: You should.

Shortly after that, he contacted me with a simple text asking how I was doing. It quickly turned to an exchange of general greetings and then evolved into jokes and his mission to share every meme he could find about tea. Most of them were about spilling the tea, but the variations of Mrs. Doubtfire drinking tea were silly. I doubted our non-serious and mostly goofy texts were standard for after-sex conversation, but with him, it made sense.

I checked back over the last few that I'd missed today. It was one of those days where I couldn't even remember which pocket my phone was in, I was so busy. As I stood here in the kitchen now, though, wishing I'd towel-dried my hair better from the long, hot shower I just took, I giggled at the latest

ones he'd sent through the day. I hadn't replied to any, but he didn't seem hurt by my quiet.

At a GIF of Big Bird making a letter *T* with his body, a *Sesame Street* throwback, I shook my head.

You're a goof, Ward.

The kettle whistled at the same time my phone buzzed.

I glanced at the device as I moved the boiling water over. Pouring carefully, I multitasked to unlock my phone again.

Ward: What are you up to?

I was about to take this mug of tea upstairs and go to my room for the night.

Jenny: Nothing.

Ward: Wrong. You're about to go for a drive with yours truly. I'm outside.

"What?" I whispered to myself as excitement shot through me. I was no longer tired, instead giddy about his message. Leaving my tea steeping on the counter, I peeked out the window. A silly thrill hit me, and I bit my lip.

Should I or shouldn't I?

My phone buzzed again with a GIF of Ron Burgundy beckoning someone closer with a come-hither move of his hand.

"You are such a dork," I mumbled, smiling at his goofiness. I couldn't resist.

Jenny: Give me five minutes.

Ward: Counting down.

I hurried upstairs to find my boots, then snuck out of the house so I wouldn't wake the other girls and alert them to my very impulsive decision to go out tonight. I'd get the third-degree from them all, and Ward was counting down.

I hurried down the path and got into the passenger seat of an obnoxiously large SUV.

“Jeez, Ward. Don’t you ever consider the carbon footprint of driving this behemoth around?”

“Hello to you, too.”

I smiled brightly after nagging so openly. “Hi.”

“And I have. Sunny happens to love this car. She thinks she’s a princess in a carriage because it’s so high.”

“Ah. Blame it on the child.”

“However.” He lifted a finger as he set the car in drive. “*She* said her teacher was talking about air pollution and how cars contribute and yada yada. Hence next week, we will be trading this in for an electric version.”

“Aw. You really *are* my hero, Ward.”

He winked as he cruised down the road. Without so many cars out and about, he must have felt it was safe enough to look in my direction a little longer. His smoldering brown eyes lingered on me in a slow onceover, suggesting I didn’t look as frumpy as I worried I might. My hair was soaking wet. My black leggings weren’t very new, showing wear and tear, my comfiest pair. And I tried to stay warm with a sweater and fuzzy boots.

A cocky grin pulled his lips up. “You look gorgeous.”

Cue my blush. I bit my lip and my cheeks heated up. “You look good too.”

He *always* looked good. In an overwhelming, taunting way.

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t have a destination in mind.” He shrugged as he turned onto another street. “I figured we could just drive.”

“And worsen that carbon footprint?”

“I can plant some trees tomorrow.”

“You know that doesn’t just fix it.”

“I do know.”

Damn, Jen. Way to be a buzzkill. I reached for his hand and patted it. “Hey, at least you’re aware.”

“And buying a replacement as soon as possible.” He didn’t let me put my hand back on my lap though. He threaded his fingers with mine as he drove, and I fought the urge to smile.

“Good.” I settled into the seat, getting comfortable with him holding my hand where he wanted it.

“So, no to driving around then?”

“No, no. It’s okay. It sounds like a fine idea for one night.”

He chuckled.

“What?”

“One night.”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “Tonight.” *Is he peeved that I’m not committing to anything more?*

“Because if I were to ask you to just drive around again in my gas-guzzler, you wouldn’t say yes.”

I shrugged. “Probably not.”

“That’s what I like about you, Jen. You don’t take shit. You stand up for what you believe in.”

“Wait. Did you make that up about trading it in for an eco-friendly car?”

He chuckled again. “No. It’ll be here next Wednesday.”

“Oh. Well, then wait until you have that to ask me about just driving around again.”

He grinned. “You don’t take shit from anyone, do you?”

I did once. From Gwen. I sighed and forced a quick smile.

“Busy day today?” he asked instead when I didn’t answer verbally. “Or am I bugging you with my memes?”

“Very busy.” I exhaled long and hard. “We had classes and a field trip. Then I was training someone new. Add to all that the usual hands-on stuff I do every day.”

“Sounds like a lot. What kind of field trip?”

“Fourth-graders.”

He nodded. “At least it wasn’t kindergarteners. I volunteered last year to go with Sunny’s class to a petting-zoo trip.”

I giggled, already guessing from his tone how it might have gone.

“Chaos. It was pure, utter chaos. A baby goat tried to headbutt my balls when I stopped a student from losing his phone in his pen. One girl peed her pants because the chickens scared her. The teacher learned that day she was allergic to barn cats, and the llama spat in another parent’s eyes not once, but twice.”

I cracked up, picturing it all. “Wait, a kindergartener with a phone?”

He groaned. “We’ve got some entitled kids at that school. I refuse to consider letting Sunny have one until she’s a teen. And only to call or text me.”

I grinned. “And is she on board with that?”

“What, not having a phone until she’s older? She doesn’t care. She’s not interested in them, and I’m glad.”

“What does she like?”

“Princesses. Princesses and glitter. Those are the main flavors of the week.”

I grinned. “Sounds like a girly girl.”

“Nah. She isn’t really. Because that’s not all she cares about. I let her be herself. She’s a brainiac.”

“Wonder where she gets that from.”

He squeezed my hand. “Be nice. Really, she gets awesome grades and works hard for them.”

“What subjects does she like?”

“She *loves* science and math. She just started playing soccer too, and she’s a total hellion on the field. No dainty princess there. She’s aggressive in a healthy way.”

I smiled. “Healthy way?”

“Well, she’s not passive-aggressive.”

I listened as he continued to gush about her. He really opened up, getting animated when he spoke about his girl. I had no difficulty seeing how much he loved her, and I was glad that even though things went rotten between mom and dad, and even mom and daughter, Ward and Sunny had each other.

I lost track of how long he drove and where we even went. Talking about everything and nothing, we fell deeper into this seamless and comfortable companionship I doubted I would ever find with anyone else. Ward and I had history, and no matter how well we clicked now, it didn’t erase it. I was mature enough to look past it though, clinging to the hope that neither of us were so naïve to behave like we had back then again.

“I told my mom that we reconnected,” he said.

I stilled.

“Hey, no. Don’t stop.” He squeezed my hand. “Please? It felt good.”

Only then did I realize I’d been rubbing my thumb over his knuckles. I felt silly at the same time a sense of pride filled me. It was natural to touch him, and I was glad I could make him feel good even with a simple touch like that.

“You didn’t tell her *how* we reconnected, right?” I asked as I resumed stroking his knuckles.

He cracked up. “No!”

“Whew.”

As his laughter faded, he shook his head. “No. I’ve always been close with my mom, but not like that. I don’t tell her that kind of stuff.”

I smiled. “I didn’t really want to tell the girls that we hooked up.”

“Ashamed of me?”

No. But scared if it's smart to do this with you again. “Not one hundred percent. Mary Ellen saw me leaving the garage and pieced together why I looked so...”

“Thoroughly fucked?”

Mentally or physically?

“Gwen always accused me of being a mama’s boy.”

I snorted. “What? No, you so are not a mama’s boy.”

“It just took me that long to realize she didn’t have much affection from her parents to know that what I have with my mom is a solid parental figure to rely on. Anyway. I told my mom that I met someone. You.”

I gave him a lopsided smile. “You already knew me.”

He shrugged. “Same thing.”

I giggled. “No, it’s not.”

“Okay, it’s not. But my mom was really thrilled when I told her.”

“Lori always held a special place in my heart.”

He glanced at me, giving me that dashing smile that was his trademark expression. With a light squeeze on my fingers, he said, “Maybe one of these days the four of us can have dinner together.”

“You, me, Lori, and Sunny?” I asked.

“Yeah. To catch up.”

His idea sounded wonderful, but at the same time, it was super risky. Spending time with Ward was fun. It was a careful balance of enjoying myself and worrying about what it could mean. Incorporating Lori and Sunny would make it more layered. Because if things didn’t pan out, if Ward broke my heart again, I wouldn’t only be losing him. I would be impacting his mom and daughter. A ripple effect of loss would follow. I knew Lori already. What I saw of Sunny so far made me smile. Neither of them would be an acceptable loss as collateral should Ward and I not make it this time.

“You know?” he asked after I was quiet for a moment.

I didn't miss the careful optimism in his voice. If he could be optimistic, shouldn't I try to be the same for once? Being guarded was wearing on me. Ward had always been an expert at pushing me out of my comfort zone like this.

“That would be really nice. I hope we can make that happen.”

Just like I hope I'm not falling face first toward heartbreak with you. Again.

CHAPTER 22



WARD

When my stomach grumbled for a second time, Jenny noticed. “Did you miss lunch?”

I nodded. “Yeah. And dinner. I had to take my mom to a minor procedure at lunch, and I scarfed down some peanuts to catch Sunny’s soccer game when I should’ve had dinner.”

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?” She pointed at a fast-food sign ahead. “Maybe you should get something.”

Is she ever not considerate? “Only if you do too.”

“Um. I don’t trust that place.”

I laughed. “Yeah, they’re the bottom of the rung for fast food. How about there?” I pointed at another place up ahead, and she nodded.

“Okay. They have good milkshakes.”

A half hour later after a drive-thru, I parked in a spot in an empty strip-mall lot. The scents of greasy food filled the car as we talked some more, and I was glad when Jenny enjoyed her milkshake *and* a few of my fries after reading the nutrition label online. They didn’t meet all of her expectations for clean eating, but it was enough that she could handle it in moderation.

I gathered up all the trash and shoved it into the bag as she slurped on the last of her minty milkshake, made with real peppermints, per her preference.

“That’s catchy,” Jenny remarked of one of the stores.

“Korny’s Kandy?” I guessed with a laugh. “Can’t see myself taking Sunny there.”

“Is that a cardboard cut-out of a cavity in the window? What kind of jacked-up advertising is that?”

“Maybe it’s like reverse psychology.”

She smirked at me. “Come in here and eat this gross candy to get a cavity?”

I shrugged. Next to it was a salon, though, not so tackily named Monique’s Nails and Hair. It was a stark reminder of how Gwen left me in charge of getting Sunny ready for her wedding.

“What’s that long look for?”

I glanced at Jenny and sighed. I didn’t want to talk too much about Sunny and be one of those parents who wouldn’t shut up about their kid. But this was Jenny, world-class listener.

“Remember how I told you that Gwen wants Sunny to be in her wedding?”

She scoffed and crossed her arms. “Yeah. *In* the wedding but not really an active part of it.”

I nodded. “She emailed me this long list of stuff. She gave me some links so it’s not a search in the dark.”

“Still, it’s putting more on you.”

I shot her a droll look. That was all she did, leave everything to me.

“And it’s not fair to Sunny.”

I freaking loved how she rallied for my daughter.

“She’s probably expecting to be included and treated like an important member of the party, just like she was for Naomi’s wedding.”

“Yeah, that was what I thought. That was the only reason I even mentioned it and asked Sunny about it, assuming it

would be like how Naomi did it.” I shrugged. “My bad, I guess. I didn’t realize that not every woman did that.”

“Well, I don’t think every woman would. It varies. Hell, some women elope, you know. But it’s especially weird because Sunny is her daughter. I get that she doesn’t want to be involved in her life, but on this big day of *her* life, I don’t know. It would make it matter more? Some kind of a connection between them.”

“I know what you mean.” *But this is Gwen. She’s not motherly at all.*

“What will you do?”

“The best I can?”

She gave me a small smile.

“I can buy whatever is needed, but that doesn’t mean I’m an expert at doing this glamming-up stuff. I know my mom will help too even though she’s not a big fan of Gwen, but I’m not sure how I can give Sunny that special feeling she had when Naomi included her in her wedding preparation.”

She scooted on her seat to face me more fully. “I could help.”

I raised my brows. *You already are by just listening to me.* “How?”

“What if your mom and I took Sunny dress shopping? Looking at stuff to buy online isn’t the same experience. It’s kind of impersonal and not the same thing as reality. You never know if what you see on the screen is what you’ll really get. So maybe we could take her to try stuff on and make a big deal out of it all. That way she can bring some options home and try it on for you. Make it like a little fashion show.”

I grinned as she grew more enthusiastic, rambling.

“Oh! We could take her for a hair appointment the same day. So she’s all dolled up. If she’s into princesses as much as you say she is, she wouldn’t mind a chance to sit up high in a big chair and be pampered like that.”

“Are you sure you’d be okay doing that?”

She nodded. Then frowned. “I mean, unless I’m stepping on toes or something.”

I grunted. “Whose? Gwen’s? She doesn’t want anything to do with it.”

“I don’t know. Your mom’s then?”

“I already can tell my mom would be annoyed to do this *for* Gwen. She really has a low opinion of her. But if *you* volunteered? She’d be all over this idea.”

“Then yeah.” She grinned. “I’m absolutely sure I want to do this. Sunny deserves it, you know. She didn’t ask to be put in this position. It’s not her fault she has Gwen as a mother.”

“True.”

“And hey, kids are easy. A week before the wedding, we could book manis and pedis together.”

“*We*? As in me? Because I don’t have the first clue about this.”

She giggled. “We as in me. Or your mom.”

I shook my head. “Mom’s not girly like this. Sure, she’ll dress up and she hoards jewelry like a dragon but she’s not into makeup and all that. More of a natural style.”

“Okay, then I’ll book them. I’m not very girly either.”

“Nope. You’re all woman, Jen.”

She paused, licking her lips at my seductive tone. “Stop flirting,” she scolded playfully. “I’m serious.”

“So am I.”

“Okay, so I’ll book the manis and pedis for her, and if your mom doesn’t want to go, then I will. Maybe Mary Ellen or Lauren could come. You’ve met them. They’re not weirdos. We could make a fun night out of it, like a girls’ night.”

I fought the urge to take her hand and kiss it. “This means the world to me.”

“It’s nothing.”

“It’s a *big* something. You don’t have to go out of your way like this, but the fact that you’re offering at all is sweet.”

She rolled her eyes. “I know I don’t have to. I want to.”

“This will mean the world to Sunny.” I took her hand then, happy when she threaded our fingers together. “But I don’t want you to feel obligated to do this just because I’m giving you this sad sappy story about Gwen’s bullshit impacting her.”

“I’m not obligated, Ward. I would be happy to help you avoid having her feelings hurt.”

Because you’re a bigger person than me. Because you are so damn loving and giving and generous, I’m lucky to even know you.

“I know I hurt you in the past.” I couldn’t add on to the confession, taking the easy out of trailing off to gather the courage and find the words of how to express myself better.

She remained quiet in the passenger seat, looking down at our hands. I wanted to cling to the sliver of hope that she didn’t pull away, but the silence tore me apart.

“Yes, you did hurt me,” she replied softly after a long moment of agony.

The guilt gnawed at me and I wanted to squirm under the pressure of owning up to my shitty actions in the past. This sweet, compassionate woman never deserved any of the hurt I caused back then, and I felt lousy to recall it at all now. “I’m sorry.”

She still didn’t look up at me, and the lack of eye contact pierced my heart. After finding her again and enjoying her company, I didn’t want to let a single bit of distance come between us. Her reluctance to face me felt like a gaping disconnect that I couldn’t bear.

“I was an idiotic eighteen-year-old who got distracted by someone else. And I let that get to my head.”

Both of my heads. But the lower one ruled.

“It’s fine.” Now she glanced up, meeting my gaze with a careful and serious expression of acceptance. “It’s over.”

I didn't realize I tightened my hold on her hand until she flinched and shook it.

"Oww," she whispered.

"What'd you say?" My heart chipped into more pieces, falling into the mire of guilt and regrets.

"I said it's ov—" She shook her head. "It *was* over. Not that this *is* over." She flicked her finger between us. "I meant that I'm over what happened back then."

I whooshed out a long exhale. She had scared me.

"I just would rather not hash it out."

Noted. Not hashing it out felt too much like shying away from it all, and that didn't sit right with me either. I wanted her to understand that I never intended to hurt her at all. It was just a shitty consequence of an action I hadn't really thought out that well. Or at all. Or with the right head.

I wouldn't force her to think about it or dwell on it though. If she didn't want to discuss it and wanted to convince herself she was over it, then I would leave it alone as she wished.

Once more, silence hung between us. Before, I enjoyed her proximity in the car, thinking it was us against the world. It was just the two of us in this private bubble that nothing and no one could break through. Now the space in here felt confining and too tight. The lack of conversation ate at me, and I wished I could think of something to say.

"Thanks." She finally spoke up before I could. "Thank you for apologizing, though. It means something. It means a lot."

Thank fuck I'm doing something right. I put my hand on her knee. "I should have apologized years ago."

She smiled sweetly. "It's okay."

I don't think you'll ever convince me it was okay for me to toss you aside and go after Gwen instead. The only thing that made my actions not entirely shitty was that I didn't cheat on Jenny. I broke up with her before I sought Gwen out. It was a pathetic slip of mercy, but I was proud of that tiny detail.

“It’s okay,” she repeated, seeming to sense that I wasn’t ready to take her word for that claim. “It was years ago. You were young and stupid.”

I laughed. “I’m not young anymore.”

“Nope,” she teased with a naughty glimmer in her eyes. “Still stupid though.”

Stupidly crazy for you. I drew in a deep breath and leaned over the center console.

She didn’t budge, locking her emerald gaze on my lips. I brought my face to hers and kissed her hard.

CHAPTER 23



JENNY

Ward leaned back just a bit, gazing at me with such a hot and heavy stare I wanted to shiver under the intensity of it. His look drove me wild. Everywhere he dragged his gaze felt like a caress, and I wanted to revel in each flicker of the burn.

But he hadn't even done that. I had the pleasure of feeling his hand on mine, his lips sucking on my throat, and his hard dick deep inside my pussy that now throbbed with need. I hadn't felt his tongue or fingers tracing over my skin, though, not where I yearned to experience his touch.

It became a feral need, a clawing desire, and I gave in to the thrill of it all.

I reached for my hem and pulled up my sweater.

He blinked, breathing harder, and he stayed firmly in his seat. One quick peek at his lap showed how fast he was reacting to my rash idea to take what I wanted from him. He had yet to really caress me, and I was ready to rectify that grievance.

“What are you—” He shut up as I lowered my hands again and removed my cami. It was a two-for-one with a built-in bra. My breasts weren't enormous, not like Gwen's purchased pair, but with a love for sugar I couldn't curb, real, pure cane sugar from organic plants, I figured my fat could settle in my boobs and it was a fair tradeoff for my sweet tooth.

“Fuck.” Ward licked his lips as he dropped his gaze to my nipples that beaded in the exposed air of his car.

Then he reached up, moving my shirt to cover me up as he looked around the empty parking lot in a panic.

Shit. Who's the stupid one now? I pulled my cami back in place as a furious blush seared my skin. "Oh, *shit*," I said aloud as I spotted the security camera between Monique's beauty parlor and Korny's candy shop of high-fructose-syrup hell.

Ward chuckled as I shrank back in my seat. He hurried to turn on the car and drive to another spot way back, further away from the storefronts and their surveillance.

"That's what I get. That's what I get!" I smacked him as he chuckled, and I wanted to hate him for laughing. Not because it wasn't funny, but because it made me want to giggle too. His amusement was infectious as ever, but how could I laugh now? I was supposed to be embarrassed and regretting my bold move.

"You make me so damn reckless and I didn't even think about what I was doing. So that was just what I freaking get for being so stupid."

"I'll show you what you get," he rasped in that sexy deep voice. He shoved the gear stick into park and reached for me.

"We're *both* stupid, now," I ranted as he put his hands on my sides.

"A perfect pair." He dipped his face to close his teeth over the cami I held to my chest.

I paused. "Are you talking about my boobs? Or us?"

He grinned a wicked smile of sin. "Us?" Then he picked me up and hauled me over to straddle him in the driver's seat.

I lowered my thighs until my knees found a spot on his seat, and I groaned and arched back. His dick was big and firm, already pressing up against me hard. The friction excited me, and I wanted more of it. When I ground against him, he growled and gripped my hips to help me push down on him more.

“And for the record,” he said as he moved one big hot hand up my back to hold me in place. “These are damn-near perfect too.”

I gazed down at him as he lifted his other hand and cupped my right breast. “Damn near?”

“Well, I haven’t had a chance to taste them yet to know.” He grinned, keeping his gaze on me, and he brought his lips closer to my nipple.

“Ward.” I didn’t care if I was begging. I could only handle so much teasing.

He shushed me, blowing a breath over my peaked nipple that ached for his kiss. Then he closed his lips over the point and sucked it into his warm mouth.

The hit of pleasure rocketed through me until I felt it in the slow buildup of tension low in my belly. I knew I was wet. I felt the sticky wetness when I spread my legs to straddle him. With the slow, lazy strokes of his tongue over my nipple, his hot lips kissed the swell of my breast. He pinched my other nipple, and I knew I was drenched now. From zero to sixty, this man made me flare up and burn so hot I didn’t know if I wanted it to go on forever or end as soon as possible before I incinerated.

His hand braced my back, pushing me closer. He dragged wet, sloppy, and greedy kisses to my other breast and gave me the same sinful treatment there. I arched my back toward the steering wheel in an instinctive reaction to needing his mouth on my tits until I came. I probably could. I usually struggled with foreplay, but with this man who knew just how to rock my world, I teetered so close to coming already.

“I wanted you to,” I said until the words petered out in an incoherent mumble.

“Hmm?”

I shivered at the vibration of his hum with my breast under his mouth.

“I wanted you to caress me,” I confessed.

“Is that so?” He forced his face against me again, laving his tongue around my nipple until he pulled it between his teeth with a hint of pain that drove me crazy. I leaned back under his direction. As soon as he claimed the space he wanted, he slipped his hand beneath my leggings.

Then paused.

He lifted his face, panting with a ravenous look, and he smirked at me. “No bra. No panties. You *are* fucking perfect, Jenny.”

I growled, pushing his face back to my chest. He didn’t need to be told twice. Between quick strokes of his fingers inside my wet core and the steady circles of his tongue on my beaded nipple, he caressed me until I came apart.

A loud cry left my lips, and I bucked my hips, riding his hand to make it last every glorious second. Pleasure swept over me, leaving me disoriented and exhausted, but I wasn’t done. Or more to the point, *he* wasn’t done. As soon as I calmed enough to catch my breath, I slowed my rocking hips over his and realized the ride wasn’t done. He still pushed up against me, grunting to get closer, but it was impossible.

“Take your pants off,” I said.

“No *please?*” he taunted.

“Do I *need* to say please and be polite right now?”

He growled and kissed me hard. “Fuck no. I just like messing with you.”

“Then mess me up with this.” I unzipped him and gripped his dick beneath his boxers. A distinct sticky spot on the fabric showed me how close he was, but I wasn’t interested in that. I wanted him to fill me up.

“Condom,” he got out around a hiss.

I laid my lips on his for a slow, drugging kiss. He hugged me close. Slanting me toward him and twisting to the side, he gave me access to reach his back pocket. While we were tilted toward the window, he shoved at my leggings. I got the condom and opened it, rearing away to wrangle with his jeans.

It seemed impossible in too tight of a space. I loved yoga, but even this seemed like too much of a challenge. Contorted on top of him, my leg up in the air and then over to the passenger seat, I proved that my leggings were the issue. They were comfy as hell, but for a quickie in the car, they were the worst idea ever.

“Just get them off!” He growled, trying to free them from me.

“You’re not helping.”

“I’m doing my best not to rip them!”

I gritted my teeth, worried I’d either kick him in the head, knee him in the nuts, or bash my head on the window. We didn’t perform a sexy wrestle, but once my other foot knocked against the door lever, he shot back down and I followed him with a breath-stealing smack.

“Ow.”

“Oh,” he said, cupping my bare ass cheek. His fingers stroked down until he found my dripping core, and I moaned into his kiss.

With more space to move, I managed to free one leg. He shoved his jeans down enough that his dick sprang up and bumped against me.

I leaned over to get the condom on the passenger seat, where it fell during our frantic fight to get our clothes off. He took it from me as I sat up, and once he covered his long erection, he slid his hands to grip my hips.

I lined him up and sank down on him.

“Perfect,” he rasped out. Never had that one word sounded so filthy, like a promise to *make* this perfect between us. I wasn’t seeking the best sex ever. I just wanted him. Now. As I rode him though, arching my back so he’d hit that spot that drove me insane, I realized this might be the best. He might be the best.

Stop. Stop thinking.

I had to live in the moment and take what I could from him. To look ahead and wish for too much, I'd be setting myself up for disappointment.

"Where'd you go?" he asked as he tweaked my nipples harder. He hadn't taken his hands off them once as I rode him, but now, he sat up.

"I'm right here," I said around panted breaths, feeling more vulnerable knowing he could read me so well to realize I was thinking too hard and not sharing this with him.

He angled up more, giving me an even deeper angle.

"Oh, like that?" he growled.

I bobbed on his cock faster, knocking into the horn on the wheel.

Beep. Beep. Beep. He jerked inside me, and I clenched around him as we came together. *Beeeeeeep.*

He laughed, pulling me toward him so I stopped with the horn. I was too delirious to care, but as always, I laughed lightly too, powerless to resist his humor.

"One of these days," I said once we'd both calmed down and I climbed back to the passenger seat to tug my leggings back on. "One of these days we'll have to make it to a bed."

He grinned at me, lifting his hips to zip up. "Does that mean you plan on doing this again?"

Dammit. I walked right into that one. "Don't let it go to your head."

He waggled his brows. "Which head?"

I groaned and laughed. "Just take me home."

I wanted to spend the night in his car when he kissed me goodnight in my driveway. This one was a slow, sweet one with a tender promise. I didn't have to worry about him assuming I'd always want to hook up with him. At the rate my heart raced for him at this gentle kiss, I had more reason to worry about giving him too much of myself again.

Eventually, I got the courage to exit his car, and once I snuck back inside, I tiptoed. It seemed like I'd have a clear path to my room, but before I reached the stairs, a light in the kitchen came on.

I gasped, turning to see what caused it.

Mary Ellen stood there in her PJs. She leaned against the counter and flicked the switch, showing me she'd done it.

"Can't sleep?" I guessed, nodding at the mug of milk.

"I should ask you the same." She tipped her chin toward the now-cold tea I left steeping hours ago.

Busted.

"Where were you so late?" she asked in a knowing, teasing tone.

I bit my lip and wished I didn't blush at the most telling times.

Mary Ellen giggled as she lifted her mug to her lips. She didn't hide all of her smile behind the rim. "Got you!"

CHAPTER 24



WARD

I glanced back down at my phone for the nth time that afternoon.

Jenny: I can't wait to see you again.

Ward: Because?

She'd sent a GIF of a person thinking hard.

Ward: Me too.

Jenny: Because I sort of like seeing you.

She'd followed that with a meme about good times being had by all.

Ward: Me too.

Ward: Admit it. You're becoming addicted.

Jenny: Highly enthusiastic in short bursts? Okay, I am.

Ward: Same thing.

Jenny: Have you ever actually said that when two things ARE the same?

Ward: All the time.

Jenny: Oh, sure. Anyway, I wanted to run an idea past you.

Ward: For you, I'm all ears.

"Ward!"

I flinched, dropping the device and stopping my obsession with rereading texts from her.

“Are you even listening?” my manager barked. He raked his hands through his hair and groaned. “We’ve got a disaster on our hands and you aren’t even listening.”

I grabbed my phone from the conference table. “I wouldn’t call it a disaster,” I hedged.

“Ward. You’re the most optimistic, glass-half-full guy I know,” another manager said as she paced. “But this does qualify.”

“As a minor shitstorm, maybe,” I ceded. “We’ll get to the bottom of it. A glitch is forgivable *and* fixable.”

I stood, shelving my need to see if Jenny had replied yet. After I stood, I slid my phone into my pocket. “I guarantee it.”

“Now?” the manager asked.

I glanced at the clock. *Shit*. With this work emergency popping up, I wouldn’t have time to pick up Sunny like I always did.

“Give me a couple of minutes, then yes, we’ll figure this out.”

I stepped out of the conference room and pulled my phone back out to call my mom.

“Hi, honey. What’s up?”

“Hey, Mom. I’m busy and shit’s hitting the fan here. Something’s come up that I need to handle.”

“Got it. Need me to pick up Sunny?”

She knew her schedule and mine. She never shied from a chance to spend time with her granddaughter.

“Could you, please?”

“Of course!”

“I’ll swing by to pick her up when I’m done here. I don’t think it’ll take all night.”

“No problem. I’m glad to help. She can finish her craft at my house while she waits.”

I hesitated before hanging up. “Wait. Please, no—”

“No more glitter,” she teased. “Yeah, yeah. See you later.”

Glad that Sunny’s pickup was handled, I dove back into work and put out all the fires that had everyone freaking out. After the flagship’s opening, an inventory crisis turned out to be a technical glitch. It warped all the sales numbers and projections, but I got everything back on track with my assistants’ help.

Just after the last file was closed out, my mother called. I frowned at her name on the caller ID. She should be in that freaking car-ride line now, or just about to leave it.

“Ward.”

Her somber tone alarmed me immediately. “Hey, Mom. What’s wrong?”

“Sunny isn’t at school.”

I stood so quickly I smacked my knees on the edge of my desk. “What?”

“Sunny’s not at school. I came to pick her up and she’s not here.”

Blood rushed in my ears as panic kicked in. “*What? Why?*”

She whined in discomfort, like she didn’t want to be the bearer of this news. “Because it appears Gwen picked her up.”

Are you fucking kidding me? My blood pressure shot through the roof. Instant anger filled me and my head throbbed.

“Ward?” My assistant stared at me wide-eyed. “You look like you’re about to have a freaking aneurysm or something.”

“I gotta go.” I kept my mom on the phone as I bailed from work. I ran down the stairs because the elevator took too long, along hallways, and through the parking lot until I reached my

car. I raced to the school once my mom told me three times the little that she knew and that she was still at the school.

“I tried calling the last number I had for Gwen but I think the number is disconnected. I’m not getting any answer.”

I cursed as I sped to the school’s complex. Her flightiness of changing numbers wasn’t anything new, but right now, it was bullshit.

“You keep that fucker there. Don’t let him out of sight.”

“I will, Ward. I will,” she promised coolly, likely giving the man I referenced a lethal, gritty stare to not try anything funny with her. The principal was the ultimate level of approval for a student to leave the school earlier than the standard dismissal time, and he damn well better have an answer for me how this could have happened.

Fear receded as anger claimed the forefront of my mind. Both were strong emotions, and between the swinging pendulum of them, my stomach clenched and knotted to the point of pain.

As soon as I roughly parked, I sprinted across the parking lot. The car pickup line was empty and only stragglers stood around as they waited to be picked up or stalled before heading to any number of camps, clubs, or extra-curricular meetings. My mom’s car was still parked near the pickup area, and I ran right past it.

I banged my hand on the door where all visitors and parents could enter the school. The intercom buzzed.

“Please press the button to request entrance,” the chipper receptionist announced. “And show your face in the camera so we can verify, oh. Whoa. Um, Principal Lannon? Mr. Emerson is here.” Clicks signaled the door unlocking, and I shoved the panel back before it opened all the way.

I ran inside toward the office, spotting my mother pacing in the hallway.

“Ward.” She shook her head. “I can’t get a hold of her at any of the numbers she’s given you before.”

“Lannon!” I stormed up to him, not stopping until I was nose to nose with him, glaring down into his pale, frightened face. “What the hell is going on?”

He struggled to swallow as he cowered back from me. “I, well, I apologize for the inconvenience.”

“Inconvenience?” I shouted at his face. “This isn’t a fucking inconvenience.”

The receptionist cleared her throat. “Mr. Emerson. Language,” she scolded primly.

I turned my face to glower at her without giving the principal any room to move.

“Language?” my mother sassed at her. “Oh, shut up and go back in the office if you can’t help.”

“This isn’t an *inconvenience*,” I growled at the principal. I barely held back from punching him. I’d hit too hard, and if I broke his jaw, he wouldn’t be able to tell me anything. I settled for clutching the front of his jacket and hauling him close. “You better explain to me right fucking now why my daughter was removed from the school premises by someone not recognized as her official and permitted caregiver.”

His lower lip trembled. “Mr. Emerson, this is a simple mistake. That’s all.”

I shook him and brought back my arm to punch him.

“Ward.” My mother was still frantically pacing and trying to reach Gwen on the phone. “Temper.”

I shot her an incredulous look.

“This is no mistake, Lannon. Not only is that woman not permitted or identified as my daughter’s caregiver, but I’ve also given explicit documentation requesting she *not* have any access to my daughter at the school without my written permission in advance.”

Written permission I never had any reason to give since Gwen never showed any interest in Sunny or her education here.

This little punk knew he was in hot water. He was in severe trouble, breaking these rules and policies the schoolboard instated for top-tier security of the school complex. He wouldn't only be answering to me for this error he wanted to pass as an inconvenience or mistake. He'd get fired for this if I pushed hard enough. I didn't give a shit what might happen to him. Sunny was my priority.

While my mom tried to reach her without pause, I made sure this idiot admitted he was wrong and explained what the hell he'd do to fix it now.

"She explained that she simply wanted to chat with her, and as she *is* her mother, I thought—"

I shook him again. "You thought wrong," I growled. "You know the fucking rules. Why'd you bend them for her?"

He stammered again, looking like he would piss his pants. "I just, I, well, I."

"You what?!" I roared

"I thought she looked so sincere and so eager to see her child and I thought it wouldn't hurt."

"I don't give a shit what you *think*, fucker. If you still have your job, this better not ever, *ever* happen again. Do you understand me?"

He nodded weakly.

"Do you understand me when I say that woman does not have any permission to seek out my daughter?"

"Mr. Emerson. I'm sure she's not intending her any harm. She's her mother."

"I know who she fucking is!" I yelled in his face.

"Ward." My mom sighed, tugging on my sleeve. "I just don't get it. I can't reach Gwen anywhere." She tugged on my sleeve harder. "Let him go. He doesn't know where she is either."

"Do you?" I whipped back to glower at him.

“No. No, sir. She didn’t say where she wanted to take Sunny. Just to have some time together.”

Which could mean anything. It didn’t make sense. She was all about herself, selfish. Why would she want to spend time with Sunny *now*?

“He clearly gave in to her and that’s that. We need to focus on how to find her.” Mom clenched her jaw. “Why would she even want to get her?”

“Just what I was wondering.” I shoved the worthless principal back. I was fuming. I’d never been so furious before in my life, but my mom was right. This idiot wouldn’t help. I had to stay level-headed and think.

“Maybe—”

I didn’t listen to whatever Mom said. The instant my phone rang, I answered without looking at the screen.

“What?” I barked. My temper had flown through the roof and to the stratosphere. My patience followed its wake.

“Um. Hi.” Jenny laughed nervously. “Bad day at work, huh? I was just calling to see if you meant what you said, to talk anytime.”

Of all fucking times, Jenny.

“I wanted to know if I could ask you about a business idea I was thinking about proposing.”

“No.” It came out curtly. “No. Not now.” I didn’t intend to blow up like that. It just happened. I was at my wit’s ends, worried about Sunny and loathing Gwen’s existence and audacity to take my daughter from school like this.

“I can’t talk about that, at all, right now.”

I hung up and turned back to my mom, firmly in damage control. “Google Kenneth Crown. Find a number for him and call to see where Gwen might be. I’ll try to find a business number for him and call there.”

She nodded, and as my heart raced with an anxiety that wouldn’t be quelled until I saw my daughter again, I

frantically searched for a way to find that asshole of a woman who thought she could take her without my permission.

CHAPTER 25



JENNY

I gaped at the screen of my phone. I'd resaved Ward's name on it to read *Favorite Mistake* and I really felt hit with that truth.

He hung up on me.

He hung up on me!

Shock warred with disbelief. It didn't add up. How could the guy who drove me crazy and made me laugh and smile so easily do a complete shift like this? Unless he was doing a Dr. Jekyll joke, this call didn't make sense. I couldn't think of any reason for him to be so curt and mean, barking at me like that. And right after he'd texted that I could count on talking to him about my ideas *anytime*.

"Anytime, my ass," I muttered.

"What was that?" a server asked as she passed, mistaking my words as a request for her.

I sniffled, hating this burn of tears that threatened as I sat in my favorite booth in the café I loved to work in when the house was too loud with the girls. I'd come here earlier to work on my laptop. I was attempting a major overhaul on the website where my customers ordered my teas. For a while now, I'd been considering a rebrand. Weighing the pros and cons was a delicate process, and I was hoping to find the courage to pitch my idea of selling my teas in Ward's stores. The Cozy Company already offered a few tea brands, but they didn't have *mine*. Yet.

Or maybe never.

I hadn't expected him to be such an ass, not after we'd been inching toward something new and old again. His tone stung, and as the server smiled and walked away, I blinked back tears.

Where did this harshness come from?

I felt deceived and dumb, worrying I'd missed a clue or a sign somewhere. Confusion filled me, but the hurt from his rude reception overtook that sensation.

Dammit. I had to get out of here before I started crying in earnest. I wasn't intimidated to cry in public, but I didn't want the stress of others being concerned and asking me what was wrong. I wouldn't know how to answer anyone if they asked because nothing about the way Ward just spoke to me felt right.

I packed up my laptop, eager to get the hell out of here as quickly as I could. I wouldn't have any clarity of mind to work anymore. My thoughts were a jumbled mess of *WTF!*

I exited the café and closed the open flaps of my jacket around me. Snuggling into a tighter hold on my garment barely helped against the fall breeze that blew through. A wad of litter skated down the sidewalk before my feet, and I zoned out, following it as it passed.

Then I stopped in my tracks.

Wait a second. I narrowed my eyes, pausing. *Sunny?*

I felt like my eyes were playing tricks on me, but as I stepped closer, I realized the small child sitting on the elevated curb was none other than Sunny Emerson. The purple and pink glittery streak of hair chalk was right there. Ward showed me a picture of it on his phone the other night in his car when he lamented about his hatred of glitter and how his mom made the mistake of estimating how temporary that hair chalk was.

I glanced around. This was too weird. First, Ward blowing up at me and hanging up. Now his daughter sitting alone on a curb in a not-so-great area of town. *Is he around here?* I didn't see him or his gas-guzzler SUV he had yet to trade in.

“Sunny?”

I spoke slowly and gently, but the girl still flinched when she turned toward me. She looked so unsure, red flags rose in my mind.

“I’m Jenny.”

She frowned, looking so lost.

“We met at your Uncle Colby and Aunt Naomi’s wedding when I tried to hide at your table.”

Recognition dawned on her, but she still seemed wary. “You had the pretty green dress.”

I smiled softly. “That looked like forests. You wore a really cool flower girl dress.”

She glanced down at the sidewalk. “It was super itchy but I didn’t want to tell Naomi.”

I rolled my eyes in commiseration. “I can’t stand itchy clothes. It can ruin the whole day.”

“Yeah. It’s annoying.”

“Is everything okay?”

She nodded, but I wasn’t convinced. Something was up.

“Would you like to come inside the café?” I pointed at it. “You could warm up inside there so I can call your dad.”

“You know my dad?” She stood up quickly. Maybe mentioning Ward was the key to earn her initial trust.

“I sure do. I even know all the embarrassing things he did as a kid. We go way back.” Selling Ward out to his daughter seemed sneaky, but I would try anything to win her over until I knew she was safe.

Her nervousness faded. “Really? Was he a nerd?”

I shook my head. “No. A jock.” I led her inside, glad that she trusted me enough to hold my hand.

“Does this place have the dyes you don’t like?” she asked as we stepped into the foyer.

I grinned. “You’ve got a good memory.”

“So do you, if you remember what my dad was like when he was a kid.”

Well, kiddo, your dad was pretty damn memorable. “I’m going to call him, okay?”

She tightened her hold on my hand and looked around. “Okay.”

I called and he answered immediately. “Jen, I’m so sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. I’m just deep in damage control here. I know you’re pissed at me and I had no business taking my anger out on you like that. I shouldn’t have hung up.”

“Ward.”

“No. Hear me out. I’m so sorry and I hate what you’re probably thinking right now.”

“W—”

“Shh. Let me finish. I just had an emergency and I couldn’t talk then. I can’t talk now either, but I have to let you know I’m sorry—”

“Ward!”

He shut up at my firm tone. Finally.

I smiled quickly at Sunny as she raised her brows at me.

“I’m with Sunny,” I hurried to explain.

He drew in a quick breath so loud that I heard it over the phone. “What? Where are you?”

I told him the name of the café.

“I’m on my way.”

“Okay.”

“Okay. See you soon.” He hung up again, but this time, I understood. Tears didn’t come. The hurt of his abrupt treatment earlier faded as understanding hit. The relief in his voice was palpable, and I knew without a doubt something had happened. He hadn’t played a trick or gone bipolar. He hadn’t been playing with me. *Sunny* happened, or something went

wrong for her to be sitting outside all alone like that and looking so forlorn and lost.

“Would you like something warm to drink?”

She tilted her head, peering at the menu, and I bit my lip. Ward did that. He did it when he was a kid, and he hadn't lost the habit.

“They don't have dyes?” she asked.

“Completely organic and eco-farmed. Well, as much as they can be. I doubt anyone can have naturally sourced sugar eyes.” I pointed at the confections they used around Halloween. Many sat unused in a jar on the counter. “They've got them leftover there where they can sit and go stale for eons, taking forever to biodegrade.”

Sunny blinked up at me. “You were a nerd in school, weren't you?”

I grinned at her, enjoying her bluntness. “Yeah, I kinda was. Isn't that cool?”

“Mary-Janine said nerds are stupid.”

I snorted. “Well, Mary-Janine sounds like she doesn't know what she's talking about.”

A hint of a smile lifted her lips, but I could tell she was still down.

Just what the hell happened?

I made a show of tapping my chin like I was thinking hard. “How about a hot cocoa with caramel drizzle on the whip?”

She nodded. “My dad told you that I liked that.”

“Yep.” We stepped up to order her drink. When I paid, she clung to my hand tighter as though she was afraid to be alone again.

“What else did my dad tell you about me?”

We moved to the side to wait, but the server shook her head at me. “Go on, Jenny. I'll bring it out to you.”

“Thanks, Becca.” I led Sunny to a booth, and I noticed that she wanted to sit with me, not across from me. My favorite spot was near the back, with the broken-in vinyl cushions, but I wanted to be closer to the door so Ward could find us easier. “Let’s see,” I said as we sat. “He told me that you are the best soccer player ever. What position do you play?”

“Mid field.”

“He also told me that you love glitter.” I leaned closer to conspire with her. “Wanna know a secret?”

She nodded as Becca delivered her drink.

“Your dad might say he hates glitter, but it’s not true. He actually loves it!”

“Really?” She barely smiled, and I really wanted to lift her spirits.

She was in a bad funk to not take the bait of my lie. “Sunny, how come you’re not out here with your dad or Grandma Lori?”

“You know my grandma too?”

I nodded. “She’s awesome.”

Sunny sighed. “My mom picked me up from school.”

I doubted she was supposed to do that. My stomach tightened as I let her words sink in. “And where’s your mom now?”

“She went into a store and told me to wait outside. I wasn’t allowed in.” She looked down at the drink and sipped it, then licked the cream from her upper lip.

Realization dawned at once. *Unbelievable!* Gwen had to have gone to the marijuana dispensary a few doors down and left her six-year-old daughter alone on the sidewalk. That was the only store on this street that would have barred a child from entrance.

I firmed my lips and set my elbow on the table. Hiding my expression from Sunny, I stewed and steamed with my chin in my hand.

I didn't care that Gwen was buying weed. It wasn't my business, and she was far from the only one who bought that stuff. It wasn't my kind of thing, but as a horticulturist, I understood it could have its purposes, both recreational and medicinal.

What pissed me off to high heaven was that she didn't care about how unsafe it was to leave Sunny all alone. Anything could have happened. Someone could have taken her in broad daylight. She could have gotten lost wandering. A car could have hit her. Hell, that dispensary was in the news recently for armed robberies in the last year. And the bar across the street was a shady place where sex stings had gone down. This wasn't a smart area to even bring a child.

I didn't question this sudden protectiveness that took over me. I stroked her hair as she carefully sipped the hot beverage. She scooted closer, sidling up against me on the bench seat.

"Your dad will be here soon, Sunny girl."

She nodded and leaned against me.

When I heard the bells chime above the door, I looked up quickly, hoping to see Ward.

No. That quick? The man had a penchant for speeding, but that fast? As I lifted my face toward the door, I saw that it wasn't him.

It was Gwen.

I stiffened, and Sunny glanced up, probably feeling me go tense.

Gwen roved her gaze through the room and spotted me seated with Sunny. Her eyes narrowed to slits and her lips curled in a nasty scowl.

"That's my mom," Sunny said quietly.

"Uh huh."

"You know her too?"

I didn't take my eyes off the horrible woman. "You could say that," I whispered back to the girl. "Stay here."

Already, Gwen was on the warpath. She stormed over. Fists clenched, expression murderous, she hurried across the tiled floor.

I shoved to my feet, making sure to step forward and block Sunny from her.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” she screeched.

Everyone’s head swiveled toward us. All the customers and employees turned their attention toward us.

“Jenny?” Sunny tugged on my jacket.

“It’s okay.”

“Huh?” Gwen snapped as she stalked closer.

I crossed my arms and lifted my chin defiantly.

“Just who the hell do you think you are?” She stopped right in my face, seething.

I swallowed, refusing to show an ounce of fear.

She was welcome to my hard expression of frustration. Maybe she’d detect the impatience I felt too.

Hurry, Ward. Please hurry up.

CHAPTER 26



WARD

“Was that her?” my mom asked.

I shook my head, already backing away from the worthless principal. “Jenny. She’s found her.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Mom nodded. “Go. Go.” She waved me on and shoved her sleeves up as she turned to face the principal and his secretary again. “I’ll just have one more word with them here.”

The glower on her face didn’t bode well for the idiots who screwed up. What good were rules and policies for students and staff when the spineless asshole would bend to Gwen’s persuasion?

I would let her handle them. I ran out of the school and to my car. Then I slammed my foot to the pedal, speeding out of there like I never had before. Dallas traffic wasn’t a great place to flirt with the chance of getting a speeding ticket, but I didn’t give a shit. With every mile that I drove, my fury deepened and thickened. I was fuming as a cloud of anger covered me. I couldn’t believe that Gwen actually had the nerve to pick up Sunny from school like that. It was stunning that she even wanted to in the first place, but like this? On a whim and without telling me first? She fucking knew she wasn’t allowed to just approach her. She didn’t have custody. She’d never even sought visitation rights, abandoning that sweet girl to me completely.

And of all places. “What the fuck, Gwen?”

I took a turn too fast, leaning in with the curve of the SUV. If she'd wanted to just "spend time with her," why the hell would she end up in that end of town? It wasn't so bad that I wouldn't drive through the area with her. No gangs hung out there, but it wasn't entirely safe, not for a kid.

I gritted my teeth as I considered how it had happened to begin with. I chose that school not only because it was close to our house but also for the damn security measures that Principal Lannon didn't abide by this afternoon.

"That does it." I would be pulling her from that school immediately. As soon as I got her home and made sure she was okay from this time with Gwen, I would be contacting the school and withdrawing her from enrollment. I'd never had issues before. Of course, she came home and mentioned the one or two kids who were getting a head start on bullying, but other than that, Sunny liked her classmates and teachers.

That couldn't matter anymore. I'd never be able to trust Lannon again. I wouldn't feel confident dropping Sunny off there ever again after this fuck-up. Not an inconvenience. Not a mistake. The school fucked up, plain and simple, and, right now, they wouldn't be getting a second chance to earn my trust again.

Lannon, the pathetic asshole he was, couldn't begin to understand this feeling of terror. He saw big tits, a charming smile, and cunning pleas. He didn't realize how batshit crazy Gwen was to try to pull this off.

It scared the hell out of me when my mom told me that Gwen was the one who took her. My heart stopped, and it wouldn't beat normally again until I ensured my ex was far from my girl. Even though I raced closer and closer to getting her, I couldn't shake the fright of worrying what could have happened. If Gwen decided to go further away with Sunny?

If Jenny hadn't happened to be there to find her and call me?

Anything could have happened, and I never would have forgiven Gwen or the school if something horrible happened.

“Thank fuck.” I drove, trying to steady my breaths and latch on to the one bright silver lining of this all. “Thank fuck you were there, Jenny.” I wasn’t sure how or why. Coincidences were bullshit, but I would forever be grateful she’d happened to be there, that she’d happened to step in and be a source of safety for my girl in a moment when she needed help the most.

Stuck at a red light, I grunted my frustration and willed the intersection to work in my favor. With the delay, though, I had the moment to recognize that other piercing ache in my chest. *Anger, yeah, I was very mad, but I was also sad.*

Sunny was probably eager to go with Gwen when she showed up, and that hurt. I knew she wanted a mother. Having a grandmother was one thing, but I could tell Sunny wished she had a mom like all the other kids. When she realized Gwen was there to pick her up, claiming that she wanted to spend time with her, I bet she felt a sense of normalcy, that she was like any other student there with mothers who came for their kids.

This was not Sunny’s fault at all. I couldn’t blame her one bit. Like at Colby’s wedding, she showed moments of being unsure about Gwen’s presence, and rightly so because of the woman’s inability to relate or connect with her. The blame for her departure from school was Lannon and Gwen’s fault, no one else’s.

But it stung to think that she might have been so willing to leave with her because she wished for a wider circle of people in her life. She probably hadn’t thought to say something like *no, my dad will come get me* instead of just going with Gwen. She was probably eager for an experience that should have been normal.

I had the means and money to provide for her, but still, like Mom sometimes told me, I was very diligent and careful about who I trusted Sunny with. Play dates didn’t happen often. I had yet to find a babysitter I would want in my house. I wasn’t a hermit or anti-social, but with my daughter, I’d always tried to maintain her safety, to the unfortunate point of keeping her circle small.

And now, I'd have to change up her whole circle and take her out of that school.

I had no other choice. My trust was shattered. I had to know that Sunny would be safe and protected from Gwen playing with her time.

Finally. I slammed on the brakes in front of the café. The SUV juttled out at an angle and one tire had climbed up over the edge of the curb. I left it parked just like that, wrenched the door open, then slammed it shut before running inside.

I rushed into the warm café and found Gwen in Jenny's face.

"I asked you a question!"

Jenny shrugged. "I heard you."

"Then answer me, dammit. Who the hell do you think you are?" Gwen craned her neck, shoving her face closer to Jenny, who stood there without budging.

Jenny smirked. "I don't answer to you, Gwen."

"The hell you don't! Sunny, come here. Come here right now!"

A barista wrung her hands on her apron and told Gwen to back up and leave the premises. An older grandmotherly woman flanked my ex on the right, scolding her to stop harassing Jenny, too. Other customers milled around, blocking my efforts from storming closer. Some had phones out, perhaps ready to call for help. All of them spoke up, alarmed with the way Gwen was blowing up like this. Their expressions of concern matched, and one teenager tried to intervene by stepping closer to bodily force her to back up.

Gwen shoved him back, and other customers caught him before he fell.

"Sunny, I told you to get over here." Gwen snapped her fingers. "Now!"

"I... I don't want to."

Gwen scowled. “Spoiled little brat. Doesn’t know how to listen. Get the hell over here.”

When Gwen reached her hand out, Jenny swatted it away, not letting her come near Sunny. “She said no, Gwen.”

“I don’t give a shit what you say,” Gwen yelled and tried to grab Sunny by reaching around Jenny on the left instead.

Once more, Jenny blocked her. “*She* said no.”

“Because she doesn’t know how to listen worth a damn. Get out of the way!”

“Nope.” Jenny stood up straighter, tipping her chin in the air.

“You’ve got no right taking her,” Gwen shouted at Jenny. “She’s not your kid!”

Sunny hovered behind Jenny as Gwen growled. She clutched the back of Jenny’s shirt. Eyes wide, she stared up at Gwen with uncertainty before she looked back at Jenny again.

Wonderful, courageous, and headstrong Jenny who so clearly wasn’t in the mood to take Gwen’s shit.

I forced my way through the throng of customers.

“You hear me, Jenny? She’s *my* kid!” Gwen shouted. “You’ve got no right butting in to my time with her.”

“You weren’t with her,” Jenny retorted firmly. “She was alone on the street.”

“What I was doing is none of your damn business. That bratty kid isn’t your business either,” Gwen shouted. “You’re going to regret this, bitch.”

“Jenny?” Sunny reached for Jenny’s hand, holding it tight. “I’m scared.”

“Gwen!” I stormed over, finally making my way through the crowd. I’d raised my voice with that one word and let her hear the command in it—to shut up, to back off, and to forget about talking to Jenny like that ever again.

Everyone pivoted to watch me rush up.

Gwen faltered, pausing with her mouth open as she saw me. Her fury evaporated as she gawked at me and realized what could happen to her now that I'd found her. She wasn't smart, but she had to be fully aware just how bad this could get for her. She might be able to trick the principal to get her way, but she damn well knew the rules. And she knew I wouldn't stand by and let her disrupt Sunny's life.

Before I could reach Jenny and Sunny, Gwen slammed her lips shut in a scowl and bristled, pointing. "She took Sunny! She took Sunny without my permission!" Turning to the crowd, she raised her voice more. "That woman took my child!"

I slowed in passing to glower down at this spiteful woman. "You don't have permission to be near her in the first fucking place." I didn't need to growl that to her. She knew. But I'd be damned if she tried to manipulate these concerned strangers with more lies.

"Dad?" Sunny's voice sounded so small, so worried, and it broke my heart that this ridiculous "adult" was her mother. I put my hand on Jenny's hip, both gently pushing her aside and touching her for comfort as I crouched toward Sunny in the booth. Only then did Jenny move a step over, ending her blockade.

I brushed my daughter's hair back toward her ear, checking her over. The sight of her sweet face was a balm to my worry. My anger would take much longer to dissipate, but just seeing my girl eased the tension that had gripped me so fiercely.

"Hey, Sunshine. Ready to go home?"

She nodded. Jenny squeezed her hand and let her go. I scooped my girl up as she lunged for me, falling against my chest. The familiar weight of her in my arms would never get old, and after the scary moments I'd just endured, it felt bittersweet as I breathed in her scent.

I didn't look at Gwen as I turned and carried Sunny toward the café's exit. She hugged me close, her little arms clinging

around my neck like she never wanted to let go. Over my shoulder, I called back. “Jenny? Come home with us.”

Gwen’s gasp rang out clear. “This is *bullshit!* *She’s* going with you?”

“Excuse me,” Jenny said calmly but firmly. A slight scuffle followed, and once I heard Jenny’s footsteps hurrying after me, I breathed a final deep exhale of relief.

CHAPTER 27



JENNY

Holy shit!

I swallowed hard as I buckled into the passenger seat next to Ward. The last time I rode in this SUV I was filled with a nervous but good excitement, breathless and hyped up on the thrill that was Ward. I felt riled now, too, but in a totally different way. Adrenaline filled me, and I wondered when the heightened feeling of bracing for impact would fade.

I never shied from a fight, but I never sought them out either. I hadn't been near such a confrontational energy since that huge fundraiser gala at Watson Wicks, when Mary Ellen and another woman were bitching at Jameson.

They'd blown up, yelling just like Gwen had in the café. Everyone had turned to see the drama, witnessing the fight in the spirit of waiting to see a head rolling down the highway. Human nature never changed. But that time, I'd been a mere spectator, even if I had tried to butt in and help tone down that fight, but this time, I'd been an active participant, defending Sunny from her mother and not letting Gwen push me around.

Ward's presence calmed me, but I couldn't lose this lightheadedness as he watched Sunny in the rearview mirror, waiting to pull away.

He spoke to her, asking her to get buckled in and be ready for him to drive, but I was only dimly aware of his words. Not until he put the car into gear and moved ahead did I feel snapped out of my mind and emotions and return to the moment. I reached for the *oh shit* handle as the whole vehicle

lurched down from a bump. *The curb?* I was tempted to comment on how reckless of a driver he was, but not now. I could only imagine what his state of mind was when he had hurried here.

“Sunny, I’m so sorry.”

I heard a faint snuffle from the backseat. The sound pulled on my heart strings. Never mind wondering about how Ward felt when he hurried over here. He was an adult. Sunny was just a mere child and she had to be confused.

“Your mother shouldn’t have *ever* been allowed to take you out of school like that,” Ward said gently.

“I thought it was kind of weird. Am I in trouble?”

He shook his head. “No. No, Sunny. I’m mad, but not at you. Never at you.”

I glanced back, giving her a small smile and hoping I could help contribute to a calm and accepting feeling in the car.

“I’m so sorry if you felt scared, Sunny.” He cleared his throat, again glancing back at her in the rearview mirror. “I never want you to feel scared like that.”

This poor man. He sounded so broken, so tired. The fear from learning she was missing had to have caused a whopper of a panic attack.

Sunny didn’t reply and tell us if she was frightened. I didn’t need her to admit it. I knew she was. I had felt the tremble in her hand when she held mine, and I hated that she’d felt that way because of the woman who gave birth to her.

She broke the silence with a question instead. “Why did Mom leave me outside?”

Ward glanced at me and drew in a deep breath. He didn’t want to have to say why, and I couldn’t blame him for hesitating. He sat there, quiet, his jaw clenching as he seemed to search for words on how to explain.

He probably didn’t want to paint Gwen in a bad light, but he had to be feeling so much anger toward her. At the same

time, it wouldn't be smart to say something that would make Sunny think she was unimportant to her mother, either.

As he sat there quietly, driving with careful concentration, I turned to face her fully.

She stared at me and I made sure to smile, to let her know I wasn't mad at her either. How could I be? I also didn't want to beam at her like a weirdo, overly bright when the mood was anything but. I only hoped she saw me as a comfortable source of support. "Your mom made an error in judgment."

She didn't react or reply.

Need a little more than that, Jen.

I cleared my throat. "You know how sometimes when people drive, they change lanes in traffic when they're not supposed to?"

"Like cutting in line?" Her voice was so timid.

"Yeah, and then someone honks their horn at them?"

She nodded.

"Well, it's like that." *I hope I'm making sense.* The last time I relied on an analogy with kids I made a couple cry and the others think the cake was cursed by a zombie baker. "Your mom changed lanes when she wasn't supposed to."

She blinked at me for a long moment. "Oh. Okay." She nodded again, then looked out the window.

I faced forward. Ward reached over to take my hand and exhaled a long rush of air as he squeezed my fingers in his.

Okay, maybe I handled that all right.

Ward didn't let go of my hand the rest of the drive. No one spoke. I could only imagine the furious thoughts rumbling through Ward's mind. Sunny was quiet, but I hadn't known her long enough to gauge if her lack of speaking was a reason for concern. After being so scared and confused, she'd need some time and space to think things through and process them.

I tried not to dwell on it and, instead, tried to be glad it was over. Sunny was okay. She was with Ward. He wasn't

suffering from acute stress. And I was no longer in that awful woman's presence. Things had to be looking up from this point on, right?

I tried to mark all the details of Ward's fancy neighborhood and his driveway as he slowed down. Just from the manicured and well-maintained scenery as we passed, I knew I was entering an area of housing that was out of my league. He parked, and with the need to get Sunny inside, I dismissed all of it again, focusing on her—and him.

Ward helped Sunny unbuckle, but she froze when she was about to step out of the SUV.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“I don't have my backpack,” she said, seeming overwhelmed.

Ward nodded, pressing his lips together.

“Still at school, huh?” I guessed.

She nodded. “I didn't think to bring it home. Or, with her.”

“It's okay, Sunny,” Ward told her. “We'll get it.”

We headed inside, and as soon as Ward closed and locked the door behind us, inputting a code on the alarm panel, she said, “Dad? Can I go play in my room?”

He nodded, and we watched her hurry down the hall to her bedroom, likely eager for a familiar sanctuary that was all hers. Privacy, too, maybe to think about what happened. When I was scared or bothered about something, I wanted space to rationalize my way through it.

Ward kept staring down the hall, lost to his thoughts. He was wound up tight. Tense and stiff, his neck had to be hurting from the way he pulled back his shoulders. Like a coil about to snap, he locked all that energy burning inside him, fists clenched and jaw tight.

I hated to see him stressed like this, and it wasn't a conscious plan to approach him. I wrapped my arms around him, hugging him close. He exhaled under my touch, and I swore I could feel a cloud of anxiety lifting from him.

“I’m so sorry about what happened,” I told him. “You had to have been so scared and worried.”

I heard it in his tone. When he snapped at me then hung up, he’d been panicked. When he rambled with worry at my next call, then sighed when I said I knew where Sunny was, he’d been instantly relieved. And when he showed up and glanced at me with such respect and gratitude, he’d had a chance to lose even more of that stress.

Turning to hug me back, he let me rest my cheek on his hard chest. With his arms loose around me in a familiar embrace, he sighed and set his chin on the top of my head. His anger held on though. He was still mad, and I could only guess how long he would cling to it.

“How dare she?” he asked hotly. “How dare she pull a fucking stunt like that?”

I stroked my hands up and down his back, letting him growl those reactions and vent.

“Who the hell does she think she is?” he snapped.

Gwen had shouted that same question to me, and the irony of hearing him say it wasn’t lost on me.

