

*A Forbidden
Romance
Collection*

Look

But Don't

Touch

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JENIKA SNOW

LOOK BUT DON'T TOUCH
A FORBIDDEN ROMANCE COLLECTION

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LOOK BUT DON'T TOUCH:

A Forbidden Romance Collection

By Jenika Snow

www.JenikaSnow.com

Jenika_Snow@Yahoo.com

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Look But Don't Touch:
A Forbidden Romance Collection

Professor

The things I knew about her, the way I watched. It was all to protect her, all to know her.

She liked her tea with milk and sugar, extra sweet just like I knew her lips would be if I were to kiss her.

I was desperate for her.

She chewed on her pencil when she was concentrating, her little tongue coming out and moving along her bottom lip.

I was hungry for her.

Painkiller

They'd grown up together, and in the public eye being with each other would be wrong... forbidden even.

But that didn't stop him from wanting her.

He knew he wasn't good for her. He partied too hard and got into far too many fights.

But despite that... Rebel wasn't going to stop until he made Rosie his in all ways.

The Edge of Forever

Everything happened for a reason.

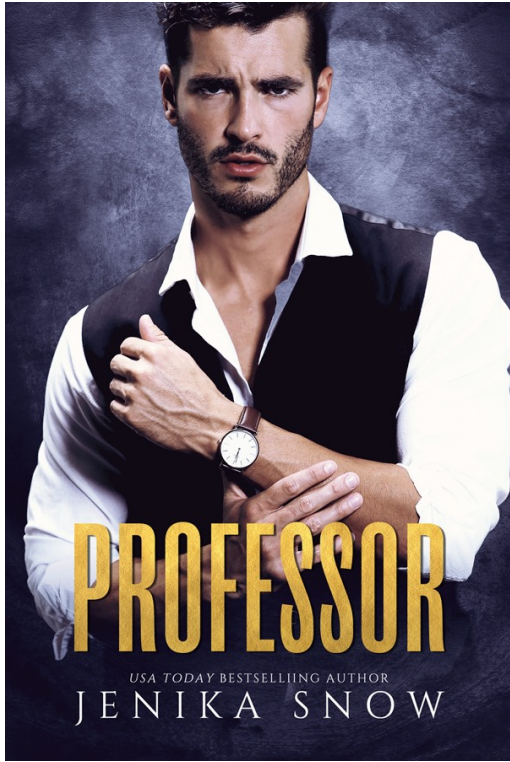
That's what Poppy Matthews told herself over and over again after she lost her husband and nearly her own life in a terrible accident.

Deciding to move to Blithe, Alaska was supposed to be a fresh new start, a change of scenery, and to hopefully find comfort and friendship with Blake Ellis, the brother of the husband she lost.

Poppy and Blake couldn't stop the inferno that was threatening to burn them both alive, because it felt too... right.

It was forbidden to be with each other, wrong in the eyes of so many, but they couldn't stop, not when for the first time

in years they both saw and felt more than just darkness, and that was in each other's arms.



PROFESSOR

By Jenika Snow

www.JenikaSnow.com

Jenika_Snow@Yahoo.com

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She played with the ends of her hair when she was nervous, her fingers delicate, long, like she played piano, her nails painted pink.

The things I thought about her doing with those tiny hands.

And she bit her bottom lip when she was worried, those straight white teeth sinking into the red flesh, like an apple being broken into, the crack of it consuming.

I didn't deny I wanted her. I didn't even try and hide it.

Innocent. That's what she was.

I stalked her, knew her every like and dislike ... obsessed over her.

I wanted her like I'd never wanted anything in my life. And I told myself that watching her, following her, was to keep her safe. To keep her mine.

I was her professor. She was my student. It was wrong to need her the way I did. But she consumed me, like I was gasping to breathe and she was oxygen.

I was a selfish bastard, and when it came to Grace, I wanted her all to myself.

CHAPTER
ONE

Professor Goode

It's said that an obsession is an idea or thought that continually preoccupies or intrudes on a person's mind.

But I say it's more than that, more than a definition, a string of words thrown together. Nothing can accurately describe how I feel, what I feel, the lengths I'd go to, to get what I wanted, who I wanted.

They'd say I was obsessed.

I called it love.

I remember the first day I saw her, how she looked, how I instantly felt. It had been hot outside, slightly humid, unusual for the time of the year. She'd had a sheen of perspiration on her temple, and I'd wanted to run my tongue along it, gather it up so I'd take a part of her into me.

I remember the first time I saw her like it was yesterday.

The first day she'd put her spell on me.

The first day I'd fallen in love with her.

The first day I'd become obsessed.

I'd known from that moment on, no other would have her. She was mine, and I'd make her see that.

She'd walked into the classroom in this white sundress, these little black flowers splattered across it like spilled ink. Her dark hair had been piled high on her head almost

haphazardly, like she'd been running late and hadn't known what to do with it.

Strands had fallen down as if she'd been running, the tie in her hair unable to keep the locks in place. Her cheeks had been pink, and I'd wondered if they'd be that color when she felt pleasure.

Her breathing had been rapid, her chest rising and falling, her breasts pressed against the bodice of her dress, her nipples hard as they'd poked against the thin material.

She'd apologized to everyone she'd walked by as she made her way to her seat, and I followed her the entire time, tracked her with my gaze, unable to pull my focus off her.

She screamed innocence and vulnerability, with her delicate beauty that had made the very male part of me rise up. Never had I felt such an instant attraction, such a bone-deep arousal.

And it was in that very moment that I knew without a shadow of a doubt I had to have her.

She was my student.

I was her professor.

It was against the rules.

But that made no difference to me. I was born to break the rules for her. I'd realized that as soon as I saw her, as soon as she'd sat in my class. Even now I thought about the way she'd crossed her legs, her dress rising up, exposing even more of her alabaster skin, as if she rarely went out in the sun.

Everything from her pink painted toenails to her little pearl earrings screamed she had no knowledge of the world, of its dangers.

She had no knowledge of the filthy things that men wanted to do to women ... that I wanted to do to her.

But she'd find out soon enough. Gracie would understand how deep my need for her went, how much I'd already claimed her as mine.

And when she did, that would be the greatest pleasure of all.

CHAPTER
TWO

Professor Goode

Focusing was damn near impossible when Grace was in my class. Fuck, it was impossible every fucking minute of every fucking day.

She was all I thought about anymore. She was all I wanted. And my need for her had grown into this consuming obsession. It controlled me, made me feel unstable, and I knew the only way to sate this craving, to end this hunger, was to make her mine.

I found myself looking over at her constantly, unable to stop myself even though I knew it wasn't right. I should keep my distance. It was best for my sanity and would be professional.

“Can you repeat that last part, Professor Goode?”

I cleared my throat and looked at the student who'd asked the question.

I tried to clear my head and focus on my lecture. “So we are able to trace that the CCR5 delta 32 mutation, which hampers the infection rate of HIV, evolved in European populations.” I glanced at Grace as I spoke, seeing a male student seated beside her lean in close and whisper something to her. “Most specifically Northern Europeans.” I felt my eyes narrow, curled my hands into fists at my sides.

Grace looked less than pleased with his close proximity, which pleased me, but the jealousy in me grew exponentially.

“How did the mutation occur?”

I heard the student ask the question, but my attention was on the little asshole who was still leaning in far too close to Grace. He moved his arm next to hers, nearly touching hers. He started to whisper something to her again, and I could see the frustration in her face.

“Mr. Baldwin, if this class is monotonous to you, you’re more than welcome to leave and give up your seat to a student on the wait list.” My words came out clipped, angry. I didn’t even give a shit that he was speaking during my lecture. I was pissed that he was too close to Grace.

My Grace.

“I’m sorry, Professor Goode.”

The student straightened, seeming embarrassed by being called out in front of the class. He should have been glad that’s all I did.

I couldn’t pull my focus off Grace, could see she had an almost embarrassed expression on her face, her teeth worrying at her bottom lip. She looked between me and the asshole sitting next to her, then back at me again.

I had my hands curled into tight fists at my side, was trying to control myself. Even something as simple as another male talking to her infuriated me. I was jealous, so fucking jealous it ate away at me.

I forced myself to turn around, to attempt to appear like I had my shit together, that I was actually supposed to be teaching a class, not lusting after my fucking student.

“I want a thirteen-page paper on a genetic variant in a certain population completed and turned in to me by the end of the month.” There was a shuffling of paper and a murmur of voices, but I didn’t turn around, because if I did, my attention would go right to Grace. “Don’t act surprised by this, it’s on your syllabus.” My voice was hard. I was still annoyed, the jealousy still present.

Class ended and I kept my back to them, putting paperwork in my satchel, my body tense. When I heard the

door shut, assuming everyone was gone, I rested my hands on the edge of my desk and braced my weight, hanging my head and closing my eyes. I breathed out slowly.

“Professor Goode?”

The sound of her voice, that sweet, melodic tone, went through me, calming me yet inflaming me all in the same breath.

I clenched my teeth together, my jaw set hard as I straightened and turned around to face Grace. She stood a few feet from me, a couple books held in her arms, pressed to her chest as if they were a shield. She looked so nervous as she glanced up at me, her eyes wide, that little sundress so fucking innocent.

“I just wanted to apologize about interrupting your class.”

God, her voice had this pitch to it that instantly aroused me.

“I’ll make sure not to sit next to Theo again. He likes to talk during class.” She worried her bottom lip again, and I wondered if that was a nervous habit. I wanted to reach out and pull her lip away from her teeth, smoothing my thumb along the flesh before I dipped down and kissed her.

It took everything in me not to make a little sound of need in that moment.

“No need to apologize, Miss Hart. It’s not your fault.” I had my hand braced behind me on the edge of the desk, my nails digging into the wood. But I kept myself in control, kept my expression blank. I could see her pulse beating rapidly beneath her ear, and lowered my gaze farther down to the bodice of her dress. Her nipples were hard as they poked through the material.

I fucking loved that dress, but I also wanted to demand she change out of it, that she cover herself so no other man could look at her, could fantasize and lust after her.

I swallowed, feeling the lump in my throat, my mouth so dry. As we stood there for several seconds not speaking, just

staring at each other, I swore I could see desire lick across her face.

She nodded slowly and offered me a shy smile, tucking her head as she glanced up at me through her lashes.

God, my chest ached.

“I’ll see you later, Professor Goode.”

She left, and watching her walk away was so fucking hard. I actually found myself taking a step toward her, wanting to lock the door and pull her right up against my body.

I was losing my fucking mind where Grace was concerned. But if this was what insanity felt like, I didn’t want to be sane.

CHAPTER
THREE

Grace

Who would have thought Genetics in Physical Anthropology would be the class I looked forward to every day?

But then again it wasn't the course that intrigued me, but the person teaching it.

I thought about Professor Goode, all the little things he did, things I doubted anyone really noticed in lecture.

The way he furrowed his eyebrows when he was looking over his notes, deep in thought. The fact his gaze was dark, penetrating ... consuming.

Or the way he curled his long, strong fingers around the eraser right before he cleaned off the board.

He was articulate and precise. He made sure his lines were exact when he wrote quotes on the dry-erase board. He was strict in the way he spoke, in the way he gave us our assignments.

It was hard concentrating in his class, hard to do anything but lust after a man I'd never have.

"What do you think about Professor Goode?" I looked over at Sherry, who was busy grinning at a guy currently seated at the next table over. I shouldn't be asking her anything about this, shouldn't call attention to my curiosity where he was concerned. "Sherry?"

She glanced at me, the expression on her face telling me she hadn't heard. "What?"

I could tell her never mind, not bring this up again. She'd never know the difference. But I found myself licking my lips and saying, "Professor Goode. What do you think about him?"

I saw her brows knit, her expression curious as to why I was asking. I became flustered as I looked down at the plastic-wrapped sandwich in front of me. I felt her gaze on me, as if she were analyzing me, trying to read more into the question.

And there *was* more in the question, so much more, but I'd never tell her. I couldn't. It felt wrong to even think it.

"I was just curious about what you thought about him ... as a teacher."

"Mm-hmm," she said, unconvinced. "You mean Professor Make Me Feel Goode?"

I snapped my head up, feeling my eyes widen. "What? Oh my God, Sherry." I felt my face heat as I looked around, wondering if anyone had heard. She was laughing beside me.

"He's seriously hot, and I know a shitload of girls want to bang him in one of the empty classrooms."

"God, you're really going there."

She chuckled. "You're such a virgin." She laughed harder when I looked at her, my expression probably showing how mortified I was.

"Sherry, good Lord." I looked around again. "Could you say that any louder?" I felt my cheeks heat. I had no doubt I was red, my embarrassment a visual beacon for everyone in the library to see.

"Wait, why are you asking about Professor Goode?"

I glanced down and started putting my books away, regretting even bringing this up. "It's nothing. Never mind." She didn't answer, but I felt her watching me. When I had my books in my backpack, I looked up, telling myself to act like I wasn't completely mortified. She watched me with this curious expression on her face. "What?"

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened in a small O.

“Oh my fucking God. Gracie, you’ve totally got the hots for the professor.”

Lord, my cheeks felt like they were on fire. “No. I don’t. You’re insane.” I was rambling, stuttering.

“You’re a horrible liar, by the way.”

I gave an awkward chuckle, which just made this situation even worse.

“I don’t know why you’re embarrassed.” She shrugged and leaned back in the chair, looking back at the table, giving the guy who sat there a come-fuck-me smile. “You know how many guys I find hot at this school.” And looked at me and chuckled. “Your face is so red.”

I grew even more frustrated.

“You know how many guys probably think you’re hot?”

I scoffed and rolled my eyes. Compared to Sherry I was a poor example of what could be considered hot. Her Lebanese genetics gave her a beautiful olive-toned skin and a gorgeous head of dark hair. Not to mention her body was rocking, with curves that I could only dream about.

There was no doubt men looked at her constantly.

“That’s easy for you to say,” I grumbled, feeling sorry for myself.

“You’re insane if you don’t think you’re hot.”

I gave her a get-the-fuck-out-of-here look.

“What?” She genuinely looked shocked that I didn’t believe her. “You are gorgeous, Gracie. You’ve got that pretty alabaster, flawless skin, and incredible hair with red highlights. And your eyes—” She made a disgruntled noise. “You have the bluest, prettiest fucking eyes I’ve ever seen.” She rolled her eyes. “You’re ridiculously hot in that innocent-schoolgirl way, and it’s annoying.”

I laughed at how upset she looked. That was all fine and nice that she said that, but it didn’t mean I believed her. Would

she still see me the same way if she knew I hadn't so much as let a guy feel me up? If she knew I was a virgin, so inexperienced it was laughable, she'd probably think there was something wrong with me.

"So, about Professor Goode." She wagged her eyebrows.

"Nothing. Never mind."

"Come on," she said and grinned. "Don't be embarrassed."

As I looked at Sherry, seeing the way she was so confident, how she knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to go after it just put me in a bad mood.

"I'm not embarrassed," I finally said and shoved my books in my bag. "But I am going to be late for work." I gave her a smile and saw on her face that she wanted to argue, maybe ask more, question why I'd brought this up like an idiot.

"Okay," she said in surrender and leaned back in her chair. "How about drinks later tonight?" And just like that the subject was changed.

Movement out of the corner of my eye had me looking to the right. My mouth instantly went dry, my stomach twisting. I watched as Professor Goode walked in, his dark brown leather satchel over one shoulder, a stack of papers in his hand. His black hair hung over his forehead and off to the side, as if he'd run his fingers through it, pushing it aside.

He had this hard look on his face, a stern expression. But I'd become used to it, come to realize that was just him.

And that was one of the reasons I'd fallen so hard for him. He was unmoving, like a mountain, like steel. Hard and unapologetic, Professor Goode was as smart as he was unyielding.

It was all those qualities that drew me to him, that had me thinking of—fantasizing—about no one else. It was him. Only him.

I couldn't look away from him, couldn't stop watching as he stalked into the library and headed back to one of the empty tables. It was as if he commanded the room, filled it with this

arctic air that had goose bumps forming on my arms, my hair standing on end.

And then he lifted his head and turned and looked right at me, our gazes clashing, the feeling of my eyes widening giving away how I actually felt.

Bared and vulnerable, as if I were looking into the eyes of a ferocious beast, of a predator about to pounce.

But the thing was ... I wanted to be his prey.

The way he looked at me was calculated. It was as if time slowed, as if there was no one else in the library aside from the two of us. I felt this tether between us, pulling me closer to him, as if he were my lifeline. It was such a consuming feeling, one that confused me as much as it frightened and aroused me.

“So, drinks?” Sherry asked, breaking through the granite-like hold I had with Professor Goode.

With Lucian.

I looked over at Sherry, thankful she was busy looking down at her phone, not realizing who I’d been staring at, how intently I’d been watching him.

And although he’d stared at me as well, I felt like it was an innocent glance, one done in passing. I was the one who couldn’t have looked away, who felt my heart dropping into my stomach.

“Earth to Gracie.”

I blinked a few times, my vision focusing as I stared at Sherry. She watched me, one of her dark, perfectly arched eyebrows lifted.

“Drinks, are you up for them tonight?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I have to work until six, but after that I’m free.”

Sherry smiled. “How about you meet me at the Olive?”

I nodded and found myself looking at where Professor Goode was seated. My heart jumped into my throat as I saw

him watching me, his gaze focused, as if he commanded me.

“The Olive. Six. Sounds good.” I muttered those words, and when I looked back at Sherry, I could see a curious expression on her face. But she didn’t probe for more information.

And I was thankful for that because I didn’t know how I would explain my fixation with Professor Goode.



Professor Goode

I SHOULD’VE BEEN MORE discrete, hiding my affection, my obsession for Grace. But I couldn’t help myself, certainly not when she was so close.

She was this addiction I had, one that made my heart race, my mouth dry, and my hands shake. A withdrawal that I didn’t know if I’d survive, because I knew the only cure for it was her.

I watched as she left the library, pleased when she kept glancing over at me. She kept biting her lip, pulling at the red, plump flesh with her straight little white teeth. It’s a good thing I was sitting behind the desk because my cock was harder than a rock, pressing against the zipper of my slacks, demanding to be free.

The obscene things I thought about doing to her had me feeling primal, feral. She was so innocent, though, so vulnerable.

But her innocence only fueled my need for her, had me craving her even more.

I wanted to be the one to corrupt her, to show her exactly how good it could feel, how good I could make her feel.

And I would make that a reality, because the alternative wasn’t an option.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Grace

I made a latte, poured it into a to-go cup, put the lid on top, and handed it off.

Monotonous actions that sucked up the time and had me earning minimum wage.

If I were being honest, I hated making coffee; hell, I didn't even drink it. But being a college student meant I couldn't be picky on what job I landed. I didn't have a lot of time for anything else, not with my full-time studies.

And although I was covered with student housing, and money my parents had saved up for me over the years, I still had to make money. Maybe not to live off of during school, but for my own integrity and mental well-being.

So, I worked at the coffee shop on campus a couple days a week, making cappuccinos and lattes and wrapping up croissants and egg sandwiches. I rang up the customer, handed them their double-shot espresso, and helped the next one.

The same thing, just a different day.

The coffee shop on campus was continuously busy, mainly with students coming in to hang out and study as they drank their five-dollar coffees and ate their three-dollar pastries.

"What can I make for you?" I said and looked up from the register only to feel my eyes widen as Professor Goode stood on the other side of the counter.

He wore a dark blazer, and underneath that a white Oxford button-down shirt, which was a crisp, stark contrast to his jacket. Being so close to him really amplified how much bigger he was than me, with his broad shoulders and narrow waist.

He was tall and lean, like an Olympic swimmer, raw power underneath golden skin.

I stared into his dark eyes, like pieces of coal that could start a fire ... and I was the one who would burn alive from it.

I stood there for long seconds not speaking, and it was only when I heard the froth from the cappuccino machine start to work that I snapped out of my haze. "Professor Goode," I finally said, finding my voice, although it was shaky, unsteady.

"Miss Hart."

I swore fireworks went off inside of me.

"How's your paper coming along?"

I licked my lips and nodded. "Good." Although that was a lie. I hadn't even started it. He smiled, just the corner of his mouth tilting up as if he knew I was lying.

"Good. I look forward to reading it."

I gave him an awkward smile. I could feel how uncomfortable it was, my own nerves making me act like a freak right now. "What can I get for you?" Being professional when all I wanted to do was wrap my body around his, was like living in literal hell.

"Just a black coffee."

Not a man who likes the fancy, frilly drinks. I liked that about him. And the fact he was drinking a strong brew this late in the afternoon made me wonder if he had a lot of work to do. He was a busy man, I could tell by the work he did around the campus, and the fact he had everything prepared for our class well in advance. But that drew me to him more.

He had his shit together.

I gave him one more lingering look before turning and getting his order. I felt his stare on me the whole time, as if he reached out and stroked his fingers along my body.

I swore it took me ages to get his order. I felt like I was moving in slow motion. When I finally turned back around, he was off to the side, another barista handling the register.

“I’m sorry for the holdup,” I said and handed over his coffee. When he reached for it, his fingers brushed along mine and I felt my mouth part as a small sound escaped me from that slight contact. Yet he looked unaffected.

Of course, he did. I knew it was all one-sided.

“It’s fine,” he said and offered a smile, but even when he appeared easygoing, I could see this hardness to him.

“Gracie!”

The sound of Sherry shouting over the crowd of people drew me out of my mesmerized focus on Professor Goode. I turned and faced her, seeing her make her way toward me with a mystery guy in tow.

I could see Professor Goode step back, and a part of me wanted to reach out to him.

Crazy, that’s what I was.

Sherry came up to the counter with a huge grin on her face. I looked at the guy standing behind her. He looked like a jock, one still living in his old glory days as he sported his high school letterman jacket.

“Hey, girl,” she said and turned around to reach for the guy. I recognized him then, remembering him from the library. “This is Craig. He’s going to the Olive with us tonight.”

I nodded, but I was very aware that Professor Goode was still standing off to the side, could feel him watching me.

I turned and started making her a double latte, knowing that’s the only reason she came into the hipster coffee shop.

I turned and handed it over, and she held out some money without looking at me. I shook my head at how invested she

was with this new guy. After ringing her up and handing the change to her, I chanced a look at the professor. He stood off to the side, taking a sip of his coffee as he watched me over the rim.

“Listen, we’re picking up something to eat before we head over there. Figure I should have a full stomach before I start pounding down the drinks.” Letterman Craig leaned in and said something in her ear. She giggled and playfully smacked him. “You’re dirty, aren’t you?” Sherry faced me and grinned. “Don’t be late. The Olive tonight at six,” she said as she made her way out the door.

I turned to where Professor Goode stood, but was greeted with an empty spot. I looked around the coffee shop, disappointed he was gone, but then felt ridiculous for thinking he’d stay just for me.

I swore the way he looked at me, the way he’d watched me, hadn’t just been all in my head. His expression had screamed one thing ... arousal.



Professor Goode

THE THOUGHT of her going to the Olive had every protective worry in me rising. All I could think about was men looking at her, trying to touch her, take advantage of her.

It had me nervous, possessive. It had me wanting to take her back to my place and keep her safe, keep her away from all the shit the world would throw at her.

I was the only one who could keep her safe, and I planned on doing just that.

I stared at her through the coffee shop window, pleased when I noticed she’d looked back at where I’d been standing, that she was searching me out. The disappointment on her face was tangible. I wanted to move my finger between her eyes and smooth away the worry settled between them.

Her desire for me was clear, and that pleased me immensely. And it was because of the way she looked at me, the fact she wanted me, that I was resolved to take things further.

I had to, because not having Grace as mine was physically painful, and not something I was about to entertain anymore.

If she was going out tonight, then I would too. No man would touch her but me.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Grace

I had no idea why I'd agreed to come with Sherry to the Olive. It was so not my scene. And as I stood beside her, the lights flashing, the music earsplitting, and the crush of bodies all around us, I just wanted to go home and curl up on my bed with a good book.

Sherry took my hand and led me toward the bar. I wasn't even twenty-one yet and had the big black X marked on the back of my hand to advertise that. But Sherry was old enough to buy alcohol, and I knew she'd get me a drink discreetly, because she was the type of person who didn't want to drink alone.

She let go of my hand before we reached the bar and gave me a look that said, *Stay there so we don't get caught*. I hadn't seen Letterman Craig yet, but I assumed he was somewhere around here. He'd been pretty enamored with Sherry at the coffee shop.

Which meant he wanted in her pants.

I could see Sherry leaning against the bar, a seductive smile in place as she ordered our drinks. I turned away from her and scanned the interior of the club. It was exactly what you'd expect from a nightclub, with the annoying decor, the dim lights, and the atmosphere of sex permeating the air.

I felt like I was grossly overdressed, too, as if I were attending church or going to the library. I had on a pair of

formfitting pants, and my top was a cardigan set, a powder-pink color that had a cashmere feel to it without the price tag.

As I looked at all the women at the club, I realized I was wearing way too many clothes. I didn't have enough skin showing to fit in, to blend in with the others. I probably stuck out like a sore thumb.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see Letterman Craig standing there. He'd gotten rid of his jacket and now had his hair slicked back and wore a shirt that was a little too tight, which I assumed was to show off his muscles. He wasn't bad looking, but he had an air of arrogance that surrounded him that was a total turnoff.

No doubt he was a wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am kind of guy, and Sherry was his latest conquest. But what he didn't know was that she was a shark when it came to what she wanted. What he didn't understand was that she was the one using him.

He said something, but I couldn't hear over the rush of music. His mouth moved, his eyes glossy. He'd already been drinking; that was clear by the way he looked and the smell of alcohol that came from him. I shrugged and shook my head, telling him without words I couldn't hear him. He leaned in close to my ear.

"You seen Sherry? I headed to the bathroom but lost her in the crowd," he said loudly and pulled back.

I gestured over to the bar, and he grinned, giving me a wink before leaving me standing there and heading over to her.

He wrapped his arm around her waist when he was right behind her, and she looked over her shoulder, grinning that sexual smile I'd seen a hundred times before. She knew she was hot and could get any guy, and she used that to her advantage. I wished I had her confidence, her prowess.

A moment later they were coming back over to me and gesturing for me to follow. We headed to the back and lucked out when we spied an empty table. Keeping my back to the

crowd, I grabbed the drink she handed me and took a sip. It was strong, so much so that my eyes watered.

I coughed and sputtered, staring at her and watching as she laughed.

“Figured if you were gonna get an underage drink, might as well make it a Long Island Iced Tea.” She grinned again and leaned against her newest boy toy. “Suck it down, Gracie. I don’t want us to get caught.”

I inhaled deeply and brought the straw to my mouth, drinking it fast, the burn settling right in the pit of my stomach. When I was finished, I wheezed out, my eyes watering fiercely, the alcohol immediately going to my head. She pulled the glass toward her so it looked like she’d been drinking it.

“How old are you anyway?” Letterman Craig said, his arm wrapped around Sherry, his other hand underneath the table and suspiciously close to her. I could only imagine what they were doing, what he was doing to her.

“I’m twenty.”

He nodded, but it was clear he wasn’t paying attention to me.

Sherry said something in his ear that had an aroused look crossing his face. And then he turned and started kissing her.

God.

I scrunched my nose, immediately feeling uncomfortable watching them make out, so I turned away to face the club.

I was so not an extrovert, and that was obscenely clear as I watched all these people dancing. The music was starting to give me a headache, or maybe it was the rush of alcohol through my veins. I was already buzzed, the liquor slowly climbing through my body.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead. Beads of perspiration dotted my skin. My heart felt like it was racing, and my face felt like it was on fire. Drinking always made my

face red, and judging by how hot it felt, I'd already gotten to that level.

“Sherry, maybe I should go.” I looked over my shoulder at her and saw she was all but on top of her date. “I'm not feeling the best. That drink went right to my head.” She broke the kiss and looked over at me.

“What?” she shouted, her brows knitted.

“I'm not feeling so well. That drink was strong,” I shouted back.

She gave me that look a parent gave a child. “You didn't eat before coming, did you?”

Did a croissant from the coffee shop count?

I shrugged.

She shook her head. “Want me to take you home?”

Letterman Craig gripped her chin and attempted to turn her head for another kiss, but she pushed his hand away, her attention focused on me. “We can head out if you're not feeling the best.”

I hadn't even been here that long and already I was ruining her night. Of course, she didn't say that, and I wasn't getting that vibe from her, but she was having a good time. “I'll be fine. I'll wave down a server and get some water.”

“You sure?”

I nodded and smiled. “I'm good.” I could tough this out. Her look was skeptical. “Seriously. I'm fine.” I gave her a thumbs-up and immediately felt like an idiot. She laughed and went back to kissing Craig.

I just needed some cold water. As if my prayers were answered, a waitress walked by. After ordering some water, getting the glass, and chugging half of it, I felt a little better and not so hot.

It was only a matter of minutes since I'd sucked down the drink, but already I was feeling the alcohol do its job. I was a cheap date, that was for sure. That one drink, especially for as

strong as Sherry had gotten it, would no doubt have me buzzed for a good while.

And even though I'd said I was fine, the thought of leaving and going home to curl up in bed sounded pretty damn good right about now.

CHAPTER
SIX

Professor Goode

This was not my scene. It was loud and obnoxious, crowded and hot. The age group for the Olive seemed to be eighteen to twenty-five.

I was out of place. Tossing back shots and grinding with sorority girls had never been something I participated in, not even when I fit in with this age group.

I was here for one reason, one person.

Grace.

As I scanned the club, looking for her, I felt my body tighten further. I didn't like her here. I didn't want her here. The amount of testosterone in this place, inhibitions lowered because of the alcohol flowing, would put her in a position that wasn't safe.

I knew what guys thought about, what they wanted to do. They had one thing on their mind and that was getting in the pants of a girl with her inhibitions down. And although Grace was smart and I hoped wouldn't fall for that shit, there were plenty of assholes who didn't know when to stop.

I curled my hands into tight fists at my sides as I moved through the club, pushing my way past people dancing, all but having sex together. The very thought of some bastard putting his hands on Grace, touching her when she was mine, had impatience and anger filling me.

I stopped at the bar and looked around, the place so crowded I couldn't even breathe.

Although I didn't see her immediately, I wasn't about to give up. She was here, I could feel it. Or maybe it was my need to protect her, even from herself, from her friends, that had me wanting to be the one to rescue her.

I wanted to be her knight in fucking shining armor.

I turned and looked in the other direction, scanning back in the corner, where the tables were slightly shrouded by the shadows, only intermittent flashes of light piercing it.

And then I saw Grace, sitting at a table with her friend and the guy that had been at the coffee shop. They were currently involved in a passionate kiss, her friend all but sitting on his lap.

But Grace wasn't paying attention to them. She had her focus on the dance floor, and even from a distance I could see how pink her cheeks were, how glossy her eyes were.

She was drunk.

I straightened from the bar, knowing that storming up to her probably wasn't the best plan but wanting to do just that, to pull her against my body, to tell her I was taking her out of here.

A rush of people came to the bar, blocking my path to her. And then I could see a guy walk up to Grace, lean down and say something softly. She shook her head and smiled, embarrassment covering her expression. He said something again and straightened, the smile he wore cocky.

He held out his hand to her. Grace looked behind her at her friend, but she'd get no help there. And when she looked back at him, his grin spread.

She slipped her hand into his and he helped her stand, leading her out to the dance floor. The song changed to something more sexual, and I narrowed my eyes and clenched my jaw as I watched him wrap his arm around her waist and pull her close to his body.

I'd break his hands for touching her.

I growled low, the vibrations in my throat the only thing that let me know the sound had spilled free. I couldn't even hear myself think in this fucking place.

It wouldn't have mattered anyway because all I could think about, focus on, was getting to Grace ... getting that fucker away from her.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Grace

He was sweaty, and he smelled like beer. It was gross, and I felt slightly uncomfortable. He started grinding up on me, and I instantly regretted agreeing to dance with him. The feel of his erection digging against my belly, the feel and smell of his humid, beer-laced breath on my neck had me all but gagging.

This felt so wrong.

But he'd seemed nice as he held his hand out, looked kind of pathetic begging me for just one dance. I should've gone with my instinct and told him no, kept my resolve. But here I was, regretting every moment of it, thinking of how to get out of the situation.

I wasn't really even dancing and instead grabbed his hands to push them away from my hips. He leaned in and the feel of his hot, wet breath on the side of my neck had me scrunching up my nose.

"I should probably go," I said loud enough for him to hear, all but shouting the words. He didn't hear me or wasn't listening. He added pressure to my hips and pulled me closer until I felt how hard he was.

That's when survival kicked in.

This guy wasn't going to stop even if I shouted no in his face. He'd either had too much to drink or he was just a dirty asshole.

I shoved at his shoulders, and he pulled me in closer, caging his arms around me. I yelled at him, tried to kick him, fear taking hold. I couldn't move, couldn't get out of his grasp. The panic was setting in, and with the music too loud, the alcohol flowing too strong, and everyone else focused on their dance partners, no one noticed I needed help.

"Stop," I cried out and shoved at his chest again.

"Calm down," he groaned against the side of my neck. "This feels good, doesn't it?"

I shook my head. "Stop. I don't want to dance anymore." I tried pushing at his chest, but he was stronger than me and kept his hold ironclad.

I tried looking to where Sherry was, but we'd moved farther away from the table and I couldn't make her out through the thick throng of people.

He smoothed his hand over my hips and belly, creeping lower. Fear spiked even harder in me, and I struggled again.

"I said no," I said loudly enough I knew he'd heard. But then, in the next second, he was pulled away from me.

I stumbled back from the sudden motion and felt my eyes widen as I stared up at Professor Goode. I didn't know why he was at the club, but that wasn't my main concern at the moment. It was the fact he was currently holding Mr. Groper by the neck.

The expression on my professor's face was downright frightening. He leaned in close to the other man's ear and said something low enough I couldn't hear. I watched as my would-be assaulter widened his eyes in clear fear. He looked at Professor Goode and shook his head frantically, holding up his hands as if to show he meant no harm.

And then he turned and hauled ass away from us, pushing people out of his way as if the place were on fire and he was desperate to get out to survive.

I stared at Professor Goode for a second, not sure what the hell was going on but thankful he'd been here at the right time.

I felt increasingly light-headed and stumbled back again, but he reached out and took hold of my upper arm, steadying me. He pulled me close to him, and I braced my hands on his chest, tipping my head back and staring up at him.

He looked around the club, and I watched as he narrowed his eyes, felt the growl leave him as the sound vibrated underneath my hands, which were still on his chest.

Before I could anticipate what was happening, he had my hand in his and led me out of the club. I looked back over my shoulder, trying to see Sherry, but the crowd was too thick.

And then we were outside, the cool air washing over me and sobering me up for just a second, before light-headedness took its place once more.

Professor Goode strode down the parking lot, opened the passenger-side door to a sleek black sedan, and helped me inside. I was too dumbstruck to say anything, to tell him I shouldn't go, that my friend was still inside. But any protest lodged in my throat.

When he was in the driver's side seat, the engine started, and he was pulling away from the club, I finally found my voice.

"Sherry is still in there."

"She's fine," he grumbled out.

"I can't just leave without telling her." I could hear the slurred tone in my voice, that one drink really kicking my ass.

"You're in no position to go back in there. You're drunk and it's not safe." The way he spoke to me was akin to him scolding a petulant child. "Text her and tell her you're fine, and you'll call her in the morning."

I didn't move, didn't say anything for long seconds. But then I found myself doing just that, reaching into my pocket for my cell, staring at the screen, and knowing I probably should have told him to let me go back into the club.

But the truth was, I didn't want to. That wasn't my scene, and I felt extremely uncomfortable being there, even before

I'd been groped on the dance floor.

I typed out the text.

Hey. I ended up leaving. Wasn't feeling the best. Caught an Uber. I'll call you in the morning. Be safe, please.

I hit send and rested my head back on the seat, seeing the streetlights passing by in a blur. I closed my eyes as a headache started to form behind them, a soft groan leaving me.

I felt my cell vibrate and looked down to see a text from Sherry. I was surprised she'd been able to hear it, what with the deafening noise of the club.

Sherry: *Why didn't you tell me? I would have ditched Craig and taken you home.*

No, it's okay. You were having a good time. That's not my scene anyway. I felt out of place lol.

I hit send and saw those three little dots pop up on the screen, letting me know she was replying.

“Get ahold of her?”

I looked at him. “Yeah.” I swallowed, my throat dry from the drink and how hot it had been in the club.

Sherry: *I wish you would have gotten me. You're okay though? Safe? Promise to text me when you get home and call me first thing in the morning.*

I smiled. She really was a good friend, yet here I was in the car with our professor, having gotten a little too tipsy, and lying to her about what was really going on.

I promise.

I didn't know what was going on, but what I did know was that I was glad Professor Goode had shown up when he did. I thought of what could've happened if he hadn't been there, and it made my stomach twist into knots.

I looked over at him again. His jaw was set hard, almost severely so. Stubble covered his cheeks, and his focus was trained on the road. He looked angry, what with his hands

tightly wrapped around the steering wheel, his body rigid, tight.

My body heated despite the situation.

I found myself turning and looking out the passenger-side window, knowing that I should've been smart and asked him what he'd been doing there. But all I did, instead, was close my eyes, wanting nothing more than to go to sleep.

All I wanted was for this night to be over with. Then I could figure out with a clear head what in the fuck was actually going on.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Professor Goode

I curled my hands tightly on the steering wheel and forced myself not to look at her, to make sure she was okay. She was in my car, with me, away from the motherfuckers in that club. I should have been relieved, but all I felt was more tension.

She hadn't asked any questions. She should have. She should have been demanding I tell her what the hell I was doing, why the hell I was there.

I could see out of the corner of my eye that she was playing with the edge of her shirt, looking out the passenger-side window. A part of me wanted to pull over and demand she tell me everything was fine, that this was okay.

Even if I couldn't step away from her.

But I didn't pull over. I kept driving.

She finally spoke, her voice soft. "How do you know where I live to take me home?"

I pulled to a stop at a red light and glanced over at her. She was looking at me, a glossiness to her eyes, her expression letting me know the alcohol was still moving through her strong. I didn't know how much she'd had to drink, but I didn't like seeing her this way.

I didn't admit that I did know where she lived, that I'd seen her record, that I knew everything about her. Instead I looked straight ahead and pressed on the gas as the light turned

green. “I’m not taking you to your house. You’re coming home with me,” I finally said after a prolonged moment.

I could see her looking at me, assumed her eyes were wide. But she said nothing, didn’t argue, didn’t insist I take her home. I stopped at another light and glanced at her.

“You have nothing to say? No questions on why I am taking you to my house, why I was at the club? How I was there at just the right time?”

She still didn’t speak, and I saw by her expression that she was thinking about how to answer. I wanted her to be honest with me, but I wouldn’t press her. She’d talk to me eventually. She’d see how she was meant to be mine, how this very moment was the start of us.

The rest of the ride to my place was done in silence. I pulled into my driveway and cut the engine, just sat there, gripping the steering wheel and staring straight ahead.

“You asked me why I wasn’t curious about why you were taking me to your house instead of mine. Her voice was soft, and I could hear a little slur in it.

I looked at her then. “You drank tonight.” It wasn’t a question. Her intoxication was evident.

“A mistake I’ll probably pay for tomorrow morning.”

More silence ensued.

She took a deep breath in and exhaled slowly. “I didn’t stop you, stop this, because I didn’t want to.” She looked at me then. “I don’t want to go home, don’t want to be alone.” She licked her lips and looked down, the fall of her hair obscuring her from my view momentarily. “Because this is where I want to be.”

My heart thundered rapidly. I kept my expression stoic even though she wasn’t looking at me, but inside I was pleased, really fucking pleased.

And as much as I wanted to finally take her, claim her as mine, the fact she’d been drinking put the brakes on all of that. I just wanted to take care of her.

Our first time wasn't going to be laced with alcohol, clouded by intoxication. The first time I took Grace as mine, she was going to be fully with it, completely immersed.

Because I didn't want just this one moment. I wanted forever.



I HELPED her inside my apartment, shutting the door behind us but keeping my arm wrapped around her waist. She was tipsy and tired, and all I wanted to do was put her in my bed and wrap my body around hers, keeping her close, letting her know that I wouldn't ever let anything hurt her.

I lead her down the hall and into my room. She sat on the edge of the bed, bracing her hands on the mattress on either side of her. I crouched on my haunches and took off her shoes, letting my hand skim the arch of her foot.

She was so small compared to me, almost fragile.

I glanced up at her to see her watching me, her eyes heavy-lidded, her expression drowsy. I didn't stop myself from reaching up and brushing a lock of her hair away from her shoulder, letting my fingers move gently along the soft skin of her neck.

She closed her eyes and exhaled, and I forced myself to pull my hand away and stand.

"I'm sorry you have to see me this way," she whispered, slurred.

I pulled the blanket down and helped her lie in the bed, covering her up and standing there for a moment watching her. Her dark hair was fanned out along the white pillowcase, a stark contrast that had me wanting to reach out and touch her.

Instead I headed toward the door, stopping and looking back at her. I watched the rise and fall of her chest beneath the duvet and looked into her face, which had taken on a relaxed expression as she slipped into sleep.

Tomorrow should be interesting, given the fact I had no intention of hiding how I felt. She needed to know what my intentions were, what I wanted with her.

The real question was, would she be on the same page as me? Would she want the same things I did?

CHAPTER
NINE

Grace

It was the feeling of warmth on my face that had me slowly opening my eyes. Everything was blurry for a moment, and I blinked a few times, my vision finally clearing as I stared out the window. The apartment was high up, and I could see buildings off in the distance. I had no doubt traffic was a flurry below, but I heard nothing but the sound of my easy inhalations.

I felt my brows knit, a moment of confusion settling in because I wasn't sure where I was. But then it all came rushing back.

Professor Goode.

The Olive.

Sitting in his car and admitting things I probably should have kept to myself.

I groaned softly, lifting my hand and rubbing my forehead. I had an awful headache, one that was beating right behind my eyes.

The scent of everything he was washed over me, through me. I actually found myself turning my head more into the pillow, closing my eyes, and inhaling deeply.

Dark and woody.

Potent.

Masculine.

Everything Professor Goode was.

I was crazy, lying in his bed, in his apartment, wondering how in the hell I was going to get through this humiliation.

I forced myself to sit up, my feet dangling off the bed, my toes barely touching the cold wooden floor.

I rubbed my feet together, looking down and realizing I had no pants on. I pushed the blanket fully off me, breathing out a sigh of relief that my panties were still on and that I was still wearing my cardigan set.

One drink and this was the result, this was how far I'd dropped in my morals.

I tried to remember if I'd slept with him. God, if I had, this would get so much worse. This would be a nightmare, even if the thought of being with Professor Goode was everything I'd ever fantasized about.

I looked behind me, half expecting him to be in the bed with me, and felt relief but also a surge of disappointment that the other side was empty. I reached out and rubbed my hand over the pillow, the sheets cold to my touch, almost crisp and severe under my fingertips. It was clear he hadn't slept beside me all night.

The sun streaming through the curtains, although muted, had my headache pounding harder behind my eyes. I heard the sound of my phone vibrating and got up to see it sitting on the dresser across from the bed.

I picked it up and stared down at it. There were three texts from Sherry, as well as two missed calls.

"Shit," I muttered. I was pretty sure I'd forgotten to call her last night once I'd gotten to Professor Goode's house.

I'm so sorry. I forgot to call you last night and ended up crashing.

Sherry: *You worried the shit out of me, Gracie!*

After Professor Goode had gotten me into bed, everything else had gone dark. I'd fallen asleep right away, and now regretted making Sherry worry.

I'll call you as soon as I don't feel like my head's going to explode.

Sherry: *You better.*

The last thing I needed to do was call her while at his house and have her overhear him say something. God, was I really at my professor's house?

I set my phone down and scrubbed my hand over my face. I wanted to shower, to get the club vibe off my body, and I needed to drink about a gallon of water to flush the rest of this lingering alcohol out.

Then I heard footsteps. I turned toward the door quickly, feeling my eyes widen and my heart race. I darted toward the bed and pulled off the blanket, wrapping it around my lower half. And then I just stood there, time seeming to go by painfully slowly as I waited for him to come in.

He knocked on the door but didn't open it. I swallowed roughly and looked around, not exactly sure what I was searching for.

"Grace?" His voice was deep and clear, coming through the door and having my body reacting instantly.

I shivered and cleared my throat, telling myself to grow up and get myself under control.

"Come in." My voice was high-pitched, and I cleared my throat again. He pushed the door open, and I swore time stood still.

Of course, he was put together and looking sexy as hell. He wore a pair of dark slacks and a white button-down dress shirt tucked into the waistband of his pants. His dark belt was cinched around his waist, showing how lean he was yet muscular at the same time. His shirt was formfitting enough that I could see the outline of his biceps, even the definition of his pectoral muscles.

God, he looked incredible, and I probably looked like I'd crawled out of a grave.

For a second we just stood there, neither one of us speaking, the awkwardness strong within me. I had to give him credit; he didn't look at me like I was insane wrapped up in a blanket.

I tightened my hands on the blanket, pulling the material around me even more. "I woke up with no pants on," I blurted out. It wasn't an accusation, more out of curiosity on what the hell had happened.

He lifted a dark brow, and the corner of his mouth kicked up. "You were fully clothed when I put you to bed."

I felt my cheeks heat after he spoke. I looked around the room again, my gaze darting to the floor. And then I finally saw my pants tossed in the corner in a heap of material.

"Do you always shed certain pieces of clothing when you've been drinking?" There was amusement in his voice.

My face was on fire, and I glanced at him but quickly looked at the floor, humiliated. "Apparently."

He didn't say anything for long moments, and when I looked back at him, his face was stoic once more. "Well, if you get dressed and come into the kitchen, I'll make you some breakfast."

The very thought of eating turned my stomach, but he looked like he was unwilling to budge on this.

I nodded once, feeling his gaze on me even though I wasn't looking at him. After a moment I heard him leave, shutting the door behind him. I exhaled slowly.

I didn't know what in the hell I'd gotten myself into, but this was quite possibly the worst situation I'd ever been in, not to mention highly inappropriate.

He was my professor. I was his student.

But then again, I was also in love with him.

CHAPTER
TEN

Grace

Twenty minutes later I was dressed, had found the bathroom and washed my face, rinsed out my mouth, and attempted to finger comb my hair into a semblance of control.

I made my way into the kitchen, the sound of dishes clanging together seeming overly loud for my hungover state.

I rounded the corner and stopped when I saw him standing by the stove. He had his shirtsleeves pushed up, his toned, tanned forearms on display. I clenched my thighs together as desire pooled between them.

Rubbing my hands down my legs, I felt so nervous, so awkward, and definitely out of place. As if he sensed me, he looked over his shoulder and smiled.

“Have a seat, Grace.”

The way he said my name, all deep and husky-like, shouldn't have had me instantly aroused.

I pulled the chair out, the feet scraping along the floor, causing me to wince at how awkwardly loud it was. I sat and looked at the spread.

The table was set for two, with a bowl of fresh fruit in the center, a carafe of orange juice beside it, an empty coffee mug in front of me, a full one at the other place setting, and a gleaming silver fork placed on a pristine white linen napkin to my left.

This all seemed so ... domestic.

“Professor Goode, I want to apologize. This is really embarrassing for me—”

“Call me Lucian.” He turned from the stove and walked over to me, holding a frying pan in one hand and a wooden spatula in the other. He scooped out the omelet and set it on the plate in front of me. I watched as he moved back to the stove and made another one.

For long minutes I just sat there, not sure how to act.

I swallowed, my throat so dry, my stomach tightening. I really wasn't hungry, yet when I looked up at him, about to say that, the expression he gave me had me keeping that thought to myself.

He looked stern, as if he dared me to tell him I wasn't eating.

Once he had his omelet plated and the pan back on the stove, he grabbed a glass from the cupboard. He filled it with water, came back to the table, and set the glass in front of me. My throat was so dry.

I gave him a grateful smile before reaching out and taking it, downing half of it before coming up for air.

He didn't say anything as he leaned back in the chair and reached for his coffee mug. I could see steam rising above it, and I stared at him as he took a long sip while he watched me.

He set the mug down but stayed silent for a second. “You should eat something. You'll feel better.”

I looked down at the plate. “Everything looks delicious, but my hangover is making my appetite next to none.” He stood after a second and went over the cupboard, reaching in for a bottle of what I thought was aspirin.

He came back over and opened it, pouring out a couple of pills into his palm, and handing them over to me.

“Thank you,” I said softly and took the pills, popping them in my mouth and washing them down with the rest of the water.

When he sat back down across from me, his focus was trained on me, his stare making me feel exposed in all the right ways.

“Just try and eat something.” He picked up his fork and started eating his omelet. The clank of the silverware on the plates spurred me to pick up mine and start eating as well.

Although I really wasn't hungry, I knew that putting something in my stomach might go a long way in helping me.

He poured me a glass of orange juice, and we sat and finished our meal in silence. It was awkward, and I felt a little uncomfortable given the fact he was my professor, but I figured he'd seen me at my worst, so from this point on it could only get better, right?

When I was finished eating as much as I could, I pushed my plate away slightly, reached for my glass of orange juice and finished it off. I felt him staring at me and looked up from underneath my lashes.

God, it should be illegal for a man to look that good, especially this early in the morning. He leaned back in the chair, one arm braced over it, the other resting on the table. He had his fingers wrapped around his coffee mug, the digits moving up and down slowly over the ceramic. It shouldn't have been as sexy as it was.

“You didn't ask me many questions last night,” he finally said, his voice this baritone timbre that had me clenching my thighs together.

I'd never been this close to him before, the setting so intimate that it almost felt as if we were a ... couple. I'd slept in his bed, and he'd made me breakfast. It all seemed so personal.

I nodded once although I didn't know what I was agreeing to. I did remember last night, but it was a little bit hazy.

“I probably shouldn't be admitting this, but I got drunk off one drink.” I felt my cheeks heat and chanced a full look up at him. “Although in my defense it was a pretty strong drink, maybe even a couple in one.” God, this was mortifying.

I cleared my throat and looked around, knowing that what I needed to do was get out of here. I needed to go home, finish sleeping off this hangover, and then maybe move to a different town, enroll in a different school. I could've snorted at my thoughts. I had to face this head-on. I couldn't run from my problems or embarrassment.

I thought about all the things I should've asked him last night, things that had come to mind, but I hadn't cared about knowing the answers at the time. Even though right now I still didn't care because the pounding behind my head was taking priority, this might be the only chance I really got to ask them.

"Why were you at the club?"

He brought his cup to his mouth and took another long sip before setting it down and exhaling slowly. "I was there because of you."

I felt my heart literally stop in my chest. I gripped the edge of my chair, my nails digging against the wood. I heard him clearly, but I wasn't sure if I knew what he actually meant.

"You were there because of me?" I licked my lips and took a deep breath in. "What does that mean?"

He didn't answer for several seconds, but the way he watched me was almost intense, as if he were studying my reaction to his words.

"It means exactly what it means." He leaned forward and clasped his hands together on top of the table, his forearms parallel with each other. He looked me directly in the eyes. "I overheard you talking about going there, about what time you'd be there, when I was at the coffee shop. So I followed you, Grace. I can only imagine what happens at clubs, and I was right. I was there because of you, because I wanted to protect you."

I shook my head slowly but didn't know why I was doing that. This was actually happening? Professor Goode, Lucian, had stalked me? That should've terrified me, yet I found myself warming. The very idea that he'd gone to those lengths

to be close to me, to think he was protecting me, had arousal moving through my veins in an almost twisted manner.

“I don’t think that’s normal,” I whispered, although the words seemed foreign to me.

“It’s very normal when it comes to my need for you, my desire, Grace.”

I felt my eyes widen and leaned back a little bit, the chair creaking from my shift. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know how to react. This had been what I’d fantasized about but never thought I’d have as my reality.

I was in love with Professor Goode, yet could I ever actually admit that?

I didn’t know how to handle his words, his admission.

“And when you were at the coffee shop and overheard me and Sherry ... were you there by chance?”

He stared at me for a second before finally shaking his head. I felt my heart race.

“I’ve wanted you for a long time, Grace, since the very first moment I saw you step into my class with that clear lip gloss on your red lips, wearing that little sundress, and your hair piled in a messy bun.”

The way he spoke was as if he envisioned that very day right now.

“I remember there was perspiration on your temple, and how much I wanted to run my fingers along those beads.”

I felt like I was sweating now, from what he said, how he watched me. Was this really happening?

“Yes, Grace. It’s really happening.” I hadn’t realized I’d said those words out loud. He reached out, and I was frozen in place as he brushed a strand of hair away from my shoulder, his fingers lingering on my cheek. “And now that I’ve admitted how I feel, now that you know the truth ... I’m not about to let you go.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Professor Goode

She'd been extremely quiet since I told her how I felt in my kitchen, and although I wanted her to talk to me, I also knew pushing her would only drive her further away.

Grace desired me as well. I could see that in the way she looked at me, in the way she bit her lip when she thought I didn't notice her glances. But maybe I'd misjudged the situation and told her this far too fast?

She'd been discombobulated with being at my home, me being at the club. And then I dropped it in her lap that I wanted her, that I'd pretty much stalked her to protect her.

Grace would come to understand that I did it all for her.

I pulled to a stop in front of her small bungalow and put the car in park. I kept my hands on the steering wheel as I looked over at her. She was biting her lip, nervous, maybe not knowing what to say, how to react.

"Grace?" I said softly.

She glanced over at me then and gave me a shy smile. "Thank you again for ... everything." It was clear she was uncomfortable, trying to escape as quickly as possible.

She opened the car door and was about to get out, but I reached over the seat and curled my hand gently around hers, stopping her from exiting. She looked over at me, her nerves tangible.

“I know what I said was a lot to take in, but I meant every word. I’m not going to walk away, Grace.” I smoothed my thumb over the top of her hand, her skin so soft, electricity moving up the digits and through my entire body. “I know you feel the same way, to an extent.” My obsession with her was consuming, maddening. “And you don’t have to admit that right now, but you will have to eventually, Grace.” I leaned in just an inch, but there was still a good bit of space that separated us. I didn’t like that. “You’ll have to admit it to yourself, and then to me, because I’m not walking away. I’m not giving you up.” There was determination in my voice, hard resolve. “The sooner you realize that, the easier this will all be, the easier it will be to accept.”

She licked her lips, and I lowered my gaze to watch the act, my heart racing and my body coming alive from, from her close proximity.

“I know,” she said, her voice soft, utterly feminine.

I should’ve let go of her hand, but I couldn’t bring myself to do it. Instead I pushed even more, knowing what I was about to ask her could very well have her drawing into herself, distancing herself from me. This was so inappropriate, desiring my student, admitting that she was mine, but fuck logistics and rules.

“Let me take you to dinner, Grace. Let me show you how it can be with us, how much I mean everything I said.”

I could see how rapidly her pulse was beating beneath her ear, wanted to soothe her, let her know that there was nothing to be nervous about. I was here for her, in this for her.

Now that I had finally opened myself up, allowed my emotions and feelings to come forth, a physical declaration of what she meant to me, there was no stopping it. There was no turning back.

“Let me take you out,” I said again, lower, gentler.

“Okay,” she all but whispered.

Pleasure surged within me at her acceptance.

I held my hand out. “Let me see your phone.” I was trying to be gentle, not so demanding. She didn’t hesitate as she handed her cell over. I punched in my number and handed it back to her. I didn’t bother telling her I already had her number, that being a professor at the university gave me access to student files. I didn’t tell her because I knew how it would sound.

“Now you have direct access to me,” I said, and knowing she could contact me privately at any given time had me feeling even more possessive.

She didn’t say anything as she messed with her phone, and a second later I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket. I knew without looking at it that she’d sent me a text ... so I’d have her number as well.

“Now you have mine,” she said softly.

I smiled, wanting to touch her, to run my fingers over her soft skin, to part her lips and slip my thumb between them and make her taste me. God, she drove me wild and all she had to do was sit there.

