



MILE HIGH SALVATION

— MILE HIGH SERIES —

CAROLYN DELANEY

MILE HIGH SALVATION

MILE HIGH SERIES BOOK 2

By
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BLURB:

Christa

When my best friend Taryn tells me I should give her brother some space, I do. After all, I've never been through something like he has, so I will respect her wishes and keep my distance.

The problem is, Eric Andrews won't leave my mind. I crave to see him, to be with him, to help him.

But Eric doesn't need my help, he's made that clear.

So, I go back to my life and my routines. Working as a paralegal and saving up for my next tattoo or new car.

But then I'm introduced to a world I didn't know existed and wonder if maybe this will help me forget the memories of him.

Eric

Life has to start throwing me some rope. After paying for a horrific mistake I made years ago, I'm struggling to get my life back in order. To have that carefree routine of working, going to the gym, sports, and hanging with the few friends I have left.

Things just aren't going the way I pictured when I had all that downtime to dream and plan from a prison cell. I've got the job thing down, grateful my friend Carter had the resources to help me back into my sports medicine job.

When Taryn introduced me to Christa Alvarez, she was purely what I needed at the time, until I realized she deserved better, and in the state I was in, I was no good for anyone. Especially someone like her.

Until one day, she's exactly where I thought I'd never see her, but she doesn't know it's me.

One

Christa

Resisting a wince, I scroll through my phone with my left hand as Reggie rubs annoying circles with his gun along my right shoulder. I'm at the point where I've been sitting here for two hours and am feeling restless. The pain keeps me alert, but the constant back and forth of the needle filling in color is grating on my nerves. I should have thrown a couple of shooters into my purse before I left to help me relax.

Or a couple of gummies. Those stink, though.

I untense and let out the breath I've been holding when Reggie lifts the needle off my skin and wipes it with a cool cloth.

"We're done, just had to finish up a few lines of the flowers back here," he says, squirting water from a squeeze bottle onto the cloth and wiping me again. The relief is indescribable.

I love these tattoos, but man, am I a baby while I'm getting them done.

"Sounds good. Then when I forget about the pain, I'll come back and do the rest of the arm."

He chuckles, the piercing on the bridge of his nose squishing with his laugh. His black hair is lacquered up in messy spikes and not an inch of his pale skin isn't covered with ink.

Reggie offers me a hand mirror and has me stand in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirrors of the shop so I can examine the work. The roses look amazing and blend into the front of the arm where a large sugar skull sits at the top.

I hand him back the mirror. "That looks amazing. Great job as usual, Reg."

He then tapes a large, white surgical bandage over my shoulder and hands me an aftercare sheet, which he knows I

don't need since this isn't my first tattoo rodeo.

I tip him two twenties and go to the front to pay with my card. As I'm leaving, my phone dings with a text.

Eric: *We still on for tonight?*

I smile at the text. Eric is constantly worried he'll be stood up. We've gone on a couple of dates since last month when we met, but they've been casual. It's like he has some kind of paranoia he'll get ghosted.

He has a lot of paranoias, actually. I would too if I spent six years in prison around a bunch of degenerates.

I get into my little BMW and reply to his text.

Me: *Of course we are, handsome.*

I include a wink and kissy-face emoji. I have this constant need to feel like I have to validate him. I'm not crazy about it, but he's so fucking hot, I just get over it.

Eric: *Great, see you tonight, gorgeous.*

I giggle like a damn schoolgirl at his reciprocated flirtation and start up the car, headed home to get ready for my date.

I wash the tattoo area with antibacterial soap and slather a light layer of Aquaphor on it after getting dressed. A glance in the mirror tells me I chose the right outfit. Red dress and strappy black stilettos. These are my favorite shoes, and it's nice that even with these on, Eric's still taller than me. One last swipe of red lipstick and I hustle into my garage to head out on my date.

On the drive, I think about Eric and how excited I am to see him. Since my best friend Taryn introduced us a few weeks ago, we've been on a few dates. He doesn't open up to me very much, which I understand. Still, I'm making it my mission to see that he can trust me and not everyone he meets is a liar just out for themselves. I can't imagine what he went through in that place, and I never ask him to talk about it, though I admit to some curiosity. I wonder what he went through behind bars for all those years, and being that I have

heard the reasoning why—in great detail, mind you from my best friend—I would love to hear it from his lips. His beautiful, full lips and that scruff of a beard that I want rubbing between my thighs.

But we haven't gone there yet. I plan to change that tonight. I mean... the guy's gotta be needing some lovin' after all those years down, right?

Maybe he's already hooked up with someone?

I shake my head at my silliness. Even if he has... it's none of my business, and in fact, who could blame him?

As for me... it's been a long, hot minute. At twenty-seven, I'm over the clubs and bars... the online dating... even the set-ups from well-meaning friends and family. I crave that symbiotic and electric connection, that one person who has eyes only for you, and you for them. Those hot nights in the sheets. Always having a date for occasions. Someone to come home to. Eric is the only one who comes to mind when I picture those things. I don't know what his financial situation is like after being gone so long, but I find that I don't care. From what Taryn told me through our conversations, he seems to be doing okay. She had to sell his townhouse so I'm sure he has money from that somewhere.

I shudder at the chilly Colorado December night air as I arrive at six on the dot and enter through the front door of Denver's most popular seafood restaurant. I'm not a huge fan of food from the sea, especially here in my landlocked state, but this place has a great reputation with other selections as well.

"Hello, gorgeous."

I turn to see Eric standing in the corner, blending in with the rest of the patrons. In a black button-down shirt rolled to the elbows and jeans, he holds his jacket, and I want to climb him like a tree, he looks so hot.

"Hi," I say, leaning up to kiss him on the cheek.

"Eric, party of two," the hostess calls out.

“Just in time,” Eric says with a smile on those perfect lips, those bright white teeth on display. He grabs my hand and we follow her to the table.

After setting down menus and water, she leaves, and Eric looks at me. “How have you been?”

I bite back a smile. We text almost every day, but don’t physically see each other that often. “I’m good. Just glad it’s Friday. It’s been hell week at work.”

“Oh, really? A lot of criminals?” he asks with a smirk, but there’s stress behind his gaze.

“Just a lot of cases, and I doubt you want to listen to all that boring stuff. What about you?” I change the subject because I can tell anything criminal-related makes him uncomfortable, and being a paralegal, that’s all I see all day, for the most part. I should go find myself a job with some ambulance-chasing car accident lawyer instead of a team of defense attorneys—a few I cannot stand because they’re so fucking sleazy.

“Just learning the job. You’d think after two weeks, I’d get the hang of it better.” He lifts his water glass and stares at me.

“So, it’s not like just riding a bike?” I ask with a lippy smile.