“For a second there, I thought...” He growled, shaking his head and then turning to look away as he released me a bit.

I peered up at him. I could fill in the blanks there. He probably thought Gwen had taken Sunny from school with no intention of ever bringing her back. It didn’t make sense, not with what he had told me about her lack of interest in custody, but this was Gwen. She was stupid and selfish.

“What are you going to do?”

He shook his head again, then stepped away to rub the back of his neck. “I’m not sure yet.” He glanced at me. “Right now, I’m going to start dinner and have a glass of wine. Will you join me? Us?”

“Sure, Ward. I’d love to.” I smiled, pleased when he lightened up at my reaction.

The day had started out with my hope of talking to him, but I hadn't figured I would end up cooking next to him. We didn't speak much, and I didn't push. We fell into a seamless companionship in his kitchen, and I let him show me the pace of what he wanted. If he wanted the autopilot task of kneading pizza dough to vent his frustration, okay. If he wanted the quiet of me chopping veggies alongside him so he could think, so be it.

Everyone reacted to stress differently, and I was just happy he wanted me here with him for it. No different than Sunny wanting to be in her room, I gave Ward the space and freedom to just *be* in the kitchen.

Eventually, we caught snippets of Sunny singing. Ward chuckled, and I paused in mixing the pizza sauce to listen closer.

I shook my head, so confused. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Sally Sweet and Cuban Pete."

I blinked at him as he chuckled and sipped his wine. "Huh? Sounds like an old-timey jingle."

He nodded. "From *I Love Lucy*. My mom got her hooked on it. She loves that episode. Lucy dresses up as Sally Sweet for a song at Club Babaloo with Ricky."

I giggled, shaking my head as I smeared the sauce on the pizza. "I wasn't much of a sitcom fan. At least not that old of a sitcom."

A smile lingered on his face. "Humor that never aged." Then he frowned. "Although that episode, Lucy starved herself to fit into a dress, so maybe that's not healthy either. At least not that episode." He was relaxed though. "She sings it while she plays with her Barbies, recreating the episodes she likes. Remember the one where she smashed grapes at the vineyard in Italy?"

I was so lost. I shook my head. "I'm gonna have to brush up on my retro sitcoms." I looped my arm around his side and gave him a hug as he came back from the oven.

“I’ll binge them with you.” He pulled me closer and accepted the hug.

“Hmm.” I kissed his cheek. “Sounds like a date.”

He chuckled. “We’ll make it happen. But that episode, Lucy literally stomps grapes in a vat in Italy. And Sunny asked my mom for a whole bag of grapes for her Barbie to smash.”

“Oh, no. Were they white or red?”

“Red. On her white carpet.”

I laughed. I could see it. And Lori wouldn’t begrudge her one bit. When Ward sighed, I glanced at him and raised my brows. “What?”

“That sound.” He nuzzled the side of my neck. “It makes my stress melt away.”

I moaned at the feel of his lips on my skin, nipping and tickling me a bit.

“Turns me on, too,” he whispered.

“Hmm.” I leaned back to plant a long, deeper yet sweet kiss on his lips. “Seeing you in protective dad mode like that in the café was a serious turn-on.”

“How serious?” He wedged his thigh between my legs, pushing with more teasing.

“Dad?”

We broke apart at Sunny’s yell down the hallway.

“What’s for dinner?” she asked.

Ward smirked at me, giving me a look that had me thinking he wanted *me* instead of the meal we had prepared together.

CHAPTER 28



WARD

“What about...” Sunny tilted her head to the side as she thought. My mom did that so often, I figured she picked up the habit from her. “Cherries?”

Jenny laughed, giving me another dose of that sweet sound. It was the ultimate stress reliever. Each time she smiled and giggled, I felt another rock of tension fall off my shoulders and my mood lightened.

“Cherries?” Jenny asked as she sprinkled more parmesan cheese on her last slice of homemade pizza. “That might work. If I’d be interested in pizza with blueberry sauce instead of tomato paste, why not?”

Sunny grinned and sipped her chocolate milk as she looked at Jenny. “I know. What about bananas?”

I pretended to gag. “Bananas? On pizza?”

Jenny shook her head. “Too mushy. I’d rather have the mashed-potato option.”

Sunny cracked up, and I caught Jenny’s eye over her head. She smirked, enjoying this nonsense talk too. What began as a question about pineapples belonging on pizza evolved into goofy banter about the craziest toppings we could ever try. It looked like I needed to try a blueberry pepperoni pizza and Sunny was intrigued about pizza with cherries and lettuce. When Sunny asked Jenny if she liked sausages and whipped cream on top, she couldn’t have known the other, naughtier implications those food items brought to mind. The innocence

of youth. Jenny turned as red as the sauce on the baked dough, though, and she wouldn't look me in the eye.

“Not sausage links,” Sunny had corrected. “Patties.” Still, the moment couldn't be saved, and I had a hard time stopping my laughter at Jenny's expense.

Having dinner with just the three of us was a spontaneous decision, but with the way Jenny made Sunny laugh and made sure to keep things playful, it was the right decision. As the sun set and the hours passed by, I felt an overwhelming sense of relief that the day was finally over. All the headaches at work, then Sunny's departure from school, and last, finding Gwen being so mean to Jenny. It had been hell, and only now, with Sunny giggling with Jenny, did I feel at peace.

I loved the way she talked to my daughter. She was deliberate and didn't brush her off or make her feel small and excluded. She was thoughtful, too, making sure to ask her questions and mention things that might interest her. Her explanation in the car earlier was nothing but perfect too. I'd clammed up, wanting so badly to tell Sunny what I thought of Gwen for leaving her outside like that. Instead of being put on the spot and figuring out a way to not mention Gwen the way I wanted to—honestly—I let Jenny jump in.

Her changing-lanes analogy made so much sense in an age-appropriate way. She could've blown her off with a false answer formulated to make her shut up, but she hadn't done that at all. Jenny's reply satisfied Sunny's question and I had to wonder if it was because she was such a good listener that she could empathize with what Sunny was likely feeling or if Jenny was just that good a person.

I knew she was. She was so giving and considerate, and I was lucky to have this second chance to enjoy her in my life again.

If Jenny hadn't been there today?

Too many bad things hit me. I might not have found Sunny ever. Gwen could have exposed her to even worse dangers with her selfishness and cluelessness of how to be a parent. Sunny could have—

Stop. That's enough.

I couldn't keep going on that path of what-ifs. As Sunny yawned more and more, I knew it was time to get moving. "Ready for bed?"

Jenny stood. "I'll clean up."

"No, no. You don't have to. I will." I got to my feet too.

"But aren't you going to tuck me in and get me ready for bed?" Sunny asked.

Jenny smiled at me and winked. "Go on. I'll be here."

That was what I was worrying about. If she would leave. Bedtime or not, I wasn't done with this woman, but that didn't mean I wanted her to be obligated to handle the post-dinner mess.

"Come on, Daddy." Sunny took my hand and pulled. "It's been a long day."

It's been a long day from hell.

I followed her to the bathroom off her bedroom, and we did the usual routine. She started with a bath and I gave in to the extra glittery bubble bath. Pediatricians didn't recommend too many bubble baths for skin sensitivities, so it was a once in a while thing for her. I already had my hatred of glitter, but it made her smile, and tonight, she deserved all the little frills she could have. Glittery bubble bath it was. I would leave an extra large tip for the housekeeping crew who'd come in next week.

Then I helped her pick out her jammies. She usually waffled between three or four favorites that were so reused and washed out that they were almost threadbare, but this time, she went with one after my suggestion and settled on it. She was more tired than usual if she wasn't going to fight and debate.

She didn't roll her eyes at all about the tooth-brushing either, and most nights, she tired of it before the full two-minute timer went off. Her argument was that she didn't have enough teeth in her mouth yet to need to do the whole two minutes. Once, at a sleepover with my mom, she got her to do

a ratio equation of how many seconds per teeth was recommended. That was too complex of a math problem for me to deal with though, so I made it simple for all of us and said we'd stick with the staple of two minutes, and she could just enjoy the benefit of extra sparkly teeth.

I enjoyed bedtime stories because it was a cozy, close moment for us. Most times, I struggled to keep my eyes open for the whole tale, but tonight, she had me beat. I could tell by how often she blinked, then how long her lids stayed lowered with each blink, that she was almost out already.

Sleep wasn't on my radar anyway. Knowing Jenny was still in the house kept me awake and eager to return to her. Before the book was halfway done, Sunny appeared to be asleep. But I wouldn't be fooled. That was a hard-learned lesson. Just because she *looked* asleep didn't mean she would necessarily stay asleep.

Instead of hurrying out like ripping a Band-Aid off and hoping for the best, I slowly lowered to the carpet. I held my breath, waiting for her to shift on her bed or wake up, but I heard nothing. I exhaled carefully and began to exit.

It was far too risky to stand up and leave. No creaky floorboards here, but I knew, also from another hard-learned lesson, that if I stood, she just might open her eyes and see me standing, no longer next to her.

On my forearms and my core, I army-crawled across her pink carpet, dodging the stuffed animals and Barbies lying out still.

Before I neared the door, I glanced back to make sure the coast was still clear. When I faced the door again, I caught sight of Jenny. She stood there in the dim light of the hallway, looking in, amused. With a hand slapped over her mouth, she held back her laughter, but I could tell she was one second away from cracking up.

A snort left her lips, and I exaggerated the need for silence, widening my eyes in mock alarm. She bent over, covering her mouth. By the time I reached the threshold, she seemed to be

in control, with watery eyes from the need to laugh and a lopsided smile on her lips.

“Just you wait,” I whispered as I stood. “You won’t be laughing one day when you have your own kid and know how easily they wake up.”

She giggled as I took her hand and led her down the hall. Once we rounded the corner to the living room, I exhaled long and hard, knowing I’d exited the potential danger zone of my light sleeper of a daughter.

“I brought the wine out there,” Jenny said, pointing toward the coffee table in front of the couch. The bottle we’d opened waited for us, but tragically, our glasses were still empty. I would have to remedy that.

“You are awesome,” I told her sincerely. She settled onto the couch. I filled our glasses and sat down beside her. She snuggled against me, and I put my arm around her shoulders.

“I was thinking. And wondering.”

I glanced at her. “Hmm?”

“Are you still going to Gwen’s wedding? And letting Sunny be in the bridal party?”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t think so. After today? Gwen would have to have a damn good explanation for her behavior and I can’t think of a single thing she might say to redeem herself.”

She sipped her wine and nodded. “Fair enough.”

I hated to outright say no, or more honestly, hell no. Telling Sunny that she couldn’t have that important role would crush her, but after today, maybe she wouldn’t even be interested, if this was an example of what spending time with Gwen was like.

“Thank you for being there today. Sunny sure needed you. So did I. And you didn’t let us down.”

She smiled as I kissed her cheek.

“I’m sorry for how I spoke when you called. I regret taking my frustrations out on you.”

“Hey. No. I understand.”

I frowned at her. “I don’t think I deserve your forgiveness that easily. You deserve better treatment than being yelled at or hung up on.”

She leaned against me more, laying her hand on my chest. “At first, I was so confused and hurt for a second. But when I saw her, I knew something was wrong. You were worried about your daughter. If there is ever something you’re allowed to be snappy about, it’s Sunny.”

That doesn’t mean you should be treated badly though. That’s never right.

I sighed. “And I’m worried about Gwen being at that dispensary.”

“That one specifically, or any?”

I shrugged. “I didn’t even know she smoked.”

She gifted me with another sweet laugh. “Maybe she needs it to help her chill out and make her more pleasant to be around.”

I chuckled at her witty humor. “Then she needs a higher dose.”

I cupped Jenny’s cheek and gave her a gentle, grateful kiss.

“What’s that for?” she asked breathlessly with her eyes still closed.

I smiled at her calm and beautiful face. So trusting, so open. She was all I needed to erase the memories of the day. “Just expressing my thanks.”

She hummed, smiling wider but still keeping her eyes closed.

I kissed her harder and longer. She moaned, parting her lips before I broke away.

“And that one?”

“Telling you how much I admire how you stood up to Gwen.”

I pressed my mouth to hers again, and she reached up to grip the back of my neck and keep me there long enough for her to snake her tongue into my mouth and duel with mine.

Panting, I reared back again and watched the needy pout cross her face.

She swallowed hard. “That one?”

“Showing you how much I need you.”

Her eyes opened. The stark desire shining there made me feel bolder and wilder.

She licked her lips, reaching for the hem of my shirt. “Don’t stop.”

I hauled her into my arms, crashing my lips to hers.

I’m not stopping any time soon, babe. We’re just getting started.

CHAPTER 29



JENNY

I slanted over Ward's lap, clinging to his neck as he kissed me hard. His brutal urgency turned me on more, and I was already a panting, helpless mess of desire. After seeing him so protective and taking charge at the café, it was impossible not to view him in a different light. He looked every bit the rugged, infallible hero coming to not only save the day for Sunny but for me too. It hadn't been fun facing off with Gwen, and I was glad he'd come when he had.

Her words still tried to pierce my shield though. When she reminded me that Ward had chosen her over me, it hurt like a bitch. I knew that. I didn't need to be told again. I had endured that pain to get to where I was today.

Which was right here in his lap, pulling his shirt up, eager to get my hands on his hot skin. I was the one straddling him and rubbing the bulge in his pants, not her. And I was the one wrapping her arm around his neck and parting my lips for him to devour me.

Not Gwen. Me.

So her attempts to hurt me and make me feel like I was less than, like I wasn't good enough to be with him or stand up for Sunny, they all fell flat. Here in his arms that he cinched tightly around me, I *knew* without a doubt how much he desired me.

Ward growled like he wanted to say something but was overwhelmed with feeling. He cut himself off, focusing on kissing me harder and pulling me to his chest. With a tighter

grip, he hoisted me up with him. I felt the strength in his thighs as he pushed me. He didn't lose his hold on me for a single second.

The thrill of being lifted and carried didn't distract me from sliding my tongue in to meet his. I didn't loosen my arms around his neck, and as he carried me from the couch, he moved his hands over my ass and encouraged me to wrap my legs around his waist more. Using my inner quads, toned from years of yoga classes, I gripped him and ground against him to drag my breasts over his chest

He stumbled, groaning lightly into my mouth without breaking the kiss. After staggering toward the wall at my little stunt, he paused to push me against the surface and thrust his hips at me.

Yes. Please, yes. I let my head roll back on the wall, giving him more access to kiss down along my neck. He stopped, though, not dipping lower toward my cleavage, and hoisted me higher in his arms.

“Not out here.” He showed me what he had in mind by bringing me to his room. If it wasn't *his* room, it was a more private setting than the hall or the living room. In his house, we had all the privacy possible, except for Sunny.

I nipped at his lower lip and threaded my fingers through his hair. He positioned me against the door he closed quietly. I didn't want him to ever move those lips from mine because I was far beyond addicted to his warm, wet mouth and skillful, stubborn tongue.

I arched my back to grind against him.

“Wait,” he asked in a desperate plea. His right hand left me, and I felt the absence of his hot palm on my cheek. A *click* sounded, signaling the lock on the door.

“Just in case,” he whispered.

“Hmm. Smart,” I agreed before I laid my lips on his. I'd noticed a slight connection that gave Sunny pause in the café, that I once knew Ward a long time ago when we were kids and

also, with my knowledge of her favorite drink, that I knew her dad now, too.

It wasn't an awkward moment, but I'd wondered if she had been trying to comprehend just how or why I knew Ward today. The last thing I needed was for her to wake up and stumble upon us in here and wonder why we were naked in bed.

Naked. Yeah, that was a good idea. I reached for his shirt and he followed along. Pushing his hips to mine, he wedged me against the door to lean back. I wanted to whine at the pressure right there, but I didn't lose track of my goal in getting these clothes off. He reached for the back of his shirt and pulled the garment off in one swift tug over his head. I licked my lips, reveling in the sight of his chiseled pecs, and I traced his muscles and taut skin. With a low growl, he leaned in closer for a sloppy kiss and trapped my hand between us.

"Do I need to be quiet?" I whispered against his warm, soft lips.

He nodded, rubbing his cheek against mine as he moved me from the door again. "Very."

"I'm not sure if that's possible," I teased as he lowered me to a bed. He followed me down. Keeping his arms around me, he covered me completely in his embrace.

He tugged my shirt up and over my face, then my sports bra. He left it covering my face and dove down to my breasts. The feel of his mouth there drove me wild. After the first hard tug of his teeth on my nipple, I gasped out loud, but with my shirt and bra still mostly over my face, I turned to giggles. Then he switched to lick and suck at my other nipple. Each touch of his tongue and lips on my sensitive flesh had me moaning, but faced, literally, with the clothes he didn't remove fully in his haste to taste my breast and play with my nipples, I had to laugh.

"Ward!" I whispered playfully. I arched my back, trying to get the stretchy fabric off all the way, but shoving my chest up toward his face gave him other ideas.

“Hmmm. Thanks.” He closed his mouth over my breast as he pinched the nipple of the other.

I sucked in a hard breath. Every trace of pleasure he wrung from me spiraled straight to my pussy. I was wet before we reached this bed, but now, I was drenched for him.

I wiggled still, struggling to get off my shirt and bra that felt like a gag. He chuckled too, amused at my efforts, and reached up one hand to push the garments higher so I could escape them.

“What is this?” he asked. He kept his mouth a breath away from my nipple. The flesh was still wet from his mouth, and with his panted words whipping over my skin, I shivered at the hot-and-cold contrast. “A torture device?”

“A sports bra!” I grunted, laughing, and we both tried to get it off.

“This is giving me déjà vu of getting your leggings off in the car,” he muttered between kisses while he helped me get naked. “Why are you wearing this?”

“I stopped at that café to work and was planning on going to yoga afterward.” I drew in a deep inhale of victory once I finally got the things flying across the room. At last.

I stretched back over the bed, my arms up, and he lowered himself to take advantage of my wide-open position. His lips on mine, his bare chest sliding against my side, he smoothed his hand up the underside of my arm. It was a strange, massaging caress, and I reveled in the strong pressure of his hand.

“Hey, we’ve actually made it to a bed this time.” I moaned as he dragged his hand all the way back down my arm, over my side, then toward my waistband. “Not a garage. Or in a car.”

“Babe, I’ll take you any and every way I can.” He wrenched my pants lower, grabbing the elastic of my panties, too. I parted my legs to help him peel off the leggings, and it was a much easier feat doing that here, in his room. It had to

be his room, his bed. It smelled like him, manly, spicy, and clean.

I reached for his pants, and with torrid kisses, we worked together to get the rest of his clothes off. He leaned over to reach for a condom in a nightstand, and I couldn't help but think back to when he'd commented about me having a kid one day. It wasn't something I thought about often, but with him putting a condom on and making that comment recently, it was on my mind.

Gwen's voice came back to me, too. "*Ward's never wanted you.*"

I frowned, hating that my insecurity about him choosing her would still show as a scar deep down. I was right here with him, naked and horny. Clearly, he wanted me, but with her fresh attack, I felt pushed to prove to myself she was wrong.

As soon as he got the condom on, I pushed at him to roll to his back. Without hesitation, I grabbed his thick cock and positioned it at my pussy. Then I sank down on him, inch by glorious, rock-hard inch, loving every stretch as I made him fit. He filled me so well. I paused, letting every tingle of friction hit my clit, and then I opened my eyes to gaze at him.

"Remember," he teased, whispering. He lifted his finger to his lips to indicate I had to be quiet.

I grinned, rocking with every lift and dip. I rode him slow, then faster. He grunted, straining, and watched me fuck him how I wanted. *I* was the woman he wanted. *I* was the woman bouncing on his dick. I did this to him, and I kept the triumph of it in my mind and heart until I came, squeezing tight on his hardness.

His fingers dug into my hips as he dragged me over him a few more times. With the loudest growl yet, he came, jerking and spearing deeper inside me. "Fuck!"

I widened my eyes at him before I collapsed in a sweaty mess over him. "Shh!"

He chuckled, a weak, tired laugh, and he hugged me close. His hand smacked down lightly on my ass as we cuddled and

caught our breath. “That’s what you do to me,” he whispered before he kissed my temple.

I smiled, nestling closer and kissing his neck.

“Want to shower with me?” he asked.

I sighed and nodded, then followed him into the most luxurious bathroom I’d ever cleaned up in. Afterward, words still didn’t seem necessary. His tender, loving touch in the shower rendered me sluggish and sleepy. After he’d dried me off, he removed the towel he’d wrapped around me, and confusion hit me.

He smacked my hand with the towel when I reached for my clothes, and he pulled me in close. His body was still hot from the steamy shower, and I sighed as I leaned into him.

“Will you stay?” He pulled up the blanket, tipping his head toward the bed.

“You sure?” I asked, giddy that he would invite me to sleep with him all night. Leaving would have been difficult to do, but I understood it. Sunny was here, and neither of us had discussed how we’d explain our relationship.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” He grinned and pulled me under the blanket with him. We settled in with him spooning me, and I smiled, cozy and safe with his hard body bracing my back.

“I’ll be gone before Sunny wakes up in the morning,” I promised before a yawn claimed me.

He kissed the back of my head and pulled me in closer, almost on the verge of falling asleep himself.

CHAPTER 30



WARD

You know, for an electric SUV, it's sure got a lot of bells and whistles. I flicked through the options on the dash's screen to find the heating combo I wanted. Switching from gas to electric wasn't a bad shift. Sunny had gone with me last night to trade in the last car she loved for the earth-friendlier one. It still made her feel like it was a carriage and she was a princess, albeit a more ecologically wise one. But not a happy one.

"I'm going to miss turning in my whole carbon footprint coding project now," she complained from the backseat. I hadn't expected her to trade in her schools as enthusiastically as she did our car, but I worried how long she'd be this upset about it.

"You'll get to do new coding projects at your next school."

She crossed her arms and sulked. I turned onto the next street that would bring us closer to my mom's house. My mother had been a saving grace, watching Sunny while I worked all week

"You don't even know where my next school is."

I remained expressionless as we drove past her former school, a visual of rubbing salt in the wound. "I should have an answer by this afternoon, though." *Is it the uncertainty that bothers her? Not knowing where she'll go next and not knowing anyone there? A new place with all new faces?*

After Jenny had left at the crack of dawn yesterday, I headed to work and spent the entire day's worth of downtime

seeking a new school for Sunny. Browsing through the list took a while. I had particular criteria to consider.

After the incident with Gwen picking up Sunny and how weak Principal Lannon had been, security was at the top of my priority list.

From the private schools I found, one seemed reputable. I spent an hour looking into it and even asked one of my assistants to snoop and see if she could find anything bad written about it anywhere. The biggest con of that specific institution was the distance. It would be a much farther drive, which would definitely put a crimp in the morning routine Sunny loved. We wouldn't be able to go through Starbucks and hang out in the parking lot. With my issue of punctuality, getting Sunny to this new place on time would be a true test for me.

And if they accepted her and approved the application I filled out yesterday, Gwen would never be told. Under no circumstances was I going to share this information with my ex. I wouldn't cut her any slack, and I'd be damned if she ever picked Sunny up like that again.

I hadn't spoken with her yet. She'd called several times yesterday but I ignored them all, still too mad to consider speaking to her.

"What about my leaf collection and identification project?" Sunny wailed as we pulled into my mom's driveway. She stood outside at the door, waving as she waited for us. "It was due today."

"Grandma let you ID stuff in her greenhouse yesterday."

"Yeah, flowers and vines. Not leaves from deciduous trees."

"Same thing."

Sunny unbuckled and hastily got out of the car, slamming the door. "It's not the same thing, Dad!"

Mom headed down the path to intercept us. "Hey, hey. What's got you so sassy like that to your dad?"

“He doesn’t care!”

“I always care,” I argued, rushing after her.

“Easy, easy,” Mom said, putting her hand up before I could catch up to Sunny as she stormed inside.

I growled, mad about her talking back, mad at myself that I was the one who was changing her schools, and then mostly, mad at Gwen for turning her life upside down.

“She’s just sad.” Mom looked toward the door. At least my hellion hadn’t slammed that one too.

“I know.”

“She’s going to miss her friends, her teachers.”

I grunted. “She told me she doesn’t care about her friends. It’s the projects she’s already worked on that she’s upset about more than anything.”

Mom grinned. “Such a little genius. That work ethic, too.”

“I’m doing the right thing.” I felt bad pulling her from the school but I needed the peace of mind that she would be safe. I furrowed my brow at my mom. “Right?”

She nodded, rubbing my upper arm. “Yes. I think you are. Gwen had no business doing that and clearly we can’t trust the staff there to do their job properly.”

I sighed. *Damn you, Gwen.*

“She’s sensitive to change. Every kid is. And she’s facing a lot of change with this shift, but I’m confident she’ll adjust to her new normal.”

I shot her a dubious look. She said Sunny surprised her yesterday, with how much she complained and whined. “She’s usually more resilient.”

“True. And it’s not all that’s changing in her world.” She smiled a bit. “She talked a *lot* about Jenny too.”

I couldn’t help but grin.

“What’s going on there? What’s the latest with her?”

She already knew that Jenny was my saving grace when Gwen picked up Sunny and left her on the sidewalk. I chuckled, thinking back to how Jenny blushed about the sausages and whipped cream conversation over homemade pizza. “I’m honestly not sure. It’s all up in the air right now. All I know is that I want to keep seeing her, and every time I do, it gets better and better.”

Mom smiled wide and patted my back. She glanced toward the door, likely already figuring out how to make Sunny sunnier. “Jenny Halsey is a quality woman, Ward.”

“I know.”

“Don’t mess this one up. Again.”

I don’t count on doing anything like that. Once was enough.

I kissed her cheek. “I won’t.” Leaning around her, I cupped my mouth and yelled, “Bye, Sunny. I love you.” Then I turned around and headed out for a full day of work.

Without the side project of searching for a school, I accomplished a lot at work. Being ahead on my to-do list was a good feeling to have as I wrapped up the work week. On the drive to pick up Sunny though, I considered calling Gwen so she wouldn’t keep contacting me. I’d muted her number all day at the office, so I changed that setting before the traffic light turned green.

As soon as I put my phone back in the holder in the dash, it rang.

“Are you kidding me?” What, did she have telepathic powers or something? I drew a deep breath for patience and answered. “What, Gwen?”

“Ward!” She sobbed loudly, and I flinched. “I’m so, so, so sorry!”

I rolled my eyes.

“I am so sorry,” she repeated with the waterworks. “That wasn’t how I thought that day would go and I’m just so super sorry.”

Save it. I didn't give a shit how much she apologized.

"I'm not like you."

"Yeah," I scoffed. "I would never leave Sunny on a sidewalk like that. And in that area?"

"I'm not like you as a parent. I don't have six years of experience being a parent like you."

I gritted my teeth and tightened my grip on the steering wheel. "That's your own fault."

"I made a miscalculation when I went into the dispensary and told Sunny to wait on the sidewalk. I didn't know how long the line was. And then when I was in there, I wanted to check out this new special they were promoting and I guess I was just in there longer than I thought I'd be."

She still didn't get it. It wasn't so much about the dispensary as much as it was about her taking Sunny in the first place.

"And when you showed up at the café, I wasn't myself. I was reacting out of embarrassment. I was ashamed, Ward. Is that what you want to hear? Huh? I was ashamed."

"I don't give a shit what you say." If I could have my way, Gwen wouldn't be a part of my life or Sunny's ever again.

"I was triggered."

I snorted.

"I was triggered because *she* was there. Seriously, Ward. *Jenny*? Of all people who could have found Sunny on the sidewalk, it had to be *her*?"

My association with Jenny was none of her fucking business. She was *not* making this about anything else. I'd be damned if she tried to deflect from her errors and make this conversation about *me* and the fact I had Jenny in my life again. "I'm done playing games, Gwen. Do you hear me? I'm done with your bullshit."

"But Ward—"

"I'm pulling Sunny from the wedding."

She gasped. “You can’t do that! You already said she’d be there.”

“Watch me. I don’t give a damn that you smoke, but if you ever see Sunny again, you are to never use that shit around her. Do you hear me?”

“Jeez, Ward. It’s just weed.”

“I don’t care. You need to have your head on straight to look after a child. I don’t want any substance use near my daughter. That is a hard and fast rule and it’s a line I won’t tolerate you crossing. Do. You. Understand?”

“Fine.” She broke down into tears again, but her dramatics wouldn’t sway my stance. “Please, just give me another chance. At least talk to Sunny for me.”

I glowered at a red light. I had hit so many of them. Traffic always sucked, but listening to Gwen made this drive feel twice as long.

“Does she still want to be in the wedding?” she asked around sniffles.

I wasn’t sure how to answer that. Since the day Gwen took her, Sunny had talked about Jenny. She hadn’t mentioned a word about her mother. She talked a lot about how unfair it was to change schools, but not a peep about that wedding.

I exhaled and hung up. *Fuck that.*

Gwen had claimed enough of my time today. As I drove the rest of the way to my mom’s house, I hated the idea that I should probably ask Sunny what she thought about still being in the wedding. If I acted on her behalf again like when I had switched her school, I would likely do more harm than good.

Gwen couldn’t be trusted. But the wedding wasn’t like school. I’d be at the event too, and in asking Jenny to come as my date, I could count on her presence there too. I would be there to keep an eye on my daughter, and Jenny could help.

We had yet to talk about what this thing was between us. It was so new still, yet not. We hadn’t talked about what we

would tell Sunny yet either, and that seemed like an important thing to clarify with her.

Regardless of what label Jenny and I wanted to use to define our relationship, her dedication to making sure Sunny felt important and protected wouldn't change. I knew that for a fact. She'd more than proven it when she defended her and kept her out of Gwen's reach at the café.

Jenny had been strong as hell to stand up to her former high school nemesis, and just the thought of it made me smile. She'd told me that seeing me act like a protective dad turned her on, but she had no clue how damn sexy it was to witness her being just as devoted to protecting Sunny.

I need to show her how much that matters.

But first, I pulled into my mom's driveway and watched them blow bubbles on the front lawn.

First, I had to see how Sunny felt about being a "princess" in that wedding, even if it was for a bride who didn't deserve her.

CHAPTER 31



JENNY

A week had passed since Lauren moved out of the house. I had barely had time to miss her because so much was going on in my life. Aside from the whole thing with Gwen picking up Sunny and then having dinner and spending the night with Ward, I had so many other things happening. I had my yoga classes, my work at the garden, and I was still in the throes of trying to figure out if or how I should rebrand my online tea business.

By the time the week ended and Friday rolled around, I was looking forward to coming home. I was overdue for an evening with my friends. Friday nights were one of our routines. We had a tradition of nominating someone to pick up takeout and then all of us would catch up while plates overwhelmed the coffee table. They were fun, easygoing nights that we had let go of lately.

None of us had remembered whose turn it was to get the food, but Lauren promised she would show up and we would figure out something to eat one way or the other. I worried that our traditions would disappear with Lauren moving in with Jameson, but here she was, ready to return for this special girl time.

I loved that my friend could try something new and life altering like moving in with her man. She would change her life up even more when she married him, obviously, but she was still holding on to parts of her past, like us.

I felt like I was in the same sort of limbo. I was starting something new with this relationship with Ward and Sunny,

too. On one hand, it was a reunion with a friend, but on the other, it was seeing him in a new light, as a dad, not a teenager.

The balance of new and old made it more exciting, but having known him before, I was more comfortable with this slower pace of figuring out what we wanted together. There was no rush to label us and make sure the rest of the student body knew that we were “taken” and we weren’t available. As adults, we could go at our own pace, and I liked that.

I was the last one home because my coworkers hadn’t tidied up at the garden center. I wasn’t a neat freak like Karen was, but at a busy place with so many tools and different projects, some sense of order and organization was a must. There was nothing worse than coming in on a Monday and having to clean up dried dirt and misplaced tools from days ago.

Lauren was already at the house, seated on the couch with her familiar spread of bridal magazines and wedding venue brochures. They covered the coffee table so well that it served as a tablecloth.

“I thought you took those with you when you moved out.” I set my tote bag on the floor near the front door and kicked my shoes off.

“Oh, no.” Lauren smiled up at me. “These? You haven’t seen these yet.”

Rylee groaned from the chair where she folded wrinkled clothes that had sat in the basket for too long.

“These just came in the mail yesterday,” Lauren informed us.

Karen raised her brows from the other chair. “You got your mail forwarded to the new address that fast?”

“It’s been a week,” Lauren reminded her.

“I know. But still.” Karen shrugged.

“I signed up for half of the advertisements and brochures with James’s address and half with mine.” She peered around the living room, frowning.

I giggled. “We stacked them up over there.” I pointed at the side table underneath the window.

“Aha! Good.”

I plopped next to her on the couch, glad she was starting to smell less like pumpkins and more like apples. Fall time was a strong and potent season for her candle making, and I missed that the most, catching scents of her as she came in and out of the house. “So, how did the first week go? Is living together the bliss you imagined it would be?”

“Well, I will say that Jameson is much cleaner than you girls.” She nudged her foot against a pile of clothes Rylee had yet to tend to.

“Hey!” Rylee grabbed the clothes and hugged them on her lap. “I just washed those.”

“You mean just four days ago?” Lauren teased.

“Yeah. Then you can leave them folded in the basket on the bench over there for a week until you empty it,” I said.

Lauren giggled, clearly missing our banter that she told me she worried she’d miss out on.

“And,” she added, pointing at Rylee’s clothes, “I never have to worry about Jameson taking my favorite pair of jeans.” She exaggerated clearing her throat as she glanced at Karen, who raised her brows and looked away, feigning innocence. “You know what I mean. A chronic borrower who forgets to put them back.”

“Hmm, I don’t know.” Rylee flapped out a pair of pants to fold messily. “Jameson’s ass would look hot in some of your jeans.”

I snorted a laugh. “Yeah, right. He’s so freaking tall he’d rip them down the crotch.”

“Is it nice living with him, though?” Mary Ellen asked. “You’re not in each other’s way too much or bickering like we do here when we need space?”

“I won’t say it’s perfect, but I’m loving it,” Lauren gushed. “It’s like a preview of what the rest of my life will be like, and

I can't wait to be married and make it official."

I giggled. "I'd say you're about as official as it gets."

Rylee gave up on her clothes and shoved the rest into the basket. "And I'm officially hungry. What are we going to eat?"

"I'm officially thirsty for a drink." Karen rubbed her hand over her face. "Long day at work. What's our poison for the night?"

"I've got new cocktails I think you'll love," Rylee said at the same time I told them, "Maybe my new blend of a chamomile tea will help."

"Tea? Again?" Rylee shook her head. "It's Friday night, girl. Just because we're staying in doesn't mean we need to sit around and be sleepy."

"It's not a sleepy tea," I argued. "I've been perfecting it for a couple of weeks now."

Mary Ellen scrunched her nose. "Is it the one with the cloves?"

"No. That's another one. And I fixed the cloves there."

Rylee shook her head. "You can have a tea party another day. I want to fix my cocktails."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "But then we *will* get sleepy. We've all been working a lot, and once we start drinking, we'll all get tired."

She scoffed. "Speak for yourself. I'm ready to have fun. Not relax."

Karen raised her hand. "Actually, relaxing sounds fun."

I gestured at her, giving Rylee a smirk that implied *There you go*.

"More like boring," she retorted.

Mary Ellen leaned toward Lauren. "You don't miss this bickering, do you?"

Lauren rolled her eyes and stood. "I say we figure out the food, *then* the drinks."

Mary Ellen popped up. “We’ve got lots of stuff in the fridge.”

Karen nodded at me as she stood. “I’ll try your tea.” She glanced at Rylee. “*Then* your cocktail.”

“Deal,” Rylee conceded, and we followed the girls into the kitchen.

Mary Ellen and Karen got to work on a charcuterie board while I steeped the tea.

“What’s so special about this one?” Lauren asked.

“Lauren!” Mary Ellen admonished her.

I grinned. Her question might have sounded harsh, but this was Lauren. I knew she wasn’t mocking me.

“Oh, hush. I know all of her teas are special, but why were you pushing so hard for us to try this one?”

I poured it into mugs. Karen sipped the spicy beverage and moaned in appreciation.

“I wanted you girls to sample it before I ask Ward to try it.” I thought back to his admission about hating half of the tea I gave him in high school. My skills had improved since then. “I want to ask him to carry my teas in his store,” I reminded them.

“Ohh! That’s right,” Karen said. “Did you bring it up with him yet?”

I shook my head.

“Nervous?” Mary Ellen guessed.

I was, but that wasn’t all of the reason. I sighed.

“Hold up.” Lauren raised her hand. “I know what that sigh means. Long story, right?”

I nodded. “Maybe we can take this to the living room and Ry can get started on her cocktails.”

She beamed. “It’s a cocktail kind of story?”

I shrugged and helped them bring the teas, food, and glasses for Rylee’s concoction to the living room.

“Well?” Karen asked once she sat in her favorite chair. “Spill the tea,” she joked.

“I called Ward to ask about selling my tea in his stores but he hung up on me, really rude and just not himself. I was bewildered, and as I started to leave the café I was working at, I saw his daughter sitting on the curb outside.”

Lauren almost choked on her sip of tea. “In *that* neighborhood?”

I nodded. “Gwen decided she wanted to spend time with Sunny. Just out of the blue. Ward never gave the school permission to let Gwen pick her up, but she talked the principal into letting her go with her. When I called him, it was right when he learned that Sunny was missing and Gwen took her.”

“Oh, whoa.” Karen shook her head.

“Why was she outside though?” Lauren asked.

“Gwen went into the weed shop and Sunny couldn’t go in.”

Rylee gave a low whistle. “Holy crap. If she just wanted to go to that store, why get the kid first?”

I shook my head. “Anyway, I called Ward and he came to pick her up. Gwen got in my face and yelled and made this whole big scene. It was ridiculous. Gwen has always been well, Gwen, but she escalated to a whole new level of crazy there.”

“Then what happened?” Lauren asked.

“Ward asked me to come home with them. Sunny was warming up to me, so we had dinner there, and then...”

Mary Ellen snapped her fingers. “You never came home that night!”

I grinned. “I spent the night.”

“Jeez, Jen.” Lauren shook her head as she picked up a piece of cheese from the board. “Gwen’s sounding a little wacko there.”

Mary Ellen giggled. “Oh, she’s just being silly, right?”

Uh, I wouldn’t downplay it that much. I shrugged. “Ward was really stressed and shaken up about it. Sunny was too. He’s switching her schools because he can’t trust the principal. He doesn’t want Gwen just taking her when she wants.”

“Especially not from school,” Karen added.

“But her antics are pushing Ward further into her arms,” Mary Ellen pointed out.

I could see why she would say that, but I wanted to believe we were already in each other’s arms to begin with. If I saw any other child looking lost and confused all alone on the sidewalk, I would have made sure they were okay, too.

“I don’t know,” Rylee said as she handed out her cocktails. “I’m not sure about you seeing him.”

Good thing I’m not asking for your permission.

“I don’t want to see you get hurt,” she continued. “You’re just wading right into all this drama.”

“No, no worries there, Ry. I’m going into this with my eyes wide open. I remember what happened in the past, and Ward is a different person now. He’s a man, and I’ve grown since I was a teenager too.”

“I say you go with your gut,” Karen said after she drained her tea.

“I am. And I know he won’t hurt me like that again.”

As I said that out loud, I realized I truly meant it and believed it. My heart felt warm, knowing that I’d come to accept the old with Ward and being open to accept the new that had yet to come.

Maybe we have the timing right this time.

CHAPTER 32



WARD

I turned off the car after I parked in a neighborhood I never wanted to return to. My visit here wasn't one I looked forward to, and I stalled getting out. It wasn't hesitation, just a deep sense of dreading how badly this would go. Talking with Gwen on the phone wasn't my idea of a great time, but I knew that I had to make my message clear to her, and that necessitated seeing her in person to lay down the law.

It didn't matter if I sat here for another minute or ten. I didn't want to face the woman who'd given me such a scare the week before. To distract myself from the inevitable, I called Jenny.

"Hey, there." She laughed, more at herself than anything. "I think I'm going to have to change the name I saved your number as."

I rolled my eyes, able to take a little bit of teasing. "I'm not your favorite mistake anymore?"

"Well, you're my favorite something."

I grinned. Jenny not wanting to call me a mistake meant only good things.

"I wanted to call and ask you something, but before I do, I should probably explain."

"That's normally a smart way to go about things."

I smiled. "I spoke with Sunny last night. I told her that we weren't going to Gwen's wedding anymore, and dammit, Jen, it broke her heart."

“Aww. Really?”

“She still wants to be a part of the wedding. I can’t tell if it’s because she’s her mom or if she really enjoys having a big role to do. She loves being included.”

“Plus the whole feeling like a princess part, right?”

I chuckled. “Yeah. There’s that too.” I appreciated that Jenny could understand on so many levels. She kept it real and knew what Sunny would prioritize.

“Hey, I get it. Gwen is her mom after all. And she’s only six. When you’re six and you get excited about anything, it’s hard to turn off that excitement or have it taken away.”

“Will you still be my date?”

“Of course, I will, Ward.”

I sighed, so damn glad. “I was hoping you’d say that.”

For a moment there, I worried that she would want nothing to do with Gwen ever again. She probably had felt like that since high school, but after the ordeal at the café, I started to wonder if Jenny would avoid my ex even more now.

“What are you up to today?” I asked as I watched a couple of dog walkers go down the street.

“I’m packaging teas.”

Oh, crap. I remembered how she’d mentioned wanting to talk to me about selling her teas in my stores. Teas and coffees were a staple at The Cozy Company, and that was a no-brainer business move.

“I’m sorry we never talked about your teas in my stores.”

“I get it, Ward. You had a lot going on.”

“That’s no excuse.” I would never lose sight of how damn lucky I was to have found such an understanding and forgiving woman. Half the time I wasn’t sure I deserved her easygoing forgiveness.

“Yes.”

“Huh?”

I smiled. “The answer is yes. Of course, I’d be happy to sell your teas at the store.”

“Whoa. Just like that?”

“Yeah. No need to vet the product or anything.” I almost laughed at the idea. Jenny wouldn’t try to con me. “I trust your integrity.” And I knew firsthand that she was devoted to perfecting her tea blends. She has been practicing for years.

“Oh. Huh.”

I frowned. The first time, she made that sound like a question. Now, she sounded off, almost flippant or unsure. “What’s wrong?” *Does she not want to sell them there anymore?*

“Well, are you sure?”

I chuckled. “Of course, I’m sure. I’d be happy to sell your teas.”

“No. I mean are you sure I don’t need to give you samples or anything? I don’t want special treatment. I want to know that you’re selling it because you approve of its quality.”

I grinned. *I should’ve known better.* “All right. I’ll text you a time for a slot to bring them into the offices and test some samples on the board on Monday.”

“*Monday?*” she squeaked. “Like in two days?”

“Yeah.” She sounded nervous, and I couldn’t help but smile wider. She was too damn cute. Confident but not cocky. It was a hell of a sexy mix.

“That’s just so soon. It makes it all the more real.”

“You’ll be great, babe. I’ll text you once I look at my calendar. But right now, I’ve got to go.” I’d probably been sitting there long enough that someone was liable to be calling the police to report a stalker.

“What are you up to?”

“I’m parked outside Kenneth Crown’s house, where Gwen lives.”

“Oh.” She packed quite a bit of distaste in that sound.

“I’m going to talk to them about my expectations on the wedding day. I feel like this conversation would be better done in person.”

“I agree.” She made a kissing sound. “There’s my kiss for good luck.”

“Thanks, Jenny. I need all the luck I can get.”

Fifteen minutes later, I sat in Kenneth’s lavish living room. Gwen beamed at me, seated next to her fiancé. She clung to his arm and gave him adoring looks as she stroked her hand over his arm. Like he was a pet.

Maybe he *was* her pet because for the first five minutes after they let me in, she bragged like he was her trophy possession. I’d surprised them, showing up unannounced like this. I had looked up Kenneth’s address so I would know where the guy lived. I didn’t want Gwen to know how to get to Sunny, but I felt better about knowing where to find her.

She boasted about his massive, modern house, but I cut the tour short after a few minutes. I didn’t care about her luxury, and Kenneth stalked with us, glowering the entire way through his home. It wasn’t a “home” in any real way. Just a showy place for collected fancy crap and showing it off to guests. I tuned out Gwen’s blabber about the house’s highlights, all the cars she could show me in the garage, and the boat in the attached building.

“Are you sure you don’t want to finish your tour?” She leaned over with her arms pressed in, emphasizing her cleavage.

Classy, Gwen.

Her tits were about to spill out of her top. I didn’t glance down and take the bait, but Kenneth seemed to worry that I’d fall for her trick. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and tugged her closer. I got the memo. He was marking his territory with that pull and that glare. *Mine*, he wanted to growl. I didn’t need a reminder.

Internally, I chuckled. *She is all yours, man.*

“I don’t want a tour. This isn’t a social visit.”

“It’s an unsolicited one, too,” Kenneth drawled.

I ignored him and cut to the chase. “If there is any more funny business leading up to the wedding, Sunny is out for good.”

Gwen sucked in a deep breath. “Really? Does this mean she’s in it again?”

Kenneth rolled his eyes but grinned quickly when Gwen faced him with a bright smile.

I nodded. “The only reason I’m allowing this to go forward is because Sunny is excited to be included. You don’t deserve this second chance, Gwen. You don’t deserve Sunny’s participation and you need to understand my decision is not about you. This is about Sunny.”

She pouted and glanced at Kenneth. “Of course.”

“I’m only allowing Sunny because she wants to. Not because *you* want her to. This is not about you.”

Rolling her eyes, she scoffed. “I *am* the bride, Ward. It’s a little bit about me.” She giggled as though she felt awkward. Then she flashed a flirty smile my way. “I mean, it’s all about me.”

Shivers rolled up my spine. I would never cease to be bothered by this woman’s selfishness.

“Me, Ward.” She reached out to place her hand on mine. “The bride.”

I knew who the fuck she was.

Kenneth let out the growl he’d likely been holding on to since I entered his house. He shot to his feet, jolting Gwen with how quickly he stood. “Leave,” he ordered as he looked down his nose at me.

I smirked. “I thought you’d never ask.” I got to my feet and gave Gwen one last withering glare to dare her to pull any more stunts or bullshit.

Then I turned and walked out of the house, ignoring Gwen's continued suggestions to come check out the backyard and brand-new outdoor kitchen suite.

The second I stepped over the threshold, I breathed in a deep lungful of fresh air. It was chilly, but compared to the stifling warmth in there and the heated glowers her fiancé kept sending my way, I was glad to be in the open coolness of the outdoors again.

A slam almost made me flinch, but I didn't give Kenneth the satisfaction of turning to acknowledge his rude version of a farewell.

CHAPTER 33



JENNY

*M*onday. Freaking Monday!

That gave me plenty of time to freak out and drive myself nuts with worry. I'd been nervous about branching out and asking Ward about selling my teas in his stores. The whole rebranding thing intimidated me. I had started making my teas for me. It was a hobby, a passion. But when people at the gardening center got wind of it and asked me for more blends, I grew on that, and then grew some more to make my website.

I never wanted to blow up. I didn't want my tea business to surpass a side hustle and take over my life. I saw how that had turned out for Lauren with Watson Wicks, and then with Room Up. I enjoyed being my own boss and didn't want to overdo anything because I could never see myself giving up my job at the gardening center. Still, I was excited about upgrading to sell my products at such a household name as The Cozy Company.

The threat of becoming too big worried me, so it was with a lot of decisions and pros-and-cons weighing that I even finalized the desire to reach out to Ward and ask. His quick acceptance of the idea alarmed me, but I was determined to prove my teas were worth selling.

I didn't freak out about having to talk in public. I had held several workshops at the gardening center. I trained others there, and I wasn't such a hermit and homebody that I didn't know how to manage small talk or strike up a conversation with people at a party.

Promoting my tea blends to strangers in an office setting was not something I was familiar with. At all. So when I asked my roommates if they'd listen to my pitch as I practiced and rehearsed, I felt better about taking the necessary steps to feel as confident as possible.

I exhaled a long whoosh of breath and lifted my face to check their expressions after the fourth, modified version. "Any better?"

Karen furrowed her brow. *She* was used to the office setting, and she was most critical with her feedback, but she wasn't mean. "You forgot the key points that you wanted to list."

Mary Ellen nodded. "Yeah, you glossed over the ingredients that time."

I slapped my hand down. "You said to leave them out."

Rylee shook her head. "No. We said to leave out the three adjectives you used with each one. The teas will sell for their tastes alone, girlfriend. They don't need you to spell them out all fancy, but you should at least point out the things they're tasting."

I nodded. "Right. Right. You did say that in the last version."

"And speak up more." Karen stood straighter and brought her hand up her throat. "Orate."

"No." Mary Ellen frowned at her. "Orate is to lecture. She doesn't want to lecture."

"Just relax." Rylee shook out her arms like a shimmy. "Loosen up. Speak up. And smile."

"Loose. Louder. Smile."

"Just be yourself," Karen said.

"You'll do great," Mary Ellen added with a thumbs-up.

I exhaled. "Thanks, girls. I really appreciate you giving up your Saturday night to lend an ear."

Rylee grinned. "No worries. I had the night off."

“Yeah.” Mary Ellen pouted. “They cut hours at the library again, so I didn’t have anything going on either.”

“Anytime,” Karen promised.

“I’m grateful for it. And you all gave good advice.” *Now I need to remember it and not clam up.* I still had tomorrow to practice. I’d be rehearsing until the words were tattooed on my brain.

I had called my mom and dad earlier too, and Nana piped up in the background. She told me to speak from the heart and it would be fine. Sure, I was passionate about tea, but I didn’t want to come across as weirdly obsessed with it. Just averagely persuasive about it to the point Ward’s board would be interested in taking my blends on for a Cozy Co. product.

I had to step back for a bit though. If I kept going like this with so much worry, I’d be more likely to screw up and not seem like myself at all. I put my things aside and closed my laptop so I could relax in the kitchen with a nice mug.

Mary Ellen was there, warming up soup. I sipped my tea and poured more loose-leaf tea mixtures into what had to be the most delicate little satchels ever. They weren’t the ones I used for every order, but I wanted to go the extra step and really impress Ward’s board on Monday. Now, it seemed like so far away and I wondered if stage fright would hit me when I showed up.

I sighed, shaking my head. I should’ve been amused with how frantic I was, swinging from worry to dread, then slipping back into optimism when I reminded myself that I knew my stuff and it would be fine.

Before I could think about it any further, a knock sounded on the front door.

I frowned, glancing at Mary Ellen. “Didn’t Lauren say she was busy tonight?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

“I’ve got no clue who that could be.”

She shrugged, wiping her hands on a kitchen towel to go answer. “Maybe Karen ordered pizza?”

I stayed where I was, pouring out small bits of tea and setting them aside to make sure they were equal in weight. Mary Ellen returned, smiling wide with a goofy grin. She gleefully turned to me, clearing her throat. “It’s for you.”

I raised my brows at her sing-song tone and headed for the door.

Ward stood there with a huge bouquet of flowers and a large gift box. He looked dashing like always, but in a bespoke suit, dressed like he was ready for a black-tie event, he made me think of prom. I hadn’t gone, but I could so easily see him as a younger guy, ready to take a date to the dance. Not *a* date, but Gwen.

Leave the past in the past, Jen.

I smiled slowly, noting the flowers. Roses, lilies, and were those zinnias? It wasn’t a conventional arrangement, but with my knowledge of blooms, I knew on the spot that those blossoms were no grocery store special he grabbed any old where.

“Hi.” I blinked, feeling so silly and floored that it took me a second to speak. I was flustered by his good looks. Dressed up like this, he was seriously sexy in a sophisticated, forbidden way. I stood there awkwardly, so confused and aware I had on my rattiest sweatshirt and leggings that had a hole in the knee. I was caught off guard even more when he handed me the large gift box.

“For me?” I asked, trying to be coy and cute but sounding lame.

I held my breath as I took it and opened it. I blinked, gazing at the gorgeous deep-green dress. It shimmered in the light, glimmery with its delicate threads of rich emerald. Green was my favorite, and this forest hue was my absolute top preference. I immediately thought of Sunny, how she’d remarked that my dress to Colby and Naomi’s wedding

reminded her of a forest. That was the vibe of this dress, and it stunned me silent.

“Do you like it?” he asked and put his hand in his pocket.

I pulled the lovely gown from the box, letting it fall out of the package. It cascaded toward the floor in a wave of soft silk.

Mary Ellen returned and let out a dramatic gasp at the sight of what I held.

“Oh, jeez. Now what?” Rylee said as she peeked around the corner. I glanced at her as she did a double-take, eyes widening. “Damn.” She blinked slowly. “This kind of shit never happens to me.”

“Who was at the door—whoa.” Karen skidded to a stop next to Rylee. Her stare got stuck on the dress, then the flowers, and lastly on Ward. “*Whoa.*”

I glanced back up at him, brows raised. I never realized I had a secret Cinderella fantasy, but clearly I did. And he was delivering.

Ward looked at me, only me. He kept his eyes on me like he didn’t want to miss a moment of my reaction. “Do you like it?” he asked again.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “Is this for me?”

Mary Ellen nervously giggled. “Well I can’t see him putting it on!”

I smiled at her joke.

“I’ve booked us a hotel room for the night. I want to spoil you and show you how much I am thankful for how you handled Gwen the other day. How you had Sunny’s best interests at heart.”

Karen let out a gusty breath, pouting. “That’s it. I’m jealous.”

“Spoil her?” Mary Ellen gave Ward her back to face me and mouth *O.M.G!*

A slow smile took over my face. “I thought you already showed me your gratitude the other night.”

“Oooooohhh...” Karen said in a not-so-quiet whisper to Mary Ellen.

Rylee huffed, shaking her head as she furrowed her brow. “Are you for real?”

I didn’t want to keep him waiting. I gave up on the visions of a prom date that never happened and I let my heart fill up with his sweetness.

“Tonight?” I asked him, curious that he hadn’t mentioned it earlier.

He nodded.

“Tonight. Tomorrow. For a week.” Karen snorted a laugh. “I’d be taking up anything he has to offer.”

“This is just like a fairytale,” Mary Ellen gushed.

“Five minutes,” I told him, carefully setting the dress back into the box. He smiled and took the box before I backed up. “Just give me five minutes to pack a few things.”

A nod was his reply, and I bolted upstairs to pack. I heard Mary Ellen invite him to wait inside.

I needed a lot more than five minutes to process his spontaneous offer. I didn’t even know what to bring. I wasn’t fit to leave the house like this, but I’d be wearing that gorgeous, expensive dress somewhere, so what did it matter what I brought with me? With the way he looked good enough to eat in that sharp suit, all I could think about was removing each piece until he was naked and mine for the taking. I scrambled into my room, grabbing my biggest overnight tote bag and spinning wildly to look around.

He’d shown up so suddenly and with such an adventure of an invite. What should I bring? Where would we go?

I squealed slightly, so giddy and excited. Or was that nervousness? It was an excited nervousness, or maybe a nervous excitement. Hell, I didn’t know, and I didn’t care. I let the feeling wash over me, seeping into me until my pulse

raced faster and I smiled wider. Either way, tonight would be a fun and memorable time.

I grabbed things recklessly, shoving them into my bag without a second thought. I hardly cared what I had as a backup. Once I got that suit off him and he peeled that beautiful dress off me, I'd be happy in nothing at all.

A whole night. No interruptions. No worries about Sunny waking up down the hall.

I grinned and whispered to myself. "No need to be quiet."

A light knock on my doorframe had me spinning around to see who was there. My first thought was that Ward had grown impatient, but it wasn't him standing there considering me. Rylee leaned against the doorframe, still wearing that pensive, cautious look on her face.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" she asked me.

I raised one brow. I wasn't sure how she could get the impression that I wasn't wowed and thrilled by his very special invite. "What do you mean?"

She seemed hesitant to answer. "You're not the sort of woman who lets a man flash money around to impress her."

I shook my head, looking at the toiletries I'd grabbed from my other bag. "I'm not," I insisted. "And that isn't what Ward is doing."

"Oh?" She crossed her arms. "Then what exactly is he doing?"

I rolled my eyes. "He's being thoughtful and I appreciate it." Standing up straight, I faced her fully. "Please stop being a downer. Can't you just trust me on this?"

She narrowed her eyes. "You're never impulsive like this. You're the one girl I know who won't ever be distracted by material things."

"It's not the dress. I mean, it's gorgeous. But it's *him*. It's the chance to be with him and go out with just the two of us to have privacy. He could've flashed a half-priced clearance

thing from T.J. Maxx and I'd still want to spend the evening with him."

She simply sighed as I picked up my bag and brushed past her to head back downstairs.

I wasn't sure how my heart wanted to fall into line about this, but there was not a single ounce in my body that wanted to miss a moment of this night.

CHAPTER 34



WARD

I ran out to the SUV with Jenny, glad to be out of the chill. She giggled in the passenger seat, *ooing* and *ahhing* over the new dash of the electric vehicle. “And does Sunny approve?”

“She does. Of the car, at least.”

She frowned, of course noticing my tone. “What’s wrong?”

“She’s upset about changing schools.” I took her hand and kissed it. “But enough about that.”

She rolled her eyes and smiled. “What? Enough about that? I love talking about her. She’s important.”

And you are perfect, telling me that so simply.

“But tonight is all about *you*, Jenny. This is my chance to treat you and focus on you.”

And I started what I hoped would be a hell of a date by checking us in at a luxury hotel. I collected the room keys for the nicest suite. I had booked the space on the top floor, and as we rode up there, I hoped Jenny would relax with me and accept my offer of a thank-you. She was right. I had tried to express how much I appreciated her when she stayed the night to share dinner with us and then to let me love on her. It surprised me when she insisted on taking over that night, climbing on top to ride me like a sexy goddess instead of letting me treat her to a stressless orgasm. But it wasn’t enough. Every day, I woke up thinking about her and how

damn lucky I was that she found Sunny and that she connected with her to make the whole experience not as scary.

Jenny deserved a night like this. Hell, she deserved many of them.

We reached the room and she entered the suite first and went to the windows. She'd never been afraid of heights, and that still seemed true today. Going to the ceiling-to-floor windows, she gaped at the vista of the cityscape. Lights glittered like faraway dots in a constellation, but she was the true beauty in my eyes. I gave her a moment to take it all in, and after I set her bag down and put the box on the bed, I approached her.

She let me tug her coat off, and once she stood there looking out the windows with a sigh leaving her lips, I nudged the loose collar of her sweatshirt to the side. I nuzzled her soft skin exposed there, and she shivered, falling back.

“That feels good,” she whispered.

I dragged my lips side to side again, brushing them over her smooth neck and shoulders.

“Ready to get dressed?” I asked as I slipped my hand up beneath the front of her shirt.

“Dressed?” She huffed. “How about undressed?” Her head fell back.

I cupped her breast and stepped closer to her, clutching her to my chest. “What about the gown? Don't you like it?” I asked as I gripped the bottom of her hem and pulled her sweatshirt off.

She gasped, bare in front of the windows. “I love it, but I like what you've got on your mind now.” Her hand found me, and a quick squeeze put too much attention on my dick, the one place I was trying to keep my control.

“Not so fast, babe.” I kissed up her neck as I ran my hand over her stomach, then reached her pants. I pushed at the material, encouraging her to lose her bottoms.

I wasn't sure if I was strong enough for this. Every inch of skin that I revealed was another tease for me to resist. "I have reservations for the rooftop," I told her, wishing that I hadn't gone ahead and assumed we'd make it there on time.

Ha. Ha. On time. I was infamous for never being on time, and undressing Jenny sounded like an excellent excuse for being late.

"I'd rather have you."

I turned her face to the side while keeping her facing the wide windows that showed the night's vista. Kissing her lips, I kept her silent until I pushed her leggings down. Her panties slipped down with her pants, but I didn't bother to try to catch them. Why not torture myself a little more by knowing she'd be sitting across from me without anything beneath that dress?

"Oh, Ward," she moaned once she stepped out of her leggings and panties. She grabbed my hand and placed it between her legs. Stepping apart, she gave me full access to where she was already wet for me.

But I wouldn't be deterred. I reached back and picked up the dress. When I brought it before her, caressing her skin with a light brush against it, she sighed.

"I insist," I whispered into her ear. "I'm going to make sure you know exactly how much I appreciate you before the night is over. Even if it takes all night long. So you need to eat, babe, to have the strength to last that long."

A sweet, pouting whine escaped her lips but she lifted her arms to let me slip the dress onto her. She shivered as I dragged my hands up her arms, then down her cleavage toward her stomach. I didn't just help her put on the dress. I touched her and hoped I drove her as lusty as I felt so we'd be on the same page.

Once the dress dropped on her, covering her toned limbs and soft curves, she slowly turned to face me with a shy smile.

I whistled and adjusted my pants, making room for my straining dick. "Damn, Jenny."

She did a little shimmy. “So, a *quick* dinner, and we’ll come back here and see about taking this off?” She dragged a finger over her hips, slightly bunching the material of her dress. “And getting this off you?” She sauntered up to me to press her hands against my chest, then smoothed them up to my shoulders.

I replied by holding out my arm for her to take which she did after she slipped on the shoes that were waiting for her, and I led her out of the room, feeling like I was on top of the world, the luckiest man alive. I did take her to the top. The restaurant was enclosed in all glass at the roof. It was like a floating solarium, and I was pleased we sat near the windows so Jenny could continue to peer out at the city far down below.

“So,” I said after the server took our orders and brought us our wines. I lifted my glass to her, encouraging her to sip after a clink. “Talk.”

She giggled. “Is this an interrogation?”

“It’s my blunt wish for you to talk about anything because I’m having a hard time thinking about anything other than the fact you’re not wearing a stitch underneath that dress.”