I knew I could come off as hardened, apathetic even. But when it came to Grace, she held all the cards, even if she didn’t know it.

When it came to her, I was putty in her hands.



Grace

I SHUT MY BEDROOM DOOR, leaned against it, closed my eyes, and rested my head back on the wood. As soon as I’d gotten home, I’d guzzled a gallon of water and headed straight to the shower. I’d hoped the heat and steam would help me feel a little better, but being so unused to drinking had really kicked my ass.

My heart was thundering, and my headache was still going strong.

All I could do was keep replaying everything Lucian had told me. God, it sounded so weird saying his name. He'd always just been Professor Goode to me, and those two words put together, spilling from my mouth, felt right.

Saying his first name felt extremely personal, erotically intimate, as if we were closer than we really were. But then again that's exactly what he wanted.

All the things he'd told me had been crystal clear. He wanted me as his, only his and he wouldn't take no for an answer. Not that I would've declined.

I was just confused, overwhelmed. I wanted him, had for longer than I could even admit.

Although all I wanted to do was go to sleep, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and dialed Sherry's number. I'd worried her enough for one day.

She picked up on the first ring, and her sharp exhale told me I'd pissed her off. I couldn't blame her though.

"Hey," I said a little shyly. I sat on the edge of the bed and kicked off my shoes, moving my toes around and closing my eyes.

"She lives," she sarcastically teased. "You do realize how scared you made me just ghosting like that? How nervous I was?" She had the tone of a disapproving mother.

"I shouldn't have just left, but I did text you."

She snorted.

"I'm sorry."

"What in the hell happened? You got that drunk off one drink?" Before I could answer, she was talking again. "You know what, don't answer that. I know your tolerance and I should've known better."

"Yeah that one drink really messed with my head. And I didn't eat so it made it ten times worse."

"You're feeling okay now?"

I groaned, and she laughed. "That answer your question?"

She laughed again. “Yeah, those Long Islands are potent. Sorry about that.”

I brought my hand up and rubbed the side of my head, my eyes still closed, my head still pounding. The aspirin had helped a little bit, but what I really needed was to sleep. “Listen, I’m gonna try and get rid of this hangover, but do you want to do dinner tonight at my place? Maybe a movie and pizza?”

She was quiet for a minute as if she were thinking it over. “You got ice cream?”

I chuckled, which only made my head ache worse, but I couldn’t help smiling. “Yup, a pint of Häagen-Dazs and a pint of Ben & Jerry’s. You can pick which one you want.”

“It’s a date then,” she said. She talked a little bit about her night with Craig, but after a few moments I had to get off the phone because the pounding in my skull was just too intense.

I set my phone on the bedside table and lay down, grabbing a blanket and pulling it up to my chin. I was a lightweight, and this was embarrassing, and as I lay there drifting off to sleep, the thing that kept replaying in my mind on a loop was how Professor Goode told me I was his.

I needed to talk to Sherry about this, to confide in her. I needed her advice on what the hell to do.

But right now I needed to crash and sleep this off. Maybe when I woke up, everything would be clearer.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Grace

The sound of banging woke me from a groggy sleep. I opened my eyes, a hazy pinkness filling my room. The noise stopped, and I was about to go back to sleep when my phone went off, the ringing obnoxious on a normal day but overwhelming right now.

I blindly reached for my phone. My vision took a moment to clear, but then I saw Sherry's face on the screen. I then noticed the time, how it was already five in the evening. I didn't know how I'd managed to sleep so long, but that didn't matter because in this moment I'd been a really shitty friend.

I answered the phone on the fifth ring. "I'm coming. I'm sorry."

I tossed the blanket aside and left my room, heading toward the front door. I was still kind of groggy, but at least my headache was gone. I opened the door and stared at Sherry, who looked less than pleased.

She stood on the other side of the door with a pizza box in one hand and a large paper bag tucked under her arm. She lifted a perfectly arched dark eyebrow, the corner of her mouth kicking up in a smile, and her gaze raking over me. Then she whistled under her breath. "Damn girl, you're looking rough."

I lifted my hand and smoothed my fingers over my hair. I had no doubt I looked a hot mess. "Yeah, won't even argue with you on that."

I stepped aside and let her in. She was already talking about another date she had tomorrow with Letterman Craig.

“Wait, so like, it’s getting serious with this guy?”

She opened the pizza box and pulled out a slice, taking a bite and shrugging but smiling at the same time. “I mean, he’s growing on me,” she said through a mouthful of pizza. She set the slice back in the box and reached in the paper bag for a six-pack of pop. “Anything good on Netflix?”

I pulled a chair out at the kitchen table and sat, bringing one of my legs up so I could rest my foot on the chair.

I shrugged, more curious about how things were going with Craig and a lot of stuff I wanted to talk to her about concerning my night. “A mystery might be a good fit for tonight.” The look on her face had me laughing.

“Hey, Craig isn’t that bad.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t talking about you and Craig.” I took a deep breath, knowing that I just needed to get this off my chest. “What I told you happened last night didn’t really go that way.”

She was mid-bite on a piece of pizza when she stopped, this look on her face telling me she was instantly piqued.

“What happened to you last night? I thought you got an Uber and headed home?”

“Yeah, about that.” I licked my lips and started picking at the edge of the table, nervous that I was actually saying this out loud, but also admitting that I had lied to her.

I knew she’d understand, but my confusion, the little bit of fear of the situation had this resistance settling in me. It had me keeping things to myself for far too long. But I hadn’t thought there was a chance with Professor Goode ... not until now.

“Gracie, you’re kind of freaking me out. What happened?” She pulled a chair out, the legs scraping over the linoleum floor. She sat down and pushed the box away so it wasn’t

between us anymore. I felt her stare on me and knew that I'd open myself up and just be totally honest. I had to be.

I could see the worry on her face, and I hated that I was putting it there. So I took a deep breath in and just told her the truth. "At the club, there was a guy getting pretty handsy with me. Like he wasn't taking no for an answer."

"What?" She sounded horrified. "God, Grace. I'm sorry I wasn't there to kick him in the balls."

I smiled and shook my head. "No, the crowd was too thick, and he was drunk. Hell, I was feeling the alcohol too." I had my hands in my lap and smoothed them over my legs. "Anyway, before I knew what was happening ..." My heart raced. I didn't know why I was so nervous telling Sherry this. "Professor Goode was standing right there, pulling him off me."

Her eyebrows were pulled down, and confusion filled her expression. And then her eyes widened. "Professor Goode? As in our Professor Goode from class?"

I nodded and licked my lips. It would only get stranger from here for her, I was sure. "Sherry, Professor Goode wrapped his hand around his neck and said something to him, something that scared the hell out of the guy who'd been grinding up on me." My throat felt so tight, the words spilling from me almost foreign. "Like he all but ran out of there."

"Oh my God," Sherri said softly.

We sat there for a long moment in silence, the weight of what I'd just said hanging between us. It sounded frightening, I knew that, but the truth was, seeing Lucian handle a man who wouldn't take no for an answer had made me feel something intense, pleasurable.

"What happened after that?" She leaned back in the chair and crossed her arms over her chest. "Like, I can't even imagine Professor Goode in a club let alone handling your would-be assault asshole." She whistled under her breath, and although I thought she would be horrified by what I'd just

said, she seemed almost ... pleased. "Wish I would've been there to see him kick the asshole in the nuts."

I looked down at my hands, which were twisted together on my lap. "That's not even all of it," I finally said as I looked back up at her. She lifted a brow and leaned forward, seeming very intrigued.

"Well, if this is going where I think it's going, you have my full attention."

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Sex, yeah, that's a no-go. But he did take me back to his place." Sherry sucked in a breath. "That one drink had really fucked me up."

"God, Gracie, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have gotten you that drink."

I waved off her concern. "It was so not your fault, so don't go there." I smiled. "I woke up this morning in his bed, with him making me breakfast."

"Um, what the fuck?" She sounded amazed. "He was making you breakfast?"

I nodded. "Yeah. It's almost like he tucked me in, made sure I was safe, and then left me alone." I knitted my brows, a part of me thankful he'd done that, but another part wishing I'd woken up right next to him, his body wrapped around mine.

"So, he brought you to his house to sleep off being drunk, let you stay in his bed alone, and then made breakfast for you in the morning?" I nodded. She leaned back again. "Huh. What was he doing at the club to begin with?"

"Well, that's the thing." I didn't know why I was so nervous, but saying these words out loud to another person was frightening. "He said he was there because of me." The thickness in the room became almost unbearable. "He'd overheard us talking about going there when you were at the coffee shop with Craig."

A confused look crossed her face. "He was at the coffee shop?"

I nodded. She stayed silent for a moment as if she were thinking about what I'd just said, replaying it in her mind over and over.

“So, he’s been stalking you?” Her eyes widened as if that very thought was insane.

And I supposed it was, but a part of me really liked the fact he’d been so enamored with me that he couldn’t stay away. “I don’t know if stalking is the right word. Looking out for me? He wanted to make sure I was okay?”

She snorted. “Um, no, sounds like stalking, just worded differently. I mean, I’m glad he was there, but it’s kind of weird that he followed us. Don’t you think?”

I didn’t respond, because I could see it from her point of view. But she also didn’t know my deepest secret. She also didn’t know the rest of what Lucian had told me.

“I feel like there’s more to the story you’re maybe not telling me?”

I nodded. “Yeah, a little bit more.” I took a deep breath. *Little* was such a broad description when it came to this. “Well, when I sat with him at the table eating breakfast, he told me that he’d wanted me for a long time, that I was his and he wasn’t going to walk away. He said he was done waiting.” The silence in the room was deafening, heavy, and I felt like it was hands wrapped around my throat, squeezing.

“Um” was all Sherry managed to say.

The look Sherry gave me was of shock, her mouth slightly open and her eyes wide. She closed her mouth, opened it again, yet no words came out.

“I love him, Sherry. I’ve been in love with him but kept it to myself.” I felt my cheeks heat after I admitted my deepest secret.

“You love him? As in you’re in love with our professor?”

I nodded, not speaking.

“Grace, you realize that being with a professor in that capacity is like a huge crossing-the-line kind of thing, right?”

I nodded.

“And he’s like so much older than you. He’s at least in his mid-thirties. You’re not even twenty-one. You’re okay with the age gap? You’re okay with the fact he seems really possessive of you, enough to follow you to the club and almost strangle a guy that was grinding on you?” She held up her hands. “Although maybe I kind of love Professor Goode for doing the latter.”

I could have laughed at that, but this moment was too serious, too sobering. “Yeah, I am okay with that.” My voice was heavy with emotion.

My heart was thundering a mile a minute, my palms were sweaty, and my tongue felt thick. I’d never uttered these words out loud to anyone, not even to myself. Yet here I was, knowing that there was no going back. Lucian wanted me, and he wasn’t going to walk away. And that’s just what I wanted.

“I mean this is a no-turning-back kind of thing, Gracie.”

“I know,” I whispered.

Why couldn’t I have what I desired? Why couldn’t I get what I deserved? The man I loved wanted me, and damn it, I wasn’t going to turn that down even if it was against the rules. Even if it was considered crossing lines.

“I hope you’re sure of what you’re doing,” Sherry said softly.

“Me too.”

She reached out and took hold of my hand. “But I’m here for you, always, okay?”

I smiled and nodded.

“And I want you to be able to confide in me about anything, even when our professor wants to make you his ... everything, apparently.” Her eyes widened, and I did laugh then.

“This is a little crazy, isn’t it?”

“A little,” she said and chuckled. “But it’ll make one hell of a story one day, right?”

I nodded, hoping she was right.

“How about we forget about this for right now and dig into that ice cream and watch some Netflix?”

“Sounds perfect.” Leave it to Sherry to make it seem like things would be okay, even if it was only for tonight and consisted of a sugar overload and a rom-com.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Grace

Later that evening

Sherry had left ten minutes ago, it was late, but here I was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling and holding my phone as I contemplated calling Lucian. He was probably asleep, and actually talking to him made me nervous.

But I couldn't stop thinking about him. All I could imagine was being with him, having him hold me, kiss me ... fuck me.

My breath started coming in faster pants, arousal licking across every part of me. I felt flushed, tempted to reach between my thighs and touch myself. This was ludicrous, but God, this all felt so incredible.

And then my phone rang.

My arousal instantly took a back seat, but as I lifted my cell and saw a number flash across the screen, the name Lucian in bold letters above that, all I could picture was him entering his number into my cell earlier today.

I licked my lips, that desire rising up almost violently once more. Should I answer? Let it go to voice mail?

No, I wanted to hear his voice. I needed to.

I hit the answer button and brought the phone to my ear. I tried to calm my breathing, but I had a feeling he'd be able to tell exactly what effect he had on me even if it was through the phone.

“Hello?” My voice was a little shaky, and I licked my lips and pushed myself up on the bed, leaning against the wall so my legs hung off the side.

“Grace.” He said my name so softly, his voice almost a husky growl. It was as if saying my name brought him immense pleasure. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

I shook my head, then realized he couldn’t see me. “No, I was awake.” *And about to touch myself to the thought of you.* I heard shuffling on the other end, almost as if he was moving against sheets. Was he in bed? I didn’t know why that surprised me. It was late. But then I thought about him lying in the bed where I had slept, his hard, lean body taking up a lot of the mattress, his sheer size making me feel so feminine and small.

“It’s late, but I needed to hear your voice, I needed to make sure you were okay after everything we’d discussed, after I told you how I felt.”

My entire body became hot, my arousal climbing even higher at just the sound of his voice. “I’m okay,” I whispered.

“Good.” He said that one word like his main concern was my well-being. That’s how I felt when he looked at me, when he said those very personal, life-changing things to me. “The last thing I want is for what I said to make you uncomfortable or afraid.”

“No, being afraid is the last thing I feel.” God, could he tell how thick my voice had become, that my desire was right there at the surface? I found myself lying back on the bed, staring at my ceiling again, thinking about how this would all play out.

“Tell me what you’re thinking about,” he said deeply, a sound that had my entire body becoming even more alive.

I started moving my legs back and forth against each other, my cheap cotton sheets seeming almost like silk as they slid against my skin. Every part of me felt on edge, ultrasensitive, and I knew if he was here, touching me, I would go off like a rocket.

“I’m not thinking of anything,” I said, my voice nothing more than a whisper.

“You’re lying.” His voice was dark ... aroused.

Was that what I heard when he spoke, that dark purr laced within his voice that had me acting out of character as I slipped my hand down my stomach and played with the button of my pants? I was so wet, my panties becoming soaked as my desire rose.

“Tell me, Grace,” he demanded gently. “Tell me what you’re thinking about right now.”

I sucked in a breath, the way he spoke causing me to feel so much lust I couldn’t even think straight, couldn’t breathe. But what I did know was that I wanted to tell him exactly what I was thinking ... exactly what I was doing. “I’m thinking about how all of this is kind of crazy and unbelievable, how my professor told me he wanted me and I don’t know how to think about all of that.”

“But how do you feel? How do I make you feel, Grace?”

My mouth was so dry. “You make me feel...” God, could I really say the words? “You make me feel alive.” There, they were out there.

“What else, baby?” He had a groan laced with those words, and the endearment had my clit tingling. I wanted to touch myself so bad. No, I wanted *him* to touch me.

“You make me feel things I didn’t know I could feel. You make me feel arousal the likes of which makes me dizzy and breathless ... makes me want to feel all the things, Lucian.” His name rolling off my tongue had me becoming wetter.

“That’s it, Grace.” I heard more shifting, more rustling of sheets. “Touch yourself, Grace. Let me know what you’re feeling, how it feels to have those fingers moving between your thighs, baby.” He groaned again, and I heard the sharp inhalation as he took a breath.

Was he touching himself, too? Was his hand wrapped around his dick right now? Was he stroking himself, thinking

about me, jerking off to the thought of me with my fingers between my thighs?

Another guttural groan left him, and I couldn't stop from moaning in return.

“Touch yourself, Grace. Tell me how good it feels.”

I moved my hand under my pants, beneath my panties, and parted my legs right as my fingers slipped along my cleft. My clit throbbed, the slightest touch of my fingers against that bundle of nerves causing me to gasp.

“Are you touching yourself, Grace?” His voice was low, causing the heat in my body to rise.

I was a volcano about to explode. I hadn't even fully touched myself yet, and I knew I could've gotten off just from hearing the deep timbre of his tone.

“Yes.” A gasp left me as a shock wave of pleasure slammed through me.

He growled, that sound vibrating through my entire body. I closed my eyes and started rubbing my clit faster, harder. My pants were in the way, inhibiting me from really working myself over. In a matter of seconds, I had the phone wedged between my shoulder and ear, shimmied the pants and panties down my thighs, pulled one leg out, and spread my thighs.

Then I had my hand right back between my legs, slipping my fingers through my slit, gathering my wetness and bringing it back to the hard little bundle of nerves at the apex of my pussy.

“Tell me what you're doing. Describe it to me, baby.”

I didn't even know if I could fully form words at this point, not as I knew my orgasm was dangerously close to the surface already and I had just started touching myself.

“How does it feel?” His voice was so heavy, his breathing so hard.

“It feels good.” My voice hitched, my breath sawing in and out of my open mouth.

“God, Grace. I wish I was there right now. It’d be my hand between your legs, my fingers rubbing that little clit of yours.”

My eyes were open, widened as pleasure shot through me.

“And then I’d part your thighs even farther, move down your body, and latch my mouth right on your center. I’d lick and suck on you until you ground your pussy against my face, until your wetness slid down my throat. I’d get you off, taste your orgasm, claim it as mine.”

“Yes,” I cried out. “Yes.”

“And when the time is right, when you’re all nice and primed for me, I’m going to claim you, baby. I’m going to take that innocence that clings to you and make it my own.”

I couldn’t think straight with the desire moving through me.

“Because you’re mine. I won’t let you go. Ever.”

And I didn’t want him to.

“Now.” His voice got harder, more determined. “Come for me, Grace.”

And then I closed my eyes, arched my back, and rubbed my finger faster over my clit. The sound of his voice, the dominance in his voice, his order it all made me intoxicated, uncontrolled.

My head was tossed back on the pillow, my entire body strung tight as pleasure coursed through every single cell in my body. I could hear Lucian groaning on the other end, the sound of his hand moving over his cock so loud it was almost like he was in the same room with me. Flesh moving over flesh, skin slapping against skin.

It made me feel drunk.

Wanted.

Needed.

It made me feel everything and more.

And just as I felt my high start to dissipate, I heard him find his own release. The guttural grunt that he made told me he was finishing off, and that spurred another smaller but still intense orgasm within me.

A low cry left me, my toes curled on their own, and my hand was soaked from my arousal. I was left lying there breathing hard, the world a whirl around me. I cared about nothing yet everything in that moment.

Things were moving so quickly, so powerfully between us, that I was left feeling as though the world was opening up and about to swallow me whole.

I had just gotten off listening to the dirty words of my professor and the sounds of him jerking off.

I should feel ashamed, but instead all I felt was ... that I wanted more.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Grace

I was nervous about going to class, at seeing Lucian after the weekend, after what he'd said to me, what I'd admitted to him ... and what we'd done over the phone.

I sat in my car in the parking lot, staring at the front entrance to the Stein Building, where Professor Goode was, where I'd have to face him and my true emotions. I wanted to tell him I loved him, but it seemed grossly inappropriate and fast, even after what all had happened.

This all seemed like a dream.

All Sunday I had worked on my paper, one that wasn't due for weeks. But I needed to keep myself busy to keep my mind off other things, mainly how I was going to face Lucian.

I held the folder in my hand, the papers inside something I'd worked tirelessly on. I wanted it to be perfect; I wanted it to reflect how hard I'd worked. Hell, I wanted it to show that my mind wasn't constantly preoccupied with Lucian.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the driver's side door, climbed out, and reached inside to grab my bag. Once the strap was on my shoulders, I headed inside. I had hours before his class, but I wanted to drop this off before then, to maybe talk with him about everything. I wanted to make it less awkward, if possible.

Although I knew that was me unable to control myself.

Professor Goode was always calm and collected, always looked like he had his shit together. Me, on the other hand, I felt like I was running around like a chicken with my head cut off.

I slowed as I approached his office, the door shut, his name etched into the frosted glass. My heart was racing, and I was starting to breathe faster, to sweat. I didn't know how long I stood there, but it seemed like forever.

I finally lifted my hand and brought my knuckles down on the glass a couple times. I took a step away, students walking back and forth behind me, oblivious to what I had with Professor Goode. I looked to the left, then to the right, wondering if they knew, if they could see how nervous I was. Could they tell that what we were doing wasn't allowed?

"Come in," he said in that deep timbre of his, his voice coming through the wood and glass and spearing right into me.

I felt an involuntary shiver race up my spine.

I grabbed the handle and turned, pulling open the door and stepping inside. The door was left partially open behind me as I stood there, staring at him as he sat behind his desk. He looked up at me, his dark gaze penetrating mine, the desire on his face instant.

"Grace," he all but growled.

He leaned back in his leather chair, resting his arms beside him, and I couldn't help but look down at how he had his shirt sleeves rolled up, his muscular, tanned forearms on display.

That was a weakness ... powerful forearms that made me feel so feminine.

"Close the door behind you." The order was laced with arousal, and I found myself reaching behind me without breaking his gaze, shutting it, and taking a deep breath in.

For long moments I just stood there, neither one of us saying anything, the heat in the room suddenly becoming scorching. I pictured me lying in bed as I spoke to him, as I touched myself and got off.

That had been something I'd never done before, but I realized I wanted to do more of it with Lucian.

I wanted to do so much more.

What was I supposed to say? Was I supposed to act like this was a student/teacher relationship when it was anything but?

I curled my fingers tighter around the folder and took the few steps that were required to get to his desk. He didn't say anything as he watched me set the folder down in front of him. Then I took a step back, rubbing my hand up and down my thigh.

He lowered his gaze to watch the act, then lifted his attention back up to look at me.

"You're nervous." He said it softly, not phrasing it like a question.

Of course I was, yet he seemed so collected.

"I wanted to hand in my paper in person." God, it was so hot in his office.

"It's not due for weeks, Grace."

I swallowed and nodded. My throat was so dry and tight. "I worked on it all Sunday to keep busy." Why did I admit that?

"Keep busy?" He lifted a brow and kept his focus trained right on me.

Before I could answer, he stood and walked toward me. There was only a couple of feet between us now, his big body leaning against the side of the desk, his arms crossed over his muscular chest. I felt the breath being sucked right out of me from the sight of him.

"Why don't you tell me why you had to keep busy, Grace?" He lifted a brow, an inquisitive expression on his face, but also one of desire.

He knew exactly why I had to keep busy, knew that my thoughts had been consumed by him and how he made me

feel. I could see the truth written across his face.

I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I didn't want to make a fool out of myself. I was so inexperienced in this situation ... in anything sexual if I was being completely honest.

Here was my professor, somebody I was in love with, someone who had gotten me off and hadn't even touched me, and I had no idea how to explain any of this. I didn't even know how to process it myself.

He reached out, and I froze, felt his fingers brush along the side of my neck as he pushed the hair off my shoulder. I felt like this was something he enjoyed doing, as if he derived pleasure from it as much as I did.

"Tell me, Grace." His voice was so low and deep, urging me to answer him, to be honest.

"I had to keep busy because all I could think about was you." I could've slapped my hand over my mouth, the words spilling from me before I could fully comprehend that they'd come out. But they hung between us, the truth—or partially so—not able to be taken back.

I heard this deep sound leave him and watched as he pushed off his desk, taking a step toward me. I could've reached out and curled my hands around his shirt, brought him closer to me, rose up on my toes and pressed my mouth to his.

That's what I really wanted to do.

"Were you thinking about you and me, how you felt when we were on the phone, the dirty things I was telling you to do to yourself?"

I found myself nodding, not wanting to lie to him. What good would that do anyway? I wanted to be truthful, wanted to tell him that I was in love with him. Maybe I just needed to come out and say it? Maybe then he'd see the depth of how I felt? Maybe then he'd understand if he got involved with me it wouldn't just be this one-time thing.

But as I looked into his eyes, repeated his words in my head, I knew this wasn't just a one-off for him. Maybe he

wanted me the same way I wanted him? I wouldn't know until I asked him, until I told him.

I felt the words rise up in my throat, sit on the tip of my tongue. But I was afraid, worried that saying something so deep and profound would ruin everything. I didn't want that to happen, especially since I'd finally gotten the object of my love.

He took another step toward me, sliding his hand behind my neck, his body heat spearing into mine. I had my hand wrapped tightly around the strap of my backpack, everything else fading away except this one moment.

And then he started walking forward, using his body to make me move backward. It wasn't long before I felt the wall stop my retreat, and felt his fingers wrap around the strap of my bag and pull it off my shoulder.

He set it down beside my feet, then trailed his fingers up the outside of my thigh, settling them on the hem of my skirt. Tingles shot throughout my entire body, and my heart pounded against my ribs. I didn't know what he had planned, but I was so ready for it.

“Was that the first time you've gotten yourself off by listening to someone talk dirty to you?”

I nodded, my voice lodged in my throat. My affirmation had him growling.

“Good.” He lowered his gaze to my mouth, and I found myself licking my lips. “If I'm being completely honest, the very thought of another man even looking in your direction sends me into a rage.” His eyes dropped to half-mast, and I felt myself become wetter.

I clenched my thighs together, the skirt I wore rubbing against my skin, my body ultrasensitive in a matter of seconds. I held my breath. Could I really be that honest with him?

Yes. I needed to be. “I've never been with a man,” I whispered softly. “I've never done what we did over the phone.” He made a low sound of approval and took a step

forward. I felt his erection digging into my belly, a hot, hard length that had a small gasp leaving me.

He felt monstrous behind his jeans, so big I actually wondered if he'd fit inside of me.

He had his hands precariously close to the edge of my skirt, his fingertips brushing my bare skin. I think part of me had wished something like this would happen when I came to his office, and so I'd worn something that would allow him easy access.

I felt so dizzy, every erogenous zone in my body alive.

“Do you want me to touch you?”

I nodded, the breath coming out of me in short pants.

“Tell me where you want me to touch you then, Grace.”

God, I didn't think I could actually say the words. Never had I been so bold and brazen, so transparent with my wants and needs. But with Lucian I felt those walls crumbling, the desire to be completely open with him important to me.

So I reached between our bodies and gripped his thick wrist, moving his hand between my thighs, up and under my skirt until his fingers lay right against the sofa fabric of my cotton panties. I heard him take a sharp breath in; then this slow, almost animalistic sound left him.

The sight of his pupils dilating, the black eating up the dark brown color, sent my pulse into overdrive.

As he stared at me, I felt him rub his fingers over my pussy, the panties a poor excuse for a barrier.

“Fuck, you're so damn wet for me. These little panties are soaked clean through, Grace.”

My lips were parted, and I swore I would pass out from not getting enough oxygen. He leaned in enough that his mouth was so close to mine I doubted a single piece of paper could fit between our lips.

“All I can think about is how you'll taste.” He added pressure to my clit, and I rose on my toes. When he spoke, his

lips gently brushed against mine. “All I can imagine is how you’ll feel climaxing with my dick deep inside of your tight little body.”

God, I thought I could come right now, before he even really touched me.

My hands were now wrapped around his biceps, holding on as if he were my lifeline and if I let go, I’d float away. As he stared into my eyes, he slipped his finger under the edge of my panties, pulled them aside, then touched me fully.

“God,” I whispered on a strangled groan. His finger was thick and big, warm and sliding through my cleft. He never once took his gaze off mine.

He said nothing else as he started sliding a thick finger up and down, gently rubbing the pad of that digit against my clit and making these sounds that had my toes curling and my nails digging into his arms. I couldn’t think straight, let alone breathe for how he made me feel.

His gaze kept darting from my eyes to my lips and then back to my eyes again. I wanted him to kiss me, to plunge his tongue deep inside my body like I wanted him to do between my thighs.

“Spread your legs a little more for me,” he said gruffly.

I parted my legs a little bit, but he wedged his foot between mine, pushing them apart further. I had to brace my hands on his shoulders to steady myself. And then I felt the tip of his finger probing my entrance.

I bit my lip, the pain and sting not even enough to bring me back to the present. I was floating high above and never wanted to touch ground again.

Lucian slowly started to penetrate me with that finger, not very deep, but enough that the unusual sensation, discomfort, and spark of pleasure was almost my undoing.

“So tight. So wet.” He closed his eyes. “So fucking hot.”

A groan left me, and I bit my lip hard enough I tasted the coppery tang of blood on my tongue. I let go of my flesh at the

same time he looked down at my mouth.

And then he was smoothing his tongue along the small wound I'd created, pulling a moan from me that was equal parts shock and ecstasy.

I wouldn't last, couldn't hold off from going over the edge. I didn't want to. Wanted to fall over the edge and hit the bottom. I didn't want to be whole, not where Lucian was concerned.

As he pumped that finger in and out of me, he ran the pad of that digit over the bundle of nerves, working his hand in tandem to get me off. My head was leaning against the wall, my eyes closed. I couldn't open them, couldn't look at him even though I wanted to. I wanted to see what he looked like as he got me off.

And then I felt his mouth latch on to my neck, his tongue smoothing over my pulse. The gruff sounds that came from him spurred me on, had me finding my release faster than what I thought possible.

"I need you to come for me, Grace. I want you to get off all over my hand." His words were harsh. "I want my fingers soaked from your orgasm."

"Oh. God." I tried to be quiet, didn't want anyone to hear us. But it was almost impossible with the way I felt, with the way Lucian made me feel.

"Now, Grace. Come for me now."

I curled my fingers into my palms, thrust out my chest, and moaned. The pleasure shot through me so intensely it stole my breath, had my heart stopping in my chest, and had my legs shaking. All I could do was ride it out.

And that's what I did. For long-drawn-out seconds I let myself be consumed by the ecstasy. Never once did Lucian stop touching me. He took me to new heights I'd never imagined myself going to.

As the pleasure started to dim and reality set back in, I realized I was gripping his biceps, my fingers curled around

his arms, my nails digging into his flesh. I was panting, the sound so loud it filled the room.

“Look at me, Grace,” Lucian said in that deep, authoritative voice of his.

I opened my eyes and forced myself to look at him, feeling light-headed, euphoric. He stared at me for only a second before he curled his hand around my nape, leaned in, and pressed his mouth to mine.

He kissed me slowly at first, passionately. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and held on tight. He stepped closer to me, and I felt the hard outline of his cock through his slacks. A rush of wetness spilled from me.

I was ready for him, primed.

I slipped my tongue between his lips and moaned, and as the kiss became even more passionate, as Lucian ground his cock against my belly, I knew that if I let myself, if we both let ourselves go right in this moment, he'd consume me over and over again.

And I'd let him because I desperately wanted all of it.

And then the sound of three knocks on his office door had my entire body freezing, and my heart stopping. I broke the kiss and looked toward the door, staring at the handle and expecting it to turn, expecting someone just to storm right in, demand to know what we were doing.

Lucian still had his hands on me, still kept me close. I looked at him and saw how composed he was, no worry etched into his face, no concern radiating from him.

He lifted his hand and cupped the side of my face, smoothing his thumb along my lip, gently pulling the flesh down and letting it go so it went back into place.

“Professor Goode? I have those files you requested.”

I knew that voice, knew who stood on the other side of the door. It was his TA, Ashley.

Fear and concern at being caught and Lucian getting in trouble coursed through me. But as I stared into Lucian's dark

eyes, his calmness further eased me. He leaned in and kissed me softly. This kiss wasn't sexual. It was a mark of ownership.

He pulled back and took my hand, leading me over to one of the chairs and gently sitting me down. I watched, my arousal rising once again, as he adjusted his erection behind his fly and went back to sit behind his desk.

“Come in, Ashley.”

I tried to keep my hands still, but they shook, the aftereffects of my orgasm still coursing through me. His TA opened the door, her attention on the files she held as she looked through the papers.

She stood by his desk, not even realizing I was sitting there, as she started talking to him about class assignments, papers that were graded, and midterms coming up. And the whole time Lucian stared right at me, a small, satisfied smirk on his face. He said something to her, but all I heard was this buzzing in my ears, drowning everything else out.

“Thank you, Ashley,” he said while still staring at me. “That’ll be it for the day.”

It was then that she looked up at him, saw his attention on me, and looked over at where I sat. Her eyes widened a little bit, and she pushed her glasses up her nose.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t know you were in here with a student.”

I had my hands curled tightly together, hoping she couldn’t tell that I was flushed because Professor Goode had just gotten me off against the side of the wall.

I gave her a tight-lipped smile and was thankful when she excused herself and left, shutting the door behind her.

The breath I’d been holding released, and I looked over at Lucian. He still had that small smile on his face, and I felt a flash of heat start at my neck and cover my face.

And then I watched as he looked at his hand and ran his tongue across his fingers, the same ones that had just been buried deep inside of my body. My mouth parted slightly, and

a small sound escaped me. He hummed low, the sound of his pleasure filling the office.

“The flavor of you on my fingers makes me never want to wash my fucking hands.”

God, the things he said to me turned me on so much.

“Tonight, Grace. I’m going to pick you up and take you out. I don’t care who sees. You’re mine. Do you understand what that means?”

I found myself nodding, realizing exactly how connected we were, how much Lucian really wanted me. There was no going back.



Professor Goode

SHE’D LEFT ten minutes ago, and all I wanted to do was bring her back into my office, to finish what we’d started. I still couldn’t focus, couldn’t get back to work. The image of her in my head, the scent of her on my fingers, the taste of her on my tongue, had me feeling feral.

I lifted my hand and brought the digits to my nose, closing my eyes and inhaling deeply. She smelled sweet and musky. She smelled like she was all mine.

I opened my mouth and sucked on my fingers, her flavor exploding on my tongue. I would forever know what she tasted like, the very essence of her ingrained in my cells, my very marrow.

I was still hard as fucking rock, my damn cock digging against my zipper, the need to relieve myself strong. But I wanted to wait, wanted to be buried deep between her thighs when I came.

My office door was closed, and I contemplated relieving myself just a little. I had my hand curled tightly around the armrest of my chair, my arousal so fucking far gone that I wanted to say fuck waiting and just get myself off. My balls

were drawn up tight, and my desire pumped through my veins. I used my other hand to unzip my slacks, reached between the fly, and pulled out my dick.

The groan was ripped from me when I touched myself.

I moved my hand over my length, from root to tip, moving my palm over the head and grunting as pleasure and sensitivity slammed into me. Pre-cum lined the tip of my shaft, and I used it as lubrication, dragging my hand back down my dick and squeezing when I reached the base.

Fuck, I was so turned on I probably could've come with a couple more strokes.

But I forced myself to stop, tucked my cock back into my slacks, and zipped it up. I had both hands on the armrests now, my fingers curled around the leather, a creaking sound from the force I used filling my head.

Tonight would be the night I finally took her, when I irrevocably claimed Grace. She'd be tied to me, know that I wasn't going to give her up.

Tonight I'd have her in my bed, my body positioned between her thighs, my cock deep inside of her. I'd make her come so many times she couldn't stand, couldn't sit comfortably for how sensitive she was.

I was going to devour her, and when it was all said and done, I'd do it all over again.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Grace

“I can’t believe you’re actually doing this.”

I glanced over at Sherry. She was sitting on top of a stainless-steel table that was pushed up against the wall in the back room of the coffee shop.

I’d locked up twenty minutes ago, had brought a change of clothes with me, and was so nervous my hands were shaking as I undid my hair from the ponytail and finger combed it. I should’ve just told him to meet me at my place, or that I’d meet him at the restaurant.

But the thought of him picking me up, making this feel like a real date, thrilled me. So, here I was, looking at myself in the small mirror above the sink in the corner, wondering exactly what was going to happen tonight.

Oh, I knew what I wanted to happen, but whether or not Lucian would be able to control himself was another matter. His willpower was strong, far stronger than mine. Whereas I would’ve let him fuck me right there in his office with students and faculty coming and going right outside his office door, he’d been able to calmly compose himself and talk to his TA like he hadn’t had a finger deep in my pussy just moments before.

I braced my hands on the sink and breathed out slowly. I turned and faced Sherry and saw she had her full attention on me. “This is insane, I know it, but it feels so right. It feels so good.”

She tipped her head to the side and gave me a small smile. “You really are that far gone for him, aren’t you?”

I licked my lips and nodded. “I love him, Sherry, and a part of that scares me because I feel it so intensely.” Maybe I shouldn’t have blurted it out right here, right now, but she was the only one I trusted implicitly to talk with about this.

“Gracie, just be careful, okay? You’re so much younger than he is. I don’t know anything about Professor Goode, but just the way he looks, the way he handles himself, it’s clear he’s always in control, has his shit together. I don’t know how experienced he is in any of this, but I know you. I know how deeply you care.” She gave me a sad but warm smile. “I know that he could really hurt you if he wanted to and he wouldn’t even realize how deep it went. You’re such an open book, your heart so big that I know if you let him fully in and things don’t work out, you’ll be shattered.”

She was right, and I think a part of my fear stemmed from that. But I also wanted to tell her that that wasn’t how it was between us, that I could feel how much he wanted me. That I could feel how deep his feelings ran for me.

They were bottomless. Just like mine.

When I looked into his eyes, I could see that truth, and I had reached out and grabbed it, held on to it like there was nothing else that could keep me stable.

I’d loved him hard, fast, and undeniably. And although I felt how much he wanted me, cared about me too, I just hoped my emotions didn’t drag me down to where there was no coming back.

Sherry hopped off the table and walked over to me. She smoothed her fingers through my hair, fluffing up the locks, and then smiled and took a step back.

“So pretty.” She looked me up and down, giving me an approving hum.

“Not too plain?”

She shook her head. “Just perfect.”

I looked at the clock on the wall and knew Lucian would be here any moment.

“Hey, just be yourself. That’s why he fell for you in the first place.” She walked over to the table and grabbed her purse. “I’ll sneak out the back so it’s not weird, me being there when he shows up.”

I nodded. I didn’t know how public he planned on making this. Surely if people knew about us, he could get in serious trouble. But then again, he was picking me up at the coffee shop, where anyone could see us from school. Which led me to believe he really didn’t give a shit who saw.

“Call me if you need to. If I don’t hear from you the rest of the night, I’ll take that as a good sign.” She gave me a white, straight-toothed grin. “But tomorrow I expect details. I don’t care how dirty they are.”

She winked, and I felt my face heat before I smiled and watched her leave out the back door, the lock automatically clicking in place.

This was it.

I walked out of the back room and around the counter just as I saw Lucian step up to the front door. Taking a deep breath, I told myself that tonight would most definitely change everything.

A date with my professor might seem so mundane to some, but it wasn’t for me. It was far from it.

I walked up to the front door and unlocked it, pulling it open and instantly smelling the fresh, clean, chilled air from the outside. A slight breeze picked up, blowing some of the strands of my hair along my collarbones, causing chills to race up my arms and legs.

He said nothing as he looked at me, gazed at my body from the tips of my toes to the top of my head. This low sound of approval left him, and I felt my body instantly come alive, arousal moving over every inch of me.

“Gorgeous,” he said in that deep, masculine voice that made me feel so feminine. “I love your hair down.” He

reached out and took some of my hair, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger before leaning in close and bringing the locks to his nose. He inhaled deeply as he held his gaze with mine, and I felt the air being sucked right from my lungs. He straightened and let go of my hair almost reluctantly.

It wasn't like I was overly dressed, but I was wearing a black pencil skirt, some peep-toe heels Sherry had loaned me, and a baby blue cashmere cardigan set that my mother had given me when I graduated high school.

This was as fancy as it got when it came to me.

He held his hand out, and I didn't hesitate as I slipped mine into his. I stepped outside, closed and locked the door behind me, and told myself to be calm.

I faced him and smiled, wanting nothing more than to kiss him.

He looked torn in that moment as he leaned in close and gently brushed his lips against mine. "The spell you've put on me has me mesmerized, Grace," he whispered against my mouth.

When he pulled back, I looked around, worried that someone might have seen. I didn't want him to get in trouble.

"Let them stare. I don't care if they do." He took my hand in his. "In fact, I want everyone to know you're mine."

My heart did a little flip in my chest. There was definitely no going back now. I'd jumped in feet first and anticipated what was next.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Professor Goode

I'd contemplated where to take Grace tonight, even thought about just preparing her dinner at my place. We would have been alone ... I would have had her all to myself.

But I wanted us to have a private experience, to have people serve us so I could completely focus on her.

It wasn't that I didn't want to be seen with her—my student—but I wanted this to be personal, intimate. And so I'd decided to go to Vincenzo's, the small Italian restaurant owned by a personal friend, one who would close the place down for me so it could just be Grace and me.

I pulled into the parking lot and cut the engine. It was deserted aside from three cars parked in the very back. I knew one of them was Vincenzo's sleek Lexus. The other I had to assume was the waitstaff and chef.

I climbed out of the driver's seat and made my way around the front of the car to the passenger-side door. I wanted this to be perfect, wanted this to be memorable for her. Hell, I wanted to show her that even though I was completely fucking obsessed and possessive of her, I could be a gentleman.

I could be gentle.

I opened the passenger-side door and held my hand out. I instantly felt aroused when she slipped her smaller palm against mine, curled her fingers into me, and allowed me to

help her out. My gaze was trained on her body as she unfurled from the interior of the car.

Long legs, a tucked-in waist, and perfectly sized breasts that were pressed against her cardigan. God, she was fucking gorgeous.

When she was standing, I shut the car door, wanting nothing more than to pull her close to my body, cup the side of her face, and kiss her soundly. But we had plenty of time for that, so much fucking time. I didn't want her thinking all I wanted was her body.

I wanted all of her.

Instead I led her toward the restaurant. A sign on the front window showed that the restaurant was closed for a private affair.

My private affair with Grace.

I pulled the door open for her and let her walk in before me. The soft sound of music playing in the background set the ambience with the low lighting and the scent of freshly baked bread.

Vincenzo's was known for its incredible and authentic Italian cuisine. Featured in many papers and magazines since it opened, with reviews all positive, the restaurant always had a long wait list.

Vincenzo and I went way back to when we were both trying to stay out of trouble so we didn't disgrace our families.

But that was a whole other story, one I knew I'd have to tell Grace at some point. This wasn't a one-time thing for me where she was concerned, and because of that I wanted her to know all of me, not just the professor she saw at the front of that classroom.

Not just the man who loved her.

I stepped up beside Grace and immediately slipped my hand into hers. She looked over at me, a little bit shocked, and I couldn't help but smile, the innocence pouring from her so strong I actually felt drunk from it.

“Lucian,” I heard Vincenzo say as he made his way toward us.

He had a smile on his face and his arms outstretched. His jet-black hair was cut short and slicked back from his face, and his equally dark eyes were creased at the sides as he grinned widely.

He embraced me instantly. “It’s been too long, my friend.”

I pulled back and nodded. “It has been.”

He put his attention on Grace, and his expression softened. “Bella,” he said and took her hand, leaning down and kissing the back of it gently. “Welcome.”

If this had been anyone other than Vincenzo, I would’ve been in a blind rage that they had touched Grace and called her beautiful. And even though I felt the sting of possessiveness and jealousy that Vincenzo had done it, I knew he had no lewd thoughts concerning her.

“Please,” he said and moved to the side, gesturing for us to follow him.

The restaurant was small, with a handful of tables in the center of the room, and booths lined up around the sides of the wall.

“I have you set up at our nicest table, with the prettiest view.”

He took us to the very back, where a large picture window showed a small pond, a lining of thick trees around it, and a soft glow from the decorative lights giving an ethereal ambience to the setting.

The table in front of the window was a two-seater, with a candle lit in the center and white china place settings.

I held the chair out for Grace, and she sat, her hands slightly shaking. I hated that she was nervous, but was also a little bit thrilled that I’d been the one to cause this reaction in her.

It told me her emotions ran deep, and even though she cared for me, a physical affirmation of that pleased me.

After I gave the wine order to Vincenzo and we were left alone, I sat there and stared at her, the soft glow from the candlelight casting small shadows along her face. I loved that she'd left her hair down for me, the dark strands making my fingers itch to touch them again. They'd been so soft, and the scent, sweet yet floral, turned me on.

She was looking out the window, her profile showing me her delicate nose, the slight slope of it, how it was so feminine. Her lips were full, pouty and pink. I thought about kissing her, about how she felt against me, how she tasted on my tongue.

Grace looked at me then, maybe feeling my gaze on her. The way her cheeks turned slightly red had this feral sensation filling me.

“What?” she asked softly.

“Nothing.” I smiled, and she looked away, her hair slightly obstructing her from my view. “It’s just hard to take my eyes off you.”

She smiled softly, sweetly, and I wanted to reach out and run my finger along the edge of her lips, to feel the slight upturn, to know that I was the one who put it there.

“Tell me about yourself,” I said just as Vincenzo brought the bottle of wine and two glasses. He didn’t say anything as he poured us each a glass, set the bottle off to the side, and gave a slight nod of his head before leaving us in private.

Dinner tonight was chef’s choice, and I was thankful for the extra time to talk with Grace without any interruption.

I picked up my glass and gently twirled the liquid inside of the clear crystal. I brought it to my nose and inhaled deeply, the scent of berries filling my head. I stared at Grace as I tipped the glass back and took a small sip, letting the liquid run along my tongue before sliding down my throat.

And the whole time I kept my focus on Grace.

The wine tasted spicy yet sweet, with hints of summer and warmth. When I set my glass down, I saw her eyeing hers. She wasn’t twenty-one yet, but that made no difference. I wasn’t trying to get her drunk.

“Try it, Grace. You can’t have authentic Italian food without a glass of good wine.” I leaned in close and gently pushed the glass toward her. “And this is a very good year.”

She picked up the glass, her fingers delicate as they wrapped around the stem.

“The year?” she said softly.

“The year you were born.”

Her eyes widened slightly.

“This wine is twenty years old?”

I nodded and leaned back in my seat.

My focus went right to her hand once more. That small, fragile bone in her wrist could be seen underneath her skin, so delicate as she brought the glass up. I watched in amazement and desire as she took a sip. Grace closed her eyes and swallowed, a slight hum of approval leaving her.

“Tell me what you taste.”

She opened her eyes, and I saw her pupils were dilated. “It’s spicy but has hints of sweetness.” She set the glass down as a little sigh escaped. “I’ve never been much of a drinker, but that wine tasted—”

“Exquisite?”

She nodded.

Just like you.

“What do you want to know about me?”

“Anything. Everything. I just want to hear your voice. I want to know everything there is to know about you, Grace.”

She smiled, a look of embarrassment covering her face. I didn’t stop myself as I reached across the table and took her hand in mine, smoothing my thumb over her pulse that beat rapidly under the soft skin of her wrist. But I let go of it and didn’t linger.

“There’s not much to tell. I’m pretty much as plain as they come.”

I shook my head slowly, my fingers wrapped loosely around the wineglass, moving the digits along the smooth stem. It was idle work, something to keep me busy, because if not I'd have her in my lap and be kissing her until we were both on the verge of losing it.

"There's nothing plain about you, Grace." She lifted her hand and tucked her hair behind her ear, the little pearls she wore catching the light and shining slightly.

"My mother and father are divorced. He lives in Florida with his new wife now. They just had a baby last year." She looked up at me, this vulnerability in her expression. It was like she had never talked about herself to anyone else, had never bared herself. "I've never seen the baby in person. It's kind of weird to think about visiting them when his new wife isn't much older than I am."

I didn't like that she seemed upset talking about this, and I was about to tell her we didn't have to talk about it anymore, but she took a deep breath in and I knew she wanted to say more.

"So it's just been my mother and me for the past couple years." She was staring at her wineglass, the candle catching it and casting light prisms along the table.

I could see she was flustered in what she'd said, her mind elsewhere. I didn't like that. I wanted her here, in the present with me.

There was so much I wanted her to tell me, so much I wanted to know about Grace. I wanted to know what her favorite food was, her favorite smell. I wanted to know if she liked sunsets or sunrises better. I wanted to know what she thought about before she fell asleep, what was the first thing that came to her mind when she woke up.

I wanted to know everything, but I didn't want to take her to a dark place, and it was clear that the divorce of her parents, the fact her father had moved on with someone close to her age and had another child, bothered her immensely.

So as much as I didn't want to tell her about my past so soon, wanted to work up to that, talking about myself might bring her back around to where she wasn't drowning in her worries.

The waitress brought out the *antipasto*, but my appetite had taken a nosedive.

“My parents died when I was young, and I ended up moving in with my uncle.” She looked up at me then, and I saw instantly that her thoughts weren't on the problems in her life anymore. She looked concerned for me, sad even. “My uncle was a hard man, cold and reclusive. He was a self-made multimillionaire and was so engrossed with his wealth that he kept people at a distance. He had no emotions, didn't make personal connections or relationships with anyone.”

“God, I'm so sorry.”

I gave her a tight smile and hated that the atmosphere had gone melancholy, but I wanted her to know every aspect of my life.

“The only reason he took me in was because he didn't have an heir, and the thought of losing everything once he died had the selfish part of him rising up.” I picked up my glass and took another long sip, thinking about the past, about how everything had played out in my life. “He didn't care for me. In fact, when I moved in with him, that was the first time I had ever met him. He and my father had never been close and had actually been estranged since before I was even born.”

I thought about how whenever my uncle had been brought up in conversation, my father would close up, get angry. It was rare that his name was uttered in our house, but every time it had been, my father became closed off, hateful even.

“What a lonely life to lead.”

I didn't know if she was talking about my uncle, my father, or, hell, me. But she was right regardless. “To this day I don't know what caused them to hate each other so much.”

Grace was the one to reach out and take my hand in hers, and electricity and pleasure moved through me. “It's probably

better that way. You don't have to carry that burden."

In that instant she took everything away, the dark memories of being alone after my parents passed, and the sadness that tried to creep up and claim me. She was the light, and I was desperate for it, having lived my entire life with shadows surrounding me. I just wanted to grasp on to her and not let go.

"I really am sorry, Lucian," she said softly.

I didn't stop myself from leaning across the table, cupping the side of her face, and kissing her. She tasted of wine, sweet and potent, addictive and mine. I forced myself to sit back, but all I wanted to do was keep kissing her, to have our lips pressed together until we were breathless, until the control was completely snapped in two.

"It was so long ago it feels like another life." I cleared my throat and saw the waitress bringing our food.

Nothing was said as the first course was brought out. It was *Il Primo*, a garlic and butter infused gnocchi. We ate in silence, and before the topic could be broached again, the *Il Secondo* was served, which consisted of a delicious chicken dish I knew was from the northern parts of Italy where Vincenzo's family was from. With the chicken, the *Contorno* was served, a fresh salad with vinegar and oil dressing, and topped with a sprinkling of salt and pepper.

Vincenzo came by to make sure everything looked perfect, and then left us.

The silence stretched between us, and although I didn't want to spoil our meal with talk of how shitty my past had been, I'd already opened that box.

"You don't have to talk about it. I know it's painful."

She was so empathetic, so perfect in every way.

"I want to tell you. I want you to be let into every part of my life."

"I'd like that, Lucian." The way she said my name had my pulse racing.

“My childhood consisted of being in my uncle’s shadow, learning the business, and being promptly neglected. I had no friends once I moved in with him. I was shut out from the rest of the world.” And fuck had I been isolated. “And the only time he ever did show me any kind of attention was when he wanted to talk business, wanted to show me how things were run. In that moment I was that young child who just missed his parents and hated his life.”

The clank of my fork against my plate when I picked it up seemed overly loud. “My father had always told me to be strong, so I endured being alone, having nannies and being homeschooled, knowing that the life I once had was no more.” I heard Vincenzo’s voice in the distance and couldn’t help but smile. “And then there was Vincenzo, the son of my uncle’s head of landscaping. We’d come from two opposite ends of the spectrum, but we became best friends. And it was during the summers when he’d spend most of his time at my uncle’s estate with his father, that I realized I wasn’t so alone.”

I glanced up and saw she watched me, a sad expression on her face, her food untouched. I cleared my throat again and shifted on the seat.

“Enough talk about that. It was so long ago, and life has changed since then. Please, eat and enjoy your meal.” She picked up her fork and started eating, not saying anything. But I could feel this heaviness surrounding her. And then I felt her gaze on me, knew that she had questions.

“But you became an educator instead? You didn’t end up following in his footsteps after all that?”

I took a bite of the entrée, chewed and swallowed, and then washed it down with a sip of wine. I shook my head. “My uncle passed away a decade ago. And although things had been secured, his business relations, his wealth, all of that already in place so it could sustain itself, I knew running things wasn’t what I wanted in life.” I watched as she took a bite of her meal, the way her lips wrapped around the fork an erotic sight that was turning me on.

God, anything having to do with Grace aroused me.

“I refused to accept that was my future.” I smiled, a genuine one that wasn’t filled with the burden of having the past weighing on me. Although my uncle’s business had been placed in my name, although technically I owned the wealth, that’s not what I focused on. “And so, I decided to do what I loved, to follow in my father’s footsteps. I went to school to become a teacher, to become the man you see now.”

The smile she gave me was sweet. She was happy for me, and that made me feel like I was on top of the fucking world.

We finished our meal just as the *Formaggio e Frutta* was served.

“I’ve never had an authentic Italian meal before,” Grace said as she stared at the fruits and cheese on the platter.

“This is to clear our pallets in preparation for the desserts,” I said and picked up a strawberry, not able to help myself as I extended my arm and offered it to her. She hesitated for a second before opening her mouth and allowing me to feed her. This low sound of possessiveness came from me as her soft lips touched my fingers when she ate the fruit from my fingertips.

And that’s what I did with the rest of the fruit, fed her from my hand and grew hard with need.

When the coffee and dessert came, homemade cannolis and fresh whipped cream, I couldn’t help myself from dipping my index finger into the cream and bringing the digit to her mouth. “And this is the *Dolce*, the final course.”

I was rock-hard at this point, so ready for her that I was at the point where I almost said fuck who would see us and took her right then and there. And as we stared at each other, as the heat increased and the conversation that had grown so heavy started to dissipate, the only thing left between us in that moment was solid need.

It was raw and hungry, and it would eat us alive if we didn’t give in to it.

I felt that with everything in me.

But Grace held the power, and she was in control of this moment.

“Take me to your place, Lucian,” she whispered as I looked into her face.

I wanted nothing more than to hold Grace, to kiss her and show her that there wasn't anything else more important in this moment, in this fucking world than the two of us being together.

“I need to be with you.”

I groaned, unable to help myself at hearing her say those words. And then a beast rose up in me and I was helpless to stop it. I stood and walked toward her, pulled her from her seat, and had my lips pressed to hers a second later. I fucked her mouth in the way I knew I'd be doing between her thighs tonight. I didn't care who watched, who saw me claiming her in this way. I wanted everyone to know that she was mine and that nothing would come between us.

And God, I couldn't wait to take her innocence ... to make her mine.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Grace

I felt out of my element a little, like I was walking through a dream—a really good one, but a dream nonetheless. After dinner Lucian had taken us to his place ... like I'd asked, hell, pretty much begged him to do.

That was also another thing so unlike me. I never asked, all but demanded what I wanted, but with Lucian I felt myself wanting to jump out of the box I'd put myself in. And then when he'd opened himself up to me, told me about his life, his past, I knew in that moment that we were one and the same.

I had a loving family, a mother who was always there for me. My father was another story entirely, but the loneliness I could see in Lucian was one I'd felt countless times. By nature I was a solitary person, living life by keeping people at arm's length.

And it had been in that one moment that I realized my love for him was true, justified, and consuming.

Now here I was, back at his apartment, my head clear but my nerves taking over.

As I walked through his apartment, taking everything in, learning about Lucian through his things, I couldn't help but feel closer to him.

It was modest but had lavish accents, as if he'd plucked each piece out of a different time period, a different era. I walked toward the painting hanging on the wall, a large piece that had a tiny light illuminating it from the top, the glow

showing the sweeping lines of color, the intricate way it all came together.

I moved on to the bookshelves, massive oak ones that were filled with books, most looking old, the leather spines having gold leaf accents. I ran my fingers over each one, and I swore I could feel their gaze, the knowledge they held inside those pages.