He shakes his head. “No. First, my state physical therapy license was expired, and I had to apply to get that back. They denied my doctoral license because of the... incident, which I figured would happen, so I applied for physical therapy assistant, and that got approved. I took the state test, and I aced it. I’d ordered books to study while I was down, and I knew it all like the back of my hand—not that it was hard. Same stuff, just at a lesser capacity. In practice, though, much different. Technology is different. New machines and medicines and things like that.”

“Totally understandable.”

The server comes up and we place our orders, though I barely looked at the menu. I only like shellfish, so I told her

I'd just like whatever the popular shrimp dish is. We also place drink orders.

Eric reaches forward and grabs my hands. "I'm really glad I met you, Christa. I'm sorry if I'm sort of... closed off sometimes. Adjusting hasn't been easy, but one thing I've learned is to not be so stubborn to admit it. I'm in 'mandatory' therapy for drugs and alcohol, but the therapist knows I don't have a substance abuse problem, so we mostly talk about deeper issues. And she'd be proud to hear me admit this to another person." He smirks again, and my stomach flutters. God, he's so beautiful.

"I'm glad you're able to talk to someone about all you went through, Eric. I can't imagine..."

"Let's talk about something else," he says abruptly, but not letting go of my hand.

"Of course, anything you want. Do you have any hobbies when you're not working and going to... therapy?"

The server brings us drinks, and I immediately feel guilty for ordering a martini after what he said about his court-ordered drug and alcohol therapy.

"Hey, I changed my mind," I tell her. "Can I just get a—"

"No." Eric pats my hand. "Please enjoy your drink. I'm not at all tempted, I promise."

I chew my lip and lift my brows. "You sure?"

"Absolutely." He looks at the server. "And when that one's done, bring another."

She looks at me. "Are you okay with that, miss?"

"Yes"—I glance at her nametag—"Carrie. Thank you."

She nods and walks off.

"We aren't doing this," Eric says immediately, lifting his raspberry iced tea. "I mean it. If I want a drink, I'll have one. I'm not supposed to, but they don't test me for it either. I may have a beer now and again while watching sports, but I will

not be drinking like I was. That doesn't mean you have to abstain. In fact, you're probably hella cute when you're tipsy."

I swallow down the vodka and lift the olives on the stick out of the glass. "Are you trying to get me drunk, Andrews?"

He chuckles. "Absolutely."

"You're crazy," I say with a giggle after I pop one of the salty, delicious olives into my mouth.

He lifts a shoulder and lets it fall. "I've been called worse."

"I bet you have," I murmur just loud enough for him to hear, slowly removing the plastic stick from my lips after eating the last olive.

I watch his powerful Adam's apple bob up and down as he swallows, but that cocky-ass smirk never leaves his face. I want to kiss it off as his eyes hold mine.

Our food arrives and we chat while we eat. It's easy and comfortable, but with an air of electricity crackling between us. It's undeniable and never goes away no matter what we're doing, and I wonder how powerful it'll be when we're alone and naked. What it would be like if we got married and went to some tropical island and had the raddest honeymoon ever, fucking on the balcony of some outrageous resort?

Stop thinking about sex and marriage, you maniac!

I take a bite of shrimp and lift my second vodka martini to my lips. I'm well and good tipsy now, and I need to stop after this one.

"So, how are the wedding plans coming along?" he asks.

I choke on my shrimp and cough a few times before the food goes down. I set the martini down and grab my water glass, chugging it. My face must match my dress now.

"What?"

"Damn, are you okay?" he asks, the smirk gone, replaced by genuine concern.

"Yes," I breathe. "I'm fine. Sorry about that."

Concern and worry color his features. “Why did you choke when I asked about the wedding? Is being the maid of honor super stressful or something?”

Then, it dawns on me. “Oh, yes, I mean no. I mean... it’s fine. Just very busy. Taryn’s pretty particular with what she wants for décor and such. Carter couldn’t give a shit less.”

With that, he chuckles. “That’s definitely Carter. You’ll let us know where to get the tuxes and shit?”

I nod, sipping my martini and am done eating for now. “Absolutely.”

We sit in silence for a bit, then he says lowly, “Wanna get out of here?”

“Yes,” I answer immediately.

Two

Eric

She cannot drive, this I know. I didn't purposely ply her with alcohol to get her to sleep with me, she chose to drink. I just didn't stop her.

Truth is, I was tempted myself, but I didn't want her to know. I deny I have an actual addiction, but I did miss drinking while I was down. The other inmates would make "hooch" from rotted fruit, sugar packets, and water, and I never understood how they could put that shit in their pie-holes with the horrific way it smelled. I would have rather been sober—and I was.

We make the short drive to my rented condo—I'm saving up for a house. Taryn and I decided to sell Mom's place—the memories were too painful for us to linger there. I use that small profit, along with those of my townhouse's for now—and I tell her I'll drive her back to the restaurant tomorrow to get her car, knowing it's the weekend and neither of us has to work.

I've been told I'll eventually be "on call" for nights and weekends in a rotating manner with the other sports therapists, but I'm too new for that yet. I look over at Christa as we drive, and she looks back at me. I squeeze her hand and hope my nervousness isn't showing. I thought the second I got out of prison, I'd head straight to a bar and pick up a woman to take out all my aggressions on. That never happened. Once I was home, I had so many other things to do and take care of, the lack of sex kind of fell by the wayside, and I've been relieving myself in the shower ever since. But weeks of that is getting old, and I already know Christa's down for some fun since we've texted about it over these last four weeks we've been "dating." We've stolen some kisses and pets, but it has never gone farther. I got the feeling she was waiting for me to make the move. Well, after tonight, she'll be done waiting.

I wanted to fuck her the first night I met her at my welcome home party Taryn and my best friend Carter threw

me. But that would have just been a rage-fuck, and I knew as soon as I met Christa, she was worth more than that. Her hard exterior belies the sweet person she is on the inside. The tattoos and piercings are hot to me, and her body is to die for. But I knew I had to wait with her. That night, I was so angry to learn that Carter had hooked up with my little sister. I was pissed off for a long time until they both proved to me that they were good together. That Carter wasn't using her, and Taryn wasn't just trying to fulfill some childhood fantasy. She'd always had a crush on him ever since her teens—a crush I ignored and vowed to keep to just a crush. Carter knew I'd pummel him bloody if he ever touched her. I just wish they'd told me about it while I was locked up so it wouldn't have been such a blow.

I'm okay with it now—mostly. It's something I'll have to eventually accept. They're already house shopping and she's mentioned babies a time or two. Carter Lockwood a dad? I'll see it when I believe it.

As soon as I park in my spot, I open her passenger door and help her out. She walks slowly in her sexy-ass heels, and after I unlock the front door, it's fucking on.