“Hmm. This lovely dress you bought.” She slid her finger along the low collar. “Thank you, by the way.”

I growled lightly, watching her swipe her tongue on her lower lip. “Please? You tease.”

“Hey, look at you rhyming.”

I snorted a laugh, unable to prevent myself from all the bloopers that happened when I rhymed words with Sunny and she blurted inappropriate things.

“I was working on my pitch earlier.”

I smiled. “It won’t be a pitch.” She frowned, and I hurried to lift my hand. “Okay, it is. But once they drink your tea, it’ll be the real pitch.”

“Let the tea speak for itself?” she asked.

I nodded.

“That’s what my nana said. To just be myself and let the tea convince them.”

“Sounds like some solid advice. You don’t need me to wish you luck because I agree with that. You’ll do fine.”

“Speaking of wishing luck, I hope you were lucky too.”

I grinned. “I hope to get lucky tonight.”

She lifted her foot to tease me with the tip of her heel, which I’d had delivered and ready in the room. She dragged it along my calf and further up, and my dick jumped to attention at the feel of her nearing my groin.

“I wished you good luck at Gwen’s. How did that conversation go? Okay?”

“Well, they heard me out. I told them that I wouldn’t allow anything funny going on and the only reason Sunny was still participating in the wedding was because she wanted to be there. Not because Gwen insisted on it.”

“Sunny sure likes being a flower girl. Or junior bridesmaid.”

“It’s not that she’s all about Gwen. Since she was old enough to realize that Gwen behaves selfishly, Sunny made her own opinions about her. She’s never wanted to be close to her, but she has this loose association that she wants to maintain.” I hated the idea of Sunny wishing for a present mother in her life. Gwen wasn’t, and I hadn’t had time to find anyone who would make sense.

Until Jenny.

“Gwen just wanted to give me a tour of Kenneth’s house. He wanted me to leave from the moment I got there unannounced. And when she openly flirted with me and I shut her down, Kenneth looked livid.”

Jenny shook her head, amused and bewildered about Gwen’s behavior. “You should still be careful, though. Gwen is crazy, and in order for Kenneth to want to be with her, he’s got to have a couple of screws loose too.”

I nodded, noticing our food coming.

“You never know what those kinds of people are capable of or what their next move might be.”

“I agree. My head will be on a swivel from now on. It helps that I’ll be at the wedding to keep an eye on things. And that you’ll be there too.”

We enjoyed our meals, and with the introduction of fine, decadent food and more wine, it was easier to let myself be distracted from obsessing about Jenny’s beauty and the fact she was naked under that gown.

After we finished, I relished the expression of surprise on her face as she watched several tables being cleared away. The restaurant staff cleared out an area, making way for a modern dance floor underneath. A black-crystal chandelier hung over the space, and once the floor was open and empty, waiting for us, I offered Jenny my hand. “Would you like to dance with me?”

“Dance?” Jenny asked coyly as she slid her hand against mine.

“Yeah, to practice for the wedding, of course.”

She gave me one of those genuine smiles that I wanted to remember for all of eternity. The look of her beautiful grin made it difficult for me to breathe. I was instantly mesmerized whenever she looked at me so radiant and open.

“Right,” she mused with playful sarcasm. “For the wedding.”

I guided her to the floor, and we danced to the gentle, soft music playing across the room. It was just me and her on the floor, one couple to experience this night without any interruptions or distractions. I was focused wholly on her, so glad to have her on my arm. With each step and every turn, I fell deeper under the spell of just soaking in her presence. I felt like I had been transported back in time, when I was trying to understand the powerful pull of attraction for the first time. Attraction to her. I was still infatuated with her, and my connection with her now was no less thrilling than it had been back then.

When I danced with Jenny at the junior high dance, I'd been so nervous. My palms were so sweaty. Butterflies ruled my stomach. And I'd been so damn scared that my deodorant would suddenly stop working.

Now, as I pulled her in closer and reveled in every point of contact with my hand on the small of her back, it was different. This time, I felt steady. Confident. Her adoring gaze on me had me feeling calmer and bolder.

Because now, without a doubt, I knew what I wanted.

Her. Only her.

This wasn't my first time experiencing a crush and wondering about how it all worked with overtaxed and fried hormones.

This time, I was sure I could handle the depth of affection and attraction Jenny excited in me.

And I couldn't wait to explore it.

All night long.

CHAPTER 35



JENNY

We danced alone, finally connecting in a peaceful setting without anyone to interfere.

My friends weren't there to tease me or question if I should be doing this with Ward.

His daughter wasn't there to need his attention and pose as an obstacle for intimacy.

Our past—Gwen—wasn't there to try to break us apart, either.

It was just me and Ward, moving to the music in a decadent setting that made me feel like we were dancing on the clouds, so high above the city.

Being in his arms like this felt bittersweet, reminding me of dancing with him when we were clueless kids who didn't know *how* to dance, just swaying side to side in a simple shuffle. I was no expert, and Ward was no professional either, but we at least looked like adults enjoying a mature night out.

And when the next song ended, Ward leaned close to whisper into my ear. "What happened to that plea for a fast dinner?" He pressed a kiss to the spot below my ear.

Shivers took over me and I smiled, clutching his hand tighter.

"What was the hurry for again?" he asked.

I borrowed his trick, leaning in close and reaching on my tiptoes to whisper against his ear. "You know what, I

completely forgot what the rush was for.”

He reared back, giving me a cocky smile. “Oh, really?”

I bit my lower lip, loving the way he locked his gaze there. “Yeah. It’s been a long time since I’ve had a nice dinner. Even longer since I’ve had a date like this, dancing and enjoying some rare peace and quiet.”

“I’m glad you’re having a good time.”

“I am, Ward. I am.” I pressed a sweet, quick kiss on his cheek.

He pulled me in close, bringing my hips flush to his. I gasped at the sudden move, but I grinned wider at the serious desire that glittered in his eyes. He was a devil sometimes, and playing with him was always fun. I wondered how long he’d keep this teasing going, though.

“But are you sure that’s all you’re interested in tonight?” he asked.

“You mean there’s more?” I taunted, feeling silly and daring to goad him like this.

I wasn’t lying. Dinner and dancing *were* nice. There was no way in hell I didn’t want him. I lusted after his fine body with every fiber of my being, but teasing him like I was clueless and uninterested was a fun twist to make him move this along to where I wanted it to end—on that bed, with him deep inside me as we came together.

The grin he gave me was wicked, full of heat and promises to deliver.

“I’m sure I could think of a thing or two to finish off the night.”

I stepped closer, practically crawling up him. “Consider me curious.”

He took my hand and released me from the embrace we’d adopted instead of dancing.

I giggled as he led me through the restaurant. He didn’t rush. He didn’t run. The man was forever late to everything,

but he didn't seem to think he was tardy in getting us back to the room.

We got in the elevator, and as soon as the doors slid closed, he pinned me against the wall. His muscled arms strained in the fabric of his suit, and with a hand at either side of my head, he braced me against the wall. I melted under his liquid stare, and I swore I could get lost in the need he had to be feeling for me with that potent smolder.

“What do you have in mind?” I whispered, eager for him to kiss me, to touch me. To do something to ease the ache that filled me from my beaded nipples to my wet pussy. Just an intense look from him had me wanting to squirm in need.

He only smiled, lowering his lips to mine ever so slowly, dragging out the suspense. I held my breath, desperate for him to kiss me, but the elevator dinged and he stepped back.

I bit back a growl, unsure if I could play this game of torment. I was all for suspense, but impatience flared quickly.

He took my hand again and guided me to our room. Once he unlocked it, he closed the door behind us and tossed the keycard to the table. Stalking toward me, he loosened his tie.

“What do you have in mind?” I asked again.

“A taste.” He gripped the back of my neck and hauled me up close. Smashing his hot mouth onto mine, he stole my breath and sucked on my tongue.

I moaned, clutching his jacket. But just as soon as I slid my tongue alongside his and kissed him back as roughly as he did me, he parted.

I growled at that too, uncaring if he heard my annoyance.

“I said I wanted a taste,” he stated smugly. With a push, he prompted me to fall back on the soft bed. I landed with a harsh exhale, but before I could sit up all the way, he'd lowered to his knees and flipped my dress up.

“But I want to devour you.” He pushed my thighs apart.
“*Here.*”

He dipped his head straight down. I already felt so exposed and vulnerable, wide open to him like this. My pussy was wet and open for him to look his fill. He did. Pausing with his face close enough to my entrance that I felt his hot panted breaths whipping against my sensitive flesh, he licked his lips and smiled.

Then he pressed his mouth to me, eliciting a long groan of pleasure. I dropped my head back, feeling so wanton and wicked as he treated me to long, hard licks. He dragged his skillful tongue up along my slit, tonguing around my hole but not penetrating me all the way. Then back and forth again, he kept a steady stream of torture on me where I ached so badly.

I was dripping, and feeling him spread my juices and his saliva so eagerly felt taboo somehow. I'd never struggled with oral sex, giving or receiving, but with the guttural growls and hummed sounds of appreciation as he licked and sucked, then nipped and bit, Ward's mouth, tongue, and teeth on me had me hurtling fast toward an orgasm. And I could already tell from the tension banding me tightly that it would be a hard and strong one that would shatter me more than ever before.

But then he was gone.

I blinked, scowling as I sought him out. He wasn't between my legs anymore. His head wasn't pressing my legs apart so he could devour me. Standing, he took off his jacket, then shirt, and at last his pants and boxers.

"Please," I begged. After making me get so damn close, he couldn't torture me like this.

"Shh. I want to spoil you." When he reached for his pocket to grab a condom, I rose off the bed and approached him.

"But I want you to enjoy yourself too."

He shook his head, chuckling that filthy sound that never failed to turn me on more. "Oh, I am." Taking my hand, he urged me toward the windows.

He set my hands on the glass and he slid his thigh between my legs, urging me to stand with my feet wider apart. The window was cold, but I kept my palms and fingers against the

chilly surface as he trailed hot kisses along my neck. He slid his hands around my sides, one going up to cup my breast while the other one lowered to rub over my mound and seek out my clit. I groaned, dropping my head to the side to give him access to kiss and suck my neck. Everywhere he touched me was a slow, sizzling spark of heat. I felt like I would scream if he didn't relieve me of the need coursing through me. My nerves were frayed. My patience was shot. He kept teasing and torturing, suspending me in an endless stretch of nearing an orgasm he wouldn't give me.

With two fingers, he parted my folds, and keeping his thumb on my clit, he circled steadily, grinding on that bud of nerves. He grunted and lowered at his knees to continue humping against me. His hard dick slid between us, and then with another shift, positioning me in front of him, the tip of his dick pushed against my entrance.

“Please!”

He shushed me, and I growled at the feel of his smiling lips on my neck. I pushed my hips back, encouraging him to just get inside already, but he didn't. He prolonged the torture of waiting and wanting, rocking his dick against me where he'd recently licked and kissed me so well.

At last, he slid all the way into my aching pussy. I groaned and let out a long breath.

I closed my eyes, welcoming the explosive orgasm that seemed so close yet too far out of reach. He pumped into my wet channel, whipping his hips harder and faster. I was trapped against him, merciless to his thrusts. He kept one hand squeezing my breast and the other hand rubbed against my mound as he played with my clit.

“Oh, fuck. Ward. Yes!”

Then he left me.

He didn't push back into me with another brutal rocking drive.

“What? No. No!” I turned to face him, panting and delirious for him to just make his point of teasing me and

spoiling me with a seemingly forbidden orgasm he was taking his sweet time in giving me.

Then he picked me up and brought me back to the bed. He stood at the edge as I bounced on the mattress. Before I got all of my hair brushed away from my face, he filled me in a long, steady thrust until he growled.

“You gonna come for me now, babe?” he taunted as he lifted both of my legs. He draped them over his shoulders, curling over me, and he angled his dick to pound into me harder and deeper.

“Yes,” I gasped at the punishing pressure that felt so damn good.

“Then scream for me. Let me hear how good you like to be spoiled with my dick.”

Twice more he pistoned into me, and *finally*, at last, he made me come. My climax barreled through me, and I cried out. I had no clue what I said or shouted. Words, mere thoughts, were lost to me. I rode out the waves of pleasure and relief as he got me off after the longest delay ever.

He followed me quickly, groaning and straining the muscles in his neck so hard that I saw them flex. His arms tensed, showing the veins and ridges of muscles there. He held me in place until the last twitch of his dick emptied inside me.

Then with a heaving exhale, he lowered my legs and collapsed over me.

I sighed, lazily slapping my arms over his back to hold him close. I was spent. I couldn't move a finger as I lay there and caught my breath. He'd spoiled me rotten, all right. He'd spoiled me with his dick like dangling a carrot in front of me, just out of reach. I wouldn't complain. I'd never come so hard and thoroughly. I knew this night would forever be etched in my memory.

Once he fell asleep over me, I grinned as a thought hit me.

I'll pay you back for that, though. Just you watch.

Because everyone deserved a little spoiling treatment at some point. And Ward would be next on my list.

CHAPTER 36



WARD

Spending the weekend with Jenny lifted my spirits. We slept in. We explored each other and learned more of what the other liked and what turned us on the quickest. I was glad that she hadn't lost her ticklish nature and she amazed me with her athleticism. It was in your face like someone who might be a cardio junkie or gym bunny, but that woman was toned and flexible. Yoga sure had its benefits, and I was a lucky bastard to reap the benefits of it in bed with her.

The way she bent backward?

"Dad? Why's it so far away?" Sunny asked suddenly from the backseat.

Mind of out the gutter. I had no business thinking about our weekend right then. I would see Jenny soon enough anyway, although it would be at the board meeting for her tea. I would much rather see her naked and in bed, but knowing she'd be coming to the offices gave me a secret thrill too. I liked having her in my life in any way I could get her.

This Monday was the first day of Sunny's education at a new school, too. They'd replied late Friday night, accepting her application, and with a discussion about donations that I could make, most of which I loosely expressed interest in, they fast-tracked Sunny's approval process.

She was nervous, uncharacteristically so, but I couldn't blame her. This was a huge, different thing to adjust to, and I hated that I even needed to put her through it.

What other option did I have, though? My mom agreed that this was the right thing to do, but I took her words with a grain of salt. She was my mom, biased and careful with what she advised, never trying to challenge me too far when it came to parenting Sunny.

I saw no way I could consider letting Sunny go back to her other school. All week and even into the weekend, Principal Lannon had called. I wasn't sure if he wanted to grovel or weakly apologize again, but I didn't answer. The school board members called. The school's administrators did too, but I had lost my willingness to talk. My trust had been broken, and there was no magical way for them to reclaim it. I wouldn't take any risks when it came to the most precious person in my life.

"It's just where it is," I replied to Sunny while I also begrudged the longer drive and traffic that slowed it down. I left super early, planning on being punctual because I wanted to take the extra time to see her to her classroom and alleviate her concerns as much as I could. It was a small thing I could do for her, and I figured giving her a chance to settle into her room and meet her teacher before the other students arrived would help.

When we arrived, she remained quiet. Her expressive eyes were large as she took it all in, and upon spotting the long line of cars already lining up to drop off kids, she shook her head. "They're all gas guzzlers, Dad."

I bit my lip. I hadn't realized one science lesson would make such a lasting impact on her. I was glad she was perceptive like that, but I didn't want her to get judgy.

"Well, maybe they haven't covered the parts about carbon footprints in science yet."

"Eco-management," she corrected. "The lesson was called eco-management."

I shrugged one shoulder, the opposite of the side I held her hand. "Same thing." And for once, I suspected those *were* close enough to claim that.

Together, we walked toward the entrance and I quickly explained who I was to the security guard. Sunny looked at the uniformed and armed man with raised brows, perhaps alarmed at the militaristic outfit. Her former school had security, but I'd always liked how they'd taken steps to make the guards look less like soldiers and more like friendly staff who kept an eye on things. It was a more understated but just as effective security team, and I didn't like the idea that this dude could be scaring Sunny.

He radioed on his intercom and soon had permission to let us in earlier than the standard time. A secretary greeted us inside and led me to Sunny's classroom. The woman focused on me, not even greeting Sunny, and I wasn't sure what to think of that either. Was she trying to check me out? Was the admin staff expected to be professional with students and avoid friendliness? My opinions of the staff at Sunny's school were low, but at least they knew students and parents by face.

Sunny tightened her fingers on my hand, and I hated how nervous she was. On the way, I pointed out the artwork hanging on the walls and made sure to remind her about the high-tech computer room she would be able to use here. Those mentions excited her a bit, but when we came to her door, she clung to my hand with a death grip.

I poked my head in, making sure we had the right room, and I spotted the teacher seated at a desk in the back of the room. A plaque on his desk showed that he was Mr. Marshall, a young guy with slicked-back hair. Yep, this was it. I'd been informed via one of the many emails I received Friday night that Sunny could fill a vacancy in this man's classroom.

He didn't react when I cleared my throat, still reading something on his desk, so I knocked. His brow remained furrowed as he looked up. A slight lift of one eyebrow suggested he didn't want to ask me what I wanted.

“Hi.”

He kept that resting dick face on as he looked at Sunny and said, “You're early. Come back in fifteen minutes with everyone else.”

I know we're fucking early. I planned to be. “I’m sorry. I should’ve explained. I’m Ward Emerson,” I said as I stepped further into the room. “My daughter Sunny is starting her first day here as your student.”

No reaction. Not even a fucking smile. Damn, was this guy wound up tight.

“She’s a little nervous and meeting her teacher one-on-one is a lot less daunting than doing so among a whole group of new kids.”

He smirked. “I don’t give kids special treatment. Not even in introductions.”

His mention of *special treatment* irked me. Jenny had worried about that too, with her teas. I preferred honesty no matter who I dealt with, so so-called special treatment wasn’t something I cared for. And that wasn’t what I was seeking here anyway.

I bit my lip, refraining from asking this guy what was shoved up his ass to act stuck-up like this, but before I could, he sighed. He gave me a long stare, and I was sure I didn’t care for whatever he was thinking. He stood and approached. “Hello, Sunny.” Without bending to her level, he lowered his hand for her to shake, then blinked at me expectantly. “There. Introductions are done. Do you need something else?”

Don’t punch her new teacher. Don’t punch her new teacher. Don’t punch her new teacher.

I cleared my throat. “Which desk is Sunny’s?”

Mr. Marshall turned toward his desk, giving me his back. “She can sit anywhere. We don’t do assigned seating. But she *will* need to abide by the uniform policies.”

I frowned, looking down at my daughter, who cast a worried glance at the undecorated room. “He means the glitter, Dad,” she whispered. “It was in that handbook you printed out.”

That damn hair chalk. It was taking forever to rinse out. And uniforms? I knew I wouldn’t come to appreciate that part of this new school.

Instead of fuming, I maintained a calm expression and helped Sunny settle into a desk near the front, where she liked to sit and be the all-A overachiever that she was.

“You’re going to do great, Sunshine,” I told her, trying my best to pep her up and pull her attention away from her new teacher. She set her folders on the desk and nodded as she searched for a pencil in her bag.

“But aren’t you just saying that because you’re my dad? And you always think everything will be okay no matter what?”

I sighed and smiled. “I’m saying you’ll do great because I know you. I know how smart and creative you are no matter the circumstances.” I leaned in to kiss the top of her head and she drew in a long breath. “I’m confident you’ll make friends in no time.”

She glanced up at Mr. Marshall. Sunny wasn’t stupid. She could already pick up on his cold welcome, or lack of one.

“And you’ll enjoy meeting your teachers. *All* of them.” Even though this stuck-up prick wasn’t earning any praise from me, I had to take faith that Sunny wouldn’t be with him all day. She’d go to other instructors for different subjects.

Yeah, that’s a great attitude to have on day one. That she’s not going to be stuck with someone for too long. Mom suggested I shouldn’t have expectations that were too rigid, but it was ingrained in me. Sunny was my girl to protect, and it was natural to want the best for her always. It also meant listening to my gut, and I instinctively did not like this man.

“I had that same color last summer,” a girl said as students came in a few minutes later. She sat in the seat across from Sunny and pointed at her hair. “My mom was so mad that it took, like, *foreva* to come out.”

I almost cringed at her Valley Girl talk. *Foreva? Not forever?*

“My grandma didn’t realize how permanent it was,” Sunny admitted.

“But I like it. When it fades, it has more of a unicorn vibe to it, you know?”

I stood, happy that Sunny seemed content to talk with this classmate. She smiled, and I wondered if she was amused by this preteen sort of talk.

God, I hope it doesn't rub off on her. I told her goodbye and approached the teacher's desk. He stood before I reached him, ready with that raised-brow smirk of expectation, like this was his room, his domain, and he was the king to rule it, not me.

I leaned in close, making sure he had to look up at me to face me fully. I didn't often try to use my height as a way to intimidate others, but this ass just bothered me and I couldn't help it.

“I don't have patience for shitty teachers, Mr. Marshall.”

He kept a deadpan expression, but I caught a flash of irritation in his eyes.

“Much less for asshole teachers who don't actually like kids or care about them.”

His lips lifted in a twisted smirk.

I slanted in more, growling a low whisper. “And if you're going to be one of those kinds of teachers?”

He stepped back an inch.

“We're going to have a problem.”

He glowered at me, his nostrils flaring.

I left the warning at that and turned, smiling and waving at Sunny as she chatted with the other girl. Once I exited the school building, I shook out my arms and rolled my shoulders, waiting for the tension to snap out of me. That prick left a bad aftertaste in my thoughts, and I again wondered if I was screwing up by switching Sunny to be a student here.

Too late. I'd committed this far, and I refused to let the worry and anxiety ruin my day too. I'd see how it went. We'd

talk when she got home. My mom would ask her for her opinions, too, and I would react and adjust accordingly.

There was no limit to what I would do to make sure my daughter was happy and secure in her life.

And as I got into my car and headed into the office, I tried to switch gears.

I would bend over backward to make Jenny happy, too, as the other girl in my life who mattered so damn much it should have scared me. She had become such an important person—again—and even though it was more tempting to think of ways we could satisfy each other in the bedroom, I looked forward to hearing her pitch today in the offices, to help her flourish and grow her business.

CHAPTER 37



JENNY

Ward spoiled me and treated me all weekend, but in the back of my mind, I knew the worry about my tea pitch would return. It did, full fledged Monday morning. No amount of my favorite lavender blend could calm me to the point I could think I had this down to perfection. Maybe that was my first mistake, thinking I *should* be perfect.

Nana told me to speak from the heart and let the board notice my passion for tea, and that should be enough. My dad had added in that these corporate guys were probably used to vendors and suppliers going out of their way to schmooze and con them, to make sure they were told what they thought they wanted to be told. Honesty, he advised, and genuine relatability went a long way. He should know. He'd sold car parts, and I bet he could sell anything to anyone.

I headed into the city with my tea blends packaged and ready. Lauren came over late last night after Ward brought me home. I hadn't told her about my weekend with him. The other girls would probably tell her. She'd come to help me figure out the best outfit because she'd had plenty of practice in the business arena.

I parked and collected my largest tote bag with everything I needed, hoping she was right. She'd told me this green skirt and white blouse would be the ideal combination of smart, classy, and approachable but not too flirty. It still sounded like a riddle in my mind, but I felt better about adding my favorite infinity tree necklace and my good-luck ring. Ironically, it was a tacky little adjustable band of aluminum that held a bent and

cracked casing for a tiny fake gemstone. I'd never lost it over the years, and it held so much meaning because Ward gave it to me when I'd stressed about the mandatory standardized test I had to complete in seventh grade. Those things sucked, and I'd been so nervous that time because Nana had just gone to the hospital for a health scare and my mom got in a car accident on the way to visit her. Nana recovered, just a bout of pneumonia. And my mom's car wasn't even totaled. But both of those events happening the week of an important test threw me off. Ward used his slight income to buy me the tiny ring and told me to look at it for a reminder that he believed in me. I passed the test, and more than once I glanced at the itty-bitty ring to know I wasn't alone in the world and it was okay to be scared sometimes. He'd have my back.

How fitting, I mused as I entered his huge skyscraper. Here I was again, nervous, and I didn't need his support but his board's okay to sell my teas.

A helpful secretary helped me set up the teas in a large board room. She went the extra mile to lug the portable hot plates from the staff lounge too so I could brew water for the teas right there for the board members.

When they filed in, I was pleased half were women and half were men. Ward took up the rear, and the secretary rushed up to him. "Can I sit in too?"

He smiled and shrugged. "Sure. But I thought you were a coffee drinker."

She shook her head. "No, maybe not. My doctor said different herbal teas can help me with breastfeeding!" She glanced back at me with a hopeful smile. "I can't wait to hear about your teas."

She seemed so genuine that I knew Ward hadn't asked her to behave overly excited on my behalf. I glanced at the men in the room, knowing they wouldn't have personal interest in teas for lactation assistance. "I don't have any herbal blends with me that would help for that specific purpose, but I would be glad to discuss what you should look for. There's a multitude

of tea ingredients that can help different ailments and concerns.”

“What about insomnia?” a burly man asked with great fatigue as he settled into his seat near the front. His suit was immaculate, but his eyes screamed sleep deprivation.

Another board member piped up. “Nah. You need a tea for calming twins to sleep in their own beds.”

The tired dad groaned. “I slept on the floor last night.”

“I’m telling you,” Ward said as he sat in the back. “You need to try co-sleeping then slip out. Sunny did that too.”

The board member groaned. “I did that. Hence, I fell out of the tiny toddler bed and dropped to the floor.”

I recalled how Ward had army-crawled away from Sunny’s bed. It was so clear that he had a good rapport with his board, and their friendly, laidback attitudes helped me to relax a bit. It wasn’t as stuffy and corporate in here as I worried it would be, but once they all settled in and gave me their full attention, the nerves swarmed again.

I drew in a deep breath and smiled, hoping it wasn’t too peppy but also charming—another riddle Lauren suggested last night. Even though I missed the security blanket of having my flash cards with jotted notes, I began my spiel, knowing this was it.

I could have taken the easy way and accepted Ward’s no-questions-asked *yes* for selling my teas, but I had more integrity than that. I wasn’t sure what we were doing. Dating? Friends with benefits? Something more? It wasn’t defined, but I knew throwing a business agreement in the mix would only muddy the waters between us even more. I wanted to know that he sold my teas because he, and his board, thought they were solid products to stand behind.

Throughout my pitch, I battled the intense nerves. Standing before a board wasn’t something I usually did. I was comfier in my gardening gear, dealing with weeds and harvesting leaves, not relying on a slideshow of my main

points and listing ingredients without sounding like I was orating.

Wait. Am I supposed to orate? I couldn't remember my friend's advice and began to fumble my words, speeding up what I said.

I locked eyes with Ward, eager for a sign of support. He wasn't sporting his usual smirk for once. Instead, he gave me a genuine smile and didn't waver in his full attention.

Take a deep breath, he mouthed.

I sighed and let my shoulders lower as I tried to collect my thoughts. The only saving grace I had for my moment of freaking out was that the board was sipping their teas and not looking at me as much.

Slow down, he mouthed next as he picked up his cup.

"Oh, this is *so* good," the secretary said. "Don't you love the fruitiness, Tessa?"

The board member she'd asked nodded. "It's tangy and sweet. Equally matched," she replied.

With Ward's advice and these women's praise, I spoke slower, highlighting the flavors they detected and what properties they offered. The men were more practical, inquiring about my branding, slightly worried if I was pitching something as a medicine rather than a beverage, but my answers addressed those concerns. Another member, a woman, asked me for more details about my marketing reach. Some things sounded so foreign and I had no ready answers, but her smile assured me she wasn't disappointed with what I could offer as a reply.

In the end, I wrapped up the pitch feeling confident and accomplished. I couldn't wait to tell my friends and family that I did it. That I felt like it went well. A huge boulder of stress evaporated from my shoulders, and I breathed much easier as I packed my things up.

The secretary took the leftover tea I'd brewed, eager to put it in her tumbler with ice. She was kind to help me gather my things as Ward and his board left the room, and as we cleared

my things from the table, I gave her advice about what could help her with lactation. Even if Ward's board passed on my teas, it seemed like I'd make a sale from this secretary when she slid my business card into her pocket.

In the hallway, I headed for the elevators, feeling so light and glad that I had gotten through that pitch. It was a huge step for me to branch out with my products, and I was proud of myself that I took the risk.

Ward rushed after me, asking me to wait up. I stood near the elevators, smiling at him jogging toward me.

"Sorry, I had to take a call right away. I wanted to help you pack up and see you to your car."

I smiled and waved his comments away. "No worries. You're working, Ward."

He smirked. "So are you. And you sure as hell worked that room." A slow smile covered his handsome face. "You were damned impressive, Jenny. I've got a really good feeling they'll vote one hundred percent in your favor."

I bit my lower lip, holding in a squeal of excitement. Ward could be a jokester, but I knew he was telling the truth. I practically squirmed with giddiness. "You better get ready for prepping more teas."

"I'm so glad it's over though. I was so nervous."

He chuckled, still smiling. "We'll celebrate. Maybe dinner soon?"

Hearing his confident words already felt like a celebration. "I'm free tonight."

He sighed, and I worried I had come across as too eager. *Dammit.* "Normally, I wouldn't hesitate to jump on that."

"But?" I shifted and tugged the strap of my tote bag higher on my shoulder.

"But I need to spend time with Sunny tonight after her first day at her new school."

"That's right. Poor girl. Was she nervous?"

He nodded.

Damn, having experienced my round of nerves, I hated to think of her suffering the same fate.

“Her teacher rubbed me the wrong way, too.”

“What, she was strict?” I asked.

“*He* seemed like a douche.”

I huffed. “That doesn’t sound like a great start.”

“You’re telling me. I want to see how she feels about him, about the school. All of it. Because I’m not sold on that place yet.”

As if he couldn’t get any sexier. That protective dad thing was hot as hell. This man wouldn’t settle for anything but the best for his girl. It was an attractive feature I couldn’t ignore.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

I took his hand, then dropped it, remembering this was his workplace. “Hey, no worries. Sunny comes first. Always.”

He frowned. “That doesn’t mean you should come last.”

I giggled and leaned in close to whisper. “Um, when it’s just you and me, you make sure I come first.”

He groaned and narrowing his eyes as a heated look crossed his face. “No fair. No teasing when I can’t see you tonight.”

I smiled. “I meant that family is number one, Ward.” I would never stand in the way of that. Dating or sleeping with a single dad was different, but I wouldn’t interfere.

“Speaking of family,” he said with a brighter smile. “I was hoping you’d come to Thanksgiving dinner.”

I blinked, trying to hide my surprise. I could acknowledge how tricky starting something with a single dad would be, but an invite to dinner like *that*?

“It’s normally just me, my mom, and Sunny, but we’d love it if you came and made it an even number. We’ve already talked about it.”

Not with me! “Wow.” I hesitated, searching for a reply. Spending a holiday together was serious business.

“Hey, no rush.” His phone rang. “You can think about it,” he said as he glanced at his screen. “But if you say no, I’m not selling your tea in my store.”

I laughed, loving this devilish side of him.

He grinned that wicked smile and I rolled my eyes. “Kidding. The board would overrule me there. They’ve fallen in love with your teas already.”

I giggled. “I’ll be there, Ward.”

Thanksgiving. New Year’s Eve. I’d already committed two holidays to him, and I wondered if it was a pattern that would stick.

I hoped so.

CHAPTER 38



WARD

As we did every year, Sunny and I woke up and watched the Macy's Day Parade. I zoned out through most of it and caught up with stuff on my phone. She lost interest, too, what with all the commercials and commentaries from emcees she didn't recognize.

Her backup was to color in her books or draw. We stayed put on the couch, though, and that was what made the tradition worth it. My mom was cooking the whole meal, and I knew better than to interfere there. That was her tradition, cooking, baking, and sticking to a grand agenda of so many dishes that I would lose track of which step applied where. Actually, I had done just that before. When I was a teen, I added chicken stock to the mashed potatoes boiling in the water, not the stuffing, and that was the first clue to my mother that, while I could handle being in the kitchen, I was not a master of overlapping dishes cooking and going at once.

Jenny: Are you sure I don't need to bring anything?

I was glad she would be here.

Mom: Don't let her bring anything. I want her to be a guest.

I chuckled at the contradicting texts. I sent Jenny a screenshot and she replied with a laughing GIF.

I backed up my mom by sending her a GIF of Belle at the Beast's castle and the candle guy singing his song.

Jenny: Okay.

Ironically, I couldn't remember that damn guy's name, and it would bug me for the dumb, simple reason of knowing you knew a name but couldn't place it. "Hey, Sunshine. What's the candlestick's name?"

She looked at me like I'd grown a second head.

"In *Beauty and the Beast*."

"Lumiere?"

I nodded. "Yeah."

"Why?"

"Just thinking." She'd never cared for that movie, but she was still familiar enough to fill me in on that detail.

"What's Jenny's favorite color?" she asked me before I could get distracted again by something else.

"Green." That was what it was when she was younger.

"You know that? Or you're guessing?"

I glanced at what she was making and smiled when I realized she was making name cards for dinner later. "I know."

"Did she tell you her favorite color was green?"

Did she? I doubted it. Of if she had, that confession was years ago. "I just know." But the careful way she continued to look at me made me feel like I was in the hot seat. Sunny's curiosity about how I would be so informed of Jenny's favorite color was a big deal from her kid's perspective, but I was more worried about how she was likely wondering if Jenny and I were closer than mere friends.

At dinner later, I tried to consider it from Sunny's viewpoint. Jenny and I didn't kiss or hold hands in front of her or my mom. My mother dominated the woman anyway, talking about gardening and herbs and the weather and hardy zones. They caught up like the old friends they were, and in a condensed retelling, Jenny brought my mom up to date about her nana and parents, plus what they'd been doing. Then my mom filled Jenny in on the travels she'd enjoyed with her sister.

Without Sunny being seated with us, I would've felt like I had been transported back in time. Having a meal with my mom and Jenny was something we'd done more than a few times in the past. I'd always been close with my mom. It was just the two of us. She'd raised me the best she could as a single parent, and when I had the money to do so, I looked after her financially. I wasn't a mama's boy like Gwen once claimed, but I loved my mom fiercely and wasn't ashamed to show it.

"I love that you two are still as close as you were when we were younger," Jenny commented when Mom and I finished each other's sentences in telling Jenny about our last vacation together. "I can tell your bond is as strong as ever."

"Because I see him all the time," my mom replied, teasing. "That's the sacrifice I have to make to spend so much time with this ray of Sunshine." She stroked Sunny's hair, gazing at her with affection.

I wasn't sure how I could have survived without my mom's help, and knowing she was benefitting just as mutually by being a present grandparent, it was a win-win I'd always be thankful for, not just on this holiday designated for gratitude.

Sunny stuffed her mouth full of potatoes and beamed up at her grandmother, adoring her no matter what she said or did. I was glad the closeness I felt with my mom extended to my daughter. She would grow up being close to her too, and as I looked between Jenny and my mom as they ate and giggled over a silly thing, I realized they'd always had a certain closeness too.

Maybe next year, Sunny would finally lose that so-called temporary hair chalk. She'd be taller with another growth spurt, probably with a gap in her smile from losing her first tooth by then. Mom would be tanner after the long October trip to Arizona with my aunt that they had planned. They wanted to go to a hot air balloon festival, and she'd be here telling stories of what she saw. I would be first to demolish my plate and waiting for the delicious meal to end so we could move on to desserts, like every year. And we'd chat about the ridiculous parade because even though those things were the

same old, we never failed to check in and watch it, or not watch it.

I grinned as they chatted. The charming holiday scene before me was good enough for now, but I couldn't lose sight of the dream of repeating it next year. And the year after. And after. Jenny was a good fit to our trio, and not only for the sake of having an even number.

I knew that would come into play later when Sunny moved us on to the other tradition of the holiday where she'd dictate what games we just *had* to play. Partners. Two versus two. My mom speculated it would make it easier to beat our little genius, but I wasn't so sure.

And it didn't make a difference. Instead of a partnered game, we digested our food after being stuffed to the tune of Uno. It was such a simple card game, one of chance and luck, but against a card demon like Sunny, we were beat. Every round. She was kicking our asses. Mom was too competitive to ever let her win. Sometimes, I did but then she caught me on it and called me out. Jenny seemed to be playing to win, frowning when she got a Draw Two at the worst moments.

Sunny was in a vindictive mood to bring in all the victories she could.

While I shuffled the cards for another hand, Jenny turned toward Sunny. "Hey, kiddo. I've been waiting to ask how you like your new school. How's it going?"

Sunny shrugged. "I guess it's going all right."

"All right? That's it?" Jenny said.

"I like some of the kids in my class but my teacher is kind of..." She furrowed her brow as she seemed to search for the right word.

An asshole?

My mom didn't interrupt and Jenny didn't offer a suggestion. We let Sunny finish as she saw fit.

"Well, he's sort of rude," Sunny finally answered.

“Rude?” Jenny asked. “How so? What has he said that makes you say that?”

Sunny slotted her cards into a lineup in her hands as I dealt. “In math class last week, I answered a question but he didn’t like how I’d viewed the equation. I said the number bond could be broken down another level, but he said that wasn’t right.”

Jenny narrowed her eyes and faced me over Sunny’s head, mouthing, *What the hell is a number bond?*

“Mr. Marshall said I was wrong, and I told him I wasn’t because number bonds could be broken down further with doubles. He said that wasn’t correct yet. The class hadn’t discussed that method yet, and I wasn’t to bring it up.”

Jenny frowned. “Number bond like chemistry?”

“No. Just math. Like, six plus eight equals fourteen, but you can break the eight into four and four as doubles. Then the six and four make ten and it’s a faster way to see the fourteen.”

Jenny nodded slowly. It hardly mattered what the problem was in which subject. The guy was nitpicking.

“He said it contradicted what he was teaching, and I said he was contradicting what I knew. Then he said I didn’t understand the connotation of *contradict* in his context and I said I did, and that he should’ve said *denotation* not *connotation*.” She glanced at me, like a know-it-all. “Because those are *not* the same thing. But Mr. Marshall rolled his eyes and blew me off like I was a dumb kid who didn’t know what I was talking about.”

I’d already heard her story about this, but I’d been sitting with how I wanted to handle it. My first idea was to approach this asshole and tell him what I thought about making my kid feel like this, but I knew that wouldn’t be the most diplomatic way to address the situation. It didn’t matter how many days passed, my impression of that man hadn’t improved since the first.

“Some people are just grumpy,” my mom said. She lived up to her role as the loving and considerate grandma, insisting

peace could be maintained. She patted her hand. “And there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Sunny frowned at her cards.

“The way Mr. Marshall acts has nothing to do with you or any questions you ask,” Jenny advised. “You continue to be your wonderful self and disregard how that teacher wants to talk down to you.” She nodded at her. “He’s not worth your time to get mad. Let him be a grump, and you carry on being a smart sweetheart.”

“So I just ignore him?” Sunny asked her.

No.

“Yes,” my mom replied with a loving smile.

“For now,” Jenny said instead. “Until he compromises your ability to concentrate at school.”

“Then I’ll handle it,” I said, raising my voice.

Mom stood up, setting her cards down. Perhaps she sensed my mood changing. This was Thanksgiving, after all, and I wouldn’t ruin the mood here, but she must have felt the need for a change of tone and topic because she winked at Sunny. “How about you help me get those pumpkin pies to the table? I think we’ve got room for dessert now.”

Sunny hopped up, eager to pause her ass-kicking at cards to help prepare the desserts. It wasn’t the allure of sweets she wanted, but to be able to help and matter.

As soon as they left the room, I prepared to tell Jenny what I thought about this Mr. Marshall situation. Simply put, I didn’t like it one bit.

Before I could open my mouth, her phone rang.

“Hey, it’s my parents,” she said happily.

A video call filled the screen, and seated next to her at the table, I saw the small gathering. Even her nana was there. She’d told me that they were visiting her nana at the nursing home in Tennessee.

“Happy Thanksgiving!” she greeted, and they replied in kind. I leaned in, photobombing to chorus with Jenny. She giggled, letting me in the view.

Her mom needed a moment to place me. Her dad frowned, similarly confused. But Nana laughed loudly. “Well, you sure filled out into a handsome hunk, Ward!”

Mr. and Mrs. Halsey smiled at my name, and with jovial greetings full of surprise and welcome, I laughed and grinned, my mood brighter without a thought to spare for jerks like Sunny’s teacher.

CHAPTER 39



JENNY

I helped Lori bring all the dishes to the kitchen. Hers was bigger than Ward's but that made sense. If her Thanksgiving feast was anything to go by, the woman was, as she always had been as far back as I remembered, a master in the kitchen.

Ward had left us to help get Sunny into bed. With Black Friday tomorrow, The Cozy Company would be crazy busy with sales. Sunny would spend the night with her grandma, and between the tryptophan in the turkey and all the exercise of cracking up at Pictionary, she was likely close to falling asleep already. I felt bad for Ward, having to get up so early.

"He's the owner," Lori said at the sink as we cleaned the dishes together. "He doesn't *have* to get up early and be there."

I smiled. "He wants to. He's always said that his sales team is his bread and butter. He respects the people on the floor, and he goes above and beyond to show his support, which means going in on the craziest shopping day of the year and, as he puts it, 'helping them in the trenches.'"

She leaned in close to whisper unnecessarily. "Besides, it gives us girls a chance to go to the boutique she likes and I can splurge on her with new clothes."

"Are you trying to sneak in some spoiling?"

She barked a laugh. "Ha. Ward refuses to let that girl grow up entitled and spoiled. I stand by him with that. But he's clueless too. He doesn't *get* the girly stuff, and I try my best to take up the slack there."

I imagined he was glad for her to take over that part of parenting. I thought back to how he seemed down about not knowing how to treat Sunny to the full pampering for the wedding. I brought it up to Lori, reminding her that I'd look at my calendar and text her when we could take Sunny looking for a dress.

"Are you worried about this new teacher?" I asked her after she agreed about the dress plans.

"Worried? No. Not yet. But between you and me, the guy sounds like an ass."

I smiled. "You know, your son can be an ass, too," I teased.

"Oh, don't I know it." She moved on to drying while I finished with stacking. Once we repositioned ourselves at the counter and she set the dried plates aside, she faced me with her hip propped against the counter's edge. "I know Ward can be an asshole. It's his defense mechanism. Always has been."

I considered her opinion about that. Saying someone had a right to be an ass because it was a defense mechanism sounded like too simple of an excuse. As I looked back to all the times he'd been quick to anger, as an adult or as a teen, they *had* been times of being attacked or cornered. Ward reacted angrily when he had the need to stand up for himself or others. I realized I'd never really looked at him through that lens, assuming he was just a guy who didn't mind stirring up trouble.

Lori seemed to sense my pensive mood and train of thought. She didn't elaborate as I thought about what she said. She didn't try to pry on my excuses or reasons either. When she began filling takeout containers of leftovers for me to take home, she tried to explain more. "My son has made a lot of mistakes in his life. Everyone does, and he's no exception. But he's certainly made his share of mistakes when it came to love."

Are you saying he made a mistake in dumping me for Gwen? Or that he made a mistake by having a kid with her?

“After being betrayed so ruthlessly by Gwen, he’s had a hard time opening himself back up again. It was hard, too, being a young single parent. He didn’t make time for love because he lacked the freedom to do so, but he also built walls around his heart because he didn’t want to be hurt again.”

That made sense. I could sympathize with that. Because of the way he’d hurt me, I’d been slow to trust in the name of love again too. It was the reason why I still hesitated with him now, worried I could be setting myself up for a repeat of the past and ignoring that old saying of *fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me*.

“That’s why I’m so happy to see you coming around and having dinner with us tonight. You’re a good woman, Jenny, but also someone Ward already knows and trusts. You’re someone who used to stand by him no matter what, someone who’s always had a high level of integrity.”

Her words sounded like praise, but they hit me deeper. Uneasiness filled me.

Is that why Ward wanted to take me out and catch up when he saw me at the flagship store’s launch?

I winced, wondering if his initial intentions were based on wanting a familiar face and listening ear.

Is he only interested in me because I’m an easy fallback option after he’s been so unlucky in love? He struck out with Gwen, but thinking he was coming after me now for the convenience of it was a hard idea to swallow.

“I’m surprised you don’t promote your seasonal teas on your website more,” Lori said after a long while of too little conversation. I wasn’t sure if she was giving me a chance to think instead of pushing me to keep going on with that topic or if she didn’t know what to talk about.

I blinked, leaving my worries and thoughts aside, pretending I wasn’t in my head.

“You’ve looked at my website?” I asked.

She laughed. “I already had been! I didn’t know those teas were yours. I tried them a year ago and signed up for your

newsletter. I went back and looked at your teas after Ward mentioned that you wanted to sell them at his stores. You have some harvest-themed ones, but you don't point them out as such."

I nodded, grateful for this safe topic to move on to. "I considered categorizing them as seasonal. The harvest and Thanksgiving ones, then general fall flavors. I've got a variety that could be shared as winter flavors, both to do with holidays or just the season. But I wasn't sure if I wanted to go too far with those ideas yet. My goal is to make packages, like a sampler per season, but then I was thinking about rebranding and starting over with the website. And then there was that big meeting with The Cozy Company board. I feel like if they like the tea and want to sell a couple of blends to try out as a product, maybe I should wait on a full rebranding and packaging attempt until I see how that impacts the business."

"Smart." Lori stacked the takeout containers in a bag. "That wouldn't be too hard to do, too. Keep the apples and pumpkins for fall. Oh, and the nutmeg ones. So many spices for autumn. Then you've got the standard mints, heavier spices, and chestnuts for winter." She grinned. "This would be so much fun. You could go any which way with the creatives of bunching them together."

Ward entered the kitchen and swiped his finger through a dollop of whipped cream. His mom smacked at his hand and put the pie back in the fridge.

He grinned with his tongue still on his finger, and I immediately blushed. I didn't look at him with worry, wondering what he wanted from me. Like this, with that secretive, teasing smirk, I thought back to the innuendo Sunny didn't know about when she mentioned sausage links and whipped cream as pizza toppings.

"What's that huge smile for?" Lori asked him when she turned from the fridge.

Oh, crap. My cheeks burned hotter. He had to be thinking the same thing with that whipped cream reference.

“I just got off my phone. An email came in as I put Sunny to bed and I checked it before joining you ladies here.”

“Oh?” Lori glanced between me and him.

He looked straight at me, grinning. “The board loved your pitch, babe. They want to sell your teas. I told you they would.”

I smiled and my heart raced with excitement. “Really? They want to start with some samples in town?”

He shook his head. “Nope. They want to sell *all* of your blends, even the ones they didn’t try. At all locations as soon as possible.”

I gasped, and Lori clapped, whooping quietly so as not to wake Sunny.

“Told you.” He winked.

I was elated. Beyond excited and so thrilled. *All* my teas! Even the ones they didn’t taste personally. That was a huge sign of trust.

I refused to let them down, but once the vision of pouring all my current blends came to my mind, I saw how crowded I’d be in the kitchen at home. How I’d claim all the counter space and be hurrying to sort it all out in between my shifts at the gardening center.

As swiftly as I’d been elated, I was instantly overwhelmed. How the hell would I keep up? How would I manage this? This was part of my reluctance to grow my business, afraid it would become a monster too big to handle.

“What’s that look for?” Ward asked, quick to read me as a slow frown tugged on my face.

“It’s just that I’m going to have a *lot* of work on my hands.” *Maybe too much that I can’t handle it solo.*

I thought back to when Lauren’s Room Up company blew up overnight. I’d stayed up late with her making packages and assisting so she wouldn’t crash and burn. My teas were different than her boxes of room décor. I knew that. My tea supplies didn’t take up a ton of space, and I knew my business

growth would be kept in check because it was a niche demand. Not *everyone* was a tea drinker, but still. It was the time commitment that I'd be struggling with.

"I can help." Lori offered with such a chipper voice that I worried she was merely speaking up out of compassion.

I glanced at her, brows raised at her sincere smile and the excitement in her eyes. Lori would be a good fit. She was into horticulture like I was.

She set her hands on her hips, sort of smug. "As a retired grandma, I have free time from nine to two thirty, Monday through Friday." She lifted her brows with a smile that asked, *what do you say?*

I smiled right back, hopeful with this huge task before me.

"I just might take you up on that offer."

CHAPTER 40



WARD

I met up with Colby after a long week in the offices. I had made sure to check out how Jenny's first day at the stores went with her teas, and thinking back to that day had me grinning like an idiot in love. I cleared my throat and hid my smile before Colby could notice. He was eager to tell me something. I could tell. We hadn't had much time to hang out lately, and I wanted to make sure he had my full attention now that we'd found a night to catch up.

"How's the newlywed life going then?" I asked.

He texted me often, but that wasn't the same as seeing him in person.

"Good. Good." He grinned. "Thanksgiving was kind of interesting though."

"In a good way?" I asked as our beers came.

"Hmmm. No. Lots of relatives were nagging Naomi about when she'd be announcing a baby on the way."

Ouch. I winced.

"Yeah." He nodded at my expression. "It's like as soon as we got married, we'd be pumping out kids left and right."

It was a sensitive topic at any time of a person's life. I knew how much they'd been trying for a kid before he'd proposed and they married. Naomi had concerns about fertility, so of course this would bother them.

“And you know, we’re trying. We’ve been trying. I guess it just felt extra intrusive. Because if we can’t conceive, then we’ll start looking at fertility treatments or adoptions, and it’s just harder on her.”

I shook my head. “No one should bring that up, period. That’s just not the shit someone should be soliciting news for. I’m sorry you had to deal with that.”

“Thanks, man. I mean, every day we’re hopeful. Fingers crossed. And other than that, it’s perfect. We’re making it a thing to christen every tree at our house.” He winked.

I furrowed my brow. “To screw outside by every tree in the yard? Now? I’d wait until summer.”

He cracked up. “Christmas trees, you idiot.”

I laughed harder than him.

“Naomi’s got so many of them up, I figured I should have some fun with it too.”

“And hey, if one of those trees is the lucky one where you got lucky, you’ll have a hell of a conception story.”

He snorted and shook his head. “So you’re still going to Gwen’s wedding?”

It was only a couple of weeks away now. I nodded. “Only for Sunny. Are you guys going?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah. I told Naomi I’d go if you went, and she said she only wants to go because Sunny would be in it.”

It meant the world to me that my friends supported her so much.

“But Naomi’s still miffed that Gwen used our housewarming party to announce her engagement. And most of the guests were strangers to her!”

I chuckled.

“My mom was so damn confused. She kept asking who that woman was and if it was a prank.”

“Classic Gwen.”

“Yeah.” He gave me a funny look. “But she’s changed over the years too. Sure, she always used to be the hot mean girl in high school, but now?” He shook his head.

“She’s still a mean girl.” I couldn’t see how he wouldn’t continue to categorize her like that. “She abandoned me and our daughter. She ran off to live her best life wherever and however her heart desired. And now she’s only back cashing in the mom card so she can have a cute kid in her wedding.”

“Why do you think she even wants Sunny in her bridal party?”

“For how it would look.”

Colby grinned. “Well, yeah. Sunny is adorable. But Gwen isn’t exactly a kid-friendly sort of person.”

“She doesn’t have a maternal fiber in her body.” I sighed and drank my beer before replying. “I suspect she’s doing it because of Kenneth’s family. She said something like that. Or he did. That his parents would stop asking him for a grandkid if they see that Gwen already has a kid.”

He rolled his eyes. “Uh, that wouldn’t mean Sunny would be his in any way.”

“Hell no,” I agreed. “But for the sake of appearances, you know? They probably know Gwen has a daughter and they might wonder why she wasn’t in the wedding. Or even there as a guest.”

“Yeah. That makes sense. But it’s pretty shitty. Poor Sunny.”

My best friend was her honorary uncle, and I knew he meant that statement from the bottom of his heart.

“I know. It’s a crappy position to be in as her father, and if she knew the truth, she’d be hurt. One day, when she’s older, she’s going to have a lot of hard questions for me.”

“She already does. I remember the day she asked you where babies came from.”

I laughed with him. “Thank goodness Naomi was at the barbecue and gave her a decent answer.”

“She hedged, man.”

“One day, Sunny will have hard questions for me about her mother. And right now, I’m not sure how I’ll answer them.”

He patted my back. “Like you do everything else. Honestly.”

Of course, I would be as honest and direct as possible, but it would suck. I already felt like I had to refrain from blurting out what was on my mind. Sooner or later, I would forget to bite my tongue and give Sunny a raw and blunt opinion.

“I’m amazed you can keep a level head with all her bullshit. You never even paint her in a bad light.”

I slanted my brows at him, doubting that. “Really?”

“Okay. You don’t paint Gwen in a bad light around Sunny.”

“I can’t. She’s still her mom.”

“Do you think she’ll want to ever ditch her? You know, like one day she’ll grow up and think hmmm, thanks, no thanks?”

I shrugged. “That would be her decision, not mine.”

“I can’t see what Sunny gets from knowing her at all. I know they’re not completely estranged, but do you think Sunny loves her?”

“No. Not really, but I feel like she must know she *should* love her, or at least like her. Sometimes she’ll comment about other kids’ moms picking them up. Other kids who have their moms bring them their lunches when they forgot. But then she also observes how some never see either of their workaholic or uninterested parents because the nannies and household staff and assistants are being present and filling the parental roles.”

“And that crap about her picking her up from school?” he said, shaking his head. “That’s just messed up.”

“It was.” I’d texted him the basics.

We ordered another round, and once we had our new drinks, it seemed Colby was ready for less depressing talk. “I noticed how you and Jenny were laughing a lot at the housewarming party.”

I tilted my head. “Hmm?”

“Yeah. Naomi was talking about it last night and she happened to mention that you’d asked her for her number.”

I smiled, not making eye contact. He had been there the first time I was deeply attracted to Jenny, and it seemed like déjà vu for him to be ribbing me about it all over again now.

“What’s going on there?”

“She’s a friend. And more.”

He rolled his eyes. “I could pick that up already. But what do you mean *more*?”

“She really stepped up for me when Sunny was taken. We’d been hanging out here and there. Texting and calling. She called me that day, actually right after my mom let me know Sunny wasn’t at school and that Gwen had taken her. I snapped at her, and damn, I felt terrible about it, but I was so worried. Then she happened to see her. She’s the one who saw Sunny alone on the sidewalk. She brought her into a café and got her a hot cocoa after she called me to get Sunny. Gwen stormed in there acting like a bitch, and Jenny wouldn’t let her take her again.”

He whistled. “Wow.”

“She’s great with her. Talks to her, not over her or about her. She makes her feel included and is so quick to laugh and joke with her. She’s been a huge help with all this drama. She’s even offered to take her dress shopping with my mom since Gwen won’t.”

I smiled, not caring if he saw just how happy I was about Jenny being back in my life again. “She’s dependable and good and...”

“Beautiful?” Colby teased.

I chuckled. “Are you trying to play matchmaker?”

“Maybe.”

“Eh. Mind your own business. Jenny and I have our thing going on, but I’m not sure where it’s going. I don’t want to ruin it or jinx it by putting that news out there in the universe too early.”

He rolled his eyes. “That’s bullshit and you know it. If you care about Jenny, you should want the world to know. That’s how I feel about Naomi. Back when we were kids and now as an adult.”

“Obviously. You married her.”

“Dude, you screwed it up once with Jenny. I was there. Don’t mess it up again.”

I smirked. “My mom already beat you to that advice.”

He kicked up one brow. “Then make sure you listen to one of us.”

“It’s complicated. We’ve got history, but we get along so well. I can see where I want this to go, but I’m not sure if she can trust me. She said she forgives me for the way I dumped her for Gwen but I can tell she’s still guarded.”

It stung when she hesitated about Thanksgiving. At first, I thought she was just worked up from the stress and nerves of her tea pitch for the board, but I couldn’t help but wonder why it wouldn’t have been an instant yes.

She enjoyed me. She seemed to enjoy Sunny, and she hadn’t seemed to lose her touch with my mom. I figured the only thing she might have balked at was the fact that a family holiday dinner was a bigger sign of commitment. It hurt to consider her reluctance to tie herself with me and the package I represented with a kid and crazy ex.

I didn’t need my friend or mom to remind me that this was a second chance I shouldn’t screw up.

I knew that, and that made the stakes so high with her.

If I messed up this time, I doubted I would get a chance to try to win her and keep her a third time.

CHAPTER 41



JENNY

I checked through my inventory and made sure I would have enough materials to make the first drop-off of teas to the offices for The Cozy Company arrangement. Then I grabbed my purse and headed out to Lori's house. The day had finally come for me to treat Sunny to her special pampering day.

I figured Lori would be the best to drive since Sunny had been in her car before. Ward was super busy with a special holiday sale at the stores, and again, like on Black Friday, he didn't have to be there but wanted to. He sure went the extra mile with his sales crew, and I had to imagine they appreciated having such a hands-on and present boss.

I pulled up at Lori's both amazed and startled that it was already the middle of December. *And so late to find a dress, too.*

I sure hoped we would get something acceptable for Sunny today. I didn't get the sense that she was excited to be in *Gwen's* wedding, just that she would be in *a* wedding. I wouldn't ask. The girl's motivations and thoughts were hers to keep to herself if she wanted to, and it would be awkward to ask.

Lori grinned, coming to my car before I could even put it fully into park. She headed to the passenger door, though, not my window on the driver's side to tell me where to park in her driveway. She opened the door and climbed in.

"Aren't you driving?" I asked.

"Nah." She waved. "I've got a little bit of a headache."

“Uh oh.”

“Just sinus pressure. You know how common that can be in this season. I’m fine to shop and help the princess feel princessy.” She buckled in. “Not that I agree with her being in *her* wedding. And no, I didn’t just say that out loud.”

“You will hear no opposition from me.”

“Shoot. Wait.” She jumped out, dashed over to her car, and came back with a booster seat. She climbed back in and smiled. “Now let’s go pick up the princess.”

We picked up Sunny at a friend’s house, and I recognized the girl from Naomi and Colby’s wedding. She spotted me too as she waved goodbye to Sunny at the end of their play date. “Hi, zombie lady!”

I smiled awkwardly and waved. *Of course, they’ll never freaking forget that conversation at the wedding.* They’d be telling their grandkids that story.

“What’d she say?” Lori asked as she helped Sunny get in the booster seat in the back.

“Uh, hi, wombie daisy?” I shrugged. “The silly things kids say.”

“No, she called you a zombie lady,” Sunny piped up from the backseat.

I set my forehead on the steering wheel and groaned.

“What?” Lori giggled.

“You don’t forget anything, do you?” I glanced in the rearview mirror.

Sunny gave me a smile that mimicked her namesake. “Nope.”

“Well, consider me curious,” Lori said as I drove to the first store.

I licked my lips. “I wanted to hide from people at Naomi’s wedding and I ended up at the kids’ table.”

“She tried to tell us she didn’t want to eat the cake because she wasn’t sure if they used the good dyes,” Sunny added. “But another kid thought she meant *die*. Like dead.”

“Which somehow turned into the baker of the cake being dead and the cake would make everyone zombies.” I shrugged.

Lori laughed.

“Don’t forget about the sparklers,” Sunny added. “They thought the candles were sparklers and that was how the zombie baker died and infected the cake.”

Ward’s mom wiped her face to clear the last of her tears. “I can just see it. The way things snowball like that. Oh boy.” She trailed off into weak giggles. Her abs had to have had quite the workout there.

We went through three stores on our dress-shopping trip and found nothing that Sunny liked. Well, she liked several dresses, but they didn’t match the criteria Gwen had set forth in the long list she’d emailed Ward. He’d forwarded it to me so I would know what to look for.

“What about this one?” Lori asked, holding up a pink dress. It looked like spun sugar with layers of lace and the softest peachy pink fabric.

I shot her a hard smirk.

She grinned, tilting her head to the side. “It’s just so cute!”

“It looks like bubblegum.” Sunny did the head tilt too and I had to smile at how similar they looked. Like grandma, like granddaughter.

“It also looks nothing like what Gwen wants,” I reminded Lori. She knew what the “rules” were. She just didn’t care, not taking this seriously likely because of her dislike of the bride.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever,” Lori replied good-naturedly.

“What’s it gotta look like again?” Sunny asked, pulling my hand toward another mannequin. “Oooh. What about this one?”

She was like a squirrel, darting from one shiny, adorable dress to another.

“No, that’s not what your mom wants either.” The one she gazed at with sparkles in her eyes was all white and silver. It looked like a Lilliputian wedding gown, and it definitely appealed to a princess-loving girl like Sunny. If she wore this to the wedding, Gwen would insist she was stealing her thunder.

I snorted. *Like she had at Naomi’s wedding, wearing something white too?*

“What’s the color theme again?” Lori asked as she came toward us in the large boutique.

I gave her another amused look. She damn well knew. I’d given her my phone while I drove, and she had given intermittent hums and grunts in response to the images Gwen had sent Ward.

I looked at them again on my phone, scrolling through the examples of the color palette. She wanted Sunny to have a dark-blue dress, something inky but not navy. It was supposed to fit with her silver midnight wedding theme, like a dark winter look even though it was unlikely we’d see any snow until the next year.

“I have to admit this does look very pretty.” She’d included images of the venue, and other weddings decorated with a similar theme. “It’ll be gorgeous.”

Lori snorted, rifling through dresses on a long rack. “On the outside. The ceremony will be pretty, but the marriage? Ha. Gwen is all about what looks good on the outside, but she has no idea of the quality of what’s on the inside.”

I’d known since junior high that Gwen was superficial and obsessed with appearances. That feature had only evolved over the years, apparently, because I couldn’t have said that better myself. The wedding would look good, but that didn’t indicate the substance put into it.