I moved to the window, a large, picturesque one that looked out onto his backyard, the cityscape beyond vast, beautiful.

When I turned, I saw the black piano, gleaming under the dim light, the ivory keys so white and pristine. I'd been so out of it my first night here that I didn't remember any of this.

And among his worldly things, I noticed the one piece of decor he was missing.

Pictures. Of his family, friends ... of himself.

I faced Lucian, saw him standing in the entryway to his kitchen, the lights off aside from the low entryway one he'd turned on when we arrived. The shadows played across his body, accenting the lean and cut muscle underneath his tailored slacks and Oxford shirt.

My mouth went dry, knowing he watched me even though I couldn't see his face clearly, couldn't make out his eyes with the darkness that surrounded him.

He'd let me wander, looking at his possessions, running my fingers over them.

He pushed away from the wall and took a step toward me, slipping his hands into the pockets of his slacks, his head slightly lowered as he continued to watch me. I moved closer to the piano, saw he tracked my movements like a predator watching his prey. The hairs on my arms stood on end from awareness, from realizing that in this moment I was very much at the mercy of Lucian, of my feelings.

I felt like he stalked me, like he knew my every move before I even took the step.

“How about some wine?” he asked, but it wasn’t so much a question as him telling me that’s what he was going to get for us no matter what.

“Okay,” I said softly and then licked my lips.

Lucian went into the kitchen, the sound of cabinets opening and wineglasses clinking together drowning out some of the stillness in the air. I sat on the bench and ran my fingers along the smooth keys of the piano, the ivory cool to the touch, the feeling of soft silkiness beneath the pads of my digits comforting.

I didn’t know how to play, but I could picture Lucian sitting right in this very spot, his fingers moving effortlessly over the keys, the sounds he created filling the air. I closed my eyes, picturing that very moment, imagining being in the room with him as he played.

I hadn’t heard him come back, and when I felt him stand behind me, his arms pressed right next to mine, his fingers over mine, a small sound escaped me. I snapped my eyes open and was about to turn, but he made a soft, almost disapproving sound in the back of his throat. I sat there frozen, unable to move, the side of his face so close to mine, his chest barely brushing against my back.

I stared straight ahead, could feel that he was as well. And then I felt him slide his hands underneath mine. My fingers now rested on top of his, mirrored, a parallel image of what he was doing. He didn’t speak, but his close proximity was so intense it had my arousal rising to the surface viciously.

I clenched my thighs together as wetness started to pool on my panties. I felt my nipples harden underneath my blouse. Fire licked over my skin, from the tips of my fingers to the bottom of my feet. I tried to breathe normally, to attempt to act like this wasn’t affecting me. But I failed miserably.

And then he started playing, my fingers still over his, as if I were a child stepping on his feet and he moved with me, my actions mirroring his. He was so calm, so collected as he played the piano, the notes filling the room, surrounding us,

like little bee stings all along my body. I started breathing harder, this moment so intimate I couldn't even concentrate.

I parted my mouth, breathing deeper, the air coming in and out of me in short, fast pants. And still he moved fluidly over the keys, playing a song I didn't know but was mesmerized with. I curled my toes against the soles of my shoes, pulled my legs closer to my body so my feet were now on the tips, my thighs clenched tightly together.

The flow of arousal was constant between my thighs.

The way I had my legs, pressing on that bundle of nerves at the apex of my pussy, had me nearly moaning. The feel of his chest to my back, of his body heat seeping into me, had little beads of sweat pooling between my breasts. I felt dizzy, the light-headedness making me even more aroused.

He barely touched me, said nothing, but I was on the verge of climaxing from this one single moment. I felt his cheek against mine, the stubble from his days' worth of growth slightly abrasive, completely arousing.

The feel of his warm breath moving along my cheek had me closing my eyes and biting the inside of my cheek. I almost moaned ... almost came right then. And the longer he played, the more I clenched my thighs against my clit, the higher my arousal grew.

He started pressing the keys harder, my fingers sinking farther against his, my mouth opening even wider. I felt light-headed as my pleasure climbed. God, what was happening to me?

The sound of him breathing calmly, as if this didn't affect him, turned me on even more. Knowing he could have self-control in a moment like this had me climbing higher.

And when he pressed himself a little more firmly against me, a soft moan escaped as I squeezed my thighs even harder together, moving them together slightly to add friction to my clit.

He started to breathe harder, the deep sound slipping from him and sending vibrations right through my body.

I came, exploded. Lights flashed in front of my eyes, my vision wavering as the pleasure consumed me. I curled my nails into the tops of his hands as the ecstasy was never ending. And all the while he still played, still had his body pressed right up against mine.

It wasn't until my orgasm dimmed that I realized he'd stopped playing.

I opened my eyes, not realizing I'd closed them, and blinked a few times, trying to clear my vision.

For a moment I just sat there, unable to move, aftershocks of my pleasure slamming into me. And then I felt fingers gripping my chin, gently forcing me to turn my head. I found myself staring into Lucian's dark eyes. I couldn't breathe, my entire body aching for so much more.

He ran the pad of his thumb along my bottom lip, staring at the act, almost transfixed by it. He gently pulled the flesh down, letting it go back in place.

"Lucian." I whispered his name, my rapid breathing the only sound filling the room. "Kiss me." I felt like I'd said that in my mind, but the low sound that left him told me I hadn't.

"I'm so hungry for you," he said in a steady, deep voice.

In the next moment he leaned in and pressed his mouth to mine, giving me what I wanted, what I needed. I went to wrap my arms around him, but he made a gruff sound against my lips.

He smoothed his hands down my shoulders, gripping my wrists and holding them gently but firmly. He ran his tongue along the seam of my lips and I opened for him, gently touching the tip of mine to his, needing more.

And then it was as if something snapped inside of him and I found, with pleasure, that his self-control had slipped.

He groaned roughly and tilted his head to the side, pushing his tongue in and out of my mouth, fucking me there. His hold on my wrists was tight, unyielding, a force, a show of dominance.

In this moment he held the power, he held the control. And I was more than happy with that, more than willing to submit to him fully.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

Professor Goode

I could feel her hands curling against mine, as if she were trying to grab me, grasp for something solid to hold on to, use me for strength.

Control. Find it.

I let go of her wrists, and she immediately held on to my biceps, digging her little nails into my skin, causing a flash of pain to mix with my pleasure. I cupped one side of her face as I tipped her head to the side, making her take my kiss, forcing her to suck on my tongue.

She was soft ... all the things I envisioned innocence would taste like.

I was collected, calm on the outside. But on the inside I was this raging storm, this turbulent weather moving through, causing destruction, consumption. I wanted her desperately, wanted to just take her on top of the piano until she cried out for me as she came, as my cock was deep in her body and I marked her from the inside out, a show of ownership.

I broke the kiss to look into her face, to see the ecstasy cover her expression, an outward appearance of what was going on inside of her. "You're sweeter than the hold you have over me."

Her eyes were closed, her head was tipped back and to the side slightly, her mouth heated. The air came out of her in little pants, her lips swollen and glossy, a sliver of light from the moon making it seem as though they glistened.

I held my control, made sure she didn't know how close I was to breaking. It would frighten her, the potency, intensity with which I wanted her.

And as much as I told myself I should stop this, should walk away, go slow, I couldn't. As much as it was the right thing to do, to let her walk away, to not get involved, I was too selfish.

My need for her was too strong. I wanted her too desperately.

I was hungry for her.

I loved her.

Never had I felt something so profound, so consuming.

I kissed her again, both of my hands cupping the sides of her neck now, holding her still for me, for what I was doing to her.

“Lucian,” she whispered against my mouth, and I felt my entire body tighten in response.

Using gentle pressure, I made her stand and immediately pulled her against me. She was so small compared to me, her little hands still clenching my biceps, bringing me closer, holding on to me. I felt something change in her demeanor, this desperation that matched my own.

She rose on her toes, wound her arms around my neck, and fucking kissed me back like she was desperate. I groaned, loving that she opened her mouth wide for me, that she allowed me to plunge my tongue into the warm, sweet recess of her mouth.

I pulled back and looked down at her, seeing the drugged expression on her face, the clear fact she was aroused as she stared up at me with her eyes wide, her pupils dilated.

“This is crazy, right?” she whispered almost as if she were trying to convince herself of the fact this wasn't really happening.

My cock jerked at the sight of her needy for me, at the smell of lemons and spun sugar that surrounded her ... at the

taste of her on my lips and tongue. I cupped her cheek, holding on to her, feeling like she'd leave, escape like a frightened little animal. This dam had been opened inside of me, and my arousal, my need and all the emotions I had for Grace were out in the open. It was like an open wound, one that would never heal. I'd never heal because of her, and it was that pain, that raw vulnerability, that told me she was the one for me.

My other half.

The person who could break me with a few softly spoken words, with the threat of not being mine.

“Should we stop?” she asked, the tone in her voice telling me she was almost afraid of what my answer might be.

“Do you want to?” I said just as softly, my focus on her mouth. I wanted to kiss her again.

She didn't answer verbally, but she did shake her head.

“Do I frighten you?” I asked and leaned down so our mouths were only inches apart.

For a second she didn't respond. Maybe she was thinking about lying, about telling me she wasn't. I could see she was apprehensive about all of this.

She nodded once but arched her chest, pressing her breasts against me. “Yes and no,” was all she said. “How I feel frightens me. The power you hold over me frightens me.”

I closed my eyes and grappled with control. She held all the power.

The need that had built up inside of me, my emotions, feelings, and having Grace here with me now, was my undoing. There was no going back. There never was once I'd had it in my mind that I'd make her mine.

I lifted my hand and smoothed my fingers down her neck, reveling in the smoothness of her skin. I felt like the world was crashing down around me. I'd move heaven and earth to please Grace. My feelings for her made me vulnerable, and I hadn't felt that way since I was a child, since before my uncle passed. But this was a different kind of vulnerability. This was

the kind that I wanted to embrace, because it felt like it was that one piece of myself I'd buried, too afraid to accept.

“All you have to do is tell me what you want, Grace, and it's yours.”

She stared into my eyes, and I felt my heart beat a little faster at the vulnerability I saw. Damn, she was so innocent, so untouched and sheltered to the way the world was, to the way things could be. It made me want to protect her, keep her close and never let anything touch her.

“I just want you.”

God, did this woman know the power she held over me? Fuck, did *I* realize the power she held over me?

You know exactly what she does to you, exactly how much strength she exerts over you with just one look.

“I love you, Lucian. I think I've loved you from the moment I walked into your class.”

I closed my eyes, and this rough sound left me, one that was more animal than man. She brought out the primal side of me, the beast that I kept buried deep within. Letting it out would only cause destruction, would let my weaknesses free. I needed to always be in control, especially with Grace. But hearing her say she loved me had everything breaking around me, inside me. It had pleasure and pain, hope and fear consuming me.

I couldn't let her go. I wouldn't. She was bound to me irrevocably, mine for the taking. No one else would ever have her, and because of that she should be afraid. She should be terrified of the lengths I'd go to keep her close, to keep other men who desired her away.

“I don't want to ruin you,” I finally said. “I don't want the love I have for you to twist and drive you away.” Because the power I felt when I was with her was unlike anything I'd ever experienced.

“You love me?”

I looked into her eyes and growled. “I love you more than I’ve ever fucking loved anything in my life.”

“Then that’s all that matters.”

The air left me. “My sweet, innocent little Grace.” I shook my head slowly. “If life, the world, was so easy...”

She was the one to shake her head now. “Why can’t it be?” she asked softly. “You love me. I love you. Nothing else should matter.”

And it didn’t, to an extent. It was outside influences that had me fearing her being plucked from my life, like a flower being pulled from the ground.

But my Grace was strong, fearless. She moved closer, pressed her breasts more firmly against my chest.

I stared into her eyes. “I meant it when I said I won’t let you go,” I said softly, our lips still inches apart.

“I know,” she whispered.

I didn’t say anything else as I leaned in and kissed her hard and deep, just wanting to imprint myself on her. All control had fucking gone at that moment. I hoped she was ready, because the restrained Lucian she knew was gone.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Professor Goode

Delicious.
Addicting.

All mine.

I kissed Grace like stopping would be my death.

Nothing else mattered but this one moment and making Grace feel good, making her see that I wanted her above all else. I couldn't have walked away if my life had depended on it.

Hell, I'd gladly die in this very moment, with Grace's lips pressed to mine and the sweet sounds of her moans filling my ears.

She broke the kiss and gasped. "I feel like if I don't hold on to you, I won't be steady. I won't be here, like this is nothing but a dream."

Before I could tell her to touch me, to hold on to me, to use me, she had her hands wrapped around my neck, her fingers playing with the short strands of hair at my nape. I kissed her again, and she made these small noises in the back of her throat. I swallowed the sounds, needing more, wanting her to surrender every part of herself to me. This was what I'd wanted from the moment I saw her, from the second I realized I couldn't let her be with anyone else.

It had been so fucking hard staying back, keeping my distance for as long as I did. But no more. No matter the

repercussions, no matter the rules I broke being with her ... Grace was mine.

I couldn't stop this. I wouldn't. I forced myself to take a step back, but took her hand in mine, keeping her close, afraid she'd run if she really saw my desperation for her.

"I don't want you to let me go," she whispered.

"Never," I said instantly. I couldn't help myself as I reached out and moved my thumb along her bottom lip, pulled the soft, slightly damp flesh down, and watched it move back into place when I let go. She was so fucking beautiful, so pliant and giving, and fearless, not letting her inhibitions control her. I'd show her how precious she was to me.

Her breath hitched a bit, and I leaned down and took her mouth in a kiss again, pulling her close because I was addicted to her. She felt good in my arms, like she was always meant to be here.

Take her. Show her what it's like to be yours.

And so I moved back, looking down at her swollen red lips, a slight glossiness on them from our kiss.

"This could get you in trouble with the university."

"I don't fucking care about anything but you."

Her breath hitched. "They'll say this is wrong."

I shook my head slowly. "Let them. How can this be so wrong when it feels so damn good, so right?"

"You don't care?"

I shook my head again and stared into her eyes. "The only thing that matters is you. I don't fucking care about anything else." I slipped my hand behind her head and gripped the base of her skull. "This can be so damn easy, Grace." My mouth was close to hers, but I didn't lean in that last inch and kiss her again.

"Then take me to your room, Lucian," she all but moaned.

Christ. Yes.

I felt this carnal need for her, one that wasn't just about wanting to feel myself buried deep inside of her, but one that told me she was mine irrevocably.

She was pliant in my arms, pressing her breasts against my chest, her nipples hard, her arousal coating the air like the smell of a fresh rainfall.

Before I lost myself and took her right up against the fucking wall, I had her in my arms. This small sound of surprise left her, and she held on to me, her hands grasping me like a lifeline. Her legs were draped over my forearm as I strode down the hall to my bedroom.

Once in the room I set her down reluctantly but kept her close, always having my hands on her. "I didn't change the sheets," I admitted. "They smelled like you, and I didn't want to get rid of that." Fuck, my heart was racing a mile a minute.

She looked over her shoulder at the bed, then back at me, licking her lips, nervousness and anticipation coming from her in waves.

"Don't be nervous," I whispered and took a step closer. The lights were off, yet the glow from the city came through the bedroom window, muted only by the sheer drapes.

"Is it that obvious?"

I moved closer and cupped her chin, tilting her head back slightly. She parted her mouth.

"I've never done this before, Lucian."

I looked at her lips. "I know," I said huskily. "I know, Grace." I leaned in and kissed the top of her head, closing my eyes and just inhaling the sweet scent of her. "You want this?" I felt her nod. "I'll go easy and slow. I'll make this good for you, baby." I moved my hand lower until I got to the hem of her shirt and felt her tense against me. "It's okay, sweetheart. This'll feel good. I'll make sure of it."

"I know," she moaned. "I'm shaking because I'm so turned on."

I groaned at that admission.

She placed her hand over mine and urged it up, bringing the material over her belly. She didn't stop me, and in fact arched her back for more. At the first contact of my bare flesh against hers, of my fingers along her smooth skin, she gasped.

"That's it," I said against her mouth. "I could take every part of you right now until there was nothing left, and I'd still need more, Grace. It still wouldn't be enough."

"Then give it all to me."

I curled my fingers against her side, knowing I'd leave marks on her delicate flesh if I wasn't gentle.

Moving my hand up higher, I felt the fact she wasn't wearing a bra. My dick punched forward even harder. Covering one of her breasts with my hand, I ran my tongue along her bottom lip at the same time. I took her nipple between my thumb and forefinger and pulled at the already turgid flesh, and she arched against me even more.

Over and over I pulled at her nipple, kissing her like I was drowning and she was the only source of oxygen. I needed her fully naked, needed her hot, soft body pushed against mine.

I needed the scent of our fucking covering the bed, filling this room.

I moved my mouth down to the base of her neck and felt her pulse beating rapidly. I licked and sucked at the spot, drawing the blood up to the surface and marking her.

When it came to Grace, I was primitive, feral. I wanted to mark her like she was my property.

If anyone owns anyone, I'm Grace's.

"Lucian." She whispered my name, and it was so fucking perfect falling for her lips.

I wanted my handprints on her body, wanted my teeth marks on her skin. I wanted her crying out my name as I thrust in and out of her, as I made her tell me who she belonged to.

"Don't stop." She all but clawed at me, bringing me closer, plunging her tongue between my lips in a desperate, silent plea for more.

I grabbed the hem of her shirt and in one swift move pulled the material up and off her body. I tossed it aside and immediately went for her skirt, fumbling with the button and zipper like some fucking schoolboy who didn't know what the hell to do.

When that was off and in a pile with the shirt, I took a step back and watched her remove her heels. I was tempted to tell her to keep them on as I took her.

And then there she stood in only a pair of plain, innocent little white panties.

“Perfection,” I said out loud, not meaning to. This obscene need filled me, and I found myself reaching down and palming my cock through my slacks like a dirty bastard. “Grace.” Her name came from me on this strangled whisper. I was left there with my heart in my throat and a hard-on so fucking big I was surprised I didn't come from the sight of her alone.

“Touch me, Lucian. Please.”

I reached out and cupped her breasts, gently curled my fingers around the mounds until she closed her eyes and started gasping like she couldn't get enough air into her lungs.

I was already at my breaking point as I kissed her.

Moving my hands lower, I wrapped them around her hips and down to her ass, the mounds perfect as I cupped them through the cotton material of her panties. My cock throbbed, my balls drawn up tight. I looped my fingers under the hem of her underwear and moved them inward so they were bunched in the crease of her ass.

For a suspended moment, all I did was hold the globes while I kissed her, fucked her mouth with mine.

“*Christ,*” I panted. I was so damn hard, harder than I'd ever been in my life, like granite. I moved my mouth to her ear and whispered, “I need you, Grace.” We were both breathing so hard. “I need to be inside of you now.”

She shivered in response. “Yes,” Grace whispered. “Take me.”

Any amount of control I'd had evaporated in that moment.
There was really no fucking going back now.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Grace

Lucian kissed me hard, holding on to my ass like he wanted to leave bruises on my flesh.

God, I want that.

The underwear was between the cheeks of my bottom, and with every passing second, Lucian moved his fingers closer to my pussy. It was like an animal had been unleashed inside of him, like he couldn't control himself and wanted me to know that.

And I was more than willing to be his prey.

He had his big body pressed against mine, the feel of his erection prominent, causing a gush of wetness to leave me. I couldn't breathe, couldn't even think straight. And when he moved his hand between us, I felt like I could have climaxed from that alone.

"Tell me what you want," he grumbled out.

"You," I said without any hesitation.

"I want you so fucking badly," he said against my neck, licking, sucking, and leaving his mark on me.

Before I knew what was happening, he had the panties all but torn from me, sounds of rending fabric filling the room, causing my arousal to climb even higher.

And then I watched as he got undressed.

Pulse rapid. Breathing shallow. Desire blooming.

He was a work of art with lean, defined muscle. Lucian was powerful, strong, and beautiful, like a statue.

We were both naked now, the hard, heavy pants coming from us identical. Beads of sweat covered the valley between my breasts. A part of me said this might ruin things, that this might be a bad idea. But another part, the stronger side, the one that didn't care what happened because I was finally going to be with the man I loved, wouldn't let me focus on anything else but being with Lucian.

His cock was like a steel rod between us, pressing against my belly. I felt wetness at the tip of his shaft, pre-cum spilling from him because of how worked up he was.

There was no stopping this, but God, I didn't want to.

I'd been hiding, holding on to my feelings for so long that having them actually free felt invigorating, and so pleasurable. It was exciting and exhilarating. Right now all I could think about was our hot, sweaty bodies pressed together.

"That's it, Grace." He was gently pressing his erection against me, as if he couldn't help himself. "*Christ*. You feel so good." He had his hands on my bare ass, his fingers clenching on the mounds repeatedly. I wanted him to take control, to do with me as he pleased.

He removed his mouth from my neck and started kissing me again, but at the same time lifted me off the ground and held me easily in his arms. When I moaned, he grunted in pleasure and held onto my ass even harder, almost painfully. But that discomfort felt so damn good. He was so strong, holding me up as if I weighed nothing, the strength pouring from him and making me feel so feminine.

His cock was a hard length between my thighs, hot and monstrous, making my insides clench in need and apprehension.

"Take me," I whispered unabashedly.

He grunted and thrust his hard cock against my pussy.

"*Please*." I didn't care that I was begging, that I sounded desperate. Right now I just wanted to feel him pushing into

me, stretching me, claiming every inch of my body.

I was ready for Lucian to claim my virginity.

I wanted to feel so full I couldn't stand it, couldn't even breathe.

“Are you ready?”

“I am so ready for you, Lucian.”

“No more waiting. I need you too fucking badly.”

He kept one hand on my ass and moved the other between our bodies. It was a testament to his power when he held me up easily with only one arm, and damn did that make me wetter.

He had me on the bed a second later, the sheets so soft and cool against my overheated, ultrasensitive body. For a second he just stood there and watched me, his gaze heavy as he raked it up and down my length.

And then he was climbing onto the bed like a predator stalking me, about to devour me.

Lucian moved his hand along the arch of my foot, over my calf, up my thigh, and closer to my pussy. With his other hand he took hold of his cock and stroked it a few times. “Spread wider for me,” he said gruffly. And when I did, I watched as he zeroed in on what was displayed between my legs.

“Fucking perfection.”

I actually saw the control leave him, like an animal ready to pounce. He was on top of me a second later, kissing me, wedging his body between my legs, his cock resting against my slit.

He never stopped kissing me as he reached between us and grabbed hold of his cock, placing the tip at the entrance. He rubbed his cockhead along my cleft, up and down, bumping my clit with every upstroke. Lucian pulled away enough that he could look at where he was lodged.

We held each other's gazes for several long seconds.

I was at the point where I wanted him shoved so deep inside of me nothing else mattered.

“Be with me.”

“There’s no going back. You never stood a chance once I saw you, Grace.”

I gasped at his words. They were so profound in that moment. But I didn’t want to go back, even if going forward was just as scary.

And then, as he watched where he was lodged, Lucian started pushing into me. The tip of his cock was now fully wedged in my body, and we both breathed out roughly, neither moving.

“I’m going to fuck you until you realize you’re only mine.”

“I only want you. Only you.” I whispered that last part.

And then in one fluid motion, he thrust his hips forward, pushing another inch into me. Lucian groaned and closed his eyes.

“You’re so fucking tight. You’re so hot and wet.”

He pushed yet another inch into me, and the burning sensation took root, the stretching, discomfort, and pain of him taking my virginity, claiming me.

My inner muscles clenched around him involuntarily.

“I’m sorry it hurts,” he groaned.

“Don’t stop,” was my reply.

“Never.”

He rested his forehead against mine, and we panted against each other’s mouths. “It feels so fucking good, Grace. So good.” He was out of breath, just like I was. In one swift move he was buried fully inside of me.

“Just like that.” He pulled out an inch and thrust back in. He started moving in and out of me, faster and harder, but all the while looking right into my eyes.

“Watch me. Look right at me as I fuck you.”

“Lucian,” I mewled out.

“*Christ*, baby.” He went slow and easy, in and out, gentle and thorough, but as the seconds moved by, his motions became frantic.

He was so far inside of me there wasn't a part of me Lucian wasn't touching. I couldn't even think straight, let alone form words. The sounds of our flesh slapping together, of his cock sliding in and out of my pussy, had my pleasure mounting. The pain and discomfort had vanished, and in its place was bone-searing ecstasy.

The sounds that came from me were low, erotic, and would have humiliated me if I wasn't so turned on, so aroused.

“I love you.” The words spilled from me on their own.

The root of his cock rubbed against my clit every time he slammed into me. He pushed fully into me, stilled, and swiveled his hips slightly, causing a different kind of sensation to fill me.

“Squeeze that pussy around me, Grace.” He ground the words out.

Never had I thought I'd see this side of Lucian, but in the throes of passion he was uninhibited.

Sweat beaded his brow, and he made this low, animalistic sound when he pulled out and then slammed into me especially hard. With each passing second he took me to new heights of pleasure until I felt my climax mounting.

“I want to see you come for me.” He let a moment of silence pass before he spoke again. “I want to feel you squeezing my cock, milking the cum from me.” He reached between us and pressed his thumb to my clit, rubbing the bud back and forth while he tunneled in and out of me.

He stared into my face for only a second before leaning down and running his tongue along my bottom lip, over my cheek, and licking at the shell of my ear. His breathing was short, hard pants, and I knew he was close to getting off, too.

He slammed into me again and applied more pressure to my clit, until I was about to explode for him. But when I was right there on the precipice, he slowed his motions. I wanted to cry out from desperation, from frustration, but before I could do or say anything, he grunted against my ear, clearly barely holding on as well.

“Tell me you’re mine, Grace.”

That’s all I’ve ever wanted.

He thrust in and out of me like a madman now, and I got so lost in the sensation, that I felt myself falling over the edge once more. There was no hesitation when I said, “I’m yours.”

“Come for me,” he demanded.

And I did just that. I came long and hard and heard him groan against my neck.

I knew this one night would forever shape our future.

“I’m yours, Lucian. I’m only yours.” I gasped when he slammed into me so hard I moved up an inch. I was in a fever pitch. The world fell away, but I didn’t care. I only cared about right here and now.

Lights flashed in front of my vision as I came, and I forced my eyes to stay open through my pleasure. Seeing Lucian get off was unlike anything I could have ever envisioned.

I felt his cock swell inside of me, felt him get impossibly harder, and I parted my mouth at the sensations. The feeling of him coming, of his seed filling me, was hot, erotic, and had my pleasure climbing even higher.

“Mine,” he growled out, and I felt him gently bite the side of my neck. I cried out as more pleasure slammed into me. It wasn’t until he pulled out of me, rolled to the side, and brought me in close to his body that I took a stuttering breath in. I felt his hand go between my thighs.

“I want every last drop inside of you,” he said as he cupped my pussy.

He was wild and intense, masculine and powerful.

He was mine.

I didn't know how this would all play out, didn't know if I was even making the right decisions, but in this moment it felt like perfection.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Grace

I didn't think I could've moved even if I wanted to, which I didn't. Having my body pressed against Lucian's, our skin slightly damp, his arm resting over my shoulder, keeping me close, and my head on his chest made me feel safe. I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

I had my hand on his abdomen, the muscles underneath slightly tense as he lay there, his chest rising and falling as he breathed evenly.

We'd been lying like this for the past hour, neither of us moving or speaking, the atmosphere content and relaxed, the soreness between my thighs a steady reminder of what we had done, what I'd given him.

My virginity.

My innocence.

I shifted on the bed slightly, so I could tip my head back and look into his face. He had his eyes closed, one of his arms bent and tucked under his head, and if I didn't know any better I would have thought that he was asleep. But the way he moved his fingers up and down my arm, how he refused to let me move away, told me Lucian was very much awake.

I rested my head back on his chest and listened to the steady rhythm of his heart beating. I closed my eyes and just absorbed that sound, feeling like I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

How strange things worked out. How funny I'd never seen myself in this position, thought Lucian would love me back.

Yet here I was, in bed with my professor, my love for him as strong as his love for me. It had all been a fantasy, the wishful thinking of an inexperienced college girl.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked softly, my hand on his abdomen, his six-pack these rolling hills underneath my palm.

He didn't answer for a moment, but he tightened his arm around me, holding me to him possessively. The sound of his even breathing lulled me. We were in this safe spot right here and now, nothing able to touch us.

"I'm thinking about the future. I'm thinking about everything I missed out on before you came into my life."

The breath caught in my throat at his words. It wasn't exactly what he said, but the way he said it, the pitch and tone of his voice, the way I felt his muscles tighten against me.

"In that first moment I saw you, I knew that there was a chance for me to be happy, that I'd found a piece of myself I hadn't known was missing. Crazy as it may seem, love had never been something I saw for myself."

I felt him shift, and I opened my eyes, leaning back slightly so I could look into his face. He moved onto his side, reached down and pulled the blanket over us even farther. For long moments all he did was stare at me, taking in every aspect of my face, as if he were memorizing every part of me.

How was it possible for one person to look at me and make me feel like I was their entire world?

"I'm thinking about how much of a selfish bastard I am where it concerns you, that my love for you is so profound that it's changed the man I am, the person I thought I was. It's made me better, Grace." He moved his thumb over my cheek in a gentle sweeping motion. "I'm thinking about how I would kill anyone who tried to take you from me." He said that so soft I almost didn't hear.

And then Lucian leaned in and kissed me softly, the scent and feel of him dragging a small moan from me. Never breaking the kiss, he slid his hand under the blanket, moved it along my belly, and slipped it between my thighs. I was already wet for him, so needy.

“Look at that,” he murmured against my mouth. “So ready for me.”

“Always,” I whispered.

And then he was moving on top of me, his big muscular body pressing me into the mattress, the weight of his power making me feel wholly feminine.

And it was the feel of him placing the tip of his erection at the entrance of my body, of him sliding deep within me in one fluid motion, that had everything becoming crystal clear.

We were one, and without Lucian I’d be nothing but a shell of a person. I felt that so profoundly that a tear track down the corner of my eye.

I held on to him, telling myself I’d never let go.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Grace

I sat on the living room floor, textbooks scattered around me, loose-leaf papers crumpled up in balls beside the small trash can I'd brought in. They were my notes, but tonight they sounded like gibberish to me, my mind so preoccupied I couldn't concentrate.

I was studying for an exam, yet my mind wasn't on any of this. My thoughts were consumed with Lucian, with everything we'd done, everything we shared.

It had only been a few days since he'd taken me to dinner and then back to his apartment, where he claimed my virginity and opened himself up to me. For the short amount of time we'd been seeing each other, I'd never felt closer to anyone in my entire life.

And yet I hadn't known I'd been missing anything until that very moment when he looked into my eyes and told me he loved me.

I picked up one of the textbooks, brought my pencil to my mouth, and started chewing on the end as I read over the required reading. But still I couldn't focus, couldn't concentrate.

I don't know how long I sat like that, but I found myself smiling intermittently every time I thought about being with Lucian, and the memory of how sore I'd been after he'd taken me.

A flush stole over me at those images of his big, hard body atop mine.

The sound of a car pulling into my driveway, then of a door opening and closing, had my heart racing. Of course it probably wasn't him, not at this hour, but still I fantasized it was.

I walked out to the living room window and pulled the curtains aside, but it was too dark to see much of anything. And then the sound of three hard knocks on the front door had my heart racing. I looked out the peephole, feeling confusion at who stood on the other side.

When I opened it, the wide smile on my mother's face had worry filling me right away. She held an overnight bag in her hand, the grin on her face looking forced.

"Surprise," she said a little too enthusiastically.

"Mom?" I stepped to the side to let her in. I closed the door and faced her, leaning against it and just watching her, waiting for her to drop the bomb I knew she'd come here to drop.

Why else would she show up unexpectedly this late?

"Is everything okay?"

She looked around the small house that I called home while in school. "This place is cute, Grace." She turned and faced me, but I could see her smile was still forced.

"Mom, what's going on?"

She set her bag down. "What? I can't surprise my daughter with a visit? "

I knew my expression was probably disbelieving.

"Not that I'm not happy to see you, but you've never just shown up out of the blue, especially when it's this late." I could see the wall she'd built around herself start to crumble. "Mom, what's wrong?"

She exhaled, and I saw her smile fade. A real expression of sadness, anger, hopelessness clung to her in that moment. I

knew what this was about before she even said anything.

My father. Michael.

He and my mother had married young. They'd been high school sweethearts, and I knew from enough reminiscing from my mother over the years that my father had been her first everything.

First boyfriend.

First love.

First kiss.

First everything.

So when things had gone downhill, my mother had taken it hard. The divorce hadn't been amicable. My father had up and left my mom, taking a good chunk of their savings, and running off with the woman who would become his new wife. He hadn't given a second thought to how this would affect my mother; probably even thought I was old enough to "get through it."

He'd tried to smooth things over with me, spouting off about being in love and wanting to start his life.

It had all been bullshit.

He'd abandoned his wife and daughter for a young, new piece of ass. He'd married her shortly after he betrayed my mom and clearly had no regrets or shame about it.

And a part of me hated him for what he'd put my mom through, for how he'd hurt her.

"It's about your father."

Of course it was. Because even after the years that had passed, he was still fucking her over.

I walked up to her and gave her a hug. I didn't know what this was about, but whatever it was had upset her enough that she felt the need to come all the way out here to see me.

I pulled back and looked at her, hating that she felt so lost. She put on a good front, though, and I knew she did it for me

even though I knew how upset she truly was over it all.

“Whatever has happened, things will work out. They always do.” I took her hand and led us into the living room, and we sat on the couch. Her focus was on the textbooks and papers strewn along the floor.

“I’m sorry for just barging in like this.”

I shook my head even though she wasn’t looking at me. “You know you’re welcome here anytime. I’m just sorry I haven’t been able to get home. School’s been kind of hectic.”

And then, of course, there was my affair with my professor.

Obviously I kept that to myself. That probably wasn’t a conversation we needed to have at this very moment.

“No, you should definitely focus on school. You shouldn’t have to worry about your mom dropping in because she can’t handle her shit.”

We sat there in silence for long seconds. I didn’t want to broach the subject again, figured she could tell me in her own time what was wrong. But then after a few moments, she cleared her throat and pointed to the textbooks.

“How’s school going, by the way?”

She was deflecting, stalling. She looked over at me and I shrugged. “It’s going.” I felt my cheeks heat as I thought about Lucian, wondering what she’d think, how she’d feel if I admitted what I was doing with my professor.

I ran my hands up and down my thighs, suddenly feeling so nervous. I saw the way she knitted her brows. My mother could read me well without me having to say anything.

“Are you okay?”

I nodded and cleared my throat. “What’s going on with Dad?”

She leaned back on the couch and exhaled, suddenly seeming so tired. “He’s having another baby with Crystal.” My mother stared straight ahead, her unshed tears evident.

I was angry instantly, not because there was another baby coming into the world, not because he had left us to create a new family—because we were clearly not enough—but because my mom was hurting.

“I’m sorry.” In that moment I hated my father all over again.

“You have nothing to be sorry about. I shouldn’t even care at this point, but I swear it’s like a wound being reopened.” She smiled at me, but it was sad, distant. “I wanted to be here with you when you found out.”

Not only had he cheated on my mother, ran off with his too-young wife, but every time his happiness came rising back up, it was like a slap in my mother’s face.

“He’s an asshole,” I said, and she looked over at me and gave me a sad smile.

“He’s your father. I don’t want you thinking badly of him.”

“Then he shouldn’t have cheated on you and abandoned us for a piece of ass.” This anger rose in me so violently I felt my hands shake.

“It was wrong of me to come here, to burden you. But I wanted to tell you the news in person. I’m sure he’ll call you tomorrow.”

I could only shake my head. “He told you today?”

She shook her head. “No, I was talking with Cheryl, and she said she overheard Bob talking to your father on the phone.”

Cheryl had lived next to us nearly my entire life. After the divorce, Cheryl had washed her hands of my dad, but her husband, Bob, still kept in contact, apparently.

“She thought I knew already when she brought it up.” She glanced at me then. “Not that I expected Michael to call me and tell me, and honestly I’m glad he didn’t, but to hear it secondhand from the neighbor?” She snorted.

I hated that he was still controlling her emotions, that he had this effect on her. It was hard for her to even have her own

life because I knew she still loved him. How could she not?

Even betrayal couldn't stop somebody from caring. Even heartache couldn't make those emotions vanish.

"Everything will be fine, Mom. He's not worth it. Father or not, he hurt both of us, and at this point I don't want him in my life."

"Oh, honey. Don't say that. He divorced me, not you."

I shook my head. "The way he went about all of this was underhanded in the worst kind of way." My mother didn't say anything, and instead I held her as we both sat there in silence, the atmosphere heavy and thick.

He'd done this to her and me, and all I wanted to do was shout and scream at him, to tell him how much I hated him, how seeing the pain he caused in my mom made me loathe him.

But I didn't need that in my life. Neither of us did. All we could do now was move on.

All we could do now was live this new life.

And all I could think about on the heels of that thought was how I wanted that new life to be with Lucian.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

Professor Goode

The more time I spent with Grace, the more I realized that my concentration on anything that didn't concern her was pretty much impossible. I ran a hand over my jaw, a day's worth of scruff scraping over my palm. I tried to focus on the papers that had been turned in from my students, yet my obsession with Grace made everything else dim in comparison.

I just wanted to be with her, to spend every waking moment with her. It was this ache inside of me that grew daily, beckoning this swarm that wouldn't be tamed.

I leaned back in my chair and stared at the ceiling. Although I'd seen her in class, we hadn't had a free moment to be together. And it was slowly eating at me. I realized I needed her in my life in every conceivable way. I needed to touch her, kiss her, just hold her every day.

I stood, not able to sit any longer, and walked over to the window. I leaned against the wall and crossed my arms over my chest as I stared out at the university grounds. I could see the parking lot, the student lounge beside that. There was a large grassy area where, during the warmer months, students sat out and studied.

Although I didn't care if people knew about my relationship with Grace, I knew she worried. It was on my mind; how they'd react, if they'd see her in a different light. It was the latter that worried me the most, because I knew people

could be heartless bastards. I knew they might spread rumors, say shit about her, think badly of her. That's what I was concerned about if people found out.

My job, my reputation ... just things in this world that didn't mean shit compared to the big picture.

And that big picture was Grace.

There was a knock on my door, and I turned and looked over my shoulder, not moving from the spot. "Come in," I said, my voice booming in the small interior of the office. I assumed it was Ashley, my TA, but a pleasurable surprise filled me when I saw that it was Grace.

She stepped inside and shut the door behind her, and I was already striding toward her, had her in my arms, my hand cupping the back of her head, and just held her. I buried my face in her hair, closing my eyes and inhaling deeply.

The scent of lemons filled my nose. "I was just thinking about you," I said gruffly against her ear and dragged my lips across her cheek, along her jaw, and pressed my mouth to hers.

She kissed me slowly, softly, but I instantly knew something was wrong. I pulled back and looked down at her, the expression on her face telling me she was guarded, that she was trying to act like nothing bothered her. But she couldn't hide it from me.

I'd watched her for too long, knew her facial expressions, what she liked and didn't like, knew when something was wrong. And being with her, finally claiming her, had only intensified all of that.

"Tell me what's wrong." Instantly my thoughts went to some little fucker hurting her. I couldn't help it, couldn't help the possessive, protective side that rose up in me where she was concerned.

She didn't say anything at first, just exhaled and shook her head. I led her over to the couch and sat down, keeping her hand in mine, in fact, wanting her on my lap so I could hold her, so I could comfort her.

“My mother came by last night,” she said softly. “Apparently my father is having another baby with his wife.” She exhaled again as if she were frustrated.

When Grace leaned back on the couch and tipped her head, resting it on the cushion and staring at the ceiling, I glanced at the slender column of her throat, at the way her pulse beat steadily beneath her ear.

“The crazy part of all of this is not that I’m upset he’s having another one, especially at his age. But that he hurt my mother.” She looked at me then, and although I could see she was upset, but she was so damn strong.

I reached out and cupped her cheek, my fingers curled gently around the base of her neck. Her long, dark hair fell over my hands, along the back of the couch.

“Lucian,” she whispered softly. Grace looked at me then, something flitting across her face. “I just want to feel something other than this hurt and frustration.” She shifted on the couch so she was facing me, and I kept my hand on her cheek.

I’d do anything for her, and the fact she was in pain, that maybe I could give her some comfort, take some of that hurt away so it was off her mind, had me reacting instantly.

I leaned in and kissed her, sliding my tongue along the seam of her lips, feeling her lean against me.

“I love you,” I said against her mouth, and she moaned, wrapping her arms around my neck and pressing herself closer to my body. “God, I love you so much it feels like my heart could stop from it.”

She leaned back and looked me in the eyes. “Don’t ever leave,” she whispered with this desperation in her voice.

“Never.” We were tied together for life.

She was mine and I was hers. Irrevocably.



Grace

WHEN MY MOM had told me about my father, there were only two people that I wanted to confide in, to get comfort from.

Sherry and Lucian.

But they were different kinds of comfort, different kinds of emotional support that I needed from them.

I'd called Sherry last night, talked to her for hours, knew that things would be okay because they had to be. And it felt better ... but I'd felt this hole in me still.

And first thing this morning, I'd come to see Lucian. I'd wanted to talk to him last night, to have him wrap his arms around me, to do more than just tell me everything was okay—to actually show me. I knew he'd pull this hurt and betrayal from me, so I felt nothing but him and me.

I clung to him, kissed him with this feverish need that I'd never felt before. I found myself on top of him, my legs on either side of his, the stiff outline of his erection pressing right between my thighs telling me he was right here with me.

I moaned and opened my mouth wider, tilting my head, delving my tongue between his lips and taking from him what I knew he freely gave.

He lifted his hips up, grinding his dick against me, and at the same time I pushed down, rocking back and forth, feeling sparks of pleasure filling me.

He had his hands on my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh with almost bruising force. But I wanted those marks. I wanted to look in the mirror tomorrow and see what he'd done to me, that I was his, that he'd branded me.

I pressed my breasts against his chest, my nipples hard, ultrasensitive. The gruff sound that came from him spurred me on, and I started rocking back and forth against his erection, rubbing my pussy along the length, the bulge. I could've gotten off this way, finding my release by moving over Lucian.

“Yes,” I whispered against his mouth, breaking the kiss only long enough to suck in a lungful of air.

I stared into his face, saw he was controlled, calm, but he couldn't hide his body's reaction. His pupils were dilated, his breathing slightly increased. His cock was hard, like a lead pipe between his thighs.

"Take from me, Grace. Use me." He slid his hands up my back, over my shoulders, and cupped each side of my throat.

He tipped my head to the side and leaned in and kissed me, his mouth, his tongue, everything about him so full of possession and power.

"I'm here for you. I was made for you."

A moan was ripped from me at his words, and I felt something break open, a dam of emotions, desire, arousal ... life in general filling me until I could cry from the overwhelming sensations.

I wasn't thinking about anything else in this moment. But when I heard his office door open, the sound of a startled gasp come from behind us, my entire body froze.

I looked over my shoulder to see Ashley standing there, a stack of papers in her arms, her eyes wide and her mouth parted in shock.

She wasn't moving, wasn't speaking as she stared at us. Here I was, on top of Lucian, his cock hard and pressing between my thighs, no doubt what we were doing hanging between us.

I looked back at him, feeling like this entire experience wasn't happening. Everything was moving in slow motion.

But he wasn't focused on her. He stared right at me, no concern or worry on his face. He still had his hands on either side of my throat, smoothing his thumbs along my pulse points.

"Oh my God," Ashley finally said.

I tore my gaze from Lucian's and looked at her again. I tried to scramble off him, but he already had his hands on my hips, keeping me right where I was.

I looked at him shocked, startled. Fear filled me. This was bad, very bad. She'd tell the administration. He'd get in trouble, and that had panic spiking in me.

I heard her leave, scrambling out, the door slamming behind her. And still Lucian hadn't moved, kept me on his lap, his hands on my body. He stared into my eyes, and a small smile formed on his lips.

"Lucian, God. This is not good." I shook my head and climbed off him, and he let me. My hands were shaking as I smoothed them down my pants. And yet he still sat there, his legs slightly open, his cock pressed against his slacks, tenting the material, showing me how big and thick he was.

I swallowed roughly, this knot of worry lodged in my throat.

"I'm not worried," he said effortlessly.

"How can you not be worried?" My voice shook, trembled.

He finally stood up, adjusting his dick before coming over to me. The smile was still on his face as he placed his hand on my shoulder and moved it down my arm, taking my hand in his.

"I don't care that she caught us."

I felt my eyes widen. "W-what do you mean? If she tells people, you're going to lose your job." And still he looked unaffected.

He said nothing as he leaned down and kissed me. It was soft and sweet, reassuring. When he pulled back, I felt that stress leave me at the fact he was so calm.

"Grace, the only thing that matters to me is you. Nothing else is a concern. This job, what people think..." He shook his head. "You're all I care about." And then he pulled me in for a hug and I rested my head on his chest, listening to the steady, even beating of his heart.

It was easy to not let it bother me because he didn't let it affect him, but I loved Lucian, and the fact that this could ruin his life was a very real possibility, no matter what he said.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

Professor Goode

I watched as my afternoon class left, the feeling of what was coming strong ever since yesterday when Ashley had walked in on Grace and me.

I gathered up my papers and put them in my satchel. When the last student was gone, I sat down and started going over the syllabus. This was pointless if I were being honest. I knew the board would call me in eventually, probably sooner rather than later.

It wasn't but a moment later when I heard the door open. I glanced up and saw Dean Richards standing there, a manila envelope in his hand, a guarded expression on his face. I knew what this was about. I'd been prepared for this visit.

So I stood, meeting him halfway, neither of us saying anything for long moments. What could be said?

"Professor Goode," he said in a professional voice, not one he'd used with me since he hired me years before.

I was friends with Calvin. I'd met his family, his children. We'd eaten dinner together. I considered him a friend. But he wasn't here on a social visit. He was here on official university action.

I had no doubt Ashley would tell them. She went by the books about everything, and it was one of the reasons I'd picked her to be my TA. She could be trusted, was loyal, and played by the rules.

But that also had repercussions seeing as her catching me with Grace meant she hadn't been able to keep it to herself. I couldn't blame her, wasn't even angry. In fact, I was glad she'd told the university.

It meant there was no more hiding, no more pretending I wasn't in love with Grace ... no more acting like I had any control where she was concerned.

"Dean Richards," I said in return and held out my hand for the envelope. The look on his face spoke volumes, but then again, I hoped mine did as well.

I wanted him to see how unaffected I was, that everything had come full circle, that things had happened the way they were supposed to.

"You know why I'm here?" Although he phrased it like a question, I could hear in his voice he already knew the answer.

"I know."

He exhaled as if this were painful for him. And maybe it was. We'd considered each other friends. He probably saw this as a betrayal.

"The school has put you on suspension until further investigation. A hearing will be held tomorrow with more details on the situation. I'll need you present first thing in the morning."

I nodded. "And Grace?"

"She's been notified as well. We'll need her there to take her account of it all."

"She didn't do anything wrong. No disciplinary action will be taken against her." Maybe I shouldn't have been so hardened, demanding shit, given the fact I wasn't in any position to do so. But I'd be damned if she got dragged under for this.

"She's not to blame for this, Professor Goode."

What Calvin really meant was that I was some predator preying on an innocent student. He could think what he wanted, as long as she was left out of it.

“What were you thinking, Lucian?” he said softly, the man I’d called a friend coming through for a moment. But I didn’t answer his question.

“Thank you, Dean Richards. I’ll be there first thing in the morning.”

I wasn’t going to tell him we loved each other, or that this was some slip of judgment and I was sorry. Because it wasn’t. I had Grace, finally, and I wasn’t letting her go. And that would most likely cost me my job, but so be it.

So be it, because it was all worth it. She was worth it.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

Grace

The next morning

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

“Do you understand everything, Professor Goode?”

I turned and looked at Lucian, knowing my eyes were wide, feeling like my heart would jump out of my chest.

“I understand,” Lucian said without any emotion in his voice. In fact, he sounded like he didn't give two shits that he'd just been suspended from his position until further investigation.

“This is a mistake, a misunderstanding,” I said before I could stop myself.

I faced the board again, knowing I looked shocked. They couldn't tell us how long the investigation would last, or if Lucian would even still have a job when it was all said and done.

“How can you take the word of one person over a member of your staff?”

The dean leaned forward and clasped his hands together, staring me in the eyes.

“We take accusations of student and faculty fraternization very seriously. An investigation will be done to find out the truth.”

All I could do was shake my head. “Nothing happened. This is all a big misunderstanding.” I was a broken record at this point. “This is all a big mistake,” I whispered, on the verge of crying. But I didn’t want to. I needed to be strong, needed to appear like I had my shit together and not break down in front of Lucian.

“It’s okay, Grace,” Lucian said softly.

And then before I knew what was happening, Lucian wrapped his arm around my shoulder and brought me in close. He took his other hand and gently grabbed my chin with his thumb and forefinger, turning my head so I was facing him now.

He stared into my eyes, and everything else around me faded, vanished. We might’ve been able to salvage this, denied everything, but when he leaned in and kissed me right then and there in front of everyone, there was no denying it.

He pulled back before I could stop him and smiled. “It doesn’t matter,” he said softly. “Only you do.” He turned and faced the board. “I love her, and I’m fully aware of the repercussions our relationship will bring.” And then he stood up and took my hand in his and led us out of the office.

I looked over my shoulder at the board, their eyes wide and their mouths open in shock. I had no idea what was going to happen from this point forward, but Lucian seemed confident of the future, of our relationship.

And that made me feel like everything would be okay.



Professor Goode

SHE WAS upset and I hated it, hated that I was the reason she was in this situation, that she felt hopeless, sad for me.

I wrapped my arms around Grace and pulled her in close. It had only been a couple of weeks since I’d been in front of the board for my “misconduct,” as they’d called it.

And although maybe I could have gotten out of it, used my years of teaching there and my reputation, my good standing, to get out of Ashley telling them about Grace and me, the truth was, I didn't want to lie about it.

So I'd kissed her.

I'd wanted to prove the point that she was mine. I'd wanted her from the moment I saw her, and losing my position was a small sacrifice to pay to be with her.

I ran my hand up and down her back, whispering that everything was fine, that I would be fine. She was upset because of me, because of the circumstances. And I wanted to take that pain away.

I pulled back but kept her close, smiling and shaking my head, telling her without words in that moment that everything was perfect.

"But it's your job, what you worked hard to accomplish."

I didn't feel anything in that moment but my love for her. "It's just a job." I wiped the stray tear that rolled down her cheek.

"I'm sorry for breaking down like this. It's just a little unbelievable. We are both consenting adults."

I leaned down and kissed her forehead, just closing my eyes and reveling in the fact she was here with me. "I knew the rules, Grace, and I didn't fucking care about them. I knew from the moment I saw you walk into my class that this would be the outcome." I pulled back and looked her in the eyes again.

"How did you know?" she whispered.

"Because I wasn't going to let you go. I'd do anything, lose everything to be with you, Grace. Don't you see that? Don't you see that I'm so in love you?"

She smiled, and I saw that sadness vanish as her feelings for me rose up. "I love you too." She wrapped her arms around my waist and rested her head on my chest. "Will you be able to find another job? Or is this something that will follow you?"

She said those words softly, and I didn't answer for a moment, just held her, felt her warmth slip into me, let her scent envelop me.

"I don't need a job, Grace. I have enough money to last me five lifetimes." She pulled back and looked up at me.

"Your uncle's business?"

"My business." I kept my arms wrapped around her, refusing to let her go. I needed her close. "It all became mine after he passed away. I went to school and became a professor because I wanted that connection with my father. And I've had it. I did it. And maybe in the future I'll teach again. But that's not my main concern, not what I'm focused on." I heard her breath catch. "I have you, and that's all I care about."

I'd say that over and over again.

I leaned down and kissed her, and she grew soft and pliant against me. If I never taught again, I'd be content because I'd have Grace.

I had her love.

They'd say I was obsessed.

I'd say I was in love.

What more did I need in life?

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

Grace

“So, he like...” Sherry leaned in close, her eyes wide, this look of wonder and excitement covering her face. “He just, like, kissed you in front of all of them?”

I couldn't help but chuckle at the shocked sound in her voice. I nodded and grabbed my cup of tea, bringing it to my mouth and taking a long sip. The flavors of chamomile and honey filled my taste buds.

“Yeah, it was kind of intense if I'm being honest.” I set the cup down and just stared at the golden hued liquid contained in the ceramic. My hands were still wrapped around it, the warmth seeping into me.

“You're thinking about him right now, aren't you?”

I glanced up and stared at Sherry. I didn't deny it as I nodded. I cleared my throat and shifted on the seat.

“So this is, like, the real deal.” She didn't phrase it like a question.

“I love him so much, Sherry,” I whispered, feeling my cheeks heat as I thought about the passion that Lucian had for me, how he'd fucked me just this morning, made me get off three times before he'd finally relented and let me breathe. My legs were still shaking, my pussy sore. He was insatiable for me, and I couldn't help but feel myself falling more in love with him each and every day.

“And he loves you? Like that’s a stupid question since I know the answer, since he all but said fuck you to the school.” She grinned. “Damn, I need a guy like that, that will just say screw everything else but me.”

“What about Letterman Craig?”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Letterman Craig?” She snorted.

“It’s what I’ve been calling him because every time I see him he’s wearing that damn high school jacket.”

She laughed. “God, don’t remind me. I keep telling him that he needs to shelve that and put the past behind him. He’s still living in his glory football days.”

We both started laughing.

“But you guys are, like, serious?”

I saw her expression change, watched the way her cheeks turned pink, how she glanced away and smiled. She didn’t have to say the words for me to hear her loud and clear. She was into Craig, maybe things were even getting serious. I was happy for her, happy for both of us that we’d found something that we deserved.

She glanced up at me then, her expression sobering. “I really like him ... am falling in love with him.”

My heart beat double-time in my chest for her.

“Does he love you back?”

She smiled softly, sweet. “He says he does.” She shrugged. “I can’t lie and say I’m not scared. I’ve never loved anyone before, Grace. I guess time will tell how things play out, but he’s really sweet and even holds the door open for me, pulls out the chairs before I sit down.”

“Love is a scary thing.”

She nodded, and we were silent for a moment, just reflecting on everything.

I was genuinely happy for her and reached out to take her hand in mine, giving it a squeeze. “I’m glad he’s good to you. You deserve that.”

She gave my hand a squeeze back. “And I’m glad you’re happy, Gracie. I can’t deny that I’m a little jealous you have our sexy-as-hell professor obsessed with you, that he’s so madly in love with you he gave up his job just so he could keep you.” She chuckled, and I heard the teasing note in her voice.

“And no doubt a lot of girls are jealous of you, Sherry. Who says chivalry is dead when you have a guy like Craig?”

“Touché,” she said and smiled wider. “We’re both lucky.”

Yeah, we were.

“I’d say we have a couple of keepers, Gracie.”

Yeah, looked like we really did.

EPILOGUE

Grace

One year later

I could feel the warmth of the sun on my face, and I stretched, the silk sheets moving along my body. Silk sheets. Not something I'd ever experienced in my life before meeting Lucian, but ever since I'd moved in with him six months ago, he'd insisted that we sleep on them, that I deserved no less.

He spoiled me, worshipped me. I was his queen, as he liked to say.

I lifted my arms and stretched them above my head, my fingers curling against the wrought-iron bars of the headboard, the feeling of the intricate details brushing against my fingertips. I still had my eyes closed, but it was the feeling of Lucian's hand sliding along my side, over my belly, and between my thighs, that had me opening them and staring at the ceiling.

He pulled a gasp from me as his fingers slid against my slit, teasing my hole before gathering the moisture already formed there and bringing it to my clit.