Her purse drops to the floor and she immediately kicks out of her shoes as we kiss. I slam her back against the door, sneaking to lock it as we make out because I'm a paranoid fuck, and run my hands over her chest as she unbuttons my shirt and slides it off over my shoulders.

“Damn, your arms and shoulders are massive!” she breathes, staring wide-eyed at my naked chest.

Wow, talk about a self-esteem boost. I never stopped working out, not in prison, not since I got home. It's my outlet, my life, my addiction.

“Thanks.” I chuckle, going back to kissing her neck. I run my tongue along her carotid artery and feel it pulse. Her breaths are harsh in my ear and she occasionally expels a breathy moan that has my dick as hard as glass.

“Bedroom,” she says, pushing off from the door and leading me to the only bedroom here, leaving my shirt and her

shoes by the door.

Once inside, we practically tear each other's clothes off. I yank back the comforter and watch as she climbs up the bed. I stop to stare at her as I pull a condom from my pants pocket before stepping out of my jeans, kicking off my shoes since they're in the way. I set the condom on the bed and gaze at her luscious, creamy body. Tattoos cover both upper arms, and she's got some writing along her right ribcage. Her waist is small and her thighs and ass are thick and luscious, as are her breasts, which are both pierced with a silver stud. I want to fuck her so bad, I stroke my dick and watch as she bites her lip.

"Come here," she says demurely, and I climb on the bed, looking down at her glistening cunt.

"First, a taste," I say, diving between her legs and swirling my tongue along her slit. She cries out when it makes contact with her juicy bud, and while I suck and lick that, I slide her cream along her crack and then into her soaking wet heat. While I eat and finger-fuck her, my cock is so hard I feel like I might prematurely blow. I must give this goddess an orgasm or two before I slip into her.

"Eric!" she cries out, gripping the bed, her head flipped back. Watching her climax is the most beautiful thing in the world, her walls gripping my fingers with delicious pressure.

"Fuck me, please!" she moans, opening her eyes and looking at me.

"Yes, ma'am." She doesn't have to tell me twice. I open the package and roll the rubber on, and it grips me tightly. I wish I could bareback her, but that would be irresponsible until we get to know each other better.

I grip both thick thighs and stare down at her wet pussy, line up my cock head at the entrance, and ask, "You sure?"

"Now, please!" she says, opening her arms like she wants a hug.

I smirk and slide home, groaning so loud at how perfectly she grips me, it's almost embarrassing. Except she squeals out

as well, as she rolls her hips in time with mine.

As we rock together, I am dangerously close, so I lean up and rub my thumb along her clit that my cock is dragging against.

“Yes,” she breathes, eyes closed. “Fuck me faster.”

I obey, picking up speed as I lean down to suck one of her nipples into my mouth, sliding the silver bar around with my tongue right when she grips my cock with her slick walls, crying out at another orgasm.

I can't last. A tingle runs down my spine and my balls become impossibly tight seconds before I explode, cum filling the condom when I wish it was filling her pussy instead.

“Holy fuck,” I cry, rocking my hips against hers as she continues to squeeze me, her red-painted nails digging into my shoulders.

I lean down and kiss her hard, then pull out, sliding the condom off and tossing it somewhere. *I'll clean that up later.*

Sliding into bed beside her, I gather her in my arms and kiss her forehead. Her light-brown eyes shine through the window where the moon illuminates our naked bodies, both with a light sheen of perspiration covering us.

I slide some black hair out of her face. “You're so beautiful,” I murmur.

She grins at the compliment, then leans up and kisses me. We fall asleep almost immediately, but I wake her twice more during the night.

“I'll call you later,” I say as we stand next to her car. I brush hair off her face and give her a crushing kiss, while I hold onto her. “I promise.”

“I'll hold you to it,” she replies, looking sexy as hell and thoroughly fucked.

I make sure she's safely in and her car starts before I get back into my used Audi. My credit is fucked from being

locked up for so long, so I'm grateful my sister sold me her car when Carter bought her a new Mercedes.

I drive off and think about my friend. When I talked to my therapist, Anne, about all I'd been through, she suggested that I felt betrayed by Carter for hooking up with my sister, even after all he'd done for me while I was down.

Taryn sold my townhouse, and I told her to just put ten thousand away for me for expenses when I got out and she could keep the rest. She refused. I found out later she gave the remaining \$190,000 to Carter and he invested it, but kept the investments in my name. I don't know. He's the tech guy, always blabbing on about tech and stocks and stuff. I'm the medical guy, I have no interest in that stuff. Learning the new medical tech that's been developed since I last worked is challenging enough. That being said, I'm not touching whatever investment he made for a while. I want to pay cash for a house or at least put half down, but homes are so expensive now, that I literally almost choked when I pulled up the internet to check. Even this ten-year-old Audi would have cost about what a new one did when I went in if she hadn't sold it to me cheaper than she had to. Still, it's nice enough, and Taryn took good care of it.

I pull into my spot and go upstairs for a shower. I can't go to the gym smelling like sex. It's smelly enough in that place.

Once I'm clean, I strip the very messy sheets off the bed and toss the condom into the trash, grateful the baby batter had stayed inside of it the way it landed, and glad I'd remembered the trash can for the other two we used last night. "Gross."

After shoving the bedding into the washer and starting it, I wash my hands at the kitchen sink and mix up my pre-workout drink, downing it as I put my fitness watch on. What a cool gadget. I'm utterly obsessed with it, and how it syncs with my phone and tells me how close I am to my daily goals. I can even track calories, protein, fat, and carbs on that thing, and I do just that after I drink the pre-workout, imputing it into the app.

Satisfied I have everything, I head to the gym, hoping I didn't waste too much testosterone on my bedtime workout last night.

I smile when I think about Christa and can't wait to do it again. Totally worth it.

Three

Christa

Staring at my best friend, I just smirk.

“What?” Taryn asks. “Answer the question.”

I clear my throat and pick up another heart-shaped piece of wood, placing a small votive candle in the center. “Do you really want to know? I ask, as I glue on the *Carter & Taryn* premade tag, and the tiny bunch of colorful flowers for her wedding favors.

She shrugs and then looks at me with her amber-colored eyes. She’s since cut her light-brown hair and it sits in a cute wolf haircut with bangs. It absolutely suits her. “I mean, it’s a yes or no question. I don’t need graphic details.” She makes a gagging noise.

I chuckle. “The answer is yes.”

Her eyes go wide. “Really? How was it?”

I purse my lips. “I thought you didn’t want details.”

“Generalize.”

“It was good. No, it was great. I didn’t think he’d last as long as he did after how long he’s been... away.”

“Ew. Maybe he hooked up with someone else before you. You know, right after he got out.”

“Not sure, none of my business, and I won’t ask him because I don’t care. I mean, who could blame the guy if he did?”

She puts her hands up. “Not me.”

I pull another wooden heart out of the basket and go to work. “Has he... mentioned me or asked things about me?”