“There has to be something here that’ll work,” Lori muttered, narrowing her eyes as she glanced around.

“There probably is.” I scanned the store too. “But finding it is another matter.”

Lori had steered us here because she claimed this place specialized in children’s formal attire. It sure did. We’d passed multiple child-size mannequins of boys in tuxes and girls in fancy gowns. But it was just so big.

We were determined, though, and with Lori and I branching off in two directions to find something for Sunny, we ended up with a crazy number of dresses for Sunny to try on. Lori seemed to broaden her search criteria to choosing dresses that had any dark blue in them, even if the dress wasn’t that color itself.

Sunny was a trooper, heading into the dressing room over and over again. Each time, she insisted she didn’t need help. Without buttoning anything on the back, she just slipped the garments on, one after the other, to get a quick pass or veto vote from Lori and me.

Sunny adamantly refused Lori’s presence in the fitting room when she took a dress back there that had a lot of ties and fasteners.

“She’s so damn independent,” Lori told me quietly.

“I think she’s just loving this.” I gestured at her dramatically shoving the curtain aside with such sass, then strutting out to us like she was a model on the runway.

I shook my head at the dress.

“But I like it!” Sunny protested.

“Yeah, I do too,” Lori said.

“It’s not blue at all.”

Sunny sighed and returned to try on the next dress.

Lori cupped her hands and yelled, “We’ll get that one just because.”

“I thought she wasn’t to be spoiled, Grandma,” I teased.

“Oh, she can wear it for something else. She looked so happy.”

I smiled, knowing how hard it was to deny her anything with that radiant smile.

At last, we found one that Sunny liked, that Lori admitted was cute and practical with no confusing ties, and that I insisted would fall within Gwen's parameters of the color palette.

With the dress chosen, we moved on to the hair salon. Lori's sinuses were irritated even more here with the products sprayed in the air, but she was a good sport, standing close to give her opinions to Sunny's stylist and also participate in girl talk. Sunny thought I was so "cool" to let her have a flute like the adults. I'd turned down the stylist's offer of champagne but I did take a glass of bubbly juice in solidarity with Sunny.

Ward's credit card covered the expenses. Even though it seemed like we were spending a lot, because the dress and hair were pricy, Sunny didn't choose anything else. Lori got her the one dress as a gift, but I was very impressed with Sunny's down-to-earth lack of materialism. She had to understand that her dad's card could buy her anything, but she didn't ask for the sake of wanting something to have.

Once we were back in the car, Lori yawned, setting off a chain reaction of me yawning, then Sunny. "It didn't seem like we were gone for long."

I laughed and pointed at the dashboard. "We were."

"And it was exhausting."

"But Daddy hasn't seen it yet." Sunny kept lifting her butt off the booster seat to see her reflection in the rearview mirror, smiling at her hair. It was a simple straighten and half twist, but it was an elegant and adorable look on her brown tresses. "I can't wait to show him both dresses. And my hair."

"Oh." I snapped my fingers. "We'll do the manis and pedis closer to the wedding, okay?"

"Really?" She gasped, beaming at me.

"Yep. We'll do that closer because we wouldn't want to dirty it beforehand."

“Hold on,” Lori said, frowning out her window. “Maybe you two could wow Ward with the things we found today. I think I’d be better off going home.”

“Don’t you feel good, Grandma?” Sunny asked.

“Oh, just a cold. I want a nap is all.”

“We can make sure you have soup,” Sunny said.

I smiled, touched that this girl would be so nurturing to the woman who usually held that role for her. She was so generous. I didn’t know many other kids to compare her to, but I doubted all of them her age were this altruistic and caring.

“No, no. It’s nothing. I’m just tired.”

“Are you sure you want to miss the big fashion show?” I teased.

She doted on Sunny so much, I bet she would hate to see her acting like a princess with her new things.

“I’m sure,” Lori said as I turned toward her house. “You can film it for me and I’ll enjoy it later.” She turned to smile at Sunny. “You strut your stuff and show off to your dad.”

“I will!” she promised with glee.

CHAPTER 42



WARD

I got home earlier than I thought I would, but no one was here. A quick look at my phone showed me Jenny's last text of an update. They would be here any minute, and I couldn't wait to see what Sunny chose to wear. It was a good thing Jenny had volunteered to help. If I left the dress selection to my mom, she would have dismissed the criteria Gwen emailed me.

Doors slammed shut outside, and I paused in scrolling through emails on my phone to peek out the window. Jenny had just arrived, and they were busy pulling out bags from the car.

"I really hope I'll get a puppy for Christmas," Sunny told her.

My eyes went wide. *What?* I doubted they realized the windows were open to let the breeze in near the sunroom. *A puppy?*

At her last school, they'd been practicing persuasive writing and each student had to pen a letter to their parents explaining why they wanted one pet or another. It wasn't a serious ask, and Sunny confided in me that she almost went with a fictional animal, a unicorn butterfly. But the more she thought about it, having a puppy would be great.

Then, she expounded on her research of dog breeds, and I should have taken notice of her interest there.

"A puppy? Wow. That's, um, that would be an interesting Christmas present," Jenny said as she unbuckled her.

“During my free period, I go on the computer and look up information all about dog breeds.”

“There are so many.”

Sunny stepped out of the car. “Yeah, but I know what my dream breed is.”

I rubbed a hand over my face. This wasn’t a silly idea. She was serious.

Fuck!

I had to give Jenny credit. She maintained a straight face. “And what’s that?”

“I want to adopt an abandoned Great Dane puppy with big black spots on tan fur.” Sunny boldly stated it, suggesting she would never change her mind.

“That’s very specific,” I mumbled.

“It could be like a pony,” Jenny joked.

I rolled my eyes. *At least she’s not outright asking for one of those.*

“What do you think?” Sunny asked her as she took the two bags Jenny handed her.

“About what?”

Sunny laughed. “The puppy!”

“Well, my first thought is that he or she would have awfully big poops to clean up.”

“I bet. I looked up how large the doggie-poop bags are that they sell at the closest pet store.”

I smiled. That was my girl, always thinking of everything.

Jenny took the last bags out of the car and shut the door. “You’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s a big responsibility. I’d have to work hard. But I always wanted a brother or sister and I think this will be the closest I could get.”

I went still. Her words hit me hard and my heart ached. This wasn't the first time Sunny had mentioned wanting a bigger family. She didn't talk about it often, but she showed a deep desire to feel like she belonged. I couldn't surround her with a bigger family yet. I couldn't even count on her mother to stay in her life.

I would have loved to give Sunny a sibling, but for so many years, until I saw Jenny, I couldn't even think about starting anything with another woman to make that happen. Nor would I just for the sake of appeasing Sunny. If and when I brought another kid into the world, it would be intentional, with someone I could trust. I had a hard habit of always using a condom because of not wanting to make a mistake, and it would be a long while until I could lower my guard to trust a woman that much again.

I frowned, watching Jenny for her reaction. "That's one way to look at it."

"Grandma said you don't have any brothers or sisters," Sunny said as she followed Jenny toward the front door.

"Not really. But I live in a house with three of my best friends. And they're like sisters."

"Wow!" Sunny stopped on the drive, gawking up at her.

Jenny nodded. "We were friends in college, and we decided we loved being around each other so much, we should live together."

"I can't wait for college then! I want to live in a house with my friends." Her shoulders slumped. "Wait. No. I don't. I can't move away from Daddy or Grandma. I'd miss them too much."

"You've got a long time before that'll come," Jenny replied as they walked along the drive again.

"Yeah. I guess you're right. And my puppy would be like a brother or sister in the meantime. After the mama dog leaves the puppy on the street, somebody will have to find it and bring it to a shelter, where I can adopt it."

Another pang hit my heart at her words. After the mom abandoned her puppy? She had to be pulling a parallel to her own life, and I hated that she'd been born into this motherless situation.

Before the conversation could go any further, they reached the front door.

I sighed, wiping the emotion off my face and trying to look surprised and not like I'd been listening in. Sunny didn't often talk about Gwen, but I appreciated that she trusted Jenny enough to share with her.

"Ward?" Jenny called out as the door opened.

"Over here," I replied.

"Don't look!" Sunny insisted. "My hair is done and I want to surprise you with my dress!"

"Okay, okay." I cringed. I already saw her out the window.

"How about this?" Jenny asked her. "I'll go in first and block you by holding my jacket up like a shield, then you run in behind me until we reach your room."

"Yeah!"

I turned, giving the front door my back, but I still saw in the reflection of the window how Jenny side-walked like a peacock, fanning her coat and bags out to block Sunny.

"Daddy!" Sunny yelled behind me. "Don't look. Close your eyes."

"She's going to show you the whole look," Jenny reminded me.

"Okay. Okay!" I smiled. "I'll go sit in the living room and wait."

I sat on the couch, waiting and curious what could be taking them so long in there. Before I stood and paced, Jenny came out and announced in a loud voice while she curtsied, "I present Princess Scientist Dr. Sunny Elizabeth Emerson,"

I raised my brows at her. "Scientist?" I asked quietly as her door opened.

She nodded, also talking quietly. “Also, did you know she wants a dog for Christmas?”

“Shit,” I murmured, not giving away that I’d heard already. “I bet my mom gave her the idea.”

As Sunny’s dainty little footsteps sounded down the hallway, Jenny dropped into a deeper and more elaborate curtsy for her to walk past.

That yoga really makes her flexible.

Sunny giggled, hurrying in her little heels as she rushed toward me.

“Wow!” I gasped as she came to the center of the living room. She switched her style, though, strutting from side to side, one arm down as she showed off like she was a model on the runway now. Jenny and I clapped and whistled, hooting and hollering for her.

She ran up to me and did another twirl.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

“I love it! Jenny found it.”

I smiled at her. *Thank you. Thank you for picking up the slack where I can’t, and thank you for listening to her.*

“I feel like a princess scientist,” Sunny said. “Royal and brilliant.”

I tilted my head to the side. “What kind of scientist? I don’t see a white lab coat.”

“Don’t be silly, Daddy. It wouldn’t go with this dress or these shoes.” She tipped her chin up. “I’m gonna be an air pollution scientist and help the earth!”

I clapped harder. “No more dreams about being a geologist?”

She grimaced. “Eh. Fossils are still cool, but I think fresh air matters more.”

“Smart girl.” I chuckled.

“Were you surprised, Daddy?”

“That you’d look perfect? No. You already did and always will. I am surprised you found such a perfect dress.”

“It took a long time. Grandma Lori kept finding dresses that didn’t have much blue.”

I rolled my eyes and shared a look with Jenny.

“I have a surprise for you, too,” I said.

She gasped. “A puppy?”

Jenny slapped a hand over her mouth to keep her laughter in.

“Just wait here, okay?” I replied, loosening the knot of my tie as I went.

I returned with a small gift box. Sunny lit up at the sight of it and sat on the floor. She looked so delicate and innocent with her dark-blue dress fanned out around her. I crouched down to her level, always making sure to meet her in the middle instead of looking down at her. I strove to be considerate in so many small ways that would matter to her.

I watched her grin as she tore off the paper to the box. Her excitement was palpable and it was impossible not to smile. Her joy was infectious, and Jenny wasn’t any better. She grinned at her, held in suspense as Sunny tore the package open. With such a rapt expression of excitement on her face, too, I saw how much she liked to dote on her too.

Mouth open and eyes wide, Sunny lifted a pretty necklace into the air. Silver sparkled in the light, and she let out a sound of wonder as it swayed from her fingers. “Wow, Daddy! It’s so pretty!”

“I went out and bought it today before I came home. I’m sorry I couldn’t have been there to help you shop, but I wanted to make sure I got you something to go with your dress.”

I couldn’t give her everything she wanted, but I always did my best.

“I love it!” She tore her gaze from it and smiled widely. “Thank you, Daddy!” She lunged forward and hugged me

fiercely, her little arms wrapped around my neck. I smiled back, closing my eyes as I held her tight and picked her up.

Pure happiness filled me as I held her. I loved this girl so damn much that I couldn't understand how she would dream up an abandoned puppy with a mama dog not wanting it. I cherished her so much I wished I could fill the role of two parents instead of one.

The sound of a sniffle had me opening my eyes.

"Excuse me." Jenny sniffled again, catching Sunny's attention.

"Jen Jen? What's wrong?"

She turned away, hiding the evidence of her emotional face.

I grew alarmed, confused. "Jenny?"

She lifted her hand and headed toward the kitchen.

"Jenny!" Sunny called out. "I want to show you my necklace!"

She hurried to the bathroom, leaving me speechless.

"Maybe it's her time of the month?" Sunny guessed.

My eyes went wide before I looked down at my daughter. "Do you even know what that means?"

She furrowed her brow. "No. But I heard Grandma say it before." She tipped her head to the side. "What *does* that mean, Daddy?"

Dammit, Mom! "Um, it's complicated."

She nodded. "Oh. Another adult thing you don't want to explain right now." She shrugged. "Will you explain it someday?"

"Yeah. Yeah, when you're older, but hey. It's not something you can say whenever a lady is upset. It's kind of mean."

She pouted. "But I don't even know what it means! I'm not trying to be rude."

I shook my head. “How about you just don’t mention it anymore?”

“Okay. Can I watch *Bluey*?”

“Sure.” Anything to get me out of that complicated layered discussion. I glanced at the bathroom door, still worried about why Jenny would have been emotional.

After a few moments, she returned to us in the living room. As soon as I heard her coming, I stood and met her before she left the open-air kitchen.

“Hey,” I said carefully. “What was that about?”

She shook her head. “Some other time.”

“How about later tonight? I ordered dinner, and Sunny is hoping you’ll watch *Elf* with us tonight.”

“Will Farrell? Yeah, some comedy would help.” She smiled. “Sure.”

I held her to that *later* because as soon as I finished putting Sunny to bed, I got us a couple of glasses of wine and settled onto the couch with her.

“What made you emotional earlier?”

She shrugged. “Just seeing how you are with her. I’m proud of you. You’re a good dad, Ward. A good person.”

I didn’t speak for a long moment, smiling at her with a goofy feeling. “You have no idea what that compliment means to me. I’m not proud of much in my life, but I’m damned proud of being Sunny’s dad.”

She grinned at me before I leaned in to kiss her. I wasn’t gentle or patient, parting her lips and giving her a taste of the red wine on my tongue. She moaned, curling her fingers around the back of my neck as I lowered her to my chest.

Just when I felt like I would drown in lust or pass out from the need for air, I parted my mouth from hers and gazed up at her. Damn, did I need her. “Will you stay the night?”

She sighed, clearly tempted. “I have teas to pack tomorrow.”

I furrowed my brow and kissed her again, longer this time in hopes of drugging her with a desire too powerful to ignore. “Are you sure?” I slipped my hand up her back and pulled her against me until she felt my erection.

“About leaving?” She shook her head and grabbed my tie. “Your kisses are too damn tempting to resist.” She lowered her mouth to mine and nipped on my lower lip. “I’m all yours, but I need to leave early in the morning.”

I grinned. “Oh, you’re mine, huh?”

She shivered in my arms. I stood, took her hand, and led her to my room. “Then let me have whatever you’ll give me so I don’t miss a single moment until sunrise.”

CHAPTER 43



JENNY

My heart raced faster with every step I took. Ward didn't let go of my hand, holding it tight and firm in his. He looked back at me with a smoldering intensity before he opened the door to his room, as though he wanted to make sure I was still here with him. Like he needed to see me following him to believe this was happening.

I understood that feeling all too well, the wonder and amazement that we had forged a way to be together again after the years we'd been apart.

"You want to be mine tonight?" He whispered it as he leaned back to shut the door behind me and lock it.

I refused to cling to the way he said *tonight*. Implying *only* this night. That wouldn't be true. This wasn't the first night we'd be sharing, and the intense need in his eyes suggested this night wouldn't be enough to satisfy him either.

I nodded, ignoring all my thoughts and worries. I meant what I told Rylee the other day. I was going into this with my eyes wide open. But right now, I turned off my cautiousness. I wanted to explore whatever he had in mind for me.

I felt raw after that unexpected burst of emotions. It hadn't been easy for me to admit aloud that I was proud of him. I wasn't proud of how he'd treated me before high school, but maybe it was time to finally drop that grudge. Telling him that I was proud of him made me vulnerable. I was putting myself out there that much farther and giving him more of my heart. And now I was eager to give him my body and let him take

what he wanted. Sex was simple. Sex was what I needed to dispel this growing need to admit how much I was letting him under my skin. It would stop me from thinking about how much I wanted to let him all the way in and realize love might be in the cards—real, adult, and mature love.

“Yours.” I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry.

He stalked through the room. I backpedaled, captivated by the want in his smirking face. He was powerful, so tall and rugged in the suit he hadn’t taken the time to change out of yet. The way he looked at me kept me right where he wanted me.

I didn’t have any time to distract myself or think about anything else. He wasn’t giving me a chance to think up a plan of how to play hard to get, or any other defense mechanism before letting him take what he wanted. Every step he took toward me had me feeling that much more like cornered prey. He was the predator, intent on ravishing me, on devouring me, and a tingle of excitement coursed through me at the thought of it.

“However you want me,” I added, hoping I sounded sexy and sultry, not intimidated. I wanted to submit to this alpha vibe he gave off. He was in charge, and I would follow along.

I wasn’t usually this quick to surrender, but after the strange up and down of spending time with Sunny like I had, and getting closer to seeing Ward as the new man he was, I didn’t trust myself not to screw this up. I wanted him to lead me. He could call the shots this time, and I was more than willing to let him.

The backs of my knees hit the bed, and I lowered to the mattress, keeping my gaze on his. I sank onto the soft surface, and he reached out to brush my hair back from my face. His caress was slow and his stare was melting me. It wouldn’t matter where he looked or touched, he would make me feel alive and needy.

He kept his hand on the side of my face, dragging his thumb along my jaw until he brushed it over my lip. His fingertip nudged there, and I slipped my tongue out to lick it. I

laved his thumb and sucked it, causing a wicked smile on his face.

His chest rose and fell faster as he watched my mouth. Then he removed his hand to drop his finger to my shirt. He pushed down at the collar once, implying that he wanted it gone.

I didn't wait for his words. I reached back to pull off my shirt, but when I moved my fingers to undo my bra—not a sports bra, for once, since I didn't go to the gardening center today—he put his hands under my arms and lifted me with ease.

I stood up from the bed as he buried his face in my chest. He ran his nose up the valley between my breasts, then alternated between nipping at each one. With his teeth, he pulled the lacy edge of my bra cup down, tasting the hard beaded nipple that pointed out for him.

Threading my fingers through his hair, I held him close and exhaled a long, needy breath. This was what he wanted? Another slow and tortuous night like at the hotel. I wouldn't go back on my word. He could take whatever he wanted from me tonight, but I wasn't sure how prepared I was for another long slow buildup of a hard orgasm.

He stepped back, lowering me to my feet. Once he released me, dropping his hands, he gripped the waistband of my jeans and tugged. I got the message. I popped the button and dropped them along with my panties. As soon as I stepped out of them and nudged them aside, he took hold of the back of my neck and pulled me in close for a hard kiss. I laid my hand on his chest, feeling the fast tempo of his heartbeat as he sucked my tongue in and brushed his demanding lips over mine until they had to be swollen and tender in the best way possible. When he pushed down, his fingers splaying out wider to not hold me but guide me, I was confused.

He took my hand and moved it toward his pants, and I figured it out.

I kissed toward his neck, undoing the buttons on his shirt until it hung open on his broad frame. Then I trailed my lips

lower yet, spreading kisses from his neck, over his collarbone, and toward his pecs. I traced the ridges of his muscles. Then my fingers made quick work of his button and zipper, and I lowered his pants and boxers until I could sink to the carpet.

On my knees, I took hold of his cock. It was long, thick, and leaking drops of glistening juices at the tip. I couldn't help but lick my lips, tantalized by the sight of this thick dick I hadn't seen up close yet.

I stroked it, moving my gaze up to his. One look of the furious desire in his eyes almost made me come. Was this for him? Or me? Was he giving me pleasure in the chance to get this big cock in my mouth or was he insisting I deliver for his own need? Because the second I touched my tongue to his dick, I grew greedy. With that first taste of my tongue on the tip of his dick, pulling his tangy flavor into my mouth to swallow, I groaned.

His eyes were already hooded, his stare heavy with lust, but now he gritted his teeth too. A low growl left his lips. Knowing I did this to him turned me on more, and I squirmed, rubbing my thighs together at the building pressure in my pussy. I was wet, dripping already, and the sensation of my cream on my skin felt so taboo somehow, so naughty, I didn't want to waste a moment of this.

I covered my lips over his cock, taking the head in fully and moaning at the feel of his soft hardness. He bucked his hips, maybe not thinking I'd pull him in so quickly with so much eagerness.

"Fuck, Jenny. Fuck." He brought his hands to either side of my head and held on tight as I bobbed up and down, dragging my tongue along his long length and humming in pleasure as I swallowed him down. I felt every vein and wanted to grin at the throb of his pulse there. It'd been a while since I'd given head, but on him, I was impatient to excel at it and make him come. His quick breaths and pumps of his hips as he shoved his dick into my mouth suggested he was close. Really close.

I reached up to pull his ass and lock him to me, but he growled and stepped back.

“On the bed. Now.”

I frowned, breathing hard as he eyed me sternly. He looked wild. His dick glistened in the low light of the room, standing so straight up. His abs contracted as he leaned over toward the nightstand, pulling out a condom. He hurriedly slid it on.

He looked like a beast, ready to roar as he came. Disappointment evaporated as I clambered onto the bed, still willing and ready to do as he pleased. I wanted the power and triumph of making him come in my mouth. I wanted to suck him down. But knowing he'd be pounding that big monster into me and making me feel so stretched and full wasn't a bad alternative.

I leaned back, but before I could spread my legs all the way apart, he'd wedged his thigh between them, gripping my ankle and dragging me toward him.

He arched over me, hovering like a sexy alpha until he lined himself up. One hand slipped through my messy hair, and he held on to the back of my neck, anchoring himself. At the same time he pulled me up for a brutal kiss, he slammed into me to the hilt.

“Oh!” I dropped my head back at the hard thrust. Grinning at his lips on my jaw, I groaned and tried to push my breasts up to him, seeking the friction of his sculpted chest against my sensitive nipples as he pounded into me.

“Come, Jenny. Come for me.”

I gasped as he moved, driving into me even deeper. It didn't matter if he ordered me or not, I was already there.

As the first waves of pleasure rocketed through me and the tension snapped, he pistoned into me even faster, letting me milk him dry as he spasmed deep inside me.

Shivering and coming down from the high, I didn't protest as he cuddled me, trapping me to the bed with him as we caught our breath.

I needed to shower. I had to make sure I knew where my clothes were so I could sneak out before Sunny woke up. But

right now, all I could do was sigh and sink against him, loving every minute of his strong arms holding me tight.

Like he never, ever wanted to let me go.

CHAPTER 44



WARD

I woke up with Jenny in my arms. She'd burrowed up against me after we showered. Sometime around one, she woke up and wanted to go to the bathroom, but because she wasn't familiar with my room, she stubbed her toe on my dresser. It woke me up, and I helped her find her way. It seemed the best way to distract her from her toe was another round of sex, and after we showered together, we'd fallen asleep again.

She rolled into me, reaching her arms up to hold me tight. I smiled at her sleepy, slightly grumpy expression. I kissed her nose and a smile almost showed. Without opening her eyes, she nestled closer.

"I wish I could stay in bed all morning," she murmured.

I ran my hand up and down her slender back, reveling in her soft warmth.

That sounds like heaven. I never wanted this woman to leave.

"I could do with a few more hours of sleep."

I kissed her cheek, smirking. "I must have given you a run for your money if you're still this tired, huh?" I couldn't help but tease her. She looked so sexy and grumpy, absolutely adorable and laidback like this. She didn't look guarded with her walls up. I didn't get a suspicion that she was holding herself back or worried about something with us. She was open and accepting as she opened her eyes and rolled them.

“Funny,” she quipped. “I’m not used to staying up all night. Stubbing my toe and getting frisky against the counter like that.”

I grinned.

“I was so hopeful we’d upgraded to beds. The garage, your car. We’d made it to a bed, but now we’re going backward again.” She stretched her neck and smiled. “I go to yoga classes for many reasons, but now I see the benefit of maintaining this much flexibility.”

The thought of her arching over my bathroom vanity started to turn me on all over again. The sexy sounds she gave me when she was about to come really had my dick waking up that much faster.

“Hey, I’m not used to staying up at it all night either.”

She sobered, kissing me sweetly. “I imagine you haven’t. Being a single parent has to be a cock block sometimes.”

More like it just has been, all the time. My lack of dating or having chance to have a woman over wasn’t only because I was a dad. I’d lacked the willpower to date or even meet anyone. I’d been burned by love in a lasting way when Gwen left. Sure, I saw in hindsight that her leaving me and Sunny was a blessing in disguise, but it left scars. I hadn’t known how to trust another woman in my life, so I hadn’t set out to find someone. With a baby, then later, a toddler on my hands, I’d lost the willingness to seek a partner.

“And I wasn’t ready,” I told her honestly. “I wasn’t ready to let anyone in again.” I pulled her over me as I kissed her. I hoped she read between the lines there, that she was the first one since Gwen that I was taking a chance on. I hadn’t been celibate all those years. I hadn’t tried to go hermit and be a monk, but the one or two hookups I’d squeezed in when my mom babysat Sunny were nothing like what I was doing with Jenny. I still wasn’t sure where we were taking this, but I would follow my gut and let her help me figure it out with her.

Passion soon filled the room, and with her warm, relaxed body draped over mine, her slender thighs framing mine, I

growled against her lips, needing even more than a sexy kiss to start the day. I was tired too, and she had to be sore, but dammit, I wanted more—

“Daddy?”

Jenny gasped at the sound of Sunny’s voice at the other side of my door. She flew back and off me. I reached out to grab her arm but was too late to catch her before she fell off the bed.

She landed on the extra pillows we’d lost during the first time we made love last night. Her brow furrowed and she stared up at me wide-eyed. The pillows likely prevented her from being bruised, but that kind of a body drop wasn’t quiet.

“Daddy?” Sunny knocked. “Are you doing a workout in there with your dumbbells?”

Jenny cringed, looking to the side where said dumbbells sat on a mat. Sometimes when I couldn’t make it to the gym, I did reps in here.

I rubbed my face, speechless and lost for how to reply.

“No.” I made a face at Jenny so she understood I shared the same *oh, shit* feeling she had to be feeling right now. “I dropped my shoe.”

“Your shoe?” Sunny asked.

Jenny rolled her eyes. “A shoe?” she hissed quietly.

“Well, I’m going to be late for school if we don’t get going,” Sunny said.

“Like a freaking alarm clock,” I moaned.

“You know, Grandma Lori said if I did get a puppy, you’d never be late in the morning again.”

My mother: I knew she was to blame for this. Sunny hadn’t been pushing hard. She’d already written her letter to Santa and yeah, her first ask was for a puppy, but I figured it was a whimsical kind of ask.

“Because I’d need to get up early and let him go pee and poop outside.”

“And who’d be cleaning that up?” I called back to her.

“Well, yesterday Jenny said she bet it would poop a giant turd.”

Jenny stood, covering her mouth so she wouldn’t laugh out loud.

“But I found a link for extra-large poop bags. So it would work.”

I got out of bed, hugging Jenny close to whisper in her ear. “Don’t tell me you’re encouraging her.”

She giggled, muffling the sound with her hand over her mouth.

“Daddy? Are you laughing?”

I gripped Jenny’s hip and nudged her hand away from her mouth so I could kiss it. I regretted being interrupted, but kissing her behind the locked door was too thrilling. We were caught anyway. As soon as I left the room, Sunny would see Jenny here.

“She wants a Great Dane, by the way,” Jenny whispered back.

Oh, fuck. I rolled my eyes.

“Daddy? I’m going to get cereal. I don’t think Mr. Marshall is going to be happy if I’m late again. He told me yesterday I had the most tardies this week.”

I growled as Sunny’s footsteps sounded down the hall. I bet Mr. Marshall wouldn’t be happy any day.

“I’m so sorry,” Jenny said, hurrying to put her clothes on. “I usually get up and go before she’s awake.”

I shook my head. “We’ll figure it out.”

“I’m sorry, really.”

I smiled at her, sighing as I got clothes. “I’m not mad.” Well, I was. A mention of Sunny’s teacher would put me in a bad mood. “I’m not mad at you or that it happened.” *With the*

way you make me feel and how good it is to sleep next to you, it was bound to happen sooner or later.

I glanced at my watch and hurried. “Shit. I’ll see you in the kitchen.” I hopped on one foot, trying to run for the door and finish getting dressed. “We’ll think of something to say.” I unlocked the door and hurried out, buttoning my shirt as I yelled, “We gotta go, Sunshine! Like three minutes ago.”

“That’s what I was saying, Dad,” she yelled back with a mouthful of cereal.

“Hey.” I frowned. “You put chocolate milk in the bowl?”

She gave me an impish, mouth-stuffed grin. “Oops.” Her brows shot up when Jenny entered the kitchen, all smiles and putting on a brave front.

No more hiding how friendly we are, I guess.

I hadn’t wanted to hide Jenny, but explaining how much she mattered to me was a tricky thing with Sunny. I’d never had a woman over, so this was all new.

“Morning, Miss Sunshine.” Jenny greeted. “I love the outfit. Very earth friendly.”

Sunny beamed, smoothing down the shirt she chose that read *Love your planet*. “Hi, Jenny.”

I fumbled and hurried to make coffee. Since Sunny and I no longer had time for our Starbucks runs, I had to rely on my coffee maker.

“What about my lunch?” Sunny asked, peering at Jenny as she got a water bottle and opened it.

“Dammit,” I muttered. Another thing I couldn’t handle with how late we’d be.

“I’ll do it!” Jenny seemed super eager to be busy so as not to have to explain why she was here so early. She grabbed Sunny’s insulated lunch box and glanced at me.

I nodded. “Good luck.”

“Dad,” Sunny groaned. “I’m not that picky.”

Jenny opened the fridge and looked inside, taking the initiative to get a move on without asking for details.

“No, you’re not picky. Just impulsive.” And unpredictable. I was glad she wasn’t too picky, but it was hard to guess what she liked one day to the next.

“Okay, we’ve got PB&J for grain and protein,” Jenny started.

“Nope. Food allergies in my classroom.” Sunny shook her head.

“Right. Right. Okay. Cheese stick and turkey bites,” she said, going for the deli drawer.

I paused with the coffee cup in hand to slot under the machine. “Wait. Didn’t you say Henry didn’t like the smell of the cheese?”

Sunny nodded. “Yeah. No cheese, Jenny.”

She furrowed her brow. “No cheese at all? Just because of one kid? Can’t he move to another seat?”

“His mom’s the music department director,” Sunny replied.

Jenny glanced at me. I shrugged. “She’s got clout.”

“Henry almost puked so they made a new rule. No cheese.”

Jenny mumbled under her breath. “Okay. Hard-boiled egg, carrot sticks, and this fruit dish?”

Sunny made a face. “I think the carrot sticks looked slimy yesterday.”

Jenny checked the package. “You’re right.” She squinted. “You’ve got really sharp eyesight to read this tiny print, Sunny.”

“You getting old over there?” I teased.

She threw the bag of carrots at me, and I laughed, catching it.

“Eww!” Sunny giggled as a line of carrot slime leaked over the counter.

“Okay!” Jenny stood from the fridge. “Hard-boiled egg, fruit dish, and these sliced cucumbers.”

Sunny nodded her approval. “And some animal crackers, please.”

As Jenny bundled it altogether, I pointed out the water bottle Sunny would need too. Another glance at the time had me seriously worried, and if not for Jenny getting the lunch ready, I would’ve had to order something to be delivered to her at school.

“Jenny, how come you slept over last night?”

I froze, spilling creamer onto the counter. Jenny dropped the top to the water bottle, flinching.

“Um.” I licked my lips, thinking fast. I was almost convinced we were in the clear, but no. Sunny was too clever not to ask.

“Didn’t you say you had to leave the house by seven to get there on time?” Jenny asked in an epic deflection.”

“Shit!” I grabbed my coffee cup lid.

“Crap,” Sunny corrected. “Grandma said that’s a better word to use.”

“Same thing,” I muttered.

“Maybe you could go with *shoot*,” Jenny suggested. “At least at school or by other people, you know?” She handed Sunny her lunch box.

“Aren’t you coming?” Sunny asked her.

“Yeah, come drop off Sunny with me,” I said.

“Well, my car’s here,” she replied.

Please, please don’t leave me in the car with Sunny and have to explain alone.

“It’ll be fun!” Sunny grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the door to the garage. “You can hear what else Dad

forgets to not say in the car line.”

“I, uh, okay.”

I breathed out my relief that Jenny would hold off on preparing her tea satchels to ride with us. It was unnecessary, but I wanted her there. She was such a huge help with Sunny. Taking her to get the dress. Joking with her. Even making the lunch. Jenny fit in my life so well that this only seemed natural.

At the school drop-off line, Sunny pointed out her friend. We were technically not in the designated space to open the door for her yet. My SUV wasn't all the way within the painted-line space of the drop-off, but I'd already disengaged the child lock. Sunny bolted out, yelling bye as she headed toward her friend.

“Shit.” I spotted her forgotten backpack next to her booster seat.

Jenny noticed it too, and she grabbed it. “Nah. Don't park and get out. I'm closer.” She opened the passenger door and stepped out. “Sunny, you forgot something!”

Before Jenny had a chance to take a few steps and hand it off to a grateful Sunny, who'd doubled back for her bag, Mr. Marshall stormed up to her.

“Sunny, get back,” he ordered.

Jenny raised her hands at his tone. “Whoa. Hey. She forgot her backpack.”

“That doesn't give you any right to set foot on school property.”

“Whoa.”

“I'm not a horse. Don't tell me to *whoa*. You are not a parent.”

I gawked at his harsh tone. Anger spiked at his abrasive words as he bullied her.

“I was simply handing her the bag.”

“Are you authorized to be here?”

I gritted my teeth, slammed the gear stick into park, and got out as Jenny tried and failed to get a word in.

“She’s my girlfriend,” I told the asshole. “She was just handing off her backpack.”

“Then maybe next time, you should authorize her presence here. Or maybe come on time so Sunny is fully prepared for her day when she exits the car.”

Jenny retreated as cars honked at us holding up the line. She noticed my tense look and grabbed my sleeve.

“Come on, Ward.”

I glowered at the man, wishing we were somewhere else where I could show him what I thought of his bullshit. *She was just handing her the damn backpack.*

“We’re leaving,” Jenny said as she put her hand on my shoulder to steer me to the car.

I opened my mouth to tell Mr. Marshall he better not treat her like this again, but Jenny must have sensed my patience running out.

“We hear you loud and clear, mister.” She nudged me harder, prompting me to get back in the car.

I went, slamming the driver’s door shut.

“That fucking asshat,” I seethed as I drove away from the drop-off line.

“Calm down there, *boyfriend.*” She smirked and took my hand.

CHAPTER 45



JENNY

Ward glowered as he drove back to his house.

“Was that the esteemed Mr. Marshall?” I guessed.

He clenched his teeth. “Yes,” he bit out.

Figures. “He was only doing his job, Ward. After the security concerns you had about Sunny staying at the last school, I can see why you wanted this place.” *I mean, maybe that dude was overkill, and so was the armed guy who walked up when he saw me taking that attitude, but hey, what do I know?*

“No. That was bullshit, Jenny. How dare he talk to you like that?”

“Ward, calm down.”

I’d told him to already, but he wasn’t listening. I’d even tried to lighten him up by calling him *boyfriend*, to call him out on how he’d so easily referred to me as his girlfriend. Dissecting our relationship right now didn’t seem smart, though. He was too damn mad. And I was too giddy about what he’d labeled me.

“I’m going to handle this. Mark my words.”

“It might not be worth the fight.”

He turned, furrowing his brow at me as we waited for a light. “You are worth fighting for, Jenny.”

My heart thumped faster at his declaration.

“But not like this.” I cleared my throat, eager to be the voice of reason here. “See how Sunny continues to settle in. If she likes this place and comes to accept it and enjoys her classmates, he shouldn’t ruin it for her. She mentioned several teachers, so it doesn’t sound like she’s stuck with that guy all the time. And next year, she’d have another new teacher for home room, right? You already changed up her life taking her from the last school to this one. I won’t claim to know *anything* about being a parent, but that back-and-forth changing would make an impact on anyone, especially when it’s someone making decision for her and removing control from her hands.”

He stewed on that, almost pouting at the road. “Stop being so damn reasonable and let me be angry.”

I grinned. “Okay, fine. Mr. Marshall is a pompous ass and a bully who feels powerful on the school property. But he’s still not worth getting worked up about. He *was* doing his job.”

He grumbled the rest of the way to his house, but when he dropped me off so I could get my car, I was the one in a hurry to go. We kissed goodbye, and I dismissed how domestic it felt. Thinking about Ward had to go on the backburner now. I had way too much work to do to be this distracted.

I’d already missed my yoga class, sleeping in because Ward wore me out last night. Then this drama with that teacher. I was getting a late start on my day and even a good black tea couldn’t kick me into hustling fast enough.

As soon as I settled into the kitchen at home, I immediately leaped into work mode. I began prepping tea satchels, but it wasn’t until I had them all lined up on the counters that I realized how many I had to fill. My first day at The Cozy Company store was a success, and if it was any indication of how well my teas would be accepted by shoppers, I’d need to upscale my efforts.

I gripped my hair, biting my lip as I counted through my inventory list. I’d need to go to the garden again. But still. “It’s just *so* many to fill!”

Mary Ellen wasn't here to help. She was working at the library. Rylee was sleeping in to prep for her late night of bartending. Lauren was gone. And Karen was at work too. My friends weren't free labor I could always count on. They had their lives, but I knew I couldn't catch up by myself.

I called Lori, worried that her sinuses would still be too funky for her to help me.

"Hi, Jenny." She giggled. "I was just about to text you and remind you to send that video of Sunny's little fashion show."

I cringed. "Crap. I forgot to get it."

"No worries. I know she'll want to parade around in that dress again."

I'd been so overwhelmed with my emotions at that moment, getting my phone out to film it for Lori had completely slipped my mind.

"You sound better," I said.

"Oh, yeah. I'm fine. My sinuses are clear and that nap did the trick. I told you it was nothing."

"Then would you be free to help me today?"

"With the tea? Sure! Text me the address and I'll come now."

She arrived within twenty minutes, all smiles and ready to get busy. I showed her how to measure and sort everything, and we made an assembly line through the kitchen. During the day, I could have the kitchen to myself, and it helped. Today, Lori filled in as a companionable worker and I was pleased we fell into step so easily. I mixed and she weighed it to bag.

We sipped tea—of course—and chatted as we worked.

"So, did you put the idea of the puppy in Sunny's mind?" I asked.

"No. I did take her to the humane society once. But I didn't realize it impacted her that much. I know Ward will think this is my doing, but trust me, it's not. I like to travel too much, and with them too. If he's got a puppy, that means we'd

have to figure out a dog sitter and boarding. I've heard so many horror stories from friends. I'd hate for Ward to feel tied to an animal. He's got enough on his plate and he's only finally hitting his stride with a good work-and-parenting balance."

"He struggled?"

She scoffed and nodded. "At first, yes. He definitely struggled when she was a baby. I think he started to struggle mentally when he learned Gwen was expecting. That was the first clue I saw that Gwen wouldn't be a good mother. Ward started planning for a baby before Sunny was born, and Gwen didn't lift a finger."

"Did she have a difficult pregnancy?"

Lori shook her head. "Nope. Perfect. Without a hitch. I recall her doctor saying she wished every patient she had could enjoy such an easy pregnancy like Gwen had."

But maybe her issues were mental.

"Those first years were really hard on Ward. Before Sunny was born, when she came, and then the whole postpartum phase when Gwen lost all interest in being a mom, not that she had any to begin with. His whole world was off-kilter, and when she left Sunny to him, not even a year old, his life flipped upside down."

I sighed, shaking my head and trying to imagine that.

"He had a tiny human depending on him for every little thing. He dropped out of college while trying to ensure financial stability. He was only twenty years old, still a kid himself if you were to ask me."

"Did you judge him for having a baby so young?"

She smirked at me. "I doubt he'd planned it. In fact, I wouldn't have put it past Gwen to trick him into impregnating her."

I thought back to all the times Ward and I had sex. He *always* used a condom. I was on birth control, but it didn't

even seem to enter his mind to not have protection. Maybe it was because he'd already gone through that once.

"I wouldn't even judge him for bringing Sunny into my life. I love that girl, and him. I am just so thankful every day that he managed to get to where he is today. I'm happy he came out the other side in one piece, a better man now for those hard years."

"He's a wonderful father."

She sighed. "He is. But there was a moment, or several moments, where I really thought Gwen would bring him down with her."

I bit my lip, unable to help myself. "Lori, what do you think he saw in Gwen all those years ago?"

She gave me a sympathetic smile. "He saw something shiny and new. And like a naïve eighteen-year-old boy, that was enough to make him abandon ship with you. I know Ward regrets his choice, but he also doesn't because Sunny is the best thing that's ever happened to him."

"Do you think he's ready for something real now?"

If this morning was any indication, how flustered he was when Sunny asked why I slept over, I wasn't sure how he saw me fitting in to his life. Sure, he called me his girlfriend, but was that how he'd explain my presence to Sunny?

Lori beamed. "Oh, yes. He's been ready for a long time." She tilted her head. "The question now is if *you* are ready, Jenny? Are you able to put your past behind you and consider the future with him?"

I swallowed, unsure how to answer.

Yes? But the doubt and insecurity remained there in the back of my mind, warning me to think again.

CHAPTER 46



WARD

I frowned as I scrolled through listings for adoptable pets at the local animal shelter. I didn't want to give in to Sunny's sudden Christmas wish. But the more I thought about it, I started to wonder why not.

Ward: She specifically mentioned a Great Dane?

She replied with a GIF of Marmaduke.

I chuckled. I used to love that comic.

Ward: That was the only breed she mentioned.

Jenny: Don't tell me you're considering giving in.

Jenny: I thought you didn't want to spoil her.

Ward: As if my mother isn't trying her hardest to do that already.

Jenny: I get it. I never had a dog. But I doubt the girls want one here at the house.

Jenny: Big commitment though.

I took a screenshot of a small beagle puppy and sent it to her.

Ward: Just look at that little face.

Jenny: I can smell the puppy breath already. She tacked on several smiley emojis with hearts for eyes.

I chuckled. "I thought you'd be the voice of reason here."

“What was that?” my assistant asked as she passed my open office door.

I shook my head and jiggled the mouse to wake up my computer, knowing I was procrastinating on these emails. “Nothing.”

But getting a puppy would be a big *something*.

Jenny: She didn't mention any other breeds. Just a Great Dane. I googled how common tan ones were, plus big black spots on the fur. I think the only image I found was Photoshopped, so I'm not sure if you'll be able to deliver with the exact dog she has in mind.

I grinned. Even Jenny was getting carried away with this. Who didn't like a puppy, after all?

I began typing a reply but a call came across the screen. I frowned at the name of Sunny's school and answered.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Emerson?”

My frown deepened at the familiar voice. I wouldn't forget the woman's voice. She'd left too many voicemails that Friday when she hastily accepted Sunny into her school. “Mrs. Jenkins. Hi.”

“I'd like you to come collect Sunny.”

At ten o'clock? I blinked. “Why? Is something wrong?”

“I can't divulge details over the phone, Mr. Emerson.”

I stood. “Is she okay?”

“Yes. She's seated here in my office waiting for you.”

For fuck's sake. If she wasn't hurt then what was it? She wasn't a troublemaker like I was. “I'll be right there.”

I hurried over, trying to dismiss all of the what-ifs that popped up in my mind. After I parked, I nodded at the stocky armed guard at the door. He spoke into his radio at his shoulder, then unlocked the front door for me. A secretary

waited there. She was the same one who'd helped me find Sunny's room that first day here.

"Principal Jenkins is waiting for you in her office," she informed me politely as she gestured the way.

I followed her, eager to know what was going on, what could be so bad that I had to leave work to deal with it. *If this shit could've been in an email, I'll lose it.* I held back a growl and sighed when I entered the office and saw Sunny sitting in a chair.

She acknowledged me with a quick glance, then looked back at the carpet as she swung her legs back and forth, too short for her feet to touch the floor.

"What is this about?" I asked.

"Please, sit," the woman said.

I took a seat next to Sunny and patted her thigh. I didn't like how she wouldn't talk to me but I wondered if she was just trying to be as small as possible and stay off the principal's radar.

"What's this about?" I repeated. I had no patience for bullshit.

"Mr. Marshall has had a record of concerns about Sunny and her inconsistent life at home."

I blinked, raising my brows. "A *record*? She hasn't been a student here long enough for a record to be compiled."

Principal Jenkins pursed her lips. "I don't take kindly to accusations of my teachers lying."

Don't yell. Don't yell. I clenched my fist and drew in a deep breath. "I don't take kindly to teachers picking on my daughter. What inconsistent life?"

"Girlfriends." She arched her brows.

I held up a finger. "*One.* Singular. My girlfriend is Ms. Halsey, and who I date isn't any of his business. Or yours." Before I could comment on how he'd bullied my one and only girlfriend, she went on.

“A father with a temper.”

Sunny snorted and shook her head.

Principal Jenkins frowned at her. “Something to say, Sunny?”

“My dad doesn’t have a temper. He just doesn’t suffer—”

I cleared my throat hard and elbowed her gently.

“I have eye witnesses who claim you spoke to Mr. Marshall in a threatening manner at the school drop-off,” the principal added.

“Did those witnesses also see how he’d bullied Ms. Halsey?”

She shook her head. “You won’t get far with a claim that Mr. Marshall is a bully. He is one of our academy’s best teachers.”

I saw how this was going to go. She thought the world of that asshole, and that poor judgment right there had me rethinking if I should spend another damn minute listening to her bullshit.

“And of most note,” she said, referring to the notes on her desk, “the complete lack of a mother’s presence in her life.”

I tilted my head to the side, trying my best to keep a lid on my anger. “And that’s unacceptable?”

“It’s impacting Sunny’s life.”

I scoffed. Like this woman knew anything at all about my child. “What if I was widowed?” I challenged.

“Then...” She opened and closed her mouth.

“What if I was gay and had a husband? Would you still call me in here to complain about a lousy teacher who thinks Sunny’s less than because she doesn’t have a mother?”

“That’s not at all what I’m saying,” she insisted. “You know what I mean.”

I gritted my teeth and hid it with a grin. “Actually, I don’t. I’m sorry to say I can’t read minds.”

“Sunny has an unstable life at home. If you expect to send her here, she needs to go through severe disciplinary actions before her behavior impacts other students’ abilities to learn.”

I shook my head. I felt like I was about to blow a gasket. My blood pressure had to be sky high. “And where the hell is this awesome Mr. Marshall? He didn’t have the nerve to say this to our faces?”

Sunny glanced up at him. “He told me.”

I fumed. I was an inch from breaking something apart.

Principal Jenkins was either oblivious to my anger or didn’t care. Hell, anything I said would only be used to paint me as a temperamental person with a “bad” kid. “Mr. Marshall is a highly reputable educator here. I stand by his word and I won’t tolerate any slander on his name. He’s won countless awards and proven to be an employee who teaches with a goal for excellence.”

Yeah, this lady wasn’t going to see reason. She was biased.

I looked down at Sunny.

“Do you miss your old school?”

She nodded.

I took her hand and stood, grabbing her backpack in my other hand. “Sunny is no longer a student at your school, effective immediately.”

She nodded. “Good.”

She had the gall to say that in front of her.

I leaned closer. “More like good riddance to you. You can take your excellence and good ratings and shove it where the sun don’t shine.”

She narrowed her eyes.

As Sunny and I left, she tugged on my hand to get my attention. “It’s where the sun *doesn’t* shine, Dad. Not *don’t* shine.”

I grinned, breathing a deep breath of air once we exited.

I'd already been receiving countless calls from her other school. Emails still came in my inbox too. The school board president felt terrible about how Principal Lannon erred and offered apologies on the daily. He likely only wanted to save face, glad I wasn't pressing charges or spreading a bad word about the school, but I needed to hope he meant it when he said Sunny could return whenever I felt comfortable. He'd assured me that Lannon had been disciplined, and while I appreciated actions being taken, I wouldn't be sure he'd do the right thing again.

"I told Mr. Marshall that I wanted to recycle my used marker and he still threw it away. My old art teacher told me that they can melt and reuse the tubes because the plastic takes a long time to break down. He laughed and sent me to the office for being difficult."

I shook my hand as she buckled in.

You fucker.

I dialed down my anger and called the school as I drove. I didn't have a chance to hold my phone. This wasn't a call I wanted Sunny to listen to, but I had to figure something out, and fast.

I was willing to beg if I had to, but the secretary routed me straight to the principal.

"Again, Mr. Emerson, I extend my deepest apologies."

Yeah, I bet being slapped on the wrist from above made you realize the difference between an inconvenience and a fuck-up.

"Is she able to return?"

"We would be glad to have Miss Sunny come back. Her teachers haven't rearranged their classrooms. Her old locker and desk are here waiting for her."

Thank fuck. That was a stroke of luck. I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw her smiling wide at his words.

"Do you understand that my daughter is only permitted to be picked up by me and my mother? No one else?"

“What about Jenny?” Sunny piped up. “She still has the extra booster seat in her car from yesterday.”

I sighed. “Principal Lannon?”

“Correct. I will remind all staff members that only you and your mother are permitted to pick up Sunny. Should that change, I will wait for written documentation.”

That’s more like it.

“We’ll be there soon,” I told him before hanging up.

Before we got there, though, my phone rang and Sunny saw the ID thumbnail of Gwen on the screen.

“Aren’t you going to answer?”

If you weren’t here, no, I wouldn’t. I rolled my eyes and answered.

“Hi, Ward!”

“Hey.” I was already in a bad mood and I didn’t give a damn if she picked up on my lack of enthusiasm.

“I wanted to call and invite Sunny to my house. I mean, it’s still just Kenneth’s house until we tie the knot, but you know what I mean. This weekend, I’m having a girls’ get-together for the bridal party.”

Her invitation put me on edge.

“Really?” Sunny squealed from the backseat, overhearing and already excited. “I can come?”

“Yes, Sunny. Would you like that?”

“Hold up,” I hurried to say. Gwen wasn’t allowed to just ask her to do anything anymore. It had to go through me. But now that she heard, how could I let her down?

Damn you, Gwen!

“Can I go, Dad?”

I wanted to groan. “I guess.” I wasn’t enthusiastic about it, not after how Gwen messed up, but I was hard-pressed to say no at the moment.

After I hung up, I gripped the steering wheel. I felt like I was going crazy. I woke up this morning wishing for a simple day, regretting that Jenny wasn't in bed with me, that the weekend was half a week away yet. And now, it seemed like the ground was falling out from under me.

We arrived at Sunny's former school, though, so I had to shelve it all—my concern about this party, Gwen's intentions, and how easily Sunny was impressionable to an invite.

As promised, the office staff and Principal Lannon were gracious handling Sunny's return.

"We're thrilled to have one of our top students back," the assistant principal said. She wasn't there that day Gwen picked up Sunny, but I still viewed her with an overall lack of distrust as I did her boss.

Still, I was grateful. One thing was looking up. Sunny beamed at me, eager to run down the hall and catch up with her friends soon to be heading to art class.

At least I don't have to deal with Mr. Marshall anymore. I shook my head as I returned to my car, wondering if I could salvage the rest of the workday and accomplish anything.

CHAPTER 47



JENNY

I slept in on Saturday to “make up” for the lost sleep over the week. I knew it wasn’t possible to do that, but it felt good to be lazy in bed. It wasn’t the same when I spent the weekend with Ward at the hotel. We had no interruptions there, but being in my own bed was a comfort so good that I couldn’t resist.

Other than the morning I woke up too late at Ward’s house, I was burning the midnight oil to keep up with my tea orders. Mary Ellen had helped me late last night, and I planned to reward her with brunch.

She picked a family place that sold half organic items and half healthier options. I chose a Cobb salad while she wanted to be “naughty” and get fried chicken and waffles.

“What’s wrong?”

She grimaced, looking at the salt and pepper shakers. Swiping a finger through the dust not wiped off there, she raised her brows at me expectantly. “It’s been a while since I came here.”

I laughed. “Yeah. Me too.”

“But it seems like they’ve let the place go a bit. Sanitary wise.”

I laughed harder, and she pouted. “No. I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing at us.” We were the odd pair, the two our friends never wanted to take out. She would be a germaphobe

and I would take forever ordering with all the questions about the source and quality of the food.

She giggled, shaking her head. “But thanks,” she said. “For offering to take me out.”

“That’s supposed to be my line, thanking *you*. I wouldn’t have finished those orders without your help.”

“I’m glad we have this chance to talk though.”

“Yeah?” I sipped my water. “Something new in your life?”

She shook her head. “No. I’ve been dying to know what’s going on with you and Ward. And if we talked about him at home and Rylee woke up, she’d barge in and be negative about it all.”

I smiled. “She means well.”

“I know. I know.” She set her elbows on the table and rested her chin in her hands, staring at me directly with a huge smile. “So spill, sister! Spill!”

I made a show of glancing around. “Like, the X-rated details?”

“Just how it’s going. Where your head is at with it all.”

“I’m not sure.” I shrugged. “If you asked where my heart is at, I’d be able to tell you that I really care about him. He’s sweet and affectionate, still funny and as fun-loving as I remembered him being. His daughter, too. Sunny is adorable. But now that I’m spending more time with her, and with his mom like when she came to help me with my teas, I’m getting a little scared.”

“That sounds more like where your head is, being scared.”

I nodded. It hardly mattered where I felt this slight fear. The point was that it was in me at all and guiding my decisions and thoughts.

“Scared because of what he did before?”

I shrugged. “Yes and no. Ward seems very clear on his opinions about Gwen.”

“You mean what he thinks about her as a mother to his child?” she asked.

I nodded. “His opinions of Gwen’s maternal skills are low, like below-the-dirt low. Since we’ve been hanging out, he hasn’t given me any indication that he wants her in any way. He’s been firmly of the mindset to avoid her and cast her out of his and Sunny’s life, but I can tell he doesn’t want to make any decisions to sever those strings completely because she is Sunny’s mother and some things should be her decision.”

Mary Ellen nodded. “I can see that. That does make sense. But it’s good that he doesn’t seem to want her back in any way.”

“And his mom agrees with me that he’s been over Gwen for a long time.” I frowned. “She did say something that made me wonder about something though.”

“What?”

“That he’s been burned in the love department. And that I’m a good person for him to move on to, because I’m ‘safe’ and he knows he can trust me. Like a fallback girl in his comfort zone.”

She smiled. “You *are* trustworthy.”

“What if that’s the only reason he wants me?”

She giggled. “Um, no. I’m no expert, but men don’t look at women the way he looks at you just because they’re trustworthy fallbacks. That man adores you and can’t wait to rip your clothes off.”

I rolled my eyes. “There has been no ripping of clothes.”

“But not for the lack of trying?” she teased.

I smirked and looked away.

“I don’t blame you for being careful though. It’s not just him that you’re giving a second chance. It’s his daughter too, and his mom again. He’s a package deal.”

I sighed. “And potentially a puppy too.”

She squealed, excited for something that might not even happen.

After brunch, I headed to Ward's house with all the tea orders that he would drop off at the head office. They would be distributed to the three main locations for a bigger scale launch. After that, I'd need to consider having a team of people to do the work. I couldn't fork over my "baby" and I would always keep close oversight of the side hustle that started as an offshoot of my passion, but there was just no way I could keep going at it like this.

I doubted Lori would let me "hire" her officially, and with her talk about all her upcoming travels, she wouldn't be here consistently for a reliable schedule. I did like her offer to use her greenhouse as a backup for storage or even growing things for my blends. I didn't need a massive crop to harvest for my blends, but if this took off even more, I'd need to consider more land to grow accordingly. Not only that, I'd need ample room to dry certain herbs and items. This was something that veered closer to daydreaming, though, because I would *love* to have my own gardens, greenhouse, and workshop to tend to at my pace. I enjoyed my job at the gardening center, but the end goal had always been to have my private operation.

When I arrived, I let myself in with the code Ward had given me for his door. It had felt like a huge step when he told me those numbers, sort of like a key-giving tradition, but he'd insisted.

I entered the house, finding Sunny groaning as she marched back to her room.

"Hello?" I smiled at Ward coming to greet me.

"Hello. Help." He kissed me soundly and winced at the sound of Sunny's door closing firmly.

"Is this a bad time?" I asked.

"No."

"Aren't you supposed to take her to the big bridal party girls' day soon?"

He sighed. “In fifteen minutes.” He glanced down the hallway, taking my hand and bringing me further into the room.

I dug my heels in and stopped him from leading me anywhere. “Hold on. I want to bring the teas in.”

“Oh, right.” He opened the door. “I’ll help.” He stepped into shoes at the door and headed out with me toward my car.

“She’s been super excited about this all week, right?” I asked, surprised that he seemed so frazzled.

“Yeah. She woke up like it was freaking Christmas morning, she was so thrilled.”

“Aww.”

“No, not aww.” He rolled his eyes as he opened the back door to my car for me. “If this is a preview to what she’ll be like as a teen?” He growled. “She’s been stressing about having her hair just right. And then picking the right outfit.”

“She’s nervous?”

He shrugged, taking the box I handed him. “If she’s not nervous, she’s *something*. No matter what I say, I’m wrong and not helping at all.” I giggled at him mimicking her voice. “Apparently it’s not cool to say something looks nice.”

“*Nice* is a bland word for an opinion.”

“Hey. You were there in English in junior high. You know I’m not a creative linguist. No matter what I tell her, I’m no help. I just want her to pick something and stick with it before she becomes stressed about it.”

“Wish I could help.”

“Hey, maybe you can!”

I rolled my eyes and brandished my hand at my attire. A tie-dye T-shirt under a black zip-up hoodie and yoga pants printed with the logo of the studio I went to most. “Yeah, I’m killing it with the fashion.”

A heated look crossed his face. “Babe, you could wear anything and look sexy.”

I pointed at him and narrowed my eyes. “Yeah. That. See? If you’re too nice *all* the time, it makes a girl think you’re not sincere. We know we can’t look awesome in *everything*, so having constructive criticism is helpful.”

“She’s six! She *is* cute in everything.”

“True. But she wants feedback to make a decision about whatever she’s unsure about.”

We came back in the house just when her bedroom door opened. Ward turned tail and went for another box as Sunny walked out in a skirt and top. The skirt seemed very long while the shirt had a slight paint stain. “Hi, Jenny!”

“Sunny! I love your ponytail. Did you do it yourself?”

She grinned and nodded, making it sway more. “Grandma Lori taught me how to brush it up.”

“Very nice. You look smart.”

She frowned. “Too smart?”

“Did anyone ever tell you that too much intelligence is a bad thing?” I huffed and crossed my arms.

“No.” She shrugged. “But I don’t know what to wear. I don’t want to look like a know-it-all. I just want to look cute and ready to help. Not like I need to be babysat.”

You’re six! You do need to be supervised, kiddo!

“Well, when I have girl time I go for comfort first. That’s a rule of the sisterhood.”

“Really?”

I nodded. “And the only way they’ll know you want to help is if you offer to. There’s no outfit that will help that.”

“You’re right.”

“Want my advice?”

She nodded eagerly.

“I’d wear leggings.” I pinched mine and let them fall back. “Because those are the ultimate comfy pants that can go with anything. Sandals, in case you do that pedi. And a cute blouse

that buttons up, in case you practice doing your hair and don't want to pull your shirt up over it later and ruin it."

"Hey! That's a good idea!"

I winked at her. "You'll look great no matter what you wear, Sunny. It's what's inside that people remember, and you're a sweetheart."

"Thanks, Jen Jen," she called over her shoulder as she ran off. "Tell my dad I'm doing just one last outfit change and we can go."

"One *last* outfit change?" Ward teased as he came in with the last box of tea. "She said that ten minutes ago."

I snorted. "Jen Jen?" I asked with a smile.

He shrugged. "She asked me this morning if she could call you that. Don't worry, it'll pass. She makes up nicknames all the time."

I'm not sure I want that to pass. It was cute.

"I'm still unsure about leaving her with Gwen." He frowned in the direction of her room and I sighed. This poor man. He shouldn't have to worry about this.

"Hey, it'll be okay. I understand why you're nervous." I took the tea toward the dining room where we'd set the other boxes. "But this seems really important for Sunny. And who knows? Maybe Gwen deserves a chance to show you that her intentions are good."

His dubious look didn't suggest that he agreed.

"Ready!" Sunny bounded back in the room.

"Final answer?" Ward asked.

"Yes, Daddy." She turned to me. "Jen Jen, are you coming to drop me off too?"

I shook my head. "Nah. I'll hang back and finish some labels on my teas here. You have fun, all right?"

She nodded and ran over to hug me before she sprinted off with Ward.

I smiled until I heard the garage door closing, relishing the phantom feel of her little arms wrapped around my waist.

CHAPTER 48



WARD

My stomach clenched as I drove Sunny to Gwen and Kenneth's house. My gut instinct was to turn around and bring my girl right back home. It was the same inner warning sense that I'd felt many times before. I didn't always listen to it, and more often than not, I disregarded it and fucked up anyway.

But I didn't like how I felt bringing Sunny here. My opinions were biased. Gwen wasn't my favorite person. She was far from it. I was also biased from her recent behavior. She wasn't doing much to instill faith in her, and that bothered me on a cellular level.