I turned my head and looked at him. He was so close now, his body facing mine, his gaze trained right on me. His dark eyes seemed even darker because his pupils were dilated. The scruff on his face had my fingers itching to touch it, pull his head down and between my thighs, to see if that five o'clock shadow would be soft or rough between my thighs.

“Good morning,” he grumbled out. He slid his finger inside of me, and I let out a silent cry. “Spread wider for me,” he whispered.

I did as he said, neither one of us saying anything. Lucian continued to finger me as he stared into my eyes. And then he leaned in and kissed me, working his hand even faster between my legs, his finger pushing in and out of my pussy.

“Lucian,” I whispered at the same time I exploded, climaxing so hard my breasts thrust out on their own, my back arching, and a flush stealing over me.

The muscles in my thighs burned for as wide as my legs were spread, and still he worked me over, wringing out the last drop of pleasure he could in me.

When he pulled his fingers out of me, I forced my eyes open, watched as he lifted his hand, the digits glistening with my cream. He brought it to his mouth and sucked it all clean, never once taking his focus off me.

He kissed me again, thrusting his tongue in my mouth and making me taste the musky, sweet flavor of my arousal. I didn't know how long we lay there, making out, my body still shaking from the aftereffects of my orgasm. But I could have stayed there all day.

I felt his erection prod my thigh, and I broke the kiss, placing my hand on his chest and gently pushing at him until he was on his back.

I pushed the sheets off us, stared down at the massive erection he sported, his cock so long and thick that the tip reached his belly button, a drop of pre-cum already on the crown. My mouth watered and my throat tightened.

I took one more glance at his face before moving down and grabbing hold of that monster dick, his girth so substantial that my fingers didn't even touch as I held him. I used my other hand to grab his balls, the heavy sac overflowing my palm.

There was no preamble as I opened my mouth and started sucking on the tip, licking away the salty pre-cum as I tried to

take as much of him into my mouth as I could. But he was too big, too long. I got halfway down before the crown hit the back of my throat, causing me to gag slightly before I retreated.

I did this over and over again, Lucian's hand in my hair, my hair tangled in his fingers. He lifted his hips up at the same time he gently pushed my head down on him, making me take more of his length. He groaned harshly, and I knew he was close, so close that I kept tasting spurts of his semen move along my tongue.

I hummed, knowing the sound and vibration would set him off. And just like I knew it would, he groaned deeply, tightened his hand in my hair painfully, and thrust his hips up into my mouth, making me take as much as I could.

He came powerfully, shooting his load down my throat. I swallowed it all, my eyes watering but my appetite for him strong.

And when I felt his cock become semisoft in my mouth, only then did I pull back. I sucked in a great lungful of air, the blood rushing below the surface of my lips, my mouth feeling swollen. He stared at me with desire on his face. This light sheen of sweat covered his bare chest, and arousal slammed into me.

I wanted him, desperately.

I climbed on top of him, straddling his waist, his cock hardening between our bodies instantly. I was so wet, drenched in fact.

I reached down and grabbed his dick, placed the tip at my entrance, and slid down on his shaft fluidly. We both groaned, and my entire body heated, sweat beading along my chest and back. I braced my hands on his pectoral muscles and started riding him.

Up and down, faster and harder. I ground my pelvis against his on every downstroke, curled my nails into his chest every time I rose up. I could feel myself climbing higher and higher,

and the clipped sounds coming from Lucian told me he'd be going over the edge right along with me.

He might've just gotten off, but when I said he was insatiable for me, I meant just that.

And then he grabbed my breasts and pulled at my nipples with his thumbs and forefingers, twisting the tips until I tilted my head back, my hair brushing along the top of my ass, and cried out as I came.

I fell over the edge hard.

It wasn't until several moments passed that I collapsed on his chest, Lucian holding me, his cock still buried deep in my body. We didn't say anything, but no words needed to be spoken.

This moment was perfect.

This moment was our reality.



Professor Goode

I HEARD her come into the kitchen and turned around as Grace walked in. She was freshly showered, her hair damp and hanging over her shoulders, the ends starting to curl slightly as the locks dried.

She was dressed in a pair of black formfitting jeans, the white ballet flats matching a little white T-shirt she wore. There were little red flowers printed on the material, her breasts pressing against the fabric, the V-neck low enough I caught just a hint of cleavage.

I made a little sound in the back of my throat at that sight, and she glanced at me. She smiled and came up to me, wrapping her arms around my waist and rising on her toes to kiss me.

“You get so jealous over everything,” she said on a little sigh.

“Does that upset you?”

“Turns me on that you want me all to yourself.”

I grunted and set the spatula down, wrapping my arms around her waist and moving her back toward the counter. I had her lifted up and sitting on the edge of it a second later, used my body to push her legs apart, and stepped between them.

I dipped down and kissed the side of her neck, smelling the soap she'd used earlier, feeling the warmth from her skin, the chill from her damp hair against my cheek.

“I can't help it. I just want to keep you all to myself.” She sighed and rested against me, and I just held her.

After a year together, my feelings for Grace had increased tenfold. Every day they grew stronger, consumed me even more.

I slid my hand down her arm, over her wrist, and rested my fingers on hers. I pulled back and looked down at her hand, lifting it up and resting a digit on her ring finger.

“I'm going to need my ring on here soon, Grace.”

“I know,” she said pleurably. “I want that.”

The only reason I hadn't married her yet was because I wanted her to finish school. I wanted her to find her independence and get her degree. I wanted her to do everything she desired. Rushing things could have her pulling away, and that wasn't what I wanted. Ever.

“Having my ring on your finger will let everybody know that you're mine.” I ran the tip of my nose up the length of her neck. Although truth be told, her wearing a fucking ring wouldn't stop me from tearing down anyone who thought they could take Grace from me.

I had my hands on the counter beside her now, knowing that I could've fucked her again, my cock already hard as it dug against the zipper of my slacks.

“Don't forget my mother is coming over tonight with her boyfriend.”

I pulled back, the mention of her family like cold water on my arousal. “I didn’t forget.” I could see the worry on her face. “Are you nervous to meet her new boyfriend?”

She shook her head instantly. “Well, kind of. I just want to make sure he’s good to her and she’s happy. That’s all that matters to me.” I nodded and helped her off the table when I heard her belly growl.

“Sit down so I can feed my woman.” She walked past me, and I turned and smacked her ass, a growl leaving me.

Grace looked over her shoulder and winked, and then made her way toward the table to sit down.

I finished breakfast and joined her, and as we started eating I thought back to the first time I’d had her here, how I’d felt a surge of power knowing she was eating the food that I’d prepared for her. I’d known that day was the first in a string of others where I’d make her mine.

“Did you talk to your father?” I brought a piece of egg to my mouth and ate as I watched her, gauging her reaction.

She nodded. “Yeah. I called him back.”

Over the last year she’d been slowly mending her relationship with her father and getting to know her siblings. And although I knew she was trying to work things out with him and move past the betrayal and hurt he’d caused, I could still see the apprehension on her face, could hear it in her voice when she spoke to him.

“He’s really trying to mend things,” she said and leaned back in the chair, her hand around the glass of water. “I can hear it every time I talk to him.” She pushed some hair away from her face and exhaled. “We’re getting there, I suppose. But I do enjoy spending time with Lizzie and Ally,” she said.

A little smile moved across her face as she spoke about her siblings. Although I’d met her father once, and I could see his disapproval over the fact we were together instantly, he had no room to judge. Besides, I didn’t give a fuck about his approval. I loved Grace and wasn’t going to give her up no matter what.

And although I did want Grace to have a relationship with her father, he did leave a sour taste in my mouth because he'd hurt the woman I loved. And that wasn't something I'd ever stand.

But if he was willing to make it up to her, and she wanted to make it work with him, I was willing to accept him into my life and not want to beat his ass for hurting Grace.

"Change of subject," she said, and I saw the excitement on her face. "I got a callback for that interview at the ad agency."

Pride filled me. "Of course you did. I had no doubts. They would've been foolish not to bring you in."

She shrugged, and I saw the pinkness in her cheeks. She'd graduate this year and had her heart set on an ad agency in the city. I told her I could've easily gotten her in with my connections, but she'd refused, wanting to do things the "legit" way, or so she said.

"I have a good feeling about this, baby."

She gave me a skeptical look, and I held up my hands. "I swear I didn't pull any strings. Them calling you back was all you."

"I have a good feeling too. Let's hope I don't screw it up."

She stood to take her plate to the sink, but I grabbed her around the waist and pulled her down on my lap. "Have I told you how much I love you?"

"Only every time you see me, but I'm not complaining." She leaned down and kissed me, and I felt like everything was right in the world.

I felt only happiness, gratitude, and a massive sense of calm that I was one lucky bastard, had won the fucking lottery where my girl was concerned.

"Maybe one day you'll get sick of me saying it. Maybe one day you'll see how obsessed I am about you." I muttered the words against her lips.

"Maybe I like that you're so obsessed with me. Maybe I want more."

I groaned. “Watch it or I’ll have you right back in that bed.”

“Don’t make threats you won’t keep.”

I grinned, but it wasn’t one of amusement. I was out of my chair, bent, and had my arms around her legs, lifting her up and throwing her over my shoulder. Excessive, sure, but necessary ... absolutely. She squealed in surprise, and I spanked her ass as I took us back to the bedroom.

“I guess you’re a man of your word.”

I sure as fuck was.

The End.



PAINKILLER

By Jenika Snow

www.JenikaSnow.com

Jenika_Snow@Yahoo.com

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She's the only girl he's ever loved.

They'd grown up together, and in the public eye being with each other would be wrong... forbidden even.

But that didn't stop him from wanting her.

He knew he wasn't good for her. He partied too hard and got into far too many fights.

But despite that... Rebel wasn't going to stop until he made Rosie his in all ways.

He's the only boy she's ever loved.

They called him Rebel, and the nickname suited him well.

She called him family. Although that's not how she'd started seeing him.

Rosie's known Rebel nearly her entire life, and although they were opposites in all things, she just knew they were meant to be together.

But his self-destruction might be the very thing that kept them apart.

She just didn't know if crossing those lines and telling Rebel how much she loved him would bring them closer together, or ultimately tear them further apart.

Note: This was perviously published under the same title. Although it's been re-edited and re-covered, the story itself is the same.

CHAPTER
ONE

“**C** hug. Chug. Chug.”
“Suck it down.”

“Rebel is a fucking maniac.”

Everyone chanted, and Rebel wasn't going to disappoint, not because he cared about the people around him, but because he needed the liquor to help numb the shit he had inside of him, the emotions he'd prefer to keep buried down.

He wanted to be numb, wanted to feel only that pleasurable rush of intoxication claim him.

Rebel held the beer can over his head, had his mouth around the hole he'd made at the bottom of it, and popped the tab on top. He sucked down the alcohol as it rushed into his mouth, not even breathing as he swallowed.

Once the last drop slid down his throat he pulled the can away and tossed it aside. Everyone cheered and chanted for him to do another one.

Hell, he did another one because he wanted to, because he wanted to not think about anything that mattered.

The party that was currently being held was in a field behind an abandoned piece of property. The cops either didn't come out this way, or they didn't give a shit about some high school seniors fucking around and getting shitfaced in the middle of nowhere.

This was usually where the parties were held—well, the badass and chaos filled ones at least.

The feeling of someone running their hand down his arm had Rebel looking behind him and seeing Rebecca, one of the girls from school, grinning up at him. He'd never fucked her, but he knew she wanted to pretty damn badly.

She was too desperate, maybe thinking she could "change" him, or make him "settle down". Or maybe she just wanted the bad boy in school on her arm. Whatever her reasoning was, he'd never stick his dick in her.

The thing was there was only one girl that did it for Rebel, and it was a girl he'd never get to have. That was also the reasoning behind him wanting to feel numb. It was hard as fuck being around the person he loved every single fucking day, and knowing he couldn't have her.

"Hey, Rebel," Rebecca all but purred.

He moved out of her grasp and turned around to face her. She wore a low-cut crop top, her belly on display and her tits all but hanging out of the shirt.

"Here, man," someone said and handed Rebel a fresh beer.

He didn't look at the guy, just took the can, popped the top, and started drinking as he stared down at Rebecca.

"Maybe you want to go somewhere so we can be alone?" She smoothed her hands over his chest and started making her way down to the crotch of his pants.

He could have told her to stop, told her she didn't do anything for him, again, but she'd find out soon enough he didn't want her.

She reached his crotch, and the sultry smile on her face faded as she came in contact with his flaccid cock.

"Whiskey dick?" she said with a smirk in her voice.

He finished the beer and tossed the can away.

He grinned. "Girl, I could be hard as fuck while I'm throwing up from being piss ass drunk. You just don't do it for me."

Anger covered her face, but she smoothed her expression pretty fucking fast, acting like she didn't care

Rebel wasn't a virgin, had slept with girls in the past, but the truth was he hadn't fucked anyone in years. Fucking. Years. Losing his virginity at a young age wasn't something he cared about. It wasn't like he was saving himself for marriage.

But it was when he realized exactly how much he cared about Rosie—the girl he could never really have—that he knew no other girl would do it for him.

He wanted Rosie so damn badly, more than he'd ever wanted anyone else. This wasn't just about him wanting between her thighs. Rosie was special. He was in love with her, so fucking in love with her that just thinking about Rosie had his chest aching.

But being with the girl he wanted was never going to happen.

Her being my stepsister kind of puts that shit on hold.

What no one knew, because he'd sure as hell never say anything, was Rebel was lonely. He partied hard, was an asshole on the best of days, and had no ambitions that went past how numb he could get, and how much he could suppress his emotions.

He didn't strive to do well in school, and as long as he passed that's all he cared about.

He'd have dropped out of school altogether, because he didn't really give a shit, but he didn't want to be one of those loser guys that would rather smoke weed and get drunk for the rest of their lives than at least have a high school diploma.

And you also don't want Rosie to think you're an idiot that has no desire to get out of this fucking small town one day.

He turned from Rebecca and looked back at the party. There were about thirty people drinking and smoking pot, hell, some even fucking. But whenever Rebel thought of Rosie, his dammed stepsister, he felt like a piece of shit for being at these things.

He didn't bother telling anyone he was leaving, not that any of them would give a shit. He was popular because of the reputation he had, because he didn't care, fucked up anyone that wanted to talk shit, and he liked to have a good time no matter what. But truth was he was a shitty person.

He knew that, and didn't try to justify it.

He finished his beer, got into his car, and tossed the empty can on the passenger side seat. Once he had the engine cranked and was driving away from the party he really started to think about Rosie.

He'd known her since they were both six years old. Her mother had married his father, and at first he'd hated her, as any six-year-old boy would hate a little girl that everyone fawned over.

Now both of them were eighteen, and hell, their birthdays were even a month apart. But they were the total opposites, with Rosie being so damn smart, knowing what she wanted out of life, and having her priorities in order.

Why in the hell would she want someone like me?

How about I don't even fucking think about that shit?

But I love her, and can't have her.

Twenty minutes later and he pulled his car to a stop in front of his father and stepmother's house. One more fucking year of school and he planned on getting a place of his own. Rosie would go to college, make something out of her life, and find a guy that was good for her, that deserved her.

I don't deserve her.

But as much as he knew her finding a smart, decent guy was good for her, the very thought of her with any motherfucker had a blind rage filling him.

"Shit," he breathed out that word and stared at her window on the second floor of the house.

When she left for college he'd have no choice but to stand there and watch her leave. He knew it was best for her to get out of this town, but the very thought of her leaving had this

darkness filling him. Leaving this shitty town wasn't really in his future, not as far as he could see anyway.

But that didn't mean he wanted to be camped out in the basement for any more time than was absolutely necessary.

Cutting the engine, he sat there for a moment just staring at the house. The lights were off, and it was late as fuck, but coming and going was easy enough with the basement having a walkout, and his father being pretty lenient, or maybe really not giving a shit what Rebel did.

Rebel reached behind him and grabbed the bottle of vodka from the back seat. He broke the seal on the lid, tipped it back, and took a long drink.

He wasn't even buzzed, but that would change by the time he said hello to the bottom of the vodka bottle.

CHAPTER
TWO

Aidan Liam Bronson.
The only boy I'll ever love.

But he was called Rebel, and it had been what he'd been called for as long as she could remember. It fit him so perfectly.

Rosie lay in her bed staring at the ceiling, sleep not looking like it would come anytime soon. Her brain kept worrying, and all she could see was algorithms and equations.

She'd studied for five hours today, even though it was Friday and her test wasn't until Monday. Shouldn't she have been at a party or hanging out with her friends on a Friday? Shouldn't she have let loose for a little bit?

You have to have friends to hang out and party with.

Turning onto her side and staring at the bedside clock on her nightstand, she exhaled as it changed from 1:59 AM to 2:00 AM. No, sleep definitely wouldn't be coming anytime soon.

Rosie sat up and grabbed a hair tie off of her nightstand, put her long hair up in a messy bun, and stood. After grabbing her robe, the geeky one with the wiener dogs on it, she left the bedroom in search of something to eat.

The house was quiet with her mom and stepfather asleep down the hall, and Rebel having left before the sun even set.

Rebel, the boy I shouldn't want but crave desperately.

The fact she'd known him for the last twelve years, and he was technically her stepbrother, should have kept her emotions in check. Shouldn't she have seen him as a family member for as long as they'd lived under the same roof?

But no, she only saw Rebel as the boy she'd been in love with since she was fourteen years old, before she even knew what those deep emotions were. He was the only boy that would never see her as anything more than how she saw herself.

But even though she knew they could never be in a relationship, and he'd probably never reciprocate her feelings, they were as close as two people could be.

He didn't care that people called her the nerd or geek in school. In fact he had no problem kicking their asses because of it, and had on several occasions.

He was the only one she could really talk to, unload on. But they had nothing in common, and maybe that was why they got along so well? Maybe that was why he'd never see her as anything more?

I'd rather have him in my life as a friend than nothing at all.

And that was why Rosie would never tell him how she felt, because the risk of him being disgusted or uncomfortable was too high, and she didn't want to risk losing what they had.

She headed downstairs and went into the kitchen. After grabbing something to eat and drink she went over to the window by the sink.

Staring out the window, she leaned forward when she saw Rebel's car off to the side, and barely made out his big form sitting in the driver's seat.

Squinting because she didn't have her glasses on, she tried to see what he was doing, but the glare from the streetlamp, and the blurriness of her not being able to see clearly, didn't allow her to make out what was going on.

I sure as hell hope he doesn't have someone in the car with him.

There had been one time she'd walked in on him about to have sex. It had been her own fault, though, because she hadn't knocked before going into his room. But God, that vision would never leave her, and neither would the pain she'd felt afterward.

You can't be upset when he doesn't even know how you feel.

About to turn and head back to bed, because she didn't want to see if there was someone else in the car with Rebel, she stilled when she saw his car door open. He climbed out of the car, braced a hand on the hood, and just stood there.

For long seconds he didn't move, and she felt her brows knit in confusion. But then he shut the door and started making his way toward the back of the house where the walkout basement door was. He was swaying pretty badly, and she knew he was drunker than shit.

But then again he wasn't nicknamed Rebel because he liked to stay at home and follow the rules.

After about five minutes she heard banging around downstairs, and as much as she told herself to just go to bed, Rebel was the only person she was close with. She wanted to make sure he was okay, and at least didn't fall asleep on his back and choke on his own vomit.

Walking to where the basement door was on the other side of the house, she grabbed the doorknob and slowly turned it open. The lights were off, and she couldn't even see the steps that descended, but then a light was turned on and she blinked back from the sudden brightness.

More banging, some cursing from Rebel, and she found herself shutting the door behind her and going downstairs. Once on the bottom landing she looked around the corner and saw Rebel in the bathroom.

Rebel had a nice setup down here, with the basement being fully finished, having its own bathroom, and even a little kitchenette off to the side. But whatever her stepfather and mother were thinking when they agreed to let Rebel have this

as his room, including the private entrance, was unknown to her.

And then she heard Rebel throwing up, and she sagged her shoulders, hating that he allowed himself to get like this. Whatever was going on with him he'd never tell her, no matter how close they were.

He kept this wall up around him, and it was so high that even if she wanted to break it down it would be one hell of a feat.

Rosie headed toward the bathroom and stopped when she was standing in the doorway. Rebel was standing over the toilet, one hand braced on the wall, the other holding onto the back of the tank.

“Are you okay?” she asked, keeping her voice low.

He turned just his head and looked over his shoulder at her. His short darker blond hair was a mess around his head, and his eyes were bloodshot. The scent of vodka also came from him strong enough she probably could have gotten drunk from the fumes alone.

“What are you doing down here?” he asked just as softly, and gave her a half grin. Even hurling after a night of partying he still could look so charming.

“I hope you didn't drive this way.”

He shook his head and straightened before turning and going to the sink to wash his face and mouth. “You know me better than that.”

Yeah, he may have a beer or two, but if he was drunk he never drove home.

“I got shit-faced sitting in my car in front of the house.” He chuckled, but it didn't sound very humorous.

“How about I help you get to bed? You know if your dad sees you like this he'll probably be pissed.”

Rebel shrugged. “He doesn't give a shit, Rosie. You're the apple of his eye.”

She felt her face heat, knowing that wasn't true. His father, Lawson, was a good man, took care of her when her biological father had skipped town on them, but she also knew he loved Rebel deeply.

Rosie reached out and took his hand in hers, pulling him out of the bathroom, but she went slowly. Having Rebel, all six-foot-three, and two hundred pounds of muscle falling over on her was not how she wanted to end the night.

He braced a hand on the wall to steady himself as they moved toward the bedroom. Pushing the door open and letting him go in first, she heard him start to grumble.

"I should have taken a shower, but unless you want to wash my back and see me butt ass naked, I'll just do it in the morning."

She felt her face heat even further at his words. Yes, she actually would have helped him shower, but it wouldn't have been because she was doing a good deed. No, she loved him, and seeing Rebel with nothing on was obviously a huge turn-on.

He sat on the bed and sighed, and for a second she just sat there, not sure if he was really okay to be left alone. Then he turned his head and looked at her. "I'm sorry you have to see me like this, Rosie." He gave her that half smile again, and her heart sped up.

God, I love this guy, and I don't think I could ever tell him.

He lay back on the bed and closed his eyes, throwing an arm over them and groaning. "The room is spinning. I shouldn't have drunk so much."

"Why *did* you drink so much?"

He removed his arm from over his eyes and looked at her. He didn't speak for long seconds, and she didn't know if he'd actually respond. But then he cleared his throat and turned his focus to the ceiling. "I just have my own shit I'm dealing with, and I guess I can't talk to anyone but a liquor bottle."

She knitted her brows and moved closer. "Rebel, you know you can talk to me about anything."

He shook his head but didn't respond. Rebel sat up again and grabbed his shirt from behind his back, pulled it up and over his head, and tossed it aside. The sight of his hard body had everything in her tensing. He lay back down and covered his eyes with his arm again.

The room grew silent, and Rosie knew this conversation was done. It didn't take long before she heard the deep, even sound of him breathing, and knew he was asleep, or better yet, passed out.

Rosie sat on the bed beside him and just watched his broad, muscular chest rise and fall. He had a tattoo on his side, a Mayan calendar that was intricate as it was beautiful. Letting out a deep sigh she stood and was about to head back upstairs when Rebel reached out and grabbed her hand with his.

She froze and looked at him. His eyes were open and trained on her, but they were glossy, and she doubted he'd remember any of this come morning. He was just too drunk.

“You're too fucking good for any of this.”

She knitted her brows and placed her other hand over his, curling her fingers against his warm flesh. Her heart was racing a mile a minute, and it had everything to do with the fact this one touch sent tingles of awareness through her.

She looked a mess right now, certainly not like the girls he'd dated in the past. She'd always thought of herself as frumpy and the “plain Jane” type of girl. The girls Rebel tended to go after were the complete opposite.

But in this moment, when he wasn't fully aware of his surroundings, she could let her guard down, even for a second.

She smoothed her fingers over his bigger ones and stared into his eyes. “What do you mean?” She shouldn't have asked, because he was intoxicated, and his ramblings probably wouldn't be coherent.

“Too good for this fucking town, for the people that live here, and for...” He closed his eyes and pulled his hand away, rubbing his forehead. “I'm too drunk. I need to keep my mouth

shut.” He opened his eyes and looked at her again. “Thanks for getting me to bed, Rosie.”

She loved how he said her name, all thick and sleep-like. His wall of reserve wasn’t as high right now, but if she didn’t leave she might find herself saying something she’d regret, something he may even remember come morning.

“Any time. I just wish you’d go easy with the drinking and partying.” That was true, but on the other hand his wild side was an aphrodisiac.

Rebel was not the type of guy to be messed with, that was for sure, and everyone knew it in school. But whatever demons he was fighting, made him lose control.

“I know, Rosie,” he responded and gave her a smirk. “I needed a different painkiller, that’s for fucking sure.” And then he turned to his side and within a few moments she heard him sleeping once more, the sounds of his breathing deep and even.

Yeah, she was so lost in this boy.

I love you so much, Rebel, and it’s in a way that would probably have condemnation coming down on me. But none of that would matter if you loved me back.

CHAPTER
THREE

Two days later

Rosie grabbed her backpack off the kitchen table just as Rebel came walking in, bags under his eyes and his blond hair disheveled.

“Morning, sunshine,” he said in a husky voice, his focus on the floor despite the fact he addressed her.

“You look like crap,” she said, teasing.

He lifted his head and glared, but he was smiling. “I forgot I had some shitty report to finish for today.”

“Wait, you, Rebel Bronson, stayed up to do homework?” Rosie started laughing.

He flipped her off goodheartedly as he made his way over to the fridge. “Believe me, I wouldn’t have given a shit if it was done or not, but if I didn’t turn something readable in I would have failed the damn class.”

He grabbed the container of orange juice and braced himself up on the fridge door.

“As it is I’m barely scraping by in that class.” He opened the carton and drank straight from it. Her mother came in and lightly smacked him on the shoulder.

“Aidan, get a glass.” Her mother and his father never called him Rebel, which she knew he hated.

Rebel took one more long drink from it, closed the lid, and put it back in the fridge.

“Annabel, the jug is almost empty anyway,” Rebel said, addressing her mom. Despite the fact their parents had gotten married when she and Rebel were only six, she didn’t call Lawson “Dad”, and he didn’t call her mother “Mom”. Rebel glanced at Rosie, smirked, and gave her a wink.

If he only knew what that did to her, how it made her heart race and her panties become moist. She felt her cheeks get hot, and looked away, embarrassed by her reaction over something as simple as a damn wink. But this tingling on the back of her neck had her looking at Rebel again. He was staring at her, his brows pulled down low in confusion.

“You taking your sister to school today?” her mother asked Rebel.

“Annabel,” Rebel said in a disgusted tone. “Rosie isn’t my sister. We’ve told you that, damn.”

Her mom turned and faced them, a coffee cup in hand. She rolled her eyes. “I swear, you two and the weirdness you get from me using that terminology. “Are you taking *Rosie* to school?”

“Don’t I take her every day?” Rebel said and winked at Rosie again. “Come on, girl. Wouldn’t want your smart ass late.” He grinned and walked past her, and the scent of the cologne he wore struck her deep, and only in a good way.

She waved goodbye to her mom, figured Lawson had left to go to the office early since she hadn’t seen him, and followed Rebel out to his car. His cell went off and he stopped to answer it, but Rosie kept making her way to the car. She opened the passenger side door, but heard Rebel starting to speak on the phone.

“Nah, man. I think after this past weekend I’ll stay in.” He glanced at Rosie, and she felt embarrassed that she’d been caught listening to his conversation.

She got in the car, and even though the door was now shut she could still hear him speaking as he made his way toward the vehicle.

“Rowley, man, I got shitfaced last weekend.” A moment of silence passed, and Rebel opened the driver’s side door.

He sat down, and she heard his friend Rowley speaking on the other end, the words muffled.

“Yeah, I was fine when I left the party, but when I got home that was a different matter.” Rebel glanced at her again, but she didn’t hold his stare, and instead focused out the passenger side window. “Listen, I’ll talk to you at school.”

Rebel hung up, started the engine, and for a second the sound of his Mustang purring was almost serene.

“Hey,” he said, and she glanced over at him.

“Yeah?”

“Are you okay? You’re acting weird.”

She knew she was. After she’d put him to bed Friday, Rebel had been gone the rest of the weekend for work. His job, consisting of doing under the table mechanic work for the local body shop, had him working a lot after school, and every other weekend.

He might party hard, but he was also a very hard worker. This was the first time since Friday night that she’d seen him, and Rosie couldn’t deny that the encounter that night had been a little more uncomfortable than normal.

Maybe it had been the things he’d said ... and the things he’d stopped himself from saying? All weekend she’d wondered what he could have told her, but forced himself not to. But then on the heels of those obsessive thoughts she wondered if it had all been because he’d been shitfaced.

“You sure you’re okay? You’re acting weird as hell.”

She waved off his words. “I’m fine. Let’s get to school, because I can’t be late.” She reached over and turned on the radio, hoping the music would dissuade him from pushing her on this.

But there was also a part of her that wished he would push her, because maybe then she’d grow a set and man up to how she really felt.



ROSIE WAS ACTING weird as fuck, but Rebel hadn't pushed her in telling him what the issue was. Maybe she was sick and tired of seeing his partying ways?

There had been far too many times that she'd had to witness his drunk ass coming home, but on Friday night she'd actually put him to bed.

Yeah, he remembered it all, even if he had been so fucking drunk the hangover the next morning had brought tears to his eyes. But he wasn't going to bring that shit up, wasn't going to try to tell her what he'd almost said.

He might have been drunk, but at least he'd been smart enough to keep his mouth shut, at least for the most part.

Ten minutes later and he was pulling into the school parking lot. He cut the engine, turned to face Rosie, but before he could say anything, she was out the door.

"Thanks for the ride, like always. See you at lunch," she said through the open passenger window, and then hauled ass into the school.

Fuck, maybe he'd said more than he remembered? Maybe she felt awkward as hell, sick of seeing him drunk from partying, and tired of all his bullshit? He couldn't blame her, but not having Rosie in his life, at least as a friend, was not an option.

But he'd starting questioning why he felt the need to be so reckless, to be a fucking idiot and drink his life away. At only eighteen that was the highlight of every single fucking spare time he had off. Was he such a damn loser that he couldn't even focus on a future?

What fucking future? You'll be stuck in this damn town while Rosie leaves and makes something incredible for herself.

He pushed his thoughts away and got out of the car. Rosie was long gone inside, and he saw Rowley and a few of the other guys he hung out with making their way over to him.

After clapping each other on the back, they made their way into the school and their first class. Truth was Rebel fucking hated school, was shit at it, but then again didn't apply himself. He did the minimum just to pass, and that was it.

Just as class was about to start, the door was pulled open and a guy walked in. Clearly new at school, he had a backpack slung over his shoulder and this arrogant attitude cast along his face.

Rebel leaned back in his seat and watched as the newcomer went to the empty seat beside him, and although he hadn't said one word to the guy everything in Rebel's body tensed. He was big, tall, and muscular, and had this smirk on his face like he knew something no one else did.

It kind of pissed Rebel off, or maybe that was the asshole side of him rising up?

The guy looked at Rebel, maybe feeling the holes he stared in the side of his head, and smirked wider.

"What's up, man?" He gave Rebel a chin tilt in acknowledgement, and when Rebel didn't respond he faced the front of the class again.

"We have a new student, everyone," the teacher said, her appearance frazzled, like she might have just rolled out of bed and hastily gotten ready because she realized she was late. She gestured for the new kid to stand. "What's your name, and where are you from?"

"Charleston," the kid said.

"Charleston?" the teacher said. "As in that's where you're from?"

"No, as in that's my name. I transferred from River Run." He sat down without saying anything else, and there were a couple of hushed murmurs from the students.

"Okay, well, welcome, Charleston," the teacher said again and turned to start class.

Rebel didn't like this guy already, not with his cocky attitude. Hell, maybe he didn't like him because Charleston

reminded Rebel of himself, and wasn't that a scary fucking thing?

CHAPTER
FOUR

Rosie grabbed her tray of food and went in search of Rebel, but he wasn't sitting in his usual spot. So he wasn't here yet, but she knew he'd be here soon enough.

"Hey, Bookie," Rebecca, one of the school bitches said and smirked. Bookie, the stupid nickname Rebecca had decided to give Rosie freshman year because she read a lot. Rebecca was an idiot, though, because Rosie didn't take offense to the name.

Like reading was such a bad thing? An insult coming from Rebecca, who spent more time in the girls' bathroom putting "her face on"—Rosie didn't give a second thought to the girl.

She made her way past the table where all the "popular girls" sat, which just happened to be close to where Rebel and his friends sat.

She sat down, and only a couple of minutes later Rowley and Max sat down across from her, two of Rebel's closest friends, and just as wild as Rebel.

"Hey, Rosie," Rowley said. He was the nicest of all of Rebel's friends, especially when it came to her. The rest usually just gave her a smile that lasted about a millisecond, and then she was invisible to them.

Maybe they didn't like the fact the "nerd" hung around, or maybe they didn't like that she was a girl and invading in their "guy time"? Either way she didn't care because it didn't bother her.

Rosie, due to her unpopular status at school and the fact she didn't really have friends, had grown a thick skin in middle school. Being teased had made her realize that this time in her life, where it was all about cliques and reputations, didn't matter.

She'd be out of school soon enough, starting college, and she wouldn't have to see these superficial assholes anymore.

She started eating, but glanced around to see if Rebel was anywhere to be found. Rebecca was staring at her, but Rosie ignored the daggers being pointed in her direction. Another group of girls entered the cafeteria and started chuckling, and then she saw one guy come in alone.

She'd never seen him before, and he looked out of place with his leather jacket, the sunglasses he was wearing indoors, and the hardest look on his face.

"That's some new kid. Charleston, I think is his name." Rowley was the one to speak.

"He looks like a douche," Max said.

Rowley chuckled and shoved half his burger in his mouth. "What the hell kind of name is Charleston anyway?" Rowley had his mouth full, so the words were muffled, but she heard them well enough. Rosie didn't bother commenting that Rowley's name wasn't that "normal" either, or that half the guys they hung out with had nicknames for each other.

Rosie watched as the guy came further into the cafeteria, saw Rebecca sit up straighter and her interest pique, and Rosie had to roll her eyes. That girl was like a damn piranha when it came to the opposite sex.

And then Mr. New Kid gave one glance at Rebecca and kept on moving. She was surprised, and a little impressed. Rebecca was a bitch in every sense of the word, but was gorgeous and had a body that rivaled the ones walking down a runway for Victoria's Secret.

He came closer to her, and although he wore sunglasses she felt his stare right on her. Shifting on her seat and pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose, she looked down at her

tray of food. He made her feel a little uncomfortable, like if she were staring right in the eyes of a savage wolf.

Really? You used that as an analogy?

He stopped in front of their table, and she looked over at him. The guys stopped eating and were looking at him as well, and for a second no one spoke or moved.

“You got room for one more?” Charleston asked, as he looked right at her.

“Uh,” Rosie managed to say, and glanced at Rowley and Max. She didn’t want to make this call given the fact she wasn’t the only one at this table, but she also didn’t want to turn someone away. “I don’t have a problem with it, but it’s not just up to me.”

Rosie smiled. She knew all too well the feeling of being pushed aside by people that wanted to be assholes. She wasn’t like that, and never wanted to make anyone feel like they weren’t welcome.

“Move along.”

The sound of Rebel right behind her had Rosie turning in the plastic seat and staring up at him. He was glaring at the new guy, his big body tense, and the annoyance coming from him as clear as if it was a neon sign flashing on his forehead.

For a second Rebel and the new guy just stood there staring at each other, and then finally Mr. New Guy looked at Rosie, smiled, and turned and left. She was confused as hell as to what was going on, and when Rebel sat down beside her she didn’t bite her tongue.

“What was that about?”

Rebel just shook his head.

“He just wanted to sit down.”

Rebel turned and looked at her. “He rubs me the wrong way, Rosie.”

He had this thing about “going on instinct” when it came to people. Maybe he was right at times, but without any

interaction, especially in this instance she kind of got annoyed with him.

“Rubs you the wrong way?”

Rebel nodded and started eating, that wall he always had around him seeming even thicker than before. She may love him, but surely he knew how she'd been treated in the past, with little to no interaction from the assholes that were rude to her.

Hell, she'd said only a few sentences in the entire time she'd known Rebecca, but the bitch was on her constantly.

“But you didn't even get to know him, or speak to him?”

Rebel sighed and stopped eating to look at her. “Rosie, you know I go off of my gut, and the moment I saw that kid, with his arrogant attitude and smirk he wore, he just rubbed me the wrong way.”

“Really Rebel?”

He lifted a brow after she spoke. “What?”

“It's true, Rosie,” Rowley said. “That kid had this cocky smirk plastered on his face. He totally thought he was better than all of us.”

All she could do was roll her eyes, stand, and shake her head. “You guys are unbelievable and ridiculous.” Looking at Rebel, she didn't know what had gotten into him, but she hated this side.

She loved him so much, was so head over heels for him, but he had a lot of issues to work out. If the guy had started shit with Rebel right off the bat she could have understood, but they hadn't even spoken. Not one word.

She went to leave, because she was annoyed now, having been cast aside from her peers in the past, and feeling pretty shitty because of it. But Rebel reached out and grabbed her hand, stopping her.

“Don't be pissed at me, Rosie,” he said in a low, deep voice.

She smiled at him, but she knew it didn't quite reach her eyes. "I just need to go. If not I'll start a fight and I don't want to do that with you here." She pulled her hand away and left the cafeteria, wanting to talk to Rebel more, to really break down his wall, but needing some air, too.

Maybe she'd let this get to her too badly, or maybe she was being overly sensitive? Either way if she didn't leave she would have started shit with all of them, and a scene was not what she wanted.



"FUCK," Rebel said, staring down at his food.

"Man, she got upset fast," Max said, and Rebel lifted his gaze to look at the other guy.

"Yeah, because you know people have been shitty to her before, and me turning away the new kid probably triggered that for her."

Max didn't respond, and maybe it was the glare Rebel cast in his direction.

"She'll get over it, man. Give her some time. Rosie's a tough girl," Rowley said.

All Rebel did was look at his closest friend. He was in love with Rosie, was a chicken shit for not telling her, but the last thing he wanted to do was make her feel uncomfortable or upset. But that new guy, yeah, he did rub Rebel the wrong way.

He always went with his gut, and for some reason the cocky air that surrounded that kid had Rebel on alert.

"I need to find out more about that kid and see why just looking at him pisses me off."

"It's not just you, man," Rowley said in between shoveling fires in his mouth. "He seems arrogant as hell. I noticed that right off the bat."

Rebel's appetite was gone, and he pushed his tray away.

Max eyed it. “You not eating that?”

“Nah, have at it.”

Max grabbed the tray and pulled it closer to him. Rebel looked around the cafeteria to see if Rosie had stayed, but he knew she hadn't. Rebecca was staring at him, and he curled his lip and looked away.

“Dude, she eye fucks you constantly,” Rowley was the one to say. “Be glad you didn't stick your dick in that psycho. She seems certifiable.”

Yeah, Rebel saw that. “I'll never be drunk enough to go anywhere near that.” If he could just have some balls and talk to Rosie, tell her how she made him feel, and let her in, his life would be a hell of a lot better. He knew that without a fucking doubt.

But he also knew he was a pussy for not manning up and doing what was right by her.

CHAPTER
FIVE

Rosie sat outside, the sun bright, the air humid but warm. She closed her eyes for a second and just absorbed the light and heat.

Hey, maybe she'd even get a tan sitting out here?

She was pale as it was, even pushing the pasty side, but going tanning, or even just hanging outside wasn't what she did. She stayed in a lot, preferred it, and didn't care that she was a homebody.

She looked back down at the book she was reading, hating that she couldn't even control her emotions, and let them get the best of her. It was kind of a silly thing to get upset about, but then again it wasn't.

She looked over to the windows that lined one side of the cafeteria. More times than not she stayed in when a lot of the seniors headed off school grounds to eat lunch. With not that much time, what was the point? She'd be tagging along with Rebel and his friends, and that wasn't really what she wanted.

No, she could sit and eat, and then she was done come out here and read.

Looking back at her book, she started to get lost in the plot, but a big shadow was cast across the table and pages, and she exhaled, knowing it was Rebel.

"I'm sorry I just left like that. I guess I just needed some fresh air." Looking up, she shielded her eyes with her arm, and sat up straighter when she saw it wasn't Rebel, but the new guy.

“Hi,” he said and smirked. “This seat taken?” He gestured to the bench across from her.

She shook her head. “No, it’s free.” Rosie closed her book and stared at him as he set his backpack on the table and sat down across from her.

“I’m Charleston, by the way.” He held his hand out for her to shake.

It was kind of an odd gesture, but she went with it. “I’m Rosie.”

“Your friend is an asshole,” he said out of the blue, and smirked again.

He seemed to do that act a lot.

She felt herself bristle at the insult thrown Rebel’s way. “He’s my stepbrother, and he has good intentions, even if he goes a bit overboard sometime.” There was a second of silence that passed. “But he’s not an asshole.”

Well, yeah, he can be, but this guy doesn’t have any right to just blurt that out.

“I’ve pissed you off. I’m sorry,” he said, but there was something about his demeanor that told her he wasn’t sorry at all.

Arrogance. Yeah, that’s what she got off of him.

“What are you reading?” He changed the subject and pointed to the now closed book.

Looking down at it, she shrugged. “It’s just a book for English class.”

He smiled. “Does it have a title?”

She chuckled. “Yeah, sorry. People tend to not care about this kind of stuff. It’s Wally Lamb’s *She’s Come Undone*.”

He stared at her for a second, the sun behind him and casting this shadow over him. “Is it good?”

She nodded. “It’s really good, in fact.”

“What’s it about?”

She lifted a brow. “Are you really interested or are you just making small talk because Rebel wouldn’t let you sit at their table?” She was teasing.

He chuckled. “Rebel? That’s his name?”

“Nickname, but he’s been called that for years.”

Charleston nodded. “No, I’m really interested in what you’re doing. I noticed you right away in the cafeteria.”

That had surprise filling her. “What? Really? Why?”

He started laughing then. “Honestly, I don’t know. I mean you’re very pretty, and I saw you sitting across from those two Hulks, and I don’t know.” He shrugged and grinned wider.

She felt her face heat. Aside from Rebel no one complimented her, or had ever said she was pretty. She was geeky, she knew that, but she embraced that, loved who she was.

But Rosie knew what she was and wasn’t, and a guy like Charleston, who reminded her of Rebel in a lot of ways, seemed like he would appreciate a thinner, prettier girl. *Like Rebecca.*

“I’ve embarrassed you,” he said, but he was smiling, as if he found it amusing.

She started chuckling and nodded. “Yeah, I won’t lie.”

He sobered, and she did the same .

“You shouldn’t be embarrassed. You’re pretty.”

She cleared her throat and looked at the book again. It was time for her to change the subject now. “It’s about a girl that goes through a lot of difficult times, losing a lot in life, and ultimately finding her way.” She looked at Charleston again. “It’s a great book.”

“This might be pretty damned forward, but I transferred here because I was having a hard time at my last school. I could use some tutoring in some classes, and you seem pretty smart.”

“You want me to tutor you?” She knitted her brows. “This is your first day. You can’t possibly be failing anything.” She chuckled.

“Hey, better to be on top of shit, right?”

“I guess,” Rosie said.

It was nice to speak to someone about this stuff. She could talk to Rebel about anything, and they did speak a lot, but the truth was Rebel wasn’t interested in any of this.

She wished he was, but life didn’t always have a way of going the way someone wanted it to.



REBEL HAD to be in class in the next twenty minutes, but he wanted, needed to talk to Rosie. He hated that she was upset because of him, but he wouldn’t have changed his reaction to Charleston, either.

He pushed the doors open and stepped outside. The sun’s glare caught him in the eyes, and he turned his head until his vision cleared.

Turning his head forward, he scanned the grounds, not seeing Rosie, and was about to head back inside, but then he froze, everything in his body tensing as he saw the new guy sitting with her over at the row of tables.

He curled his hands into fists at his sides, and felt his rage and jealousy rise. Rebel knew, right here and right now, this wasn’t about Charleston making his instincts rise up, but the fact a guy was talking to Rosie.

Rebel loved her, and having some guy, especially some new punk, sitting close to her, making her smile, royally pissed him the fuck off. Making this low sound in the back of his throat, all Rebel saw was red.

He shouldn’t have gone toward her, should have been stronger in that regard, because truth was he knew this was going to end up badly. But Rebel couldn’t stop himself.

And then he saw Charleston reach out and touch her on the hand. He saw Rosie's cheeks turn red, watched her pull her hand away as her embarrassment came through full force, and he was beside Charleston in the next second.

Rosie made this startled sound and looked up at him. Rebel stood behind Charleston, the guy not turning around yet.

"Rebel?" Rosie said softly, but Rebel was now looking at the guy, his anger not dimming as he kept picturing him touching Rosie, even if it was innocently.

"Can I help you with something, man?" Charleston said, but didn't bother turning and facing Rebel.

"Yeah, you can get your ass away from Rosie."

And then Rebel saw the corner of the asshole's mouth lift as he reached out and stroked Rosie's cheek. "I'll call you about that tutoring."

Rebel grabbed his shoulder, but Charleston was already standing and shrugging off the hold.

"Watch it, asshole," Charleston said low enough Rebel didn't doubt he was the only one to hear.

"Don't fucking touch her, look at her, hell, don't fucking think about her."

Charleston smirked, and Rebel wanted to cold cock him right now, just knock the little shit out. But he held back, knowing Rosie was watching this, probably uncomfortable as fuck.

"I know guys like you."

Rebel lifted an eyebrow. "Guys like me?"

"Guys that rule the school, start shit, and never back down."

Well yeah, Rebel wasn't about to deny any of that.

"I know guys like you because I'm the same way." And then Charleston pushed past Rebel and went into the school.

For a second all Rebel did was stand there and watch the asshole walk away. Yeah, he'd had a bad feeling about Charleston, and now he knew why ... because he was just like Rebel.

He looked at Rosie and saw her eyes were wide, her shock clear. "What the hell was that about?"

All he did was shake his head, because he didn't know what to say, or how to explain his jealousy.

Being honest was what he wanted, but he was too afraid of it ruining things.

CHAPTER
SIX

Rosie tapped her pencil on her desk in her bedroom, staring out the window. She couldn't see anything because of how dark it was outside, and she couldn't focus because she was thinking about Rebel, and the encounter that happened at school.

What had gotten into him? Why was he acting like this, seemingly all of a sudden? Did he really dislike Charleston so much that he'd order him not to touch her or even think about her?

It seemed extreme, but Rosie also couldn't lie and say having Rebel so protective didn't please every part of her.

But he'd been distant the rest of the day, had dropped her off, but had left right away. What was going on inside of him that he couldn't talk to her about?

Was it the drinking, the partying ... God forbid, drugs? She resolved that she'd talk to him tonight, to see what was wrong, make him talk to her, tell her what he was going through. They weren't just living under the same roof, they were best friends, and she'd remind him of that.

They'd known each other nearly their whole lives, and that had to count for something, right?

But what if it's a girl? What if he's found someone and is uncomfortable talking to you about it? What if it's not just a piece of ass for him?

She needed to not think about that because she'd just end up driving herself crazy. No, she'd talk to Rebel and that was

the end of it. She was tired of pretending, of not thinking she could be happy.

If things got weird then they got weird, but not being honest with herself or him was painful. Rosie didn't want that to be her life, where she regretted what she should have done.

What a shitty life she'd lead if she never got her feelings off her chest. She'd at least be able to sleep better at night, even if Rebel didn't want anything to do with her.



I SHOULD HAVE JUST GONE HOME right after work.

But all Rebel had been able to think about was Rosie and the look of confusion and shock she'd given him when he'd all but beaten fucking Charleston's ass.

"We're here."

Rebel glanced over at Mickey, one of the guys he worked with, and the person he'd gone to the bar with afterward. It didn't matter that he was only eighteen.

There were plenty of places around town where he could get a drink because he knew the people. But he wasn't drunk, just buzzed and trying to forget about all the ways he'd fucked shit up.

"Thanks for the lift."

Mickey nodded. "Anytime."

He got out of the car and shut the door, standing there a second and staring at the front of the house. It was late, but even if he'd come home right after work everyone would have been settling down for the evening. He wasn't full-time at his job, for obvious school reasons, but after he graduated he was going to save up and get his own place.

He needed that, needed a place that didn't remind him of the girl he loved that would no longer be in town.

Scrubbing a hand over his hair he made his way toward the front door, unlocked it, and went inside. Rebel could have just gone through the basement door and not have to talk to anyone if they were still up, but he secretly hoped he'd run into Rosie.

He didn't know what he'd say, maybe the truth finally, but he wasn't thinking that far. He just wanted to see her, to touch her...

Get that out of your fucking head. She's your best friend, probably sees you as nothing more. If you tell her you're in love with her she'll fucking back away and there will be this wall between you two.

But the house was quiet and still. He went into the kitchen, grabbed a plate of leftovers from the fridge, and took it downstairs.

But he stopped at the staircase and looked up, seeing light coming from underneath Rosie's closed door. He wanted to go talk to her, but common sense told him to leave this alone right now.

So, instead of being a man and dealing with this head-on, like he did with most things, he went to the door that led to his room, and left well enough alone.

But it's far from fucking well.



ROSIE FOUND herself leaving her room, walking down the stairs, going to the door that led to the basement, and opening it. She should have called Rebel's cell phone, given him a heads-up she wanted to talk, even if he was in the same house as she was.

But she was just doing this, and not giving herself time to think about what she should or shouldn't do.

Once the door was shut behind her she descended, seeing the light still on. Rounding the corner she didn't see Rebel at first, but then saw his big shadow coming from the bathroom.

Calling out to him and letting him know she was here would have been the right thing to do, but her throat was tight and her mouth dry. She didn't even know if she could have said anything in that moment for how nervous she was.

And then he came out of the bathroom, turned the light off, and everything in her stilled. She looked at his body, his chest, which was bare, and the towel that was wrapped around his waist. He'd just gotten out of the shower, and damn did he look good in only that terrycloth. He had his head downcast, but after only a second he lifted it, their gazes clashing.

"Rosie?" he said her name softly, but in that deep timbered voice of his. He didn't move, and neither did she, for her nerves were on high alert right now. "What are you doing down here?" he asked sincerely, not upset that she'd just come into his room.

"I should have let you know I was coming down here," she managed to say, but she felt like she had no control over herself when it came to Rebel. It's not like she'd never seen him shirtless before.

They'd gone on plenty of family trips during the summer. But right now, knowing why she was down here and what she planned on saying, made this seem so ... intimate.

"You don't ever have to give me a heads-up. You're welcome down here anytime." He smiled and walked over to his dresser, grabbing a pair of sweats. "Give me a minute and I'll make myself decent."

When he faced her it was only for a second before he turned from her. Rosie didn't miss what he sported ... massive fucking wood.

Oh. My. God.

He was gone for only a few moments in the bathroom before he came back out, still shirtless, and looking so damn good Rosie felt her cheeks heat, knew she was blushing, and looked away.

"What's up?" he asked, his voice tight, as if he, too, were uncomfortable. But that didn't seem right, not when it

concerned Rebel. He always seemed so in control, so with it.

She looked at him, but forced herself not to check him out, or to see if she'd just been imagining things and had imagined his erection.

Why would he be hard for me?

"I wanted to talk," Rosie blurted out. She wasn't going to walk around this, because just saying what she needed to say and getting the hell out of here before shit really hit the fan, seemed like the best course of action.

"Okay," he said hesitantly. "You want to sit down?"

She shook her head. No, she needed to be able to leave if he started getting uncomfortable after what she said.

Taking a deep breath, Rosie told herself this was for the best, but there was a little voice in the back of her head that said it wasn't, that this was a horrible idea.

A moment of silence passed, and she took another deep breath, willing herself to do this, that it wasn't the end of the world. This needed to be done, or she'd lose her damn mind. Looking him right in the eye, she could see the worry on his face, but at the moment no words came from her.

"Rosie," Rebel said and moved closer to her. "Are you okay?" His brows were knitted in concern. "Someone fuck with you?"

She saw his nostrils flare as his anger started to rise.

"Was it that fucking new kid?"

She shook her head right away. "No, everything is fine. I'm fine." She saw him visibly relax, and couldn't help but smile at the fact Rebel was her protector. He was so good to her, her best friend, and the boy she was about to tell she was in love with.

I can't keep it in anymore.

"I'm in love with you," Rosie managed to blurt out, felt herself grow hot from the awkward sensation coursing through her, and didn't know what else to say.

Rebel didn't move, didn't even show emotion aside from the slight widening of his eyes. Seconds ticked by of agonizing silence, but it felt like hours.

"You're in love with me?" he asked in a stoic voice.

She could only nod.

And then he was right in front of her, his hand cupping the back of her head, and this smile spreading across his face. That's when Rosie felt this weight lift off her shoulders.

"You're happy?" Her voice shook as she asked him the question.

Rebel closed his eyes and nodded. "Fuck yeah, baby." When he opened them again the blueness of his eyes was startling. "Because I wanted to tell you I'm in love with you, too."

She could feel how hard he was ... for her.

"I've fucking loved you for so long, Rosie."

She couldn't breathe, couldn't even comprehend what was happening. Was this really going on right now?

"I've felt the same way, Rebel." She barely got the words out because her throat was so tight.

"I was too fucking scared to say anything to you about it."

She closed her eyes as pleasure at hearing those words coursed through her. "Me too."

They stared into each other's eyes for several seconds, and then he groaned right before he leaned down and placed his mouth on hers. The kiss started off slow, sensual and gentle even, but as the seconds passed by the more frantic it became.

God, am I really doing this with Rebel?

"I want you," Rosie found herself saying out loud.

Rebel pulled back, surprise clear on his face.

Rosie swallowed, knowing she didn't want this to stop, that she wanted Rebel to be the boy that took her virginity.

“Is this really fucking happening?” he asked in a strained, tight voice.

She nodded. *Yeah, it's really happening.* “I love you.”

He groaned before claiming her mouth again. She was pressed up against the wall as he kissed her with a passion she'd never thought she'd experience with him. Rosie wanted his hands all over her, taming this fire inside of her.

“Fuck me,” she whispered against his mouth, and his grunt of a response was all he said before he had his hands on her breasts.

He clenched the mounds through the material of her shirt, and a spark of pleasure filled her.

“Take it off,” she all but gasped out. Before she knew what was happening he pulled the collar of her shirt down hard enough that it tore and her breasts spilled free.

“Are you sure about this, Rosie baby?” he asked, even though she'd all but said that, and her tits were hanging free right in front of him.

She didn't even need to think about this. “I've never been more sure about anything. I want you to be my first, Rebel.”

He groaned and started kissing her neck. While doing that he pushed down her lounge pants and panties, and she felt like her heart would beat right through her chest. He cupped her cheeks in both of his hands and started kissing her mouth again, his tongue pushing past the seam of her lips and plunging in deep.

“Take off my pants, baby,” he murmured against her mouth.

With fumbling hands she pushed down the material blocking her from seeing all of him. And then they were pressed together naked, his cock hard against her belly and the tip slickened with his pre-cum.

His hands on her breasts were almost painful as he squeezed and released her flesh, but she wanted more, needed more.

“You feel so good.” He slid his hands down her sides, moved one of them to cup her ass, and had the other one right over her pussy. A gasp left her when he speared his fingers through her soaked folds, and the gruff sound he made had her heart beating faster.

Never had a man touched her in any way, and she was so glad Rebel would be her first.

“I’ll be your last, too, Rosie girl,” Rebel said, and groaned deeply. His words, his whole demeanor, screamed possession. It was a side of Rebel she’d never seen, but had always wanted directed at her.

Had she said that last part out loud? She must have, because his response spoke volumes. But she wanted to be honest with him about everything. Rosie didn’t want to hide what she wanted, or how she felt anymore.

What was the point?

Rebel started moving his fingers through her folds, rubbing her back and forth slowly until she curled her toes and felt her eyes roll back in her head because what he did to her made her feel so damn good.