“No, but don’t take it the wrong way. We don’t talk about that stuff, and not to mention, I’ve been so busy wedding planning that it’s pretty much consumed me. When I’m

married and bored, I'm sure I'll be all about that nosy, gossipy life."

"Bitch, you already are about that life," I say with a chuckle, shaking my head.

She giggles. "Okay, you're right."

We finish the rest of the wedding favors and then head out to the dress shop for a fitting.

"Oh, my God, you look breathtaking," I murmur as Taryn does a little twirl. The pure-white fitted satin gown is very minimal and suits my best friend. A simple veil on top of her head complements the dress well.

She looks down at herself. "You think?"

"Absolutely, babe."

"Yours fits perfect, too," she says, gesturing to the black fitted silky dress with the spaghetti straps. It hugs my curves and is so simple and elegant. Even I'm getting butterflies looking at the two of us in the mirror. She must be downright giddy.

"Carter's gonna have his breath stolen when you walk down that aisle, girl," I comment, adjusting the veil so it's perfect.

"You think?" she asks, hope shining in her eyes.

"Of course," I assure her.

I am, of course, a little jealous. I hope my time will come, and I hope it's with her brother. After last night, he's all I can think about. I'm deliciously sore where he plowed into me over and over, making me lose count of the orgasms. He'd gone down on me twice more, his tongue a magical entity all on its own. He said he'd call me today, and I've yet to hear from him, but I refuse to get all clingy and obsessive. He'll call when he's ready. I notice he likes to talk on the phone more than texting, and I'm sure I can figure out why. I won't sit and analyze that right now, though, as this day is Taryn's.

After we change back into our clothes, the dress shop attendant takes our dresses and tells us she'll see us in a few weeks for another fitting.

"I need food," she says.

"Of course," I reply. "Chinese?"

"Heck yes," she answers.

I'm secretly glad I'm her only wedding attendant. The affair itself isn't planned to be grandiose by any stretch of the imagination, but it's not small and intimate either. But they each only wanted Eric and me to stand up for them, and I'm selfishly grateful for that. They both have other friends but wanted to keep it simple.

Over lunch, we chat about last-minute things, the bachelorette party, and how excited she is for her honeymoon in Bora Bora. I'm thoroughly jealous and am brought back to my fantasy of having Eric fuck me on the balcony of some tropical locale while we stare into each other's eyes, so in love.

A wistful sigh I didn't mean to expel slips out, and Taryn gives me a confused look.

"What?" I ask.

"What was that for?" she asks.

I debate telling her how I'm feeling, and because it's not fair to her, I opt for something not quite the truth but not a lie, either. "Just so happy for you, and hope I'm next."

She immediately squeezes my hand. "You will be. If not Eric, someone else."

But I don't want anyone else. Four weeks of dating and I already know he's "the one"—but I won't tell her that. I can't risk her telling her brother my feelings and fantasies, so for now, I keep them to myself.

My phone dings and I tap the screen to see a text preview on the locked screen.

Eric: *WYD?*

I frown at the greeting, but tell myself to stop it. At least he contacted me.

“What’s wrong?” Taryn asks at my expression.

“Your brother sucks at texting.” I show her the screen.

She laughs. “I can’t believe he’s using text slang. I guess he’s trying. He rarely texted before... you know.” She looks around as if anyone in the restaurant gives a crap that her brother’s a convict. “So, consider it an upgrade.”

I laugh. “Okay, if you say so. I don’t mind talking on the phone. His voice is soooo sexy.”

She drops her chopsticks and says, “Stop it.”

We both burst out laughing. But it’s true. It’s deep, and sinful, and when he whispers in my ear, my panties are punished with a flood. I keep that to myself, though.

I decide to reply to his text anyway.

Me: *Lunch w/your sis.*

After lunch, we say our goodbyes, and each head home. It’s Saturday night and she and Carter are going out for dinner to can discuss wedding stuff.

My phone rings as soon as I get inside my little house and close the door. I smile when I see Eric calling. “Hello, sexy.”

“Well, hello, sexy yourself,” he replies in that sinful voice of his.

My nipples harden, which is a common occurrence when I hear him or see him. “What are you up to?”

I glance at the clock to see it’s nearing 5 p.m.

“Worked out, played some hoops with a few guys, grabbed a wrap for lunch. How was your day with Taryn? Get your wedding stuff done?”

We chat like this for a few minutes, and he’s being so sweet I can’t stand it. I usually go for the bad boys—and admittedly I assumed he was one, my bad—but this sweetness is winning me over too.

“You got plans tonight?” I ask casually.

“Not really. You?”

I shake my head. “Nope. Why don’t you come over and I’ll cook for you?”

“That sounds amazing, gorgeous. What time?”

“How about seven? I have the perfect meal in mind and I need to pop to the store real fast for a couple things.”

“Want me to pick them up on my way and we can make it earlier?” he asks, hopeful.

Melt.

With a little chuckle, I reply, “No, it’s okay. I got this. See you at seven.”

“You got it,” he replies.

I end the call, grab my purse from where I’d dropped it on the entryway table, and get back in my car, excited for the night.

Eric leans back in the dining room chair and puts his hand on his belly. “Dammit, woman. I went way over my calories for the day. But it was worth it.”

I smirk at his empty plate, proud he loved it.

Anything’s better than prison food...

Shut up, Christa!

“I have dessert for later, too,” I comment. “Since you’re already over your calories for the day, anyway. Not that I think you need to count calories.”

He chuckles. “Oh, yes, I do. I’d be a big chubby guy if I didn’t.”

I shrug. “Nothing wrong with a big teddy bear to lay down with at night.”

His smile falters as he stares at me. “Seriously?”

“Sure, why not? How someone treats you is more important than looks, not that I would be turned off if you were a little pudgy.” My gaze roams from his face to his chest, to his lap, then back up. “Not that you are anything close.”

Unlike me, I want to say, but don’t because guys hate that shit.

He chuckles. “Well, thank you, gorgeous.” He gets up and pulls me to stand. “I love your sexy body,” he whispers.

A chill causes goosebumps to pepper my skin. “I’m glad you like it.”

I’ve always been so self-conscious about my body. I have those thick Latina hips and ass, passed down to me by my father’s side of the family—not that my White mother was a skinny thing. Thick hips as well, which my dad likes to remind everyone almost nauseatingly as to why he married her.

“I want to see it,” he murmurs in my ear, nipping my earlobe with his teeth, causing a shudder to ripple down my spine.

“You sure you don’t want to chill for a bit, let our food settle?” I gesture lazily to the couch, my panties already soaked, making a liar out of me at that suggestion.

“Sexercise is better,” he whispers in my ear, and I’m about to go nuclear with desire.

“You’re right,” I agree, grabbing his hand and dragging him to my bedroom.