I also knew that my hands were tied in wanting to do what was best for Sunny. I could guess right now that Gwen would never be an important *lasting* influence on Sunny. She was too smart. She wasn't so dumb to want to work hard to gain the approval of someone not worthy of her time. Like she'd almost blurted to Principal Jenkins, I didn't suffer fools. Neither did she, and my girl had a level head on her little shoulders.

I told Colby that Sunny would ask me hard questions about her mother when she was older, but I also could tell that Sunny was already forming her own opinions and drawing her own connections. She was only six, but she was very perceptive for her age. She missed nothing.

Sunny wanted to go to this thing, though, and her excitement grew to fever pitch as the date and afternoon came. Jenny wasn't helping either, playing devil's advocate like that.

She had good points though, that maybe I was overreacting and that all would be okay.

Besides, it's not like it's just her and Gwen. Jenny and I both knew a handful of the bridesmaids who would be here. We knew them from school, and they were still decent and normal people. Other than their friendship with Gwen, they would be logical and calm adults who would act like adults.

Being in the bridal party implied a lot of obligations. Sunny would be near or with these women on the big day, and it wasn't a bad idea to let her get used to them and more familiar with them before the stress of the event was on them.

"Remember, you need to call me if anything goes wrong," I reminded Sunny as I turned onto Gwen's road. "You ask one of the ladies for a phone and you call me. You can come home."

With her typical sassy fashion, she giggled. "Daddy, you're being paranoid."

"That's my job."

"That's not a job."

"It is. When you were born, I received a letter in the mail that informed me I was now a member of the daddy organization, and from that day forth, I needed to worry and be paranoid about everything in your life."

She giggled harder.

It's fucking true. I'll worry about you no matter how old you are, baby girl.

"All we're going to do is eat cucumber and cream cheese sandwiches."

I exaggerated a gag.

"We'll sip tea."

"But it won't be Jenny's tea."

She frowned, nodding. "I know. I'll have to make do. Oh, and we'll have girl talk!"

I resisted frowning. Knowing Gwen, she might not have a child-friendly version of girl talk in mind.

“That’s what ladies do at these things.”

I chuckled. “Is that so?” I parked and helped her out of the car.

She took my hand as we walked to the door. “Yep. I have it on good authority.”

I glanced down at her. “Whose authority?”

“My friend Sara. Her cousin got married last year and she told me. Besides, that’s what we did for Naomi’s wedding, remember?”

All I could remember about the day that I brought Sunny over for Naomi’s girls’ day before her wedding was that I didn’t feel a single ounce of dread like I did right now.

Sunny knocked and smiled up at me. For her sake, I hoped she had a perfectly fun time. If I truly worried about her being safe here, I wouldn’t have risked it.

Gwen answered the door. She wore a silk robe and held up a tiny matching one for Sunny.

“Here she is!” she called out to the other bridesmaids.

Sunny’s face lit up at the small robe and I exhaled a long breath. It looked like some intentional decisions had been made to include Sunny. Seeing her extending the robe and welcoming her in put me at ease. While the bridesmaids all said hello to Sunny and helped her inside, Gwen smiled up at me. “Thank you for giving me another chance.”

I shook my head and shrugged. “Sunny wanted to be here.” *So I made that happen. For her.*

“I’m glad. I wanted her to be here too. I’ll bring her home before dinner. Around five?”

“Sure.” I nodded and waved at Sunny, who waved at me from behind the glass door. I had a hard time leaving though. For a moment after the door closed, I hesitated to go, still warring with this worry about her.

That uneasiness lingered the entire drive home, and I checked my phone at every stop sign. I was glad to find Jenny still at my house, like she'd told me she would be.

"Ward, it'll be okay." She could tell that I was still off.

"Hope so."

"What's bothering you the most about this?" She glanced up from placing stickers on tea satchels.

I grabbed a sheet to help. "These go on those?"

She nodded. "Talk to me, Ward."

I chuckled. "You always have been a good listener."

"Is that why you like me?"

I shot her a look. "That among a million other reasons."

"Okay, so talk. What's bugging you the most?"

"A big part of my worry is that she'll smoke around her. Or vape." That was a legitimate concern any parent would have.

"Fair enough. Did she ever do it around her before?"

I shook my head. "No. Not that I can remember."

"Or drink? Anything?"

I shrugged. "She drank, but it wasn't like she ever had custody or even visited to be near her long enough to drink or get drunk."

"Then maybe the weed is a new thing. And not so often that she'd use it in front of her."

I kept placing stickers on the tea bags. "I know. And I told her never to use it by her, but her word means jack shit."

"What else?"

"A small part of me is always afraid I'll lose Sunny. Or if something were to ever happen, she'd go to live with Gwen."

"Are you afraid of that because you don't want to lose her, or you don't want her to lose you?"

I shrugged. “Both?” I felt worse now. “When Gwen picked her up from school that day, I was worried she’d never bring her back.”

“To spite you?”

“Maybe. I don’t fucking know. She’s crazy. Self-absorbed and crazy. She’s never acted like a mom, so why would she want to take her?”

“Do you ever worry that Sunny might choose her over you one day?”

I shook my head. “No. She loves me. And I can tell that she has always been reserved around Gwen. That bond is just not there.”

“That should make you feel more secure about it then, right?”

I rubbed my stomach. “It should.” This gut feeling just wouldn’t go away, not even with Jenny listening and helping me rationalize the way I felt.

“You’re still worried?”

“I can’t help it. The only thing that made me take this risk was that the other bridesmaids would be there. You know? They’ll act like adults and be able to stand up for Sunny. But it’s messed up that I would have to worry about Sunny needing to be on the defense at all in her mother’s house.”

“I agree. But like I said, maybe Gwen can use this as a chance to redeem herself.”

I shot her a hard look. “I think she’s far past the point of true redemption.”

She shrugged.

“Sorry to be a downer. I know it can’t be easy dealing with my crap.”

“Your *crap*?” She laughed. “You have a daughter, not a curse.”

“But it can’t be easy, dating a single parent.”

“It just so happens that you’re the one I want to be dating, though, so there’s not much I can do about that. I happen to adore Sunny. And I agree with you about this stuff with Gwen. I wish you didn’t have to deal with it like this.”

“And Sunny adores you. If you’ve elevated to the status of having a nickname already, you’re on her good list.”

“Hmm. And if I encouraged her about that puppy a little more, I bet she’d like me even more.” She winked.

“I’m struggling to remember reasons why getting a puppy is a bad idea.”

“Aww. A Great Dane?”

I shook my head. “I want a lap dog.”

“I hope I can help pick it out.”

I sighed, trying to think about a puppy, but as soon as I did, a worry would pop back into my head.

After a moment of silence of applying stickers, she sighed. “You’re still thinking about her being at Gwen’s, aren’t you?”

“I just can’t stop worrying.”

“Hmm.” She grinned then bit her lip as she tossed her sheet of stickers to the table and gripped the hem of my shirt. Pulling me further into the house, she backpedaled down the hallway toward my bedroom. “Then how about I distract you for a bit?”

CHAPTER 49



JENNY

“How do you plan to do that?” Ward asked as I led him toward his room.

Sunny wasn't down the hall. We didn't have to worry about being quiet this time, and I wanted to take advantage of this thrill while it lasted.

“Oh, I've got a few ideas,” I teased.

He gave me a lazy smile, following me until we reached his room. Then he closed the door behind him and waited for my direction.

This was different. He had let me take charge in the car when we had sex there. I thought back to how I'd honked the horn and had to stifle a giggle. I loved how he'd taken care of me the other night, when he was so alpha and controlling when I told him he could take whatever he wanted from me.

It seemed like he was relying on me this time, and I knew I wanted to get my mouth on him again. That was a starting point, at least, but not until I kissed his lips and tried to erase that worry lining his face there.

I pulled him to me. Curling my fingers into his shirt, I pushed the fabric up so my knuckles could brush against his hard six-pack abs. The hardness of his smooth skin enticed me to explore further. He growled into the kiss, and that sound never failed to ignite my desire in a flash. At this rate, I would sizzle before seeing to any distraction. He was the master at distracting *me*.

I looped my arm around his neck. Reaching up on my tiptoes, I pulled him down to me so we could smash our mouths tighter together, slide our tongues in a sensual dance, and deprive each other of oxygen until we had to part for desperate pulls of air. I grinned against his wet lips. He wrapped his arms around me, nuzzling me and kissing my neck.

“And what are those ideas?” he growled playfully.

I leaned back to press my finger to his shoulder, prompting him to walk back. He kept his arms around my waist and it resulted in us almost tripping over each other.

“Losing these,” I replied with a tug on his pants. As he backtracked, I pushed his jeans down and he stepped out of them and his boxers with each step. I hadn’t had much time to notice all the details of his bedroom, but of what I did remember, I’d stubbed my toe on his dresser over there. I’d found my tossed-aside shirt and bra on a chair over this way. That was my destination. I wanted Ward to sit there and let me have my way with him.

He landed with a grunt, and his dick bobbed up from the action. I watched it and he growled again. “Like what you see?” he taunted.

I nodded, licking my lips. I reached down to stroke him softly, and I felt so hot with his intense look. He didn’t move his gaze from me. His arms lay on the armrests, his muscles and veins a webbed relief protruding even though he had no reason to be flexing his hands. With his legs splayed wide apart, he gave me full access to his dick, and he looked like he was surrendering, open to whatever I wanted.

“Do you like what *you* see?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Too many clothes.”

“Then take them off.” He reached for my shirt, but I shook my head. “With your teeth.”

He grinned. “You sexy little thing. Feeling naughty?”

“Impossible not to when I’m near you.” I lowered onto his lap, grinding against his bare dick. Nuzzling me, he pushed my

shirt up and kissed my skin. Soft, tender kisses formed a line from my side to side, and I gripped his hair tight.

“I thought you said I had too many clothes on.”

He chuckled, then bit my shirt and tugged. I lowered, making sure the garment would get near my head, but he couldn't manage it from this angle. I sank even lower, brushing my cheek, then my lips, along his hard shaft. He cursed through his clenched teeth that still held my shirt. At last, as I rubbed my lips along his dick, he freed my shirt.

I wanted my pants gone too, but I couldn't wait. I was already right here. I opened my mouth and licked my lips before sliding them over the bulbous head of his weeping dick. Juices glistened at the tip, and that was my goal. He'd deprived me of swallowing him down until he came last time, and I refused to be denied a taste now.

I sank down on him, testing how quickly I could accommodate his long length without gagging. I tried to go as fast as possible, but there was no rush. I was the one dictating how this would go, and I slowed down, determined to trace my tongue over each vein and ridge and feel every throbbing pulse of his velvety, hard cock.

“Oh, fuck, Jenny. Babe.” He grunted when I hollowed my cheeks, then swirled my tongue about his head with a harder pull. “You have no idea how damn sexy you are. Sucking me like this.”

I'd never felt more alive, revved up on lust and driven to please him. I knew he found me attractive, but blowing him like this took it to a new level of a connection. A deeper yet more playful intimacy without anyone or anything to interrupt.

“Look at you,” he crooned throatily. “You've got so much power over me. You drive me crazy, Jenny. You look so fucking sexy and bold with your sassy lips wrapped around me like that.”

I moaned, flicking the tip of my tongue at the slit on his head. His words should've annoyed me, but they only made me hotter. A slow tension coiled within me, tightening with

each filthy word he spoke and every twitch of his hips as he tried to grind up into me.

“This is your idea of a distraction?” he growled as I lowered on him, taking him all the way in. “Keep this up and I won’t even remember my damn name.”

I lifted up and took him all again, swallowing hard.

“Fuck!”

I slid my hand down my stomach until my fingers eased beneath my panties. I slipped my pointer finger into my wet pussy, and I tried to use the heel of my hand to maintain friction against my clit.

He groaned in satisfaction. “Yeah, babe. Fuck, you’re unbelievable. You fuck your hand, huh? Feel good? You filthy girl. You feel so damn good.”

I sucked harder and faster, unable to let him get closer without me. It wouldn’t be the same magical feeling when he orgasmed deep inside me, but it seemed like the distracter was in the same position as the distracted. He was beating me at this, nearly making me come on my own hand as his balls tightened and his thighs tensed.

“I’m going to come, Jenny. I’m going to come.”

That’s the point! I wasn’t there yet, but I knew he’d see to me after he came. He was too sweet and considerate not to.

“Stop. I’m going to come.”

I furrowed my brow, glancing up at him as he shook his head. Then he caught me under my arms and pulled me up.

Panting, I pouted at him. “Why’d you do that?”

He lunged forward to wrench my pants down. His fingers replaced where mine had been, and he pumped two digits into me with a wicked, sinful stare on where his fingers disappeared. “I want to fill you up here.” He gazed up at me with longing as I stepped out of my leggings and panties. “That will distract me.”

I rolled my eyes, smiling. “But you never *do* fill me up.”

I leaned over, sacrificing his fingers in me to reach into his pocket for a condom. He must have mistaken my action as leaving him there in the chair, though, because he growled and hugged my waist as I turned and lowered. I gripped the condom in my hands, but I leaned back over him before I fell. His hard head bumped against my clit.

It felt so good, and when he held on to my hips, my back to his front as I knelt above him, he pulled me back to bump into it more. I rocked my hips, rubbing against him and smearing my juices over his head.

His hands reached up to cup my tits, and I sank down on him in a slow, gradual drag of his hard dick spearing into my pussy.

I sat there, breathing hard as I reveled in the feel of him bare inside me.

“Condom,” he reminded me with a gritty growl.

“I’m protected. And clean.”

He kissed my back, aiming for a line up my spine as he massaged my breasts then pinched my nipples. “So am I. But some habits are harder to break than others.”

I got it. Lori said she had suspected Gwen tricked him into knocking her up. I couldn’t fault him for wanting to be so cautious. A small part of me was hurt that he wouldn’t trust me, that he wouldn’t see the difference between me and Gwen, but I also knew that his “habit” to always use a condom wasn’t necessarily a *me* thing as much as it was a *him* thing.

I covered his slick dick with the condom. Then without turning, I sank down on him again, slowly to torment him as much as he did me. Pushing back into him, I rubbed my thighs against him and let my ass grind back.

He growled, grabbing my ass cheeks and squeezing hard before he rubbed his hands over to my hips to guide me up and over him. “Oh, fuck yeah, you sexy—”

“Ward.” I panted as I dropped down and took the full sensation of his dick in that one spot deep inside me. “Shut. Up.”

He groaned, dragging his hands up to my breasts instead, holding them up and pinching my nipples as I rode him. I bounced on his dick, rolling my hips to make sure I kept up the friction on my clit. Each dip down on his hardness pushed me higher toward the peak, and I knew that any minute now, I would reach the pinnacle and explode in an intense, breath-robbing orgasm.

“Are you distracted yet?” I gasped, waning in my strength to keep going.

He pulled me back, sensing that I was struggling. I was so close, but I focused so hard on coming that it blocked me from letting go and accepting it.

“Fuck yeah, I’m distracted.” He scooted down the chair so he’d have more leverage with his feet flat on the floor and me draped over his legs. With one hand pressing down on my stomach, he humped up into me.

I whined, rolling my head back on his shoulder. He did it again, and the bounce of my heavy breasts pulled a point of pain and pleasure together.

“Look at us,” he rasped against my ear. He reached up to pull my hair back, and I leaned my head forward to look. Propping my feet on the edge of the chair as he curled at his abs, I saw how his dick slid into me. It came out wet with my juices, and with his fast thrusts up, my breasts bounced on my chest.

He’d taken over. I was supposed to be the one seducing him and getting him off, but in the end, he got me there. In a blissful implosion of tension deep in my pussy, I climaxed with waves of intense euphoria. We came together because he twitched deep inside me. Both of us groaned loudly and breathed hard until we finally crashed and slumped in the chair, spent and sated.

“I like your ideas,” he teased much later after we sat there.

I giggled, stroking my fingertips over his muscled arm, which he kept banded over my stomach. “And I like

distracting you.” I turned to kiss his cheek. “But sometimes you just talk too damn much.”

He chuckled and helped me up so we could shower.

CHAPTER 50



WARD

Jenny was the best distraction. After she tortured me on the chair and we showered, we moved to the living room to snuggle with a hot tea.

“It’s too sweet.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Yeah, because you added way too much sugar to it.”

I furrowed my brow and looked at her mug. “Didn’t you?”

She shook her head. “Never. The tea is already sweet.”

I sipped her mug. “Hey, you’re right.” I held the mug to my side as we shared the laptop. I had my feet propped on the coffee table. I’d only bothered to throw on sweatpants while she borrowed a T-shirt of mine that hid her like a dress would.

“Wait. That’s mine!” She reached over for the mug to reclaim it.

“Shhh.” I kissed her cheek and tickled her side. Her giggles were infectious, making me want to laugh, but I tried to keep a straight face. “You’re distracting me.”

She growled playfully. “Well, that *was* my goal.”

“You’re distracting me from research,” I told her as sternly as I could with a shit-eating grin.

“Research.” She snorted and made one last attempt to reclaim her tea. I held the mug too high and she slumped against my side and narrowed her eyes.

I sipped, feigning ignorance for her sassy look, then chuckled. “Fine. Fine.” I handed her the mug back only because I wanted both hands free. “And this *is* research. I can’t go into potentially getting a puppy without looking into it first.”

“I doubt she’d be upset if you can’t find the exact dog she wants.”

I sighed. “There are Great Danes with tan fur and black markings, but they’re more like smudges not big black spots.”

“Maybe you need to refine your search. Type in breeders of Dalmatians and Great Danes and see what comes up.”

I shrugged, snuggled against her. This afternoon was going great, and if there was anyone I could do something as mundane as looking for a puppy with, it was her.

“Hey, what if we head out for appetizers and drinks somewhere before Sunny comes home?”

“I’d like that. Hey. Look at that link. It looks promising.” She pointed at the screen.

“That one? No. It’s for somewhere in Wyoming.”

“So? You can’t seriously be thinking that you’ll find something local. I already looked. Shelters have been sharing posts about all the puppies being claimed and reminding adopters that puppies aren’t a temporary gift but a long-term commitment.”

“I think Santa will drop the ball here. She won’t be getting a puppy for Christmas.”

“Aww.” She pouted up at me. “I was getting *my* hopes up too. I was looking forward to seeing her open a huge box and just squealing in surprise.”

I shrugged. “One, I doubt I could find one soon enough that wouldn’t mean cross-country transportation to get it here on time.”

“What are the other reasons?”

“Two, Gwen’s wedding is on New Year’s and it’ll be hectic, if not a full blown disaster.”

“Yeah. I can see that.”

“And three, Mom’s already hoping to do a little family trip to Disney World for a couple of days before winter break is over, like the second week of January. I don’t want to have to find a sitter this soon.”

She gasped, gaping at me. “Um, hello? Like I wouldn’t be excited to puppy sit?”

I smiled. “How could you puppy sit if you came with us?”

Her response was a slow but awkward grin. “You’re looking that far ahead? Planning trips with me?”

“No. Planning trips with *us*. You, me, Sunny, my mom.” I didn’t want to put pressure on her too soon. This was another one of those moments where I suspected she was still cautious with me, doubting my intentions with her. She’d fallen into calling me her boyfriend with ease. And why wouldn’t she? It felt natural to call her my girlfriend, and that wasn’t because we’d dated exclusively long ago. She *was* my girlfriend, one I wanted to invite on our family trip.

“Hey. It’s just an idea. I know you’ll be busy. And if it’s not that, then something else would come up before the spring. I don’t want to rush anything with you. And I won’t rush getting a puppy either. Her birthday isn’t that far away.”

“When is it?”

“An ordinary date, May seventh.” I grinned at her. “Unlike you, Ms. April Fool’s birthday girl.”

She smirked. “It’s such a weird birthday,” she complained. “I feel bad for people with birthdays on other holidays too.” She shrugged. “So no puppy *yet*. Sunny and I will just have to work on our skills of persuasion.”

“Oh, I’m on board. I just need to figure out the timing. Speaking of timing.” My stomach growled, as if on cue. “How about those appetizers?”

She smiled up at me. “Yeah. I’m getting hungry too.”

Knocks sounded on the door, breaking us out of making good on those plans.

“Your mom?” she guessed.

I shook my head. “No. She’s at a friend’s playing cards. A biweekly thing.”

Jenny stood, looking at the clock near the TV. “It’s way too early for Sunny to be back.”

I nodded. My first thought had gone there too. A glance at my watch showed that I hadn’t missed any calls.

We headed to the door together. I opened the door and immediately tensed before the panel was fully ajar. The sounds of cries came first. Jenny wrenched the door open the rest of the way, gasping at the sight of our arrivals.

I knew those cries, and I was instantly on edge and furious to hear them.

“Sunny?” I lowered to her level, my arms open so she could run into them. She kept her face down as she sobbed, not even making eye contact with me as she stood there next to Kenneth.

The man loomed over her, arms crossed as he glowered down at her. His wrinkles battled the stiffness of the work he’d had done, and with the fake tan, he seemed more sinister in the harsh sunlight glaring overhead.

“What happened?” Jenny demanded.

Sunny only cried harder, not looking up at all. I never handled her tears well, and this sudden outburst of them didn’t make sense. Kenneth’s presence confused me more. I immediately went on the defensive. “Sunny?”

“Go,” Kenneth shouted at her. “Go on, you little brat.”

Sunny sobbed harder and shoved past me, running inside.

“What in the hell?” Jenny watched Sunny dash into the foyer. At the sound of her sniffing, she whipped around and glared at the man.

My blood boiled. I clenched my hands into fists and stepped outside over the threshold to get in his face. “What the fuck did you just say?” An intense need to pulverize this man and put him in his place came over me, but Jenny’s cool hand on my upper arm pulled me back from losing it. *Yet.*

“I brought your brat back.”

“About that,” I spat through clenched teeth. “Where’s Gwen?”

I looked past him, seeking her out. I didn’t like that she wasn’t anywhere around. She wasn’t in the car waiting for Kenneth. She wasn’t here. I never *wanted* Gwen to be around, but this prick had no business bringing Sunny home without her. I couldn’t think fast enough to guess why he’d brought Sunny home himself, but I didn’t care to know the reason. It wasn’t right. My little girl bawling her eyes out like this wasn’t right.

“Sunny? What happened?” Jenny asked. She dropped to her knees and rubbed Sunny’s back. “It’s okay. Whatever it is, it *will* be okay.”

I furrowed my brow, looking at her and trying to console her to no avail. Sunny wouldn’t meet anyone’s gaze and that wasn’t like her at all.

“Sunny?” Jenny scooted closer, opening her arm for a hug. Sunny wavered, stepping closer like she really wanted her comfort, but she turned and fled to her room, slamming her door shut, another first.

“You’ve got a real brat on your hands, you little son of a bitch.”

Jenny sucked in a hard breath as she returned to the door with me. “She’s not a brat.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, slut.” Kenneth snarled, facing me as he pointed in the direction of where Sunny ran off. “She’s going to grow up to be a bitch too. She needs a firmer hand at home. The world’s going to hell with this so-called gentle parenting crap. Parents forgot the need for spanking their little brats.”

“You better watch what the fuck you say,” I warned him, taking a step forward.

“Ward,” Jenny warned.

If she dared to tell me to take it easy, I would scream.

“I should watch what I say?” Kenneth huffed. “I know what I’m talking about. Kids don’t know how to listen. How to respect people. Your kid is nothing but a brat. It’s no wonder Gwen doesn’t want her. I’m not surprised that she bailed. She was smart to do it when she did.”

Jenny gripped my wrist as I shook with rage and the need to punch this prick.

“Gwen was lucky to see what a fuck-up you are,” he sneered at me. “She saw how pathetic of a ‘man’ you were and didn’t want to have her wagon hitched to yours. Who’d blame her? I don’t. You’re not a real man. A real man wouldn’t be afraid to take a firm hand and keep his brat in line.”

I vibrated with anger. I was about to snap. I’d been mad when I learned that Gwen took Sunny from school unauthorized. I’d been livid when Mr. Marshall pulled his stunts. But I didn’t think I’d ever been as furious as I was right now.

Jenny knew it too. She slipped in front of me, backing me up with her butt. She held her hands up, intercepting the lethal stare-down Kenneth initiated with me.

“You listen to *me*, asshole. You need to take your ill-informed.” She shoved both hands at his chest. “Stupidly opinionated.” Another shove. He snarled as he almost tripped backward over the step as Jenny stayed in his face. “Pig-headed.” Once more, she pushed him until he almost tripped over a planter of mums my mom had put there at the edge of the path. “Whiny ass off Ward’s property *right now* and go back to your equally unlikeable and despicable idiot of a fiancée.”

She huffed, blowing her hair from her face as she returned to the door and prodded me inside. Then she slammed the door in his face with a resounding thud so hard that I felt the

vibrations travel from the floor up through my feet and then my legs.

She turned to face me, still breathing hard but grinning wide. “That felt good.”

I blinked and numbly nodded. “Yeah.”

But knowing my little girl was in tears ruined the lasting effect of that silver lining of Jenny being such a badass in her honor.

She sighed, looking at Sunny’s door at the same time I turned my head that way.

Without a word, we both headed to check on her.

CHAPTER 51



JENNY

Oh, *that poor girl*. My heart broke as Ward and I hurried down the hall toward Sunny's room. She'd slammed her door so hard, I swore I could still hear it in my mind, such a final thud. It hadn't felt good like when I'd closed the front door on Kenneth's face. After yelling at him and giving him a piece of my mind, I wanted to float on the high of telling someone off. But there would be no chance to smile or enjoy anything while Sunny continued to cry in her room.

Her sobs and cries came through the closed door, gnawing at me. It made no damn sense. Sunny was, well, *sunny*. I hadn't known her for that long, but I'd never witnessed her throwing a tantrum or reacting with tears like this. The little girl who'd almost hugged me at the door was hurting something fierce, and I wanted to be her protector. She didn't deserve Kenneth calling her a brat or saying such vile things in front of her face like that, suggesting Ward use a "firmer" hand with her and browbeat her as discipline. She *was* disciplined!

What in the hell happened?

Ward exhaled a tense breath next to me. He stared at the closed door for a moment, no doubt just as bewildered and lost as I was. Mad, too, but at least I prevented him from striking out like I knew he wanted to. Sunny had been distraught enough. Escalating to physical violence felt like a bad move, even if that guy deserved a smack in the face.

"What the fuck?" Ward whispered, shaking his head.

She cried louder, and I winced. My heart felt like a crumpled piece of paper, never to be smoothed out again until she was happy once more.

I echoed his sentiments. *What could have happened that hurt her this badly? Why would Kenneth be dropping her off, not Gwen?*

It was supposed to be an innocent afternoon of tea and finger sandwiches. Applying the word *innocent* to anything of Gwen's felt like an oxymoron, but like Ward had said before I distracted him, we knew the other bridesmaids there. It should have been a relaxed afternoon with other rational adults present.

This get-together was supposed to be a chance for Sunny to dip her toe in the water and get to know those other bridal attendants. And most importantly, to let her have an opportunity to feel included in the wedding planning and preparation after Gwen showed how much of a terrible job she'd done of that so far.

Ward rubbed his hand over his face, then lowered his arm to his side. He was physically distraught over this, and I worried about how I could help. To help her. To help him. To help her help him.

I'd been told my whole life that I was a good listener, and I was eager to offer that service to assist however I could now.

As his fingers dropped, his knuckles brushed against my thigh. The touch starkly reminded me that I was bare there. Dressed in nothing but his large T-shirt, I didn't look decent.

Slut. I narrowed my eyes to slits, recalling Kenneth's insult. It hadn't hit me fully then because I was so confused and defensive of Sunny, but now that he'd left and I had a moment to think, it seemed like no wonder he'd shouted that horrible word. Ward and I clearly looked like we had been interrupted from a recent round of something sexy, but that would never give Kenneth or anyone else the right to slap that label on me.

Not now. Not that. This wasn't the time to fret about anything Kenneth called me. This moment had to be about Sunny. We had to figure out what happened and how to fix it.

Hold up. We?

After all that talk with Ward about me going on a vacation with them soon, he'd put so many ideas into my head. He'd prompted me to think of him and me as an *us*, but I couldn't dive headfirst into automatically thinking we were a couple. That *we* should help Sunny in there.

I might do more harm than good. And that was the last thing I wanted.

"I understand if you think it's best if you go in and talk to her." When he glanced up at me, furrowing his brow in confusion, I added, "Without me."

He opened his mouth, but I put my hand on his back and shook my head before he could voice his protest. "No. I can wait. She needs her dad and I don't want to interfere."

"You are *not* interfering."

I smiled. I might have been elevated to a special status in Sunny's eyes to be granted a nickname, but that was no indication that I should be inserting myself as a parent. "Go on. I'll make myself busy." We'd been thinking about appetizers, so maybe the good old food trick would be a smart distraction. "I'll whip up something for dinner if you'd like."

He let me take one step before he took my hand and stopped me. The poor man looked as broken up over his daughter's crushed spirit as I felt, but I noticed an edge of anger lingered within him. Of course, he was sad, but that fury wouldn't dissipate anytime soon.

Maybe I should stay and be a voice of reason?

I immediately dismissed that too. If he was mad, then Sunny should see that too, that someone would be in her corner always and get angry on her behalf.

I moved my hand to his shoulder and squeezed as I managed a small smile. "It will be okay, Ward. I've got faith in

that.” *I’ve got faith that you’re a wonderful father who can handle this.* “Just go in and talk to her.”

If I wasn’t here, he probably already would have been in there doing his best. Even though he could insist that I wasn’t interfering, my presence here was something that cut into the duo they always had at home.

Still, he didn’t let me walk away, pulling me in close to press a sweet kiss to my cheek. He blew out another harsh breath and nodded. “Maybe it is for the best I talk to Sunny alone this time.”

This time? He could never resist slipping some thread of an argument in.

“But you do *not* have to cook anything. We’ll order something.”

“Okay, Ward.” I leaned in to kiss him quickly.

I stopped in his room to grab my pants and switch into my shirt. Sunny was perceptive. I knew that already. So, the sooner I looked like “normal” Jenny, the better for her to adjust after her trying day.

That poor, sweet girl. I wouldn’t be forgetting the sounds of her anguish anytime soon, and the next time I ever saw Kenneth or Gwen?

I growled, heading into the kitchen to focus on something else. Hell, I’d do the dishes. Ward was sweet enough to tell me I didn’t have to go out of my way, but I needed something to occupy myself while Ward talked with Sunny.

The dishes didn’t take me long, and wiping the counters down didn’t either. When my stomach growled, reminding me again that we’d canceled our impromptu ideas for appetizers somewhere, I searched for something close to order.

I scrunched my face, not a fan of the wait times for a delivery. Plus, I had no clue what Sunny might like. I wanted to make a guess at what a kid’s comfort food might be, but I hadn’t gotten to that point of familiarizing myself with Sunny yet.

Then I'll stick with what I know. I set my phone down on the counter and returned to the kitchen, sourcing the basic ingredients for the food items that I'd always loved when I was a little girl. I'd never forget how my mother made me grilled cheese sandwiches and chicken noodle soup whenever I felt lousy. It didn't matter if it was for a head cold or the flu. Or a broken heart or bad reaction to a test grade. She'd made these foods almost daily right after Ward broke up with me, and even long after when something would remind me of him or when Gwen would bully me.

Something about the familiar and basic food just hit the soul differently, especially when it was made with love. I didn't feel right about being in Sunny's room and hearing her out about whatever went down at Gwen's today, but I could do *this*, and I hoped she would realize it was my indirect way of showing support.

As I collected the ingredients and set them out on the counterspace, I ached for her. It wasn't right that such a young girl should even *need* comfort food. Sunny didn't deserve being treated like that to need her father to console her. I wished I could make it all better. I wanted to do something far more than make a gesture for her with food.

I was no stranger to how Gwen could behave. She'd been my friend once, long ago before she became such a mean person. Once she'd shown who she really was, a boyfriend-stealing bully, she gave me no mercy. The cruel insults, the rumors she spread behind my back. All those snooty looks and laughing at my mistakes in presentations. She was the quintessential mean girl, the cliché bitch that I was sure every high school had, and her treatment of me had hit *hard* in those adolescent years.

But to make Sunny, her own biological daughter, feel so awful? That was unforgiveable. I'd matured. I was an adult now, able to reflect and look back at those terrible high school years with a distant indifference. Whatever Gwen said to me back then could stay back there. She couldn't hurt me now. Neither could Kenneth with his insults at the front door. They were nothing to me.

Sunny, though? She was just a girl. She shouldn't have to deal with a high school bully mentality or ever feel like she needs to cry her heart out after spending time over there.

As I prepared the food, my appetite waned. I shouldn't have coached Ward to let her attend. He'd had his doubts and worries, rightfully so, and now I regretted my words of advice. I'd wanted to be positive and suggest he be more open-minded, almost like a devil's advocate, and look how that turned out.

I should've let him stick with his doubts and concerns. He knew how Gwen could be, and I felt extra terrible for wanting to hope for the best, that Sunny would enjoy the experience there and have a good time.

"Yeah, right." *A good time, my ass.*

I paused in stirring the contents of the soup in the pot, straining to listen for any sign of more crying from the other side of the house. Silence met my ears, and I hoped that Ward was getting through to her. I prayed he was getting the full story and that Sunny saw she was loved and supported *here*.

Still, my mood remained sour. Gwen simply couldn't exist without causing turmoil and suffering. It was her only way of going through life. No matter how I tried to view it all, I couldn't shake a sinking feeling that this was all her doing.

I tried to concentrate on the happier thoughts of Sunny. How she'd been so thrilled and excited to go dress shopping. How eager she was to fit in and belong. And how she was so giddy to participate and contribute.

All because of Gwen, those highlights would be dimmed. Even that gorgeous dress she'd chosen for the wedding would be tainted now, forever associated with the plan to wear it to Gwen's wedding.

That was Gwen, all right, sucking the joy out of everyone's lives.

CHAPTER 52



WARD

Once Jenny walked away, I entered Sunny's room. My little girl lay on her side on her bed. Her back faced me while she cried with her head on her pink pillow. It was hard enough to hear sadness through the door but seeing her so upset absolutely broke my heart.

Any time that I even thought she was hurting, I wanted to be her hero and take away her problems. Stepping back and letting Sunny learn how to navigate life with the ups and downs it offered us and not interfering when she had a mistake to get a lesson from were the hardest parts of parenting.

I couldn't remove her problems, especially not this one. I couldn't remove Gwen from her life. She was her mother and always would be in a strict biological sense. But I felt like the opposite of a hero by letting her go to Gwen's. I regretted telling Sunny that she could attend the bridal party afternoon. I should've listened to my gut and kept her away from Gwen.

Too late for that. All I could try to do now was damage control once I had some answers.

I closed the door behind me as softly as I could. Then I knocked on it in case she didn't hear me enter. She didn't turn around, but she curled together, burrowing against her pillow even more, perhaps expecting my arrival and wishing she could avoid it.

"Sunshine? I'm here if you would like to talk." I kept my voice gentle and calm. Not raised or demanding. I wouldn't yell at her.

I wasn't perfect. Sometimes I raised my voice. I had to imagine that was human nature sometimes, like when I was frustrated with myself, but never *at* her. She'd certainly heard me shout at others, like with Mr. Marshall. While I didn't hide the fact from her that I didn't suffer fools, I never lashed out at her. *Never* ever at her.

Just thinking of the way Kenneth treated her at the front door pissed me off all over again.

She didn't roll over. She didn't reply at all. This would be harder than I thought. Sunny and I always found a way to talk with each other and I treasured how much she trusted me to speak up. That she wouldn't now was a bad sign.

Just what the hell happened?

I padded over her plush carpet, pretending I didn't even see that spot of glitter slime that had hardened into a spot. My mom suggested cutting it out of the pile there, but Sunny *liked* it. Approaching slowly, I tried to figure out what I could say or do to get through to my girl.

I bet Jenny would have an idea. She was creative and kind, and listening seemed to be her specialty.

"Is there something I can do to make you feel better?"

Nothing. She lay there without facing me.

"Would you like a hug?"

Her shoulder lifted like she wanted to roll over, but she remained with her back to me.

"Would you like me to put on your favorite movie?" No reply. I glanced at the TV in the corner. "Would you like me to put on the *I Love Lucy* episode of when she was at the candy factory?" It was her favorite and she would watch it on repeat. "Or the music you play when you do yoga with Grandma?"

Her head rolled on the pillow, shaking *no*. I raised my brows. That was progress. It was a reply of some kind and I'd take it.

"Would you like me to give you space?" Her lack of answers wasn't encouraging. If she needed more time to lie

here and process whatever had happened, I would give her the freedom and space to do so. I never wanted to push her too far, trusting her to let me know when she wanted something from me.

I tried one last time to get a reply. I knelt beside her bed, wishing that I could reach out and hold her. Watching her suffer made my heart crumble.

“What do you need, Sunny?”

Only now did she turn, rolling over slowly until she could face me. She didn't stop there. With a tear-streaked face, she slid right off the bed and onto my lap. Settling on top of me, she tucked against me. My heart swelled with gratitude that I could be her comfort, but it ached just the same that this had happened at all. I hugged her close and locked her in my embrace. Being able to hold her helped my mood, and I hoped that having the comfort of my hug would reassure her enough to talk. Stroking her hair, I gave her more time. “I promise you, no matter what happened, it will be okay.”

She sniffled again, but her head moved in a bobbing motion, and I wondered if she was nodding in agreement.

Just like that, we sat on her carpet. With each minute that passed, I calmed myself down with the knowledge that she was here with me and I could see that she was all right.

“I've got you now.”

Her fingers clutched me tighter as she clenched her hand in my shirt.

“Do you feel ready to share with me why you're so upset?”

She sniffled again and nodded. Then she backed up more and lifted her sad face to mine. “I think I'm ready, Daddy.”

“Take your time, Sunshine. I only want to fix your problems.” When it was something to do with Gwen, I felt limited. But whatever would make my girl smile again, I would attempt it.

“Everything was going really well,” she said. “I couldn't believe that I got my own robe. It matched all the other ones

and it was so cute. I was about to get my nails painted by one of the bridesmaids and I accidentally knocked the nail polish over. It spilled on the white couch and leaked to the carpet.”

Oh, shit. If they were in that living room I had sat in briefly, I recalled the scene. Pure-white sofa. Even white carpet and rugs. Clinically bland and bright white.

“Another bridesmaid started to clean it up with nail polish remover but Gwen freaked out. She started cussing and kept saying the F-word under her breath. She tried to hide the spots with pillows and told the bridesmaids to cover it with their robes so Kenneth wouldn’t see it, but he was suspicious. The smell of the remover and the polish was really strong and he noticed a spot on the coffee table and yelled at us all to move so he could see the damage. Then when he found the mess on the couch and the carpet, he got *really*, really mad.” She wiped tears from her cheeks. “He was scary. He yelled at me and called me names.”

I gritted my teeth, holding back all the emotions that swarmed to the surface. Rage filled me, practically making me shake with the need to react. I wanted to drive right back to his house and pummel Kenneth on his precious white carpet. I could add some damn blood spots to his stupid couch and carpet and stain it even better.

“Can I see?” I raised her hands, inspecting the half-finished manicure. Some didn’t have polish or just a thin coat. They were all smudged and dotted with lint and dust. They looked terrible. I didn’t know much about painting nails, but I knew it wasn’t supposed to look like this. I sighed.

“Why was it such a big deal?” she asked. “I’ve made messes before at home and at Grandma’s and no one has ever yelled at me.”

Because Kenneth is an asshole.

“And you say that any mess can be cleaned or replaced.”

That was true. Material things could be repaired. I had the money and means to afford cleaning and replacing whatever I needed to, and Kenneth damn well could as well.

“Why did he get so mad?” she asked again when I didn’t answer.

I couldn’t tell her the truth, that the guy was a grade-A asshole. No other ready answer came to my mind though. Again, I wished Jenny had come in here with me. She would know what to say that was both appropriate and helpful. I could use one of her analogies right now, like what she said about Gwen leaving her on the sidewalk.

I furrowed my brow, thinking about Jenny some more. “Well, it’s like stubbing a toe.” I thought back to when she’d stubbed her toe on the chair in my room. “Kenneth’s reaction was like when you stub a toe. You yell.” I shrugged. “It just comes out.”

She narrowed her eyes, thinking. “Like a reflex?”

I nodded. “Exactly like that. But that doesn’t mean it was okay for him to talk to you like that. There is no excusing that. Under no circumstances should he talk to you like that.”

She dropped her gaze, looking at her lap as she seemed to consider this.

“It’s normal for you to have hurt feelings like this. Anyone would. But Kenneth owes you an apology.”

I hoped she was listening, but she didn’t look up or comment.

“What did your mom do when Kenneth got mad?” I asked.

She shrugged. “She just sat back, bothered about the party being stalled. She wanted the afternoon to be about her wedding, and him getting mad put a dent in it all.” She glanced up at me then. “She said that maybe he should drive me home if he didn’t want kids in the house that badly.”

And she thought it was okay to let you go with him when he was so angry? I fumed all over again. I smiled through my anger. Leave it to Gwen to fail to stand up for her own child.

I looked down at her in my lap, glad that the crying had stopped. I would handle this from here on out. For now,

though, more comfort was due and I knew just who could help me with that effort.

“Want to go see Jenny?” I tipped my head toward the door. “I think I smell something cooking.”

Of course, that stubborn woman wouldn't listen to me. I told her I didn't want her to feel obligated to make anything, but she must have wanted to anyway.

“I smell something good,” Sunny agreed as she stood. “Let's go see.” On her feet, she lowered her hand to help me off the floor. I chuckled, getting up without pulling on her arm.

We walked out together, and I felt like a champion to see that Sunny's spirits were already higher now. I bet telling me made her feel lighter, and knowing Jenny was making something for her was a motivation to continue to leave her sadness behind.

In the kitchen, we found Jenny at the stove. I leaned in to look closer, spotting the sizzling grilled cheese sandwiches and bubbling chicken noodle soup. Together, they smelled good. Sunny's face lit up with a huge grin, and she drew in a huge breath.

I watched as she walked right up to Jenny and reached up on her tiptoes to see what she was cooking. Jenny didn't hesitate. She picked her up and let her look in. “Which sandwich do you want?”

“Hmmm. That one.” She pointed at the perfectly golden brown one.

Jenny's sweet laughter followed immediately. “Good choice!”

Sunny looped her arms around her neck and hugged her before Jenny set her back down.

“Wanna help set the table?” Jenny asked. “I found some bowls but I don't know where the plates are.”

“Over here!” Sunny scampered off, pointing at the door that hid the plates.

Genius. This woman was a genius, quick to realize Sunny wanted to help. Always aware of making sure Sunny felt included.

I leaned my forearms on the counter and watched them get the table ready for an early dinner. My heart felt fuller now, at peace with Sunny surrounded by those who cherished her and doted on her.

It was never wise to compare lovers. It was especially tricky comparing Jenny to Gwen, given our history.

But witnessing this scene, I knew without a doubt that Jenny was a better mother to Sunny than Gwen ever was or ever would be.

CHAPTER 53



JENNY

My mom's grilled cheese and chicken noodle soup had always done the trick of brightening my mood. It seemed it worked its magic on Sunny too. She ate up, and with every bite she consumed and every minute we shared at the table, her spirits lifted. I would go as far as to claim it helped Ward as well.

I had no doubt he was still angry beneath the surface. He had that alpha, protector, daddy thing going for him. Like Lori told me, he reacted in defense, and he sure as hell would be eager to defend Sunny against whatever happened with Kenneth and Gwen. Still, his mood seemed lighter as Sunny's improved.

Sunny asked me to stay after dinner, and I had a hard time saying no. She was a pleasure to be around, and if my food or company could make her happy, she more than deserved it after the day she'd suffered. If hanging out a while longer and agreeing to play some boardgames would help her move on past whatever went down at Gwen and Kenneth's, no problem. I was in.

She kicked our asses, though, and Ward and I got more competitive to try to win. After all, we couldn't let all these triumphs get to her head!

We weren't trying to let her win, and more than once, I growled in frustration when I couldn't get ahead. Karen was usually the super competitive one when we had game nights at the house. We hadn't gotten around to starting that tradition back up since Lauren moved out though. This was the super

busy time of the year, not only with family stuff, but I bet both of Lauren's companies were nonstop frenzy pace. Maybe after the new year we could try to start it all back up again.

While it was cute at first, Sunny's obnoxious behavior with her victories goaded me to win just once. She rubbed it in our faces, hopping on the chair and doing a little victory dance, but I couldn't actually be mad. She was too damn goofy and silly, and we all agreed it was just a game. My abs hurt after we wrapped up the last attempt of dethroning her as the champ of Chutes and Ladders. I couldn't remember the last time I had laughed this much. Laughter was a hell of a mood booster, and I couldn't have wiped the grin off my face if I tried.

"Can we have some ice cream, Dad?" Sunny asked after we put the pieces and board away.

A wide yawn stole across her face, and Ward smiled at her with the lopsided grin that never failed to charm me. He was such a sucker for her, and I had no trouble falling for her request too.

"That actually sounds good," I said.

She nodded, even though she couldn't lose that sleepy look in her eyes. After the excitement about the bridal tea party, the stress of preparing for it, then the worse stress of what made her cry so much when she was brought home earlier than expected, it was no wonder she was dead tired.

"Kind of late, isn't it?" Ward countered.

"Dad." She stuck her lips out in a classic pout. "*Please?*"

He sighed and shook his head.

"I was so sad earlier. And I didn't get any desserts or treats at my mom's house because of the whole incident." She picked at her nails, and seeing them again made me curious about the shabby half-finished ruin of them.

"All right. All right. But I know we're out."

"Can you go buy some?" Sunny sat up straighter, peppy and bright.

He glanced at me. “Would you mind staying here with her while I run out for a carton?”

I smiled. “I don’t mind.”

As soon as the door closed after he left, I grabbed a box of cards. “How about Go Fish?” I asked.

She still rubbed her finger on another nail, and I frowned. “Want me to help with that?”

Her eyes widened. “Can you?”

I nodded.

“Grandma Lori said nail polish remover is a chemical and I can’t use it.”

“It is. But I can.”

She grinned and bounded out of her chair to run to the bathroom. Next to a plastic container of nail polish remover, she placed a baby wipe package. “Grandma Lori left these here for doing our nails but she warned me to never touch it without her help.”

“That’s right.” I scrunched my nose. “Besides, it really stinks.” I nodded at the back door. “Maybe we can hurry up and do this out on the patio.”

Once we sat down at the table there, I helped her remove the gunky polish.

“What happened to them?”

She frowned, watching me remove the ruined manicure. “I accidentally tipped a nail polish bottle over on Kenneth’s white couch and it spilled on his carpet.”

I winced. “Whoopsie.”

She nodded. “But he got really mad and yelled at me. He called me names.”

“Well, he’s an idiot. Everyone knows mistakes happen.”

A slow smile spread across her lips. “You just called him a name too.”

I pursed my lips and pulled them in between my teeth. *Caught*. And *idiot* was much tamer than what I'd told the man at the front door. And what I wanted to call him now.

“Correct. Which is not nice, either. So, uh, maybe this is more like one of those *do as I say not as I do* things.”

She giggled. “I won't tell anyone.”

“Our secret then, huh?”

Finished with the remover, we went inside where we could both wash our hands, then returned to the table for Go Fish.

As soon as we sat down, she cleared her throat and folded her hands on the tabletop. “Jenny, what are your intentions with my dad?”

Her forward question caught me out of the blue so much that I lost the cards. Mid-shuffle, I fumbled and sent them flying all over. I raised my brows and fought hard not to burst out laughing. *My intentions? Just where does she learn to talk like that?*

I respected her too much to laugh, though. Keeping my face neutral and friendly, I hoped she couldn't tell how much her blunt inquiry threw me off. It was such a crazy question coming from a six-year-old, and it had flown out of her mouth with such seriousness that I knew she meant it. She'd probably been planning on how to ask and when. Hell, I wouldn't have put it past her to have sent Ward out to get that ice cream just to get me alone and toss that question at me. Her relationship with Ward was precious, though, so I knew that no matter how I replied, I'd need to address this seriously and not blow her off.

“To be honest, I'm not actually sure what my intentions are.”

Sunny frowned, clearly hoping for a better response than my vague words. I didn't want her to think I was hedging or avoiding a reply.

“Your dad and I have history together. We used to love each other, but our lives went in different directions.” That was the truth, but it still felt like a sham answer. I hadn't done

anything. *He* was the one who'd redirected *his* life to exclude me from being a part in it. Ward dumped me. He'd moved on after me. And I just let it happen and tried to react the best I could.

Now, though? Crap. Her question was more loaded than she ever could have realized.

"I'm just grateful to be spending time with him. And to have met you, too."

Sunny smiled. "Do you still love him?"

I opened and closed my mouth, hesitating. "I don't know." If I wasn't careful, I would be able to swear I did. He made it too easy for me to want to love him, but I couldn't ignore all these insecurities I couldn't let go of just yet.

"I think he still loves you."

Oh, boy. I hadn't planned on this kind of girl talk today, much less with her. My cheeks felt hot and I doubted I could tame them quick enough for this uber-observant child to miss.

"What makes you say that?" I asked instead.

She shrugged, scooping up the cards. "My dad talks about you all the time. Like, *all* the time."

"Good stuff?"

She giggled. "Yeah! And silly stuff. And he smiles the most when you're around. His laugh is definitely louder than usual too."

I raised my brows, fighting a smile. "His laugh is *louder*? You notice all of that?"

She nodded. "Yep. I know my dad better than anyone else."

I used to think I knew him well too. I chewed on the inside of my cheek. "Would it bother you if I said I did have feelings for your dad?"

"Good feelings?" she asked.

I almost laughed, reminded that I wasn't actually having girl talk with a peer. "Yes. If I still loved him, would that bother you?"

She beamed, showing off that gap of where her tooth wiggled so much it was a shocker it hadn't come out yet. "Nope. I would love it!"

You say that now, but it's not that simple. No matter how Ward and I wanted to become something—if we got to that stage officially—it would be a tricky task to make their two a three. Or even their three, with Lori, into a foursome. Thanksgiving had been great. I loved having that holiday time with them, but even that was temporary.

"That's why I'm glad you're going as my dad's date to my mom's wedding."

"Oh, yeah?"

She nodded with that sage expression again.

"Weddings are the best places for people to fall in love, right?"

"Uh..."

The front door opened and Ward returned, saving me from having to answer. *Lucky timing!*

"Ooh, ice-cream time!" I stood, encouraging her to follow this distraction instead of asking me anything else.

Within fifteen minutes, Sunny proved how tired she really was when she nodded off halfway through her bowl. Ward chuckled, sliding her arm to the side to cushion her face on the armrest of the sofa, and I picked up the bowl from her lap.

"She's worn out," I said.

"Very," he agreed. "I'll be right back. No bath or shower tonight." He reached for her to gather her in his arms but paused at her hands.

"She, um, she asked me to clean her nails up." I shrugged. It wasn't a big thing to do, but in light of how her nails had

gotten messed up in the first place, maybe it wasn't a little favor either.

"Thank you," he replied soberly as he looked up at me. "I'll be right back." Then he lifted her into his arms and carried her out of the living room, toward the hallway near her bedroom.

I stood there with her bowl and mine, watching them go. They were a package, one sexy dad and his precious girl. I had already known they were a package, but today and this evening, I saw just how much she had her father wrapped around her little finger.

Ward wasn't the only one I was falling for. I sighed, thinking back to the heartache of her being hurt, the anger of hating what Kenneth made her feel, and then the joy of being able to pull a smile or laugh out of her. I was starting to love Sunny, too. With her questions about the feelings I had for Ward, it made it so much clearer that I needed to protect *my* heart too. I wouldn't want to lose Ward again, and I'd hate to lose Sunny as well.

I needed to talk to him about what this all meant between us before we were in over our heads.

As if we're not already.

CHAPTER 54



WARD

I carried Sunny to her room and was glad that this trip wasn't as awful as the first time today. I wasn't approaching carefully and worried about what had upset her. I knew the reason for her outburst now. That didn't mean I liked what had happened. Of course, I didn't, but at least I wasn't in the dark. I was informed now, and I would be acting on this incident as soon as possible.

Right now, it was a sweet moment of putting her to bed. She was light in my arms, which made it easier to move her without waking her. One day she wouldn't be so little, and I wanted to treasure these opportunities now while they lasted. It didn't enter my mind to rouse her and help her to bed. She could skip brushing teeth and a bath tonight. With all the stress she'd put up with at Gwen and Kenneth's, she needed to rest and recover.

I wasn't sure yet what I would do with Gwen, but I had my ideas. If Jenny had removed Sunny's messy nail polish, my girl had to have explained something. Even if Sunny hadn't told Jenny what happened earlier, I would confide in her and seek her advice.

I held back a laugh as I lowered Sunny to her bed. Her pillow had long-since dried from her tears. A chuckle still bubbled in my throat though. Jenny told me she didn't know anything about being a parent, yet here I was instinctively seeking her advice on something that had happened with my kid. That sweet woman of mine would be better at this than

she realized, but still, I wanted to make sure I wasn't forcing anything on her.

Sunny and I came as a package. We were a two-for-one deal, and that was a factor that had held me back from dating for so long. I hadn't wanted to test any woman and see if they'd fit in my and Sunny's life, but Jenny was there. And she fit perfectly. Still, I didn't want to coerce her into the assumption that she'd *need* to be a parent if she stuck with me. She hadn't mentioned anything about having her own kids one day, but hell, this was still all new between us. It felt new, and for that reason, it seemed automatically complicated.

Fortunately, Sunny didn't stir as I covered her with her favorite blanket and released her. She shifted into more of a curled position that she often slept in, and once she seemed completely out, I slowly left her room. Before heading back to Jenny, I stopped at Sunny's bathroom and grabbed a wet cloth to at least wipe the ice-cream smudges from the corners of her mouth. I would have felt like a better parent if I insisted on her brushing her teeth, but I didn't want to wake her and delay her from getting much-needed sleep.

One time. I could be flexible.

By the time I got back to the living room where I'd left Jenny, she was up and heading for where she'd left her coat near the front door.

"Hey. Where are you going?"

She turned, smiling sweetly and patiently. "Home?"

"So soon?" I challenged as I stalked up to her.

"Soon?" She rolled her eyes, not losing that smile. With an exaggerated lift of her brows, she looked at her watch. "I've been here all day. The whole evening too."

I grinned, taking ahold of her hips in a loose hug. "Not long enough." As I slowly guided her toward the couch, backpedaling, she followed my steps.

"I don't want to overstay my welcome."

"Who said you are?"

She shrugged, still walking away from the door with me. “It’s been a tricky day—for all of us.”

“You are *not* a slut.” Making that claim seemed like a huge jump, but with her wording, that she, too, had been impacted by what Kenneth had done, my mind immediately went there.

“I know. And that’s, like, not even on my mind. I meant you dealing with that. Sunny dealing with that.”

I squeezed my fingers into her sides as I encouraged her to sit on the couch with me. “You were there too. You had to deal with it as well.” As soon as the words left my lips, I regretted them. Some package deal we were. I came loaded with all kinds of bullshit and drama. This woman was a saint to put up with it.

“Again, I know. But I can tell this is going to hit you hard. And her. You need a good, peaceful night of relaxing and decompressing from it all too.”

Exactly, which is why I want—need—you to stay.

“Please stay?” I asked, going for a direct request as I tugged her hand toward the couch.

“I better go home, Ward.” Her voice wasn’t very firm.

I banded my arm around her, and as she let out a light squeal of shock, I took advantage and spun, making sure I landed on my back on the couch with her on top of me. “I insist you stay.” Because she glowered with a mock look of annoyance, I leaned up to kiss her fast. She gave in instantly, moaning into my mouth.

I pulled back, gazing into her gorgeous green eyes now burning with desire. “I’d really like it if you stayed the night. It might help if you’re here in the morning anyway because I was hoping you’d be up for an adventure. Sunny and I will be picking out a Christmas tree tomorrow. You should come with us.”

Alarm chased away the desire I saw in her gaze. *What the hell?*

“I bet you have a good eye for that sort of thing. Besides,” I said, laying on the persuasive charm as I rubbed my hands up her arms, “I could use some help with the heavy lifting.”

She licked her lips, then bit down on the lower one. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

What in the actual hell?

“Why?” Confusion gripped me and I couldn’t help a frown. “Isn’t everything going well?”

It had to be Kenneth, what he said about her. And that she was even here when he dropped off Sunny. I couldn’t think of any other reason she’d be on the fence about spending time with me. Before that whole incident, she’d been so hot and wild, calling the shots. Then after that incident, she’d been playing it careful.

“Jenny?”

She sighed, looking down before facing me fully. Even though she still lay draped over me and didn’t make any move to get up, it seemed like a canyon of distance was starting to crack between us.

“I’m...”

She was uncertain about something, that was clear. And I hated that she might be uneasy about *me* all of a sudden.

“I’m feeling a little overwhelmed.”

I knew I could count on her to be honest and reply, but I wasn’t expecting that. Maybe I should have been. “Because of what Kenneth said and did?”

She snorted a laugh. “What, him calling me a slut?” She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that doesn’t matter. His opinions of me don’t matter. That’s like, uh, high school crap. Maybe Gwen wants to act like she’s still there, but *I’m* not. I don’t care what he said about me.”

“Then what? The whole incident? That I come with a side of drama?”

“I wouldn’t call that a side.” She shook her head. “Tonight, I realized that my feelings are very invested in you.”

I grinned, running my hands up and down her back. *Like when you slammed the door in that bastard’s face for me? I know.*

“And my feelings are invested in your little family, too.” She lifted her brows.

“Sunny?”

She nodded. “It’s impossible not to feel like I’m falling in love with her, she’s so damn sweet. And the more I spend time with you or her; I’m just not sure what that means.”

“It means we continue spending time together?” *Why wouldn’t we if it’s good?*

“Yeah, but how? Or to what end?” She licked her lips again, a tell that she was still uneasy. “This wedding that has been hanging over our heads was supposed to be my motive for spending time with you. Because I was supposed to be your date. And to help Sunny. But the more I’m around you, the more I start to feel like I used to.”

“How?”

“Like a giddy schoolgirl who is naïve and blind to how things could do wrong.”

I sighed, hating that she’d circle back to that. This wasn’t the first time I’d picked up on her hesitancy, on her guardedness where I was concerned. I couldn’t blame her for that, but at the same time, how were we supposed to move on?

I took her hand and lifted it to my lips to kiss it. “I am not going to hurt you again.”

“Maybe not on purpose,” she whispered.

I shook my head, wishing it didn’t have to sting. Her words hurt because, with her sharing them so honestly, I realized that she *still* didn’t trust me. Despite all this time we’d been enjoying with each other, regardless of all the steps we’d taken together, she wouldn’t put any faith in me yet. “Will you ever trust me?”

Her only reply was to stare at me, undecided.

“Can you get past the mistake I made when I was eighteen?”

She searched my eyes, so hopeful yet cautious. “I want to. I just can’t promise that I will.”

I wanted to growl, to groan, to get up and pace. With her warm softness over me, it felt like I was trapped. I was damned if I did, damned if I didn’t. I couldn’t wrap my head around the fact that she wasn’t feeling what I did. That she didn’t look at me—and Sunny—and think we might be her future.

“It might always be at the back of my head. I know that’s silly, and short-sighted, and probably a form of self-sabotage, but it’s the truth, and I’ll always be honest with you, Ward.”

I nodded. I appreciated that. “What can I do to prove myself?” Because I would. I was sure of it. I was convinced we would last.

“Can you be patient?” she asked.

Haven’t I already showed you that? “I can try.”

“After the wedding, we need to reassess. Sunny’s heart is already caught up in this. That should be our first priority.”

“Because you were here that one morning when she got up?”

She smiled, trying to hide it. “When you went for ice cream earlier, she asked me what my intentions are with you.”

I rolled my eyes. “She did not.”

“Did too.”

I narrowed my eyes this time, studying her. “Those were her exact words?”

She giggled, nodding.

“Dammit. If my mother is letting her watch those Austen docuseries again, we are going to have to have a talk.” I chuckled and rubbed a hand down my face. Shock swept

through me, not only that my daughter would be so bold to ask that but also at the mere fact she'd put Jenny on the spot like that.

She smiled up at me.

What did you say?

“You have a wonderful kid on your hands, Ward. She is in no capacity a brat, like Kenneth said. You've got to know that. She's kind, funny, and way too observant for her age. Which means she's seeing and feeling and getting curious about everything happening between you and me.”

Yeah, she's witnessing me fall in love with you while you can't convince yourself to trust me again.

“You're right.” I brushed her hair back, admiring the glint of the copper in her tresses. “We need to be more intentional going forward.”

So long as we are going forward, right? I swallowed hard, waiting for her reply.

“Thank you for understanding.”

I exhaled a big breath of relief, glad that she wasn't veering more toward quitting on me. I knew that her lack of desire to stay the night wasn't an indicator of things falling apart between us, but I hated that she would ever think that she was overstaying her welcome, especially when I hated to see her leave at all.

Pulling her close, I kissed her tenderly and left a trail of soft kisses from her mouth up to her ear so I could whisper. “Sunny isn't here right now.”

She groaned, a sweet sound of surrender, and she framed my face and turned my lips back to hers for another deeper kiss.

CHAPTER 55



JENNY

I told Ward that I didn't think it was a good idea for me to come to pick out a Christmas tree with him and Sunny because it felt like another family event that should be reserved for just them. I didn't want to intrude.

Before that, I told Ward that I was going to head home because I didn't want to overstay. I didn't want to overdo anything that would complicate this messy business of my heart.