“Fuck, you’re so wet for me, Rosie girl,” he murmured against her throat as he continued to move his fingers up and down. She didn’t know if he was aware of the low grunts he was making, or the fact he was pushing his dick against her stomach, but God, were those things hot.

Back and forth he moved against her, harder and faster with every passing second. The feeling of Rebel, of the arousal coursing through her veins, had all sanity and common sense leaving her. He continued rubbing her while he licked up her throat.

“You feel so good against me.” He thrust his cock harder against her belly. “You taste so fucking good.” He ran his tongue up the length of her throat again.

He teased her for several more seconds, rubbing her clit every time he stroked his fingers up her cleft, and teasing her

hole on every down stroke. The sounds that came from both of them should have had Rosie embarrassed, but she wasn't.

She'd never been with a guy, never wanted to, in fact, but the pleasure and lust she felt for Rebel were unlike anything she'd ever known. It was empowering.

He removed his hand, moved back just an inch so they could look into each other's faces, and brought his hand up. She could see her wetness coating his fingers, and her heart beat harder, if that were even possible.

"You see how wet you are for me?"

She nodded even though she had a feeling it wasn't a literal question. While holding his gaze with hers, Rebel brought the fingers to his mouth and spread her wetness across his lips.

Rosie felt her eyes widen, felt her mouth part at the sight of what he did, and she held her breath. He spread her wetness along the top, and then bottom lip, and before Rosie could say anything, Rebel kissed her.

He made her taste herself on him, and damn, was that hot. He gripped the back of her head, tangled his fingers in the strands, and held her in place for his erotic onslaught.

"Open for me," he whispered against her mouth.

She gasped, her lips parting. He pushed his tongue inside and stroked it along hers. There was a musky, sweet flavor that bombarded her senses, and she moaned for more.

He broke the kiss and started moving his mouth and tongue down her neck once more, along her collarbone, and stopped when he was right above her breast. The small, hard, and hot pants of his breath bathed her flesh, caused her nipples to harden even further, and had her clenching her thighs together almost painfully.

God, I've never felt this way, this inflamed.

"I've wanted you for so long, Rosie."

She nodded, but wanted to tell him verbally exactly how she felt, exactly what she wanted.

“I want you to be my first, Rebel. I need you.”

He groaned deeply, but didn't fuck her like she had hoped. Instead he latched his mouth onto her breasts, and sucked her nipple until her clit throbbed and more wetness spilled from her. Over and over, he tormented her breasts, licking and sucking at her nipples and gently pulling the flesh with his teeth.

The pain and pleasure morphed into one, and she wasn't just thinking of begging him, she actually was.

“Rebel, be with me already.”

She was nervous, sure, even scared that it would hurt, but she was so in love with Rebel that everything else dimmed in comparison. This certainly wasn't what she had seen herself doing when she'd come down here.

In fact, Rosie had thought he'd tell her there was nothing that would ever come between them. She'd mentally prepared herself. But this ... this wasn't anything she'd ever envisioned.

And with one last drag across the stiff peak Rebel stepped back and looked at her. Then he went over to his dresser, grabbed a condom, and slid it on.

She was transfixed at the sight of his huge erection, at the fact he was so thick and long, and it was all because of her.

“You see what you do to me?” he asked and grabbed his dick, giving it a squeeze and looking her up and down.

He walked toward her, pressed fully against her once more, and gripped the cheeks of her ass. A soft sound of female appreciation left her when he lifted her with a strength that made her feel petite.

She was pressed against the wall fully once more, and parted her mouth as a gasp left her at the feeling of his latex covered dick.

“Hold onto me, baby,” he said in a guttural voice that was so damn attractive.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressed her breasts against the hardness of his chest, and sighed at how good this

felt. She probably should have been more nervous given the fact this was her first time, but she trusted Rebel with her life, and knew he'd take care of her in all ways.

He'd make this good for her.

For a second neither seemed to breathe as they just stood there, chest pressed to chest. But then he smoothed his finger along her bottom lip, watching the act.

"I want to go slow because it's your first time, because that's what you deserve," he seemed to say to himself. "But it's fucking hard to control myself with you." He lifted his gaze to her eyes. "But I need to make this good for you."

She licked her lips. "I know you will. I trust you."

And then he started kissing her, softly at first, almost gently as if giving her time to accept all of this. But as the seconds ticked by Rebel's passion exploded. He kissed her brutally now, like a floodgate had been opened and she was drowning in it all.

Never breaking the kiss, Rebel smoothed his hands over her ass, clenched and released the flesh, and then lifted her easily off the ground. He turned with her in his arms, walked them over to the bed, and gently laid her on the mattress.

He took a small step back and just stared at her body, and this flush stole over her at how erotic that simple act was.

She skimmed her gaze down the hard planes of his chest, moved lower over his defined, rippled six-pack and that V of muscle that pointed straight down, and finally looked at his cock again.

He ran his hand over his mouth, and made this deep, erotic sound in the back of his throat. Without saying a word he climbed up on the bed, wedged himself between her thighs, and stared right into her eyes.

For long seconds neither one spoke or moved, their breathing matching intensity and speed, and the feeling of her heart beating a fast and erotic rhythm. This was what she'd wanted since she even realized what love and sex were.

Rebel cupped her cheek and stroked her skin with his thumb. “You’re really sure?”

She smiled, loving that he was so considerate of her. She knew he wasn’t a virgin, had heard stories back in the day of how wild he was, and had lived through some of it. But right here and now it was just them. She knew he’d never been like this with another girl.

She just knew.

“Be with me, Rebel, in every way.”

He closed his eyes, and for a second he was motionless, as if maybe controlling himself. But then she widened her legs, reached between them, and grabbed his big dick. Rebel snapped his eyes open and groaned, and she saw the way his pupils dilated.

“That feels so fucking good.” His words were distorted. “Having you touch me feels incredible.”

She moved her hand up and down his length, and another guttural sound left him.

“Put my cock at your pussy.” The way he said those words almost sounded as if he wasn’t himself. His voice had dropped deeper, his expression harder.

Swallowing, Rosie placed the tip at the entrance of her pussy, held her breath, and removed her hand from between them.

“It’s going to hurt.”

She nodded. “I know, but I want this, want you.”

Yes, she wanted this more than anything right now, and she didn’t want anything standing in her way ... not even herself.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Without any more talk Rebel took her virginity. In one fluid motion he shove all of his hard, thick, long inches into her body. She was pushed up the bed from the force of his thrust, and her own movements because of the discomfort that slammed into her.

When he was fully inside of her he stilled, giving her time to adjust, maybe giving himself time, too. “You feel so fucking...” He didn’t finish speaking, but the groan that came from him spoke volumes. “Are you okay, Rosie?”

She swallowed, her body tense, the discomfort real, but the pleasure of finally being with Rebel overcoming everything else. “I’m fine.”

“Does it hurt a lot?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. I want this.”

He pressed open-mouthed kisses along the column of her throat, over her collarbones, and then moved back to her mouth to kiss her possessively. He fucked her with his tongue, pushing it past her lips, stroking the interior, and claiming every part of her.

The sheets were chilly against her overheated body.

“Spread wider for me, baby.”

She did as he asked and felt him go inside of her deeper, if possible.

“Yeah, that’s so fucking it.”

He pulled out and pushed back in, and an involuntary gasp left her at the feel of how deep he was going, and how stretched she was. The base of his shaft pressed against her clit every time he pushed into her.

“Fuck, Rosie,” he groaned against her mouth.

“Rebel,” she breathed out his name as pleasure rocked her entire core.

He broke the kiss and went back to sucking her breasts, licking them, running his tongue over every inch of them. Her nipples tingled, throbbled from his ministrations.

“Fuck, you’re so damn wet for me, so juicy.”

Yeah, she was so wet, and it was all for him. Her inner muscles clenched, and Rebel grunted in response.

“I don’t want this to hurt for you, Rosie.” He pushed into her gently. “I want to make this good. I want this to be good for you.”

“It’s good, Rebel.” It was uncomfortable, yes, but every second that passed the more it started to feel even better, more intense. “Just be with me, Rebel.”

“*Christ*, Rosie.” He kissed her softly. “I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want you.”

“I don’t want the sweet and gentle side of you, Rebel. I want the *real* you.”

She saw his pupils still dilated, could see the change in his expression, and she knew Rebel was about to show her the real him, the feral and intense side of him.

“You want the crazy side of me, Rosie?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I want you to fuck me like you mean it.”

He closed his eyes and thrust into her again, harder this time. “You want me to be fucking dirty with you, filthy in the good ways?”

She could only nod.

He stared at her for a second before speaking again. “You want me to fuck you with my big cock?”

A gasp of pleased surprise left her at his dirty words.

“You want me to stretch out this virgin pussy so it fits perfectly around my dick?”

“God, Rebel.”

“Yeah, I’ll have you screaming that before the night is over with.”

He started thrusting in and out of her a little harder and faster than before.

“I want to hear you say it, baby. I want you to ask me for it.”

This was what she wanted. She wanted this free and bad boy Rebel that she’d fallen in love with.

“I want you, Rebel.”

He shook his head. “Say the fucking words, Rosie.”

“I want your cock stretching me.” It felt weird saying that, but it also felt freeing. But he stopped moving and pulled out of her.

“Ask me for my mouth on your sweet pussy. Ask me to lick you until you come.”

His words fueled her, made her stronger. But when she opened her mouth nothing came out.

“You want that?” he asked again, now having his hands on her inner thighs and smoothing them closer and closer to her pussy.

“I want that,” was all she could say.

And then Rebel was between her thighs only seconds later. He used a little bit of force to spread her thighs even wider, his warm breath puffing along her exposed pussy.

“Oh. *God.*”

She loved when he groaned, the noise vibrating throughout her whole body, centering right on her clit.

“I am going to eat you out so fucking hard, Rosie. I’m going to make you come all over my mouth and beg for more.” He licked her from the opening of her pussy to her engorged clit at the top of her mound. He’d then slide back down again.

He repeated this action over and over again until Rosie couldn’t breathe, let alone think of anything else. Her climax was approaching swiftly, and she didn’t know if she’d survive it.

“Rebel,” she gasped out. “I’m so close.”

Rebel groaned and had her clit in his mouth and a finger inside of her pussy in a matter of seconds. He sucked hard and fast on the engorged bud, finger-fucked her until she was gasping for air and her vision blurred, and she couldn’t comprehend the type of pleasure she felt.

“God, yes.”

He added a second finger into her pussy, and the stretch of the penetration, the way he scissored those digits, had her coming undone for him.

Ecstasy washed through her, stealing her breath, her sanity, hell, making everything around her vanish.

“You taste so fucking good, so sweet and addictive,” he murmured against her as she came for him.

Rebel continued to drag her orgasm out. She thrust her pussy against his mouth and arched her chest, not able to control herself. Rosie’s legs shook as she kept them spread, her pulse beat in her clit, and she felt herself getting even wetter.

Legs shaking, heart racing, and sweat beading her brow, Rosie felt her orgasm start to dim, but the pleasure never fully left her.

Rebel moved up her body again, licking a path over her belly, across her breasts, and kissed her right on the mouth. She tasted herself on his lips, a musky but sweet flavor that had her moaning.

“Hold on to me, baby, because I’m going to fuck you so good.”

Rosie gripped his hair and opened her mouth wider, sucking his tongue into her mouth, relishing in their combined flavors. He reached between their bodies, grabbed himself, and placed his dick at her entrance again.

Rosie lifted her hips, needing him inside of her again despite the fact she’d gotten off already.

She was so ready for him.

“I want this to last,” Rebel said, his eyes closed again as he slowly started to push into her. “But I know it won’t, not with how good you feel.” He pushed in another inch. “Hold onto me, Rosie girl.”

She grabbed onto his biceps, dug her nails into his flesh, and felt his muscles tense beneath her palms. He hissed, maybe because she was digging her nails into him too hard, but she couldn’t stop, and his groan that followed told her he didn’t want her to stop either.

“Kiss me.”

He had his mouth on hers instantly, ran his tongue over her top and bottom lip, and pushed the rest of himself into her. “Put your legs around my waist.”

She did as he asked, and gasped when he slid in even deeper.

His hands were on either side of her head, his big body braced above hers, his strength immense.

The thickness of his cock stretched her and made this delicious burn travel throughout her entire body. He worked himself in and out, stopping right at the entrance of her pussy, letting the tip fill her, and then pushing back into her.

“Yeah, you feel so damn good, so right, Rosie.”

And he felt incredible. She tried to relax, to not let the fullness overwhelm her.

He pulled out until the tip was almost all the way out of her again, and then in one consuming move, he buried all of his thick inches into her pussy again. Over and over he did this, fast and hard. She couldn't stop the cry of pleasure that came from her.

“Yeah, Rosie, make those sounds for me, let me know you fucking like this.”

He had his eyes closed, his jaw locked tight, and beads of sweat covered his brow and chest. He looked so good, like he was lost in the sensations. Her inner muscles clenched around him of their own accord, causing deep moans and curses to come from him.

She loved that she was the one causing him to react this way. He stretched her so good, made her feel so full.

Rosie smoothed her hands down his back, feeling his muscles clench and tense beneath her fingertips, feeling his flesh slick with sweat.

When he opened his eyes again she saw the concentration on his face.

“I'm trying so fucking hard not to come right now.” He grunted when she clenched her inner muscles around him once more. “But you're so wet, so fucking tight and hot, that I can't help myself. I have no control when it comes to you.”

Good, she loved that, because she felt the same way.

His forearms were still straight on either side of her head, and when he lifted up and pulled back slightly, it was so he could look at where he was buried inside of her body.

His expression was one of pain, as if it was uncomfortable not to come. That turned her on even more.

“Look at us, baby.”

She lifted up slightly and looked down the length of her body, seeing his cock moving in and out of her. It was erotic as hell.

Never taking his eyes off of her pussy, he started moving in and out of her faster, his breathing becoming more haggard.

The sounds that came from him were hoarse and serrated, but then again she sounded like a wounded animal.

They should have been quiet so no one heard them, but it felt too good, and she couldn't control herself.

The pleasure turned to something more carnal, and before she knew it she lifted her hips to meet his thrusts, needing him as deep as he could go. Rosie wanted her pussy filled all the way, wanted to always have that stretch.

She wanted to be able to feel him inside of her even when he wasn't. The ecstasy stole her breath, had her lips parting, and frantic sounds leaving her.

Perspiration covered both of them, and she felt her hair stick to her temples.

“That's it, Rosie girl, lift those hips. Fuck yourself on me.”

She felt her arousal grow at the way the muscles of his abdomen contracted and relaxed with every thrust he delivered. “God, Rebel.”

“Yes,” he groaned out and tilted his head back, the muscles and tendons in his neck standing out from the force of his concentration. “You feel so fucking good.” He looked at her again and slammed into her hard.

“Oh,” she cried out and felt her eyes roll back in her head as intense ecstasy moved through her. “Rebel.”

“Say my name again, Rosie,” he grunted out.

She stared right in his eyes. “Rebel.”

He hummed in approval. Reaching out and cupping the side of her head, he leaned down over her so their chests were flush with each other. He latched his mouth onto her throat, and he ran his teeth along her neck, sending shivers through her.

He wasn't gentle with his actions, and that turned her on more.

Over and over he worked his cock into her, sending this heat through her, searing her alive from the inside out. And

then he slammed into her so hard she moved up an inch on the bed, tilted her head back, and cried out.

He covered her mouth with his hand to muffle the sound, and if she wasn't feeling so incredible she might have been embarrassed. The last thing they needed was their parents coming downstairs and seeing what was happening.

"Come for me," he whispered against her skin, and just like that she was getting off.

The climax that claimed her was swift, body numbing, and had everything else fading. Was it always like this? She doubted it. It was like this because she was with Rebel, the guy she loved.

"Yeah." He kept fucking her. "That's it, baby. Come all over my dick, make it all creamy." He breathed harder against her throat, and she knew he was in the throes of getting off, as well.

The sound of him slamming into her, of his cock moving in and out of her wet pussy, filled her ears.

She closed her eyes and felt him remove his hand.

"Look at me as you come."

She opened her eyes just as her pleasure peaked, staring right into Rebel's face. If possible, looking at him made the pleasure even more intense. And then she saw the expression on his face and knew he was getting off, as well.

Oh. God. That is so hot.

He had his jaw clenched tight, closed his eyes, and groaned deeply as he continued to push his dick into her and pull out, repeating the action over and over again before finally stalling in her.

The root of his dick was pressed right against her clit, and even though he stopped thrusting and she knew he was coming, he started moving his hips back and forth, rubbing her clit with the base of his cock.

Another smaller orgasm wrenched out of her and she gasped.

He didn't look away from her while he came, and all she could do was ride this pleasure out.

Her inner muscles contracted around him, making the fullness even more vivid.

When he finally stopped and sagged against her all she could do was run her hands over his back and breathe out.

He had his head resting on her shoulder, and his hot breath bathed her skin. The fact he was exhausted was because of her, and that was a high all on its own. After several more seconds of being on top of her, Rebel finally rolled off.

His chest rose and fell harshly as he tried to control his breathing, and the sheen of sweat on his body was visible.

She turned onto her side to look at him, feeling this euphoria consume her. Rosie didn't know what to say, or if she should say anything at all. In the end she just kept her mouth shut and stared at him. Rebel had his eyes closed, and his arm thrown over his head, his bicep muscle on clear display.

Lowering her gaze to his cock, he still wore the condom, and wasn't fully soft yet. Even semi-hard he was huge.

"I love you, Rosie," he said softly and opened his eyes, turning his head at the same time and looking at her. "Come here, baby."

She shifted over to him, and then he had his arm around her, pulling her flush with his hard, sweaty body. "I love you, too." She rested her head on his chest, closed her eyes, and felt herself smile. She was happy, so damn happy.

"Do you regret doing this?" he asked.

She lifted her head and looked at him, her smile fading. "No, do you?"

His gaze was penetrating, but after a second he slowly nodded his head.

"No. I'm so fucking in love with you, and I've wanted you for so damn long." He tightened his arm around her. "No one compares to you."

She sighed in contentment.

There were no words for what they'd done, at least none that could really say how she felt at that moment. What she felt for Rebel was real, tangible, and hearing him say he loved her, too, made this feel so good and right.

But what happened now?

"Rebel?" she said his name softly, not sure if she should even say anything, but wanting to know what the next step was.

"Mmm?" He sounded sleepy, and looking up at him showed he had his eyes closed.

"What happens now?"

A moment of silence passed before he opened his eyes and responded.

"It means you're mine, Rosie girl. I've always thought of you as mine, but this cements things."

God, that felt good to hear.

He looked at her, this seriousness on his face. Was it the same expression she wore? "Is that what you want, too?"

She nodded, feeling how big her smile was. "It's what I've wanted since I knew what it meant."

"I love you, Rosie, and I always will." He cupped her cheek. "This wasn't just me fucking you. It means you'll always be mine."

Leaning up, she kissed him. "I love you, too." That was what she wanted it to mean, as well.

She wanted it to mean they were together, that nothing else mattered, and it seemed all her fear over tonight had been for nothing.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Rosie stared at Rebel across the breakfast table. Her whole body felt hot, and she felt like she was on edge, but in a good way.

“You want second helpings?” her mother asked, but Rosie just shook her head. Rebel smiled, and Rosie couldn’t help but do the same. All she could think about was what they’d done just a couple of days ago, and how she was still sore between her legs.

A shiver worked its way through her body, and she felt chills race along her spine. Even though it sounded cheesy, she felt so damn happy. Just a few days ago she’d been with Rebel in every possible sense.

“Aidan, do you want seconds?”

“Annabel, I go by Rebel,” he said, but he kept his focus on Rosie, this half grin on his face. She knew Rebel didn’t get annoyed that her mother refused to call him by his nickname, but more so he got a kick out of reminding her every time because it annoyed *her*.

“You ready for school, Rosie girl?”

She felt her face heat and glanced at her mother sharply. But her mom didn’t even glass their way, and instead was focused on her cell phone.

“Rebel, your father will be home late tonight, and I have a meeting after work.” She turned and faced them then. “Looks like you’re fending for yourself tonight. Will you two be okay?”

Rosie looked at Rebel and saw his expression was dead serious.

“I think we’ll be good, Annabel.” He smirked at Rosie again, and she felt her face heat even further.

Her mom came and gave her a kiss on the cheek, gave Rebel’s shoulder a squeeze, and was out the door. They sat there across from each other for long seconds, neither speaking nor moving.

“I want to just fuck you right now,” he said and leaned forward, taking her hand in his and pulling on her until she stood. Rosie walked over to him, and in the next second she was pulled onto his lap.

“Rebel, my mom could come in again.”

He started kissing her neck, and despite the fact she should be worried her mother could walk in, and that’s not how she wanted this to get out, she found herself relaxing against him.

Closing her eyes and just letting him do his thing, Rosie felt her body become pliable for him. Her pussy was wet, her nipples hard, and as much as she wanted to stay right here with him she knew she had to be stronger than her arousal.

“Rebel,” she said softly and pulled away, knowing she was smiling.

“Hmm?” he went back to sucking at her neck.

“We’ll be late for school.”

He groaned, but fortunately didn’t keep kissing her. Rosie didn’t know if she would have been strong enough to stop him a second time, because honestly she wanted him pretty damn badly right now.

Just as he pulled away fully her cell phone rang. Pulling it out of her bag beside her feet she looked at the unrecognizable number.

“Who is it?” Rebel asked, but didn’t seem all that interested.

She shrugged. “Not sure.” Rosie answered the call anyway. “Hello?”

“Rosie?”

She felt her brows knit as she stared at Rebel. “Yeah? Who is this?”

“It’s Charleston.”

Charleston?

“Um, hi.”

“Who is it?” Rebel said, not bothering to keep his voice low.

“How did you get my number?” She covered the phone with her hand. “It’s Charleston.”

The expression on Rebel’s face changed to annoyance. He went to reach for the phone, but she got off of him and smacked his hand away, smiling.

“I’m not some stalker, I swear.”

“Okay,” she chuckled a little awkwardly.

“But you’re pretty easy to find online.”

Yeah, I’d say that sounds stalkerish.

“Okay, that came out weird as hell.” Charleston cleared his throat. “Anyway, if you’re not too creeped out by me, can I hit you up for those tutoring lessons?”

She didn’t answer right away, glanced at Rebel and saw he was pissed, but didn’t want to straight out turn Charleston away.

He’d done nothing bad to her, and just because there was this beef with him and Rebel, she didn’t want to be a bitch.

“Sure, I can tutor you.”

Rebel flared his nostrils as his anger was tangible, and she shrugged. Once she was off the phone and had it shoved back in her bag, she looked at Rebel.

“What?”

“I don’t like you talking to that asshole.” Rebel stood and picked up her bag from the floor.

She followed him out of the house and locked the front door behind her. “Rebel, he’s been fine to me, nice even.”

“He’s bad news.”

“How can you possibly know that? He’s been at the school for such a short time.”

Rebel stopped and faced her. “Because he’s like me, and I know what an asshole I can be.”

She couldn’t help but smile. Looking around to see if anyone was outside, Rosie grabbed his hand and pulled him back onto the porch where they were partially hidden. Then she rose on her toes and kissed him.

He groaned and gripped her nape, pulling her even closer and he stroked her lips with his tongue. She pulled away before it got too intense.

“Is it that you really don’t like him, or that you’re just jealous?” she asked, kind of teasing, but hoping he’d come around and see that not everyone was this bad guy.

True, she didn’t know Charleston that well anyway, but it wasn’t like she’d just agreed to go on a date with him or anything.

“Both,” Rebel said honestly, and without any hesitation. He leaned down and kissed her again, but it was a quick peck. He grabbed her hand and led her to the car, and once inside he cranked the engine.

Although he seemed fine now, looking over at him showed that Rebel was still tense.

Well, her guy certainly was a “bad boy”, and Rosie knew that came with a lot of things. But it’s also one of the massive reasons she’d fallen so hard for him.



REBEL REACHED out and took hold of her hand, pulled it closer, and downshifted while their fingers were entwined.

“What do you think my mom and your dad will say when they find out?” she asked, and he could see out of his peripheral vision she was looking at him. “Or do you think we shouldn’t tell them? They’ll probably freak out.”

Yeah, no doubt they would, because their parents saw them as one big happy family. They might be that, but he’d never seen Rosie as a sister, and the very thought of her in that way made him disgusted.

He loved her, wanted her, and now that they were past all the bullshit of hiding how they truly felt, he didn’t want anything getting in the way.

“No, I think they need to know, but if you’re not comfortable telling them anytime soon I won’t push you.” He glanced at her and gave her hand a squeeze. “But I’m not letting you go, and sneaking around will be hell, but I’ll leave the ball in your court, Rosie girl.” He loved that her cheeks heated.

“I like when you call me that.”

He couldn’t stop his grin. He liked calling her that, his little pet name for the girl he was in love with.

When he finally pulled up at school and cut the engine all he wanted to do was lean over and kiss Rosie. He wanted her, wanted to fuck her until she couldn’t walk straight.

Hell, he was semi-hard right now just having her in the seat beside him, but there were people all around, and he knew just because he’d finally slept with her, and they’d professed their love, that she may not be ready for the type of PDA he wanted to give her.

Rebel also knew even if they did kiss and hold hands, and do all that sweet shit, she’d have nothing to be worried about concerning people giving them shit.

He’d fuck up anyone, kick their asses, hell, he’d just have to look at them in a fucked up way and they’d shut the fuck up.

But he could control himself.

“Lunch?” she asked and smiled, her cheeks still pink.

“Of course.”

She glanced around, and surprising the hell out of him she leaned forward and kissed him right on the lips. Her face got redder when she pulled away, and she glanced around, but it didn't look like anyone saw them.

“Damn, baby, I'm hard as fucking steel right now.” He grinned. “How am I supposed to walk sporting this thing?” He gestured to his dick.

She reached out, her gaze on his, and rubbed him through his jeans. “You'll figure it out.”

And then she was out of the car and waving to him as she headed inside.

Damn, she was a little tease, and fuck did he love it.

CHAPTER
NINE

Rosie made her way to the next class, her mouth still tingling after the kiss she gave Rebel, even hours later. She found herself touching her lips, and knew she was smiling.

It had been a spur of the moment kind of thing to kiss Rebel, knowing anyone could have seen them, but also not being able to help herself. Since they'd slept together that's all she'd been able to think, all she'd been able to feel.

But until they told their parents she didn't want to risk them finding out. What a shock that would be.

"Hey."

The voice in front of her had Rosie stopping and looking up. Charleston stood just a few feet from her, his expression stoic.

"Oh, hi." To be honest she felt a little weird over the fact he'd looked her up online. Why hadn't he just asked her for her number?

"So, you up for tutoring me sometime today?"

She felt her eyebrows rise. "Today?"

He nodded.

"I don't know if I'll have time."

"I'm already struggling in English," he said.

"Uh." She thought about her schedule. "I could probably carve out like an hour after school tomorrow?"

He nodded once. “That would be great. My place?” He seemed pretty eager about doing it at his place.

“Yeah, that really won’t work. How about the library?”

His brows went low over his eyes, and he looked down at the ground for a second.

“I’d say your place, but your brother—”

“Stepbrother,” she corrected him.

“Yeah, he’ll probably be there and knowing how our track record has been...”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” she said and adjusted her bag. “So the library would probably be best.” Because she didn’t want more drama, especially when this was strictly about helping Charleston in school.

He was silent for a second, but then nodded. “Okay, cool. See you then.”

She nodded and watched him walk away. Maybe it was just all the shit Rebel was telling her about him being a bad boy, but Rosie had a weird feeling about Charleston.

But that wouldn’t stop her from helping a fellow student, and the weird feeling she got with him was the reason she’d said the public library.

I need to get my shit together, because I have other things to worry about, like how in the hell I’m going to tell Mom about me and Rebel.



REBEL BOUNCED his leg under his desk as he stared at the back of Charleston’s head. He had one more class after this before lunch, and all he’d been thinking about was seeing Rosie.

Fuck, he wanted her like a fiend, and he knew that would never go away. But he’d also been thinking about the phone call Charleston had made to Rosie this morning, and the fact he’d searched her phone number out like some kind of stalker.

That pissed him off enough he felt like a beast was about to burst free from him.

He felt Rowley nudge his back, and Rebel leaned back in the chair and turned his head slightly to see what the other guy wanted. The teacher was rambling about something, but Rebel wasn't paying much attention to it.

"I found out why that prick left his other school," Rowley whispered.

Rebel glanced at Charleston again, the guy using his pen to carve something into the desk.

"Apparently he assaulted his girlfriend."

Rebel turned and faced Rowley.

"He also has a bad track record with the school, like randomly picking fights. He beat the shit out of one guy and sent him to the hospital just because he bumped into him."

"How the fuck do you know this?"

"Shh," the teacher said and glared at them. When he turned back to the dry erase board and started the lecture again, Rowley finished talking.

"Marnie works in the office during study hall. She said she saw his record. The fucker has an anger issue that makes him a psycho."

Marnie, Rowley's on again, off again, fuck buddy.

Rebel looked at Charleston again, and saw the asshole was looking right at him. Rebel might be the school bad boy, but he certainly didn't resort to random acts of violence, and he sure as fuck didn't assault women.

Fucking Charleston was a menace, and Rebel's instincts were right. Now he just had to make sure Rosie stayed away from the prick.



ROSIE WAS busy grabbing something in her bag when she felt hands wrap around her waist and pull her against a hard body she was about to cry out in surprise when a hand went over her mouth and she was pulled into an empty classroom.

She was turned around, and she saw it was Rebel. Her heart started to slow its frantic beating, and she felt a smile spread over her mouth behind his hand.

“What are you doing?” she asked once he had his hand away from her mouth.

“I had to see you.” Rebel leaned down and kissed her soundly. The room was dark, but there was a little bit of light coming through the blinds on the window.

This soft sound left her, and although she could hear students right outside the door, that only increased her arousal.

“I would have seen you at lunch, which is just one class away,” she teased.

Rosie did hate that she had to hide what she had with Rebel, but until they knew how it was going to play out, it was better to be safe than sorry.

She didn’t want condemnation, didn’t want to pretend like that wouldn’t bother her.

“Yeah, well you know I have no patience, especially when it comes to you.” He gave her a wink.

She smiled felt her cheeks heat from his compliment.

He pulled her close again and she placed her hands on his chest, stopping him. “As much as I would love to just give in right now, we can’t.”

He pretended to be sad, and she laughed.

“Anyone could come in here and see us.”

I don’t give a shit about that.” He kissed the top of her head. “Besides, I wanted to talk to you about that fucker Charleston.”

She placed a finger on his lips. “Not now, please.”

He exhaled.

There was only so much of this pissing contest she could handle.



REBEL COULDN'T TAKE his eyes off of Rosie. She looked so fucking good in her button up shirt that showed off her big tits, and the way her pants hugged her curves like a second skin. Yeah, they could talk about that little punk Charleston later.

He wanted Rosie so badly right now, but she was right. They had to be smart, or more so he needed to keep his libido in check. But when it came to Rosie he had a hard time keeping himself in control.

The bell for class rang, but he didn't care. Rebel could have stayed in this room with her the whole time.

He cupped the back of her head and brought his lips to her mouth, sweeping his tongue between the seams of her lips and stealing the breath from her.

"I hate hiding what I feel for you," he murmured against her mouth. "I've been hiding it for a long damn time."

"Me too," she murmured against his mouth.

Rebel pulled away, but just as he was about to lead them out of the classroom the door opened and light spilled in.

Rebecca stood in the doorway, her eyes wide, but then her expression morphing to anger.

"I heard from someone they saw you guys kissing out in the parking lot, but I couldn't believe a sick rumor like that." She sounded disgusted, but fuck her and her uptight, jealous ass.

"Get the fuck out of here," he said.

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Rosie right before she looked at him again. "What the hell, Rebel? You'll be with her nerdy ass but not me?"

Anger filled him at her immature insult. Without thinking Rebel pulled Rosie in close to his body again, cupped the back of her neck, and kissed her right in front of Rebecca. When he pulled away he saw Rosie looked shocked.

They both turned their head and looked toward the doorway, seeing a few more people standing behind Rebecca now, their expressions full of surprise.

Obviously he didn't care that people saw, but he felt like shit because Rosie probably hadn't been ready for that PDA. But he'd been so fucking pissed at Rebecca, and her thinking she was better than Rosie.

"They all saw," Rosie whispered.

"Yeah, and even if I don't give a shit, I'm sorry I just did that to you."

"Oh my God," Rebecca said. "What does she have that I don't?"

Rebel didn't bother answering, because he didn't need to explain a damn thing to this bitch, or anyone for that matter.

Rebecca shook her head, and glanced behind her at the people that now had gathered.

Fuck them all.

"Is that what you're resorting to now, not only a nerd, but your fucking sister?"

"Stepsister," Rosie said, and he couldn't help but chuckle at the sarcastic tone in his woman's voice.

"Just get the fuck out of here," he said again, his patience gone.

She snorted. "If you want to be with a fat geek like Rosie then you can just go to hell. Both of you and your twisted asses."

He felt Rosie push past him, and on instinct he wanted to pull her behind him and protect her, but his girl was strong, he knew that.

“You’re a bitch,” Rosie said, and Rebecca’s eyes went wide, maybe surprised Rosie had actually found her strength when it came to Rebecca.

“Excuse me?” Rebecca said in a prickly tone.

“You’re a big bitch. I’m sorry Rebel doesn’t want you, and maybe that’s why you’re so damn needy for his attention, but it’s sad.”

Rebecca narrowed her eyes at Rosie.

“You have such low self-esteem you need to bash other people?”

“Fuck you, Rosie.”

“No, fuck you, Rebecca.”

God, seeing his girl being so tough was such a turn-on.

CHAPTER
TEN

Rosie had no clue where this strength was coming from, or maybe she was just so sick and tired of the bullshit with Rebecca that she'd snapped.

Either way this felt good, empowering even. She was done being the girl that had been picked on.

She was eighteen years old, may not be considered the prettiest or thinnest, but dammit, she got the guy she loved, and he made her feel beautiful.

At first she'd been embarrassed that Rebecca had seen them kiss, along with whoever was standing behind her. PDA, even if it was with the guy she loved, had her shy.

But she didn't care anymore. She didn't care that they'd seen, and in fact felt proud it had happened. She loved Rebel, and fuck anyone that thought it was wrong for them to be together.

Rosie was tired of being cautious and keeping her head down. She felt like this power was controlling her, and she didn't have to be afraid of anyone or anything.

Being with Rebel wasn't a dirty little secret, wasn't something taboo and meant to be looked down upon, and she wasn't going to hide who she was in love with.

She stared at Rebecca, saw the other girl was glaring at her, the anger coming from her tangible, and Rosie couldn't help but stand up straighter because of her pride.

Rebecca probably never had thought Rosie would stand up to her. Well this was a new day, and she was feeling pretty damn good.

Rebecca started laughing then. “It’s funny how you suddenly have a backbone with Rebel by your side.”

The people behind Rebecca looked at Rebel and seemed nervous. They had every right to be. Rebel had a reputation not to be fucked with, and this was hitting close to home for both of them.

“You think he really wants your ugly fat ass?” Rebecca sobered and shook her head.

“Shut the fuck up, Rebecca,” Rebel ground out, his anger clear.

“No, I won’t shut up, Rebel.” Rebecca looked at him over Rosie’s shoulder. “You could have had this, but you want *that*.” Rebecca gestured to Rosie, disgust in her voice and on her face.

“The only fucking ugly thing in this room is your attitude, Rebecca.” Rebel stepped up behind Rosie. “I don’t give a shit what anyone says or thinks about being with Rosie. I love her, and fuck you or anyone else who has anything to say about it.”

Although there was a group forming in the hallway, no teachers had shown up yet.

“Just accept he doesn’t want you,” Rosie said. “Have some dignity and stop making a scene.”

Everyone was deathly silent, and when Rebecca looked behind her, maybe hoping for some backup or support, she found none. She’d been a bitch to a lot of people, and they knew exactly what type of person she was.

“Rosie is mine, and if anyone has a fucking problem with it step up.”

Rosie looked up at Rebel, not surprised by the hardness in him. All of this would be spread throughout the whole school before lunch that was for sure.

Rebecca gave this weird little cry, as if she'd had enough. "You bitch." Rebecca came toward Rosie, but she'd been expecting her to act like a psycho. She hadn't gotten her way, and for Rebecca that was a big deal.

Rosie was ready for her, or at least as ready as she could be. Rebecca went to grab a chunk of Rosie's hair, and before Rebel could intervene, which she knew he was about to, Rosie pushed Rebecca away.

Rebecca came at her again, but instinct rose up, and Rosie found herself hitting the other girl right in the nose.

There was this disgusting sound after the fact, and then a gush of blood that came from Rebecca's nose. She covered her face and cried out, her eyes wide on Rosie, blood pouring from her nose.

"My fucking nose, you bitch," Rebecca screamed out. "God, you two fucking deserve each other." And then she turned and left them alone, the people that had been behind her moving out of the way.

No one moved or said anything for several seconds after that, but then the crowd shrugged and dissipated, leaving Rebel and Rosie standing there.

Blood was on the ground, and she knew what she'd done could very well get her in serious trouble, but she didn't care.

"Holy fucking shit," Rebel said, and Rosie looked behind her to see Rebel looking shocked. "Is it weird if I say how hot you look right now?"

Rosie couldn't help it. She started laughing. Maybe she was in some kind of shock over what had just happened, or maybe for the first time in her life she was being strong and free?

It felt good, she felt good, and right now she had enough endorphins running through her veins that she didn't care what the consequences of her actions were.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Rebecca had ended up going to the principal after all, and for the first time in Rosie's school life she'd been sent home for her behavior and suspended for three days.

Although she was glad she'd stuck up for herself, and didn't take anymore of Rebecca's shit, she also couldn't lie and say the repercussions sucked pretty bad.

Turning off the kitchen light she headed into the living room, her thoughts heavy as she wondered how she was going to explain this to her mother and stepfather.

Rebecca hadn't told the principal exactly what had happened, just that she'd been "attacked" by Rosie. But Rebecca had also called forth "witnesses" maybe thinking they'd back her and say she was innocent in all of this.

That had backfired, because the students the principal had spoken to told it exactly like it was. Rosie knew they were afraid of Rebel and going against him, and it was his badass reputation that had helped them both out in this instance.

Rebecca had been the one to come at Rosie first, and Rosie was defending herself.

Be that as it may, she'd still fought on school grounds, hurt another student, and therefore had to be punished.

But her mom and stepdad would want to know what started the fight, and she wouldn't lie to them. She was not going to lie or deny how she felt for Rebel, not now, and not ever.

She was proud of her feelings, and no one would make her feel ashamed of that.

“Look at you, my little delinquent,” Rebel said from the couch.

She saw how relaxed he was, the way he had his legs propped up on the coffee table, and his arm thrown over the back of the couch. He was also shirtless, and did he look damn good, with all his muscles on clear display.

He sat up straighter and patted the seat beside him. “Come here, Rosie girl.”

She felt a flush steal over her body, her nipples got hard, and her pussy got wet. All it took for her to feel this kind of arousal was one look from Rebel, but now that she knew what he could do, how he could make her feel, that lust was intensified.

Rosie walked over to him, and Rebel pulled her down on his lap.

“I thought you wanted me to sit next to you, not on you,” she said and smiled.

It was strange, but in a good way, that it only took one night of them being physical, and telling each other that they were in love, and they were already at this comfortable level.

It made Rosie think that this was truly the right choice, and she was meant to be with Rebel.

“Hell, I’ll take you anyway, but having you on me is always the best.” He leaned in to kiss her on the side of the neck. But he didn’t pull away, and instead continued to lick and suck at her throat until she had her head tilted back and her eyes were closed.

Rosie wanted him like a fiend right now, despite her worries about everything.

Who are you kidding? You want Rebel all the time.

This was true on every level.

All she kept thinking about as he sucked on her skin was how big he'd been, how thick and long. He'd taken her like he wanted her above anything or anyone else.

He'd made her forget about anything that didn't have to do with them. She didn't worry about coming clean with their parents and telling them what they wanted.

All of that seemed so minuscule compared to the bigger picture.

Her body was strung tight, and beads of sweat lined the valley between her breasts.

“Are you wet for me, baby?” he murmured against her neck.

“Yes,” she breathed that one word out.

The lights were dim in the living room, and the TV had this bluish glow filling the room. It was a very intimate setting, especially when the only thing that could be heard was the sound of their combined breathing.

With every second that passed her pulse quickened further, her pussy became damper, and her clit throbbed. Her panties were past the point of being soaked.

Rosie pulled away and looked at Rebel, knowing her eyes were half-mast because they felt heavy to keep open. Her arousal was just too intense right now.

“The way you're looking at me is about to have my control snapping, baby.” His voice was low and rough, like sandpaper moving along her body.

“And what way am I looking at you?” Even she could hear how sultry her voice sounded.

But their parents had called when they'd gotten home from school and said their meetings would be going on longer than they thought, and they wouldn't be home until really late.

So she and Rebel had the house all to themselves, and it was still early.

“You’re looking at me like you want me to fuck you, like you want me to ease that arousal you have.” He leaned in close and whispered in her ear, “You look like how I probably look, because right now I want to do all of that and more.”

Her heart pounded so hard that she felt like it would burst right through her ribcage. Rebel smelled so good, like cologne and a scent that was all him, all masculine.

His gaze was lowered and trained on her lips, and she felt them part under the weight of his stare. Damn, Rebel just had this raw masculinity that poured from him, and Rosie couldn’t have stopped this even if she’d wanted to.

She went to lean forward that small inch to seal their lips together, but before she could even move Rebel started speaking.

“I am going to fuck you so hard and good when you sit down tomorrow you’ll still feel me inside of you, still feel the soreness of how fucking good I stretched out your cunt.”

He lifted his gaze from her mouth and looked at her eyes. After a prolonged second he finally eased the suffering and kissed her. Rebel was potent, so damn intoxicating, and he was about to have his way with her.

“Tell me how much you fucking want this, baby. I want to actually hear you say it. I want to hear you tell me how much you want my cock in your pussy.” His breath brushed along her lips, and a small sound left her.

Here, now, and especially with Rebel, she felt so very helpless and feminine. It was an incredible feeling, knowing this man would take care of her in all facets.

“Tell me you want me to do filthy fucking things to you, that I’m the only one you want ... ever.” He slid his hand over her thigh, along her hip, and up her side to rest right by her breasts.

A shiver worked its way through her body, and as much as she wanted to say those words, her throat was too tight and her mouth too dry to say anything.

“Tell me what you want, Rosie.” He slid his hand over her breast, very slowly, teasing her, tormenting her.

When he covered the mound a moan spilled from her on its own.

“Come on, baby. Tell me what I want to hear.” He applied pressure to her breast, and curled his hand around her sensitive flesh until a sting of pain filled her and mixed with the pleasure.

Rosie let her head fall back slightly, not able to hold it up anymore as pleasure tore through her. Rebel had his mouth on her exposed throat, licking, sucking, and running his teeth along the skin.

She was going to come before he even fucked her.

“I want you, every part of you. Fuck me, Rebel.”

And she knew he would until she was sated and couldn't even keep her eyes open.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Rebel groaned deeply against Rosie's neck, his cock so hard, and pre-cum slipping out of the tip because he was so turned on. She tasted sweet, addictive.

He flattened his tongue and ran it up the length of her neck, over and over again, knowing he was just tormenting both of them with going slow. But he wanted this to last, even if he ached to fuck her.

Her breasts were more than a handful, and her nipples were rock hard, pressing against the material of her shirt. He wanted the damn clothing off, wanted to feel her naked body pressed up against his.

His cock jerked against the zipper of his jeans, and he couldn't hold in his groan.

Rebel wanted her, and he was going to fucking have her. "You have no idea how hard I am for you, baby."

She moaned, and the vibrations that came from her neck went right to his mouth, and had his cock growing impossibly harder.

"I'm so wet," she whispered, and it was his turn to groan.

"There are so many things I'd like to do to you, baby, but I don't want to push you."

She moaned and thrust her chest into his hands. "Tell me what you want to do to me."

He'd taken Rosie's virginity, and even before he'd known she was in love with him he'd already deemed her as his. But

he owned her cherry, and nothing would ever change that.

She was his, and that would never change.

“I want to see your ass in the air.”

She made this soft sound after he spoke.

“I want to spread your ass cheeks and look at the cunt that is mine now, Rosie girl.” He pulled back enough to look in her face, but she was already watching him.

“Rebel, God, I need you.”

He didn't want to talk anymore, didn't want to tease them both. All he wanted was them naked and on a bed with him between her thighs. Rebel took her lips in a kiss again, fucking her mouth with his tongue.

He groaned deeply at the feel and flavor of her. He wanted her to scream out his name as she got off.

“The things I'm going to do to you...”

A gasp left her, and he swallowed it. Kissing her harder, he didn't give her time to think about anything else aside from what they were doing. He slipped his hand down her side, gripped the hem of her shirt, and in one move tore the material from her.

“Rebel,” she gasped out, pleasure lacing her voice.

“I'm sorry. I'll get you another one, but I need you naked.” He pulled back and looked at the work he had done.

Her dress was in two pieces now, hanging open and showing him she was braless. His mouth watered at the sight of her huge breasts and her darker rose-colored nipples. All self-control snapping, Rebel pushed her back on the couch, not able to go slow.

She breathed hard, her chest rising and falling.

He lowered his head and latched his lips around one of her nipples. Moving his tongue around her areola before sucking on the taut peak, Rebel felt her tremble beneath him. He took her flesh harder and more fiercely in his mouth.

He alternated to the other breast, sucked, licked and nipped until both of her nipples were wet from his saliva, hard from his mouth, and red from what he was doing.

Her little pants and soft mewls for more had him escalating things.

“As much as I’d love to take you right here, I want you spread out completely on a bed for me.”

“I don’t care where we are. I just want you, Rebel.”

He groaned. “I want to see every fucking part of you spread for me, on display.” He leaned forward, placed his mouth right on hers, but didn’t apply any pressure.

“Tell me what you’ll do to me,” she said again.

“I’ll slide my dick into your pussy, which I know is all nice and wet for me, all primed and ready for my big cock.”

She arched up for him.

“I want to see you stretched for me, Rosie, want you to tell me how much I’m filling you up.”

She arched up again, and the smallest pressure was applied to his mouth with hers, at the same time her breasts pressed to his bare chest.

He ran his tongue along her bottom lip, his cock so damn hard he couldn’t even think straight.

Rebel swore he could smell how wet her pussy was, like these animalistic senses rose up inside of him.

“Rebel, please, enough with torture.”

He placed his hand right over her pussy, through the material of her panties, and pulled back to look into her face again. Her eyes were closed, and her mouth was slightly opened as she breathed in and out heavily. “*This* is mine, Rosie, do you understand?” He added pressure between her thighs. “*You* are mine.” Slowly she opened her eyes, and her lust was so strong that her pupils were fully dilated.

“Yes. I’m yours, only yours.”

He hummed in approval. “I have no problem resorting to violence with any fucker that thinks they can do so much as think about touching you.”

“I don’t want anyone else.”

Good, that is real fucking good.

“I want to be inside of you so badly right now.” He removed his hand and thrust his cock against her spread thighs. “I want to slide my cock deep into your body, feel you clench around me, and have your wetness slide down the length of my dick.”

“Yes, Rebel. Do it already.”

He thrust against her again.

“And when you think I can’t possibly go any deeper, I’ll push that last inch far inside of you until there isn’t any part of your pussy that I’m not touching.”

“Oh. God. Rebel.”

Yeah, he fucking loved when she was lost in the moment.

She licked her lips and lifted her hips, causing his cock to press further into her. He needed her naked, and wasn’t going to wait. I

n a move faster than he thought was even possible for himself, Rebel helped her get fully undressed. Once she was naked he took off his jeans and boxers.

He pressed his bare cock against her slick folds, and they both groaned.

This time he took her mouth brutally, their lips pressing so hard together he didn’t doubt circulation was cut off. Rebel rotated his hips against her, rubbing himself along her exposed pussy, and feeling her lips part for him, her center soft and hot, wet and his.

She writhed under him, held onto his biceps with an unyielding force, and curled her nails into his flesh.

There was pain from the act, and he fucking loved that. As much as he just wanted to shove his dick into her sweet body,

he had to taste her first.

Pulling back so he could look down at her, all Rebel could think was that she was all his. He leaned down and ran his tongue along her lips, moaning at how good she tasted.

“I’m going to eat you out until you come all over my mouth, baby.”

A moan left her, and before she could suck in another lungful of air he was moving down her body until his face was at the junction between her thighs.

He ran his tongue first along her left inner thigh, and then moved to her right, slowly getting closer to her exposed pussy. She smelled good, clean and sweet, but with a hint of intimate musk.

She had her hands in his hair, and tugged at the strands, trying to push him lower. He grinned, knowing his girl wanted to feel good, wanted to get off. “*Please, Rebel.*”

“Christ, baby, you have no idea what it does to me to hear you beg.” He latched his mouth right over her pussy and sucked on her like he was starving.

Her pussy lips were puffy from her arousal and his suckling, and a gush of wetness came from her. He licked it up, lapped at her until she was pressing her pussy harder against his mouth.

Leaning back to look at her again, he reached between his legs and rubbed his cock, jerking himself off at the sight of her. Her pussy lips were slightly parted, and he saw the pink center of her cunt.

The swell of her ass was generous and had his hands itching to grip the cheeks and squeeze the fuck out of them.

She had a trimmed thatch of dark hair at the top of her mound, but her labia were bare, and he fucking groaned at how hot that was.

A guttural sound left him, and he let go of himself to lean forward and eat her out more, harder, until she came for him.

The musky, sweet smell and flavor of her exploded on his tongue, filled his nose, and he licked, sucked, and bit at her flesh harder.

“Come on, baby. Get off for me, let me taste your juices.”

The sounds she made were driving him insane. He fucked her pussy with his tongue, slid it in and out continuously until he knew she'd be coming soon.

Flattening his tongue once more and slowly dragging it up her slit, Rebel sucked her clit in his mouth and hummed. She cried out softly, so he did the act again.

Taking a finger, he started teasing her pussy hole while he continued to suck on her clit. Her pussy gripped those digits in rhythmic pulls, and the soft sounds she made told him she was close.

“God, yes, Rebel.”

And then he knew she was coming.

Tugging at his hair forcefully, Rebel grunted but didn't stop his ministrations. He was so fucking turned on that he started pressing his cock into the couch, thrusting against the cushion to try to ease his own raging desire.

When he felt her relax he moved away from her pussy. Her pussy juices covered his mouth and part of his chin, and that just turned him on more.

“I don't think I can last much longer, baby.”

She shook her head. “Let's go to a bed.”

Good fucking idea.

Rosie's eyes were wide, and her cheeks were red from her orgasm. Rebel was the one to make her look like that, and damn was it a good look on her. He had her in his arms seconds later, and the little giggle she made had him smiling.

Her face was in the crook of his neck, and the small, heated puffs of her breath moved along his flesh.

Rebel went into her room this time, shut the door with his foot, and set her on the ground. He took a step toward her and

she took one back, smiling.

Tease.

He kept moving toward her, loving every glorious inch of her body, of her curves, and when the bed stopped her retreat he reached out and gently pushed her back on the bed.

If she wanted dirty from him, Rebel would give her fucking filthy.

“Spread your legs as wide as you can get them, baby.” Her chest rose and fell quickly, but she did what he said without any hesitation. When she was in the position he wanted a deep noise left him.

The room was dark, and the setting sun cast this dusky glow in the room.

Rebel ran a hand over his mouth and looked at her spread pussy lips. Her clit was hard and engorged, and the crack of her ass and roundness of her cheeks called out to him.

Fuck, I want my cock between those luscious cheeks.

For a moment all he did was stare at her, at the pussy that was his and no one else's. For some reason she loved him back, and he knew he was a lucky bastard. “I love you,” he said, and the smile she gave him could have lit up the room.

“And I love you.”

Slowly he slid his eyes from her pussy to her face, and held her gaze with his own. There would be no other for him, and Rebel knew it was the same for her.

They were meant to be together ... the good girl with the bad boy.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

A high settled into Rosie at the fact she was here, with Rebel, and they were doing this again.

God, she wanted more. So much more. All of it.

She was on her back, her entire body on display, her legs spread and Rebel looking at her like he wanted to eat her alive. All she could think about was pushing him further, to see how much he could handle before he snapped.

Why she was playing with fire she didn't know, but it was tempting.

Taking in every inch of his hard, muscular body had lust slamming so hard into Rosie if she hadn't been lying on the bed she would have fallen right over.

Every hard ridge, dip, and bulge of his form was shown in startling clarity, and she bit her lip to hold off her moan. He was just so very big, so tall, and perfect in all the ways that counted.

Rosie stared at his tattoos, traced them with her gaze, and wanted to just beg him to be with her already. Even coming earlier didn't tame her lust.

"You want dirty?" he asked, and she nodded.

Yeah, she did. She wanted all of Rebel's bad boy charm.

"I want you on your hands and knees." He took a step closer to her. "Let me see that ass." He grabbed himself and started stroking his huge dick back and forth as he clearly waited for her to comply.

Rosie didn't think watching a guy masturbate could have been as hot as it was, but damn was it a turn-on.

She was so wet, embarrassingly so, and the feel of her cream sliding down to the crack of her ass had her shifting on the bed, needing him to be inside of her already.

He stood before her just as naked as she was, his cock hard and pointing right at her.

He gestured for her to rise. "Get on your knees and turn around, Rosie." Rebel took another step toward her, his voice dropping an octave.

Once she was on her hands and knees, she looked over her shoulder at him.

He walked the rest of the way toward her, his cock still in his hand, his gaze on her ass.

"God damn, you have a fucking incredible ass." He palmed one of her ass cheeks, squeezing the mound hard enough a sound left her, but also had pleasure filling her.

When he was on the bed and positioned behind her, the heat that came from his body could have scorched her skin clean off. He felt good, so good she didn't hold in the moan that left her.

"That's right, Rosie. Let me hear your pleasure."

And then he brought his open palm down on her ass with enough force that the sting had a yelp leaving her, and she tightened the sheets in her hands. "God, Rebel," she squeaked out, the pain and pleasure, burn and intensity claiming every inch of her.

"You like that?"

All she could do was nod.

He spanked her again and again, causing her ass to jiggle with each slap.

"I love seeing this ass shake. I love that it's all mine." And when he spread the cheeks and cool air moved between them, she stilled. "Don't worry, baby, not tonight." He smoothed his

hands over the mounds. “But one of these days I’m going to shove my dick deep into your ass, stretch you nice and good and have you coming for me.”

He rubbed her ass cheeks, soothing the pain he’d caused. When he pressed his hips forward so she felt the hard length of his dick settle between her legs, all Rosie could do was close her eyes and moan. Rebel was just so big, and his cock felt so hot.

Her heart beat hard and fast, and her pussy was so wet that cream kept slipping out of her, preparing itself for his penetration.

He moved his hand between their bodies, and his knuckles brushed along her sensitive, soaked flesh. A gasp of pleasure and surprise left her. She was so sensitive that the small touch ignited her even further, making her feel like she’d burn alive.

“Ready for me?”

She could only nod.

He positioned the thick, bulbous head of his erection at the entrance of her body, and she froze, waiting for that stretch and burn, that feeling of being filled to consume her.

But Rebel didn’t thrust into her right away. Instead he held very still, his hands on her hips, his fingers pressing into her flesh. He was breathing so harshly behind her.

“If you want it so badly, ask me for it.”

Looking over her shoulder at him again, she bit her lip at the dark, delicious expression on his face as he stared at her.

“You want me to beg?”

He didn’t respond aloud, but the look on his face spoke volumes.

“Just fuck me already.”

This deep sound left him right before he pushed his length into her. It wasn’t slow, but one that claimed her fully. The discomfort of being stretched by his size was there for only a second before the ecstasy washed through her.