We tear each other’s clothes off, but then slow down. I’m disappointed at first, but begin to love the delicious buildup. After a lot of kissing and touching, he puts on protection and then slides into me, and we roll slowly together, kissing and touching.

“You’re so beautiful,” he says in my ear through lazy thrusts.

I want to tell him I’m in love with him but I won’t. It’s way too early and I don’t want to scare him, but I already

know this. It's crazy and insane but this right here is the best feeling in the world.

He slides an arm under my shoulders and begins to quicken his pace, my legs spread wide to accommodate his hips and huge dick that fits perfectly inside me.

“God, you feel so good, Christa,” he murmurs, causing a climax to roll through me and me to whimper.

He stares down at me as we lock eyes. Then, he stiffens, groaning as he closes his eyes and comes inside me. I wish we didn't have the condom between us and make a mental note to get on some kind of contraception so it won't have to be.

After he rolls off and discards the condom, he holds me in his arms and we talk a little bit, before he kisses my forehead and we fall asleep together.

My heart is full. And I hope his is, too.

Four

Eric

Most of this stuff is coming back to me. The stretches, the exercise, and the therapy in general. I have to tell myself to be patient with the doctors “training” me. Yes, I had only had my license for two years before the day that destroyed lives, but I do remember a lot of it. So much has changed though, that I want to learn it. Unfortunately, I’m now a physical therapy assistant and not a physical therapist since the state won’t renew my license due to my criminal history. Declan, the assistant hospital administrator and one of Carter’s closest friends, seems to think if I pay my dues for a couple of years, and do a good job, along with some volunteer work, I could petition the state to reinstate my license, especially since my crime wasn’t related to my job. He explained that other doctors who’ve been convicted of felonies, such as prescribing narcotics that killed people, will never get their license renewed after serving time. I was just simply at a bar and phone-distracted while on that dark road that horrible night,

“Be prepared for the patient to hiss or wince. After a surgery like that, they are very tender. And made worse by the fact that they’re usually young, active sports players who just want to get back in the game,” Dr. Turner, my supervisor here says. “But we’ll have you on the geriatric floor doing PT for those folks as well, mostly hip replacement patients, things like that.”

“Okay,” I reply, not sure what else to say. I don’t want to work on hip replacement patients, but I have zero say. I’m lucky Declan helped me get a state license to be a PT assistant and then hired me here. If I have to help an old geezer after a hip or knee replacement, I’ll do it and be grateful to have a job.

Before the incident, I had aspirations to work for a major sports team. I didn’t care which one—football, baseball, hockey. We have stellar teams in Denver, and I wanted to be one of their private PT doctors. I dreamed of getting paid to

watch a live professional sport while I waited around “in case” someone got hurt, and when they did, I’d rush onto the field, or the ice, and be one of the heroes.

But I’m not a hero. In fact, I’m little more than a zero.

Dr. Turner brings me to another patient as I’m shadowing him during his rounds, and he explains another injury from another young patient. This time, a college kid of only twenty who snapped his wrist during a forceful slide into home plate.

“How ya doin’, buddy?” the doc asks.

The kid eyes me, then looks back at the doctor. “I’m fine. When can I leave? The food here sucks ass.”

We both chuckle. “I hear ya. One more night for observation, then six weeks in the cast.”

“Fuck. I’m out for the season,” he groans.

The doctor nods. “Yes, you are, but if you heal up, you’ll be fine for next year. Might need to wear a wrist brace to protect those delicate bones when you’re sliding home.” The doctor smirks.

“Were you at least safe?” I ask, pointing to his cast and how he got it.

The kid is not amused and scowls at the doctor, then at me. “No.”

I smile at him. “Hang in there, man. Six weeks will go by quicker than you know.”

Which reminds me of Christa. That’s about the amount of time we’ve been together, and I am utterly addicted to the dark-haired beauty.

We leave the room and I continue to make rounds with him, taking notes on things I didn’t know or had forgotten. By the end of the day, I’m exhausted and want out of these scrubs. I’m also starving. Thin crust sounds amazing right now and I can have four slices and stay within my calories.

I pull out my phone and text Christa: *Pizza?*

After retrieving my backpack from my locker, I head to the elevators when my phone buzzes.

Christa: *I'm gonna be as big as a house if I keep hanging out with you!*

I chuckle.

Me: *Then come to the gym with me! NOT THAT YOU NEED IT.*

Hope the caps emphasize my point that I love her just how she is.

Christa: *Exercise is bad for you.*

My brow furrows. I type a reply.

Me: *What do you mean?*

Christa: *Everyone I know who works out has bad knees, bad hips, bad backs, etc. They go mountain biking and fall and hurt themselves. They run marathons and sprain an ankle. They lift weights and drop one on their foot. I'll stick to my lunchtime walks with my boss ;)*

I laugh a snort, startling the guy sharing the elevator with me.

Me: *Pizza it is then, hater!*

Christa: *Your place or mine?*

Me: *Mine. See you @ 6, gorgeous!*

She puts a “heart” reaction on my last text and I smile. I forgot the new phones could do that.

I'm freshly showered and waiting for the pizza guy to arrive. I ordered wings and breadsticks too, in case she wanted that. I'm still getting to know her tastes. From what I've seen, she's not picky, and has only expressed a dislike of mushrooms and mustard.

The doorbell rings and I race to it to find both the pizza guy and my girl. The guy is looking at her like she's dessert and I want to knock his teeth in.

“Hello, gorgeous,” I greet, grabbing her hand and kissing it before I even acknowledge the guy.

“Hi,” she says, batting her long eyelashes up at me. “Pizza’s here.” She juts her thumb over her shoulder as she makes herself comfortable in my home.

I pay the guy cash, including tip, and close the door more forcefully than I need to.

“You okay?” Christa asks, taking off her sweater. She wears black yoga pants and a tight red tank top that shows off her every curve, the swell of her breasts begging to be licked.

“Don’t you know when you’re being flirted with and ogled?” I ask her, rubbing a hand along the back of my neck and trying to sound cool but I’m not.

She stares at me confused, her brown eyes wide. “You think he was flirting with me?”

“Who wouldn’t?” I ask, grabbing paper plates from the top of the microwave because I hate doing dishes, even though Christa loads my dishwasher ninety percent of the time.

She slithers up behind me, puts both arms on my chest, and rests her head against my back. “Well, I didn’t notice because I only have eyes for your blue ones.”

I turn around and stare down at her to see she’s absolutely sincere. “Well, I appreciate that. I can be kind of... jealous. Not sure if that’s the right word.”

She laughs and starts opening boxes. “Well, if I saw a woman flirting with you, I’d go apeshit.”

That surprises me. “Why?”

“Because you’re mine,” she whispers, circling her arms around my waist while I stare into her eyes.