But neither of those protests lasted. He'd squashed them both. Even worse, flirting with the idea of having sex with him again, right here, was a *terrible* idea.

He released me from that torrid kiss to suck at the underside of my jaw.

"Sunny *is* here, though," I argued weakly.

Each pull on my skin was a wicked kiss that spread goosebumps racing down my arms. Any way he touched me got me hotter and turned me on faster, and he damn well knew it. Ward was a master of pushing all the right buttons, and he seemed set to do so now.

"She could come out of her room and find us."

He hummed his agreement and lifted me off him to drag me further up his chest. He brought my cleavage to his mouth. "She could."

I panted, thrusting my core down to him in gyrating pulses, and he licked and tongued my breasts. He spread his tongue

over all the skin he could reach with this top and bra closing me off from him. And dammit, I wanted them gone. The man was a sinful artist with that mouth and tongue.

“Which means I’ll give you a three-second head start.” He nipped at my breast.

I sucked in a hard breath. “What?”

He cupped my ass cheek and squeezed. “One.”

I widened my eyes at him. *Three seconds? No, two?*

I scrambled off him, unsure if he was just joking. “What happens if I fail to get moving with this head start?”

He swung his legs over the couch so he stayed upright instead of lying down on his back. “Then I’ll catch you. And get you to my bedroom faster.”

I stopped retreating and licked my lips, eyeing the huge bulge tenting his gray sweatpants. I raised a brow. “But I want you to catch me.” *I’m fighting the thought you already might have snared me in your life again.*

“Is that so?” He stood. “Two.”

I walked back, not entirely sure where his furniture was placed with this backward direction. “What do I get if I reach your room first?” I whispered, taunting him.

“Me.” He walked faster, and I tried to speed up too.

“What do you get if you reach the room first?”

“You.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“That’s *my* line.” He grinned, rounding the side table to pursue me.

Oh, crap. He was so hot, so determined to get me, I fell under the spell of his mischief. I *always* did with him.

We stared each other down as we headed toward his room. He stalked me like a predator, and I was the trapped prey retreating blindly. A segue straight to sex didn’t seem smart, but this was where we connected and it all made sense.

Feeling him fill me and stretch me so perfectly, hearing his growls and grunts of need as if I was the only woman who could sate him. That made beautiful sense. It was only when we talked and tried to think things through that made it all seem so complicated.

I wanted him. He wanted me. And right now, after the heaviness of my reluctance, we both needed this chance to truly reconnect.

“One.”

I paused at his door and lowered my arms. After a glance at Sunny’s closed door further down the hall, I gripped the hem of my shirt and pulled up, snagging my bra with the motion. Bare for him, I sidestepped through his doorway, then held my arms out. “Then come get me.”

He chased me in, closing the door and turning the lock. “All I ever wanna do, Jenny.”

Then he made good on that, stepping out of his sweats and then reaching for his shirt. If this was going to be a fast one, I could slip out of here even quicker after, but just thinking that bothered me. The plan made me feel like I was half-assing this with him, that it was just something to get through, and Ward mattered more than that. I didn’t want to miss a second when I was with him, and as I removed my leggings and panties the best I could without tripping over myself, I resolved to stop the thoughts. To just be here in the moment with him. The hell with all my fears and concerns. I told my friends I would go into this with Ward with my eyes wide open, but right now, it seemed like a smarter strategy to close them and simply feel it with him.

He was quicker, baring his smooth, warm skin faster than I could get out of my leggings. Before I toppled over like an unsexy gazelle trapped in my clothing, his hand closed around my waist and he steadied me. All that glorious heat from him radiated to my flesh, and I shivered, both in his naked proximity and the sincere sweetness in his gaze. Desire flared there too, but he wasn’t in a kinky or rushed mood. The way

he looked at me felt like a tender caress, and I paused to breathe deeper and not let myself get lost in this need for him.

With a short, soft kiss to my lips, I felt the smile curving his mouth up. “What is with you and these impossible-to-remove elastic clothes?”

I giggled, thinking back to our time in his car. “They’re comfy.”

“Hmmm. If you say so.” He traced his rough hands down my sides, from my waist, my thighs, my knees, and calves, then lowered to the floor. His head was right there, inches from my pussy, and I held my breath at the liquid need pooling in his gaze as he looked back up at me. He closed his fingers around my leggings and tugged the material off my ankle. But he was in no rush to stand. Keeping his stare locked on mine, he dragged his hands back up my legs. This time, his fingers rubbed the inside of my legs and he pushed at my knees, then thighs, with gentle prompts to spread them.

Oh, fuck.

I didn’t know what was so sexy about this man on his knees before me, eager to get busy with foreplay, but I relished the gift of him wanting to show me how much I should trust him. That I could rely on him. Then I could count on him to catch me. Of course, I knew he could get me off, but in this, wanting to see to *my* needs first, I tried to recognize and remind myself that he could put me first too. And if he could, he wouldn’t be in the position to hurt me like I feared.

Breathing faster since I could intuit what he had in mind, I stepped aside and watched him crawl closer. His dick bobbed straight out, and I wished I could stroke it to see to his need to come too, but once he got close enough to press his face between my legs, I lost sight of anything lower than his face.

He nuzzled me once, brushing his mouth against my mound, and I slipped my fingers into his thick, soft hair. As he hummed against my slit, I tightened my digits more, pulling on him and keeping his face where I wanted him to please me. His shoulder lowered on one side, and with a directed nudge, I got the point that he wanted me to drape my leg over it.

I did, trembling already with so much desire coursing through me. His slow and tender act had me halfway to an orgasm already. It wouldn't take me long to detonate, and he knew it. Once I positioned my leg over his shoulder, he got even closer. His hands cupped my ass, guiding me to lean on him and stand so I wouldn't fall with only one foot on the carpet.

And then he destroyed me. He slid his tongue all the way along my entrance, pausing to suck and pull at me until I squirmed. I could smell the sex in the air, and the scent only made me wetter as he lapped at me.

Each time he scraped his teeth over my clit, I fought the need to cry out loudly. And when he dragged that hot tongue over it to finish with swirling circles on that point of so much pleasure, I moaned as quietly as I could. Before long, I was rocking against him, humping his face as he ate me out. His fingers bit into my ass cheeks, pulling them apart slightly as he devoured me. With his hot tongue pistoning into me, then licking up my weeping pussy, he pushed me so close to the peak. What had me gasping, though, was his intense sucks on my clit.

I came with a crushing, quaking, full-body tremble. Every fiber of my being was sparked alive with the pleasure cruising through my veins, and I wanted to collapse on him. To curl up and savor wave after wave of release, but the only place I went was down to the bed. Before I had a chance to come down from my climax, he gently pushed me toward the mattress. I landed, still wired on ecstasy and coming in pulses, and he covered me seconds later.

He must have gloved it as I tried to come back to earth because he parted my legs with his and was right there. That big cock head was prodding at my entrance. I leaned up just enough to look down and watch the sinful, wicked sight of his big dick sliding into me. Hovering over me, with his head hung low to witness it, he groaned a low, long growl of pleasure.

“Fuck. Yes.” Then he pulled back, almost all the way out, and he lifted his face to watch my expression. He slammed

back in to the hilt, and I arched my back. I was sensitive, still not down from coming the first time, and his full thickness felt extra good.

I raised my arms, encouraging him to lower so I could hug him, and he obeyed. With my arms around him, my legs locked around his waist, I held on tight as he drove into me slowly, but deeply.

We came together too soon. Every time felt both too soon and not long enough. I wanted to come because the pressure was so great, but then I also wished I could savor it forever. With his dick jerking inside me, I milked him until we were both too spent. I sighed, hugging his broad back. One foot lowered until my leg lazily slipped off his, and he exhaled a gusty breath of satisfaction, too comfortable to get off me.

Eventually, without any need for words, we sleepily got up and showered in his bathroom. I was too exhausted to think about putting my clothes on, much less getting in my car and driving home. He noticed too and wasn't shy about inviting me into his bed.

Spooned against him, I nestled closer and shut my eyes, secure and content. After that kind of a double hit of orgasms, I was a puddle of fatigue. He didn't skimp on aftercare though, stroking my arm and kissing the back of my neck.

Oddly, sleep wouldn't come. It was almost as though I was too tired to sleep, if that could make any sense. I didn't fight it and asked, "So, are you and Sunny the kind of people who cut down their own tree? Or do you go to the tree farm and buy an already chopped one?"

He chuckled, making his chest rub against my back. Then he tightened his arms and hugged me closer. "Do you expect *me* to walk into the wilderness with an axe and hack one down myself?"

I grinned. "I'd like a front-row seat to that show."

I was coming to realize I'd want a seat to everything this man would get up to. But I couldn't be that naïve again. I

didn't know what else Ward could do to prove that I could trust him, but I hoped I would figure it out sooner than later.

CHAPTER 56



WARD

Jenny woke up before me and elbowed me. I stretched, tightening my arms around her before she could think to escape.

“What am I supposed to wear?” she asked, clearly having been awake long enough to think ahead to a practical detail. “Sunny is super observant. I don’t know how to fudge around an explanation of wearing the same thing again. Much less that I’m in your room with you instead of a guest room or something.”

I kissed her nose, smiling at the way she started to freak out. She was just adorable all riled up.

“Ward!” She nudged at me again. “I’m serious.”

I slipped my hand to her ass and pulled her flush to me. “Me too.” *About getting another taste of you before we get up.*

“What can I wear? What if she—”

I kissed her hard, smiling when she responded and gave up on her concerns. But they returned swiftly. She broke the kiss and scowled playfully.

“Okay,” I said. “First, you could wear the clothes from yesterday but cover your shirt with one of my mom’s sweaters she always leaves around. You’re about the same size. Well, you’re shorter. Your beloved leggings are black, too. They’re a staple, right? They won’t stand out.”

“All right.”

“And the second detail,” I said as I pulled her out of bed with me. “If we hustle out of this room before she gets up, she won’t know where exactly you slept.”

I grinned as she clung to me like a koala. In the colder air of the room, I’d given her a chill with that hasty exit from bed. While I wanted a chance to cozy up with her and have her to myself, I knew I couldn’t be greedy. Besides, we’d agreed last night that we needed to be more intentional about our behavior. I could tell Sunny that Jenny was my girlfriend without any issue, but going so far to have to detail what it means when she sleeps over in my room? Well, that was a bigger fish to fry another day. Hell, another year. Or many years.

She hurried to dress, and I yawned as I staggered to my closet to find clothes for the day. We headed out of the room together, but not before Jenny leaned past the doorframe to peer both ways, searching for Sunny.

In the kitchen, well out of earshot of Sunny’s room, I chuckled. “She doesn’t get up at six o’clock on the weekends,” I teased. “Neither do I.”

“Then go back to bed.” She brightened, snapping her fingers. “Wait! I have one of Lauren’s sweaters in my car. She left it there. That would be better than wearing your mom’s. She’d recognize that.”

She turned and headed out the side door before I could get a word in. *Okay then.* I wished I could counter her concerns with the suggestion to leave a few garments here. I’d be glad to offer her some space in my closet, but that would probably fall under the category of going way too far into commitment for her.

Right after she came back in wearing a grayish sweater, Sunny woke up, almost making a liar out of me with my claim that she slept in on the weekends. “Jen Jen!” She ran up to her and hugged her. “I didn’t know you would be here this morning too.”

I grimaced behind her back and Jenny shot me a similar look of, *what do I say now?*

“Well, your dad mentioned getting a Christmas tree today and I hoped to come along,” Jenny said cheerily.

No need to sugarcoat it there. She hadn’t been this enthusiastic last night, and it almost hurt a bit that she’d put on a show for Sunny now.

“Really?” Sunny faced me and ran to get her morning hug. “Can Jenny come? Can she? I bet she’s much better at picking a tree.”

“Of course. That’s why I asked her.” I furrowed my brow. “Wait. What?”

Sunny giggled, dashing away toward her room. “I’ll hurry up and change!”

“Better at picking a tree?” I yelled after her, mocking shock. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

Her giggles reached me and I smiled.

“I wasn’t sure anyone could fail picking a tree,” Jenny teased behind me. She wrapped her arms around me, hugging me from behind.

“Don’t ask,” I grumped.

She laughed until I turned her around to face me. “Oh, I will.”

I kissed her quickly before Sunny returned. I didn’t want to be chaste around her, but I planned on the hardship of keeping my hands and mouth to myself. “You live to tease me, is that it?”

She winked and kissed me harder, showing me with her tongue how teasing she could be.

“Ready?” Sunny said as she hurried down the hall. Jenny and I broke apart just as Sunny ran back toward the kitchen. “Because I am! Jen Jen, you’ve got to be better than my dad.”

“What’d you do?” Jenny asked as she grabbed her purse. “Pick a bush instead of a tree?”

Sunny giggled. “Worse!”

I groaned, realizing I'd never live down the holiday story I wished would die for good. But with these two, I couldn't stay in a lousy mood for long. We headed out, stopping first to get a quick breakfast at a café. It was bustling, too loud to even talk with the customers chatting in there, so it wasn't until we were back in the SUV that Sunny could regale Jenny with the sad story.

I'd had the lousy luck to choose a trifecta of bad conditions when I brought home last year's tree. A *pregnant* squirrel, which had to have been way worse than a non-expecting one, a vine of poison ivy, which was leafless and totally unidentifiable, and a cache of ants on the trunk. Or within it. I didn't remember. It was, all around, a *bad* tree. I had to admit it.

"Poison ivy vines *can* be ID'd though," Jenny said once I parked at the lot.

I wasn't in the mood for the farm. This local market lot would do just fine.

"Oh, according to *you*, smarty," I replied as we exited the car.

"How?" Sunny asked. "It just looked like a vine."

Jenny smiled. "It takes practice to distinguish one vine from another, but I'll show you pictures."

"Well, I just know that the vine is still potent, especially when you cut it." *Never again.* I shuddered, remembering the rash that I couldn't soothe.

While Sunny ran ahead to browse the trees, Jenny detoured to get another coffee. I kept Sunny in sight while I flagged down an employee. "Do you guys check for vermin and poison ivy on your trees when you bring them here? Oh, ants, too?"

"Damn." He chuckled. "You've had some bad picks before, huh? Yeah, we check most of them."

Hmm. We'll see about that.

I caught up with Sunny, laughing at her scale of fluffiness and “needleness” of the trees. Jenny returned with hot ciders and a hot cocoa for Sunny. “Aw. It’s plain,” she whined.

I was quick enough not to cringe, but I didn’t want Jenny to think she wasn’t appreciative.

“Where’s the whipped cream and caramel?” Sunny asked, disappointed.

Jenny huffed, grumpier than my daughter was. “Yeah, and where’s the freaking coffee?” She shrugged at Sunny. “Sorry, kiddo. It was a very simple beverage stand.”

“But these will keep us warm,” I said, eager to get everyone smiling again. “And the faster we drink up and pick our tree, we could head over there and see what they’ve got.” I pointed toward a kids’ area, and Sunny’s good mood was reclaimed.

“Yay!”

Jenny took my hand, and my heart was that much fuller because she took the initiative with the simple gesture. This was a good step. A simple step. And as we walked around comparing trees, Jenny dutifully checked that none of the trees showed any vines of any kind. I wished I’d brought a hard stick to poke at the top, though, for a rodent inspection.

We chose our tree, one that Sunny certified as tall, fluffy, and “branchy” enough. After I paid the lot worker, Jenny led us toward that area sectioned off with decorations. Like every place did now, there were the standard backdrops and wooden scenes to pose in front of, to satisfy the chronic self-seekers. The lot’s hashtag was etched into the stands, but it wasn’t so obnoxious. We all took turns with the props, disguising ourselves with red hats, reindeer-nose glasses, and even snowman wear. I snapped pictures of Sunny and Jenny, and vice versa, but it really excited me when Sunny insisted on doing one.

“You and Jen Jen, Dad. Over there!” She grabbed Jenny by the hand and guided us to a wooden stand for a snowy cabin scene. As my daughter held up my phone to take our picture

together, I thought back to how she'd asked Jenny what her intentions were.

“Okay, a normal one first,” Sunny announced.

“What’s normal?”

“Just smile,” Sunny chided.

I put my arm around Jenny and we did.

“Now silly ones!”

Jenny and I both made faces, but at the end, she tugged my hood down over my eyes and kissed my cheek, which sent Sunny into fits of laughter.

“Would you like me to take a picture of you with your wife and daughter?” a stranger asked.

“Oh, I’m not—”

“She’s my—”

We both blurted over each other, but Sunny handed the man my phone, chirping, “Yeah, thanks, dude!”

She wedged between us and we all smiled for the stranger. I knew Jenny had to be flustered after that kind stranger’s mistake, but instead of commenting on it after we left the prop area, she laughed.

“*Dude?*” she asked as Sunny bounded up to the person dressed like an elf who was handing out candy canes.

I shook my head. “My mom showed her episodes of *Full House* for a bit when she was three or four.”

She giggled harder.

I groaned. “I thought the habit died! It was terrible. She called *everyone* that, even the dentist. He kept laughing so hard he had to pause in her teeth cleaning.”

On the way home, with the tree wrapped up hopefully without squirrels, vines, or ants, I stopped at a drive-thru to get another round of hot beverages. Jenny and I needed coffee. Sunny, however, turned down a repeat hot cocoa claiming one was enough. Instead, she lectured us on different dog breeds

on the ride home. She had yet to come out and ask *me* for that puppy, and I felt caught in a tight spot. If she asked Santa, instead of me, and he didn't deliver, would that ruin the magic and make her not believe? I'd have to think on it.

Jenny and I got the tree inside, and after I did the honors of cutting the wrapping off, I let little miss horticulturist make sure this tree was all right for a domestic setting.

"What did you do with the squirrel last year?" she asked after giving the tree an all-clear.

"Grandma Lori used a basket and a broom to steer her outside," Sunny said as she carried out more containers with decorations. "Dad tried to lure her to the door with bits of jerky but I think it scared her."

I shrugged. "Probably too much pepper."

"And the ants?" Jenny asked as she helped spread out the containers on the couch for the easiest opening.

"I sprayed them with some kitchen cleaner," I admitted with a cringe.

"And killed the tree?" Jenny guessed.

"Maybe," I said at the same time Sunny said, "Yes!"

"But that's not going to happen to this one," I promised as I hung an ornament.

"Nope. According to what I see here, we've got a tree free of any pests," Jenny said, then stilled. "I mean, you've got a tree."

She didn't give me a chance to reply to what she'd muttered as an afterthought because she picked up a box and selected an ornament Sunny made at school last year. "Now this one has got to be front and center," she said as she started hanging them all up with us.

I didn't need to ask her. She'd helped herself to the task, smiling and asking Sunny about all the different ornaments. She simply fit. And dammit, in my opinion, this was *our* tree, even if she didn't live here. With the music playing in the background, snacks on the table, and full wineglasses for me

and her, we spent hours making the tree come to life—in a decorative way, not literally this year.

Sunny laughed while Jenny propped her on her shoulders, walking closer for my daughter to reach up high and put the angel on the top. I sighed, committing the picture to memory and on my phone. This was definitely a moment I wanted to keep and treasure forever. I knew it was one that would matter later when I wanted to look back at this day.

Jenny made sense with us. She seemed to be a missing piece of our puzzle here, and while I could understand why she was hesitant, deep down in my being, I knew I was looking at my future.

CHAPTER 57



JENNY

It took a few attempts to find a night that worked for all of us, but at last, in the middle of December, AKA the busiest month ever, all five of us at the house found an overlap to pull off our Christmas tradition. We cleared out the whole evening to bake shortbread cookies and watch a Christmas movie. And yes, that was all *five* of us. Lauren came back for the night, insisting she wouldn't dare miss it.

I wouldn't lie. It felt good to be at home with them. This was my normal, but it was shocking how much it was starting to feel like an "old" normal. I'd been spending so much time with my teas—bringing Lori into the mix there too—and if I had free time to spare, I was with Ward and Sunny. I had counted on things feeling different with Lauren moved out, but her absence wasn't the biggest factor in upturning the order in our house. It was just me finding more things to fill my life with. While I refused to wonder if that was a positive or negative change, I was aware of it.

Lauren fit right into the chaos, almost like she had never left at all.

"You didn't wash your hands!" Karen chastised her when she came back from the bathroom.

"What, you installed a camera at the door since I left?" She put her hands on her hips and blew her blonde waves back from her face, clearly irritated.

"There's no way you went that fast and washed," Karen argued.

Rylee giggled and I rolled my eyes.

“I was hurrying!” Lauren stalked up to Karen and thrust her hand up. “Smell. It’s a soapy smell, isn’t it?”

Karen sniffed and shrugged as she went back to the dough. “Okay, she’s clear.”

“I didn’t want to lose my spot rolling,” Lauren said.

“So long as we keep you away from mixing the dough,” I joked, and Rylee nodded her agreement next to me.

“Remember when she swapped the salt for—”

“All right. All right.” Lauren waved her off. “That’s enough.” She claimed her spot next to Mary Ellen, who seemed really quiet. She was always quiet, but this total lack of chiming in was unusual. She was the germaphobe, so if anyone were to call anyone out for sanitation, it would have been her.

“You okay, Mary Ellen?” I asked. “You seem down.”

“Want one of my reindeer cocktails now?” Rylee asked.

Mary Ellen scrunched her nose. “Is that the one with the glowing light in the liquid?”

Rylee grinned. “Yeah!”

“Not sure how that’s approved by the FDA.”

That’s more like her. Still, she seemed off. “Is something up?” I asked.

She gave me a small smile as she swapped a star cookie cutter for a snowman one with Lauren. “Just thinking about work.”

“Good or bad?” I asked.

She sighed. “There’s this rumor going around work that the library will be shut down and demolished in the new year.”

We all gasped, jerking our faces toward her.

“No way!” I said.

Rylee shook her head. “That’s so wrong. The library is a part of the city.”

“They can’t just knock it down!” Lauren protested.

“Says who?” Karen demanded stiffly, ready to argue.

Mary Ellen waved us off, clearly not wanting to bring the mood down. She seemed to regret saying anything at all. “That’s just it. At this point, it’s just silly rumors. It’s probably not even true.”

I sure hoped it wasn’t. Mary Ellen loved her job and she was excellent at it. I had yet to meet someone who didn’t treasure that historic building. We left the topic alone, though, playing along with the trivia questions about Christmas carols on the satellite radio channel.

Before we set the last tray into the oven, Karen asked me where the tea was.

With Ward? Or does she mean actual tea?

“Yeah, this is the one time of the year I look forward to your hot drinks,” Rylee joked.

“It’s a standard.” Lauren nodded. “I can’t believe you haven’t offered us any yet.”

I giggled, so giddy to be able to explain. “As much as I would love to push my teas on you girls, I’m out of stock.”

Mary Ellen raised her brows. “Completely?”

I nodded, so damn proud of myself. “Every tea I had at The Cozy Company has been sold. I’m totally sold out on my online storefront too.”

Business had been crazy lately. I figured a lot of that was due to the season, but having my teas in Ward’s stores was already making an impact because many reviews and questions on my independent storefront were about which locations would have certain flavors. At this rate, I’d never be able to keep up with the demand. “I might need to pick your brain sometime about expanding,” I told Lauren, “since you’re such a pro in the business world.”

She agreed, excited to chat about it soon.

We moved into the living room and started *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* on the TV. It was just what I needed. I'd been watching Christmas-themed things at Ward's, but they were all PG. I was overdue for some adult humor, and Cousin Eddie would deliver there.

We all cozied up on the couches and chairs, snacking on the fresh-baked cookies and sipping the reindeer cocktails Rylee had made. Mine was too sweet, and I wished it had a little more spice, but it went well with the cookies somehow.

None of us actually paid attention to the movie. It played in the background as we caught up between laughter and sharing news. It didn't take too long before they all faced me, asking about how things were progressing with Ward.

I didn't want to lie, and with the little bit of liquid courage from the reindeer cocktails, I confided in them fully. "I'm falling for him." I covered my face. "I'm so totally falling for Ward all over again."

"Called it," Rylee teased. "You're hardly here anymore."

"Aww." Mary Ellen tilted her head to the side and smiled. "That's a great Christmas present for both of you, finding love again."

"Not so fast. I haven't admitted it."

Lauren furrowed her brow, more sober. "Why not? Isn't he feeling it too?"

I appreciated how she was coming around to Ward a bit. She was my best friend out of all of them and she would be the hardest test for Ward to pass. Lauren and I never stopped texting and video calling, so I kept her the most up to date with my thoughts and feelings, but we'd both been slacking. It seriously was just the craziest time in my life.

"I think he's feeling it too." I felt confident he was. "But it's not just him. This time, a child's heart is involved. He's a package deal, and I absolutely love this chance to spend time with Sunny too, but it complicates it a lot more."

“That makes sense,” Karen said with a somber expression. “More responsibility on both of you to do this right.”

“And it’s scarier,” I admitted honestly. “I feel like there is no safety net to catch me if this doesn’t end well.”

“That’s awful.” Lauren winced. “Falling in love and letting someone in your life like that is hard enough, but now I worry about Sunny.”

“So do I,” Rylee agreed.

I looked up at her, finding her studying me closely. Of all of us, she understood best how important it was to take Sunny into consideration. Rylee had grown up in a home with a broken marriage. Her mother always had a steady rotation of boyfriends, and some weren’t great role models. Rylee would know what she was talking about on this subject since she’d seen it firsthand before.

“It’s hard to lose an adult you look up to and respect.” She glanced away, eyeing the TV for a moment. “I wouldn’t wish that on Sunny.” She sipped her drink and smirked. “I wouldn’t wish that on any child.”

Me neither. I could see how Rylee’s childhood had messed with her sense of stability through life, and I would never forgive myself if something soured between Ward and me and Sunny suffered as a consequence. The last thing I wanted to do was have Sunny hurt as collateral damage. She already had a failure of a mother.

Lauren sighed and glanced at me with that knowing look she had perfected so long ago. She could read me well no matter what, and I was desperate to change the topic. “What about finding that puppy, Jen? Any luck?”

Rylee gaped at me with a wide giddy smile. “A *puppy*? Are we getting a puppy?”

Karen closed her eyes and cringed. “Oh, please. No. A puppy is a huge responsibility.”

Mary Ellen cooed and smiled dreamily. “Awwww.”

I giggled, smiling at Lauren, who winked at me before she sipped her drink.

Nice work there, Lauren.

I was saved from getting stuck in the tricky topic of my future with Ward for now, but I'd need to have clarity, and soon.

CHAPTER 58



WARD

Friday afternoon, I left the office early so I could meet with Gwen before Sunny was out of school. I wanted to go now so I could pick up Sunny as usual. If I asked my mom to get her instead, she'd probably ask what I had going on. I couldn't be sure she would be entirely understanding of me wanting to speak with Gwen.

My mom had never been a big fan of her, and after Sunny told her about how she'd come back from that bridal party get-together, my mother decided that should be the last straw. I begged to differ. Gwen *was* Sunny's mother, and she was, whether we liked it or not, a part of my girl's life.

I'd taken a few days to stew about what Kenneth said and did, and I finally felt like I'd calmed enough to approach her and the situation.

Gwen and I had significant things to talk about, and it was between just me and her. Kenneth never had any business talking to Sunny. Period. And it was time to make that clear without the guy looming over her shoulder. That would just lead to a fight.

It was harder to get Gwen alone than I had expected. She clung to her fiancé, and it took my offer to meet her at a bar/restaurant near my office building to get her to agree.

When I arrived, I saw that she'd beaten me there. She sat at the bar, looking like she'd made herself comfortable. I walked up toward her slowly, taking stock of the scene. She didn't notice my approach, too busy flirting with the bartender

who ate up every second of the attention she gave him. He couldn't have been more than twenty-one, maybe even younger with that baby face.

I wasn't shocked. The woman wore an outfit guaranteed to turn heads and capture eyes. In a skintight dress that pushed up her fake tits, she was dressed to the nines. Leaning over the bar, she showed the kid more cleavage, as if she worried he might be far-sighted.

I sat next to her and cleared my throat. I didn't want to play any games here, so if I looked bored and tired, that was just what she'd get.

Turning toward me, she raised her brows like she was surprised to run into me here. Then she batted her fake lashes. "Oh, look who's here," she purred as she stroked my sleeve. "I've been waiting for you."

Two empty martini glasses sat in front of her. I supposed the kid had been too distracted to clear them away. Gwen had never struggled with alcoholism as far as I could tell. She was more of a social drinker than anything, and that was one more thing she'd disliked about being pregnant. Also why she refused to breastfeed. "Mama needs a drink," she used to say, hating that carrying a kid and being a mother put a damper on her ability to let loose and have fun.

Because you'll never stop being selfish, will you? I tamped down the thoughts and faced her seriously. *I wonder how Kenneth would feel if he knew his fiancée was out here making moves on a young bartender.*

"This isn't a social meeting," I told her, deadpan. "I'm here to talk about Sunny. Nothing more. We need to talk about what happened last weekend." More like she needed to start spilling details *now*.

She sighed, dropping the flirty act for a brief moment. "Yes, that business was just awful. Poor girl. I think Kenneth overreacted and scared her."

"You think?" I snapped.

She grimaced. "He's not very good with kids."

I arched a brow.

“Okay.” Gwen rolled her eyes. “He’s awful with kids.”

And that’s okay?

“But I know why.”

That doesn’t mean it’s excusable! I nodded calmly, even though I was screaming inside. “Why’s that?”

“He was an only child. He never even had any cousins. No kids of any sort were ever around him. And he’s particular. He takes pride in his things, all right? He’s got his right to that. So when he saw his couch and his twenty-thousand-dollar rug ruined, can you really blame him?”

“Yes. Yes, I can blame him. It’s just a fucking couch and a rug.”

“Expensive and high-quality couch and rug.”

For fuck’s sake. “If the guy cares that much about his stuff, he shouldn’t use them for functional purposes.”

“You can’t tell him how to prioritize his possessions in his house.”

I sat up straighter, trying to refrain from outright glaring at her. “When my daughter is there, *she* is priority.”

“Okay. Okay.” She rolled her eyes again. “It was just that one incident. She was having fun and stuff before that. And I felt crummy that it ruined the whole vibe of the day.”

Always about you. You’ll never get it.

But she continued to try to smooth things over. “When Kenneth came home after dropping Sunny off, he felt awful.”

I chewed on my lower lip, fighting back the urge to shout. “Did he by chance tell you what he said when he dropped her off?”

She smirked. “He mentioned that *Jenny* was there, looking like she’d just had some fun. So I guess you should’ve thanked me. You know. Free babysitting for you to get some.”

I clenched my hand on the bar, squeezing my fingers to hold back my anger. “It’s not fucking babysitting. You’re her mother. And I didn’t want Sunny to go over in the first place, so you better watch what you say here, Gwen. Tread carefully.”

She lifted her hands. “Okay. Sheesh. Kenneth felt terrible. He just didn’t know how to apologize at the moment.”

“That’s a bullshit excuse.”

“He was embarrassed, Ward,” she whined.

“He should be. He had no right to yell at Sunny. At all!”

“Yeah, I get it.”

You don’t! “And he’s got no right to talk shit to me. Or Jenny. What she and I do is none of your business.”

“Well, you have to admit it’s at least kind of awkward.” She crossed her arms.

“How the hell so?”

“Uh, you sleeping with the ex you dumped before you met me? It’s very awkward.”

I shook my head, not in the mood to even go there. “You have no visitation rights. No custody. Unless it serves your own benefits, you’ve never expressed *any* desire to bond with Sunny. If it weren’t for her, I would never speak to you again. When you broke up with me, that was *it* between us, Gwen. You have no right, and you never will have any right, to get into my business with Jenny.”

She pouted, circling the rim of her glass with her finger as she avoided making eye contact.

“Do you hear me?”

“Yeah, Ward. You’re such a hardass about these things. I hear you.” She glanced up. “But I’m telling you the truth. Kenneth felt bad. I could tell. He told me that he hopes his behavior doesn’t change the fact that Sunny wants to be in the wedding.”

I blinked, surprised. I hadn't expected her to just assume that Sunny would want to be near them again. She'd come home so upset that I guessed that would be the end of it.

"You mean *wanted* to?" I snapped.

She cringed. "She's not interested anymore? She came out and said that specifically?"

I hadn't asked her yet. I'd been letting things fade and tempers cool. "No. I haven't asked her." I shook my head. Again, I felt that same warning sensation deep in my gut.

I shouldn't give Gwen *another* chance with Sunny. She wasn't proving herself trustworthy at all lately, but in this, I could agree a little bit that Kenneth was the one at fault this time, not her.

What got to me was that Gwen was still interested in having Sunny be involved even though she'd made a mess and had "ruined" the day that weekend. Some of my anger dimmed, and I tried to rationalize the fact that Gwen might really want her daughter involved as a participant on her big day.

Maybe she has a point. Maybe that asshole is just tone deaf when it comes to kids. I recalled them saying that having Sunny in the wedding would get his parents off his back about having his own kids. I didn't like the idea of my little girl being used as a pawn in any way, but that put it into perspective. Kenneth was out of touch with kids.

"I'll ask her," I said, shaking my head. "But only if you understand that I need to lay down some new rules."

She smirked. "Yeah, yeah."

I pointed at her, stern about this. I wasn't joking around. "Sunny is to spend no time alone with Kenneth in any capacity. You hear me?"

Her nod was weak and I didn't like that *whatever* attitude she gave me. "I hear you."

"In fact, I don't want Sunny around Kenneth at all unless I'm there myself." I caught myself from saying unless Jenny

or I were there to supervise. Adding Jenny to the mix would likely fan the fire of antagonism Gwen couldn't let go of.

"Ward, you're being dramatic."

"I don't give a shit what you think."

"Okay!" She lifted her hands in surrender again, agreeing.

"Those are my rules and I won't bend on them." Sunny relied on me to look out for her best interests and I hated the feeling that I had already failed her a bit there in letting her be near Kenneth at all. The guy had rubbed me the wrong way from the beginning, and I should've listened to that instinct.

"Fine. Fine." She smiled. "I take it that this means you'll be at the wedding still?"

"With Jenny." I didn't care if that bothered her.

She gagged. "Whatever. But you're really not going to try to punish me for my fiancé's short-sightedness?"

"So long as you follow my rules." I frowned at her, not liking how excited she was at my confirmation that we'd still be coming. "You do understand that I'm only coming as a guest because Sunny is there, right?"

"Well, I guess. I mean, I would've invited you anyway even if Kenneth didn't ask me to invite Sunny as a junior bridesmaid."

"Gwen, we're not friends."

"Uh, we sort of are. We have to be." She smirked. "I mean, it's getting annoying how often you call Sunny *your* daughter instead of *our* daughter, like rubbing it in that she's daddy's girl."

Because you never wanted her! "No. That means I will tolerate you, as an acquaintance. For her sake."

"Boy, you sure lost your charm. You used to really know how to make a girl feel special."

I stood. "*You* are not my girl to charm."

She smirked. "Saving it all for Jenny then?"

“I told you. You do *not* talk about her.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She lifted her glass but then frowned when she saw it was empty. “But you don’t have to be so cold, Ward. We *do* have a kid together.”

“Remember this,” I said as I stood. “We’re also *exes*. How many ex-boyfriends can you still say you’re friends with?”

“Like you should talk. You’re banging the ex you dumped to be with me!”

I gritted my teeth. My patience was shot. If she tried to comment about me being with Jenny just one more time, I would lose my shit.

“Okay. I’ll stop.” She plastered on a bright smile. “You’ll be at the wedding?”

Why does it matter if I’m there? “Yes, *if* Sunny wants that. We’ll be there unless you cross any more lines.” I left her with a stern glower, daring her to push her luck.

CHAPTER 59



JENNY

Christmas Eve came and I almost couldn't wait for the house to empty out so I could sit in the peace and quiet and stare at the tree. I was exhausted. I had busted my butt for the last week, scrambling to keep up with all of my online orders of tea. I was sold out, depleted of materials to even make another satchel.

I'd been using Lauren's old room to store extra things I'd dried from the gardening center. It had been a smart move to harvest more than enough last month, but with Lori's garden donations, I was still out. Not only were my teas showing *out of stock* on my website, but the managers at The Cozy Company were still reaching out to me to place more orders. Several of them were excited for the product placement in the new year, and I knew my hands would be full. I was more than a little overwhelmed, which sort of felt good in a productive way, but I had to figure out how to adjust moving forward.

Feeling overwhelmed like this and overworking wouldn't have made me *this* tired if I was running at one hundred percent. I wasn't. A stupid little head cold had gotten me, and with the sniffing and sore throat special, I felt lousier than simply fatigued from doing too much.

Thanks, mom at the winter pageant.

I rolled my eyes as I brewed a cup of peppermint tea at the kitchen table. This brew was my go-to for tiredness and illnesses, but I felt whiny to think back to where I was sure I'd picked up the germs. Two days ago, I went with Lori and Ward to watch Sunny perform a forty-second part in her class's

winter program. For the other fifty minutes of the show, I sat there and tried not to breathe in too much with the mother of a snotty toddler as she coughed and hacked through the entire thing. What happened to staying home when you were sick? I was. I was supposed to go to see my nana in Tennessee but it wasn't worth the risk of me bringing my germs to her there.

I sighed, listening as my roommates got up and hustled to depart. They were all heading out to their respective families, which was why I knew I could count on that relaxing quiet later. Maybe a nap in front of the tree would help. We'd all done our presents exchange last night, and without the gifts blocking the skirt from view, the tree looked lovely with its twinkling lights.

"Rylee!" Karen shouted upstairs. "Where are my jeans?"

I winced at the loudness. I didn't have a headache today, but that volume was just too damn loud this early. Shaking my head, I sighed and dunked my tea ball as the peppermint brewed. This was usually a special, calming ritual, brewing my tea in the quiet of the morning, but not today.

"I didn't take them!" Rylee shouted back. Drawers and doors banged shut, and I caught the sound of Mary Ellen's running footsteps overhead as she hurried to get ready to go too.

"Oh. Here they are," Karen said sheepishly.

"Ha!" Rylee retorted. "Wait. Are you borrowing my lotion again?"

I rolled my eyes, looking out the window. Today would be a crisp, cool, but sunny Christmas Eve. Maybe a walk later would help the pressure in my sinuses. I doubted I was still contagious, just icky with the congestion, but I didn't want to take chances infecting anyone else. I closed my eyes, basking in the glow of the sunshine starting to trickle in through the kitchen window.

"You *are*! The bottle is like halfway empty!" Rylee shouted.

I winced, opening my eyes.

“No, I didn’t. That was Mary Ellen,” Karen said. Her suitcase sounded down the steps as she rushed. When she spotted me in the kitchen, she detoured from leaving. “Make sure you heat up that soup I made you,” she scolded as she hugged me.

“I will.” I hugged her back, glancing at the time. “When were you supposed to be on the road?”

“Seven.” She reared back and widened her eyes. “Crap! I’ll never make it to Austin for that breakfast thing now.” With a wave, she left, late to meet with her family. She’d be staying with them there and wouldn’t come back until January.

As soon as she left, Mary Ellen thundered down the steps, a huge duffel bag slung over her shoulder. She called up the stairs. “I just wanted to try it.”

“Try it?” Rylee yelled down. “It’s almost gone.”

“Well,” Mary Ellen said as she reached the first floor, “I liked it.”

“If you’d told me, I would’ve bought that fragrance for you instead of the other one!”

Mary Ellen winced at me. “I’ll still use the one you gave me last night.”

“That’s not the point!”

Mary Ellen sighed and shrugged, coming to give me her farewells next.

“Excited to see your sister again?”

She drew in a deep breath, undecided. Similar to Karen, Mary Ellen was expected at her family’s gathering. She was going to spend the day and night with her sister and then they would drive together to their parents’ house tomorrow morning.

“My sister? Yeah.”

Mary Ellen had stayed with her sister recently, when Lauren and Jameson’s relationship caused drama in our house.

“My nieces and nephews are a whole other version of crazy right now though.”

“I bet.”

After she hugged me, she paused, frowning. “You sure you’ll be okay here by yourself?”

She was sweet to worry about me. I grinned though. “Yeah. A nap without all this bickering sounds divine.”

She giggled. “Lauren said she’d come and hang out,” she reminded me.

I shook my head. “Nah.” She would be with Jameson, of course. “I’ll be fine.”

“Well, FaceTime me if you’re lonely.”

I nodded, grateful for her sweetness.

Rylee was last to leave, eager to get coffee on the way to her dad’s. She was late but didn’t seem bothered, taking the time to rummage for snack food for the drive.

“You’re going to your mom’s tomorrow?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah. Dad today. Mom tomorrow. Then maybe I can hit up some old friends back home and bar hop.” She winked. “You know how I like to critique other bartenders.”

I laughed. She sure did. We hugged, and I saw her off.

Once I closed the front door, I gazed at the living room. We’d decorated it like usual, but without any of them here bickering or squabbling about petty things, the house felt so massive and empty. No amount of décor could hide the fact I was spending a holiday alone.

I was the last one standing, and I tried not to let the eerie silence get to me.

“Nap. Then maybe a movie,” I told myself as I headed to the couch that I didn’t have to share for once. I nudged a pile of Rylee’s unfolded laundry over and settled into the cushions. The crackle of the fireplace mixed with the distant sounds of Christmas music Rylee forgot to turn off upstairs. I gazed at

the tree's twinkling lights glittering in front of the living-room window, tricking myself into thinking this place could still be magical if I tried hard enough.

It hurt though. I was supposed to be with my parents and nana, and I couldn't help but let the homesickness hit me. If Nana's health wasn't so fragile, I would've been there, but hey, shit happened.

"It'll be fine."

Before I could wallow in the loneliness, my iPad rang with an incoming video call.

I smiled and answered, glad to see my parents and nana checking in.

"How are you feeling, honey?" my mom asked.

"A little better."

"Better enough to make the drive to see me?" my nana asked with a toothy grin.

I shook my head, frowning. "No. I can't risk it."

"Damn," Dad said, pivoting the tablet on their end so I could see them playing Scrabble. "Wish you were here with us, Jen."

"Me too." So much for that loneliness fading. "But it's for the best."

"I'm glad you're at least feeling a little bit better," Mom said.

"Yeah. There is that. Trust me, I'm fine staying in Dallas. I like the peace and quiet for a change, and when the time is right, I'll come visit."

I watched as they played, helping when they showed me their tiles. It was the strangest way I'd ever played the game, like a spectator and sneaky helper, but it helped pass some time and lift my spirits. I couldn't help but wonder how Sunny would fare at *this* game. She sure was a smarty pants, and I doubted it would be fair of me and Ward to challenge her at a wordsmith game when she was only at an E reading level.

Wait, no. He told me last night that she was onto level G books already.

I smiled at the memory, feeling a residual pride in that little girl's accomplishments. It was becoming harder and harder to ignore her being a part of my life, and I struggled even more with missing Ward. I'd told him to stay away for the same reason I wasn't in Tennessee. Sunny had just gotten over a minor cold and I didn't want to keep passing germs around.

A knock sounded on the door, and I frowned in the direction of it. I bet it was Lauren, ordering DoorDash for more comfort food. "I gotta go. I'll check back later, okay?"

We disconnected, and I headed toward the door to answer. I wrapped my shawl around my shoulders and reached for the doorknob, curious.

Ward and Sunny stood there smiling wide at me. He held her in his arms, and she practically launched to get free and charge inside. I laughed, surprised and delighted to see them here. Just the mere sight of them lit me up and chased away that sadness I'd been stuck in.

"Wait. Wait!" I backed up as they barged inside. Keeping my arm up, I tried to maintain distance from them. "I'm sick!"

Ward blew a raspberry. "I don't care. I probably gave it to you when I was congested earlier this month."

"Or me!" Sunny said, giggling as she ran up to see the tree.

"We don't care about a little head cold." Ward proved it by reaching up and taking my hand. He lowered it at the same time he used it to pull me close and hug me.

I smiled, closing my eyes at his embrace and the light kiss he pressed on my brow.

"Come on, Jen Jen." Sunny bounced on the couch. "You're still in your jammies and robe!"

"Of course, I am. I planned on having a quiet and lazy day in." I smiled at her excited mannerisms. She couldn't sit still and it was adorable.

“Nope. You gotta go get dressed! We’re going to the North Pole!”

I glanced at Ward. “Is that so?”

He chuckled. “The tiny tyrant has spoken.”

I sighed, shaking my head. I wasn’t refusing, just adjusting to the surprise. “How’d you even know to come? I thought you would already be at your mom’s.”

“Nope.” Ward released me and nudged me toward the stairs to go to my room and change. “She can wait to see us until later. Mary Ellen got a hold of me and told me you were all alone for Christmas.” He patted my butt lightly at an angle where Sunny couldn’t see with his body blocking the view. “And that just won’t do.”

I grinned, loving this playful man and his sweet daughter’s inclusion.

“Go change, Jen Jen!” she insisted.

I grinned, giving in. “I’ll be right back.”

CHAPTER 60



WARD

Seeing Jenny smile made it all the more worth it. As soon as she opened the door to us, she beamed with so much joy I felt like a king to brighten her mood. And now, as we entered the chaotic indoor attraction for all things Christmas, she giggled with excitement.

“You’ve never brought her here before?” she whispered, watching Sunny’s reactions with me.

Sunny couldn’t pause long enough at one thing. She gasped over and over again, each time louder than the last. Her fingers aimed to point at the things we could do, and with an announcer-like tone, she called it out as though the carved and painted directions hanging from the ceiling guiding us would leave anything to question.

“An elf training course?” Sunny gawked at it, then looked back at me, stunned in a silent wonder that I might have known about this place but had never brought her before.

“Santa’s workshop?” She covered her mouth, her eyes wide and glittering with excitement as she took in the sight of workspaces with wooden pieces children could fashion into DIY toys.

“Dad!” She pointed the other way with a shriek. “A reindeer ride!”

I furrowed my brow, looking. “Inside?”

Jenny giggled, easily amused with Sunny’s manic survey of the massive place.

“No. I haven’t brought her here yet,” I told her as we held hands. It was packed, and I already worried about Sunny zipping ahead and taking off, too excited to wait up for us. But I was glad I hadn’t brought Sunny here any sooner. A haggard-looking and annoyed mother pushed past us, hurrying to leave with a toddler screaming and flailing in her arms, deep in the throes of a tantrum and clearly uncooperative for a picture with Santa somewhere in here. And no wonder. The poor kid looked miserable in that full-body fleece outfit of Olaf.

I blinked, glad those terrible twos were in the past. And Sunny hadn’t been a spawn of the devil for them anyway.

“Dad! Come on!” she squealed, chasing after a line of kids on a train. She pulled on my hand, and I didn’t let go of Jenny. Not once. We stuck together, the three of us, as we enjoyed all the festivities the huge place had to offer. Again, we took pictures at the many selfie areas, and an elf-dressed worker paused to take our “professional” portrait with the Grinch, something I could upgrade my ticket for. I’d pick up the print at the exit, even if Jenny thought it was silly.

“They’re going to put a tacky border on it and stuff.” She wrinkled her nose. “The ones we’ve got on our phones are better.”

I agreed, but I wondered if her slight annoyance at the elf guy popping up to snap the picture bothered her because he was intrusive and soliciting, also mistaking her for my wife.

As we headed through the maze of yuletide fun, my phone buzzed with a text.

Colby: Making it official now?

He’d attached a screenshot of me and Jenny. *The elf worker had posted it on social media that fast?*

I glanced at Jenny, wondering if she would be upset about showing up on social media with me. She wasn’t on her phone much, and I didn’t care for spending time on mine either. I’d much rather be present with Sunny than behind a screen. Still, given Jenny’s hesitations about making anything official

between us, I worried that she might take offense to the public picture.

Ward: I didn't know they'd share that online!

Ward: And not that fast.

Colby: Naomi found it actually. She wanted to get out of this family thing and an ad popped up for that place, so she went to their page.

Ward: Spare yourself. It's loud and crazy here.

Colby: And Jenny's happy to tough it out there with you for Sunny?

Colby: I'm glad to see you took my advice to heart about getting serious with her.

But we weren't. Or, according to Jenny, we weren't. She seemed to have one foot in only, and I wanted to jump all the way.

"Dad!" Sunny raised her brows at me. "Take a picture of us."

Jenny made a face, trying to keep the huge Christmas-tree-shaped bubble in the air near the hands-on STEM corner. Sunny ducked, standing within the bubble space, grinning for a picture.

"Hang on." I hurried to take a picture before the shape busted, and I couldn't help but feel like it was symbolic of my life. If Jenny didn't hold on to me, would this hope for a future together pop and go out?

"I'm going to look for a place to grab a snack," Jenny said, glancing around once we moved away from the STEM area that seemed too messy to risk for long.

"I could eat too," I said, joining her in looking for the signs to direct us somewhere.

"We can eat at Mrs. Claus's!" Sunny bounded off, prompting us to follow.

"How does she know where everything is already?" I asked.

Jenny laughed. “Mapped it all out to make sure she wouldn’t miss any of it.”

Mrs. Claus had a limited menu, but I was happy they offered a chicken noodle soup. Jenny wasn’t a spoilsport. I could see her putting on a brave face to be here for Sunny despite feeling lousy. I had yet to hear a single snuffle, though, so I wanted to think she wasn’t feeling too crummy in here. Still, the soup had to help.

Sunny chose a ridiculously named chicken tender basket that was the same thing that could be found anywhere else but fancier because they had green and red checkered tissue beneath them. My sandwich wasn’t that bad. The highlight was how easily Jenny and Sunny joked around until they both cracked up.

“Daddy!” Sunny craned her neck to see through the throngs of people entering the café at the height of the lunch rush. “I see Penny!”

I followed where she looked and pointed, spotting one of the friends I recalled her talking about and playing with before from school.

“Can I go say hi?” She was already on her feet, wiping her face quickly. “Please!”

Penny’s mom had been begged as well, because she approached with an excited Penny jumping at her side. “Hi, Mr. Emerson. We just finished eating and Penny’s eager to ride the train. Again. Could Sunny come with her?”

“Sure.” I’d already purchased the all-inclusive wristband for her to enjoy everything this place had to offer. “I’ll come find you at the exit. Thanks for watching her and offering.”

She smiled. “No rush. That line looked awfully long. I’m sure it’ll take a good few minutes for them to get seats.”

Sunny held Penny’s hand, and with both girls in green, sparkly, festive dresses, they looked like two peas in a pod.

“I’m glad she’s got her friends.” Jenny glanced at me. “You know, with her going back and forth between schools.”

“Me too.” I sighed, trying hard not to think about Mr. Marshall and Principal Jenkins at that other academy. They and that entire experience could remain in the past. “She’s been a real trooper with all of it.” Sunny had always been able to roll with just about anything, which was a blessing with Gwen as a mother.

Now that we had a few minutes alone, I turned to Jenny to give her *all* my attention. “How are you feeling?”

She smiled quickly before sipping her water. “It’s just a head cold. Nothing dramatic.”

Of course, she’d say something like that.

“But it could have been worse for Nana, so I had to stay home.”

That news bummed me out because, just days ago, she was telling me how excited she’d been to go see them. We texted and called daily, but she hadn’t sounded sick. I was bummed on her behalf to miss out with family time, and I couldn’t help but admire her even more. This woman was a sweet, considerate, and selfless person to put others’ needs over her own.

“Are you okay, though? It’s got to be hard to be away from them like this.”

She nodded but tried to smile, not completely successful in erasing that sad look in her eyes. “I miss them. We were trying and failing to play Scrabble over FaceTime, but it’s not the same.” Then she sat up straighter. “I’m glad I’m here though. Glad I’m here with you and Sunny.”

I could see how much she meant it. She didn’t need to tell me she was happy with us at this crazy kid place. She didn’t smile genuinely like this for the hell of it.

“It means a lot to me that you two made the effort to include me today.” She leaned in to press a quick, chaste kiss on my cheek. “I appreciate it. Because I was feeling lonely once all the girls left the house.”

I draped my arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer for a hug as we sat there together and watched the

mayhem of stressed parents and cranky kids.

“How about you spend the night tonight?” I invited her for many reasons, and she could take her pick of them. I didn’t want her to be lonely on Christmas Eve. I wanted her near me. And I couldn’t wait to make her smile and laugh more than she already had.

She stiffened but didn’t try to back up out of my loose hold.

Dammit. Here we go again. I hated this stubborn distance.

“I already talked to Sunny about it. She was enthusiastic about the idea of waking up in the morning to open presents with you there.”

She bit her lip and eased away from my side to sit fully on her own again. “I’m not sure.”

I pulled in a deep breath, doing my best to remain patient, just like I promised her I would be.

“Spending the night on Christmas Eve?” She slowly shook her head. “That’s not really taking things slow and protecting Sunny’s heart.”

“Sunny’s good with the idea.”

“But that’s not taking things slow. That’s jumping in headfirst.”

“How is it?” I didn’t want to fight or start this back-and-forth, but I didn’t want to be too lax either.

She shot me a smirk. “You know it is. Christmas is like the biggest holiday of the year. Reserved for family. You know that, Ward.”

I did. “But she’s seen you sleep over before.”

“Yeah, and we have to be careful to make sure she never realizes I’m sharing your bed, not in a guest room.”

And with her being even slightly sick, I bet she’d want to just sleep in and maximize on her rest anyway. Now I felt like an ass to push it. “You’re right. Sorry. Forget I said anything.”

She took my hand and held it on her lap. “Don’t be like that. You said you could be patient.”

“I know. And I will be.” *I was just really looking forward to it too.* “Are you sure?” I asked, double-checking one last time and hoping I didn’t sound too disappointed.

She nodded. “Thanks for the invite, but I’ll pass on spending the night.”

I sighed and quickly forced a smile. “I understand.”

“You’re sweet to want me to feel included,” she added.

“Will you at least have dinner with us tonight? My mom would like to see you there too.”

I couldn’t tell if she was faking the slow grin she gave me, but she nodded. “Sure, I’d love to. Dinner is fine.”

What would be truly fine was if I could figure out a way to convince her to fully lower her guard with me.

Doesn’t look like that’ll be a Christmas miracle I can rely on this year.

I kissed her, hugging her close again to relish her presence—any bit she’d give me, however she saw fit.

CHAPTER 61



JENNY

This wasn't the way I thought I would be spending Christmas Eve, but I wasn't lacking a good time. Instead of going to Ward's house, he brought me over to Lori's house, and it reminded me a bit of how we used to spend our holidays, at the big parties where my dad would apparently put Ward on the spot and demand to know what his intentions were with me.

And now it's the reverse. Ward's kid asking me what my intentions are.

I'd laugh at the silliness of that later.

For now, I had nothing else to do but dig into the massive feast Lori had prepared.

"All of this just for the three—well, four of us?" I asked, stunned at the spread of food on the table.

"Yeah!" Lori beamed. "I mean, I'll take leftovers and the extras I made to the shelter tomorrow too."

"Mom always makes a couple more dinners' worth to donate," Ward said.

I leaned over and hugged the woman before I took my seat. "You are a saint."

"Why, because I had to raise that hellion?" she teased.

"Ha. Ha." Ward winked at me before calling Sunny to the table. She kept going to the window to look out for a hint of Santa coming through the sky.

We piled our plates up high and I wished my taste buds were able to give me the full run of flavors. Being sick wasn't pretty, but it was cruel when so many dishes of goodness waited to be tasted. I'd thought Thanksgiving was an epic meal, but Lori had outdone herself here. The turkey had a sweet glaze, and the stuffing had soaked up some of that deliciousness, as well.

The mashed potatoes were a hit with Sunny, who made a lake of gravy in the middle of them, and much to Lori's astonishment, the little girl ate every lick of it, not wasting a single speck. Among the sweet potatoes, green bean casserole, and the excellent cranberry sauce, I loaded up for seconds and didn't care if it took me forever to digest it all. I swore I'd never tasted a better cranberry sauce, and that was saying something since I'd been convinced my nana had a top-secret recipe that beat all others.

While the food was great, the company was better. It didn't matter whose story was being told, we all ended up in stitches, laughing together. Sunny's jokes weren't childish but truly good puns, and Lori and I teased Ward for having his brand of dad jokes.

Lori and I also chatted about my tea business. We didn't make a conversation *about* work, but more of a loose brainstorming effort that convinced me to speak with her about my overwhelming business after the holidays. I had to do something differently to make it a continuing success without burning myself out.

Like most dinners with them, we wrapped up at the table with a variety of games. I got suspicious that Sunny was letting *me* win, perhaps out of pity because I wasn't feeling one hundred percent with this lingering cold. Ward convinced me that wasn't the case though, because he called her out on not paying attention.

"Sunshine," he drawled. "Santa only comes when kids are asleep."

"But how do *you* know that?" she challenged as her gaze drifted to the windows again.

“Easy,” he said as he moved his game piece over the board. “I’m not a kid.”

“But you were when you were little.” She widened her eyes. “Have you *seen* Santa come? Because you can stay up late as an adult?”

Ward shrugged. “Nope. I always fall asleep.”

“I bet I could get night-vision goggles and catch him in the act,” Sunny said.

“I don’t know if I’d risk it,” Lori said.

I shook my head. “I tried that one year. I planned to stay up *all* night and see if he came.”

Ward grinned at me, recalling that night. We’d shared our first kiss in that attempt. He’d broken out of his house to sneak over and scare me, knowing I was trying to prove once and for all that Santa was a myth. We were still kids then, yet not teenagers, and he’d claimed he’d kissed me because of a double-dog dare from Colby. It was juvenile, but after that, we weren’t *just* friends, but tiptoeing to something more.

“What happened?” Sunny asked.

I shrugged. “I fell asleep. And was really cranky and tired the next day because I didn’t get enough rest.”

Sunny sighed. “You’re probably right.”

I grinned, rolling the die for my turn, and it was at that moment that I caught myself. I hadn’t had to guard my heart all night. I was able to bring up a memory of my history with Ward and not feel that aching pain from the heartache he gave me so long ago.

I hadn’t been watching myself all evening, not as we ate, joked, or played these games. I realized with a brow-lifting surprise that I’d been too busy enjoying my time here without any conscious effort to hide what I was feeling. I got along with them so well that I felt like I was fully one of them here on this usually special night reserved for family and close friends.

I felt like I *belonged*.

Ward went out of his way to include me every day. He wasn't a hands-off friend. He reached out to me with calls and texts morning to night. He thought to invite me and get me out of the house when I was feeling lonely and experiencing holiday blues by myself. And he was the consummate attentive lover.

Sunny was an amazing kid, which helped. She didn't treat me like I was a third wheel butting into her time with her dad, who she was very close with. She never once made me wonder if she regretted my intrusion into her life.

Lori was more than inviting and welcoming, always eager to have me over at her house for these holiday meals, just like she had been way back when. She gave me encouragement and advice not to give up on her son, and other than that, she was a huge help with my tea business.

All three of these Emersons were doing a damned good job of convincing me I had a place in their lives, and that was the best Christmas gift I ever could have asked for. It felt good to know my worth and value but it felt extra warm and loving when others could appreciate me and want me around too.

I belonged with them, but it was my connection to Ward that posed the biggest risk still. If he and I couldn't make it work this time, I stood to lose all the love and welcome his mom and daughter gave me so freely.

Later into the evening, after I drowned my worries and thoughts with one glass of scotch that Lori told me was some kind of tradition, we moved closer to the tree so Sunny could play another game, this one a guessing game of her trying to figure out what was wrapped in which gift.

"Will you stay for the night?" Sunny asked me. She glanced at Ward and he shook his head, causing her to frown slightly. "Oh."

"I'll see you later in the day," I said, hoping I wouldn't have to explain why I had misgivings about staying the night.

"Okay." She sighed but quickly perked up, getting a present from under the tree. "Then can you open this tonight?"

She handed me a box she'd wrapped with brown paper bags that she'd colored as wrapping paper.

“Oh, I'd love to, but Sunny, I can't rip this!”

Her fingers aimed for the tape. “Yeah, you can. I'll show you how.”

“No,” I said, giggling. “It's too pretty! I love your artwork.”

Sunny smiled, edging closer to point at it, labeling where we all stood in her cartoon.

I narrowed my eyes. “What's that?”

“The squirrel mommy running out of the tree last year.”

“Ohhhh...” I nodded, realizing now that those black squiggles on the bottom represented a line of ants from the tree.

Lori cracked up, and Ward groaned as he poked at the logs burning in the fireplace.

I carefully unwrapped the package, folding and saving her drawing so it could join the pile of artwork she'd already gifted me over the last month.

Then I opened the box, finding a beautiful pair of wool-lined leather gloves inside. We weren't due for any snow yet, but it was cold out there. They were gorgeous and warm. I slid them on, smiling as I held my hands out to show her the perfect fit.

Sunny beamed up at me. “Daddy bought me a pair too. We'll match. We can be twinsies at the wedding.”

Lori rolled her eyes and looked away, not wanting to weigh in on the mention of Gwen's wedding in just a few days. I smiled at the girl, then up at Ward, who stared at me with such intensity it looked a lot like love.

“Thank you, Sunny.” I hugged her close, gazing at Ward. “I love them.”

That L-word caused a damn tickle in my throat. It almost came out wrong. After all my concerns, I couldn't lose my

filter and blurt out that I loved him, not tonight. I wasn't sure if and when I could risk my heart that much with him.

"They are beautiful," I told Sunny after she squeezed me tight. They really were, and I felt immensely grateful and special to have been given them.

Ward was a billionaire. He could afford anything his heart desired, but these were presented to me with thought and love. Both Sunny's handmade wrapping paper and the gloves. It was a practical item but also pretty, and I appreciated that Ward knew me well enough not to assume I'd be materialistic and wish for anything extravagant.