The clench of her inner muscles around his dick had a gasp leaving her each and every time he pulled almost all the way out before pushing right back in. He thrust into her once more and stilled.

His balls were pressed right up against her slick flesh, and she closed her eyes, needing some friction. Every time he groaned she swore the vibrations went right to her clit, making the little nub swell further.

“*Christ*, baby.” He slid his hand up the center of her back, his nails moving along her spine ever so gently. He pushed her hair over one shoulder. “Look at me when I fuck you.”

She did as he ordered.

And with that he started pulling out of her, and then pushed back in. He did this continuously at an agonizingly slow pace, one that had her curling her hands into the sheets and biting her lip until the taste of blood filled her mouth.

“Faster, Rebel,” she found herself saying.

Rebel started pushing into her and pulling out harder, faster. Beads of sweat covered her flesh, and her throat was dry and tight.

“Yeah, that’s it, baby. That is *so* fucking it.”

The faster and harder he pumped into her, the higher her pleasure climbed until she knew she’d be coming soon. And then he spanked her ass cheek at the same time he thrust into her, and everything else faded away.

She came explosively for him, crying out at how good it felt. Stars flashed in front of her eyes, she grew lightheaded, and all she could hear was the sound of Rebel panting behind her.

But she could tell he hadn’t gotten off yet, and even as her pleasure still climbed Rebel pulled out of her and flipped her onto her back.

He pushed her legs open again with his knee, settled between them once more, and had his cock thrust back into her

body just seconds later. A moan spilled from her lips, she arched her head back, and all she could focus on was Rebel.

He lowered his gaze to her breasts, his mouth slightly parted, and sounds came from him that resembled a feral animal. When he was fully inside of her again and the root of his cock bumped her clit sparks of electricity slammed into her.

He didn't give her body time to become accustomed to his size again, just started fucking her. The expression on his face was fierce and filled with pleasure.

“So. Fucking. Good.”

Beads of sweat lined his forehead and chest, and she reached up and ran her hands over his smooth skin, rubbing the perspiration around.

“I'm going to come soon, baby. Fuck.” He grunted, and she clenched her pussy around his erection. His hands were on her inner thighs, and when he pushed her legs up and pressed them to her chest she froze. She was so exposed, and although she wasn't embarrassed, this wasn't something she'd ever envisioned.

This position had him going in deeper with every thrust into her, and she opened her mouth and sucked in air at the ecstasy.

Curling her nails into his chest, he hissed and pumped into her faster. Even after she had already gotten off it felt like she could come again.

“I want you to come again,” he said in a hoarse tone.

God, how many times can someone get off in a night?

He slammed his cock inside of her hard. Over and over he did this, hitting something deep inside so that it felt like fireworks were going off in her. And then he was bent over her, his chest brushing against hers.

Their faces were mere inches apart, their gazes locked on each other. He slipped his tongue out and ran just the tip along her bottom, and then her top lip.

That was all it took for Rosie to get off again. She arched her head back, her breast thrust out, the air teasing her hard nipples. Eyes now closed, this sound left her on its own, but she couldn't have held it in anyway, didn't want to.

"More, Rosie. I need more from you, baby. I need everything," Rebel grunted out. The way he slammed into her and then rotated his hips, rubbing her clit, had an overload of sensations moving through her.

Even before she'd slept with him she knew he was it, that there would be no other guy for her.

Young as she was, Rosie knew what she wanted, and what she wanted was Rebel's love, always.

He was looking at her, and she leaned forward for a kiss, needing his mouth on hers. They breathed out at the same time, their tongues pressed together, sliding along the others. While still kissing Rebel thrust into her like a madman.

One.

Two.

Three.

He stilled on that last thrust, burying himself fully in her. Rosie swore she could feel him harden even further inside of her, and this gasp left her lips.

The deep sounds of pleasure he made, was almost enough to have Rosie coming again.

As the seconds moved by she felt his body grow less taut, and her own started to relax as reality rushed into her again. Rebel started breathing easier, and with each passing moment she felt even closer to him.

Rolling away from her they lay there side-by-side, the only sound filling the room that of their breathing.

After several seconds he leaned over and kissed her head, and she couldn't help but smile at how good it felt to have him give her that simple act. She stared at the ceiling, feeling deliciously sore in all the right places, but exhausted all the same.

Closing her eyes and still trying to catch her breath, Rosie felt lightheaded and thoroughly sated. Rebel pulled her over to him, and she snuggled into the hardness of his chest.

For a long while they did nothing but lie there, their breathing eventually matching an even tempo. With the stillness and silence surrounding them, Rosie knew she wanted their relationship had been out in the open.

“We need to tell them.” She knew she wouldn’t have to elaborate on whom she was talking about.

Rebel smoothed his hand over her hair. “I’m ready when you are.”

She tilted her head back and looked up at him. Rebel was staring at the ceiling, his expression relaxed. He must have sensed her staring at him because he looked over at her.

“I want my dad and your mom to know. I want everyone to know I love you, that you’re mine.” He kissed her on the forehead. “You make everything better, make me feel like I don’t hurt.” He smiled then. “You’re my very own painkiller, and I don’t want to ever lose you.”

What a thing to say.

She smiled and rested her head on his chest, feeling pretty damn lucky.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Rosie felt Charleston staring at her, knew he wasn't paying attention to one word she said, and her annoyance rose. She'd agreed to meet him at the library for an hour of tutoring.

She hadn't told Rebel because she knew he'd be pissed, and it seemed this was all a waste of her time.

Sighing and pushing the book away, Rosie leaned back in the hard plastic chair and looked at Charleston. "Are you even taking this seriously?"

He lifted a brow and smirked, the expression on his face telling her he wasn't. "Honestly?" he said, that damn smirk still on his face.

He was acting differently, not like the nice guy she'd met over the last couple of days. Was she such an idiot she could tell when someone was genuine? "Yeah, Charleston."

He leaned toward and took her hand in his. She was so taken back that she froze. "No, I don't give a shit about any of this."

She knitted her brows. "Then why ask me to help you?" Pulling her hand free from his, she saw the dark mask that covered his face a second before he smiled again.

He reached for her hand, but she kept it in her lap. "I think we should keep this friendly."

"Friendly? I thought I was being your friend."

She wasn't about to tell him he was bringing the creep factor to a whole new level.

"Don't go. We barely even got here."

"You're not interested in this, and I don't feel like wasting my time." She exhaled and told herself to just be honest. "I don't know if you thought this was something you could do to hook up with me, but I'm not going there." Swallowing at the clear annoyance covering his face, she went on. "I have a boyfriend."

He lifted a brow. "You mean your brother?"

She straightened. "He's not my brother. His father just married my mother."

He shrugged, that damn smile still on his face.

"But either way it's none of your business." She reached for her bag, not about to waste another minute. God, she was a fool for not listening to Rebel.

"I just want to spend time with you. I like you."

"You don't even know me." She didn't bother looking at him as she started putting all her stuff away. The library in the center of town was small, but it was pretty dead this time of day and they were in the back, a row of books blocking them from anyone that looked this way.

There was a big window across from them, and although there were a lot of people walking around outside, no one paid them attention.

"I know that I like what I see."

Okay, this is getting weirder by the second.

Red flags were done sprouting up. Those fuckers were waving right in her face, all but screaming at her. "You're not even acting like the same person that needed tutoring," she said, wanting to appear calm even if she felt anything but. "I should probably go." She stood, but when she turned to leave Charleston grabbed her arm in a firm, painful hold. "What are you doing?" she asked, shocked, not sure where this aggression was coming from.

“You know why I left my other school?”

She shook her head. “No, but I don’t care, nor do I want to know.” She tried pulling her hand away from him, but his hold tightened.

“Because anyone that fucked with me, denied me, or put me in a downright shitty mood got to know me real personally.”

She knitted her brows. “Let go or I’ll scream.” She should have just done it, but this crazed look in his eyes stopped her.

“They wanted to say I had some kind of mental defect, but being underage there wasn’t a lot they could do.” He grinned and pulled her toward him. “My parents refused to have me checked out, and thought switching schools, and having different scenery would be better.”

His warm breath bathed her cheek, and she turned her head.

“I’ve come to accept who I am.” He leaned forward an inch. “And I like who I see when I look in the mirror.” He tightened his hold on her chin with his other hand. “But one thing I don’t like is not getting what I want, and what I want is you.” He chuckled. “Even if you aren’t my type.” He purred like some kind of rabid cat. “Geek and all, you got this innocent thing going on, makes me want to pop your cherry.”

And just as she was about to scream out for help, because it was clear Charleston was a psycho, even if he wasn’t assaulting her in a public library, someone cold-cocked him in the side of the head.

That’s when all hell seemed to break loose.



WHEN HE SAW that fucker put his hand on Rosie, pull her toward him, and grab her forcefully something in him snapped, just broke free. He saw red, wanted blood on his hands, and he wasn’t going to stop until Charleston fucking

knew messing with Rosie was the biggest mistake of his worthless life.

He slammed his fist into the side of the guy's head again, but Charleston shook it off and rammed his shoulder into Rebel's gut. They fell backward, the bookshelf shaking and books falling around them. There were a few people shouting, and one person telling someone to call the cops.

Rebel pushed Charleston back. "You motherfucker. You don't ever touch her."

"Fuck you," Charleston spat out, and Rebel was pleased to see the smear of blood along his cheek from his split lip. He charged Rebel again, but Rebel was ready.

He grabbed Charleston's shoulders, turned him around with all his force, and slammed his back against the bookshelf. The thing went down, and so did the prick.

Charleston grabbed his head, and Rebel saw the gash in the side of his temple from where Charleston had clearly hit his head on the corner of the shelf.

"You fucking think about Rosie again and I'll make sure you can't walk right for the rest of your miserable fucking life."

Charleston lowly stood, shifted on his feet as if he might be dizzy, and grinned. Blood covered his teeth, and although Rebel wanted to do more to the asshole, he didn't want to frighten Rosie, and they were in a library.

"Fuck. You." Charleston reached behind him, and the gun he pulled out of the back of his pants had Rebel freezing. He instinctively moved in front of Rosie, reached behind him, and gripped her waist, pulling her flush with his back.

"Just chill the hell out," Rebel said, his body taut, his worry for Rosie getting hurt outweighing his own safety.

Charleston waved the gun around, and a few people gasped and screamed out. What fucking high school kid carried a gun?

A fucking crazy one, that's who.

“You know why I transferred?” Charleston asked, pride coming from his voice.

Rebel didn't answer, and felt Rosie holding onto the back of his shirt, probably scared shitless.

“Because they didn't fucking understand me.”

Understand that you're a fucking psycho?

Charleston lifted the gun, and whether he was actually going to start shooting was a mystery, because in the next second police swarmed in and took Charleston down. Everything seemed to happen so quickly Rebel couldn't even comprehend it all.

But what he did know was he still held onto Rosie, because no way in fuck was he going to let her go.

Rebel turned and grabbed her so she was now pressed to his chest. He fucking hated the fact that little prick had scared her, and put all these people in danger.

“You're sure you're okay?” he asked her and stroked his hand down her back.

“I'm fine, or I will be. I'm just a little shook up.”

They watched as the police handcuffed Charleston and hauled his ass out of the library. The few people that had been in the building were all pressed to one side of the room, looking scared as shit.

“I'm sorry I didn't listen to you regarding him,” Rosie said, but he didn't want her thinking that.

“You don't need to say sorry. I know how I am, how I can get. Even I didn't think the asshole would have been carrying a gun or go as far as assault you in public.” He kissed the top of her head. “I'm just glad you're okay.”

“I'm so thankful you showed up. I don't want to think of what would have happened if you hadn't come when you did ___”

“Shh, let's not even go there.” Thinking about what could have happened to her would only have a beast rise up inside of

Rebel again, and right now he needed to be there for Rosie.

“I love you.”

She tightened her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest. “I love you, too.”

He was never letting her go, never letting anyone hurt her. She was his.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

The next day

Rose didn't know why she was so damn nervous. Maybe it was the fact her mother and stepfather were staring at her and Rebel like they didn't know what to make out of the situation?

Her mom sat in front of Rosie, and her stepfather sat beside her mother.

They hadn't responded after Rosie told them the whole story, starting with the situation with Rebecca, moving onto the library incident with Charleston, and finally ending with admitting her feelings for Rebel.

Their parents knew about everything already, but she'd wanted them to hear their side of the story. When they'd gotten home after the library incident there had been a lot of hugs, tears, and her mother saying how worried she was for both for them, but thankful they were okay.

After everything settled down this was where they found themselves.

Although she should care that she'd gotten in trouble and suspended, even still be scared as hell about the library shit, Rosie was more worried about what her mother and stepfather had to say about her loving Rebel.

Maybe that shouldn't be her priority, but it was how she felt.

Rosie glanced at Rebel. He was looking at her, this sincerity in his expression that gave her strength. He held her hand under the table, not seeming the least bit worried about any of this.

“So this kid with the gun is now in jail?” her stepfather asked, even though he knew this already. Maybe he wanted to know again for his own peace of mind?

Rosie nodded.

“And, Rebel, you attacked him because he put his hands on Rosie?” her stepfather asked again.

“Yeah,” Rebel said without apology.

“And the girl that you fought with,” her mother asked, “she came after you and you were defending yourself?”

Rosie nodded. “Yes.”

They stayed silent again after that, but then her stepfather sighed and leaned forward, bracing his arms on the table. Were they going to address the clear elephant in the room?

“And you two...”

Rosie looked at her mother who spoke. She looked at Rebel’s father, and then at Rebel.

“You two are what, in a relationship or something?” her stepfather finished speaking.

She was tense, she felt it in every part of her body, but knowing Rebel was beside her, with her in all of this, made things easier.

“Yes,” Rebel said before she could answer. “I love her, am in love with her. I kicked that guy’s ass because he put his hands on Rosie. I didn’t know about the gun until after that.”

“How long has this been going on?” her mother said, gesturing between both of them.

Rebel and Rosie looked at each other.

“Not long,” Rosie was the one to speak.

“It’s not wrong,” Rebel said after her.

Rosie was surprised by the determination in Rebel's voice.

Rosie's mother looked over at her husband, and Rose felt the air in the room lighten. It was a strange sensation, but she didn't feel so worried, didn't feel like she was walking on the edge.

"We suspected something," Annabel said and smiled as she looked between Rosie and Rebel.

"Wait, what?" Rosie said, confused as hell.

"We aren't blind, and we used to be your age." Her stepfather looked over at Annabel and smiled. "And we know what being in love is like." He looked at Rebel then. "We just weren't sure, but we had our suspicions."

Rosie looked at Rebel. *Is this really happening?*

"You're not going to try and tell us this is wrong, that we are family or some gross shit like that?" Rebel asked, his voice a little harder.

"Not counting in the fact you're both adults and know what you want, you've both made it clear throughout the years that you don't see yourself as family. We may think of you as our children, but if you're asking if we think it's disgusting that you're stepsiblings and together..." Her stepfather shook his head, and her mother did the same.

"No, we don't think that."

This was not how she expected things to go.

Rebel gave Rosie's hand another squeeze.

She looked at Rebel and smiled. "I love him."

A moment of silence passed between everyone.

"And I love you," Rebel said.

"And you're both happy?"

She smiled at her mom. "Yeah."

"Yeah, I am really happy, Annabel."

Her heart was beating so fast and hard she wondered if anyone else heard it.

“Well, you two are happy and in love,” Annabel looked at her husband, “so it’s not our place to tell you what’s right or wrong.”

In that moment it felt like this weight had been lifted from Rosie’s shoulders, like the world was right and good, and nothing could touch them.

Maybe it would only last until they left the house and were faced with the judgment of the world, but for right now Rosie would take it.

Knowing they accepted them for how they were and what they wanted was one of the best feelings in the world. Rosie had expected the worst, braced herself for it, but what she’d gotten, what they’d both gotten, was acceptance and love.

It made Rosie feel like not everything in the world, not everyone they would encounter, would try to bring them down.

And right now that’s what she needed, what they both needed.

EPILOGUE

Two years later

“Fuck.”

She heard Rebel curse from the other room, and Rosie could only shake her head because she knew why he was frustrated. Putting away the last of the clean dishes, she wiped her hands on the rag and set it back on the kitchen counter.

Leaving the kitchen and going into the living room, she saw Rebel sitting on the couch, his big body hunched over their little coffee table and his textbooks scattered around him.

“Fucking hell.” He cursed low.

“What’s wrong?” she asked although she already knew the answer.

He looked over his shoulder at her, this bland expression on his face.

“You know what’s wrong.”

She smiled and walked over to him.

“I am a fucking idiot to not be able to get this shit.” He leaned back on the couch and exhaled. He was shirtless, his hair damp from his shower, and his big, muscular body taut.

“Hey,” she said and waited until he looked at her. “You’re not an idiot. Math is hard.”

He lifted a brow. “Not for you. I swear, I don’t know how I got so lucky to have such a beautiful, smart woman to love

me.”

She felt her face heat and glanced down. Even all these years later she still got shy when he complimented her. Rebel just made her feel so damn good.

“Come here,” he said, his head resting on the back of the couch, the muscles in his chest showing off in stark clarity. Her gaze lowered to his side, where he had her name in script tattooed onto his flesh.

She’d tried to talk him out of it, but Rebel was a headstrong guy and did whatever he wanted.

Rosie telling him getting her name inked on him was permanent had had him responding, “Well, you’re permanent in my life.” That had shut her up and made her feel all gooey inside.

She was about to sit down beside, but Rebel grinned and grabbed her around the waist. He pulled her on top of his lap and just held her. She felt so small compared to him, so feminine.

“I don’t know how I let you talk me into taking classes.”

She smoothed her hand over his bare chest and smiled at him. “Yes, you do.”

“Oh? And how did I let you talk me into it?”

“Because you’re smarter than you give yourself credit for, and you love me too much to say no to anything I ask.”

He chuckled softly. “Yeah, I do love you too much to tell you no.” He exhaled again and pulled her even closer to him. “College is fucking hard for me though, baby.”

“I know, but you’re only taking a couple of classes. Give it some time. I’m here to help.”

They sat in silence, but no words needed to be said. It was comfortable, as it always was between them. After graduation she’d gotten accepted into a college just an hour from where they’d lived. Rebel had moved with her, even to her surprise.

Their relationship been accepted by their parents, and that had been her biggest worry. She loved her mother and stepfather, and the happiness they had for their relationship.

Rebel might not have had any intentions of going to school, and had told her he'd rather work so she didn't have to worry about money, but she knew he had potential.

Even if he was just taking some trade classes, Rosie was sure he'd find his niche. It didn't matter if he got a degree or not, as long as he eventually realized he was smart and could do anything he set his mind to.

Here they were, two years later, her starting her junior year of college, and Rebel working full-time at a custom body shop while going to night school two days a week. It didn't matter that they were living in a one-bedroom apartment and eating pasta and tomato sauce most nights.

They were together, and that was all that really mattered in her eyes.

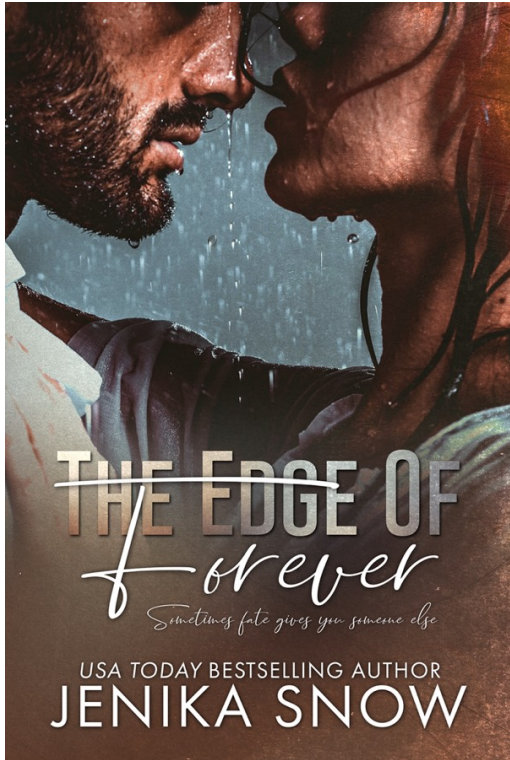
"I love you," he said and stroked his hand down her back. "You're it for me, Rosie. There isn't anyone else that will ever compare to you, that will ever hold a place in my heart. Without you I'm nothing."

She pulled back and looked at him. Cupping his stubble-covered cheek in her hands, she leaned down and kissed him.

"It was always meant to be you and me, Rosie girl."

Yes, yes it was.

The End.



THE EDGE OF FOREVER

By Jenika Snow

www.JenikaSnow.com

Jenika_Snow@Yahoo.com

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Everything happened for a reason.

That's what Poppy Matthews told herself over and over again after she lost her husband and nearly her own life in a terrible accident. And after everything was taken from her, she let the darkness in, let it swallow her whole.

She embraced it.

But she was tired of the loneliness. She was ready to be happy again, move on, experience life. That's what living was about.

And as the years passed, as her heart healed and the future looked brighter, she still kept herself guarded. It was safer that way, easier to not let herself get hurt again.

Deciding to move to Blithe, Alaska was supposed to be a fresh new start, a change of scenery, and to hopefully find comfort and friendship with Blake Ellis, the brother of the husband she lost. He knew what she was going through.

They both lost the same person who meant the world to them.

It started as two people needing comfort, seeking refuge from the torment of emotions. They connected, their friendship a safe haven in a wild storm of pain.

But as that friendship started to change into something more, Poppy realized coming to Blithe may very well have altered the course of her life in a way she never anticipated.

Poppy and Blake couldn't stop the inferno that was threatening to burn them both alive, because it felt too... right.

It was forbidden to be with each other, wrong in the eyes of so many, but they couldn't stop, not when for the first time in years they both saw and felt more than just darkness, and that was in each other's arms.

Reader note: This story was previously published under the same title. It has since been re-edited and revised. Material may be sensitive to some readers.

PROLOGUE

Jon: Seven years old

“I ’m going to marry Poppy when I’m older, Blake.” Jon looked up at his older brother and smiled.

“Sure you are, buddy.” Blake ruffled his hair, and Jon ducked out of the way. He hated when he did that.

Jon smoothed the now messy strands and puffed out his chest. “I am; you’ll see.”

“Says the seven-year-old with the missing front teeth.”

Jon felt his face heat at Blake’s words.

“I’m just teasin’, buddy.” If Blake wasn’t older and bigger, Jon would have put him in a headlock and messed up his dark hair. “Look, Jon, there’s the girl of your dreams.”

Jon followed Blake’s gaze and saw Poppy Matthews step into his home with her parents behind her. “She’s so pretty.”

“Kiddo, you got a lot of years ahead of you, but go for it.” Blake walked away, but Jon didn’t bother watching. He let his feet carry him over to the prettiest girl in the world.

“Hi, Poppy. Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Matthews.” He kept his eyes on Poppy. Her blue eyes reminded him of the big blue stone on his mom’s ring.

Everyone made their way into the dining room, but right before she followed through the doorway, he grabbed her hand, stopping her. She looked down at her hand, and he saw her cheeks turn a pretty shade of pink.

Don't chicken out. Don't chicken out.

Glancing up, he saw the little piece of green with red berries hanging from the doorway. He had seen his mom and dad kiss under it a lot. They called it mistle-something or other. Jon moved in closer, and Poppy gave him a funny look.

“What are you do—”

He pressed his mouth to hers, but the next thing he knew, he was on his butt and looking up at her.

“Gross.” She wiped her mouth on her shirt then turned around and went into the dining room. He could hear her telling on him, but he didn't care, because he just kissed Poppy Matthews.

Yeah, Jon was going to marry her, and no one would tell him otherwise.



Jon: Eighteen years old

“DUDE, if you don't quit staring at her, she's going to think you're a freak.”

“Shut up.” Jon didn't pay attention to Zack or Mike as they continued to give him shit. In all honesty, Jon didn't care what anyone said. He loved Poppy, and sooner or later, she'd come to realize she loved him too.

He couldn't have imagined all the shy looks she cast his way, or the way her arm brushed up against his. He had known her for thirteen years, and he knew without a doubt she was the girl he would spend the rest of his life with.

Jon couldn't remember exactly when that one, perfect moment of realization had occurred, but the wheels had been set in motion the moment his seven-year-old lips touched hers underneath the mistletoe.

“Why don’t you just quit being a douchebag and ask her out already?” Zack nudged him in the shoulder, and he pushed him away.

“If you don’t, I will.” Mike went to stand, but Jon pulled him down and stood.

“Try it, and I’ll kick your ass.”

Mike and Zack laughed, but they knew Jon wasn’t joking. He may not have asked Poppy out on a date, but he spent a hell of a lot of time with her, thanks to their parents being good friends.

Gathering his courage, Jon took the ten or so steps until he stood behind Poppy. The bikini she wore had parts of his body threatening to come to attention if he didn’t keep himself in check.

For several minutes, all he could do was stand there and stare at the slender slope of her shoulders. Her skin looked so damn soft that he had to curl his fingers into his palm to stop himself from touching her. Poppy spoke to her friends, but he couldn’t focus on their conversation, not when the scent of sunblock and baby powder surrounded her and did crazy things to his head.

The conversation around her suddenly stopped until all he could hear was the erratic pounding of his pulse in his ears. She looked over her shoulder, and his blood coursed through his veins as adrenalin and testosterone filled his system.

There were probably close to seventy-five people at his graduation party, but only one person held his attention. She turned around to face him, and he was struck by her beauty. His friends and family were in the pool, and splashes of water covered them. It took all his willpower not to watch those droplets of water cascade down her body.

“Hey, Jon.” Her smile could bring him to his knees.

Bright, clear blue eyes regarded him, and he realized he hadn’t responded. “Hey.” He sounded nervous. *Hell.*

“Cool graduation party.” She brought her drink to her mouth and took a sip. Her friends started giggling behind her,

and Poppy cut them a dirty look. When she turned back to Jon, her cheeks were pink.

“Yeah, thanks.” He looked at the pool and ran his hand over the back of his head. His short hair scraped across his palm.

“You okay?” she asked softly.

Jon looked back at Poppy and took a deep breath. “Would you like to go out with me?”

Poppy laughing in his face or telling him she wanted nothing to do with him had been the reaction he expected, but not the warm, sweet smile she gave him or the yes that fell from her lips.

“I didn’t think you’d ever ask, Jon.”



Jon: Twenty-five years old

“YOU READY FOR THIS, LITTLE BROTHER?” Blake asked as he adjusted Jon’s tux jacket.

“I’ve been ready for this day since I first saw her.”

Blake took a step back, and Jon turned around and looked at himself in the mirror.

“I know, Jon. I know.” He slapped him on the back. “Come on. Don’t want to keep your blushing bride waiting.”

Jon took his place at the altar and faced the wide double doors. Their families and friends filled the pews, the hushed murmurs of excitement filling the church. The soft organ music started to play, and his heart raced. The doors opened, and everything else faded until the only people in the room were Poppy and him.

God, she was so beautiful.

Poppy’s waist-length hair was coiled atop her head in intricate curls and braids. Her veil partially hid her face, but it sure as hell didn’t hide her smile. Bliss spread through him

when she started walking toward him. Her father turned her to him and brought her close enough to whisper in her ear. Jon didn't doubt he told her all the things he would do to Jon if he ever hurt his little girl.

Taking the two steps it took to get to her, his smile widened when she placed her hand in his. Before he could lead his soon-to-be wife to the officiant, her father stopped him and pulled him in close.

"You take care of my little girl, Johnny." Her father gripped him behind the neck and locked eyes with him.

"Always, Stewart. Always."

He gripped Poppy's hand again and led her up the steps. Jon didn't let go of her hand, wouldn't ever let go of her hand. Blake stood beside him, his older brother's happiness clear on his face.

They turned to each other when it was time to say their vows. Poppy's words had his heart clenching deep in his chest and his love for her growing exponentially. This was the woman he loved, the woman he would give up everything for. She was his soul mate, had known the first time he laid eyes on her.

Jon reached in his tux pocket and pulled out the folded piece of paper that had every feeling, every emotion he felt for her. He put the piece of paper back in his pocket, because everything he wanted to say was already engraved in his heart. Taking a deep breath, Jon looked into Poppy's blue eyes and said what he wanted to say since he first saw her in that pretty pink dress all those years ago.

"Poppy Shay Matthews, I have loved you since I was five years old and you walked into Mrs. Hailey's kindergarten class. I loved you even more when you pushed me on my ass for kissing you under the mistletoe when we were seven." Even through the veil, he could see the tears in her eyes. "My heart beats for you. Every second of every day, I breathe for you. I knew I would be standing beside you at the altar one day, but no matter what I say, words will never express how much I love you and how much you mean to me."

Jon took a step closer and gripped the edge of her veil. He hadn't been given the all-clear to get to this part yet, but he didn't care. He had been waiting for this moment his entire life.

He lifted the delicate material until her glassy eyes and tear-stained cheeks came into view. "I have dreamed of this exact moment over and over again. I love you, and I will spend the rest of my life proving to you exactly how deep that love goes." They stared at each other, her watery grin like a fresh ray of sun just peeking over the horizon.

The rest of the ceremony commenced, but Jon only had eyes for Poppy. He brushed her tears away with his thumbs and loved the way her smaller hands gripped his wrist, holding him to her.

"You may now kiss your bride."

That was all Jon needed to hear before he dipped his head and kissed his wife, his love, his Poppy.



Jon: Twenty-eight years old

THE FREAK STORM that hit earlier that day made the roads unbearably difficult to drive in. Poppy sat beside him, her body tense and her lips sealed tight. Jon exhaled and tightened his hands on the steering wheel.

"Honey, I said I'm sorry." He cut his eyes to her and saw her back straighten from her anger. When Poppy was upset, she tended to hold that damn grudge for eternity.

"Jon, you lied to me."

"Honey, I didn't lie, not technically."

He felt her icy glare but couldn't bring himself to meet it. He knew he had been in the wrong, but really, it wasn't *that* bad.

"Purposefully not telling me that you had lunch with a female coworker, one that has been after you since you started

working at the firm, is a lie in my book, Jonathan.”

Fuck, she’s bringing out the full first name.

“Honey—”

“Don’t *honey* me, Jonathan.” Her words sliced, because deep down he knew she was right. “What if I had gone to lunch with Alex?”

Just the mention of that prick’s name had his knuckles turning white and his jaw locking tight. “That’s completely different, and you know it.”

“Really?” She sounded incredulous. “Because last I heard from *you*, Michelle has been flirting with you so thick you were drowning in it.”

Yeah, she was right, like always, but still. “Alex is in a whole other category, Poppy.” He looked at her but found her staring out the passenger side window again. “Honey, please let’s not fight. I promise you it was only lunch.”

When she looked at him, all words failed him when he saw the hurt in her gaze. “Why did you lie when I asked who you ate lunch with?”

Jon sighed and rubbed at the back of his head. “Because if I told you I had lunch with Michelle, this is the reaction I would have gotten. Honey, please, you’re overreacting.”

“Overreacting!”

Jon winced at the high-pitched squeal that came from his wife.

“I love you.” Maybe saying those three little words would make her forget she was mad at him. The narrow-eyed look she gave him told him his answer. “I swear it was a completely innocent meeting. We were going over the Anderson account. Poppy, love, you know we’re working on the account together.”

She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Let’s just stop talking about it, okay?”

“Okay.” He drove home, the silence stretching wide and getting under his skin. But before anything more could be said, as the silence grew thick enough it could have been cut with a knife, the sound of metal bending and glass shattering filled his ears.

Then there was nothing.

CHAPTER I

Two years later

The headstone was a marker for death. A fat tear slid down Poppy's cheek, and she angrily brushed it away. Poppy didn't want to cry anymore. Exhaustion filled her from the sadness that consumed her and wouldn't let her rest. Two years had passed, and it still hurt so damn much.

When will the pain end?

She looked at the headstone for what had to be the millionth time in the past twenty-four months.

Jonathan William Ellis

Beloved Husband, Son, and Brother

SHE HAD TRACED the engraving so many times she could close her eyes and see the exact placement of each of the letters.

"It's time for me to go, Jon, to move on." The ground was cold and frozen beneath her ass, but she didn't care.

A gust of wind whistled past her, rustling the bare tree branches and scaring a flock of birds. Tilting her head to the sky, she watched the cloud of black twist and turn, as if ink had been spilled into water. The birds squawked high above her but disappeared across the murky grayness of the sky.

It had taken her two years to finally have the strength to make the decision to move out of Ohio. Being around their friends and family was just too hard, even years after his

death. Looking at them, the home they shared, and the possessions they bought together was a reminder of what they had and everything she lost.

She was healing, had gotten so much better over these years, but she was ready to start a new chapter in her life. Poppy had accepted that with life came death, that she'd lost Jon, but that didn't mean she had to lose herself. He wouldn't have wanted that. Jon would have wanted her to live, to be happy.

And that was what she was going to do.

Poppy was sick of the sympathetic looks everyone gave her and the whispers they thought she couldn't hear. Yeah, she had one hell of a time dealing with Jon's death, but what the fuck did they know? She would take all the time she needed to heal—at least that's what the shrink told her. Honestly, Poppy didn't know if she would ever feel whole again, or if the emptiness that now lay in her heart would ever be filled.

Getting away from everything seemed like the perfect thing for her to do at the moment. Jon and his family had been an integral part of her life growing up. Their parents had been close friends, and their families did everything together. But since Jon's death, she felt pulled away from them and disconnected from her own family.

All she wanted to do was be alone and try to heal on her own terms, without everyone telling her what they thought would help her. She didn't want any more help. Did they not understand she may never be okay?

They talked about the inevitable, about if one of them died before the other. He wouldn't have wanted her to keep the pain inside until it ate her alive.

"I love you, but it's time for me to press forward." She lifted her hand and rubbed it along the smooth granite top. "I'm sorry our last conversation was me acting like a jealous bitch." The tears fell harder, and she swallowed. "I should have told you that I loved you." Poppy squeezed her eyes shut as the ever-present pain filled her. Whoever said it would get easier with time should be shot, because they were a damn liar.

“I’m going to Alaska of all places.” She laughed, because she knew Jon would have thought her crazy as hell. “Don’t worry; I promise to watch out for bears.” She couldn’t help but tease, since she knew that would have been something Jon pointed out... all the damn bears in Alaska.

Making the decision to move so far away hadn’t been easy. “I just want to escape, Johnny, and Alaska seems like the perfect place to do that.”

After Jon died, every single person in his family had come out of the woodwork to give their condolences. When Blake, Jon’s brother, had called, something inside her shifted. Poppy couldn’t explain it, and it made no sense. Up until that moment, she had just wanted to keep to herself, but hearing Blake’s voice brought back good memories of her time with Jon, of all three of them laughing and enjoying life.

He’d known Jon just as well as she had, and because of that, she felt a familiar connection.

She had seen Blake enough times growing up that she considered them close despite him moving out of Ohio to the barrens of Alaska. He was ten years older than her and Jon, but he’d stayed in contact over the years.

And after he moved away, the visits from him had lessened significantly. Now, after two years of talking every day and unloading all her pain and worries on the one person who had been just as close to Jon as she was, Poppy made the decision that would forever change her life, one she hoped was for the best.

She gave one last touch to Jon’s headstone and stood. She gripped the lapels of her jacket and pulled them together. The knit hat she wore did nothing to stop the cold that seeped into her bones.

“Bye. I love you.” Poppy turned away and strode quickly to the waiting taxi. She headed straight to the airport, with only a few suitcases of her belongings with her. Everything else held too many memories.

Once in the cab, she wrapped her arms around her middle and stared out at the cemetery as it faded in the distance. This was it. She was leaving for good, or at least until she didn't feel like she was crawling out of her skin.

Poppy looked down at her left hand, saw the ring around her finger, and swallowed past the lump in her throat. Slipping off her wedding band, she tucked it into her pocket. She knew the pain of losing her husband would always be there, but the life she lived now wasn't meaningful, and Poppy knew she had to make a change.

So, that's what she planned on doing, one solitary moment at a time.

CHAPTER 2

Blithe, Alaska

Poppy stepped out of the small boat that had taken her from the Alaskan airport to Blithe. The air was crisper here, with more of a kick. Blithe was a small island community. With the Pacific Ocean on one side and the Bristol Bay on the other, Poppy found herself getting excited for the first time in years.

The wild frontier would do her some good, as would the seclusion the island of less than fifteen thousand would provide. She had done enough research on the town when she decided to move there that she could have been the official spokeswoman for the place.

A small visitor/ranger station greeted all newcomers, which happened to be all of ten. Apparently, Blithe wasn't a popular tourist attraction, especially during the winter months.

Poppy made her way past the station to where several vehicles were parked. All of them were SUVs, but she surmised one had to have four-wheel drive when living in Alaska. The other passengers from the boat moved in front of her, temporarily blocking her view.

When the sea of people parted, she felt herself smile. It felt strange doing the act, since it had been so long, but seeing Blake, his smile warm and familiar, Poppy couldn't help her reaction.

He pushed off the black SUV and strode toward her. It was a bittersweet moment seeing him. All the memories of Jon and

them together washed through her, choking her up. An equal amount of happiness and good memories his presence evoked inside her had her grin spreading wide.

“Hey, sweetheart.” Blake wrapped his arms around her, and Poppy felt herself stiffen from the contact. The feel of someone’s arms around her that weren’t Jon’s just felt aberrant.

With her bags still in hand, she didn’t return the embrace, but Blake didn’t seem to notice, or he didn’t care. He pulled back an inch but kept his arms around her waist. He was taller, probably at least a foot more than her own five-foot four-inch frame.

“You cut your hair.” A smile filled his voice, and he lifted a strand of her blonde hair.

Her once waist-length hair had been the talk of the Ellis and Matthews families. Jon had loved it, but when he died, she cut it off. Just looking at it, feeling the heavy weight, reminded her of all the times Jon had sifted his fingers through it and told her how beautiful she was. Now it sat in a bob style atop her shoulders.

“You look good, Poppy. I’m glad you’ve put the weight back on.”

She looked down at her boots. Her weight had been an issue too. Her once size sixteen frame had shriveled down to a six. The ones who didn’t know how deep her depression had been complimented her on her thinner figure, but the ones closest to her knew how sickly she looked.

“Thanks, Blake. I’m hoping the change of scenery will continue to help me.”

He smiled down at her, and emotion struck her momentarily speechless. He reminded her a lot of Jon. Of course, there were differences, but they had the same hazel eyes and dark hair. Blake’s had a little bit of silver through it, given the fact he was nearing forty, but it looked good on him.

“Come on, I’ll show you the town while we head home.” He took her bags and led her to his vehicle.

Home.

Poppy hadn't known what a home was for the past two years.

Once her bags were in the back and they were both in the cab, she prayed again that she made the right choice.

"So, how have you been?" She knew he asked the question simply to be polite. They had been talking nearly every day for years, and he knew how horrible her time without Jon had been. They had only seen each other a handful of times since his death, but after the first year of obligatory holiday visits, Blake stopped coming around. He might not admit it, but Poppy knew it had been hard for him to be around when everything reminded him of Jon too.

"Better than I was." She had no need to sugarcoat anything with Blake. Over their many conversations, she hadn't held anything back. Not her feelings, not her fears of what the future held, not anything. Poppy didn't know why it didn't feel strange telling him her innermost thoughts, but the truth of it was, if Blake hadn't been there, she didn't know where she would be in life right now.

"Well, you look like you're doing better." He cut a glance to her and smiled. "The last image I had of you was at Christmas, over a year after Jon passed..." His voice changed an octave, and Poppy knew it was still just as hard for him. "You weren't looking so good. All skin and bones. I asked Mom about you, and she said the same thing. They were so worried about you. *I* was so worried about you."

Poppy cleared her throat and looked out the passenger window. "Yeah, well, it had been a really hard time for me. I'm getting better now." She felt his hand cover hers and looked down at it. His hand seemed to swallow hers whole.

Comfort seeped from him, and she wished it would move into her body, but all she felt was the same emptiness that followed her of late. After a moment, he pulled his hand away and placed it back on the steering wheel. They sat in silence, but not the uncomfortable kind that made someone itchy.

Black spruce trees and evergreens were on either side of them, hugging the road in an almost intimate embrace. It took thirty minutes for them to reach the center of town.

“Welcome to Blithe, population 14,589.” Blake started pointing out the major structures of the town. Grocery store, hardware, and post office were lined up side by side. It appeared to be a quaint little place.

“That’s my office.” Blake pointed to a small wildlife preserve building to the left.

“Do you enjoy your work?” A smile came over his face, and Poppy couldn’t help her own smile from surfacing. She liked seeing him happy.

“I love it. Being a wildlife biologist gives me the chance to be free amongst the animals. The scenery changes every day, and I learn something new all the time.” He made a left and continued up a steep incline for about half a mile before the road evened out.

They drove for another twenty minutes before he pulled onto an unpaved road. His cabin came into view through a break in the trees. It was small but gorgeous, with big picture windows and a wraparound porch.

“Wow, Blake, it’s stunning. The pictures you emailed me don’t do it justice.”

“Thank you.” He pulled the SUV right up to the front steps and cut the engine. For several moments, they sat there. Neither of them spoke, and the only sound that filled the interior was that of the cooling engine.

“I have to admit I’m still surprised you wanted to come to Blithe.” His voice sounded deep and low. Poppy could tell in her peripheral vision that he turned toward her in his seat and watched her, but she didn’t turn her gaze from the front of the cabin.

“Why do you say that?” She did turn in her seat to look at him then. He didn’t answer for several moments, and Poppy took that time to take him in. Where Jon’s dark hair had been on the longer side, Blake had his cut short, so it fell across his

forehead. He sported a five o'clock shadow, and she idly wondered if the men in Alaska grew beards to stay warm.

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "You left everything behind to come live in the sticks." He looked at her then. "Although I do see the appeal, but it's not for everyone."

She smiled in return.

Blake was a big man and filled the interior of the spacious vehicle to capacity. That had been another difference between Blake and his brother. Jon had been a few inches taller than her. He had been just perfect; they had been perfect for each other.

Taking a deep breath, Poppy blew it out slowly and faced the house once again. "There were a few times I thought about not coming. I mean, there are places a hell of a lot closer than Alaska that I could run away to." Blake chuckled, and she went on. "I just..." Poppy rubbed her eyes, suddenly feeling exhausted. "I just wanted to get away from Ohio, from my family, and from our friends. Everywhere I looked, I saw Jon, and I knew I would never be able to heal, be happy, or move forward."

"Listen, Poppy, I didn't mean to make it sound like I don't want you here, because hell," he said the last word on a ragged breath. "I'll be honest, talking to you all those times after Johnny died helped me get through a lot of shit." He ran his hand over the back of his neck, and Poppy was struck with the memory of every time Jon used to do that same mannerism when he appeared uncomfortable.

"Anyway, enough talk about this in the car before we freeze our asses off." Blake's grin was all straight, white teeth.

In that moment, nothing sounded better.

CHAPTER 3

When Poppy climbed out of the vehicle, she let the pristine calmness surround her. There were no familiar scents in the air, or the hustle of cars moving up and down the street. The aroma of car exhaust was absent from the air, and she tilted her head back and closed her eyes, inhaling deeply.

She sensed Blake step beside her but didn't open her eyes right away. Letting the stillness of her surroundings pour into her, Poppy smiled, knowing without a doubt this had been the right decision. When she did open her eyes, she saw Blake standing in front of her.

When she told everyone her plans to move, they hadn't seemed all that surprised, but then when she revealed where she planned on moving and with whom, their shock had been evident. Poppy knew how counterproductive it might seem to everyone. What with her wanting to leave behind everything that reminded her of Jon, only to be living with his brother, of all people.

Poppy couldn't explain it, didn't even want to try to understand it. All she knew was that being in Blake's presence and talking to him about her feelings helped her heal.

She followed him up the front steps and into the cabin. The scent of wood and leather filled her senses. The sun had already started to set, so the interior was dark, but she could make out the sharp lines of the furniture scattered throughout the room. A second later, he turned on a light, and the golden glow came from the antler chandelier, of all things.

“Nice.” She started laughing as she craned her head back to loom at the light fixture.

“You like that?” Poppy could hear the smile in his voice.

“Does everyone in Alaska have one of these in their homes?” She turned to watch him set her bags down.

“It’s standard, but only if they’re moose antlers,” Blake said through a chuckle. “Come on, I’ll show you where you’ll be staying.”

Poppy followed him down a short hallway and into the first room on the right. There were two other doors in the hallway, which she presumed were his bedroom and the bathroom.

A light clicked on, and she saw a full-sized bed in the center of the room, a couple bedside tables, and a dresser. Blake set her suitcases on the floor beside the bed and took several steps back.

“The bathroom is just down the hall. Here, let me take your coat.” She peeled it off and handed it to him. “I’ll just hang it by the door.” A moment of silence passed before he said anything else. “Well, I’ll let you get settled in while I make some dinner.” He strode toward the door.

“Blake?”

He stopped and looked at her over his shoulder.

“Thanks for letting me stay with you. I know you didn’t have to do this for me, but thank you again.” Poppy offered him a small smile.

“I’m just sorry it took Jon passing away for you to visit.” He smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

He shut the door behind him, and she suddenly felt very alone in the large and empty room. Aside from a few pictures of lakes and trees, the decorations were scarce in the room. A set of French doors stood to her left, and she moved toward them. The handles were cold as she curled her fingers around the brass. A gust of frigid air whipped by her when she pulled the doors open.

Stepping onto the deck, she walked until the rail dug into her belly. The cold seeped through the long-sleeved shirt she wore, but she didn't care. The discomfort made her feel alive, made her think of something other than the past.

The light from her room spilled into the darkness. The sky looked a hazy mix of greys, blues, and pinks. The promise of snow in the very near future lingered in the air. Her lungs burned as she inhaled. Resting her forearms on the banister, she stared at the thick tangle of trees right in front of her.

When Blake had offered her a place to stay over a year ago, she hadn't thought much of it. Thinking he offered because he felt some kind of obligation toward her had crossed her mind more than once. Maybe he still felt like that, but either way, she was so very thankful for the reprieve. It wasn't like this had to be permanent. Poppy knew she always had a home back in Ohio with a family who loved her.

Hanging her head, she let her eyes close and wished for once nothing filled her mind. More than one of her friends told her she was making a huge mistake. Dropping everything to move to the middle of nowhere did sound ludicrous, but what did they know? Had they ever lost someone who meant the world to them? She had money saved up, and it wasn't like she was jobless. Thanks to Blake, she had a new job, one where she filed things away at his office. Yeah, that was her, Poppy Ellis, the Great File Clerk. She didn't doubt the work would be monotonous, but it would keep her busy. Besides, she had views like the one right in front of her at every turn. How could this be a bad idea?

Deciding she was frozen enough for one night, Poppy went back inside and shut the doors behind her. Leaning against them, she looked at the two suitcases at the foot of her bed. Anything worth keeping was shoved into that luggage. The memory of the night she packed those bags slammed into her mind like an unwelcome guest.

“What do you mean you've decided to go to Alaska?” Her mother walked into Poppy's room, her look incredulous.

“Calm down. I never said living there would be permanent.” She shoved more clothes into the bag and turned to grab more.

“Why in the world would you want to leave? And to Alaska of all places? You don’t even know anyone outside of Ohio. Where would you stay? What about your job?”

Poppy took a deep breath, knowing this was bound to be her mother’s reaction. She had no doubt this would be a lot of people’s reaction, especially when they found out who she planned on staying with.

When she spoke with Blake last week and finally made the decision to take him up on his offer to stay with him for an undetermined amount of time, she dreaded this very moment. Grabbing several hangers out of her closet, she walked back to her bed. Might as well get it over with.

“I’m taking a leave of absence from work. If I decide Alaska isn’t for me, and it is before my allotted time, then I can always go back. If not, then I’ll find something there.” Of course, she didn’t tell her mother that if she decided to stay in Alaska she had no intentions of continuing with advertising. Poppy had changed and wanted the same thing for her life.

“I actually already have a place to stay.” Poppy folded the shirt she held and placed it in her bag. “I’m going to stay with Blake.”

Her mother sat a little too quietly for Poppy’s liking. Poppy lifted her gaze and saw her mother staring at her with a confused look.

“Blake Ellis? Jon’s brother?”

“Yeah.” Poppy sat on the edge of the bed and sighed. “It’s just so damn hard being around everyone who loved Jon. Everywhere I turn I think of him, smell him, and hear him.”

“Sweetie.” Her mother sat beside her and ran a hand up and down her back. “It’s been nearly two years. How are you going to distance yourself from all this if you’re running to the person who was closest to Jon? You think it’s hard now having

all of these reminders of him around you, but staying with Blake is not the answer.”

Her mother had been right, of course, but she was getting better. “I don’t expect you to understand. I don’t expect anyone to understand. All I ask is that you support my decision.”

“Poppy, honey, I will support whatever you want to do. I just don’t want you to get all the way out there, look at Blake, and fall back into the despair you’ve just come out of.”

“We’ve been talking nearly every day for the past two years.” Her mother’s hand momentarily stopped rubbing her back, but catching herself, she continued. “After he came home for Jon’s funeral, we started talking. At first, it was every once in a while, but then it was all the time.”

“Are there feelings between the two of you?”

Poppy shook her head, knowing what her mother was getting at. “It isn’t like that. I can talk to him, like really talk to him, Mom.” Poppy lifted her eyes and stared into her mother’s. They were the same blue as her own. “When I feel so discombobulated around everyone else, I am at ease with him. We talk for hours, and I unload everything that is bottled up inside me. He listens to me.”

“Sweetie, we are all here for you. We listen to you.” A sliver of pain laced her mother’s voice, and Poppy wrapped her arms around her mom’s waist.

“I know, and I’m thankful I have such a supportive family, but I have to do this for me if I have any hope of getting through this.” When she pulled away, her mother had tears in her eyes, the same as Poppy. She lifted her hands and used her thumbs to brush Poppy’s tears away. Leaning forward, her mom kissed her forehead.

“You do what you have to do.”

CHAPTER 4

The sun on her face woke Poppy the next morning. She had finally fallen asleep well after midnight. Blake fixed them a wonderful meal then she had gone to bed, or at least tried to. After a phone call to her family to let them know she arrived safely, Poppy retired to her room.

Visiting with Blake sounded nice, but she was just too tired. Despite her exhaustion, she had lain in the bed for hours, staring at the ceiling and watching the moonlight shift across it.

A glance at the bedside clock showed it was barely seven in the morning. If she could have slept longer, she would have, but she was wide awake now. The hardwood floors were freezing beneath her bare feet, and she hurriedly ran to the dresser and grabbed a thick pair of socks. The sweats and thermal tee she wore did nothing to help keep her warm.

After quickly changing, she walked to the French doors and looked through the glass. A freshly fallen layer of snow covered everything. Her breath started to fog up the glass, and she lifted her hand and rubbed the moisture away. She didn't know how long she stood there, watching the snow flutter, the wind blowing it around like a slow dancing couple, but a knock on her door drew her attention.

“Come on in.”

The door was pushed open, and Blake peeked his head around the corner. “Sorry, I heard the floor creaking and knew you'd be up. Thought you might like a cup of coffee.” His

hand made an appearance, his fingers curled around the ceramic. “Two spoonsful of sugar, a little splash of cream?”

A smile tilted her lips. “You remembered.” She moved toward him and took the offered cup from him.

“Yeah, well I don’t think there is any woman alive who drinks as much of the stuff as you do.” He pushed the door open wider and leaned against the frame. He crossed his arms over his wide chest and regarded her silently.

“What?” He looked almost sheepish and Poppy started to become slightly self-conscious. “What, Blake?”

“You sleep okay?” He sounded concerned.

It was her turn to look sheepish. “You heard.” Poppy didn’t phrase it as a question. Clearing her throat, she went to the bed and sat on the edge. Her feet were suddenly extremely interesting.

The bed dipped beside her, but she didn’t look up. One night and she had already probably freaked him out. Who wanted to live with someone who had nightmares that caused them to scream out, sometimes waking a whole houseful of people?

“I’m really sorry.”

A finger under her chin lifted her face until she stared into his hazel eyes. “Why are you sorry?” Blake let his finger drop away but continued to stare at her. “Like you can help it? I’m more concerned with how you’re doing.”

Poppy licked her lips and looked down for a suspended moment before lifting her eyes back to his. “The nightmares used to be really bad, a nightly occurrence, but with time, they’ve gotten better. I’ve gone weeks without them, but then they come out of nowhere.” This was one of the few things she hadn’t talked with Blake about. Honestly, Poppy had been a little embarrassed. On top of everything else that happened, she had the same reoccurring nightmare, one that had her screaming out and waking in a cold sweat.

“You never told me about those.” He took her hand in his, his eyes portraying his concern. “Do you want to talk about

it?”

“Yes and no.” Poppy stayed silent for a moment.

“I dream of the accident. It’s always the same and so vivid in detail.” She closed her eyes, trying to purge herself of the memory of her dream, of her reality. The gentle sweep of his thumb across the back of her hand went a long way in soothing her inner turmoil. It wasn’t like he didn’t know the details of the accident. Both of their families knew, but it wasn’t the same, not when she had been in the middle of it all. Painful memories invaded her, and she closed her eyes tighter.

“Talk to me, Poppy.” His words urged her. “I know it’s hard, but isn’t that why you came out here, to help yourself heal? I bet you haven’t really discussed your feelings with anyone, not even that psychologist you saw.”

She opened her eyes and looked into his. Blake was right, of course.

Poppy may have spoken to a professional after the accident, but she hadn’t been fully able to unload her problems, not like she wanted to. Even years later, the accident was still fresh in her mind. The sights and smells of the carnage that surrounded her were ingrained inside her.

“Is me telling you the horror of my dreams really going to help anything?” She didn’t ask to be cynical or untrustworthy of Blake’s attempts to help her. She simply spoke the truth.

“Yes, Poppy, I do think it’ll help, but I won’t push you.” His eyes were a warm green-brown that had her wanting to open up to him.

Looking out the French doors at the swirling snow, Poppy told him about the crash, about her dream.

The sound of glass breaking and metal bending was so unbelievably loud it encompassed Poppy. Pain registered at her temple as soon as her head struck the passenger side window. Flashes of black and brightness danced before her eyes. The metallic flavor of blood filled her mouth in a gush, and she gagged as it slid down her throat.

The world felt strange, off-kilter. Blinking rapidly, Poppy's vision cleared enough that she realized she was suspended in the air. The only thing holding her was the seatbelt that dug into her throat, partially cutting off her airway like a tight noose intent on taking her life.

Harsh, violent gusts of wind whipped by her, and she turned her head. Jagged shards of glass from the passenger side window filled her vision. Something warm and wet made a slow but steady track down her forehead. The wetness started to drip from her nose and into her eyes, and she lifted her hand, trying to wipe it away. But her arm wouldn't move. Panic seized her chest, and her heart pounded strong and hard behind her sternum.

"Jon." Her voice sounded hoarse, scratchy. Poppy cleared it and called out again. "Jon." There was still no answer. Her neck hurt, and she still couldn't get her arm to move.

Poppy turned her head to the left, and a tortured sob left her. "Jon?" Hot tears sprang to her eyes. "No, please, God, no." She tried to reach out, but her fucking arm wouldn't move. Poppy looked and saw the flash of white protruding from her forearm.

Poppy screamed. Loud, gut-wrenching sounds left her, and she prayed someone heard her, prayed someone came to help. She tried to use her right arm to unlatch her seat belt, but every move she made sent agony throughout her entire body. "Jon, please, wake up." Blood covered her hand and made her actions slick and sticky. A rolling wave of pain stole her breath. Poppy cried out.

Sirens sounded in the distance, and Poppy could hear shouting nearby.

"You okay in there?" A female voice was to her right.

"What's your name?" A male voice sounded to her left.

She reached out with her right arm, but she couldn't reach Jon, couldn't touch him. "Please, help Jon." Poppy let her head fall back against the seat and closed her eyes. Blood and tears made seeing anything damn near impossible, and the

pain made it hard to think straight. Another sob tore through her, and she tried once more to reach for Jon.