“Am I?” I breathe.

She nods, capturing her bottom lip into her mouth. “Yes. I think I’ve proven that to you.”

“I guess we should have ‘the talk’ then?” I ask with air quotes and head to the dining room table. My stomach feels

like it's chewing on my backbone I'm so hungry.

She lifts a shoulder. "If you want to. I'm not seeing anyone else, and I just got on the pill a couple of weeks ago so you can raw dog me."

I choke on the sip of water I just took from a bottle. "Raw dog?"

"Yeah, you know. Ride me bareback? No rubbers?"

"Yes, I get it. Never heard that term before," I reply with a chuckle. "I can't wait to raw dog you."

"Two more weeks," she replies. "Gotta be on the stupid pill a month."

"Bummer," I say. "Let's eat and then we can play."

She waggles her eyebrows. "It's a date."

We don't finish eating, barely a slice each. The electricity crackling between us when we're in the same room is too much. We're like magnets, cosmically pulled to one another and unable to keep our hands off each other. Just seeing the way that pizza guy looked at her made my knuckles itch.

I drag her to the bedroom, and we proceed to spend two hours "playing" until we're both exhausted. I barely have the energy to get up and put the food away before slogging back to bed to hold my girl in my arms.

She's already asleep by the time I get back in bed and doesn't stir when I slip between the sheets and gather her in my arms. She breathes evenly, and her black hair is splayed out on my chest where I'd pulled it out of its complicated ponytail earlier. I love it when she wears her hair down, it just makes her look all that more pretty and exotic.

I play with it between my fingers as I watch her sleep. She looks so peaceful and content, and I'd give anything to sleep that soundly. My nightmares have awoken her before, which are always embarrassing and upsetting. I wish I could make them stop. Anne says they should dissipate over time but I'm not so sure about that. I do admit to sleeping better when Christa's here. She keeps the horrors out of my head, for the

most part, and I find the only nightmares I have when she's here are ones about monsters—human ones and supernatural ones—coming to get her. It upsets me in my dream because they should be coming for me, not her. She's perfect and good and I'm the monster who deserves to be tortured. I try to distract them, to get them to chase me so I can lure them away, but they are always after her, and something in my dream stops me from saving her. It's the worst, most helpless feeling in the world, and I'm always startled awake when the monsters get to her.

I softly kiss the top of her head and rub circles on her tattooed shoulder, tired but not sleepy enough yet. Being alone in my thoughts is not a good thing, but I'm learning to cope with them. I remember my nightmares and wonder what I would do if someone came after Christa for any reason. I would probably tear everything apart and get myself locked up again to keep her safe. I have no reason except my own irrational insecurities that anyone or anything would want to hurt her. She's just a paralegal from a good, loving family who completes me. She really should be more discerning with men, but I'm selfishly happy she's chosen me, when I don't deserve any part of her love.

I hope one day I'll feel worthy of it, because now I don't. I'll just greedily take what she gives me and hope that I can reciprocate the love and tenderness she shows me. Otherwise, it'll be a cold day in hell before I let anyone else touch her because she's fucking mine.

Five

Christa

Waking up in his arms is the best feeling ever, and I stare up at him, loving how peaceful he looks when he sleeps.

“Good morning,” he murmurs after his eyelashes flutter open.

“Did you feel me watching you?” I ask.

“I’m used to it,” he replies.

At first, I’m confused by this, but then I realize what he means. “Care to talk about it?”

“Nope,” he replies.

I rub circles on his chest with my red-painted nail, and lift my gaze to his. “You know you can share anything with me. I won’t judge.”

“I just want to put that part of my life behind me. What I did... my time locked up... I wish I could just forget about it all. Prison stories aren’t as exciting as you think they are.”

I frown. “I didn’t think they were. I just wanted to let you know that if you needed to vent or even share a story, no matter how boring it is, I’ll listen, and I promise to keep it to myself.”

“That’s what my therapist is for,” he says. “You, gorgeous, are for keeping my bed warm and my heart full.”

“I can live with that,” I reply, finding my smile again.

I slide my hand down his chest and grip his morning wood, stroking it softly.

He lets out a low groan and kisses me. My legs part as he finds me wet for him, and it only takes a few minutes for both of us to get each other off with just our hands. Afterward, we laugh like a couple of kids and then shower together.

“I can’t believe you dragged me on a hike,” I huff, throwing daggers with my gaze at Eric as we reach the top of the crest. My new blue Nikes are coated red with dirt, and I silently pray it will come out in the wash. With my hands on my knees, I try to regulate my breathing.

“Wimp,” he replies, setting his backpack down in front of a large rock before sitting on it. He pulls two water bottles from the side pocket and hands me one. “Hydrate, grumpy.”

I say nothing as I snatch it from him, pop the lid open, and take a swig. The cold water feels glorious as it slides down my throat.

“We only have another mile to go to get to the top. Isn’t that exciting?” he asks.

“Don’t push it,” I murmur, drinking more water. It’s so dry and warm, I feel like I’m in the desert.

“Slow down, don’t gulp too fast.”

“Fine,” I say, flipping the lid closed and handing him back the bottle to replace in the backpack he carries. Since he insisted on a hike, he can do the heavy lifting.

“Want a bar?” He tosses me a Kind bar.

“I hate nuts, but I’m so hungry I’m gonna eat it anyway.” I tear open the package and bite into the fruit, nut, and chocolate. I shouldn’t have skipped breakfast.

He chuckles in response and watches me.

I look up into the sky to see the sun is directly overhead, which means it’s about noon. Mid-April weather is hit or miss in Colorado, and it’s still chilly, but the exercise is gratefully making it feel warmer. What I’m not grateful for is how thin the air is.

“It’s hard to breathe,” I parrot my inner thoughts.

Without a word, he rummages into his pack and hands me a green can. I read the label: *Portable Oxygen Cannister*.

“Pull off the lid and suck,” he instructs.

I obey, and immediately feel better and less grumpy. “You thought of everything.”

“Not my first rodeo. C’mon, let’s finish this.” He indicates for me to hand him the oxygen, but I refuse.

“I’m gonna hold onto this. Unless you need it?”

He shakes his head. “No. I’m good.”

Showoff.

We continue our trek up through the red dirt path of the mountain, and I ask, “So when you say let’s finish this, you mean a rich man in a helicopter is gonna whisk down and give us a ride back down the mountain? Because it feels like once we reach the top, we’re only halfway done with the hike.”

He chuckles, and says, “No, hiking down is the easy part. It’s the uphill that’s rough.”

Narrowing my eyes at him, I say, “I don’t believe you. Don’t you have rich friends? Don’t any of them own a helicopter we could charter?”

He stops his hike and turns to me. I try not to laugh at the flaps draping down from his hat that cover his ears and neck, or the ascot-looking handkerchief thing around his neck. “You really hate this?”