I'd already given Ward my gifts for Sunny to have her open at his house. One was a gardening toolkit that I would show her how to use at the gardening center if she'd like to visit me there sometime. Lori admitted that Sunny had outgrown the toddler-size "tools" but was still too small for true adult-sized ones. With a friend's help and advice at work, I located the perfect sizes for Sunny and ordered them. Then, because I couldn't resist, I found a place that made custom stuffies and had them create a Great Dane puppy, true to life size, with the specific coloring she'd told me about. Ward was waiting on the real thing, a puppy of any breed, but I bet she'd enjoy a substitute for now.

At the end of the night, Sunny got more and more tired, failing to keep checking out the windows. I began to grow sleepy, too. Especially after Lori suggested I try her version of a hot toddy. Between that one glass of scotch and then that "remedy" drink, I was about to snuggle up with the little girl and pass out myself.

"I'll drive you home," Ward said, smiling at me as I leaned against him.

I nodded, sitting up and sighing. "Thank you for the lovely dinner, Lori." I glanced at the clock and smiled. "Merry Christmas." It was almost there anyway.

She grinned up at us, settling in to watch Dean Martin reruns as she sipped her wine. Sunny lay with her head on her

lap, fast asleep now. Lori stroked her hair back, at peace, and winked at us. “No rush.”

I glanced at Ward, wondering how he’d interpret *that* on the way to my empty house.

CHAPTER 62



WARD

I glanced at Jenny again, checking to see if she was still awake. I didn't blame my mother for giving her that hot toddy. As the night passed and hours went by, I caught signs of Jenny waning. I knew it was just a head cold and she'd handled the commotion of the North Pole place all right, but still, a head cold was no laughing matter. It might have seemed minor to her but I bet her body was insisting she rest.

Yawns came more frequently as we played games, and her eyes just had that drowsy look. I wasn't convinced my mom's drinks turned Jenny into a tired mess, but unless I took her home then, she *would* have been spending the night at my mom's house, passing out on the couch next to Sunny.

She was awake though, smiling as she watched the scenery blur by out the window. It was a show I'd loved as a kid, too. All the houses lit up and decorated. The blow-up characters and fake trees adorned with more lights and baubles that people probably hoped would weather the winter until they remembered to take it all down. In my neighborhood, they had a deadline for removing such things, but they also had a maintenance crew that would assist. Hell, most of my neighbors probably paid a service to do it all, both putting it up and taking it down, but I was stuck doing it myself. Sunny *loved* participating in stringing lights outside, and this year, she'd requested we switch to all LED lights and solar-powered panels for them. So, it was a task.

Jenny would no doubt approve, and I smiled at the coincidence that Sunny was learning about the environment

and getting into everything being green right when Jenny came back into our lives. She was the green expert, the gardener guru of all things tea, and I couldn't wait to see how her wisdom would foster Sunny's interest.

How she would foster anything with her.

I sighed, taking in her profile and reminding myself to go slowly. I had told her I would be patient. I would be, but at the same time, I was damned eager for my future to start.

I drove on, appreciating the empty roads and enjoying the quiet calm of the ride. We held hands, and suspended in this easy silence without any pressure to fill it with small talk, it seemed like it was just us. We were alone, traveling through the show of lights, and it made the whole night more magical somehow.

I pulled up at her house and climbed out of the car to walk her up to her front door. That wasn't all I was hoping for, but it would be her call.

"Thanks for including me, Ward," she said with the front door unlocked and opened a crack. "I really had fun, both at the North Pole and your mom's house."

I smiled and reached into my coat to pull out another gift for her. "It's not over yet, is it?"

She pretended to give me a stern look of disapproval. "Another present? You don't need to."

"I want to," I said as I handed her the box. It wasn't shaped quite like *that* kind of a small box, but she lifted her brows in question as she took it. Inside, a pair of sparkly diamond earrings reflected the light from the string hanging from the eave of her porch.

"Oh, Ward. Wow." Her eyes widened as she gaped at it. Then she lifted her face to mine as hers remained stuck in shock.

"You can wear them to the wedding," I explained. It wasn't the same as my fantasy of her wearing them and nothing else, but I could pace myself.

“Ward, no. This is too much!”

I closed her fingers over the box, insisting. “No, they’re not too much. They’re not enough.”

When she opened her mouth to argue, I gently placed my finger to her lips. “You’ve been here for me and shown up in a way nobody ever has. I’m so grateful for you, Jen. And I know you’re scared. I realize I don’t have your trust yet, and a pair of earrings won’t change that, but I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. I want you to know that I am confident in wanting this to work. I want this life with you. And Sunny. The three of us as a family. But I will wait for as long as you need. I told you I would be patient, and I will wait for you, Jenny. I promise that.”

She sniffled, smiling, and wiped at her eyes. This wasn’t another sign of her cold. If I had to guess, these were happy tears. “Oh, Ward. Thank you.” Blinking fast, she nodded and smiled wider. “Thank you.” She sealed it with a soft, sweet kiss on my cheek, but I didn’t release her hand.

“I hate leaving you alone like this.” I craned around her, glancing through the windows at the empty house inside. No one was waiting for her, and of all festive nights, she shouldn’t be by herself on this one. It was Christmas Eve!

She turned toward the door though. “I’ll be fine. It’s just a head cold.”

Before she could get too far, I grabbed her other wrist.

Arching one brow at me, she waited.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in for a cup of tea?”

Her grin was slow and sexy, more tempting when she bit her lower lip. “I’m sick, Ward. Trust me, sick isn’t sexy.”

“You are always sexy. No matter what.” I feigned innocence as she pulled me inside with her, triumphant that she was inviting me in after all.

“Sex isn’t sexy when someone’s sick,” she clarified.

I laughed as she closed the door behind me.

“But a cup of tea? That, I could go for.” She shed her coat, and as I took off mine, I watched her glance at the earrings again, almost as though she wanted to check that they were real.

“I’ve been picturing you wearing them,” I confessed.

“With the dress for the wedding?” she asked.

I shook my head and reached for her. “Just them.”

“*Just* the earrings?” she asked as she looped her arms around my neck and hugged me close.

I nuzzled along her jaw, near her ear, but when I went to kiss her mouth, she shied away. “I’m sick, Ward.”

“I can’t kiss you?” I took the small box from her and set it aside on a side table.

“Not on my mouth. I don’t want to get you sick again.”

“Everywhere else is fair game though?” I teased and kissed her cheek before trailing down toward her neck.

“Hmmm.” She tipped her head back and closed her eyes. Her fingers speared through my hair and she pulled hard.

I licked my way down her sweater, so glad it wasn’t a pullover. Undoing the buttons while I kept my open mouth on her warm skin, I prompted her to walk back toward the couch. We hadn’t had sex here yet. A bed would be better, but I doubted she’d last. Already, she moaned and breathed hard, reacting to my mouth sucking at the swell of her breast and my tongue stroking along the edge of her bra cup.

“How about here?” I asked as I shoved her sleeves off and pushed her bra down. Her nipples were already hard, pointed at me and begging for attention. I braced her with a hand at her back as I closed my lips over the turgid peak, pulling it between my teeth as I cupped her other breast still confined in her bra.

“Oh, yeah,” she breathed, reaching back to unclasp the garment for me.

I alternated between both of them, sucking, nipping, and licking until I could have sworn I memorized every inch of her tits. She let her head drop back, arching and thrusting her breasts into my face, and she kept her hands on my head, locking me where she wanted me. I pushed them together, rougher with my touch as I bit at them, then chased away the sting with a long lick. She cried out and almost fell onto the sofa.

I lowered her at the same time I reached for her leggings. These were silkier, perhaps not her usual yoga wear, and I was pleased with how easily I could lower them, along with her panties.

“And here?” I asked, dropping to my knees on the floor.

I pressed my lips to her entrance and she gave me a husky, sexy groan of need. Her pussy was glistening pink, wet and needy for me already, and I didn't delay in tasting and kissing her there, too. I didn't rush, laving at her entrance and collecting the juices she'd already leaked the more I turned her on. I didn't torture and tease her clit like I loved to, not wanting to prolong this wait.

It was Christmas Eve. And I had to get back to my mom's house to be “Santa” and help my mom get Sunny in bed. But I couldn't leave Jenny here unsatisfied. It gave me immense pleasure to make her come with my mouth and fingers, but tonight, it seemed right to reach our releases together.

As she humped her pussy against my face, I licked in tandem with her movements. I lowered my hands to free myself and slide a condom on, eager to feel her squeezing me with that wet heat.

I moved too quickly, though, bumping my chin on her mound, and she sat up, staring at me in question.

“I need you.” I reached for her, and she tumbled into me. She fell off the couch, straddling me as I dropped onto my back. Right there in front of the Christmas tree. Her fingers gripped me, moving my cock toward her entrance, and with one quick torturous drop, she sheathed me.

“Fuck, yeah.” I knocked my head back to the hardwood floor and gripped her hips. “Ride me.”

“Merry Christmas, Ward.” She sounded out of breath, raspy, and so damn sexy. Lifting up and rocking back down with each drop, she rode me just like I liked. Slow and grinding, so she could feel all of the friction. And this was the best gift I could find—literally under the tree. She picked up the pace, pushing me closer to oblivion. Pleasure was right there, within reach, and I watched her in a desperate need to commit this to memory forever.

Multicolored lights from the tree cast an array of hues over her bare skin. Blue over her breasts, then green highlighting the glistening wetness from my kisses on her nipple. Red showered over her hair, making the wild, mussed tresses crazier as she moved fast, and then purple, contrasting the depth of desire in her eyes.

Lights faded from one to the next, almost like a show synchronized with the rhythm of her bouncing on my dick, and she made the ornaments sway. I cupped her jiggling breasts and pinched her nipples. Squeezing me tight, she cried out as her orgasm hit her. I jerked my hips up higher, and with her tightening around me, I had no choice but to give in and come with her.

Every time we had sex, it seemed better than the last time. But I’d never considered how awesome sex under the Christmas tree would feel.

Best. Christmas. Ever. I smiled to myself moments later once we both caught our breath after the intense and quick orgasms. She lay blanketing me as I hugged her, rubbing her back.

“I’m shocked nothing fell off the tree,” I commented.

She snorted a silly laugh. “Karen is very particular about securing ornaments.” She leaned up, gazing down at me. “I’m shocked that wedding is just around the corner.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know how and why she was thinking about Gwen’s wedding right after sex, but I had to

agree. “I know. It’ll be here before we know it.” And then I wouldn’t have to deal with it anymore.

“So I’ll be coming over the morning of, right?” She asked it but it sounded more like a confirmation. “I’ll help Sunny get ready.”

I kissed her, a full, deep kiss on the lips, germs be damned. “Thanks, Jenny. I couldn’t do any of this without you.”

And hopefully, once the chaos with this stupid wedding is over, I’ll find a way to convince you that I only want a future with you for good.

CHAPTER 63



JENNY

I hurried from Sunny's bathroom to Ward's, furrowing my brow as I hunted for that damn lip gloss. Sunny trailed after me, still in her pajamas and hugging the stuffed animal I'd gotten her. According to Ward, and what I'd seen from spending last night here, she had yet to put the toy down. From the moment she opened the package on Christmas afternoon, she fell in love. If she was as dedicated to a real version of a Great Dane as she was to this toy, that dog would be so loved and smothered with kisses and hugs.

"It's your mom's wedding," I reminded her as she dutifully followed me while I searched the counters. I wasn't a big makeup sort of girl, but I did have an astonishing number of lip glosses. I knew I had one with "minimal" glitter, which of course was the one Sunny wanted to wear. "So, she's the one who gets to decide who can be a guest or not."

Sunny sat on the closed toilet lid and tilted her head to the side. "But she doesn't seem to like you, and you're coming."

I blinked, stunned still. Turning slowly, I licked my lips and tried to think of what to say. Did Gwen talk crap about me at that failed bridal party thing when the nail polish tipped over? She had no right to be telling a child bad things about me.

"Remember? When you found me on the sidewalk and brought me inside the café? She yelled at you lots."

Oh. Yeah. I nodded, shrugging as I resumed the search. That was right. Sunny had witnessed firsthand what Gwen

thought about me. “Yeah. She’s probably not a big fan of mine, but she invited your dad because she wanted you in the bridal party, and since he can pick a date, he picked me.”

I paused, glancing up at her reflection in the mirror. I couldn’t believe the day was finally here. Half of me had been dreading it, while a bigger part of me was glad that it could just be over already.

“She can’t tell guests who they can bring?” Sunny asked.

“Well, no.” I frowned, picking through my makeup bag. “Um. I don’t know.” Gwen would be an exception to the rule. “Generally, no. A guest picks their date and that’s that.” *Kind of.*

“Okay. Then *I’m* a guest, even though I have a big important job. And I pick Duke to be *my* date!” She thrust the stuffed animal in the air as if I could’ve forgotten the name she chose for him.

I smiled, loving this sweet innocence. I wished she would always hold on to this cuteness, but today, as we hurried to get ready for her mom’s wedding, I had to figure out a sterner way to explain.

“Sunny, I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“What’s not a good idea?” Ward asked as he walked into the bathroom, buttoning his shirt. “Hey.” He frowned. “You two aren’t in your dresses yet. If we’re late, nobody can say it’s my fault this time.”

“I’m trying to suggest that Sunny leave Duke at home. Because Gwen never specified if animals were welcome.” I raised my brows, expecting him to pick up on my distress call for help. It was adorable that she wanted to bring a toy. She was six. She was a kid. Tugging along a toy wasn’t out of the norm. But Sunny was in the bridal party and wasn’t going as just a kid. I had no doubt Gwen expected her to look like a mini version of her and probably not act her age.

“Yeah, I told you last night,” Ward said gently. “Duke might not have fun there. Boring old wedding stuff.”

Sunny rolled her eyes. “But, Daddy...”

“And he could get lost,” I added as I found the lip gloss.

“You mean I could misplace him?” Sunny asked.

“Same thing,” Ward said as he left the bathroom again.

“How could I misplace him if I don’t put him down?”

I crossed my arms, determined not to be late with the chronic late guy. I’d never live it down, even if we were going to the wedding of a woman I didn’t like at all.

“Wouldn’t you have to put him down when you walk down the aisle?”

She frowned and hopped off the toilet lid. “No. Look. I’ve been practicing.” She picked up a little basket with construction-paper petals. Sticking the basket handle over her arm, she balanced the large stuffed dog under the opposite arm. She did manage to toss some petals down, and it was adorable, but I knew Gwen would freak.

“I even made him a bow to match my dress!” Sunny pointed at the blue strip of construction paper with stars made out of marker.

“That’s precious,” I told her. “But do you want the truth?”

She nodded. “Well, duh.”

“I think your mom won’t like it.”

She sighed, slumping her arms down. “Dang it. Fine.”

I giggled. “All right. Time to get your dress on.” I guided her out of Ward’s bathroom, but she stopped short.

“Jen Jen?”

“Huh?”

“Why are your things in Daddy’s bathroom?” She glanced at the unmade bed. “Did you sleep over in *here* with him?”

Ward froze in knotting his tie, sending me a wide-eyed look in the mirror.

“Yep.” I refused to lie to her. “But right now, it’s time for your dress!”

“I can’t wait!” She ran off ahead with her toy, amazing me with how quickly she could take “big” news and run with it. I shot Ward a look of shock, then hurried after her.

Once I got her into her adorable dress, I checked her hair. Then it was a quick matter of lip gloss and a swipe of blush on her cheeks. My dress was a simple but elegant gown of sparkly midnight blue. Lauren actually had it and said it would be perfect for the winter-themed event. She’d worn it to a gala years ago, and with a faux white-fur shawl, I would fit in with the crowd.

I applied the barest makeup to my face, but when I reached for the earrings Ward gave me, he surprised me by reaching around behind me to pick them up.

I glanced at him in the mirror, damn near drooling at the sight of him in that tux. Sunny sang along to a show’s theme song in the other room, and I relished sneaking a moment with him in the bathroom. It was intimate, just the two of us as I put the earrings in. He nudged aside the shawl to kiss along my bare skin, and I shivered at the feather-light touches.

“So, she knows I’m sharing my bed with you.”

“Yeah.” I sighed and nodded, leaning back against him. He rested his chin on my shoulder and banded his arm over my stomach.

“I’m shocked she notices anything but that dog,” I said.

“It was bound to happen. But she didn’t seem bothered,” he replied.

Because this is a busy morning of getting ready. She was excited about her role in the wedding, too. I had no doubt she’d ask more questions later though.

He nuzzled the side of my face. “And speaking of noticing, I can’t help but notice how beautiful you look. You’re gorgeous, Jenny.”

I reached up to place my hand against his cheek. “You’re awfully handsome yourself.”

He nipped my earlobe at the same time he copped a feel, squeezing my breast. Then he groaned. “No bra? Fuck me. I’ll be fighting a hard-on for you all night.”

I giggled, twisting away from him but not before he grabbed my hand and made it more like a dance move as he followed me out of the bathroom.

“I told you. I want to see you in those earrings.”

And nothing else? I grinned, hurrying out of the room with him.

He could joke about being hard for me all night, but with those kinds of ideas in my head, I’d been worrying I’d be wet myself.

“Let’s go!” Sunny tucked Duke into a “bed” on the sofa, kissing him goodbye and promising to be back soon. “We can’t be late,” she scolded us both.

I glanced at the clock, smiling at the fact we were well ahead of time.

The sooner we get this over, the faster we can move on to the future. Starting with tonight.

We arrived at the venue at the same time as Colby and Naomi. I was confused, wondering what I’d missed, because when we all exited the cars at the same time, the newlyweds hooted and hollered, clapping like royalty had driven up. A look around proved they were applauding us, and a blush stole over my cheeks. Were they seriously making that big of a deal that Ward and I had more or less gotten back together?

“Amazing. With, what? *Five* minutes to spare?” Colby shook his head and clapped harder, beaming at Ward like he was a proud father.

“Shut up.” Ward rolled his eyes.

Naomi raised her arms and clapped. “It’s a miracle! Is this a New Year’s Resolution or something?” She winked at me. “Arriving at weddings on *time*, Mr. Emerson?”

I giggled, shaking my head as I helped Sunny out of the backseat.

“Oh, Sunny girl. You look beautiful!” Naomi gave up on teasing Ward to hurry over and hug Sunny. “Hi, Jenny. Looking good.” She made a show of glancing at me, Ward, and Sunny. “All of you are looking good together.”

I smiled and resisted the flurry of nerves about her comments. *Not today. Not yet. Let’s go through this thing first.* It had been hanging over our heads for so long now.

Ward picked up Sunny and took my hand, and we walked in together. As we entered the massive venue, we were met with royal blues, sparkling silver, and plenty of glitter. The whole place was artfully decorated in a winter’s night style. Naomi and Colby entered with us, and both of us women gaped at the detail in the foyer.

“Wow,” Naomi breathed.

“Damn,” Colby said. “If they decked the halls this much out here, I can’t imagine what it looks like inside.” He whistled and rubbed his fingers together, indicating lots of money.

“I knew she said Kenneth was loaded,” I said as we walked in further. “But this is something else.”

“An insane budget on décor, at least,” Naomi agreed.

Ward squeezed my hand before he released it. “I’m going to get Sunny to the bridal suite.”

I smiled at her in his arms. She looked absolutely adorable and so excited.

“You have fun, okay?” I stepped closer to kiss her cheek. “I’ll be looking out for you on the aisle.”

“Thanks, Jen Jen!” She waved at Naomi and Colby too, but before I could join the couple, Ward took my hand again and pulled me close for a quick and hard kiss.

Be still my swooning heart. That kiss wasn’t just a promise for more later. It felt like he was marking his territory.

I watched him carry Sunny off, and the cheeky girl looked over his shoulder and waved again, blowing kisses at us.

“She is so precious,” Naomi said softly.

I sighed, missing them already. Now that the big moment had come, I felt directionless. We’d been focusing on getting her ready, and now that we were here and Sunny would do her part, then what?

“She’s the best.” I tipped my head toward the entrance to the actual room the wedding would be held in. “Let’s get good seats.”

I headed inside with Naomi and Colby, still awed by the décor. We’d been offered flutes of champagne, but we all passed on it. I was too nervous. Colby and Naomi didn’t seem interested yet. As we walked further into the venue, we stalled and stared. I was floored by the displays, intended to give the guests no room to doubt Kenneth’s wealth. *No wonder Gwen wants to marry him.*

We’d come through a side doorway to reach the “general” seats, which meant we had to pass a good portion of the front rows. Gwen’s family members collected up there, and when they began to point in my direction and whisper, I did my best to hold my head up high. I knew I’d be recognized, but I’d foolishly hoped it wouldn’t be a big deal.

Since Gwen and I used to be best friends so long ago, her family knew me quite well. Lori had given me updates about Sunny’s other grandparents, and Gwen’s mother and father weren’t interested in their roles. According to Lori, they’d only met and visited Sunny maybe three times, and that was plenty for them. They’d consistently shown no interest. I couldn’t understand how anyone, much less a family member, could be that cold and unwelcoming of such a sweet girl. As I found a seat with my friends, I wanted to shake my head at the idea.

Seated and eager to see Sunny and Ward again, I tried to ignore the way Gwen’s relatives turned to spot me and whisper. I could only imagine the lies Gwen told them to make them think I was the bad guy.

CHAPTER 64



WARD

“Are you excited?” I asked Sunny as I walked with her to the bridal suite.

She’d asked to be set down, insisting she wasn’t a baby and didn’t need to be carried. I argued that she would always be my baby no matter what, but she shook her head and told me I would be crumpling her dress if I held her. So, I settled for walking with her and holding her hand. I couldn’t explain why I wanted to keep her close. I wasn’t usually clingy like this. Maybe the incidents pertaining to this big day had colored my attitude. I couldn’t escape the feeling that we were in enemy territory somehow.

“I guess I’m excited,” Sunny said.

You guess? Why, because the last time you saw Kenneth he was a raving asshole? He’d never reached out to apologize at all, and this would be the first time she’d be seeing him since that day he made her cry.

“I would have been happier if I could have brought Duke.”

I exhaled in relief. *The innocence of the youth.* I preferred for her to care about a toy instead of remembering and avoiding a mean bully of an adult.

I chuckled, glad that Jenny had started this out with a stuffed animal version of a Great Dane puppy, sparing me from getting the real thing—yet. Because I knew for a fact Gwen and Kenneth would *hate* the idea of an actual dog here.

We reached the bridal suite, and it was immediately a hive of activity with our arrival.

“Oh, my gosh! You are *adorable!*”

“That dress is so cute, Sunny.”

“Isn’t she just the sweetest thing you’ve ever seen?”

I smiled, sticking my hands into my pockets as Sunny walked toward the bridesmaids gushing over them. One grinned at me, almost like checking in with me, and I nodded in acknowledgment. I’d felt so uneasy about Kenneth that I reached out to the one woman I remembered from school. She had a niece, so she could relate more with a kid, and she explained that she was the one who tried to help with that nail polish incident at Kenneth’s. I wouldn’t put my full trust in her. I would remain with Sunny when Kenneth was near. This bridesmaid wasn’t a close friend, but I appreciated having an acquaintance aware of Kenneth not being allowed near Sunny.

I noticed that all the women made sure to compliment Sunny’s dress and her look with decidedly juvenile descriptions. They’d no doubt wanted to make sure all the mature praise went to the bride, and as I stepped further inside and saw Gwen, my brows shot up.

I wouldn’t deny it. She looked absolutely stunning. Maybe too stunning in a way some people would put collector Barbies on a shelf to look at but never touch, but she looked good.

“Well?” Gwen swayed her hips as she approached me, then did a little twirl.

Well, you can’t even fucking say hi to Sunny? I shoved aside my irritation. She *was* the bride. This was *her* day. I knew she was fishing for compliments, but it wouldn’t kill me to give one.

“You look lovely, Gwen.”

“Do another twirl,” a bridesmaid told Sunny. She obliged, giggling, and the other woman fawned over her tutu dress and sparkly shoes. I watched, mesmerized by the sight of my little girl’s smile. This was what she’d wanted. To fit in. To look

pretty with other “princesses.” And seeing her content warmed my soul.

“Ward?”

I stilled at Gwen’s hand on my arm and turned to face her.

“I’d like to speak to you privately.”

I furrowed my brow. *What the hell for?* “I’m sure you’re too busy.”

“No, please, Ward.”

I shook my head, trusting this sinking feeling in my stomach that warned me not to.

“Ward. *Please.* For just a minute.” She glanced at the door. “It’s important,” she insisted.

I doubt that.

With one more look back at Sunny with the bridesmaids, I hesitated. Anything Gwen wanted would be something for herself. She was selfish to the core. If she wanted to speak with me *now*, moments before her wedding, what the hell would be on her mind about me?

I gave in, not wanting to be difficult, and stepped into the hallway with her. Making sure a venue employee was within distance, a sort of usher, I gestured at her. “What is it?”

She opened and closed her mouth, troubled. “I, uh, I’m having cold feet.”

I knew it. I knew it would be some kind of bullshit like this.

I grimaced, shaking my head, and I stuck my hands back in my pockets. “I’m *so* not the person to talk to about this.”

“Can’t you give me a pep talk or something?”

“Me?”

“Yeah!”

“No. Not really.” Nothing even came to mind. I shrugged. “Maybe there’s a reason you’re feeling doubt.”

She paced, keeping me toward the corner of this alcove, and I waited, tense. Just when I hoped she'd give up, when I braced myself to move off and leave, she blurted, "I don't think I'm in love with Kenneth."

I froze, unsure how to react. Honestly, I didn't care, but that felt too harsh. "Uh, that sounds like a reason to have doubt, then."

"Everything was going just fine." She smirked at me, but she was so worried, her expression came off as a mixture of anger and disbelief. "Everything was going just fine until I saw you and Jenny at Naomi and Colby's wedding. And now I'm just confused."

I felt my blood turn cold. Of all the reasons she could give me, that wasn't one I counted on. The mere mention of Jenny bothered me because Gwen had no room to talk about her. None.

The urge to run filled me. I wanted to sprint down the hall and get as far away from Gwen and this conversation as possible.

If she was waiting for a reply, she'd be standing here for a long time. I had no apology or excuse to give her for the fact I'd seen Jenny at that wedding. The idea of her insinuating I was at fault for her confusion pissed me off.

"I want a second shot at being Sunny's mom."

I rolled my eyes.

"Properly."

I lost the tight control I had on laughing, and a wry snort escaped. *Oh, sure you do.* She'd done the opposite of actually proving that since Naomi and Colby's wedding.

"And I don't think I can do that if I marry Kenneth."

I shook my head. "Sunny wouldn't be at your house with him there. I refuse to bend on that."

"He doesn't understand or like kids."

Not my problem.

“I won’t be able to explore motherhood with him around. He wants to travel and buy nice things. I mean, I do too. But he won’t want Sunny even breathing on them.”

I gritted my teeth. Fuck this. And fuck her. She would try to manipulate me and get her way until she was in the grave, and I didn’t have to put up with it.

She gazed up at me, pleading me for I didn’t know what. *Fuck. This.*

“You had plenty of time to sort this out. You had *years* to decide if you wanted to be a mother. You had months to break off your engagement. Why did you wait until the last minute?”

She lowered her head, crying, but this wasn’t my first rodeo. This wasn’t the first time I’d witnessed her “tears.” More like the lack of them. She sobbed but glanced up too often, checking that I was watching, without actually spilling a tear.

“Cut the crap, Gwen.”

“I was intimidated by Jenny,” she whined.

That was the second time she’d mentioned her now, and I was sick of it.

“You loved Jenny first, and of course she’s back now, trying to weasel her way into your life now that you’re loaded. Do you really believe Jenny would trust you again after what we did to her? After you ditched her for me? I thought you were smarter than that.”

“Don’t go there.”

“Why, because you don’t want to hear the truth?”

“You don’t *know* the truth.”

She scoffed, no longer trying to maintain the front of crying. “Uh, yeah, I do. I was there.”

“*Was*. You were there years ago, Gwen. You’re my past.”

She crossed her arms. “So was she.”

“But she doesn’t belong there. She’s my future, and I’ll be damned if you try to sow doubt like this.”

“There’s no way she’s going to believe that. She’s only back for your money.” She shook her head. “That’s the only thing that would make sense.”

Jenny was back in my life and I was fighting to keep her in it because of love. Both the love we had before and this newer version of it—if she could ever lower her guard to trust me with a second chance.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” I repeated firmly. And she never would. Gwen and Jenny were opposites. Where Gwen was selfish, Jenny was giving. Where Gwen would avoid Sunny, Jenny would embrace her. And where Gwen would just like the popularity of being with me, Jenny chose me for the sake of wanting me for who I was.

“This,” I said as I gestured at her in her bridal gown, “is your problem. And it has nothing to do with me and Jenny.”

I turned to leave, but she grabbed my arm, stopping me from going back to Jenny.

“Ward, I need your help!”

I looked back at her, glaring at her hand on me, then wrenched free and left her to figure it out on her own.

CHAPTER 65



JENNY

*S*urprise, surprise.

I glanced around as I sat with Naomi and Colby. Naomi caught my eye and arched one brow, no doubt wondering the same thing I was but also not shocked that a stunt like this would happen.

Imagine that. Gwen, late to her own wedding. Hmm.

Colby leaned forward to whisper in front of Naomi. “We saw you in the parking lot, ahead of schedule. No one can blame *this* for not starting on time because of Ward.”

I gave him a small smile, mildly amused by his best friend teasing him. Ward struggled with punctuality and it would forever be fodder for jokes. But Colby was right. This time, the tardiness wasn’t because they were waiting on Ward to arrive.

Guests were starting to fidget. The musicians in the band kept playing the soft melodies and remained smiling and calm, but every now and then, one would glance at another with a silent what-the-hell expression.

At the altar, Kenneth checked his watch. After a handful of seconds, he’d flick his wrist and peek at how far the hand might have moved. He stood alone up there. No groomsmen waited off to the side. The best man was absent. I wasn’t shocked that Kenneth stood there alone. He had yet to strike me as likeable and I doubted he had any friends at all, much less a single acquaintance he’d want to stand up there with him.

I looked him up and down, trying to reconcile the image of this man in a finely tailored tuxedo and slicked-back hair as the asshole who'd yelled at Ward's front door. That day, he'd been furious and nasty, red in the face as he called Sunny a brat. While he looked calmer here, not even speaking, I sensed that he hid a switch that could easily be flipped. If he was annoyed or thought he'd been wronged, he'd lash out.

Naomi sighed. "What's taking so long?"

Colby took her hand. "Who knows?"

"I'm starving," she said.

"Me too." Colby looked around again, frowning.

"I'm sure Gwen is just waiting so her grand entrance can be as dramatic as possible," I told them. But in the back of my head, I couldn't help but wonder why Ward was also missing in action.

Did something happen? There's no way he couldn't have found the suite.

Is Sunny okay? Maybe she's clinging to him because of the way things went the last time she was with the bridal party?

Or more drama?

With Gwen, it seemed an unlimited amount of drama and misfortunes were possible. The woman seemed to invite trouble no matter what she did.

Minutes passed, and Kenneth's face became stonier as he waited on the altar, glaring at the arched opening where Gwen's procession should begin.

This is ridiculous. I was antsy and impatient, sitting here. The suspense got to me and I counted down from twenty. If no one showed by then, I'd go hunt Ward down at least. If something was up with Sunny, I'd be there in a heartbeat to help support him with her.

Twelve. Eleven. Ten...

I drew in a deep breath and looked at my phone, in case I missed a reply from Ward. I'd texted him what row we were in

already.

Four. Three. Two...

Just before I got up to search for him, letting my insecurities get the best of me, Ward arrived. He strode down the side aisle, looking for us.

Finally! I exhaled the breath I'd been holding, relieved to see him coming toward us. For a second there, I'd been worried.

No. Ward does not want Gwen. It was that doubt, that worry, that kept me back from trusting him fully. She would linger hidden there in my mind as a nagging reminder of when Ward *hadn't* loved me enough. When he'd wanted her over me.

I'd hated every second of thinking Ward was with Gwen somewhere. And with her not showing, my imagination started running wild.

He strode toward us, his sober gaze locked on me.

Oh, no. Sunny? Was it more trouble with Sunny?

I could tell Ward was a bit off. His jaw looked tight and he had that super aware expression, like he couldn't relax. He slid into the seat next to me and immediately reached for my hand. It was a needy gesture, but one I welcomed. If he sought my touch, I'd give it to him. His fingers tightened on mine, and I placed my other hand on top of them as I leaned in.

He turned slightly, giving me a look I couldn't read. Nope. This man was far from relaxed, and it put me on edge.

"Is everything okay?" I whispered.

His look morphed into a sterner one that suggested *hell no*.

Is anything okay?

"We shouldn't have come to this thing," he muttered darkly.

Yikes. I leaned closer. "Tell me what happened."

Before he could reply, the bride showed. Gwen entered from the back. Heads swiveled and chatter stopped. The music cut off immediately, making her heels clicking on the back of the marble floor louder. She wasn't walking in a procession. No bridesmaids preceded her. No one, not even Sunny. Gwen strode in, hurrying closer but not going down the aisle. She lifted her hand toward the musicians, shaking her head as they began the first notes of the bridal march. The tune waned and died out with those preliminary notes.

I stared, as everyone else did. Confused, stunned, and oddly impressed. She looked beautiful, with every detail done to perfection. I hated to admit it, but there was no way to deny how put together she was in that gorgeous dress. I knew her beauty was only skin deep, and the inside was so rotten the outside failed to matter. As lovely as she was, though, I noticed she also kind of looked *insane*. Gwen wore such an unhinged and uneasy expression, I waited on the edge of my seat.

She lifted her chin higher, looking all the way across the aisle at her fiancé at the altar. After she cleared her throat, she said, "I can't marry you, Kenneth."

All the guests gasped. Naomi slapped her hand over her mouth. I went still, volleying my focus between Gwen and Kenneth.

Holy shit!

"I'm calling off the wedding," she stated boldly. She looked uneasy and unsure, but her words rang out with confidence.

What the hell?

Ward exhaled in a long breath, rolling his eyes. I glanced from him to the altar.

Kenneth looked like he was about to explode. Even from this distance, I saw how his face reddened. His hands clenched at his sides and he stood taller, puffing up his chest. Before, his lips were tugging down in a scowl, but now they pressed together in a thin, tight line as he widened his eyes at his bride.

Oh, no. I covered my mouth, shocked and knowing what might come next. This wouldn't be the first time I was a witness to his explosion of fury. For him to lose his cool here, in this glitzy, glamorous wedding site, though?

Oh, no.

A vein on his forehead bulged, and his nostrils flared with rapid breaths. He looked like a bull, readying for a charge. He marched, stomping each foot, as he went to meet Gwen in the aisle.

“What the *hell* are you talking about?” he demanded.

Gwen crossed her arms. “I'm not marrying you.”

“Yes, you are! You're going to get your ass back there and come back out here the way you're supposed to.”

She shook her head, not seeming bothered by his nasty scowl. He was right up in her face, but she didn't cower.

“You're marrying me, Gwen. Now get your ass back there and come out with the bridal party. I'll be damned if you try to jilt me like this!”

“No!” She fisted her hands and thrust them down at her sides.

“You don't get to tell me *no*.”

“I am now!”

Ward looked down, shaking his head, and I lifted my hands to shield my face from watching. It was embarrassing to even witness this. This argument was something better reserved in a private setting, not in front of hundreds of guests.

“How can you do this?” Kenneth roared.

Just hearing his angry voice triggered me. It brought me right back to when he shouted at us and Sunny at Ward's front door, and I worried about the little girl. I sure hoped the bridesmaids were keeping her back out of sight so she wouldn't have to see this and hear this vile man shouting so meanly again.

Sobs reached me, and I looked up, grimacing as Gwen cried. “I’m sorry.” She sniffled, shaking her head woefully. “I really am sorry, Kenneth. But I’m scared.”

Kenneth hadn’t cooled down at all, but he seemed hellbent on getting answers. “Scared of what, for fuck’s sake?”

“Scared that I don’t want this. That I don’t want to be married to you. I don’t think this is what I want out of life.”

He growled, stepping aside like he was going to leave her in the middle of the aisle, but he wasn’t giving up that easy. “I don’t understand!”

Her shoulders lifted as she cried more, blinking and looking up so she wouldn’t cause her makeup to run more than it was starting to. “I’m confused. I’m just so confused, Kenneth.”

“You weren’t confused when you told me *yes* and wore my ring.”

She shook her head. “So much has happened. In the last two months, I’ve had my eyes opened. So many things happened that I never could have expected.”

“That makes no sense. You were happily planning this wedding for the last two months,” he shot back.

“When you proposed,” she said, flicking her finger between them, “this was what I wanted. All I could think about was being your wife and doing whatever we wanted. But now...”

She sniffled and wiped at her face.

Kenneth furrowed his brow, seeming repulsed by her breakdown. “But now *what?*” he shouted.

“But now...” Her gaze moved through the crowd of guests watching the drama. She looked and looked until she settled her sights on one person.

One man.

The man next to me.

Ward.

I held my breath and my stomach dropped. My heart raced as the implication hit.

All the things that happened over the last two months? That was the same timeframe of Ward and me getting back together. A wave of nausea mixed into the dread I couldn't escape.

He stiffened, holding my hand tighter on his lap, but he didn't look away from Gwen. Nor did he turn to face me. I didn't know any longer if he was holding my hand to comfort me or if he sought out my touch to ground himself. I'd felt cautious and guarded before, but now, I wanted to scramble in the aftermath of having the rug pulled out from underneath me.

People around us immediately murmured and whispered, seeing how Gwen eyed her baby daddy, her ex.

Naomi gasped next to me, and Colby whispered, "Aw, shit. Now what?"

As Kenneth turned slightly and looked over his shoulder, I watched as recognition dawned. He realized Gwen was looking at Ward, of all people. His face screwed up in rage. He'd looked red before, but now he seemed scarlet, his brow shiny with sweat like he was working up a fiery need to lash out.

Then he pivoted, rushing in our direction. Guests clambered to get out of the way and twisted to watch the dumpster fire of a wedding as the groom stalked down the aisle to reach our row.

Aiming straight for Ward.

Oh, shit.

I really, really hoped Sunny wasn't around to watch this. Because Lori's words came back to me clearly. Ward fought back in defense. He was an asshole as a defense mechanism, and as Kenneth plowed his way closer, I knew one or both of them were going to prove just how much of an ass they were.

CHAPTER 66



WARD

U *h oh.*

I released Jenny's hand and shot to my feet. Kenneth barreled toward me like a freight train of fury busting off its tracks. His seething glare was locked on me as he shoved his way closer. Jenny, Naomi, and Colby had chosen seats in the middle of the row. Chairs stood in a dense cluster around us, like a barricade, but the groom didn't give a damn about any obstacles. He pushed his way close, elbowing everyone aside as he charged for me. One woman cried out in shock as he knocked her chair over, and the man with her helped her from falling to the floor.

Kenneth cut through them all like parting a wave, but no one left. They all looked on as the drama escalated.

Bring it on, fucker. If he wanted to blame *me* for any of this bullshit that was all Gwen's doing, he wouldn't get far.

Jenny must have sensed the fight brewing in me. "Ward." She gripped my arm, trying to pull me back, but I remained where I was, determined to face him head on. I heard the alarmed and worried tone of her warning, but I ignored it, facing Kenneth without flinching.

I wasn't the kind of man to back down from a bully. Especially not this one. Ever since he called my daughter a brat and made her cry, I'd been spoiling for a fight with him. I'd been itching for an excuse to show this asshole how little I thought of him and how he treated people, and he was finally giving me the opportunity to do so now.

Just as I expected, he got right in my face, trying to look so tall and mighty and falling short. Heaving deep breaths to charge up for more yells, he moved his shoulders and leaned forward to intimidate me.

“You’ve got a lot of damn nerve showing up here after stealing my bride.”

That accusation was a lie I wouldn’t listen to. “I didn’t steal anything.”

“The hell you didn’t!”

I straightened, narrowing my eyes at him. “I. Didn’t. Steal. Anything.” I didn’t want Gwen, and he was delusional to think otherwise. It was crappy of her to insinuate something was happening between us. She’d told me about her hesitation because of her late, so-so interest in being a mother, but that had nothing to do with *me*.

“You’re nothing but a snake!” He jabbed his finger at my face with that shout, and I scowled at the spittle flying from his mouth.

Don’t. Don’t do it. The urge to punch him filled me, but I tried to resist it. Everyone was looking. Sunny might be too. While I wanted her to know that I would always stand up for her and myself and those I cared for, I didn’t want her to think resorting to violence was ever okay.

“You’re making a scene,” I told him as evenly and firmly as I could without shouting the words. He didn’t have any qualms about arguing with Gwen in the aisle, but I had no interest in such a public shouting match with him.

“Maybe you and Gwen should talk about this in private,” I suggested.

Kenneth sneered, glowering at me with deep hatred. “Fuck you! You’re a smart-mouthed know-it-all. Just like your annoying brat of a daughter. I’m not listening to a damn word you say.”

I gritted my teeth, trying to let his awful words go in one ear and out the other. I knew he was saying that to get a rise

out of me, and I refused to be that easy and give him the satisfaction of thinking he'd pissed me off.

“Stop.” Jenny pushed closer, next to me. “Kenneth, just leave it.” She used her take-no-shit tone but it didn't seem to diffuse the tension. He switched his glare from me to her, seething.

“Let's all just leave this for now.” Colby moved toward me, backing me up. Naomi shuffled out of his way, retreating nervously with her hand over her stomach.

“I'm not listening to you,” Kenneth sneered at Jenny. “Like hell. You're not telling me what to do right now.”

“Watch your tone,” I warned him.

“Or what, you piece of shit?” He got right back in my face.

“Settle *down*,” Jenny ordered quietly, supporting me in facing him off.

Gwen pushed her way closer. She gripped her dress, but even holding the excess fabric up didn't make it any easier for her to wedge into this standoff. Guests backed up more, letting her catch up and weasel in.

“Calm down.” She glanced at Kenneth, nervous almost to be this close to her fiancé. “She's right. Can't you please calm down?” she implored Kenneth.

She blinked, but it didn't save the cosmetics around her eyes. I might have been mistaken, but she almost looked apologetic as she glanced at her groom fearfully. This didn't seem to be another manipulative waterworks to make sure she got her way. Her face was tight and her eyes were truly sad as she tried to tame the angry energy between Kenneth and me.

I didn't like Gwen. I didn't care for her in the slightest. She was a pain in the ass I'd have to put up with for the rest of my life. But aside from my opinions of her, I was glad she decided not to marry this asshole. I wouldn't wish that fate on *any* woman.

Still, I remained guarded. She wouldn't dupe me that easily. I'd spent too long knowing her and recognizing her

manipulative behavior to be one hundred percent certain she'd changed this much and could act like a feeling adult.

“Walk it off.” Colby reached my other side, standing tall. “Just walk it off, man. Go grab a drink. Let everyone go home and call it a day.”

“Don't make this worse than it needs to be,” Jenny advised.

Kenneth simmered, still fisting his hands and scowling so fiercely I doubted the deep grooves of lines on his face would smooth out. He'd freeze in that furious expression if he didn't lighten up. He growled, shaking his head as he still looked for a fight. Colby and Jenny were trying their best to mediate, but their words fell on deaf ears.

“You're nothing but a fucking homewrecker!” he accused. Escalating even more, he lurched forward to grab the front of my shirt.

Shit. I braced myself, staying steady on my feet. He curled his lips, baring his teeth like a rabid, angry man. He drew his arm back, winding up to swing his fist at my face.

I prepared to block his hit, but it never came.

With a gasp, then a loud, “No,” Gwen deprived him of a chance to punch me. She kicked out, getting him between his legs from behind. As his nuts were struck, he curled forward with a groan. His fingers released my shirt as he curled into a ball, cursing and moaning in pain.

“You bitch!” he growled without lifting his face.

Gwen staggered back, reeling a bit from the force of kicking him. She caught herself, leaning on a couple of guests who thrust their hands out to break her fall. I couldn't think back to a time she'd ever been violent, and her first attempt at it probably shouldn't have been in heels that high.

Jenny waved her arm, and I vaguely registered her motions at my side. She was beckoning the venue security staff to come break it up. I'd spotted them back there through the crowd. They were dressed in the same outfit as the employee

I'd seen in the hall when Gwen insisted on speaking with me about her much-belated concerns.

With or without Jenny's prompting and guidance, the two guys knew enough that they'd need to intervene with some kind of drama that had everyone clustered in a big group among the chairs here.

Kenneth resisted the first guy's grip on his arm, but the second one was burlier and taller. He was enough of a bodybuilder that the groom looked foolish to try to evade him.

"You're going to regret this, Gwen. Do you hear me?" Kenneth yelled as he was escorted away. More like pulled. He stomped his feet, trying vainly to drag his heels and make sure he got the last word.

"And you're going to pay for this, asshole," Kenneth shouted at me before narrowing his eyes at Jenny. "You too." Then he sneered at Colby. "And you!"

"Whoa, hey. I'm not involved in this." Colby huffed.

"You're going to regret this, Gwen!" her "man" screamed before the security guards towed him kicking and flailing through the doors.

Everyone's heads turned to watch the aggressive groom's exit, but once he was removed, all eyes roved back to stare at Gwen.

She'd always enjoyed being the center of attention, but right now, she seemed to shrink in on herself as she gazed at the doors swishing shut. Zoning out, she failed to tear her attention away from Kenneth. Or maybe it was his parting words that had her in such a funky trance. If she was going to listen to him and reconsider calling this off, she would've been crazier than anyone I'd ever met.

Damn. I cracked the tension in my neck and smoothed out the front of my shirt. I buttoned my jacket again and looked up at Gwen, tracking if she had snapped out of it yet. If she would announce the wedding's cancellation, as if a single person in this huge room hadn't heard or witnessed the fallout.

She sucked in a deep, wracking breath. Then her lips curled, her eyes glossed over, and she bawled. Loud, ugly cries with her whole face scrunching up. She'd once admitted to me long ago, back in high school, that she hated people who cried because crying wasn't pretty. I'd taken it as another version of *I'm a tough girl, hear me roar* and all that, but over the years, I realized she'd meant it literally, that she thought expressing oneself via tears signified unattractiveness. It blew my mind. Crying wasn't supposed to be pretty. It just was, and I'd dismissed her opinion as another facet of her shallowness.

That was exactly what she was doing now, though. Ugly crying, with her face wrinkled and red and without a care for her makeup or hiding her face.

For the first time since I'd known her, she was choosing to *really* cry, not that fake sobbing act she did to get her way.

Then before anyone could try to console her, she picked up the bulk of her skirt and wove through the crowd. She ran from the ceremony, leaving her sobs in her wake.

What in the hell just happened?

All the details replayed in my mind now that the adrenaline could wear off from tensing for a fight with Kenneth. I breathed easier, relaxing with the threat of drama over, but as I thought back to all that was said and what had happened, I really couldn't wrap my head around it.

Jenny took my hand and squeezed, but I wasn't in the right frame of mind to reply yet.

I shook my head, trying to make sense of it all. I knew Gwen had cold feet, but I was shocked she'd had the guts to call it off. I wasn't happy at all that she'd indirectly tried to imply I was the reason for her hesitation to marry Kenneth, but I understood that she'd pointed me out as a representation of Sunny, of this chance at motherhood she claimed to now want.

“Ward?”

I almost turned to face Jenny after she quietly said my name. “Hmm?”

I didn't catch what she said, still bewildered and stuck in the feelings that rose to the surface now that the potential danger had passed.

What the hell just happened here? And why do I feel bad for my crazy ex?

CHAPTER 67



JENNY

“Ward?” I tried again to reach to him.

That was freaking wild.

I deflated with a sigh of relief. No more shouting or threats of violence, neither of which had a place at a wedding. Guests dispersed around us, moving toward the exits or grouping up to chatter with wide eyes.

Naomi giggled nervously next to me, catching my eyes and raising her brows. “Wow.”

“Uh huh,” I replied.

The woman relaxed, slumping her shoulders as Colby returned to her. Ward had yet to turn around from staring in the direction of where Gwen had run off, but Colby didn’t wait to check with his friend to return to his wife. He draped an arm around her shoulders, seeming overly protective, and I furrowed my brow as she once again lowered her hand from where she’d been holding it over her stomach.

No way. My jaw dropped as I looked at her in silent question.

Naomi gave me a small, knowing smile, confirming my guess.

Oh! I couldn’t believe it. I knew she’d been posting things for quite a while about infertility.

She leaned closer to whisper, “We haven’t told anyone yet. Not even Ward.”

I nodded. “Your secret is safe with me.” I winked, grinning at this sudden good news. The high of their coming fortune didn’t keep me smiling for long though. I looked back at Ward, starting to wonder when he would face me.

When he dropped my hand and headed down what remained of the row, I graduated from worrying to stressing the hell out.

“Ward?” I followed him, dodging around the mess of chairs that had been shoved aside and rearranged haphazardly with Kenneth barging over here to confront Ward.

He had to be concerned about Sunny. If she’d heard that or saw anything of a threat. It had crossed my mind, and I prayed she hadn’t witnessed it. Assuming he was rushing off to find her, I kept right on his heels, almost crashing into Ward when he stopped at the main central aisle splitting the wedding congregation, or what remained of the guests who were still excited about the drama of the ceremony being called off like that.

Spinning to face me, he caught me and looked down at me seriously. I blinked, raising my brows at his unreadable expression.

“You should probably wait here,” he told me, releasing my upper arms.

Wait here? Why? I furrowed my brow, trying to understand. “You want me to wait here?”

He nodded, smoothing down his coat.

“Where are you going?” He had to be getting Sunny, but if that was the case, why didn’t he want me to come with him? We’d arrived together.

“I’m going to go see if Gwen is okay.”

My jaw dropped again. This time, it hung open as I tried to process what he’d just told me. His plans to pursue Gwen stunned me stupid, and all I could do was stare at him, like his words would shift like puzzle pieces in my mind and sound like something different.

“Why?”

It was all I could say. The simplest, most critical question in response to his plan. Why on earth would *he* need to check on his ex?

He looked away, then back at me before glancing over my shoulder at where I assumed Naomi and Colby waited. Indecision showed on his face, and I started to tense up. Was he trying to pick through his thoughts and find the things he wanted to tell me and what he wanted to keep secret? Was he confused about the urge to run after the person he often referred to as an epic pain in the ass he'd rather not deal with ever again? Or was he stuck in determining if his idea to go after her was a smart thing to do?

“Ward?”

He shrugged at last, frowning in frustration. “I don't know. I can't give you a good reason.”

I clamped my lips shut, hurt at once. I could've been glad that he was being honest, but damn, that lack of a reason stung. He wanted to check on her but didn't even know why? I knew he was a compassionate and kind man, but Gwen was his ex. She fell into a different category in terms of deserving his compassion and kindness, didn't she? I hated the ugly feeling of envy and something like betrayal that crept up within me. If he hadn't spent so long before the wedding who knew where, maybe I wouldn't have been this suspicious and tense.

All I could latch on to was the fact that he wanted to go to her when she was emotional and needy.

Wasn't this how it happened before? She snagged his attention and, boom, she had him hook, line, and sinker?

“I'm just worried about her after what happened. Will you get Sunny from the bridal suite?”

I grimaced, hating this doubt brewing in my mind. “Yeah. I mean, sure. I'll go find Sunny.” As I agreed and told him I'd seek out his daughter, I battled the confusion claiming me. Frustration too.

He must've sensed my struggle to follow along. "I need to make sure she's all right."

I blinked up at him, still stuck in a cringe.

Who cares if Gwen is okay?

As soon as the words entered my mind, I wished I could erase them. I sounded bitchy, but it was my truest reaction. Clearly Ward cared. Otherwise, he wouldn't be rushing off after her. But why?

He'd told me he was over her, how he couldn't stand her. He cared, sure. Ward cared about many people because he wasn't an unfeeling asshole. But Gwen, his ex, how much did he still care for her after all she'd done? Enough to chase her down instead of being with me and looking for Sunny?

It made no sense, but he didn't linger to explain. He didn't offer me any answer that could help me lose this awful sensation of my stomach dropping like when she'd looked at him as an excuse for why she had to call off the wedding.

He left, and I stood there for a moment trying to get past the ugly doubts and insecurities filling me up.

Naomi tapped my arm, jarring me from the bombardment of thoughts and worries. "Maybe we should go find Sunny." She spoke softly, no doubt realizing I was stuck in this funky and weird feeling of being ditched. It was the very thing I never wanted to experience again, especially not where Ward and Gwen were concerned.

Colby frowned after Ward, too, but when he faced me, he nodded. "Yeah. I bet Sunny's really confused by now."

"And disappointed," I said as we headed out together. "She was looking forward to being the junior bridesmaid for so long now." Just as long as I'd been counting down the time for this wedding to be done with and in the past. It was over, never even starting, but I didn't feel good about it.

Colby and Naomi came with me to the bridal suite, and I was grateful for their company. I couldn't shut off the worries in my mind, but they distracted me a bit.

“I’m shocked that you talked her out of bringing Duke with her,” Colby said.

We’d all gone over to Ward’s house for the men to watch a bit of the Cowboys’ game and for us to hang out and exchange gifts as friends. They’d found it too funny how Sunny wouldn’t put down the stuffed animal. Colby, the joker, told Sunny she should ask Santa for *two* dogs next year, so they would have each other and never be lonely.

“Oh, she tried,” I told them as we found the room.

Inside, the bridesmaids sat or stood around, waiting. Gwen wasn’t here. I’d almost hoped she would come seek her maid of honor’s shoulder to cry on, and Ward would be there too, but no. Just gossiping women and a confused Sunny.

“Jen Jen, what happened?”

Fuck if I know, kid. “Well, your mom seemed to change her mind about marrying Kenneth.”

She scrunched her nose like she ate something bitter. “Because she’s going to marry my dad? Because that’s what that tall bridesmaid heard.”

I sure as shit hope that’s not the mind game Gwen’s playing right now! I swallowed hard, realizing why rumors would fly about that. Gwen *had* looked at Ward when Kenneth pushed her to give him a reason about calling off the wedding. “No?”

Colby shook his head, elbowing me aside to lower to a crouch in front of her. “No, Sunny girl. Your dad isn’t with her.”

“Where is he?” Sunny asked.

“Uh…” I rubbed the back of my neck. “He’s talking to her. She seemed sad.”

Now I’m making excuses.

“I mean your dad’s not in a *relationship* with your mom,” Colby amended.

I wanted to feel better. He knew Ward well enough to be able to say that confidently. But I felt stupid, thinking that *I* knew him that well too.

“Just to clarify,” Sunny said slowly. “No wedding?”

We all shook our heads.

“No chance for me to walk down the aisle?”

We shook our heads again. I winced at the devastation in her voice.

“And no one will be able to see me in my pretty dress?”

“Hey, *I* see you in that pretty dress.” I took her hand and squeezed it.

“Yeah, me too,” Naomi chimed in.

Even though my heart felt fragile after another glance at the gossiping bridesmaids I didn’t know that well, I knew it was in Ward’s hands. That was my own fault, for falling for him again when I should’ve been guarded and thought this through better. I couldn’t change anything now, and with Sunny frowning like she’d had her fun stolen from her, I grew determined to take care of her and focus on making her smile. It’d distract me at least. “Come on, let’s go wait for him out there.”

She stayed with me, and Colby and Naomi walked with us through the massive venue hall. Guests were still exiting, but we found another hallway that led to the vast reception space, not to be used by a new Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Crown.

We succeeded in cheering her up there, dancing and goofing off on the wide-open and empty dance floor. No music played overhead, but Naomi held her phone up and blasted tunes the best she could. It wasn’t anything close to the fancy ceremony and focused attention Sunny had been envisioning and dreaming about, but with her giggles and smiles, it seemed we were doing a decent job of giving her a smaller version of what she was missing out on.

In the back of my mind though, as song after song played from Naomi’s phone, I roughly calculated how many minutes

Ward was with Gwen. No matter how I looked at it, it was an awfully long time for two ex-lovers to be together.

I hated the feeling of picturing exactly how far Ward could go in making sure she was okay.

He'd moved on from her, but that didn't mean he couldn't revert and want a second chance with her. After all, for the last two months, I thought we'd been tiptoeing toward *our* second chance.

CHAPTER 68



WARD

“**Y**eah, I’m coming home right now, baby. The wedding was canceled! Ain’t that awesome? Now I can stay at home and put my feet up instead of carrying trays all night and—Oh!” The catering staff member finally looked up when she almost collided with me in the hallway as I searched for Gwen.

She’d taken off in this direction, but there were an awful lot of rooms to check in this huge place. I figured I’d look back this way first. Then hopefully, most of the guests would be gone near the front.

Several catering staff members had already passed me by, heading home early and free of working the reception that wouldn’t happen.

“Sorry,” she said, standing straighter and revealing her small baby bump. I bet she would like a night off her feet.

After she walked by, I did a double-take, whistling at her to stop. She faced me again.

“Do you know where the bride is?”

Hell, maybe she’s not even here anymore. Then I could get back to Jenny and Sunny quicker and make sure they were okay with the drama.

“In the kitchen,” the worker said and pointed.

I headed that way and found Gwen. She sat on a stool, eating her wedding cake. All four tiers remained in place, stacked on what seemed like perilous noodles for stakes. I was

sure the baker knew what he was doing. With the amount of money Kenneth liked to spend, he would've made sure to hire a competent architect of a baker.

She sniffled, still crying as she shoveled a forkful of white cake into her mouth. Without a glance up at me or any acknowledgment, I dragged out another stool and sat next to her.

Then she lifted a brow, peering at me as I sat there silently. I had no clue what to say, and I'd let her speak first. She didn't. Instead, she cut me a slice of cake and slid the small plate toward me.

"Someone may as well enjoy it," she muttered.

I ignored the cake, not in the mood to make this a social call. "Are you okay?"

She laughed, losing a crumble of cake from her last bite. Then she evolved into hysterics, coughing so hard I worried some of that cake had gone down the wrong pipe. Brows raised, I hurried toward the sink and got a glass of water.

She gulped it gratefully, harshly clearing her throat and thumping her fist at her sternum. "Swallowed wrong," she croaked.

I nodded. Given how distraught she already was, emotional and crying, she might want to slow down to at least chew.

"And no, Ward, I'm not okay." She lifted a handful of the skirt of her dress, emphasizing the area stained with cake icing. Then she smirked, aiming her finger at her running makeup and blotchy face that was the result of her crying.

I smiled. "Hey, it's better this than marrying someone you're not in love with."

She shot me a deadpan look as though she couldn't believe I would dare to say that.

I tilted my head to the side. "Right?"

"Sunny does that head tilt thing." She returned to her cake, taking a smaller bite. "It used to annoy me so much when

you'd do it but it's cute when she does."

Thanks? I was always cautious to accept her compliments about Sunny being cute. It was such a basic, superficial thing to comment on, what she looked like, but she was talking about an action, so I guessed it was all right. No surprise that I'd annoyed her, though.

"Right?" I asked again. "Better than marrying someone you don't love?"

She sighed heavily.

"Kenneth is an asshole, Gwen. You made the right call. For once in your life."

She cried harder, wiping the back of her hand over her cheeks as she shoved another tiny bite of cake in. I wasn't sure how smart it was to cry and eat at the same time, but I didn't want to tell her what to do.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed.

My brows jerked up high and I stared at her, surprised. An apology was the last damn thing I expected her to share.

"Maybe Kenneth and I deserve each other. I've been a shit person too. Don't lie and tell me I'm wrong just because I'm crying. You know it. I've been an asshole too."

She glanced up at me and I nodded. Hey, she called it.

"And even when I tell myself I'm going to be better, to do better, I never follow through."

I wanted to ask why she thought that was, but she seemed to be on a roll. I wanted to be a listener, like Jenny.

"Ever since I found out you and Jenny were together, my stomach has been twisted and tied up in knots."

I tensed. "I told you, Gwen. What Jenny and I do is none of your business." We hadn't gone out of our way to hide the fact we were together, but it wasn't anyone's business but our own.

"I know. I know. But when I saw her with Sunny at that café, she made me realize how crappy of a parent I was, and I

got defensive.”

I had nothing to argue there. Gwen had no right leaving Sunny out on her own like that.

“And when I saw that stupid picture of you and Sunny and Jenny at that Christmas place, it really bothered me. There you were,” she said as she flung her hand out, “off looking like a whole, complete and happy cute family and I was about to get hitched to a man with anger management issues who can’t stand kids at all.”

Colby had seen that same post, but I hadn’t thought about how it would look to Gwen. I didn’t care either. Gwen would never be a part of my immediate family because she hadn’t shown she wanted to be. She was the one who left, not me.

“The thought of you and Jenny together?” She growled, curling her lip in disgust.

I arched one brow, daring her to talk crap about her.

“I don’t know why it bothers me so much!” She dropped her fork onto the small plate and it landed with a clatter. As she groaned and rubbed her face, she smeared more of her makeup.

“It’s not like I love you anymore.” She shrugged. “I don’t know if I ever did.”

I nodded. *Ditto, Gwen. Ditto.*

“I just really, *really* like the idea that you’d never moved on after me.”

“Because I had a kid. Because you left me. I wasn’t in the mood to move on to anything or anyone for a long time because I was suddenly a single parent.”

She sighed, shaking her head. “No, I get that. I bet Sunny’s a cock block.”

Still missing the point there.

“I got obsessed with the idea that you never moved on after me because you never found anyone better.”

I looked at the ceiling, wishing I could find patience up there. No such luck. This woman had issues, self-centered in an unhealthy way. No one should be that stuck on being the best.

“Gwen, we were *never* good for each other. In high school, as young adults, we were not a good match. The only thing that kept us together is Sunny, and even that wasn’t good enough for you.”