“God, Johnny, I’m so sorry. Please forgive me. Please be okay.” Then darkness took her away.

Poppy wiped the tear that started making a slow trail down her cheek. Blake’s comforting presence seeped into her, and she absorbed the sensation.

“I’m so sorry, Poppy.” He rubbed her back, the rhythmic up-and-down motion further helping to ease her pain.

“Well, it is getting easier every day, and I’m hoping it’ll get better since I’m here.” Poppy wiped at the last tear and forced a smile on her face. She looked at Blake and saw a pained look on his.

“I’m going to make you whole again, Poppy.”

“It’s not your job to do that, Blake.”

They stared at each other for a suspended moment, then he gave a nod and stood. “Okay, well I’ve got some breakfast made when you’re ready.”

He shut the door on his way out, and Poppy sat on the bed and went back to staring out the French doors. The snow continued in a flurry of motion, and she was struck by the beauty of it.

If only she could be one of those snowflakes with the wind taking her far, far away.

CHAPTER 5

“Breakfast was delicious, Blake.” Poppy leaned back in her seat and smiled at him. The sunlight poured through the bay window and cast a golden glow across Blake. The thermal Henley he wore was snug against his broad chest, and Poppy could make out the twin mounds of his pecs. She looked away quickly. After finishing her coffee, she stood and walked over to him.

“Here, let me do the dishes.” She reached out to grab his plate, but his hand atop hers stopped her. She lifted her eyes to his and waited. For a moment, she was struck by how handsome he was. Guilt immediately consumed her.

“Forget about the dishes. How ‘bout I take you to the waterfall?”

“Really?” Genuine excitement filled her. “Like an actual waterfall?”

His chuckle was deep and low, and it did funny things to her belly, things she didn’t really want to think about.

“It’s not much of a waterfall this time of year, but it’s still a beautiful sight.” He stood, and she took a step back. “It’s breathtaking this time of year, and if you want to see it, we should go before the storm hits.”

“A storm is supposed to hit?”

He scooped up his plate and took hers out of her hand. “Yeah. We’re supposed to get a few feet starting tomorrow night, and it’ll continue until Sunday evening.” He set the dishes in the sink and turned around. Blake leaned against the

counter and crossed his muscular arms over his chest. He hadn't shaved yesterday, and the extra days' worth of growth looked really good on him. "First, I'll show you the office so you're familiar with it come Monday, but then we can head up the mountain." He grinned.

"Okay." She headed back to her room to change into warmer clothes and freshen up then met Blake in the kitchen. He was already dressed, with his coat on and his car keys in hand.

Once in the SUV, they headed into town. They didn't really speak, but that was okay, because a comfortable atmosphere filled the vehicle. They pulled into the small parking lot of the wildlife preserve, and Blake cut the engine.

The first thing Poppy noticed inside the building were the framed samples of different flora and fauna that lined the walls. A small desk was off to the right with stacks of paperwork littered atop it. A standard, gray filing cabinet stood next to that.

"So, that'll be your desk." Blake pointed to where her gaze was already. "As you can see, we are in desperate need of some help." It was cute the way his cheeks turned pink after he said it.

Noise sounded down the hallway, and Blake gestured for her to follow. A door stood to the left, which was closed, and Blake told her that was where most of their records were kept.

"You guys don't keep anything in the computer?" He continued to lead her down the narrow hallway and stopped in front of the only other door.

"We do, but internet connection out here is spotty, if we can even get it. Besides, we're kind of old school around here. Maggie likes to have actual hardcopies of our findings, but we still have to input our data into the system. That's where you come in."

"Maggie?"

Blake pushed open the door and proceeded to let her enter first. A thin woman was bent at the waist and rifling through a

box of papers.

“Hey, Maggie.” The woman stood at the sound of Blake’s voice. She pushed her wire-rimmed glasses up the bridge of her nose and smiled.

“Hi, Blake.” She flicked her eyes toward Poppy, and a slight frown wrinkled the skin between her eyes.

“This is Poppy Ellis, my sister in-law, and the one who is going to help us get the files organized.” Maggie smiled, but Poppy could tell it didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Nice to meet you, Poppy.” Maggie wiped her hand on her brown corduroy pants before sticking her hand out. “Maggie Harris, wildlife botanist and Blake’s partner.” The way she said “partner” sounded almost like she tried to stake some kind of claim on him.

Okay.

Poppy took her hand and shook it and didn’t miss how the other woman tightened her grasp marginally. “Nice to meet you too.”

“I was just showing Poppy the place then we’re going to head up to Falls Cliff.”

“Oh, well, have fun. The storm is supposed to hit tonight, so you’re heading up there just in time.” Maggie looked behind her. “I’m just trying to find the files on *Hierochloe odorata*. I could have sworn I put them there, but I’m having a hell of a time finding them.” When Maggie turned back around, she looked at Blake.

“I think you stored them in the *Calamagrostis canadensis*.”

Poppy looked between the two of them, not sure if they were speaking English. Blake turned to her and smiled.

“Those are just the scientific names of two different types of grass.”

Poppy nodded but still felt so completely out of place. She was totally out of her element. When she lived in Ohio, she

worked in advertising. Now it seemed she had to work with long, foreign-sounding names for different types of grass.

“Don’t worry. We don’t expect you to memorize the scientific names or anything.” Blake threw his arm around her shoulders and grinned down at her. “Come on.”

Blake led her toward the door, and Poppy glanced behind her shoulder. “It was nice meeting you,” she said, but Maggie’s attention was on Blake’s retreating form. When she finally looked back at Poppy, she had a forced smile on her face.

“Likewise.” With that, Maggie turned away and continued to dig through the box.

Once they were back in the vehicle and on their way to the falls, curiosity got the best of Poppy. “So, uh, you and Maggie work together long?”

“About three years now. She came from Seattle to do an internship in my office. Once she completed it, she decided to stay in Blithe.”

Poppy watched the scenery as they passed by. She would have been a fool to miss the attraction on Maggie’s face. She would have also been blind not to feel the hostility that came from the other woman that had been directed right at her.

Blake maneuvered the SUV up the winding mountain for another twenty minutes. Finally, he stopped and climbed out of the car. Poppy followed.

“It’s about a fifteen-minute hike to the falls, but the trail is fairly flat and shouldn’t be too difficult, even with the light layer of snow.” He led the way, and Poppy kept close behind him.

The sights, smells, and noises were stunning. Large trees towered on either side of them; the smell of crisp air and pine surrounded them, and the small sounds of animals scurrying about made her feel like one with nature. Blake pointed out the different types of flora and fauna, and although she honestly couldn’t keep up with his scientific lingo, she was interested.

Blake was intelligent and knew exactly what to say to keep her mind in a positive light, whether he knew it or not.

The wind picked up, and she tucked her chin to her chest and pressed on. The sound of rushing water could be heard before anything could be seen. A break in the trees led to a clearing that overlooked a gorgeous waterfall. Poppy hadn't realized the trail ascended so much, but as she stepped closer, she saw a steep drop-off just feet from her. Blake's hand gripped her bicep. "Careful." His breath teased tendrils of her hair that had fallen free from underneath her knit hat. "The ground is slick, and the edge might not be stable. I wouldn't want to have to dive in after you if you go over." She looked over her shoulder and realized he was far closer than she realized. His voice held a teasing tone, but she found herself growing uncomfortable by the tightening in her gut.

Disentangling herself from his grip, she took several steps back and looked at the scene before her. The waterfall cascaded from at least twenty feet. It was just a steady stream of water and not the rushing torrent she imagined, but then again, it was October. A basin of water pooled below the falls, churning slowly then traveling down the mountain. The cold air rose up from the bottom, and Poppy pulled her coat tighter around her.

"It's so beautiful."

"Yeah," Blake said as he stared at the scene in front of him. He pulled a thick blanket out from the backpack he wore and laid it out on the ground. He sat and patted the seat next to him. Once Poppy sat beside him, they watched the water rush down before collecting at the basin.

"After Jon died, I came up here a lot to think." She was surprised by his comment but didn't interrupt. Even before Jon passed away, Blake hadn't been very forthcoming with his feelings. Even when Poppy opened her heart up to Blake all those times they spoke, he hadn't really shared what went on in his head. Poppy never pressed him though. She knew all too well that people dealt with their grief differently.

“The quiet helped me out, believe it or not.” His knees were drawn up, and his forearms rested atop them.

He kept staring at the falls, and she wished he would look at her so she could see what was going on behind his hazel eyes. The wind blew his short dark hair around his head, and Poppy had the strange urge to brush the locks away from his forehead. Instead, she curled her fingers into her palms and turned her attention forward.

“It isn’t your fault, Poppy.”

Shock resonated through her at his words, and she looked at him. “What?”

Blake looked down at her, his eyes holding so much emotion she felt it all the way inside her. He looked away, and when he dragged his eyes back to hers, the sadness behind them had her throat closing. Why did she think coming to stay with Blake had been a good idea?

“I came to the hospital after your surgery.”

Poppy blinked in confusion. “You came to the hospital? To see me?” She saw the way his throat worked when he swallowed. For several long moments, he didn’t answer her, just watched the water cascade into the basin.

“Yeah. Mom and Dad called me right after the accident, and I got on a red-eye flight. They told me you had internal bleeding and didn’t know if you’d even make it through surgery.”

The memories of those days spent in the hospital came back full force. Blake’s words reopened the scar on her belly, reminding her that she should have died in that car right along with Jon.

“I sat by your bed that whole night, just watching you sleep.” Poppy didn’t know any of this. After two years of talking, of planning her move, Blake had never said any of this. “You talked a lot while I was there. Of course you were out of it, and a lot didn’t make sense.” Blake had turned his body so he faced her. “But the thing you murmured over and over again was that you thought it was your fault he died.” He

took her hand in his, and Poppy let the warmth seep into her. His words, and the way he spoke them, touched not just the surface, but deep down as well.

“I don’t know what to say.” The words came out on a whisper, and she felt tears burn the corners of her eyes.

“You don’t have to say anything, sweetheart.” Blake moved closer and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. With the side of her body flush with his, Poppy let her head fall to his shoulder. “I just want you to know it isn’t your fault.” He gave her a little squeeze as if to emphasize his point.

They sat there for another hour, not saying anything else. The weather grew colder, but Poppy didn’t care. Sitting next to Blake, even if no words were said, was the single most peaceful and fulfilling moment she had experienced in the past two years.

CHAPTER 6

The storm had come Saturday night and lasted all through Sunday afternoon. Poppy stayed inside the whole time, watching Blake keep the fire going. It was strange, but being around Blake didn't require a lot of conversation. They could enjoy each other's company without words getting in the way.

The sun had already set, and aside from the desk lamp on the desk in the corner, the only illumination came from the fire. Poppy sat curled under a blanket with a book in her lap. Blake sat on the other side of the room at his desk, working on paperwork. He had a pair of glasses on, and his hair was disheveled from the numerous times he ran his fingers through it.

Poppy found it extremely hard to concentrate on anything when his big body was hunched over the desk and a look of concentration marred his face.

The light from the lamp cast harsh shadows along his angular jaw. Blake still hadn't shaved, and Poppy admitted, albeit only to herself, that it added a rugged, masculine quality to him. Although he only sat there, working on mundane things, there was no denying he was very comfortable in his skin, in his surroundings.

It wasn't just that he had lived in this environment for years. It was something deeper, something almost... peaceful.

"You're thinking too hard." Blake lifted only his eyes to her and smiled. His glasses slid down his nose, and he watched

her over the rims. He straightened and leaned back in his chair. The leather creaked from his weight and the movement. “Is there anything you want to talk about?” He took the glasses off and rubbed his eyes.

“Nothing in particular.” Poppy set her book aside and wrapped the blanket tighter around her middle. “I was just thinking that you seem like you’re at peace. It’s nice, comforting in a way.” When he opened his eyes, she swore she could see the green and brown mixed together. The shadows wrapped around him like a cloak. The way he glanced away made her wonder if the peace had all been an illusion.

“Sometimes what you see isn’t always the truth, Poppy.”

“No? Why do you say that?”

He stood and cracked his back. Blake walked around the desk and sat on the couch across from her. The sound of the fire crackling pierced the sudden silence.

He watched the fire, and she watched him. Blake laid his head against the back of the couch and turned to look at her. “Did you know I used to be a troublemaker?” he asked then smiled.

“Oh? I thought I knew everything there was to know about the Ellis boys.”

Blake chuckled and shook his head. “Nah, I used to run my dad ragged. Course, I doubt you would remember any of it, and I sure as hell know my dad didn’t brag about all the shit I did. You and Jon were too little, and even if he realized what I did, he was too enamored with you to notice anything else.” A faraway look crossed his face, but he quickly hid it. “He used to follow me around. It drove Dad nuts.” He rubbed his eyes again. “I hated Jon following me around, used to piss and moan about it, but Dad always told me that he looked up to me, that I had to set a good example.”

Poppy wasn’t sure where Blake planned on going with this, but if it helped him, then she would be that ear he needed. Lord knew she had unloaded enough of her shit on him over the years.

“I hated all the rules my dad laid out, hated having my little brother follow me around.” He looked at her again, and his pain was so strong that she felt her throat clog shut with it. “I wanted to do whatever I pleased. Yeah, I was a cocky little shit back in the day. I guess my point is I wish I could go back to the days where Jon hung on my coattails.” Blake leaned forward and placed his forearms on his thighs. For a long time, he did nothing but let his head hang between his shoulders. “I see him, running around, that goofy-ass smile on his face, and I let myself feel happy again when I think of him.”

Poppy knew exactly what smile Blake talked about, and the happiness that thought brought.

“But even though those thoughts bring me a sense of comfort, the pain, dread, and regret follow.” He lifted his head and looked at her. “You can’t change the past, and you can’t control the future. You have to embrace your life, or the sorrows of the world you carry on your shoulders will drag you down to the pit of despair.”

Poppy forced herself to look away from Blake and the words he said. She hated that he spoke the truth, hated that he was so damn smart. “When did you become so smart?” She wasn’t really talking to him in particular, but he took her hand in his regardless, and she clasped it.

“It’s not about being smart, Poppy girl. It’s about knowing which battles you want to fight. Life is way too short.” He tightened his hand and smiled. “I know, without a doubt, that Jon wouldn’t want you to keep all this inside you. It’s eating you up, Poppy, and you need to let it go. You can’t do it for anyone else but yourself.” His big, warm hand landed right over her heart, and her breath stalled. “You have to accept death in order to understand life.”

CHAPTER 7

Blake felt the steady beat of Poppy's heart right below his palm. Her eyes held unshed tears, and she blinked rapidly. He could tell she did so to keep them at bay. Her mouth opened and closed several times, but she didn't say anything.

"What is it?" Over the years, he found out so much about her. Their conversations hadn't always been about Jon's death, but the majority of the time they were. Poppy didn't know how to deal with what she felt and how not having Jon around changed her life. When she wasn't telling him about the turmoil they felt, Poppy gave him little pieces of herself in her words.

He had loved her, because she was the girl Jon loved, because she was his little brother's wife, but after speaking with her and feeling their connection grow, he loved Poppy Ellis, the individual she was. How could he not when she had been so important to the one person he cared about the most?

Blake remembered the very first time Jon told him he loved Poppy Mathews at seven years old and that he would marry her. That had been the start of a great romance, one that poems should have been written about. It was the love Jon had for Poppy that made Blake believe in soulmates and love at first sight.

"I didn't tell you everything, Blake." Her softly spoken voice drew him out of his thoughts.

“What do you mean?” He still held her hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Their relationship was one of open honesty. He would never hold anything back from her, and she knew he was always here to listen. Jon’s death had brought them together in a way that survivors clung to one another. At least that was how Blake felt.

Poppy turned her whole body toward him. The tension that surrounded her was thick, but he didn’t rush her. Obviously, a serious subject matter had just arose, and she deserved his understanding and undivided attention.

“That night, before the accident, Jon and I were fighting.” She closed her eyes, and her face took on a look of pain. “It was so damn stupid. He went to lunch with a female coworker, and I blew it way out of proportion.”

“Poppy—” She shook her head, and he stopped what he was about to say.

“Our last conversation... I’d been pissed at him, all but accusing him of cheating.” The blue of her eyes seemed more intense with her unshed tears.

Blake felt his throat close with emotion.

“Poppy, you know Jon would never have cheated on you.”

She nodded and wiped her tears away. “Of course I know that. It was my own insecurities and jealousy that made me so angry.” When she lifted her eyes to his, the firelight played off the tears slowly sliding down her cheeks.

“Hey, now.” He brushed them away with his thumb and cupped her cheek. Her skin grew warm from the fire. “This is not your fault.” She started shaking her head, and he cupped the other side of her face with his hand. “Poppy. This is not your fault. Do you understand me? The accident, the fighting, was not a result of you doing anything wrong.”

“I know, it’s just—” She took a deep breath. “—I wonder if I hadn’t kept the fight going, then maybe Jon wouldn’t have been so worried about me and the accident may never have happened.”

“Sweetheart.” Blake ran his thumbs under her eyes. “Things happen, no matter what we do. We can’t control the weather, and we certainly can’t control other people’s actions.” The car that had slammed into them had lost control and hit a patch of black ice. When it hit Jon’s car, it caused it to careen out of control and slam so hard against a telephone pole the car had nearly wrapped around it. Poppy had been lucky she lived that day, but because the driver side had been the one to take the impact, his little brother hadn’t been so fortunate. Blake was just glad Jon’s death had been instant. If Jon had suffered, it would have made the grieving process even more arduous.

“I knew as soon as I woke up in the hospital that I lost everything, that I lost Jon. I felt that emptiness right away.” Hard, wracking sobs left her, and Blake pulled her into his lap. Her whole body shook from the force, and he wished he could take the pain away from her.

“I’m a coward, Blake.”

“Shhh, Poppy.” He cupped the back of her head and whispered things he wished someone would have said to him when he was hurting. “I’m here, and I’m not going anywhere.”

“There is just so much anger inside me.” Her voice was muffled, and when she lifted her red-rimmed eyes, something inside him clenched with torture. Seeing her upset was so much harder than hearing her tears over the phone. “I feel like I’m drowning in it, Blake. When will it go away so I don’t feel like this?”

He searched her face but didn’t know how to answer. “I don’t know, Poppy. I don’t know.” He pulled her into his chest again and rocked her until her sobs stopped and the even sound of her breathing told him she had fallen asleep.

CHAPTER 8

Monday morning came and went, and now Blake sat behind his desk Monday evening with a massive headache. He hadn't gotten much sleep last night, partly due to the storm, but mainly because he couldn't stop thinking about everything Poppy told him.

He'd lain in bed for hours, listening to shards of ice pelt against his window. The weather mimicked his mood, turbulent and violent.

"You doing okay, Blake?" Maggie asked.

He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes. The pounding behind his eyes matched the steady thumping of his heart. "Yeah, just tired." His eyes were closed, but he knew Maggie sat in the seat in front of his desk. He could smell the cinnamon bagel she ate and the dust that always seemed to surround her from digging through boxes for samples.

"Did the storm keep you up?"

He sighed and opened his eyes. Her thin wire-rimmed glasses were slightly askew. Her red hair was twisted in a severe bun at her nape, and her thin lips were painted with bright red lipstick. "Yes. No." Blake let his head fall to the back of his chair and stared at the ceiling. A water stain sat in a brown, dull circle in the corner.

"Everything okay? All day, you haven't been yourself." She took a bite of her bagel and watched him.

"Yeah, like I said, I'm just tired." In all honesty, he hadn't been able to concentrate today. Poppy was just in the next

room over, staying busy with filing samples into the computer system that needed to be up and running by the beginning of the year. Occasionally, he could hear her muttering profanities, and those times he hadn't been able to hold in his smile.

Something about Poppy calmed him and made everything seem bearable when it shouldn't be. He knew her pain, because he lived with it also. Two years might have passed, but every morning when he woke up, the agony of knowing he wouldn't be able to call his brother and see if everything was okay, or plan a guys' night out the next time he came to visit, hit him full force.

Every day, he woke up wishing it had been him instead of Jon.

"Hey, maybe we can go out again sometime?"

Maggie looked so hopeful he didn't want to crush whatever ideas she had brewing in her mind. "Maggie, I don't think that's a good idea." She looked a bit forlorn, but she quickly schooled her expression and smiled.

"Listen, you're not feeling the greatest, so I'm going to leave you alone and get back to work." She stood and smoothed her hands down her pleated pants. She gave him one more smile and left his office.

Sixth months ago, they had gone out on a date. That one had led to another then the two of them in bed together. It had been a mistake, in more ways than one. For one thing, he should have never gotten involved with his coworker. For the second thing, Maggie had grown attached to him after the dates and one night in bed.

He didn't want to hurt anyone, but being with Maggie had temporarily filled the void inside him. The morning after, he told her they could never do it again. Maggie hadn't made a scene, and things were still good between them, but every once in a while, she nudged him for something more.

The sound of Poppy cursing again had warmth spreading inside him. He stood and left his office. Blake leaned against the doorframe and watched her. She was bent over the tiny

desk, her upper body forward and her face close to the computer screen. He could hear the sound of her fingers flying over the keyboard.

“Well, shit.” Poppy looked at the keys, typed something out, and looked at the screen again.

Maybe he should have made his presence known, but he couldn’t help but sit back and watch her.

“Argh!” She sat back and ran her hands through her short blonde hair. It looked soft, and his fingers itched to touch the strands.

What the fuck is wrong with you? Blake mentally berated himself for his inappropriate thoughts. The floor creaked as he shifted on his feet, and Poppy turned to look at him.

“Oh hey.” Her cheeks took on a pink hue. “You, uh... you didn’t hear my foul language, did you?”

Blake threw his head back and laughed. *God, that feels good. To actually laugh and feel it throughout my whole body.* When he looked at Poppy again, her face took on a pretty shade of red, and he grinned wider. “Your face always did show your emotions.”

Despite her emotions, Poppy smiled at him. “So I take it you did hear me swearing up a storm in here?”

“Yeah, but that’s all right. I think it’s funny as hell. Makes for an interesting day.” He stepped into the office and looked at the computer screen. “Everything okay, though?”

Poppy sighed and stared daggers at the screen. “You know, I did advertising for years, worked on the computer for hours a day, and could tell you any program out there and how it worked, but when it comes to organizing samples with crazy-ass names, I’m computer-illiterate.”

Blake chuckled again. He grabbed an extra chair and sat beside her. “The system is pretty outdated, but we’re required to document and print our findings and send them to universities and research facilities. It’s a pain in the ass, but the government funds our research, so they have us by the balls, so to speak.”

Poppy gave him a coy look and started laughing.

“I like it when you laugh. It sounds nice,” he pointed out, and the air shifted around them, and her back straightened. “I’m sorry.” He went to stand, but her hand on his forearm stopped him. Blake looked at her.

“No, it’s fine. It’s just...” She let go of his arm and looked away. “I feel kind of guilty.”

He felt his brows knit. “Guilty? But why?”

“Because I wasn’t thinking about Jon. I wasn’t thinking about anything aside from the way you make me feel.” She smiled again, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “I’m so happy around you, Blake, contrary to the way I’ve been acting, and I feel guilty I find myself not thinking of Jon.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” He reached for her, but she shook her head and stood.

“Listen, is it okay if I finish this tomorrow?”

“Poppy, can we talk?” Blake stood, but she took another step back.

She shook her head and offered a smile. “It’s time for me to go anyway. Can you take me home, or do you still have work to do?”

Blake rubbed his hand over the back of his head and breathed out. She was right. It was time for her to go, but he didn’t want her leaving when she felt like this.

“Everything okay?” Maggie stepped in the room and looked between them.

“Yeah, Poppy is ready to go, so I’m going to have to finish up tomorrow.”

“I don’t want to tear you away from anything. I can just wait until you’re done.” She took a step forward and grabbed her jacket off the back of a chair. “I’ll just go sit in the front.” Poppy went toward the door.

“No, no, that’s crazy having you wait. It’s not a problem taking you home. I’m about done here anyway.” He offered

her a reassuring smile.

“Blake, we have to get those samples filed and packaged to send off to McKenzie Research Center. We are already behind.” Maggie was right. “I can take you home when we’re done if you want?” Maggie’s expression turned hopeful.

“No, I can come in early tomorrow and finish it.”

“Blake, that’s ridiculous. If you’re okay with it, I can just drive myself back.” Poppy slipped her coat on and grabbed her purse. “I don’t want to keep you from what you need to do.”

“I don’t mind taking you home, Blake.” Maggie stepped farther into the room, and he nodded.

“Yeah, okay, if you’re okay with it, Poppy?”

“Of course.”

He handed her his car keys and saw her to the Yukon. When she was in the driver seat, he leaned against the open window. “So you’re sure you remember how to get home?”

Her cheeks were red from the chilled air. “Yeah, it’s a pretty straight shot, but I have my cell and GPS. If I need you, I’ll call.”

“Okay, well, send me a text when you get there.” He straightened and touched the hand closest to him. For several seconds, they stared at each other. Blake couldn’t deny it, couldn’t ignore the tingle that traveled up his arm from the simple touch. He pulled his arm away and made a fist. He stood there and watched her drive away, knowing in his gut he should have gone with her. Poppy’s emotions were still raw, and she didn’t need to be alone.

“She’ll be fine, Blake.” Maggie’s voice sounded behind him, but he didn’t bother turning around. He continued to watch the Yukon that got smaller and smaller. “Besides, once this is done, the two of you will have all kinds of free time to visit.” He turned around then, and Maggie looked up at him.

“Yeah, well let’s just get this done. I don’t feel right having her go home alone.” Maggie led the way, and right before Blake entered, he turned around and watched the now empty

road. He placed a hand over his heart, realizing that watching Poppy leave left an ache in the center of his chest.

Guilt swamped him, because at that moment, he realized Poppy meant something more to him than as his sister-in-law, and as more than just the widow of his little brother. He lifted his hand and looked at it. He could still feel the tingles that her touch caused within him.

She meant the world to him, and that was a very dangerous emotion, one he didn't know if he felt comfortable with.

CHAPTER 9

Poppy cleaned up her dishes from dinner and put them away. She had been home for several hours, had sent a text to Blake when she arrived, but hadn't heard anything from him since. No doubt he was busy, but after she left, he was the only thing she could think about. And it was those thoughts that made her feel sick. She sat on the couch and stared at the fire she started when she first arrived.

A smile curved her lips as she remembered Blake showing her how to start one yesterday. It had been easy enough, but the way he explained it to her, like he wanted to make sure she knew the make-up of the best wood that would burn and the length it should burn for, had her feeling light.

Something about his presence eased the whirlwind of emotion that constantly consumed her.

Every time he looked at her, butterflies started inside her. Warmth grew at the small, comforting touches he gave her. All of it made her feel whole, like a human and not just a being floating around a world she didn't fit in. He made her think of other things, things that didn't have her crying and wishing things would be different.

Poppy couldn't say when that feeling between them changed, but it had definitely shifted. He was her rock, her shoulder to cry on, and he never turned away when she needed him. He helped her in more ways than he would ever know.

While in his presence, talking to him, laughing with him, Poppy found herself not thinking of Jon. The guilt from those

thoughts kept her pushing her emotions down. If she were honest, her feelings for Blake were starting to change and go into territory she wasn't comfortable with.

She closed her eyes. It seemed to keep her grounded, to ease her in some way. Poppy opened her eyes and looked down. She gripped the edge of her shirt and slowly dragged it over her stomach. Her belly was slightly rounded, thanks to her putting her weight back on, and she ran her hands over the scar that made a long, raised vertical line two inches from her belly button.

The damage had been repaired on the inside, but she now wore a permanent, physical reminder of that day. Poppy dropped her shirt until it covered her stomach, and she watched the fire.

The sound of a car engine coming up the drive had her standing and going to the window. Maggie's Blazer parked parallel to the cabin, letting Poppy see into the cab without the glare of the headlights. Blake's big form seemed to take up the entire passenger side. They were talking, and from the smile on Maggie's face, the conversation obviously pleased her. Poppy wasn't blind or stupid. The desire for Blake on Maggie's face was clear as day, but a sick, twisted part of her couldn't deny the pleasure that formed inside her when she noticed Blake didn't seem to reciprocate Maggie's feelings.

Maggie touched his bicep, and Poppy knew watching them was an invasion of their privacy, but she couldn't force herself to move away. A tingle of jealousy worked its way through her body when Blake turned and faced Maggie.

His hand landed on hers, and Poppy's stomach tightened. Her emotions were completely misplaced, yet she had to keep watching, like some kind of masochistic fiend.

What would your families think if they knew your feelings for Blake were becoming more than innocent?

No doubt, they would be disgusted, and Poppy couldn't blame them. She disgusted herself.

Maggie leaned in and kissed him, and that was when Poppy forced herself to turn away. She moved to Alaska to heal, not to start something completely inappropriate with her brother-in-law. She made herself comfortable on the couch and grabbed her book. The story was about a young girl who faced horror after horror in her life. From abuse to ridicule, the young girl turned into a woman who constantly sought out love and affection in the wrong places.

Losing someone you loved was a true horror, but stories like the one she read made Poppy realize her life could be so much worse. She should be grateful for what she still had.

CHAPTER 10

Blake opened the front door and shut it once he was inside. He leaned against the wood and closed his eyes.

He should have known Maggie driving him home was a bad idea. It was clear she had a different mindset from his. Her feelings for him were far more involved than he initially thought.

That much became uncomfortably clear when she told him how she felt before he got out of the Blazer. He had tried to explain that, yes, they had shared something six months ago, yet he would just like to keep their relationship professional, but then she kissed him.

A flicker of emotion passed across her face when he explained again that things couldn't go there between them, that he had too much going on in his life and she deserved someone who could give her the time and attention she deserved. For the hundredth time, he cursed his weakness that had resulted in a now complicated situation with Maggie.

The sound of the fire crackling drew him away from his problems, and of course he started thinking about Poppy. God, if his life wasn't complicated enough, he had feelings for her. No doubt she would see him as a sick bastard. That's the way he saw himself anyway. What kind of man lusted after the woman who had been married to his little brother?

He scrubbed a hand over his face and pushed off the door. No, he needed to remember Poppy had come here to get away from the drama that now surrounded her life. He certainly didn't want to complicate that by confessing that talking and

spending time with her had healed him in more ways than one. He was all kinds of fucked up.

He went into the living room and saw Poppy lying on the couch, a book in her lap. Again, he found himself standing back and staring at her. He loved the way she played with the ends of her hair and the way her little nose scrunched up when she was deep in thought.

Every little mannerism was like a kick in his gut and a tight fist around his heart. When had the brotherly love he had for Poppy turned into something deeper?

“That’s an incredible book.” He moved into the room and sat on the couch beside her but made sure to leave a good space between them. She shifted in her seat and looked uncomfortable. Blake felt his brows knit. “Everything okay?”

Poppy ran her hand over the page and nodded. “Yeah.” She cleared her throat. “Everything’s good.” She smiled up at him. “You’re right; this is an incredible book.” She marked her page and closed the book. The title, *She’s Come Undone*, explained the story perfectly. Blake noticed the way she wouldn’t look at him.

“Hey.” He reached for her, but she stood and shook her head. “Poppy?” Worry started to eat at him. Had something happened? Did she get hurt? He scanned her body but couldn’t see anything that would suggest she was in pain. “What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“Nothing, nothing.” She walked over to the bookshelf and slid the book in the empty spot. “I’m not making things hard for you, am I?”

What? “Hard for me? What do you mean?”

She leaned against the bookcase and wrapped her arms around her middle. “I don’t know.” She shrugged and looked away. “I mean, I packed up my life and moved up here. You’ve given me a place to live and a job—”

“Poppy, come here.” He moved over an inch and gestured her over. He could see the indecision on her face and wondered what had gotten into her. Had she sensed where his

feelings were with her? Had he been that transparent with them? It would certainly explain her need for distance, and that had him feeling uncomfortable. The last thing he wanted was to put distance between them.

When she sat beside him, he stared at her profile. The gentle dip of her nose and petite bow of her lips drew him to her like the fire licking across the wood. “Why all these doubts all of a sudden? If I’ve made you feel uncomfortable in any way, you know you can tell me. I promise that wasn’t my intention.” The slender column of her throat worked as she swallowed. “I love having you here.” Her smile was slow, hesitant as it moved across her face, and his heart increased at the sight.

Poppy turned to him, and words failed him as he gazed upon her beauty. Before, she had been stunning, with a fire behind her eyes and a kick in her personality. She was still equally breathtaking, but she now knew all about life and how cruel it could be. Her experiences had weakened her, and it called out to him.

Blake wanted to be the man who touched her, watched over her, and made sure she never cried again. Without thinking, because he didn’t want to let his thoughts control him any longer, he cupped her face in his hands and leaned in an inch. Her breathing changed subtly, and he felt excitement grow inside him that he affected her.

“Blake?” Her eyes were wide, and her lips slightly parted. “What about Maggie?”

“Maggie?” He stared at her mouth. Her lips were pink and had just the right amount of fullness to them.

“Yes,” she breathed out. “I saw the two of you kissing.” Her voice was pitched low, husky, and her eyes were also focused on his mouth. Chills traveled up his spine from the heady feeling her look gave him.

He shook his head. “No, sweetheart, it was all a misunderstanding. I don’t have those feelings for Maggie.” He lifted his eyes to hers and hoped she felt the seriousness in his

words, because what he was about to say, to do, was wrong, and he didn't want to lose her because of it.

“Oh.” He hadn't realized how tense she had been, but when she breathed out that lone word, her body relaxed against him.

Blake leaned in that last inch, but right before their lips touched, he stopped. Poppy held her breath but didn't move away. In fact, her hands gripped his wrists, as if she wasn't sure if she should push him away or pull him closer.

“I...” He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers. *God, what are you doing, Blake?* Words failed him, so he did what he wanted to do since the moment he saw her walk off that boat. He kissed her. At first, she didn't respond to his touch, but then she opened her mouth, and he slipped his tongue into the warm, sweet depths.

He let his hands move to her head, and he curled his fingers into the silky strands. A light tug from him had her head tilting back. He delved deeper into her mouth and dragged his tongue over every inch of her.

Blake couldn't get enough and found himself wanting—no, needing—to be closer to her. Poppy was so receptive to him, and the soft, pleading noises she made for him had him getting so hard he could feel his length press against his fly.

“Poppy.” He tilted her head with his hands and deepened the kiss. She moved her hands so they gripped his biceps and pulled him impossibly closer. A low, guttural groan left him. As if his hands were in control, he pulled her onto his lap. She tensed at first but melted into his body.

He broke the kiss and trailed his lips across her jaw. “God, Poppy.” The breath gushed out of him in hard pants against her cheek. She rested her forehead in the crook of his neck, and when he felt the tiniest touch of her tongue against his skin, his cock jerked in his pants. “You smell so good.” Blake moved lower and inhaled the satiny flesh at the base of her throat. Because he couldn't help himself, he ran his tongue down and over her collarbone. “And your taste,” he moaned deeply, and even he could hear the carnal lust laced in it.

She gripped each side of his face and dragged his lips back to hers. She took his mouth in a bruising, desperate kiss, and he gave her all of him. The feel of her full breasts rubbing against his chest almost broke his self-restraint, but he didn't want to push her.

The fact that she let him hold her was more than he could have ever asked for, but she touched him and kissed him in return, and because of that, he needed to be gentle with her.

“Blake, you make me feel... free.” She moved her mouth against his.

“Yeah, I know, Poppy.” *Because you make me feel the same way.* He moved his hand down her throat, over her delicate collarbones, and covered the full mounds of her breasts. The low sound that came from her had him curling his fingers into the soft flesh. He felt her nipple harden beneath his palm, and the little control he had left him in a rush.

Gripping her hips, Blake turned her so she was forced to straddle him. A gasp left her, and he swallowed it. Licking, nipping, and teasing, Blake devoured her mouth. He would never get enough. Never.

You have to take things slow and gentle.

He told himself this over and over again, but then he found himself lifting up her shirt and trailing his fingers over the bare flesh of her stomach. The raised, puckered flesh of what he knew to be her scar was beneath the digits. Something changed inside her, and her body stiffened under his touch. Poppy pulled away, her eyes large and filled with unsaid emotions.

You went too fast.

“I'm sorry, sweetheart. I shouldn't have gone so fast.” She moved off him and several feet away in the next second. Blake made a move to stand. This was his fault. His desire for her, his *love* for her, clouded his better judgment.

Poppy shook her head and wiped a stray tear away. “No, you didn't do anything wrong, Blake.” She wrapped her arms around her belly and looked down. “I wanted it as much as

you did. I just..." She exhaled loudly. "I just can't do this." Without another look in his direction, she turned and disappeared into her room.

He stared at the spot she just left, ran his hand through his hair, and gripped the short strands. "Dammit." What in the hell had he done? He quite possibly just fucked up the one thing that meant more to him than anything else in the world.

CHAPTER II

Poppy had run away, because frankly that was what she did best. So now, hours later, she lay in her bed and watched the moonlight filter across the ceiling. Her tears had since dried, but the pain still lingered. It felt like she betrayed the memory of Jon, but logically she knew that wasn't true.

She hated feeling it, was sick of its cold, angry touch clawing at her until she couldn't breathe and drowned in her own hatred and disgust. Blake was right. Jon wouldn't want her to live like this, to go day by day without a meaningful passing thought, without feeling love or giving it in return.

Blake hadn't come after her, and she didn't know if she should feel relief or disappointment. She felt ashamed for what they had done in the living room, but she also felt immense heat still coursing through her. Blake had made her feel alive, without the regret of the past two years dragging her further down into a dark abyss.

A look at the clock beside the bed showed it was going on one in the morning, yet Poppy lay wide awake. Her body still thrummed with remembered pleasure at the hands of Blake. She knew she wouldn't stay alone for the rest of her life—at least she hoped that wasn't the case—but the desire she felt wasn't for a stranger she just met. No, it was for Jon's brother.

She rolled onto her belly and buried her face in the pillow. She supposed it was inevitable for her to feel like this for Blake. He had been the one to talk her through her hardest times, and she now lived with him. Flopping onto her back

again, she exhaled loudly. She wouldn't be able to sleep, not when her breasts felt impossibly full and a low throb settled between her thighs. Poppy got up and slid her feet into a pair of slippers. Maybe something to drink would settle her raging body and mind.

The house was quiet when she slipped out of her room and headed toward the kitchen. The subtle noises of the house seemed amplified. The wood creaked beneath her feet, the clock ticked away the seconds on the wall, and all of it was like a chorus of music that surrounded her. Maybe she was just overly aware of everything. Maybe she was just strung too tight. After grabbing and drinking a glass of water, she leaned against the counter and stared out the window.

It looked incredibly cold outside, especially the way the frost glistened like crystals under the moonlight. She filled her glass again and headed back to her room, but she found herself stopping in front of Blake's door. It stood partially open, and like some kind of creep, she peeked inside, expecting to find him asleep in the massive bed.

The feel of her heart thundering in her chest was a result of seeing the empty bed, and before she could race back to her room and hide, the bathroom door opened, and Blake stepped out, their eyes locking.

Despite the chill in the air, he only wore a pair of plaid fleece pants. The moonlight speared through the open doorway and bathed his bare chest. Hard planes of muscle covered every inch of his broad chest, and because she couldn't help herself, Poppy let her eyes travel lower. A line of dark hair started below his belly button and made a trail down his rippling abdomen to disappear beneath his pants.

The low throb that had been present between her thighs now became a fierce pounding that demanded to be noticed. Blake hadn't moved. In fact, he seemed just as frozen to the spot as she did.

"I—" he started and took a step closer. "I'm sorry about earlier." His voice was low and filled with emotion. He stopped, and she saw his hands clenched at his sides.

The fear was strong at the fact that she wanted Blake so intensely. It caused a desperate need inside her. Could she actually surrender to her wants and give herself to a man who so clearly wanted her as well?

The thick bulge behind the thin material of his bottoms was a testament to how her presence affected him as well. Poppy didn't say anything, couldn't have even if she'd been able to form words.

"No, Blake." A look of pain crossed his face, and she hated that she was the one to put it there. She should turn around and flee to her room, go to sleep and forget all about what she wanted right now, but instead, she took a step closer, and another until they stood toe-to-toe. The force of his breathing brushed across her face, ruffling the tendrils of her hair in a minty caress.

His chest rose and fell quick and hard, and the pulse at the base of his throat beat wildly. Was her need just as evident as his?

Her hands shook, but she lifted them anyway and placed them tentatively on his belly. The hard muscles clenched under her palm, and she slid her hands up the rolling, defined hills of his abdomen and rested them on each of his pecs. The beat of his heart was strong and steady, so unlike her rapidly pounding one.

"Poppy?" Her name came out as a whispered question. She didn't stop or answer. If she derailed from what she wanted to do, she wouldn't be able to regain her strength.

She leaned into him, felt the heat from his body seep into hers, and closed her eyes. It felt good to feel warmth. For a long time, all she felt was a coldness that stole her breath and left her numb. Blake made her feel cozy, and heated, and alive.

When she opened her eyes and looked into his face, the fierce look of desire reflected back at her increased her pulse. Very gently, she curled her fingers into the hard yet pliant flesh at his chest.

“You make me feel good, Blake. I don’t want to lose that. I don’t want to give up everything that has grown between us.” She moved an inch closer until her chest pressed against his. “Will you help me heal?” She asked him for so much, she knew that, but a part of her knew only Blake could be the one to help her. She rested her forehead on his chest and closed her eyes, just inhaling the strong, masculine scent that was all Blake. The aroma reminded her of peace and energy and... home.

His big, strong arms wrapped around her and tightened. Poppy tilted her head back. Thank God he saw how much she needed this and brought his mouth to hers. The kiss started slow and passionate, filled with so much yearning from both of them that she thought she would die from sensory overload. With her hands still on his chest, she couldn’t hold him like she wanted to, but he had other ideas.

The feel of his hands coasting down her back and cupping the mounds of her ass sent a thrill of wet arousal through her. Panties slick with her lust, Poppy deepened the kiss and moved her tongue faster and harder against his. His answering groan came from deep within his chest and sent vibrations throughout her body.

Her mind and body screamed for more, yet she didn’t feel like she could get close enough to him. The tightening of his hands on her ass was the only indication of what he was about to do. With a strength that rivaled the wilderness surrounding them, Blake lifted her so she was forced to wrap her legs around his waist to keep stable. The hard length of his erection prodded between her legs, and she wished they didn’t have the material of their pajamas obstructing what she really wanted.

With their mouths still fused and her wrapped around Blake like a pretzel, he started to move. A door shut behind him, and she felt the cool, soft sheets of a bed greet her back. Blake broke the kiss and leaned back. A smokiness covered his expression, a hidden temptation that called to her.

“Poppy, love.” The endearment sent a spike of liquid heat through her. She reached for him, but he stopped her with a gentle hand to the center of her chest. She rested against the

mattress again and watched him. Blake lifted his hands and smoothed them down her arms. She cursed the long-sleeved tee she wore, because she wanted to feel his bare flesh touching hers.

When his hands skimmed the hem of her shirt, he flicked his eyes to hers, as if silently asking for permission. She licked her lips and nodded.

The sound of him swallowing filled the too quiet room. For a suspended moment, he did nothing but stare at where his hands rested on her lower belly. A tightening started within her that she recognized as excitement.

“Please,” she whispered into the darkness. Too slowly for her liking, Blake pushed her top up, exposing her belly and ugly scar. Up until that one moment, she hadn’t even remembered the nasty raised flesh that marred her. *How could you forget?* Humiliation slammed into her at the knowledge that he saw the physical product of the accident. She tried to cover herself, but Blake was fast and held her hands down. Tears formed in her eyes, but she refused to let them spill.

“Look at me, Poppy.” His voice was soft, but there was a distinct note of command laced in the words. She hadn’t realized she closed her eyes until she opened them and stared into his face. The shadows cast harsh lines across his face. For several long seconds, he didn’t speak, just stared at her and continued to keep a firm yet gentle hold on her wrists.

Slowly, he removed his hands from her, but she didn’t try to cover herself again, not when he watched her so intently. With her heart in her throat, Poppy stared with wide eyes when Blake gripped her shirt again and lifted it. He stopped right below her breasts, but her embarrassment was the area of her body his attention was now on. Face feeling like it was on fire, she was frozen in place.

His warm breath teased the skin of her belly, and she took in a stuttering breath. The first touch of his lips on her scar had her mouth parting and her pulse racing. Over and over, he kissed and ran his tongue along the proof of everything she tried to forget.

The tears she tried so hard to keep at bay spilled forth until great, wracking sobs left her. She covered her face with her hands and cried as Blake continued to lavé attention to the part of her body she had always felt discomfiture over.

“You’re beautiful,” Blake whispered. “You’re the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.” His hands took over where his lips had just been. He caressed her in a gentle sweep of his fingers, so soft and smooth that goose bumps formed along her skin. “Every part of you is beautiful.” His hands moved up, and up, until they stopped right below her breasts, the nightshirt barely restraining them. “Look at me.” Poppy let her hands fall away and looked at Blake, who was now mere inches from her face. “I want you to tell me you’re beautiful.” He leaned in the rest of the space and kissed her long and slow. When he broke the kiss, he stayed only inches away again. “Tell me, love.”

Poppy licked her lips, the words getting lodged in her throat. His eyes urged her to continue, to find the strength deep inside her. When was the last time she felt beautiful? *When Jon told me right before he died.* Now was not the time for this, not when Blake opened up her heart again. Not when she *felt* something. Finding the courage deep inside her soul, she grabbed for it and didn’t let go.

“I’m beautiful.” The words were barely a whisper from her, but Blake heard her nonetheless and brushed his lips across hers in response.

“Yes, yes, you are, love.” He took her mouth again, and she became lost in the sensations of lips, tongues, and hands. It felt like they kissed for hours, or maybe it was just minutes, but it felt glorious regardless. Mouth swollen from the blood that rushed below the surface, cheeks sensitive from the erotic scrape of his stubble along her skin, and pussy so wet the lining of her panties was unbearably soaked, Poppy drifted away in the hazy fog of aroused delight.

With quick movements and expert hands, Blake had her shirt off and tossed aside. She had only ever been naked in front of one person, had only ever given herself to one man, but the way Blake looked down at her, with not just desire but

love and understanding, had the wall she built around her heart after Jon died fading away.

She lifted her arms and ran the pads of her fingers across his bare chest. His body lightly shook beneath her hands, and she knew he was just as affected by this encounter.

“I want you, Blake.” She dropped her hands and gripped the edge of her pajama bottoms. She lifted her hips and dragged them down her legs and off when Blake moved aside. He looked almost stunned, or unsure of her actions, but he didn’t stop her. So she reached for the drawstring of his lounge pants. “Tell me this is right, that you want this too.”

Hands on the strings but not making a move to loosen them, Poppy stared into his eyes. Everything around her stilled as she waited to hear his answer. It was strange how the roles had been reversed. It now seemed Blake was unsure of what was transpiring. He closed his eyes, and his jaw clenched as he dealt with his internal battle. Poppy went to drop her hands, but he anticipated her move and placed his hands atop hers, stilling her movements.

“I want this, so much, Poppy.” He removed her hands and stood. For a moment, she thought he meant to leave her in his too big room, alone and naked, but then he pushed his pants down and crawled back on the bed over her. His big body rested atop hers, pressing her into the mattress and sending a lovely, heavy sensation coursing through her. “I want you so much.” Warm, hard male flesh molded to hers, making the sweet anticipation of release just a reach away.

Blake’s narrow hips fit perfectly in the cradle of hers, and the hard, impossibly thick length of him parted her pussy lips. She was wet, unbelievably so, and his shaft moved against the slickness on its own accord. A guttural groan left him, and he dropped his head to her shoulder at the same time his hips jerked and his cock slid against her again.

“You feel so good, Poppy.” He curled his fingers around her upper arms and pressed his hips into hers again. Over and over, he did this, his length sliding up and down as he rocked against her. The base of his erection bumped her clit on every

upstroke, and Poppy had to bite her lip or she would have screamed for him to move harder, faster. “I’ve wanted you for so long, ever since our relationship changed during those conversations years ago.” Another bump to her clit, and she squeezed her eyes shut. So, so close to feeling that explosion she longed for.

“Yes, Blake. Please,” she whispered into his hair. He was so big, so muscular, and so very male that Poppy felt wholly feminine beneath him. She begged him for his words, for his touch, for his emotions. She wanted that from him, wanted him to break down his wall like she had.

He pushed up from her, one forearm braced on either side of her head, and looked down at her. The dark slashes of his eyebrows were knitted above his eyes, the look of deep concentration etched on his face. She certainly didn’t want to push him, just like he didn’t want to push her. “I’m sorry. We don’t have to do this.” Maybe this was a sign that what was happening between them wasn’t the best idea. Poppy went to roll out from under him, but Blake pressed his upper body flat on hers, keeping her motionless. “Blake?”

“I just…” He looked away, and the muscles in his jaw jumped beneath his flesh. “I’m afraid once we cross this bridge you’ll look back and regret it, regret your time with me.” He looked back at her, his heart on his sleeve. She cupped his strong jaw, knowing his fears were valid, because she had the same ones.

Poppy pushed herself up on her elbows and kissed the underside of his jaw. She nipped at the skin that was covered in his stubble. It was an intoxicating sensation, one that she wanted to feel all over her body. “Let’s take it one day at a time.”

When she lay back down, she took his hand and placed it between her breasts. He braced himself on his other arm and stared down at where his hand took up the majority of her chest.

“Can you feel that, Blake? Can you feel my heart beating?”

“Yeah, baby,” he whispered.

“You made it start beating again. I didn’t realize it until now, but every conversation we had, you made it come to life a little more each day.” Telling him all this was scary as hell, but she needed to say it if she had any hope of moving forward.

Blake dragged his hand down the middle of her body, so slowly she thought she’d scream in frustration. He stopped right above her mound, stilling for just a second before he dipped his fingers into her folds. At that first touch, fire raced through her, and she spread her legs wider.

His thumb found her clit and rubbed it back and forth until awareness traveled through her, starting between her legs and working its way up her body. Her nipples tightened and drew up tight as blood rushed to them. Blake worked his middle finger into her, the creamy wetness of her arousal having the digit slip easily into her pussy.

“Yeah.” He latched his lips onto her neck, licked and sucked at her skin until it felt abraded in a good way. “You’re so responsive.” He ran his tongue up her throat. “So wet and tight.” Her inner muscles clenched around his probing finger at his words. A groan came from him in response to her body’s reaction to his words. In and out, he pumped into her, slow and steady and so damn good.

With her eyes closed, Poppy let herself just feel every little thing Blake did to her. Her senses were attuned to the little touches of his fingers on her breasts, to the scrape of his teeth on her collarbone, and to the thrusting motion of his hand between her thighs. He moved his head lower, trailing wet kisses along the top of her breasts before finally latching his mouth on an aching, hard nipple.

God, so good. The wet sounds of his lips around her turgid flesh and his finger pumping in and out of her filled the room. All too soon, he let go of her nipple and continued his downward path until his warm, humid breath brushed over her pussy. Adrenalin and endorphins rushed through her bloodstream, making her feel drugged with pleasure.

“Look at me, love. Watch what I’m doing to you.” She panted in and out, not getting enough air into her lungs. The sight of Blake between her splayed thighs, his hair like a raven’s wing, his eyes like a dark angel, did funny, wicked things to her. He kept his eyes on her as he removed his finger from her body and spread her lips wide. Her clit stood out obscenely from its hooded home, but even that couldn’t tear Blake’s eyes away from her.

His tongue peeked out, and when the muscle met her swollen, saturated flesh, Poppy couldn’t hold her head up any longer. Ecstasy consumed her from just that small touch, but then something snapped inside Blake. He went wild on her, fucking her pussy with his mouth like he couldn’t get enough and sending her higher and higher into the hazy abyss that had been just out of reach for so long.

Poppy speared her hands into his hair and tugged on the strands. She pulled him closer to her pussy, needing him to deliver on his promise and devour her. This was the most she had felt in a very long time, and she grew drunk on it.

Blake was relentless with his mouth. He sucked on her clit harder this time and added another finger. The fullness was a shock, but all too soon the coils of her orgasm wound tight and burst free, bathing her in the afterglow of pleasure that stole her eyesight and sucked the air from her lungs.

She might have tightened her hands in his hair and curled her fingers into his scalp, but she couldn’t be sure, because she floated away. The ground left, and the air stopped until she swirled in a mist of conscious awareness that tingled through her and left her senseless.

When she finally returned to the land of the living, Blake’s harsh, guttural groans filled her ears. He gave one last suck to her now oversensitive clit and moved back up her body. In the opalescent moonlight, the glossiness of her juices on his mouth had her pussy clenching with the need to feel him inside her.

Without thinking, Poppy grabbed Blake behind the back of the neck and brought his mouth to hers. She swiped her tongue

along his lips, loving the harsh sound that came from his throat. The musky, sweet flavor of herself on his lips was a pleasant shock to her taste buds. For several moments, Blake gave in and allowed her to explore his mouth, but then he pushed up and moved away.

He didn't make her wait long to know what he reached for. The sound of foil tearing fell across the silent room, mixing with their harsh breathing and bringing a sense of eroticism to the night. He moved back on top of her a second later, his hot, hard length slipping through her folds once again.

Blake braced himself on one arm and looked down at her. He lifted his other hand and ran his thumb along the swell of her bottom lip.

“No more waiting, Blake. Please.” She whispered the last word and arched her hips, causing his dick to slide a little harder against her pussy. A shock went through her at the way his lids dropped to half-mast, and a steamy look moved across his face. “I've been waiting for years.” And at that moment, she realized she had.

“Poppy...” He reached between their bodies and gripped himself. He placed the crown of his erection at the entrance of her pussy and slipped inside. The broad head stretched her unused muscles. With every inch he sank into her, Poppy felt filled, claimed. When he was completely sheathed inside her, they both groaned.

“So good, love.”

Yes, it is.

Blake placed his upper body fully on her chest and framed her face with his hands. The play of muscles that rippled along his shoulders and biceps spoke of his strength, and a gush of moisture slipped from her, further aiding in his penetration. He pulled out slowly and pushed back in. Over and over, he did this, slow and easy thrusts that had her lifting her hips in hopes he'd go faster.

Beads of sweat dotted his brow and slid down his temple. The force it took for him to control himself was astounding,

but she didn't want gentle. She wanted his sweat to drip on her as he pounded into her body. She wanted to just... *feel*.

"I know you're holding back, and I don't want that, Blake." Something shifted behind his eyes after she spoke, and his movements picked up. His cock slid in and out of her, growing faster and faster as his hips slapped against hers and the sound of wet flesh filled the room. Poppy gripped onto his biceps, the muscles rock-solid beneath her touch.

"God, Poppy," he said harshly. He pushed himself up, forcing her hands to fall from his body. He gripped her inner thighs, pushed her legs impossibly wider, and stared down at where his cock sank into her pussy. He locked eyes with her and said hoarsely, "Look, Poppy." The pleasure was insurmountable, but when she braced herself on her elbows and stared down at where their bodies met, the ecstasy rose.

His cock pulled out, glossy from her cream, then sank back into her. He did this countless times, the moonlight glistening off the wetness she created just for him. He placed his thumb on her clit and moved the bundle of nerves back and forth, back and forth, and she exploded without any preamble.

Lights flashed before her eyes as her orgasm claimed her, body and soul. Blake didn't relent as he pistoned in and out of her, drawing her climax to the peak then keeping it there until she couldn't breathe. When the world came back into focus, the image before her had her arousal racing to the forefront again.

Blake looked wild, untamed, and full of heat. Sweat dripped down his chest in sensual droplets of salty pleasure. His short hair was unkempt, mussed, and wet from his perspiration, but he had never looked so good to her. Before she could even blink, he moved onto his back and had her above him, straddling him.

His hands were on her waist, and he lifted her, forcing his cock to almost slip out before he impaled her on him. Poppy's head spun as he did this continuously. All she could do was brace herself with her hands on his chest as he fucked her on his shaft.