Do I?

I mean, I could think of a hundred different ways we could spend time together, but this much physical exertion isn’t it.

“No,” I lie. “As long as I can spend time with you, it’s all good. I’m just... ah, out of shape.”

He draws me in close, our warm bodies flush. “Well, I happen to love your shape.” Then, he kisses my nose and waves. “C’mon. We’re almost there.”

I flush at the feel of his lips on me, albeit briefly, and keep hiking. I’m using a large stick I found to help me keep my footing because I’m clumsy as hell.

“Look, I can see the top!” He points and I shield my eyes with the flat of my hand while I look up. We’re getting close

and I see snow at the peak. Which explains why I'm less sweaty and almost cold.

"Yay," I mutter sarcastically so he can't hear it. I go to take a step again and stumble, falling onto my knee. I cry out.

"Oh, my God, Christa!" Eric rushes over as I'm humiliated, on the ground, covered in dirt. My knee throbs and stings, and I pant, noticing the can of oxygen has rolled away from me when I put my hands out to brace my fall. I look to see a large rock tripped me, and I silently curse nature and basically all of Colorado.

Without a word, Eric unzips his pack and pulls out a first-aid kit. He pours something on the gash that stings and causes me to hiss, then gently wipes it away with a disposable cloth. Then, he dresses the wound with a large bandage.

"Can you stand?" he asks after putting the kit away. He holds his hand out, and I grab it.

"Yes, it's just a scrape. I'm fine. But like I told you—"

"Exercise is bad, I know."

We both laugh and he hugs me. "We can head back down now. I can see how much you hate this."

"I don't... hate it. Just not used to it."

With his arm around me, he points off into the distance. "You see those cables?"

I squint to where he points. I hadn't noticed before, but there are lines leading from the top of the mountain and disappearing through a cloud bank going south. When I squint, I see small cars attached to the lines, like a ski lift.

"Yes! What is that?"

"I was going to surprise you and tell you that we don't have to hike down. We can take a gondola lift down to a mostly flat area. I mean, it'll be about a quarter mile walk back to the car, but it's a nice ride down. Damn beautiful view. But..."

“But what? Let’s go!” I say, grabbing the sleeve of his Under Armor shirt.

“But we have to get to the top before we reach it. Can you still hike?” he asks, scooping some hair that escaped my ponytail to loop it behind my ear.

I roll my eyes. “It’s just a scratch. Let’s go!”

I’ve got a second wind now that we have a carefree ride down the mountain. A gondola ride sounds like heaven right about now.

The breath leaves my body as we’re whooshed into the air the minute the lift’s door closes. Just the two of us, Eric’s backpack on the floor of the car that has a faint smell of vomit, but I don’t care. He slides his arm around me.

“Look at this view!” I cry, pointing at the deep canyon below us. I see nothing but trees and rock and my stomach turns. But... it’s gorgeous. “I can see the whole city from here! Hell, multiple cities!”

I turn to see Eric chuckling in my ear. “I love how excited you are. First time, I assume?”

“I didn’t even know this was here. Shit... I need to get out more.”

“I’ll make sure that happens.” He lifts his sunglasses and stares into my eyes, and I’m so mesmerized by his blue orbs that I no longer have the desire to look at the scene surrounding us. Then, he kisses me, and I lose my breath.

As our tongues mingle, our hands wander. I’m missing out on a beautiful scene, but I don’t care. Eric is all I see. My hand moves to his belt and I unbuckle it, then unbutton his khaki shorts before running the zipper down. He’s predictably hard, and reaching into his underwear, I run my thumb over the tip of his cock, loving the feel of his precum oozing out. I break the kiss and take a look around. The nearest cars are at least ten feet in front and behind us, so lower myself to the floor, using his backpack as a cushion for my poor knee, and yank down his pants and underwear. My mouth latches onto the

head of his cock, and while making eye contact, I give it a hard suck, then use my tongue to lick him from base to shaft. He moans and closes his eyes, his head craned back.

“Fuck, baby,” he murmurs.

This, of course, encourages me, so I lick some more, running my tongue over the veiny shaft and then swirling it over his cock head. He grips my ponytail like a handle and I love it. Next, I take his entire dick in my mouth, loving how it bumps the back of my throat. I hum in appreciation and his cock jerks in appreciation. More precum oozes out and I lap it up with each turn up to the top.

“I’m so close,” he groans, and I reach up to rub my nails over his balls. I follow my mouth with my fist, running it up as it chases after my lips. He becomes impossibly hard after a few strokes, and then I feel him explode into my mouth, his grunts accompanying the grip on my hair as he orgasms. I delightfully swallow and wipe the corners of my mouth with my finger as I smile up at him.

“Fuck, baby. We have like a minute before we reach the bottom.”

I turn to sit on the bench while he pulls up his shorts and zips up.

“I’m so fucking wet I’m about to start touching myself,” I whisper in his ear.

“You just wait,” he says, kissing my jaw. “I’ll make you come so many times you’re gonna beg me to stop.”

I gush some more at his words.

The quarter-mile hike down to his car is torture. Once we reach it, he instructs me into the backseat and closes the door. I’m thankful the windows are tinted dark, as a lot of other hikers are now getting in their cars to go home.

He yanks down my bike shorts and immediately dives into my pussy. With both fingers spreading me wide, he spears his tongue and in out of me, lapping up my clit each time until I start to tremble. My uterus cramps and my fingers clench his short hair as the climax builds.

“I’m gonna come,” I whimper as he latches onto me and sucks hard.

The most blinding, intense orgasm of my life rockets through me and I scream, not caring who hears.

“Fuck yeah, come on my face,” he murmurs, lapping at me like it’s his last meal.

We chat about Taryn and Carter’s upcoming wedding as we wait for the food to be delivered.

“It’s been a while since I’ve worn a monkey suit,” Eric comments, and it makes me wonder if he had to wear an orange jumpsuit every day for the last six years. The thought literally gives me nightmares. Of course, I don’t ask.

“I bet,” is all I can think to say. Thankfully, the server drops off our meals.

He smirks as we dive into our food.

“What?” I ask.

“I can’t believe you blew me in a gondola lift.”

I glance around the Indian restaurant, but nobody’s paying us any mind. “And I can’t believe you devoured me in the backseat of that tiny Audi. Between my big ass and your height, how did we even fit?”

We both laugh, and I snort so hard curry rice is almost embedded in my nose.

“I’d do it all again,” I say when I recover.

“Well, I don’t think I’ve had a mile-and-a-half-high BJ before.”

I chuckle and fork some tandoori chicken. “We’ll have to do it again. Minus the fall on the rock.”

“You mean minus the hike,” he replies, plucking lamb from his kebab.

I lift a shoulder and let it fall. “It’s fine. I know what to expect next time. Knee pads, junk sneakers, portable oxygen, a

better attitude...”