Not to mention there’s no love between us, we’re fundamentally different people, and we don’t want the same things in life.

She nodded, slicing off more jagged chunks of cake to add to her plate. She licked her lips and glanced up at me with a look of devastation and guilt. “I know. I so know that, Ward. I’m a shitty person and an even shittier mom.”

“You are.”

She huffed, widening her eyes at my blunt agreement. She shook her head and laughed. “If you’re good for one thing, it’s always telling the truth. I like that I always know what I’m going to get from you.”

“There’s no point in lying when I could get caught in it.” That hadn’t stopped me from trying to fib with my mom when I was younger, but her radar for detecting the truth was uncannily accurate, and I gave up on it.

“You should go get your girls,” she said quietly between small bites.

I will. It was the next thing on my list, but I knew they were in good hands. Both Sunny in Jenny’s and vice versa. They understood each other and got along well. We fit as a family, the ideal that made Gwen so jealous.

“You don’t have to take care of me.”

I knew I didn’t. But it didn’t hurt to make a nice gesture and check on her. Jenny would understand. Sunny, too. I knew they would because we loved each other.

“I’m not your problem, Ward.” Another tear streaked down her cheek. “And I’ll stop harassing you both now.”

“Me and Sunny? Or me and Jenny?”

She rolled her eyes. “All three of you. You’re right. I’m no good for Sunny and I’ll stay away from her.”

That wasn’t the outcome I was after by coming here to check on her. I drew a deep breath and hoped I wasn’t making a mistake. After I put my hand on hers briefly, making her look up at me, I said, “I’ll make you a deal.”

She waited, staring at me expectantly as she chewed her cake.

“After six months of therapy, let’s see if we can make something work so you can spend time with Sunny every other weekend, with me there.”

She wiped her mouth and licked her lips, gazing at me with hope in her sad eyes. “Really?”

I nodded. “But the therapy is a must. I won’t negotiate. You have to work out why you behave the way you do.” For a long while, even back when she was pregnant and right after Sunny’s birth, I suspected and wondered if Gwen was a narcissist. There simply wasn’t any room for that kind of behavior and manipulation in Sunny’s young life. She was too impressionable, too vulnerable as a child to be around that.

But in the vein of wanting to be the bigger person and aiming to do the right thing, I wanted to believe that Sunny deserved a chance to know her mother. Gwen deserved that chance too. I couldn’t be confident that it would stick, that it would work, but I was willing to put it out there as an offer. It wasn’t farfetched to think that Gwen deserved a chance to prioritize herself and her health and do better.

She wiped her nose. “Thanks, Ward.”

I nodded, feeling good about her at least taking me seriously as she stared at me soberly.

“Can I be alone with my cake now?”

I held back a chuckle, not wanting to rock the boat and let her think I was laughing *at* her. I lifted my hand in acknowledgment and I stood up and backed away from the stainless-steel counter. As I exited the kitchen, I shoved my hands into my pockets, cautiously optimistic that just maybe, Gwen had finally had the wakeup call she needed.

She didn't have a long history of proving herself. Back when Sunny was a toddler, she'd gone through a couple of these spells of claiming to want to do better but she always fell short. Often, she'd find a new, shiny thing to be impressed with. Another man. A pretty purse. The way her body looked after a certain workout. Gwen was fickle, and I wasn't chasing something guaranteed. Instead of holding on to my anger and sticking her on my bad list, I felt lighter to have tried to make something like amends.

I would never call Gwen a true friend, but I wished her well. And that was something I expected Sunny to grow up believing, that even when it was hard to take the initiative to work toward something difficult, or deal with someone who was difficult, it would be more rewarding than walking away.

I grinned as I strolled down the long, empty hallway, hoping Jenny and Sunny weren't too impatient out front. I imagined most of the guests were gone now, including Gwen's parents who always had such a stilted and aloof attitude toward Sunny. I hadn't wanted to run into the pair who told me they did *not* want to be referred to as a grandma or grandpa in any fashion.

The only people I wanted to see now were Sunny and Jenny.

Particularly Jenny. Because now that this wedding was over with and I could have a clearer objective in the future for Gwen to potentially be with Sunny in a limited capacity, the only thing I would be focusing on was convincing my tea-loving girl that she was it for me.

CHAPTER 69



JENNY

The wind picked up as we headed further outside. We aimed for Colby and Naomi's super family-friendly SUV crossover. I bet they'd planned for a family for so long they'd had that car in mind for a while.

"Please zip up, Sunny," I called out as she skipped ahead. The flaps of her coat flew up with her frolicky gait, and I winced, securing my shawl around me tighter. It wasn't frigid, but close. I had only just gotten over that stupid head cold that kept me home on Christmas, and I didn't look forward to bothering my sinuses all over again with a hot-to-cold temperature fluctuation. I didn't want her to be ill either, but I couldn't help but hear the "mom" tone when I spoke.

She listened though, racing Colby to the next empty parking spot and zipping on the way.

"Jenny," Naomi said, walking slower next to me. "I'm sure he's just checking on her. Like he said he would."

We hadn't spoken about how long it was taking Ward to "check on" Gwen. I'd thought about it the entire time we occupied Sunny. It felt more like stalling before we left, like most of the other guests already had. Naomi was perceptive, though, and she could tell. Hell, we were all in junior high and high school together. They knew how awkward this all could be.

"Don't worry about it," I told her, desperate to sound airy and unaffected, which was a total lie. I felt like my nerves were frayed with the constant *what-ifs* that filed through my

head. If I had to be kept wondering and waiting for much longer, I'd snap.

"But I can tell *you* are," she countered.

I leaned in to hug her. "You guys have a good night. A relaxing night, okay?" While I was close, I smiled and whispered, "Because it looks like you won't have many of those in the near future!"

"Oh, I hope so. We're not telling anyone or making it public until after the first trimester. Just in case."

I nodded and mimed zipping my lips. Still, as she gazed at me beside their car, frowning, there was no way to ignore the tension I felt.

"Good night, Naomi," I said louder.

Sunny came sprinting up to her to hug her. Colby walked up and gave me a quick side hug. "Night, Jenny."

I smiled the best I could but he chuckled, shaking his head.

"Have a little faith," he advised. "I know him. And I know he does *not* want her."

He wanted to go to her, though. There was no denying that fact.

I nodded, and as Sunny stood with me, we waved goodbye as they got into their car.

"Hold up!" Ward shouted from way back near the building, and his footsteps suggested he was running fast.

I went still, unsure how to react. *What the hell could have taken you so long?*

I tried my best to flush out the image of Ward and Gwen doing something—anything—other than talking.

Sunny turned and grinned. "Daddy!"

Colby paused in getting into his car and stood fully.

"Hey," Ward said as he caught up to us. He didn't sound out of breath, but from the corner of my eye, I noticed he was smiling easily. As he jogged toward their car, he scooped up a

giggling Sunny and held her as he went toward Colby. “Heading out? I’ll catch up with you later.”

“Yeah. Talk to you soon,” Colby replied, giving him a side hug and pat on the back. He backed up, going toward the car, but not before getting another fist bump from Sunny, still in her dad’s arms.

“Good night, Naomi,” Ward said as he leaned down and waved at her through the window. “Thanks for helping Jenny keep Sunny company there.” He glanced at me, but I refused to make eye contact, locking my gaze on Colby at the driver’s side, and waved again.

Giving Ward a cold shoulder might have been a juvenile tactic, but I had to rely on some layer of protection. I couldn’t shift from worrying what-ifs that had no business in my life to just being happy and peppy and smiling with him like nothing was wrong.

Naomi locked her gaze on me as Colby reversed the car. She raised her brows at me and mouthed, *Talk to him!*

I wasn’t sure what I would say when I did, and I felt like he should be the one explaining himself to me, not me begging for answers or nagging him with questions.

Once they drove off, Ward hoisted Sunny higher in his arms as he walked up to me. “Thanks,” he said.

I didn’t reply. I didn’t even look at him. I smiled at Sunny instead. “Tired, kiddo?”

Because I sure as hell was. I was exhausted from hanging on to the thinnest thread of patience and trying to tell myself all was well. Seeing Ward without Gwen again should have reassured me, but his demeanor pushed me too far out of my comfort zone.

Ward glanced at me a couple more times as we walked to his SUV. I didn’t feel like I had the sanity to look at him yet. I wasn’t levelheaded right now, and I didn’t want to react in front of Sunny.

I climbed into the passenger seat while he helped Sunny buckle into her booster seat in the back. All those layers of her

dress complicated what should have been a simple tug of a strap and click into a buckle.

He got into the driver's seat and glanced at me again, but he seemed to have picked up on my coldness and didn't try to speak again.

Come on, grow up. Don't model this kind of stupid behavior for Sunny.

Once Ward pulled out of the spot and drove through the still-emptying lot, he glanced at Sunny in the back and quickly smiled as she yawned.

"Daddy? Is my mom okay?"

I focused on staring out the side window, but it didn't escape my notice how often they both phrased it like that. Sunny never referred to Gwen as *Mom*, but *my* mom. That article didn't matter, but in light of her giving me the Jen Jen nickname, the difference stood out to me. Ward never called her by the familiar name either, and it made it all the trickier for me to understand why he would worry about her so much.

"She's sad," Ward said carefully, "but she made the right decision for herself tonight. Everyone should respect that."

"So, she's not marrying him at all?" she asked.

"Nope."

"Is she sad about that?" Sunny checked.

"She's sad. But she'll feel better every day for sticking to her gut instinct about Kenneth."

"Jen Jen?" she asked before another yawn.

"Yeah?"

"I had fun with you tonight."

I smiled, forcing an outwardly calm expression. The girl was so perceptive that she would be able to tell if I was off, and looking out the window was a safer bet.

No one spoke for the majority of the ride, and eventually, her soft snores filled the overwhelming quiet within the car.

“Jenny?” Ward spoke up only after she was asleep, likely smart enough to realize whatever we would say wasn’t for her nosy little ears. “You awake over there?”

I tightened my arms. He damn well knew I was awake. I’d been tapping my finger on my elbow all this time, the only way I could release my pent-up energy. He saw that I was awake. I shifted in my seat for a nonverbal reply.

“Thanks for watching Sunny.”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“I’m sorry for having to step away like that.”

“*Having to?*” I bit my lip, trying to rein in my temper now that we were talking.

“Yeah.” He grunted, maybe in disbelief that I’d question him at all. “After everything that happened, I had to make sure Gwen was all right.”

“Why?” It was the same damn thing I’d challenged inside the venue place. And it remained the same simple question I wanted a good answer for.

He frowned. I didn’t turn to face him but I caught the profile of his expression in the reflection of the window. “Because she just blew up her wedding.”

How was that an answer? I bit my lip harder. “So what?”

“What do you mean *so what?*” he argued.

“She’s not exactly someone who deserves a happily ever after.”

As soon as the words left my lips, I hated how cruel they sounded. Old hurts resurfaced though, with a more mature version of an eye for an eye. She’d been that cruel to me, and worse, in high school when she stole Ward from me. I felt like I’d moved on over the years, but she’d never graduated to be on my good side. Sure, everyone deserved their own happily ever after in some sense, but when Ward was eager to spend time with her, it dared me to worry that she wanted another shot at developing a happily ever after with *him*.

His frown deepened. “What makes her undeserving of a happy future?” he asked, defending her.

His reply only made me angrier. After everything I’d done, after showing up for him and demonstrating how much I cared about a potential and lasting thing between us, how could he sit there and come to her defense?

“Gwen has absolutely no redeeming qualities. You should have stayed with me and Sunny. We should have just left. Her wedding and fiancé were *her* problems. Not yours.”

“She’s Sunny’s mother,” he argued.

I huffed. “Unfortunately.”

He went quiet, and I loathed the idea that his silence was an answer. That he didn’t even care enough to bother anymore. That he was done with this discussion and done with me.

I burned up inside, fuming and seething. A wicked sensation of hatred filled me. Pain made my chest ache too, and I realized this was just a big old dose of déjà vu. I was angry, confused, and sad. I wasn’t prepared to settle on one emotion, and this was *not* how I expected things to go. Just like last time in high school, when push came to shove, Ward prioritized Gwen over me. He picked her. Again.

Moments later, he pulled up at my house. Thank fuck, I was here. I couldn’t stand another moment of this ugly mixture of negativity. At the top of my thoughts, a mantra of *you should’ve known better* wouldn’t stop taunting me.

As he put the car into park to drop me off, I reached for the diamond earrings he’d gifted me for this wedding. Well, the wedding had come and gone, never even happening, so I guessed I didn’t need these anymore. I exited the car without a word, and once I stood outside, I reached back in and placed the jewelry on the passenger seat.

Tears burned my eyes, but I refused to look at him, afraid the dam would break. Without a farewell, without anything else, I closed the door firmly but quietly, not wanting to wake Sunny in the backseat.

Then I turned, hurrying to get inside the safe haven of the big house. As soon as I got in and closed the front door behind me, I burst into tears. Sucking in big deep breaths, I slumped against the door and slid down to sit on the cold floor there.

“What is going on?” Rylee called out from the kitchen. She rushed in with Mary Ellen. They were the only two home to see me crumbling to pieces.

“Jenny!” Mary Ellen gasped, watching me closely.

They both wrapped their arms around me as I covered my face with my hands, sobbing for all that I’d lost.

Again.

CHAPTER 70



WARD

I furrowed my brow, staring at the closed front door of Jenny's house that she shared with her friends. I itched to get out and follow her to figure out what the hell was up. Sunny was sleeping in the back, though. I couldn't leave her.

I looked down at the sparkling earrings in the passenger seat and frowned.

Well, I wasn't expecting that kind of a reaction.

I couldn't put the car into gear yet, confused and alarmed to the point I couldn't just leave.

Again, I glanced at the door, glad that she wouldn't be alone in there. Two of her housemates had returned after Christmas. Maybe some girl talk would help her figure out her issue?

I shook my head and drove away, heading home. With each mile, I tried to pick at all we'd done and said today, eager to figure out what had ticked her off so much. She hadn't been kind with her words, accusing Gwen of being unworthy of a happily ever after. That kind of bitterness was uncharacteristic of the Jenny I knew and treasured. She was witty. She had a backbone. But she was never unkind for the sake of being mean.

My head was still spinning when I reached my house. The whole night had been tense. For so long, we'd both been looking forward to just getting this event over with and moving on. She'd asked me to be patient, that we could reassess what was happening between us after this wedding.

With the way she'd left my gift in the car and had given me such a cold-shoulder treatment, it seemed like she'd already made up her mind of wanting nothing to do with me at all, deciding so without any assessment or conversation with me.

I carefully extracted Sunny from her car seat, glad that she was so tired that she didn't wake. It had been a long day. Getting ready for the wedding, then the stress of traveling there, and then the headache of waiting for it to start, only not to at all.

I hadn't looked at the time when I went to check on Gwen noshing on her cake in the kitchen. I knew it had taken more than a few minutes, but I doubted it was more than an hour. Hell, even if it had been, so what? These were extenuating circumstances. It wasn't exactly an everyday thing to cancel a wedding at the last minute.

I wasn't shocked that Sunny was out like a light. After I unlocked the front door and let us in without lowering my arms, I closed and alarmed it again. She didn't stir with all of that jostling, and when we reached her bedroom, I doubted a sonic boom would rouse her. Some nights I envied her ease of slipping into deep sleep, but on those days, I thought back to just how active she was all day and night. If I were to recreate every single bounce, spontaneous run, and any playground acrobatics that was the norm for her fun-filled life, I'd be whipped.

She didn't wake as I laid her on her bed. Once I stood and set my hands on my hips, furrowing my brow at her, I debated if I should at least attempt to rouse her just to change into her pajamas. I weighed the pros and cons, not reaching a good answer. If I woke her and she got a second wind, I wouldn't have a chance to focus on this issue with Jenny. I intended to get my own version of girl talk too, AKA call my mom and seek her advice. It'd be easier to do that with Sunny peacefully asleep. But the con of letting her sleep in that dress meant she would undoubtedly be very uncomfortable.

Hey, maybe all those layers in the skirt are serving the purpose of a burrito. For all I knew, she was cozy in the dress.

Either way, she'd be quick to forgive me for letting her sleep in it.

I removed her shoes because those had to be tight and uncomfortable. I couldn't recall a time that sleeping in footwear was ever a joy.

Stepping quietly, I retreated and slipped out of her room. I waited at her door, just checking to make sure she didn't wake. Once the coast was clear, I walked back to the living room and slumped onto the couch.

My mom answered on the third ring. "Sick of the reception yet?"

I rolled my eyes. She'd never had a good opinion of Gwen and she'd made her feelings about the wedding clear from the beginning.

"Actually?" I sighed and readied to talk. "It didn't happen. Gwen called it off."

"I *knew* it."

I raised my brows. "You *knew* she was going to cancel her wedding at the last minute? How?" She'd either taken a crash course on how to be a psychic without my knowledge or got a weird-ass fortune cookie recently to be able to guess that happening.

"I knew she'd do something crazy. Dramatic and attention-stealing."

I snorted. "She was already the bride. She was supposed to have all the attention. And she did. He did too. She told him she was scared to marry him and he blew up. It wasn't pretty."

My mom whistled. "Damn. That's insane!"

"That's not all."

"Huh?"

I licked my lips and got up to get a bottle of water from the kitchen. With the stressful ups and downs of the day, but particularly the low of the way Jenny left me at the car, I felt like I needed booze. But not until I explained to the one

woman who'd been my sounding board my whole life. Gwen was wrong. I wasn't a mama's boy. I was just a man who loved and respected his mother, and there was not a single damn thing wrong with that.

"When I dropped off Sunny at the bridal suite, Gwen said she wanted to talk to me privately," I said as I walked toward the island and sat there.

"Oh, no. Ward, no. Don't tell me you gave her the time of the day."

I frowned. "Yeah. I did. I figured the quicker I heard her out, whatever it was, I could get back to where Jenny was sitting."

"And?"

I explained how Gwen had cold feet and worried that marrying anti-children Kenneth would ruin her chance of being a mom to Sunny.

My mom laughed once, darkly. "It wouldn't matter who she married, someone who was great with kids or a total grouch who didn't. *She* doesn't have a maternal bone in her body."

"Anyway, I told her that my relationship with Jenny was ours alone. That her not wanting to marry Kenneth was her problem, not ours. Then I went to my seat. As soon as I got there, Gwen showed up without her procession and told Kenneth she was calling off the wedding."

She gasped. "Right there in front of all the guests? I told you! All about the drama."

"What's really bad is how she explained it all. He got mad. Furious, of course, like the hotheaded asshole he is. But when he demanded to know why she didn't want to marry him when she told him yes before, she hedged, saying so many things had happened over the last two months, and she was confused. But she looked *right* at me, singling me out, and he saw that. He assumed—Fuck, I don't know, Mom. She looked so guilty staring directly at me, he probably thought I was sleeping with her or something. I'm sure she already talked shit about me

with him, so he already didn't like me." If I had time to think more on it, I might have come to the conclusion that he was jealous of me simply because I was her ex. Who the hell knew?

"Why'd she look at you at all?" Mom asked. "To imply something was your fault? Because she can't take the blame and speak for herself at the risk of looking bad?"

"She meant me and Jenny getting back together. That was what happened over the last two months. That seeing me with Jenny made her jealous. Or threatened her chances of ever being a mother. It's complicated."

"When hasn't it been complicated with that woman?" she muttered.

"Anyway, I knew what she meant. It was more about him not liking kids and her having very late and last-minute thoughts about trying to be a mom again. I've made myself clear that I'm not her friend. Just an ex. And I've made it clear I'm with Jenny."

Which remains to be seen.

"So, Kenneth stormed over, got in my face, yelled at me and Jenny, even Colby, because he was there and backed me up."

"Good ol' Colb."

I chuckled. "Mom, he *hates* that nickname."

"But it's funny! Naomi laughs too."

I rolled my eyes. He could take the joke. "Then when he was about to punch me, Gwen kicked him in the nuts and security came to escort him away."

"*Wow.*"

"Yeah. Gwen ran off crying, and I was worried about her."

She blew a raspberry. "Oh, she never actually *cries.*"

"No, she did. First time ever. So I told Jenny to stick with Sunny while I checked on Gwen."

Radio silence.

“Mom.”

“Say what again?”

“I asked Jenny to stay with Sunny while I checked on Gwen.” *Since when are you hard of hearing.*

“Okay. Then what?”

“I went to talk to Gwen, and she was a mess. It felt like a kumbaya moment of reckoning. She admitted that she was jealous. She admitted that she doesn’t love me. But she hated the idea of me going back to Jenny. She said she would stop. She realizes how crappy of an influence she is for Sunny. I made a deal with her and told her if she goes to therapy for six months to work on what I suspect is her narcissist behavior, I’ll consider very limited visits with Sunny.”

“Uh huh. Which leaves you where now?”

I detailed the drive home to drop off Jenny. Her cold-shoulder treatment. I even repeated verbatim what she told me, about Gwen not deserving to be happy. By the end of the summary, I was frowning nonstop, bothered all over again about the way she stormed off and left the earrings with me.

“I know I can screw up sometimes, but Mom, tell me straight. Did she break up with me? She didn’t say a single word. Just left me with the earrings.” I let them roll over each other in my palm as I looked at them again. So much for that fantasy of sliding into her with nothing but these earrings adorning her.

“Well, Ward.” She sighed. “I’ll be honest.”

“Please.”

“While I can sympathize with your situation, I can see where Jenny might be coming from with the way she acted.”

“Treat me like I’m five, Mom. Spell it out.”

She laughed lightly. “Five? You’re not that dumb. Just think about how this might have triggered her.”

“Triggered her? *Jenny*?” She was cool, always so laidback, and that was what didn’t make sense. “I don’t get it.”

“You know, I love you. I really do, but you can be awfully dense sometimes.” She cleared her throat. “You left *Jenny* for *Gwen* when you were younger. That broke *Jenny*’s heart. Now she probably feels like the same thing just happened all over again. You neglected her to be with *Gwen*.”

“I didn’t *neglect* anyone.” *Jenny* wasn’t needy or clingy. And I thought I knew her well enough to know she wouldn’t have any grounds to feel neglected, of all things.

“Add on top of that the fact it’s New Year’s Eve and there are always expectations wrapped up in that?” She sighed. “*Jenny* is probably feeling rejected, overlooked, pushed aside. And unloved, *Ward*.”

Shit. That was the opposite of what I ever wanted her to experience. I’d promised her I wouldn’t hurt her again, but with the way my mom painted it, it sounded like I’d done just that.

“Consider how it would look from her perspective, with how she was the victim before, and with the same manipulative woman.”

“I never intended any of this. I didn’t set out to make *Jenny* ever feel like that. I just saw that *Gwen* was genuinely hurting. She wasn’t putting on a show like usual, and I went to check on her. Today wasn’t just an ordinary day. It was supposed to be her wedding day. And she’s not just some ex, she’s the mother of my child.”

“I know. I know.”

“Even though I don’t remotely like her as a person, that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t care about her well-being.”

“You’re a good man, *Ward*. I’m glad I didn’t screw up with you.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You can still make this right if you want to.”

I glowered at the earrings in my hand as I grudgingly grumbled. “I don’t think I did anything wrong.”

She chuckled. “Just because you didn’t do something intentionally wrong doesn’t mean the woman you love isn’t hurting. You’re the only one who can fix it and make this better. Take your shot now or lose her forever. Your choice.”

I closed my fingers over the earrings. That was an easy answer. “Could you come sit here while Sunny sleeps?”

She huffed. “I’ve already got my coat on and am headed your way.” Her car beeped to unlock on her end of the phone, and I grinned.

CHAPTER 71



JENNY

After I changed out of the blue dress I borrowed from Lauren, I trudged downstairs in my junkiest leggings that were perfectly buttery soft and my favorite tank top that was down to a threadbare jersey-soft layer of perfect comfort. I didn't want to ruin Lauren's dress with crying and running my minimal makeup. I couldn't afford to replace it, and I needed the comfort of my whatever clothes.

Mary Ellen and Rylee told me not to stay hiding in my room. They refused to let me be miserable in my room all alone. I interpreted that as them wanting all the juicy details of my heartbreak. Rylee was likely impatient to tell me she told me so. But they were my sisters, and I knew they'd only ordered me to come right back down after I changed because they wanted to help me.

To my right, Mary Ellen held up a steaming mug of tea. To my left, Rylee waggled a bottle of vodka.

"I made you your favorite peppermint tea to comfort you." Mary Ellen smiled.

I hid my wince. She always botched the brewing time, not like that detail would matter now. I could eat the damn tea leaves and not feel comforted. Turning to Rylee, I arched a brow and sniffled.

So much for giving my sinuses a break after that cold.

"Cranberry?" she asked simply, hoisting the vodka higher.

I pointed at her, opting for the stiffer drink. "Please."

Mary Ellen set the steaming mug aside and wrapped her arm around me to guide me to the couch. Rylee made quick work of the drinks, prepping one for each of us. As I sat, I saw the bottle of champagne they must have been saving for when the ball dropped.

“This is a New Year’s Eve I never want to remember,” I said, lifting my drink in a weak toast before I sipped it liberally.

My friends shared a worried look.

Rylee sat forward on the coffee table, resting one hand on her knee as she made a *gimme* motion with her free hand. “Talk to me.”

I furrowed my brow. “Is that how you get people at the bar to talk to you? I thought bartenders were supposed to be persuasive.”

She lifted both brows, and I hated to admit it was kind of demanding. “This is *you*. Not some stranger I want to fake giving a crap about so they tip me well.”

“What happened?” Mary Ellen asked.

I drank more of my drink without emptying it. As the alcohol burned down my throat, I sighed. “I think Ward got back with Gwen. Or is on the path to do so.”

Rylee’s eyes widened. Without a word, she reached for the vodka to refill my glass.

“No. That can’t be right,” Mary Ellen argued gently. “He seems so into you.” She gestured vaguely. Then she shook her head, frustrated. “What happened?”

I started from the beginning, how Ward took forever to drop Sunny off at the bridal suite. Then how ticked off he looked when he came to where I sat for the wedding. Then I gave a line-by-line replay of Gwen calling off the wedding, her flimsy reasoning, the way she implied she didn’t want to marry Kenneth because of Ward, and then Kenneth storming over to yell at us and almost punch Ward.

“*Gwen* stood up for Ward?” Mary Ellen asked.

I nodded. “Security came to take the groom away, and then Gwen ran off crying. Here’s the kicker.” I explained how Ward felt that he *had to* go check on Gwen and disappeared with her for just over an hour.

I slapped my thigh. “What could he be doing to ‘check on her’ that would take an hour?”

Rylee opened and closed her mouth, hesitant to reply too quickly.

“Did you ask him?” Mary Ellen asked.

“No, I couldn’t even face him in the car.” I shared how he stood up for her again before I ran inside.

Tears streaked down my cheeks through the whole retelling, but now I just felt tired. Tossed aside and rejected. Again, by the same man because of the same woman.

“I want to be all cool and not let my mind go there. I want to be confident and think, *no, Jenny, Ward wouldn’t go back to Gwen because he has you.* I want to be this bold, modern woman and think like that, but it’s so fucking hard because I thought that back then, and he went to her. He chose her over me then, and it seems he can’t break that habit now.”

“You mean way back when you were all kids? Who literally knew nothing about love?” Rylee challenged.

I narrowed my eyes at her. How was she not on my side? She’d been anti-Ward from the beginning!

“But sweetie,” Mary Ellen said gently. “Do you think that maybe, just maybe you’re overreacting?”

Rylee swatted her arm. “That’s not what you’re supposed to say right now!”

“But I can’t help but think that may be the case,” Mary Ellen protested.

“I don’t know.” I rubbed my face, keeping my eyes closed. “I can’t tell if I am overreacting or not. Either way, my feelings are real. They’re nothing but a repeat of what I felt before, and Ward being so eager to go after Gwen made me feel awful.” I looked up at them as the notification for the Ring

camera went off, signaling someone was at the door. “I’m entitled to feel awful, right? Is that still allowed?”

I hoped to hell it was because I felt terrible. Confused, angry, and so wounded at the same time.

“I’ll be right back.” Rylee stood to answer the door. “Don’t ask her anything else until I’m back.”

“But you realize you *might* have been overreacting, don’t you?” Mary Ellen asked softly. “It sounds like a natural thing to do, given your past. But it’s like you said. You’re not the same naïve girl that you were before.”

It looks like Ward is proving I might be.

Rylee returned. She came back to the living room with a nervous look. Then she stepped aside to reveal Ward.

I exhaled long and hard, unsure how I could handle seeing him right now. He still looked just as devastatingly handsome as he had earlier. That tux made him look downright sinful, but with a wary, uneasy expression on his face, he seemed sexier in a rugged and unpredictable way.

“Jenny, can we talk properly?”

Rylee and Mary Ellen shared a glance, then faced me.

“I didn’t have my head on straight in the car on the way over here.” He shook his head and drew a deep breath. “I shouldn’t have let you leave the car like that. I want to make this right.”

What makes you think this can be fixed? That it can be right again?

“I’m going to—” Mary Ellen cut herself off as she hurried to leave but smacked right into Rylee as she rushed to escape the opposite way, saying, “I think I’ll—”

Rylee solved it by just grabbing Mary Ellen’s forearm and hauling her out of the room and upstairs, making themselves scarce.

“I’m not sure there is anything you can say,” I told him once the doors shut upstairs, giving us privacy. I doubted he

could say a single thing that would spare me the twisting heartbreak in my chest.

He sat on the coffee table and faced me directly, seeming determined and unbothered with my unwelcoming invite to try to “make things right.”

“I still care for Gwen as a person and the mother of my child. Sunny is curious about her, and I think she might love her in her own way, like recognizing she matters to her existence from a distance. Therefore, Gwen’s best interests still and always will matter to me, even if she has the unique ability to piss me off more than anyone else in the world can. She is my ex, and nothing will undo that status, but she will always be Sunny’s mother, and nothing can undo that status either.”

He looked down at his folded hands. He kept his elbows on his knees as he stared at his hands for a moment, like he needed to pause before continuing. My heart hammered away, held on the edge of suspense. Everything he said so far made sense, but it was still just his words. Could I believe them?

“I completely understand if you can’t accept those terms, but I have to make one thing perfectly clear before you can make your choice about having me in your life.” He looked up at me, boring into me with his intense and soulful gaze. “I am in love with you. Completely, utterly, stupidly, and blindly, one-hundred percent in love with you. I thought I loved you before, when I was an idiot teenager who didn’t know what love even was, but seeing you with my daughter has only made me fall harder. Seeing you as the strong and smart woman you became after you moved on from me has made me fall in love with you so deep, I never want to return to what I felt before I saw you at that wedding. You bring light into my life, into Sunny’s life, and it’s been missing for a long time. I don’t want to lose that.”

I pulled my lower lip between my teeth to tamp down on the urge to say something.

“It might be selfish of me to ask, but can you forgive me for not understanding how I hurt you? Will you give me a

chance to make it better?” He reached out for my hand but thought twice, lowering it. “I never want to make you feel that way again, and going forward, we’ll have to communicate better, but I can’t remove Gwen from my life. She’ll be a part of it forever.”

He stared at me, silently begging for me to reply.

I licked my lips and tried not to choke on choosing wisely.

CHAPTER 72



WARD

I held my breath as I sat there, hunched over but not crowding her on the couch. She didn't speak. She didn't flinch. All she seemed willing to do as she curled up there on the cushions, hugging her knees to her chest, was participate in a serious stare-down.

I didn't mind looking at her. I could stare at her beauty for hours and not tire of it, but this moment was too tense, too important, and I tried my best not to show a single sign of impatience or the anxiety that gripped me so fiercely.

I didn't know what to do, so I remained as still as I could. For a terrible moment, I freaked out that I would mess up and laugh. It was a weird, terrible thing, and Colby once told me that he'd looked it up. Something about people being stressed and their emotions going haywire, like someone laughing at a funeral or some other awkward situation. Of course, amusement was not on my mind, but I was stuck in this intimidating feeling of too many heightened emotions that I simply focused on watching her for any sign of a reaction.

If my stupid ass dared to chuckle, let alone laugh, there would be *no* coming back from it. But that was how strongly I felt here. Stuck and desperate for her to reply somehow.

She'd given me the silent treatment, a cold shoulder, and refused to make eye contact in the car, but at least here, she seemed willing to face me and hear me out. That had to be a good sign, but damn was I about to sweat buckets as she searched my face. She looked at me intensely with an

expression I couldn't read, almost like she was deciphering whether or not she could trust me.

I fought the urge to keep talking and to bolster my efforts to reassure her, but it would be pointless. I had been completely transparent, telling her without any distractions or interruptions. And I knew I told her everything I could. All I could do now was wait and give her the space to make her choice.

Finally, her lips moved. They tipped upward as she started to smile. It wasn't a smirk, but a real, honest smile as she beamed up at me, showing me the most beautiful face on this earth.

Hope bloomed inside of me, and I breathed faster, like coming back to life after the worry and darkness of the chance I'd lost her again.

She sat up more and lowered her arms from her knees. Her legs slanted to the side, almost like she had to remove layer after layer of walls she'd hidden behind to protect herself. "I love you, too."

I scooted forward and grabbed her hands to hold them as she continued to uncurl on the couch and meet me in the middle.

She shook her head. "I overreacted, Ward. I'm not proud of it, but I realize I let my insecurities get the best of me."

I hated that she had insecurities about me at all, but that was my fault, my doing. I couldn't change the past between us, but if she gave me a chance now, I would plan to do everything right in the future.

"You were gone for so long with her before the wedding, and I kept picturing her trying to get you alone and..." She shrugged.

"She did get me alone," I explained. "In a very public hallway to tell me that she was scared and worried about never having a chance to try to be a mother with Kenneth in her life."

“And then after, when you wanted to prioritize her so quickly and, again, were gone for so long, my imagination ran wild,” she confessed as she gripped my hands. She followed me to stand with me. “I concocted stories of you choosing Gwen over me.”

I laughed, pulling her closer to hug. “Gwen over you? *Never* again.” Framing her face, I lowered to get more to her eye level and enunciated it slowly, like I was sounding out a hard word for Sunny to spell in practicing for a test. “*Never* again, Jenny. Gwen is a necessary evil, nothing more.”

She leaned into me, smiling so sweetly and full of hope. I never wanted to be responsible for making that expression fall.

“But you?” I said in a lower tone, almost murmuring so close to her face. I watched her lick her lips, and I wondered if she knew how much that action got to me. “You’re the part of me that’s been missing ever since I lost you the first time when I was too stupid to realize what a mistake it was to ever let you go.”

“I told you. You were stupid then.” She rolled her eyes. “Still can be now. Or we both can be. I’m sorry I jumped to conclusions and got carried away. It’s a touchy subject where Gwen is involved.”

“I see that now. Which is why we need to be able to communicate, no matter what. No more guessing and assuming anything.”

She nodded.

“Will you be my girlfriend?”

She laughed. It was a spontaneous bubble of giggles at the silliness of my question, something I knew for a fact I’d asked her in all seriousness in eighth grade. I grinned, letting her see my goofiness and enjoying that way I could really be myself with her.

“I suppose that’s a direct means of communication, huh?” she retorted as she reached up to grip the back of my neck and pull me down to her.

I didn't need to be told twice. I dove down, following her lead with my heart bursting at the simple fact I hadn't lost her. I still had a chance, tonight, tomorrow, and for the rest of our days.

I slammed my lips to hers in a crushing kiss, swallowing her instant moan. She smiled quickly, curving her mouth against mine, and I hauled her to me until we were flush together. I relished every inch of her softness pressed to me, the swells of her breasts rubbing against my chest, the softness at her waist where she pushed into me. But it was what beat inside of her, so close to mine again, that made me feel powerful. Being near her and able to give her so much joy filled my heart that much more.

I broke the kiss though, loving how she curled her fingers into the hair just above the back of my neck. Panting down at her, I got lost in the gorgeous green of her playful eyes. She huffed at me, clearly not liking how quickly I ended the kiss.

“So, will you be my girlfriend?”

She giggled, reaching up on her tiptoes to capture my lips again. Brushing them over mine, then boldly parting them for a taste, she took charge in sealing us in another kiss that made me hotter even faster. My dick hardened beneath my pants, and with the thin thread of her casual clothes, I damn near felt every inch of her body as though it was bare.

Again, I reared back, gasping and catching my breath.

She growled as she smiled, locking her arms around my neck and jumping up. I caught her, gripping her ass tight, and dodged her kiss.

“Will you go steady with me?”

She dropped her head back, laughing louder. “You're determined to mock every line you used back then, aren't you?” Locking her legs around me tighter, she ground her core against my growing erection. With her hungry kisses and sweet laughter, my cock strained to get free. Make-up sex was always fun, but I was in no rush. I'd prolong this for as long as I could with her so free-loving and happy in my arms.

She looped her arm around my neck and stroked her hand down my cheek. “I’ll be your girlfriend,” she replied sweetly.

I stole a kiss and lowered her to the couch.

“If you’ll be my boyfriend,” she added as she reached lower and cupped me through my pants. The second her hand touched my dick, I tensed, gritting my teeth at the instant hit of more desire for her.

I nodded. “Fuck yeah. I’ll be your boyfriend.” I kissed her as I slipped my hand up beneath her shirt to cup her breast. “I’ll be your lover.” I stroked my thumb over her beaded nipple, then kissed her to muffle the shriek. “I’ll be whatever you want me to be, Jen. So long as I’m steadily yours and you’re mine.”

She giggled until I thrust against her.

“Knock knock!”

I stilled, covering Jenny at the sound of her friend’s obnoxiously loud voice. The noise of a hand rapping against the doorframe followed. We were both decent but sorely interrupted. Together, we scrambled to sit up and peek over the couch.

“What’s up?” Jenny asked of the brunette.

I sat up more, realizing the moment with Jenny was on hold until we could get some privacy. I snapped my fingers and pointed at her. “Mary Ellen!” I recalled her from Naomi and Colby’s house-warming party.

“Yes.” She stepped further into the room, and Jenny picked up a decorative throw pillow to smack over my crotch. I caught it and held it there as I stood.

“Rylee and I wanted to come back in if, uh, everything was going all right.”

Rylee smirked at Jenny, and she shot to her feet and tugged her shirt the rest of the way down from where it had been pushed up by my arm.

“The countdown is about to begin,” Rylee said.

I laughed, running my hand through my hair. “I totally forgot about that.”

“Can we join you?” Mary Ellen asked. Then she closed her eyes and blushed. “Not—Not like that. Not join you with what you were doing, but—” She shook her head.

“Well, obviously!” Rylee teased as she grabbed the TV remote.

“I hadn’t realized it was that late,” Jenny said as she made room for her friends to stand before the TV with us.

You mean you lost track of time being heartbroken because of me? I draped my arm around her, promising mentally to never let her feel like that again.

Rylee quickly filled four flutes with champagne while Mary Ellen found the live footage of NYC. The ball was about to drop, and the camera stayed on the sphere as the numbers ticked down.

“Five! Four! Three! Two!”

I cupped Jenny’s chin and turned her face up to mine just as they reached *one*, kissing her to ring in a truly new year.

Mary Ellen and Rylee cheered and whooped, clinking their flutes together, but I dismissed all the excitement in the background. As everyone celebrated, both on the screen and in this living room, I dipped Jenny and gave her a sweet, romantic kiss, aiming for a tender touch compared to the greediness we fell into on the couch moments ago.

When I pulled her back up, shivering at the trace of her nails along my scalp, Jenny blinked lazily, stunned and under the same spell of desire that coursed through my veins. I needed this woman right now, and as Jenny licked her lip and gazed at me, I knew she was debating how we could make that happen.

Mary Ellen cleared her throat, flustered. “Um, yeah. Rylee and I are going for a walk.”

“*Now?*” Rylee pouted. “I don’t want to go for a walk right now.”

Mary Ellen tugged on her arm. “Yes, you do.”

“No. I’m tired. I just want to go to bed.”

“Shut up,” Mary Ellen hissed as she grabbed her friend’s hand. With more force than I would have credited her for, she hauled Rylee out of the house.

The door shut, and Jenny faced me immediately. Her cheeks were pink with the prettiest blush, but it was the mischief in her eyes that was my undoing.

“Looks like we have the place to ourselves.”

“Is that so?” I teased as I reached for her.

She nodded. “Better than a garage or your car.” She exaggerated looking up at the ceiling as she stroked her fingers down the lapels of my tuxedo jacket. “We’ve already claimed the floor in front of the tree, too. But I’m not sure if we’ll make it to my bed.”

I grinned. I’d never tire of her playfulness.

“I’ll race you.”

She kissed me. “Why rush?” She backpedaled, pulling me with her as she gripped my jacket and guided me to follow. “We’ve got our whole lives ahead of us now, don’t we?”

CHAPTER 73



JENNY

T *he rest of our lives?* I felt silly saying something as grand as that, almost like I was declaring my expectations instead of offering to love him forever. I wanted to know he was as committed to me as I was him, but that had sounded weird, almost needy, but the way he gazed at me filled me with an intense yearning.

Ward was right here, following me toward my room, but I wanted to feel him everywhere. I needed to experience that deep connection of coming with him that I knew I wouldn't find anywhere else, with anyone else.

Ward was it. He was *the one*, as far as I was concerned. Now that we'd had our first fight, it was crazy of me to assume we were due make-up sex. This wouldn't just be a chance to reconnect and make love following our hiccup. In the first hour of the new year, it seemed more symbolic, like this truly was the fresh start of the upcoming months. This would be a brand-new year together, so why not celebrate it fully?

I turned to walk up the stairs, not wanting to risk backpedaling up the steps and falling. He held my hand the whole way up, and I was so giddy and in love that I couldn't slow down enough to care that he was watching me attempt to be seductive in leading him to my room while I was dressed like a raggedy bum. Threadbare clothes were comfy and could look casual, but the hole in one armpit took it too far.

I didn't have to worry about my shirt for long. As soon as I reached my room and shut the door after us, Ward took hold of

the hem and pulled it up. I bit my lip at the excitement and hunger glittering in his eyes. He looked his fill, staring at me up and down, and each sweep of his gaze felt like a scorching caress.

“All night I was thinking about you bare beneath that dress.”

I giggled, pulling him in close for a slow kiss, and he dropped his hands to my leggings. “I was wearing panties.” *That I epically got in a twist from assuming the worst of you.*

“But not anymore.” He nuzzled his mouth along the underside of my jaw as he circled his arm around my back, tugging me closer. One hand stroked downward, urging my loosened pants to slip down to the floor, and as he guided me further from the bed and more into the room, I stepped out of the soft, stretchy material.

I was naked. I stood with him, completely bare and willing. With him still dressed in that tuxedo and his tie off-kilter and loose like the devilish man he could be, the contrast got to me. The difference of my nudity and his formal attire made this hotter, more taboo somehow, and I shivered in delight of what would follow next. Christmas had already come and gone, but the revered and tender way he removed my clothes felt like a silent worship, as though he was unwrapping me as a gift to enjoy.

He dragged his hand up over my ass, then up along my back until he hugged me with a breath-stealing kiss on my lips. I moaned into his mouth, and he growled, pushing against me as if I needed a reminder he was still incredibly hard. I doubted the throw pillow I gave him downstairs hid anything from my friends as we watched the ball drop. There was hard, then there was Ward eager to make love with me. The pressure of his erection nudging at me, so close to where I wanted him to stretch me, fanned the flames of my desire. Between my aching nipples and my wet pussy, I felt alive and wild. Every nerve was frayed, and the consuming urgency to love on this man filled me fully.

“Take me, Ward,” I whispered between kisses. “I need to feel you.”

He stood back as I shifted in his arms, wanting to get on the bed and truly welcome him into me. I scooted back, still seated, but he grabbed my knee and stopped me from reclining any further. After he reached into the inside of this tux jacket, he showed me the parting gift I’d left like a scorned woman just hours ago.

Holding up the diamond earrings he’d given me, he arched a brow. “I think it’s past time for me to live out at least one of my fantasies where you’re concerned.”

“Oh?” I trembled under the heat of his stare. Then I climbed onto my knees to be more at his level. He kissed me first, slow and sweet, and the tenderness threatened to undo me. As he brushed my hair back from my face, revealing my ear, I shook even more. He had really taken it to heart when I said we didn’t have to rush.

Gentle and deliberate, he was determined to drag this out and torture me with these feather-light touches and kisses. And I was all here for it. We matched in any and every way. Hot or sweet, fast or slow. Ward would always be the one to make sense with my needs.

I tilted my head to the side, giving him access to put one hook of metal onto my lobe. He didn’t shift to the other one immediately, stalling with soft kisses to the skin just below my ear and along the underside of my jaw until he returned to my lips again.

I sighed, so overcome with his sweetness and passion. But I was impatient too, helpless to reach out and unzip his pants. With a growl, he spread his legs to steady himself as I pulled his long, hard dick out and stroked it with my fingers. Maybe my touch on him pushed him too far because he moved faster, yet still deliberately. He kissed back toward my other ear, and I repeated my actions, slanting my head to the side to give him access to my ear.

Again, he brushed my hair back, tickling me and eliciting goosebumps from the too light touch of his fingers. Before he

put the earring in, he closed his teeth over the lobe and tugged on it. I'd never really thought of my ears or the area around it as an erogenous zone, but I was coming to realize that anything Ward did to me would make me hotter and crazier with need for him.

I moaned, quickening my strokes up and down his dick as he kissed and sucked his way down my throat again.

“Just like I imagined,” he rasped as he lifted me up higher, his hands under my arms. He looked up at me with lusty adoration. “In nothing but those earrings.” He closed his lips around one nipple. “Perfect.” He moved his hot mouth to my other breast and repeated the tugging pleasure of suction. “And all mine.”

I grinned, licking my lips. I breathed faster in anticipation. “All yours,” I agreed as I lowered onto the bed again and lay back. I put one hand behind my head. I gazed up at him and circled my fingertip around my nipple to tease him. With one foot flat, my knee in the air, I left my other leg to the side a bit. Open and his for the taking.

He growled, lowering over me. His mouth crashed down on mine, and I locked my hands on the back of his head to keep him hovering over me just like that. He braced himself up on one hand, fumbling to remove his clothes. I slid my hands to his tux jacket, then his shirt, helping him get them off without stopping the kisses for more than a second. We were famished for each other, needing each other more than oxygen.

Once he was topless, he shifted to stand and remove his pants and boxers. I leaned up on my elbows to watch him, desperate for his hot body to cover me again. Only seconds passed, but even that wait for his embrace was too long. The moment he crawled back over me, dragging his hard cock against my legs, then prodding at my mound, I moaned. I would never tire of his warmth, his hard body over and in me. The friction of his hard skin alongside mine reminded me that I was safe with him, secure and protected.

All the walls protecting my heart fell away, and I sighed in pleasure, knowing I could trust him. I could trust *us*.

He lay over me, staring down at me with a smoldering intensity as he framed my face. “And I’m all yours, Jenny.”

I nodded, tipping my lips up to his for a wet, open-mouthed kiss. He grunted, pressing down and seeking my tongue with his at the same moment he slid into my slick entrance. The wide head spread me with a delicious sting of being stretched, and as he drove every thick inch into me as far as he could go, I clutched at his back to keep him close.

“Ward!” I gasped at the feeling of him deep inside me, spearing up in an exquisite fullness I would never tire of for as long as I lived. But common sense still prevailed somewhere in the back of my mind. “Condom!”

He grinned against my lips, kissing me as he pulled out only to thrust back in slowly with force. “Didn’t you hear me? I’m all yours, Jenny. I love you.”

Enough to break his habit of not using a condom. I didn’t want to look too far into what he was saying and what he wasn’t. I’d told him I was on the pill. This wouldn’t make a sibling for Sunny, but he seemed to be saying he wouldn’t mind it if that were to ever happen. We were exclusive. We had been, but with us finally getting over ourselves and admitting our love for each other, he was ready to break his own protective habits and fully lower his guard with me.

“I love you, too,” I promised before I pulled his head back down for a long kiss until we parted, gasping for air. He didn’t stop filling me once. Back and forth, he dragged against me and teased my breasts with the friction of his chiseled chest. And deep inside, he pumped into me with an agonizingly slow and steady pace.

We had no need to rush. It might have taken us a while to understand our hearts were meant to be together again, but now that we knew it, without any obstacles or misunderstandings, they were beating in sync, representing the soulmates we always were, then and now.

I cried out as I met his thrust for thrust, arching my back to push my hips to his until my orgasm washed over me. I tensed, then quaked, gripping deep inside until he grunted and

jerked, filling me with his come. He didn't stop, still kissing me and holding me close as I milked him dry. Then together, we lay in each other's arms in a tangled mess on the bed.

I smiled, so content and happy. No doubt remained in my head or heart, and I *knew* I was safe and loved, secure to give him my love, too.

"I love you," he repeated as he stroked his hand down my arm as we cuddled together. Neither of us made a move to rise and clean up.

I cupped his face and grinned at him. "I love you, too, Ward. Happy New Year."

"Happy new *us*," he promised with another sweet kiss.

EPILOGUE



WARD

Six Months Later

I helped Colby hang up the last rack in his garage and stepped back to check our progress. No one would ever get away with calling me a handyman or crafty guy, but I could get around a simple project. Nothing about helping my friend rearrange his garage seemed simple, though. Last week he moved all the equipment outside to clean it and install a new dust vac. Then yesterday he got in over his head installing new magnetic strips and holders for tools.

“Is this, like, a form of nesting?” I teased him.

He rolled his eyes.

“Well?” I laughed, only partly joking. Naomi was due in less than two months, and I remembered that phase of impending motherhood that meant clutter was against the law, everything needed to be cleaned, and all possessions had to be organized with a new guidance. Gwen hadn’t really “nested” but she was the exception, I imagined, because she still wasn’t very maternal. Like my mother had told me many times, some women just didn’t click like that. Gwen was still in therapy, enjoying the chance to really focus and work on herself. I’d given her a timeline of six months, and that had passed, but maybe one day she would be more open to being a part of Sunny’s life.

Jenny was at my house hosting Naomi's baby shower, although it didn't seem like it was *my* house. Not just for me and Sunny. Jenny stayed over so often that she had her own half of the closet now, stocked with her staple of leggings and gardening wear. I didn't care where she put the next garden bed in the back, but the last I checked, Sunny was the one making the last-minute decisions about why they should plant the herbs in one spot versus another. So long as they left the area nearest to the side, where I saw a dog run being fenced off for the future puppy in our lives, I didn't care what they planted where.

"You think I can pick up Naomi yet?" Colby asked.

We'd been making ourselves scarce for the whole afternoon. Sunny insisted, claiming baby showers were for ladies only. I doubted that was true as a rule. I'd been invited to some of my board members' showers that were for couples or inclusive to anyone on the guest list. Colby wanted to make Naomi's dreams come true though. They'd been so eager to start a family and have a baby for so long I bet they'd had all the details for the baby shower down for a while too. And according to Naomi, Colby's role was expected in bringing all the gifts home.

"I don't know." The last time I checked in with Jenny, at the time the party was supposed to be done, my mom answered her phone for her, claiming they were all cracking up too hard at some of the games and hadn't even gotten to opening the gifts yet.

So, we'd come out here to "nest" and gave the women a couple more hours. I was glad to let Naomi have her fun and for Jenny to embrace more ownership of my house, so she wouldn't feel like a guest but a resident there.

But I didn't want to stall all day long. I had things to do. More like *one* specific thing to do, and the impatience and suspense to get to it made every minute seem like time was dragging.

"Well, we can get a head start on packing all the gifts," he suggested as we left the garage.

I nodded, smirking with a secret smile as I walked out the door, remembering fondly that this was where Jenny and I had started. Or restarted because this was our second chance that I wanted to make sure lasted forever. Every morning I felt lucky to have another day to make her happy and soak up her love, and every night, I went to sleep with her in my arms as proof we were still as in love as ever.

We returned to the house decked out in the bumblebee theme Sunny was super excited about since she'd learned about how important bees were for pollination. She hadn't lost her love of science, and even though she had yet to start second grade where she'd get to do so many more projects, Jenny was fostering my daughter's excitement about nature and being outside.

As soon as I walked through the door, she bolted toward me, eager to hug me close. "Hi, Daddy!"

"Hey, Sunshine. Did you have fun?"

"Oh, yeah!" She took my hand, leading me toward the mountain of gifts. "Look at how many presents there are!"

I nodded at the stacks while Colby's eyes went wide. "Whoa. Where is it all going to fit?" he mumbled to himself.

I laughed and patted his back, ready to help him carry things out to his car. They'd need a few trips.

"The baby got so many cute things," Sunny gushed, beaming at my friend, and she hugged him next. "I hope it's a boy!"

I laughed, strolling through the living room to find Jenny. "I thought yesterday you wanted the baby to be a girl."

She shook her head. "No. *I* want to have a girl, a baby sister," she gushed. "No! Two baby sisters!"

Two? Twins? I laughed. "Slow your roll, Sunny. Yikes."

"No, two baby sisters sounds smart," Colby said, egging her on as he looked for Naomi. "Tell your dad to get you one baby sister now, then another later."

I shot him a look to shut up. It wasn't a topic I wanted to silence but lately she'd been asking *so* many questions about where babies came from, mostly curious *how* the babies got into a mommy's tummy. She had barely turned seven. I had to have a little more time before giving all the details.

"Hey, there you are," Jenny greeted with a smile. She paused in putting food into leftover containers to give me a quick kiss hello. She looked gorgeous in a yellow dress that matched Sunny's. "The loaders have arrived," she teased with Naomi, who picked at the veggie tray on the counter.

"Hi, Ward. Thanks again for letting us have the shower here."

"Was it fun?" I asked.

"Oh, it was great." She hugged Jenny before Colby asked her to tell him what to move first.

I helped him load up the biggest things, and he'd already asked a neighbor to assist with carrying things inside their house. Once more, they came back to load up his car with more gifts, and Naomi was too tired to deal with the last, smallest load of things.

"I'm ready for a nap." She rubbed her belly and winked at me, likely realizing I was about to burst with impatience to have Jenny to myself again. "Little Sylvester or Seraphina is keeping me up at night, and I need a catnap in the afternoon."

Sunny scrunched her face and shook her head.

"No? Those names aren't good either?" Naomi asked.

"There's a Sylvester in kindergarten who picks his nose and eats his boogers."

"Eww!" Jenny said as she headed back to the kitchen, still toting cake plates there.

"What's wrong with Seraphina?" Colby asked her at the door.

I wasn't sure when Sunny became the name judge, but it was fun.

She shrugged. “It’s too long. Four syllables? Nah.”

We saw them out the door again, and Jenny shifted into full cleanup mode, delegating tasks. “Sunny, can you please figure out which cookies you want to keep here? I’m going to make a plate of the leftovers to drop off at the gardening center tomorrow.”

“I thought Grandma Lori took the extras before she left. To share with her Rummy friends.”

“She didn’t take enough. We’re never going to eat *all* those cookies.” She pointed at me next. “Can you start with the stuff in here?” She twirled her finger at the great room, and I wasn’t sure what she was referring to exactly. The many streamers hanging from the ceiling? The balloons bouncing everywhere? Or the massive bumblebee pinata board?

I sighed as she headed back to the kitchen. “Sure is a lot of stuff out here,” I called back to her.

Sunny raised her brows too, excited because I told her this was “the” day. I hadn’t told Colby. He was my best friend but he couldn’t keep a secret worth a damn. Naomi figured it out because I’d recruited her to sneak Jenny’s ring away and trace it on paper when they went to a massage treatment. My mom had given me the idea last month when she commented about how Jenny still wore the little trinket of a ring I gave her way back when we were kids. It was a cheap and flimsy thing, and I was shocked it had held up over the years, but I knew I wanted to incorporate it into *this* ring, that would last forever.

“Shh.” I scolded Sunny to look busy while Jenny stayed busy in the kitchen. I eyed the balloons, and an idea hit me. I picked up a pin and started popping them, then dropped to my hands and knees to pick up the pieces of balloon carcasses. “What is this?”

I shot Sunny a stern look and she slapped her hand over her mouth, giggling.

“Is this *glitter*? You blew up balloons filled with glitter?”

She laughed harder, snorting.

“What?” Jenny hollered.

“I was saying I drew the short stick here,” I called out, shaking my head at Sunny. “You know how I feel about glitter,” I whispered to Sunny.

“Grandma Lori picked those out.”

I rolled my eyes. I appreciated her silliness. It helped to distract me from what I planned. Nerves filled me, but I shoved them aside. I didn’t doubt her reply, but it was still such a big moment I couldn’t help but feel a spike of apprehension, like climbing the hill on a roller coaster and knowing the thrill of a plunge was imminent.

“Hey. What’s this?” I winked at Sunny, who beamed at me. I paused in picking up the balloon pieces. “Jenny, I found something on the floor.”

“Oh, sh—shoot. Ward, I’m sorry. I seriously didn’t know your mom found balloons with glitter inside.”

“No, not that. Something else. Come tell me what it is.”

“Maybe it’s the tab to the zipper for that onesie Naomi’s aunt had shipped here. It got stuck and we had to jimmy the zipper.” Her voice sounded louder as she came into the room.

Before she stepped foot on the carpet, I lifted onto one knee and looked up at her. The ring box had been burning in my pocket, an unmissable reminder all day, and now, I held it up to her and opened it.

She gasped, stopping short at the picture of me on one knee.

“It looks like it took me two tries, but I think I found the rest of my life in you. Will you marry me, Jenny? Let’s make it official and go steady for good.”

She immediately grinned, looking from the ring to my face.

Sunny bounded over and sat on my knee. She pressed her hands together in a begging pose. “Say yes! Say yes! Say yes!”

Jenny blinked, still smiling as she came closer to us. She narrowed her eyes at the ring and teared up. “Is that my ring?”

I nodded, holding it up higher, damned proud I'd had it custom made to match the look of the ring I gave her when I was a kid, just bigger and with a real rock this time. "If you'd take me for your husband."

"Yes! Of course, yes, Ward." She dropped to her knees and kissed me as she hugged me tight. Then she let go and pulled Sunny into a group hug, giggling when my daughter protested. "Put it on her finger, Daddy!"

I stared at her, etching the memory of her beautiful smile in my mind as I slipped the ring onto her finger and then kissed her again. "I love you."

She sighed against my lips and rested her forehead to mine. "I love you, too," she whispered.

"I can't *wait* for this wedding!" Sunny jumped off my knee and hopped in place.

Jenny and I stood together and I held her close in a hug as she marveled at the ring.

"I told you, Jen Jen. I told you weddings were the perfect place for people to fall in love." She shrugged. "That wedding never happened, but still!"

"I fell in love with Jenny long before that," I corrected her.

"Way back," she agreed.

Sunny didn't seem to hear, jumping from the couch to the chair in an excited lap around the room. "I'll get a new dress. And sparkly shoes. Then I can be a flower girl again! Being a junior bridesmaid didn't seem like as much fun as being a flower girl."

Jenny shook her head. "No, you're not going to be a flower girl, Sunny."

Sunny tilted her head to the side. "What will I be?"

Jenny pretended to think hard, tapping her chin. "Hmmm. What if you were my maid of honor?"

Sunny's jaw dropped before she rushed up close to hug her tight, almost knocking her off her feet. I caught her, laughing

and holding them both close before I kissed my fiancée again.

My fiancée.

I liked that.

I'd love calling her *my wife* more.

But so long as she was mine and we were together, my heart would be full no matter what.

Did you fall in love with Jenny and Ward? Want more of them? Check out this deleted scene that's just for YOU! [Get your copy HERE!!](#)



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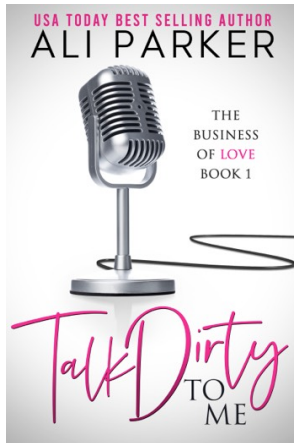
A woman in the business of love that's never been in a real relationship.

Check. That's me. Nessa Night.

Now I know what you're thinking. That sounds like a stripper name.

Hold up. Let me explain.

It's my radio talk-show name. My incognito way of helping the world love deeper and more often.



Though *my* love life is like a ten-year-old fall leaf trapped between the pages of an old journal. #dramatic

I'm short. Curvy. Average at best.

And I'm a fraud.

For all the advice I give on the air, I have zero experience to back it up. I'm eternally single. Forever alone.

And the only man I've ever caught feelings for is one of my callers: Mr No

Name.

Much to my surprise, he's not unknown at all.

The grandson of the great Jack Daniels is my caller, and worse? He's my brother's best friend from high school.

Only one way to right these increasingly awkward wrongs.

High school reunion time. He wants in, and I want a date who looks like him.

The only thing off is his advice about love. It's from Nessa night. Me!

And if he swoons over her (me!) one more time, I'll have to give in and tell him.

Besides, I'm in the business of love.

If I don't got this, who does? *Gulp*

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Ali Parker is a full-time contemporary and new adult romance writer with more than a hundred and twenty books behind her. She loves coffee, watching a great movie and hanging out with her hubs. By hanging out, she means making out. The man is hot. Hello.

She's a creative at heart and loves coming up with more ideas than any one person should be allowed to access. She lives with her hubs, teenage son, two grown daughters and two love-of-her-life grand babies! Telling a good story that revives hope, reminds us of love and gives a

vacation from life is all she's up to.

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Him Again?

A Girl's Bestie Rom Com Novel #2

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First Edition.

Editor: Eric Martinez

Cover Designer: [Ryn Katryn Digital Art](#)