Grunts and groans left him and grew louder and louder. She knew he was close. Taking matters into her own hands, Poppy pressed all the way down on him and ground her pussy on his pelvis. A gasp left her when her clit rubbed against the short, coarse hairs of his lower belly.

“Yeah, Poppy. Fuck. *Yeah*,” Blake said. He tightened his hold on her waist as she took over the rocking motions. Up and down, she moved, sinking harder and faster on his cock until her head grew dizzy from it all. She placed her hands behind her, resting them on his muscular thighs, and worked herself on him with more fervor. She was going to come again.

The taste of sweet release was so close that on the next down stroke, she ground her clit against him. The explosion inside her rivaled a nuclear bomb. Poppy threw her head back and cried out as her pussy clamped down on his cock.

Blake dug his fingertips into her, and his low, animalistic grunt signaled he found his own release. If it were even possible, Poppy felt him harden even further inside her. She collapsed against his chest, their skin sweaty and their breathing cacophonous.

Blake wrapped his arms around her and rolled so they were on their sides facing each other. The heavy length of him was still buried inside her, and spasms continued to travel through her.

For so long, she'd lived in a bubble of hurt. Everyone around her had been so kind and caring, giving her the space and time she needed, but then Blake called her, and everything changed. Even now, with his arms wrapped around her and the euphoric wave of bliss still coursing through her, Poppy could imagine that things would be different.

She had slept with Blake, Jon's brother. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye, and she hid her face, not wanting him to see it. Inside were conflicting emotions, and she honestly didn't know if her tears were for guilt or the immense happiness she felt.

This was real, and she no longer lived in the past. She couldn't deny how she felt, couldn't ignore the clear

connection between her and Blake, but that didn't make her emotionless. The steady *thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump* of his heart lulled her into a deeper relaxation, and she pressed her cheek harder against his chest. She thought he was asleep, but then he kissed the top of her head.

“You're thinking too hard, sweetheart.”

Poppy sighed, because Blake was right. “I know, but it's inevitable.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” The husky drawl of his voice was laced with sleepiness.

Did she? He always listened and never judged. “No, not right now.” She just wanted to enjoy this moment where the guilt couldn't touch her, and she had the warmth and safety of Blake surrounding her. He didn't respond, just ran his hand up and down her back until she felt the tendrils of sleep curl around her and there was nothing but darkness to sweep her away.

CHAPTER 12

Poppy blinked her gritty-feeling eyes open. The bedside clock showed five in the morning. The activities of the night before rushed back to her, and when she shifted, the ache between her thighs cemented those memories.

Blake wasn't in the bed beside her, and when she ran her hand across the empty space, cool sheets greeted her. It was clear he hadn't been lying beside her for a while. She decided he probably needed some time alone with his thoughts, but then she noticed him standing on the deck right outside his French doors. He had to be freezing out there in only a robe and slippers.

She slipped from bed and grabbed the comforter thrown haphazardly on the mattress. Images of why the blanket was mussed had her heart rate increasing. She stepped into her slippers and went to the doors. The glass was frosty around the edges, but she couldn't feel the cold seeping through the glass.

Blake turned when he heard her open the door. Smoke billowed out around him, but it wasn't when his warm breath hit the frigid air. The scent of cigarette smoke instantly hit her sense, and she frowned.

"Thought you kicked the habit years ago?" Poppy closed the door behind her and stepped beside him. Blake took another drag of his cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke.

"Yeah, I did." He cocked his head to the side and smirked. "But sometimes my weakness kicks me in the ass." He took one more drag and stubbed out the butt. He rested his forearms

on the banister and looked ahead. “They’re horrible for my health, I know.” He didn’t look at her, but he grinned.

A lot of things ran through her mind, but the silence felt serene, and for several moments, she didn’t do anything but stand beside him and watch as the frost glistened in the moonlight like tiny crystals.

“Why don’t you go back in, sweetheart? It’s freezing out here.” Blake wrapped his arm around her and rubbed hers. Poppy wanted to press him, talk to him and see what he thought, but that wouldn’t accomplish anything. So, she nodded and pulled away from him.

A moment passed when she thought he might pull her back into the safety of his embrace, but instead he clenched his hands at his sides and turned away from her. A dejected feeling washed through her. She slipped back into the house and forced herself to be strong.

For some reason, the feeling of being rejected slammed into her, so hard and forceful it sucked the air right from her lungs. She turned around and looked out the window. Blake’s shoulders were bunched, and his head was dropped low. White puffs of air left him, and his hands were tight fists in front of him. She knew that body language well, knew the emotions that practically slammed against the house.

CHAPTER 13

Blake's balls were about to shrivel up and fall off from the fucking cold, but he refused to go back inside, especially now that Poppy was awake. *Fuck*. He felt like the biggest asshole for all but shoving her back in the house. He ran a hand over his face and breathed out.

A light dusting of snow started to fall around him, just adding to the inches that already covered the ground. Being with Poppy was the best thing that had ever happened to him, but he couldn't help but feel like the worst piece of shit alive. Here he had told her not to think so much, that what they had was special.

All of that was true, yet after they had been intimate and she had fallen asleep pressed against him, Blake had done nothing but think about what they'd done. The dual feelings of guilt and euphoria were at war inside him.

He had slept with Jon's wife, the one woman whom his little brother had loved above all else. If that didn't make him a Grade-A prick, he didn't know what did.

He could imagine the reaction of their families when he sat them down and told them the only woman he had ever loved was his sister-in-law. A humorless laugh left him.

"You really are fucked up." Blake tilted his head back and looked up. The sky was clear, with the hint of morning out over the horizon. Stars still dotted the sky, their bright, white lights flickering and pulsing with life and energy. Was there someone else out there, staring up at the sky and wondering

the same thing at this exact moment? Did he have the same worries, the same hopes, and the same dreams? Did he love a woman who had been married to his brother?

Blake hung his head and closed his eyes. Maybe he was taking advantage of her. He knew she still hurt over Jon's death. Hell, so did he, but Poppy was having an especially difficult time. He wanted to be there for her, no matter what. The only problem was if he could let everything inside him go so he could be the man she deserved.

Blake pulled another cigarette out of the pack and lit it. He had quit smoking years ago, and the pack was just as old, but when he pulled away from Poppy's sleeping body and stepped outside, he needed something to calm his fucked-up nerves.

He inhaled deeply, the nicotine kicking in instantly, but the aftereffect leaving a hollow feeling inside him. He stubbed the rest of it out and sighed.

He stayed outside until his fingers and toes became numb. When he stepped into his room, he didn't need to look at the bed to know it was empty. What did he expect, though? He had made love to Poppy then shut her out. The urge to go to her was strong, but he needed to think, needed to wrap his head around what the hell he really wanted.

What he did know was that he loved a woman he had no right to love. Blake shrugged off the robe and stepped out of his slippers before slipping back in bed. The scent of Poppy rose up around him, and he closed his eyes and inhaled her into his lungs.

Her side of the bed was still slightly warm, and he rolled over, burying his face in her pillow until every part of his body ached to be with her. Why did it have to be so hard? Why couldn't it be easy to be with the woman he wanted?

Because every time you look at her, touch her, kiss her, you'll think of Jon and the way you're betraying him.

God, what she must think of him right now. Blake threw the covers off and stood. He didn't bother with his robe or slippers as he slipped out of his room and made his way down

the hallway to Poppy's. The door was cracked, and he saw her body huddled in the center of the bed.

He placed his hands on the doorframe and watched her, knowing he should go to her, hold her, and tell her what they had done was good and right. He wanted to, itched to do that, but he was weak and a coward and didn't move. Just as he turned to leave, her soft whimper stopped him.

Blake rubbed the center of his chest as his heart started to clench painfully. The sound of her crying felt like a bullet to his chest. He pushed the door open and stepped inside. When he reached the edge of her bed, he could see her body shaking under the sheets. Her eyes were shut tightly, and she had yet to notice his presence. Not worrying about anything but the woman before him, Blake slipped into the bed and pulled her to him.

A small sound of surprise escaped her, but then she molded her body as close to him as she could get.

"I'm so sorry, Blake. I don't want to ruin what we have. I don't want to lose you." Her tears were hard and wracked her body, so he held her tighter.

"Shhh, I'm not going anywhere." He kissed the top of her head and knew there was no way he could give her up. "I'm not going to let you go, Poppy."

She half laughed, half sobbed. "I hope not, Blake, because I don't want you to let me go."

CHAPTER 14

One week later

Poppy brought her sandwich to her mouth and took a big bite. Her focus was on the man across the room with his nose buried in a book. It was slightly humorous that he sat there so serious, like he worked out the world's problems. He shifted in his seat, and the long-sleeved dress shirt he wore stretched across his chest.

Lord, it should be illegal for a man to look that good. The light-blue button-down shirt did nothing to hide his raw physique. Since they had sex seven days ago, they had talked... a lot. It wasn't just about Jon and their past. They also talked about plans for the future.

It was strange sitting here, knowing she had been intimate with Blake. The butterflies in her belly refused to relent, and the excitement that the black cloud that had hung over her head for so long dissipated had her smiling more than she had in a very long time.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you it's rude to stare?" Blake kept his head lowered when he lifted his eyes to her. God, did he not know how incredibly distracting it was when he looked at her over the rim of his glasses? The smirk he graced her with let her know he was teasing.

"I wasn't staring." Poppy looked down when she felt heat rise to her face. His deep chuckle had her looking at him and smiling.

“Yeah, okay.” He leaned back in his chair and linked his fingers behind his head. The muscles in his biceps bulged and flexed, showing all his raw masculinity. “Come here.” His voice dropped lower, and instantly her nipples beaded. When she didn’t move right away, he slowly leaned his forearms on the desk and stared at her. “Poppy, come here.” She rose slowly and walked over to him, anticipation beating through her veins like a tribal drum and rivaling her erratic heart.

When the edge of the desk met the front of her thighs, she stopped and swallowed. The level look he gave her spoke so loudly that his unspoken words screamed around her. His look was pure, unadulterated lust, and it was directed right at her.

“You know how I knew you kept staring at me?” His low-pitched question helped to clear some of her arousal.

She had no answer and shook her head. *Why is it suddenly so hot in here?*

“Because I was staring at *you*.” This time, there was no teasing note in his words, and a shiver worked through her. “Now, come here, Poppy.” Suddenly, she regretted wearing heels, because it seemed so much harder to walk in them.

When she stood right in front of him, she tried to slow her breathing, but just being near him had her inhaling the scent that was uniquely Blake. He leaned back in his chair and spread his legs slightly apart. Her pulse pounded in her ears and drowned out every other sound.

“I want you right here.” He placed his hands on his thighs, his sight never wavering from hers. Poppy had never seen this side of Blake, commanding and sure of what he wanted. She stepped forward and went to sit on his lap, but he shook his head firmly. “No, straddle me.”

Oh. She had never experienced this kind of rush before. She liked it. She gripped the hem of her plaid skirt and slowly drew it up her thighs. Blake’s gaze dropped to watch the act. The stiff outline of his erection pressing against his slacks didn’t go unnoticed by her. The skirt was midthigh when she went to straddle him, but Blake stopped her when his hands landed on her waist.

“Pull it up to your waist. Let me see your panties.” He flicked his eyes to her then back to her skirt. “Go on, love.” Poppy did as he asked and let out a shuddering breath as his lids lowered with his desire.

“Blake...” His name came as a whisper from her lips.

“Yeah, baby?” He didn’t take his eyes from her panties. A heady sensation washed through her from the power she held over this man.

“What if someone comes in? What about Maggie?”

He looked at her then. “Everyone’s gone for the day.” He smiled slowly. “Now—” He patted his lap. “—straddle me.”

Poppy placed one leg on either side of his thick, muscular thighs and lowered herself onto his erection. A gasp left her when the hardness pressed against her silk-covered mound. A low hiss left him when she sat fully on him.

“You feel what you do to me, Poppy?” He closed his eyes and used the leverage he had on her hips to rock her back and forth on him. The motion had her panties slipping against her saturated folds. Over and over, he rocked her against his hard-on, having her climb closer to climax.

The look on his face told her he knew exactly what he did to her. Blake leaned in until his lips barely touched hers. “Does it feel good?” The movement of his lips brushing against hers had Poppy gasping in need.

“Yes.” He kissed her lightly, too lightly. She wanted his tongue in her mouth, stroking her, sucking at her. She wanted Blake’s flavor filling her taste buds until she was drunk on him. He resumed moving her back and forth, back and forth, faster and faster. Each time he pulled her closer, he lifted his hips, which caused her panties to press farther into her cleft.

“Oh. God.” Poppy let her head fall back as a thrill washed through her.

“I want to feel you let go on me, love.” He kissed her passionately, finally giving her his flavor until she moaned against his mouth. She sucked his tongue into her mouth until she grew dizzy with the taste and feel of him.

Blake was relentless as he continued to drive her closer to release. The air became stifling hot, and Poppy felt beads of sweat form on her brow. “That’s it.” So close. Poppy was so close, but just as sweet surrender touched the edges of her body, a loud, shocked gasp came from the room.

Blake stilled their movements, and they both turned to see Maggie standing in the doorway, a brown paper bag with the logo of the town’s sandwich shop printed on it and clutched to her chest. Her eyes were wide and almost fearful in their intensity. For so long, no one said anything, and the only thing that could be heard was their combined breathing.

“I...” Maggie looked around the room as if she were in search of something. “Um.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “So sorry. I just thought you might be hungry.” She held up the bag and refused to look them in the eyes. “I’ll just leave this here.” She set it on a small table set off to the side then left as quickly as she arrived.

“Shit.” Blake kissed her on the lips and lifted her off him. His erection pressed hard against his slacks, but his attention was on the now empty doorway. “I should probably do some damage control.” Before Poppy could say anything, he strode after Maggie.

For a moment, Poppy stood there, her skirt still around her waist, shock filling her. *Did he just leave me standing here on the brink of climaxing to go after another woman?* Really, Poppy’s thoughts were ridiculous. Clearly, Blake needed to fix things with Maggie so it didn’t spiral out of control and end up getting him in trouble. That was the last thing she wanted.

After straightening her clothes and grabbing her bag, she realized it was time to head home anyway. They could certainly finish what they started there. When she stepped out into the hallway, she heard the hushed, angry voice of Maggie. A peek around the corner showed her by the front door, her jacket clenched tightly in her fists. She kept pointing to the room Poppy just left.

“I just don’t get it, Blake.” A defeated note sounded in Maggie’s voice, but beneath it there was also anger. She

exhaled and rubbed her eyes.

“Maggie, I’m not doing it to upset you, believe me.” The pained expression that Maggie held disappeared, and a smile that looked far too sweet and forced curved her lips.

“I know. None of this is your fault, but remember what I said and think about it.” She lifted her hand, ran it down the front of his shirt, and stopped at one of the buttons to slip it back into its hole. The act didn’t seem overly intimate, but the look on the other woman’s face told Poppy the affection Maggie held for Blake ran deep.

Discomfort crashed inside Poppy, and she forced herself away from the scene. She had witnessed something that seemed very personal between the two of them, even if Blake hadn’t acted like it was. He said what he and Maggie had over six months ago was just the one night, but maybe he had just been saying that to hide the fact that it had been more.

He didn’t like mixing business with pleasure, yet wasn’t that what he did with Poppy? Just thinking about it gave her a headache. Things were pretty quiet out there, and images of Blake embraced with Maggie played through her head.

No, you’re being ridiculous. Blake wouldn’t touch another woman after almost making you come in his office.

No, he definitely wasn’t *that* kind of man, but still, she couldn’t deny her curiosity was piqued.

The front door opened and closed, and she felt her pulse quicken. The heavy footfalls of Blake coming back to her sounded through the hall. He emerged in the doorway, his expression grim. At least he wasn’t grinning and looking all too pleased with Maggie’s clear desire for him. Or maybe he was like the majority of men and honestly didn’t see what Poppy saw?

“Everything okay?” Poppy tightened her hands on her coat and watched him expectantly. He didn’t answer right away, and she didn’t miss the way he glanced back at the front door. His brow furrowed, and he rubbed the back of his head.

“Uh.” That didn’t sound good.

“Are you in trouble?” Poppy knew there had to be a no fraternization policy in place, but for her, even that wouldn’t have kept her away from Blake. He made her feel too much, and after living in the dark for so long, she ached for the warmth of light only he could provide. But that being said, Poppy didn’t want him losing his job or getting reprimanded because of their relationship and the fact that neither of them seemed to keep their hands off each other.

“It’s fine. Everything will be fine.” For some reason, Poppy wasn’t sure she liked that answer. His voice sounded distant and held a strange note. He kept his gaze on the hallway, his brow furrowed severely.

“Hey.” Poppy placed her hand on his forearm until he looked at her. “If something’s wrong, you know you can talk to me. About anything, Blake.” He kept something from her, that much was clear, and she became sick at the thought that it had to do with Maggie.

After everything they had been through, done together, she thought they were past keeping things from one another. His lips tightened, and he forced a smile.

“Everything’s okay, sweetheart. Maggie didn’t care. She was just shocked.”

The tone in Blake’s voice had Poppy thinking he buried the truth under a layer of sweetness.

“Okay.” She could still see the affection on Maggie’s face as she looked up at Blake. Was the woman in love with him? God, if that was the case, how painful would it have been to see her and Blake embraced like that? “Blake, are you sure there aren’t any feelings that Maggie still harbors for you?” For a beat of silence, he stared at her then shook his head and glanced away.

“We’ve just worked closely together for a long time. You know how it is.”

Poppy didn’t, but she wasn’t going to push him on anything. It was clear Blake really had blinders on to the other woman’s feelings toward him or he chose to ignore them.

Either way, Poppy wasn't going to push him. There had been plenty of times when she had kept her innermost thoughts to herself, afraid, ashamed, or just unwilling to share.

“Are you ready to go home?” she asked.

He gave a sharp nod and grabbed his coat. He led the way, and Poppy didn't like the silence that descended upon them. She sighed heavily.

She had known from the beginning that starting a relationship with Blake wouldn't be easy, but she didn't think she'd have to fight to prove she loved him, especially where another woman was involved.

CHAPTER 15

“How’s Alaska, honey?” The concern in Poppy’s mother’s voice was clear as day. Poppy dried the last plate and put it in the cabinet. Her cell was held between her ear and shoulder.

“Good, Mom.” She went over to the fire and threw more logs in before sitting on the couch. Blake was working late again, and she sat alone, once again, wondering what was going to happen between them.

Although she spoke to her mom a few days a week, Poppy hadn’t told her what happened with her and Blake. In fact, she didn’t know if there was anything to tell, given the fact that he had withdrawn from her. It may not have been a lot, but there was certainly a difference in him that she noticed.

The increased late nights at work and having to run errands several times a week, errands he wouldn’t tell her about, weren’t helping her fears and worries that she would lose another person she loved.

“I’m glad, honey. We miss you terribly, Poppy dear, but as long as you’re healing and finding what you need there, that is all that matters.” A beat of silence filled the line, and Poppy sighed, knowing her mother meant well but wasn’t nearly done. “So, do you know when you plan on coming home?”

“Mom...” Poppy rubbed her eyes then stared into the fire.

“I know, I know. You haven’t even been there a month, but I miss you, honey.”

She was thirty years old, but ever since Jon's death, Poppy's mother treated her like a child. She supposed she hadn't helped the situation with her depression and need to be alone. Things were different now; *she* was different now. "I don't know if I'm going back to Ohio. I kind of like it here."

"Poppy, honey." There it was, the *mom* voice. "I'm not going to argue with you on this, but your home is here, with us. Your job, your friends and family, all of it is here."

Poppy let her head fall back and stared at the ceiling. She needed to tell her mother about how she felt, about her relationship with Blake. It was bound to come out eventually anyway. The sooner she told her mother, the sooner she would understand why staying in Blithe was so important to her.

"I want to stay here, because..." She took a deep, strengthening breath. *Here goes nothing.* "I've met someone." The breath left Poppy, and she waited for her mother's response. The seconds ticked by as her mom clearly absorbed that little piece of information.

"Really?" Poppy heard her swallow. "Honey... I'm so happy for you. Who is he?" The choked sound that came through the receiver told Poppy her mom was crying. The tears came to her own eyes, and she didn't bother wiping them away.

She cried, because she was deliriously happy and because she felt peace. But Poppy also cried, because she worried about her mother's reaction to the next part she was about to reveal.

"It's Blake, Mom." The silence stretched out, and her mother cried harder. "I love him. I love him so much. He makes me feel happy, calm."

"Oh, Poppy—"

"No, Mom, I need to tell you this. In the past two years, I've let myself sink deeper and deeper into despair. All the conversations I had with him helped me heal one word at a time." Her heart pounded rapidly as she waited to hear her mom's response. "I love him." Poppy said those three words

with so much conviction she didn't doubt her mother heard by her sharp inhalation.

"I'm happy you've found someone who takes care of you, and I have no doubt that Blake will do just that."

A sob left Poppy, and she covered her eyes as the tears flowed faster and harder than before. Just knowing her mother was supportive of this had her heart swelling to great proportions.

"I may not understand the connection you have to Blake, but I do know you deserve to be happy."

After they hung up, Poppy sat and watched the orange and yellow flames dance around the wood. Of course not everyone would be as accepting as her mom, but in the end, it didn't matter what others thought. The sound of the front door opening and closing had her standing and turning to watch Blake step into the living room.

She had taken the Yukon home, which meant Maggie had given him yet another ride, but Poppy wouldn't let her worry and jealousy over the other woman's intentions soil how she felt at that moment. Euphoria was a blissful sensation.

"Poppy, baby, what's wrong?" He all but tossed his briefcase on the floor and strode toward her. She couldn't have stopped the tears even if she tried. He cupped her cheeks with his big hands and brushed her tears away as fast as they fell. "Please, tell me what's wrong." He thought she hurt, and because of that, he felt her pain.

"I love you." She wrapped her hands around the back of his neck and lowered his mouth to hers. She kissed him with everything inside her, but still it wasn't enough. She murmured against his lips, "I told my mom about us."

His body tensed, and he gripped her shoulders and pushed her gently back. He searched her face with his eyes. "You did?" He sounded surprised.

Poppy licked her lips, tasting his flavor. "Yeah."

For a solid heartbeat, he didn't show any reaction, and then he smiled and crushed her to him.

“I told her, and she’s happy for me, for us.”

He pulled her away, and tears shone in his eyes. He slanted his lips against hers and took her fast and passionately. Something snapped inside her, and she ripped her mouth away and started tearing off his jacket then went to the buttons of his shirt.

Hard, tan male flesh greeted her once the offensive material fell off his shoulders. Her panties became wet the instant she placed her palms flat against his chest. Poppy trailed just the tips of her fingers down the muscled hills of his abdomen and stopped at his belt.

A glance into his eyes showed all the lust she felt inside her. With quick, sure fingers, Poppy undid his belt, slipped it through the loops, and pushed his slacks down his muscular thighs.

A fire raced through her, burning her up internally until she couldn’t think of anything else but having Blake inside her. When he was void of clothing, he went to work on hers. When she was just as naked, he pulled her up and lifted her easily into his arms.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and felt his hard shaft slip between her wet folds. Mouths fused together, with tongues dipping in and out of each other’s mouth. Poppy couldn’t get close enough, couldn’t stop running her hands over his flesh that was warmed by the heat of the fire.

Blake spun around and strode forward. The cool wood of the dining room table greeted her bare ass, and she gasped from the sharp shift in temperature. He pushed her down until her back met the flat surface, smoothed his hands over her hard nipples, down her belly, and dipped them between her thighs.

The first feel of his hands pushing her thighs apart and his fingers delving into her wet pussy had a cry leaving her. Feet flat on the table, Poppy closed her eyes and absorbed what Blake did to her. Thick fingers probed at her entrance, teased the slick opening, and pressed inside. Immediately, her inner

muscles clenched around the intruders, trying to drag them in deeper instead of pushing them away.

He latched his warm, wet mouth onto her clit and sucked while he pumped his fingers in and out of her pussy. The climax that crashed through her had her vision wavering and flashes of light exploding behind her lids.

“So good, baby.” He flattened his tongue on her and dragged it down her slit to her opening. “You taste so fucking good.” Once at his destination, he speared the thick muscle into her, fucking her with a part of his body that was both satisfying and disappointing. She wanted his big cock in her and intended to get what she wanted.

Poppy pushed up then lowered herself to the floor until she was on her knees before him. His chest rose and fell quickly as he looked down at her. When his hands landed in her hair and he gripped the strands, a flash of pleasure/pain coursed through her.

“Go on, Poppy.” His voice was deceptively calm. The hard, thick length that sprouted from between his thighs was impressive and intimidating, but her mouth watered nonetheless.

She took hold of the base of his erection and leaned forward. The smell of him filled her nose: clean, sweet, musky, and masculine. The combination of scents had her closing her eyes and taking him into her mouth with excitement. His flavor burst forth and had her pussy creaming and her nipples hardening.

He was far too long for her to fit all of his length in her mouth, but what she couldn't reach, she worked with her hand. Bursts of pre-cum coated her tongue, and she greedily swallowed all of him. She wanted more, a lot more.

“That's it, love. God, that is *so* it.” Shards of pain lanced through her scalp, but that little bit of discomfort only added to her ecstasy. She sucked more and more into her until his cock filled every inch of her mouth and the tip of him hit the back of her throat.

Poppy swallowed around the head of him, felt another shot of his salty essence, and moaned loudly. Her clit throbbed in time with her pulse, and her juices made a slow, steady trail down her inner thighs.

“Are you ready for me, Poppy? Is that sweet pussy primed?”

God, his words were so erotically explicit that she knew she could have gotten off from just them alone.

“Mmmm.” She could have pulled away and answered him, but she didn’t want to lose the flavor of him or the feel of his cock in her mouth. Hollowing out her cheeks, she sucked harder until her lips became numb, but before she could get lost in everything that was Blake Ellis, he pulled her head back.

Poppy stared up at him, her lips throbbing from what she had just done to him. He moved his hand lower until he could move the pad of his thumb over the swells of her lips. Blake appeared dazed with desire as he stared at the rhythmic motion he continued along her mouth.

“I love seeing your mouth so red and swollen from sucking my cock.” The words that came from him had a faraway quality to them. After a suspended moment, he lifted his eyes slowly to hers. “I want to be inside you, Poppy. Now.”

Her heart palpitated at his words. Before she could speak, he had his hands on her arms, and he hauled her up the length of his massive body. The way he kissed her, so demanding, controlling, like he was marking her, claiming her, was enough to have everything fade away in the distance until there was just the two of them and no worries could touch them.

For several long, intense moments, they kissed. Hands explored bodies, skin pressed against skin, and thoughts vanished in the presence of desire. He used his bigger body to move her backward until the leather of the couch pressed to her ass. Blake’s touch became firm and demanding, and when he took hold of her hips and spun her around so she was bent at the waist and her belly dug into the couch, the breath left her.

Hands landed on her ass hard, the sound of flesh meeting flesh loud. Her ass cheeks were spread, and warm breath coasted over the lips of her pussy, then he was sucking on her, lapping at her wetness and grunting against her flesh. When her second orgasm of the night barreled through her, Poppy didn't bother suppressing her cry of pleasure.

Whooshing filled her ears, and Blake pressed his torso to her back, and his cock nudged the entrance of her cunt. The world tilted for a precious moment as neither of them moved. She swore she could feel his heart beating at the tip of his dick. In one swift, body-rocking move, Blake buried himself to the hilt inside her.

Eyes wide from the fierceness of his actions, Poppy held on. He rocked back and forth, slowly picking up momentum with every second. Soon, his hips thrust back and forth so hard as his cock pounded into her pussy that Poppy could do nothing but hold on and close her eyes. The wet sounds of her cunt sucking at his shaft fueled her and had Blake cursing in pleasure.

“Fuck, Poppy.” The pain from his viselike grip on her waist would leave bruises, but it made her feel all the more claimed by him. He had her pushed so far over the back of the couch that the tips of her toes barely touched the floor, but that was okay, because he kept her grounded.

The tip of him hit deep within her, and she gasped in pleasure.

“Hang on, baby.” He moved her slightly, so he had her ass in the position he wanted. The new angle had him hitting a spot inside her that sent fireworks careening into the tips of her fingers and the soles of her feet.

Her orgasm came upon her so quickly that it blinded her with its force. Poppy was aware of Blake pumping into her several more times, and of the filthy, erotic things he grunted out with each thrust. He groaned as he came, his erection swelling even more inside her.

The awareness of being filled to the brim with Blake's dick was powerful. They tried to catch their breaths as neither

moved from the compromising position. He pulled out of her, and the sense of loss became so great her heart skipped a beat. What they had done was not about making love.

It was raw, blazing, passionate, and hungry. It was about living and being in love, about giving up their preconceived notions of what they should and shouldn't do. It was everything Poppy needed.

Blake gently cleaned her up and carried her to his room. Immediately, she curled into the warmth and safety his body provided.

“I love you, Blake.”

He kissed the top of her head and inhaled deeply. “And I love you, sweetheart.”

If only reality wasn't around them, Poppy could imagine they lived in their own little bubble of bliss.

CHAPTER 16

One week later

“You’ve misclassified the *Abies grandis*.” Maggie tossed a file in front of Poppy and glared down at her. The thin wire-framed glasses were perched on her nose, a nose that looked like a bird’s beak.

“Are you sure?” Poppy picked up the folder and scanned the printout.

Maggie snorted. “I think I would know.” Her finger jutted in front of Poppy’s eyes and forced her to lean back slightly. “You see this?”

Poppy looked at the line in reference. “Yeah?”

Maggie looked at her incredulously. “You’ve placed it with the *Picea pungens*. These are completely different classifications. By placing them together, you could have compromised *our* data.”

She knitted her brows together at the way Maggie said it, like there was a lot more to them than what met the eye. She stared at the woman, trying to gauge what really went on in her head. Blake was collecting samples, so Poppy knew she had a bit of privacy with her. No point in having Blake hear their conversation, especially with what Poppy planned on asking her.

“Maggie?” The woman cocked a dark eyebrow at her. She couldn’t help but feel like a child being reprimanded for something she didn’t do and looked away. Suddenly, she felt nervous broaching the question, but she knew she had to know

where Maggie stood when it came to Blake. “Do you have feelings for Blake?” Poppy lifted her gaze and was surprised by the expression on her face: narrowed eyes, nostrils flaring, and face turning pink.

“How in the hell is that any of your business?”

Whoa. “I meant no harm. It’s just, well....” Words suddenly failed her.

“Listen, just stick to doing your job. I was with Blake well before you decided to come here, so let’s just keep the relationship between us purely business.” Maggie snatched the folder out of Poppy’s hands and continued to glare down at her.

The hostility was so thick that Poppy couldn’t breathe. “The fact that you showed up here, out of the blue, and act so disgustingly inappropriate with Blake leads me to believe you have no decency or self-respect.” She all but snarled the last part. “Blake is not up for discussion. Can you fix the mistake you made, *please?*” She said the last word a little too saccharine. Maggie turned and left Poppy feeling dumbstruck.

For several long moments, she didn’t do anything but stare at the open doorway. *What in the hell just happened?* The fact that Maggie’s reaction had been especially strong told Poppy all she needed to know. The woman was clearly hung up on Blake. She really didn’t know how to feel about that.

What she did know was she had no intentions of informing Blake of the conversation, or lack thereof, she had with Maggie. The woman already didn’t like her, most likely from the extreme PDA she witnessed, and having Blake know wouldn’t help anything. Maybe there had been more to their one night than Blake let on?

Clearly, after months, Maggie still pined over him. Pushing aside her embarrassment over her confrontation with Maggie, and her clear misunderstanding about classifications, Poppy turned back to her computer and fixed the mess she caused, but that was about all she could fix.

CHAPTER 17

Blake had left Poppy in bed, deliciously warm and snuggled against his pillow. Guilt and disgust over what he was doing were a constant whisper from over his shoulder. He told himself he wasn't doing this to be sneaky or dishonest, but it didn't matter how many times he repeated that in his head, because he knew it to be the truth.

He parked the Yukon in front of the small café right outside of town. The warm glow of the lights drowned out some of the darkness that settled around him.

The dashboard showed 10:00 p.m. It was late, but the little café was open all night. Not too unusual, since a lot of shipments came and went from Blithe at all hours of the night, and several businesses, especially ones on the outskirts of town, took advantage of the steady flow of dock workers.

He saw Maggie's Blazer parked off to the side, but the vehicle was empty. After turning the SUV off, he sighed in defeat. These impromptu meetings were getting fucking ridiculous, and today he planned on setting things straight with Maggie. Even now, he could hear her voice in his head from two weeks ago, when she caught him with Poppy in his office.

Of course it had been his fault that she had seen him all but fucking Poppy in his office, but dammit he hadn't been able to help himself. The way Poppy looked at him from across the room that day, all hot and needy and wanting him, had snapped what little restraint he had.

She had been so close, so fucking close to letting go right on top of him, but then Maggie had come in. Then when he tried to do damage control, Maggie had flipped the fucking switch. She was blackmailing him, and today he would put it to rest. Blake wasn't about to be cornered by a woman who couldn't let go of that one night they shared.

The fact that she threatened to report him, which would end up cutting off his funding, had him seeing red. She didn't care that running her mouth would affect her too, not when her motives were to get him to be with her.

Blake rubbed his eyes and tried to calm himself as his anger built. When he dropped his hand and looked out the windshield, he wasn't surprised to see Maggie standing in front of the Yukon. It wasn't lost on him that something was definitely missing from her, something that would have made her see that all of this shit was wrong.

Tonight, he would put an end to it, even if that meant his funding got cut off and his research couldn't continue. He was wrong for having anything sexual with Poppy at the office, and wrong for waiting so damn long to set Maggie straight, but things were going to change.

Poppy had told her mother about them, and here he was keeping this from her.

His sweet and innocent Poppy, who didn't deserve to be kept in the dark and betrayed, was the only light in his life. She had already been through so much, and he was just adding to that. Guilt that he had been seeing Maggie behind her back was a constant companion to him.

It didn't matter that he did nothing physical with Maggie, because staying at work late just so Maggie could talk with him, going to these ridiculous meetings at cafés and restaurants, was just as bad as touching his coworker. Maggie lifted her hand in a wave, and her smile grew slow and appeared satisfied. She thought she had him by the balls and would just string him along until she could get whatever it was she was aiming for in this sick and twisted situation.

Blake climbed out of the SUV and walked toward her. She immediately reached for him, like she always did, but he deftly moved out of her grasp. “Come on. Let’s just get this over with.” He pulled open the café’s door and stalked inside. The scents of coffee and pastries wafted around him as he searched for an empty table. He sat in the booth, and she slid into the seat in front of him. Already, he itched to leave.

“What’s the matter?” She always sounded so sweet and sincere, but he could see the plotting going on behind her dark eyes. She reached across the table and tried to touch his hands that were folded together. He moved them onto his lap.

“Maggie—” The waitress arrived and cut him off. After they ordered and she disappeared to get their drinks, he hurried forward. “Listen, these phone calls from you at all hours have to stop. These meetings have to stop.” Her face revealed no expression, and he breathed out. He would have rather she scream and yell at him instead of this apathetic personality she displayed. When she did tear her eyes away from him, it was to look at her lap.

“I’ve been enjoying your company, Blake. I thought you reciprocated those feelings as well.” She always sounded so clinical. “Is this because Poppy is making a big deal about us seeing each other?”

“We aren’t seeing each other, Maggie, and no, she isn’t making a big deal about anything, because I haven’t told her anything.”

The smile she gave him was downright blinding. “So you don’t want her to know about us?”

Blake exhaled and leaned back against the booth seat. “Maggie, I really don’t know how many times I’ve explained this to you. We are not seeing each other. I shouldn’t even be here right now talking about this, because there isn’t—” He gestured between them. “—an *us*.” He leaned forward and hoped the seriousness of what he was about to say really cemented how he felt. “It’s wrong that you are trying to corner me into something that isn’t going to happen, and it’s wrong that I’ve gone along with it for this long.”

Brow furrowed, Maggie asked, “So you haven’t been enjoying our visits? I thought you enjoyed them as much as I have.”

Was nothing he said getting through to her? “Maggie, this thing you think is going to happen between us, won’t.” Blake said it gently, but he needed her to know he was serious.

She leaned back in her seat and looked like she wanted to respond, but the waitress took that moment to bring their drinks. Once she left, the silence filled the space between them. Maggie’s stare was trained on him and calculating.

“So, you must not care about all the work we have accomplished or the grant money that helps us achieve that.” Maggie showed no emotion and brought her coffee cup to her lips.

“You know I care about the work we do here, but blackmailing me for something you thought you saw is immoral.” A hint of emotion played across her face. Her jaw tightened just a fraction, and the corner of her eye twitched.

“What I *think* I saw? You had her on your lap and were doing inappropriate things in the office. How is that proper?”

Is she fucking kidding?

“Really, Maggie? How proper is telling me that if I’m not available when you need me, then you’re going to the head of the department and telling him what I did on company time?” Still, she didn’t crack that damn façade she held so close. “I’ve known you for years, worked beside you tirelessly, but the woman I see right now is not the Maggie I know. You are calling me constantly, taking me away from important things to come here and talk about nothing at all. You tell me you need help after hours in organizing and filing the specimens, yet all you do is grill me on my relationship with Poppy.”

“Please, Blake, don’t say stuff like that. I’m still the Maggie you know.” Her eyes were big, pleading, but he had seen too many shifts in her emotions to know what was real and what wasn’t.

When he didn't respond, she narrowed her eyes and thinned her lips.

"You think what you have with her is a relationship?" She started to laugh, but it held a strange note to it and sounded humorless. "Sleeping with a woman who's only been here for what, a month, six weeks, is far from what I would consider a relationship." She leaned forward and instantly looked so earnest. "I've been by your side for years, Blake, *years*. We share something special. Don't you see?"

He shook his head. This conversation had already veered way off course. "Poppy isn't up for discussion."

"No? It seems like *she* is the reason we're even having this discussion." Maggie's voice dropped lower. "Seems she is the reason we are even in this situation to begin with." Blake noticed how her eyes narrowed and her nostrils flared. This anger and sudden hostility he saw in Maggie were new to him. The years he spent with her prior to Poppy coming to Blithe had been anything but memorable. She was quiet and reserved and certainly didn't show any kind of anger. The woman in front of him was like a stranger.

"I want to know why you're willing to give up everything for this woman." The switch in her flipped again, and she was once again calm and seemingly unaffected.

Blake sure as hell wasn't going to talk about Poppy. "Listen, I guess I just need you to know that this is over. I'm all about keeping our work relationship professional, but what you *think* is going on here won't happen." He dug out a few bills and tossed them to the table. Blake stood and said, "You do whatever you have to do. If that means telling the department about what you saw Poppy and me doing, then so be it." He knew it was so much more than what Maggie saw. She looked for any excuse to bridge the gap between coworkers and lovers.

He turned to leave, but her hand shot out and gripped his forearm. "What about us, Blake?"

He gripped her hand and pried it off his arm. "There is no us, Maggie. I'm sorry." He turned to leave, knowing there was

only one place he'd rather be, one person he'd rather see. Poppy's face flashed through his mind, and he let the image and thought of her soothe him.

When he got in the Yukon, he pulled out his cell and dialed her number. It was late, but he wanted to hear her voice. It rang and rang, and when he thought she wouldn't answer, her sleepy voice filled the line.

"Poppy, love, I'm sorry to wake you." Shuffling sounded on the other end.

"Blake? Where are you?" He had left her a note, but clearly she hadn't woken up and found it since he left. He didn't want to go through all of this over the phone. He had so much to explain to her, and he needed to do that in person.

"I'm sorry I'm not there, sweetheart. I had to meet up with Maggie."

"Maggie?" She sounded confused but awake.

"Yeah, but I'll explain everything once I'm home." Letting his head fall back against the headrest, Blake closed his eyes and exhaled. "I've caused a big mess, baby." The sound of her breathing calmed him further, and he knew there was no other woman for him, no other person who could heal his broken heart and bring his life meaning like she could.

A beat of silence passed, and she said, "Okay, but please be careful driving." Blake looked out his window, watched the steady fall of snow around the vehicle, and smiled.

"Always, sweetheart. I have something very important waiting at home for me." There was more shuffling on the other end, and he pictured her naked in the bed. "I love you, sweetheart, and I'll be home soon."

"I love you too, Blake, so much."

And with those words, he knew that no matter what happened in his life, everything would be okay as long as Poppy was by his side.

He cranked the engine and pulled out of the parking lot.

The sound of the windshield wipers swishing back and forth filled the interior. The snow started to come down harder and cover the road, but he was used to the inclement weather. Bright lights flashed in his rearview mirror, and he adjusted it to lessen the glare.

Swish, swish, swish. The sound of the wipers moving back and forth had an almost lulling quality. The car behind him got closer, and closer, and he looked in the mirror. The roads were far too slick and dangerous for someone to be driving so close to him, but he refused to speed up and put some distance between them.

It wasn't lost on him that the car made the same turns as he did and made sure to keep up with him. This far into town meant the roads were dead, especially when he turned onto the back road that would lead him closer to his house. That road had practically no traffic during the day, and zero this late at night.

It could have been merely a coincidence that the car traveled the same route as he did, but in Blake's gut, he knew that wasn't the case. As if the driver read his thoughts, they slammed into the back of his SUV, causing the wheels to catch a patch of black ice and swerve to the thick line of trees to his right.

"Fuck." Gripping the steering wheel tightly, Blake breathed out and focused on keeping the truck steady. He reached for his phone, ready to call the cops, when the car slammed into him again. The vehicle jerked to the side, and the phone slipped from his hands and fell to the floor.

He couldn't control the vehicle as it spun and skidded right for the bank of trees. The tires slid on the snow-covered ground as he barreled to the side. The force and momentum in which he lost control had the trees rushing at him fast. The last thing that came to his mind was Poppy and how she was going to lose someone else she loved.

CHAPTER 18

Another look out the living room window showed the same thing: a steady dump of snow that only seemed to increase in activity with each passing second. Poppy continued to pace the length of the living room. It had been over an hour since she had spoken to Blake.

The roads were bad, but even so, it shouldn't have taken him this long to get home, even if he was at one of the cafés on the outskirts of town. She had called the Blithe police, because her worst fears came crashing through her. All she could see in her mind was twisted metal, snow falling, and blood covering the ground.

Her nails were stumps on the tips of her fingers as she continued to chew on them. The police had been kind enough, but she hadn't heard back from them. That could be good or bad. Again, she tried to call Blake's phone, and again, it rang until it went to voicemail. Fear and panic seized her chest as the worst-case scenarios played through her mind. No, she couldn't think like that.

He's fine. The roads are just bad and he's taking his time. Maybe he got held up and is talking with Maggie.

When he called her and said he had a lot to talk to her about, that he was with Maggie, she hadn't known how to respond, what to think. She trusted Blake implicitly and knew he would never hurt her, but the way Maggie responded when she asked what her feelings for Blake were had Poppy not trusting the other woman. Right now, none of that mattered.

Please, I don't care what he did with her or why he was at the cafe. Just make sure he's okay. Please, just make sure he's okay.

Pacing, pacing, pacing. That was all Poppy could do, but then she grabbed her phone, intent on calling the police department again and demanding they tell her something, anything. Just as she went to dial the number, her phone lit up with an incoming call. She knew that number, because she was just about to call them.

Her hands shook as she slid her finger over the screen to answer and pressed the phone to her ear. "Hello?" Sweat coated her palms, and her heart thundered frantically.

"Poppy Ellis?"

"Yes?" Tears already swam in her eyes, because she knew, she just *knew* this call wasn't going to be good.

"This is Officer Stevens from the Blithe Police Department. We've found Blake Ellis."

CHAPTER 19

“Ma’am, Blake has suffered extensive head trauma. The CT and MRI showed brain activity, which is extremely positive when it comes to the outlook of his condition, but right now, we are keeping him sedated to give his body time to heal and decrease the swelling around his brain.”

Twenty-four hours had passed since Poppy received the phone call about Blake being found, and she hadn’t been able to rest since. She thanked the group of doctors and watched as a sea of white lab coats left the room.

They had to life-flight him into Anchorage due to the fact that the small hospital in Blithe wasn’t equipped to deal with such severe injuries. So now it was just a waiting game.

She sat in the chair beside his bed and took his hand. He felt warm in her grasp, and she turned his hand over so she could look at his palm. Poppy ran her finger along the lines that covered the smooth flesh. Placing her hand on top of his, she marveled at how small hers was compared to his.

“I don’t know if you can hear me, but I want you to know I won’t leave your side until you open your eyes and smile at me. It’s kind of crazy that two years ago you were the one by my bedside, and now here I am, doing the same.” She kept her eyes on his hand and ran her finger around the edges of his. “When I lost Jon, I thought my life no longer held any meaning. I was scared to live, Blake, but then we started talking, and I saw that my fear was irrational.”

She lifted her eyes to his face and felt tears well in her eyes. He looked so peaceful, even with the tubes and lines coming out of him. The lines that normally graced his face were smooth and flawless, and she reached up and brushed the short dark hair from his forehead.

“I’m not going anywhere, Blake, so please be okay so we can start our life.” Poppy dropped her head onto the bed and rested her cheek on their clasped hands. Nothing could pry her away from him. Nothing.



Four days later

“WE WANT you to be prepared that Blake won’t be the same when he wakes up. The incision we made on his scalp and the area of skull we removed has helped significantly in the reduction of the inflammation, but we still need to keep a close eye on him.”

Poppy rubbed her eyes, feeling the lack of sleep taking its toll. Since they had brought Blake to the hospital four days ago, there hadn’t been a whole lot of change with him. They slowly brought him out of the medically induced coma, which was great news, but it still frightened the hell out of Poppy.

She had contacted both their families, and they were filtering in from Ohio. Both their sets of parents were a wreck, no doubt their thoughts on Jon’s accident like hers were.

“He may have permanent brain damage, have difficulty remembering people and simple tasks, and will require a lot of patience as he works through this.” The physician held a look of empathy, and Poppy hated him for it. He left, and she was once again alone with Blake. The tubes that helped him breathe were now gone, yet he was still unconscious.

Poppy had made sure to keep his face shaved, knowing he wouldn’t have wanted to look like some caveman while people

came in and out of his room. A smile formed on her lips at the thought.

“Honey?” Blake’s mother, Katherine, stepped into the room. She looked just as bad as Poppy felt. Red rimmed her eyes, and she held a tissue to her nose. “Why don’t you come with me and get some coffee?” At Poppy’s hesitation, Katherine said, “I’d like to talk to you, and that will give Henry a chance to sit with Blake.” Blake’s father wrapped his arm around his wife’s waist and brought her close to his side.

“Hi, Henry.” Poppy offered him a watery smile. Just seeing them standing together brought back a wave of emotions.

“Hi, sweetie.” The tears in his eyes threatened to spill out, but Henry was a strong man and kept his emotions in check. “Go on and take a little walk with Katherine. I’ll watch over him.” He smiled, and a little bit of the stress in her faded. It was nice seeing the two of them again.

“Yeah, okay.” She grabbed her purse and walked out with Blake’s mom, but she stopped and looked over her shoulder. Henry sat beside his son, the pain on his face clear. Her heart tightened at the sight.

“Come on, dear.” Katherine led the way to the small cafeteria.

After they got a cup of coffee and found a seat, the silence descended. Poppy stared at her mug and ran her finger around the rim. Exhaustion played heavily within her, but even if she had the time to sleep, she wouldn’t have been able to, not with her mind on a constant reel.

“Poppy?”

She lifted her eyes to Katherine. “Yeah?” She offered Blake’s mother a smile she didn’t feel.

“I just want you to know that I’m happy you and Blake found each other.” She took her hand across the table and held it tight. “I know Jon would have been happy that the two of you found comfort in one another.” Tears fell from Katherine’s eyes, which had Poppy crying as well.

After Poppy told her mother about her relationship with Blake, he told his parents. They had cried, and their concerns had been expressed. Though overall they'd seemed very supportive, Poppy hadn't really felt their support until right now. Seeing his mother's emotions and tears cemented Poppy's relief that, yes, Blake's family was okay with this. She hadn't realized until right now how much their approval meant.

"Thank you, Katherine. You have no idea how much that means to hear you say that."

Katherine patted her hand in a very motherly way. "I'm glad Blake has you. Jon was lucky to have you in his life, and now Blake is." She sniffed and took her tissue to her nose. "Anyway, have you heard any news about the woman who caused the accident?"

Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

"Maggie wasn't harmed and is in police custody. I've been too concerned about Blake to inquire what is going to happen with her." She pulled her rat's nest of hair up into a sloppy ponytail and looked at Katherine. When an officer came by the hospital room, he explained they apprehended Maggie Harris, who had admitted to causing the accident while she stood off to the side and stared at the wreckage.

Apparently, she had been mumbling about her love for a man who didn't want her, and if she couldn't have him, no one would. The revelation had come as a shock, but until she knew Blake would be okay, she wouldn't let that acid eat away at her.

As long as Maggie was in custody and there were no plans on letting her go, Poppy would worry about her later.

When they returned to Blake's room, it was to see his father hunched over his son's body, singing a low song. Katherine instantly burst into tears, and all Poppy could do was hold his mother and cry right along with her.

CHAPTER 20

A week and a half later

Poppy leaned back in the chair, her focus on the muted television and the sound of Blake's IV pump droning on in the background. It was going on two in the morning, and the infomercial that played on the screen became blurred by Poppy's lack of sleep.

Katherine and Henry stayed with Blake while she took a quick shower and changed into clothes her mother had brought her. She was so thankful for the support of their families and didn't know what she would do if they weren't here. *Yeah, you do. You'd be a broken mess on the floor.*

Blake slept peacefully beside her. With his hand in hers, she brushed her thumb back and forth along the smooth skin. Her attention faded until all she saw was his fingernails. They were long, strong fingers and were attached to masculine hands. Closing her eyes and resting her head back against the chair, she imagined the future, one where Blake wasn't lying in a hospital bed.

The slightest pressure on her hand had her snapping her eyes open and sitting up. Had she imagined it? Holding her breath, Poppy didn't move as she stared at their joined hands. Yes! He clenched his hand again around hers. For so long, all she did was blink back the tears and watch his face, hopeful. The lights were off in the room, but the glow from the nurses' station through the window in the room illuminated his face.

“Blake?” Voice hoarse from unspoken emotion, Poppy moved closer to him and cupped his cheek in her other hand. No way would she let go of him. The world stopped as she waited for him to open his eyes, and after what felt like forever, he finally did. His eyes looked dark in the shadowed room, but she could still see the intense hazel. “Oh God, Blake.” She could hardly see him through her deliriously happy tears.

For several long moments, he didn’t say anything, just stared at her. The comments made by the doctors, about how he might not remember things, slammed into her brain. What if he didn’t know her? It seemed surreal, but the way he looked at her had her heart plummeting. “Blake? Please, say something.” She caressed his cheek, waiting for his first words in over a week. He closed his eyes, and she heard him swallow.

“Poppy, sweetheart.” Just the feel of his hand tightening its hold on hers had Poppy covering his chest with her body and sobbing into his hospital gown. She should go get the doctors and tell their families he was awake, but for just this small moment in time, she absorbed the fact that he was alive and hoped everything would be okay.

“I love you, Blake. I love you so much.”

“I love you too, sweetheart.” His voice sounded soft and hoarse, but the meaning behind his words was clear. “There is so much I want to tell you, wanted to tell you before all this happened. The whole Maggie thing—”

“Shhh, I don’t want to talk about any of that right now. I don’t care. All I’m worried about is you getting better so we can be together.”

She pressed a gentle kiss on his lips and forced herself to let everyone know that Blake would be okay. The nurses and doctors came in, asked him a series of questions, and performed some tests. Then it was their families’ turn. A few had stayed in the waiting room, but the majority stayed at a local bed and breakfast.

After the tears of happiness, cries of joy, and hugs and kisses, Poppy and Blake were once again alone. “I didn’t know if you’d ever wake up, Blake.” Poppy pushed herself up and wiped the tears away. A small smile touched his lips, and when he trailed his finger over her arm, she returned the sentiment.

“Sweetheart, there isn’t anything that would have kept me from you.” With that, he cupped the back of her head and brought her to him for a gentle yet love-filled kiss. “Everything’s going to be okay now. I promise.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. Here he was, lying in a hospital bed after a massive car accident and promising her that everything would be okay. “I should be the one telling you that.” She kissed him again. “How about we just take care of each other?”

“Sounds good to me.” Her hair fell around them, concealing them like a curtain. Only time would tell if there was permanent damage to him, but Poppy would be there every step of the way.

“You’re my life, sweetheart.”

“And you’re mine, Blake.”

EPILOGUE

Three years later

“**S**hit.” Poppy snatched her hand to her face and checked the diamond on her ring. This was the fourth time in the last week she had banged her wedding ring on something.

“What? What’s wrong?” Blake all but skidded into the kitchen, his eyes wide as he looked her up and down. He was in front of her a second later, the limp in his left leg slightly noticeable. His hands shot out to grip her waist, and he hauled her to his chest. “I heard you shout.”

Poppy couldn’t help but smile at the concern on his face. “I just banged the ring on the sink.”

“Again?” He cocked a brow at her as his lips twitched in amusement.

“You won’t think it’s so funny when I break the damn thing. Why did you have to get such a big rock anyway?” She was all talk. She loved that big diamond, especially when it sparkled in the sunlight.

“I can always take it and put a smaller diamond in it if it makes you feel better.” He made a move to take the ring off her finger, and she snatched her hand away. The chuckle that came from him ignited her own. “I thought you were going into labor or something.”

“Blake, I have like a month left, and besides, we already went through this two years ago. You act like this is our first baby all over again.” He dropped to his haunches, and she was

struck by how vulnerable such a big, strong man like Blake could look staring up at her. His hands landed on either side of her rounded belly, and she speared her hands in his hair.

“Every time you carry my child, I’m going to be like this, sweetheart.” He kissed her protruding belly button. “People deliver babies early all the time. I sit up at night worrying that I won’t get you to the hospital in time.”

“You worry too much, Blake.”

“Yeah, well, when it comes to you and the baby, it’s all I seem to do.” The sound of little pattering feet running down the hall had them both looking in that direction. “Carson Jonathan Ellis. What is all over your face?” She went over to their little boy and scooped him up. His little hands rose and started patting his face at the same time his grin widened.

“Mama, we was coloring pwetty pitchews for you.”

“Oh, my sweet little boy.” Poppy laughed as she took in Carson’s marker-colored cheeks. Blake came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her belly. He kissed the side of her neck before leaning forward and kissing Carson’s headful of dark hair.

Since Blake woke up in the hospital, his rehabilitation had been slow but progressing well. He had a limp in his left leg, and the doctors still didn’t know if it would ever be completely functional. Aside from that, he made a total recovery. The rehabilitation had been hard on him, but Blake was one of the strongest men she knew.

Now, three years later, they were married, had a healthy and rambunctious little boy, and were expecting their second child, a little girl. Their family was supportive of their relationship, and their wedding had been held in front of them all back in Ohio.

Maggie had been sent to a maximum-security prison for attempted murder, and they were told she would be there for a long time. Apparently, she had a longstanding record under a different name and had gotten into trouble in three other states before she settled in Blithe.

“I love you, you know,” he whispered against her neck. She could feel him smiling, which had her smile growing across her face.

“I wuv you too, Mama.”

She kissed Carson on the cheek and knew she'd have blue marker on her lips, but she didn't care. “And I love my two boys most of all.” At her words, Blake tightened his hold on her.

Life may have turned upside down for her, but it had righted itself and now only gave her the happiness she thought she would never see again. Things were looking good, and from that point on, she would never let the past dictate how her future would play out.

Blake and her family didn't want that for her, and she knew neither would Jon if he were still alive. She felt the certainty of that in the bottom of her heart.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Find Jenika at:

www.JenikaSnow.com

Jenika_Snow@yahoo.com