We both laugh and finish our meal in comfortable silence.

After dinner, we go for a stroll around a small lake near the restaurant. Waterfront places are rare here in Colorado, and most of the lakes are manmade in the city, but it doesn't matter. It's a beautiful walk under a clear April sky, his hand in mine.

“This has been the perfect day,” Eric says, kissing my temple as we walk.

I turn to him. “I agree. Why are you so good to me?”

He looks surprised at the question, then shrugs. “It's easy to be good to you. You're a good person. You make me happy and you aren't high-maintenance.”

I laugh at that. “Are you sure? You should see what I spend on my hair, nails, and makeup.”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “That's not what I mean. You're just... easy.” Then he starts singing, “Easy Like Sunday Morning” by Lionel Richie, and I laugh.

“Like, you're... just no fuss. You don't demand things. You don't ask about my money or my time... away. You're just you. You let me be.”

His words warm my heart. I always thought these things about me, but wondered what was wrong and started to think maybe guys didn't want those things since I'd been single so long.

“You know, Taryn told me not to hook up with you,” I admit. “Told me you'd use me and throw me away.”

He stops walking, his brows hitting his hairline. “She fucking said what?”

“I'm serious. Said she read some shit about people who just get out of... prison, and said those relationships don't last. They're just hookups. Just sex. It scared me, Eric. It still does.”

He places both hands on either side of my face. “Listen, Christa, and listen good. Taryn doesn’t know what the hell she’s talking about. Yes, it happens. It’s not all the time though. I didn’t leave that place vying for a hookup and a bunch of pussy. I knew I had a lot to fix about myself, and I certainly wasn’t looking for a relationship. You and I... we just kind of fell together. Do you know what I mean?”

I nod, completely agreeing. “Yes, I do. That’s how I feel too. Still... I worry.”

Eric leans down and places a soft kiss on my lips. Opening his eyes he says, “You don’t need to. I love what we have. I want this. You’re my person. Even if you are too good for me.”

It hurts to hear that, and no amount of words is going to make him change his mind. I’d have to prove it with actions. But the caretaker part of my personality—the part that always wants to “fix” someone—won’t let me continue to let him hurt.

“I’m not, though. I’m just a regular girl. I have a past too, you know. Maybe not as... sordid as yours, but I’m no angel.”

“Yes, you are,” he replies immediately. “One sent from heaven that I couldn’t have possibly asked to be more perfect.” He pulls me flush against his body and wraps his arms around my waist. “You’re fucking perfect and I’m never letting you go.”

It warms my entire body to hear those words. Yet, Taryn’s also rings in my ear: *“I’ll introduce you, but it won’t be for a while. I’m reading a book right now and trust me, you don’t want him fresh outta prison. Let him go find some ho to get his sex-deprivation outta his system, and when he’s ready, I’ll introduce you.”*

I hope I’m not that ho.

Six

Eric

I stand here sweating in this tuxedo. It's mid-May. Why is it so damn hot in here? We stand at a makeshift altar in this estate mansion where they chose to have this wedding. It's drop-dead gorgeous, but nothing's more beautiful than Christa standing on the other side of Taryn, in a sexy black dress and heels, her colorful tattoos a striking but gorgeous contrast against her pale skin. She catches me staring and she gives me a subtle smile and nervously adjusts the two bouquets of flowers she holds.

We've been inseparable lately, hanging out at one or the other's house after work, having sex, then leaving to go home to our respective homes. Things are moving fast and it scares me, but not enough to want it to slow down. Between kisses and lovemaking, we talk about everything. She said her mom is Irish and her dad is Mexican, and I tease her about it when she gets mad, having had no chance of skipping over a bad temper or the love of a good tequila or whiskey. I have not, myself, had a drink since I got out, except the beer I imbibed the night of my welcome home party at the Silver Breweries pub. And I'm proud of that.

Once the ceremony is over, we head to a large ballroom in the mansion for the reception. After my sister and best friend have their first dance, the emcee invites everyone to dance and I don't hesitate to grab my girl and whisk her around the dance floor. Her body is heaven against mine, and I have to think of something else so I don't embarrass myself. My dick just doesn't know how to behave when she's around.

As we dance to a love ballad, I look down at her and realize I love her. I've been fighting with myself because it's only been a few months, and I keep telling myself that it's just lust and infatuation from being deprived for so long. That I can't possibly fall in love this fast.

I have a past... a girlfriend, Laci, who I was in a relationship with the horrible night I left that bar and took a

woman's life, leaving behind a husband and a little girl whose devastated, teary blue eyes in that courtroom will haunt me for the rest of my life. Laci left me as soon as I received the six-year sentence, and I didn't bat an eye. Laci's personality could be described as vapid and only skin-deep. She was selfish and cared too much about appearances. She had made it clear several times that she thought I was good-looking and was proud to have me on her arm in public. It never went deeper than that. I thought I'd started to have feelings, but she showed her true colors when she promptly sent my sister a text asking her to "relay the message" to me. And relay it she did, when Taryn visited me in jail after my sentencing.

I couldn't even be sad. Taryn was furious but I told her to drop it and just leave Laci alone. I wouldn't expect anyone to wait for me for six years, knowing I'd come out of there a changed man. Let alone someone like her. I barely thought about her while I was inside. I learned quickly to leave the street business behind and only worry about keeping myself healthy and, well, alive and unstabbed while there.

I force awful thoughts away, and smile down at my girl. She puts her hand on my cheek. "Thought I lost you there for a minute."

"It's something you'll have to get used to, unfortunately. But I always return." I kiss her forehead.

"You know, Eric. I'm a good listener. Anytime you want to talk about anything you've been through, I will listen and not judge. I know what happened, and in great detail thanks to Taryn, so nothing you say can surprise me. I just don't bring it up because I feel like it's your story to tell."

God, could she be any more perfect?

"Thank you. Maybe one day, gorgeous." I reach a hand up and brush hair away from her face. I want to tell her I love her, but I refrain.

The emcee says something about dinner, so we sit at the head table with the couple, but I have to give a toast first.

As soon as everyone's quieted down, and the champagne has been served, I tap my spoon against my glass and stand. Someone appears out of nowhere and hands me a microphone.

Keep it together, man. Do not choke up.

Why am I so damn sensitive all the time? I didn't used to be like this. I was so hard in prison. Never shed a tear past the initial night, when I vowed I wouldn't fucking cry ever again.

I clear my throat and begin. "Carter, my man. You know I wasn't exactly happy with you dating my little sister."

The wedding party and some of the guests chuckle.

"But after I put away my own selfishness, I realized you two were made for each other. You always were." I look out at the crowd. "You should have heard the way Taryn talked about my best friend here during our high school years. She was just a little squirt, always trying to get Carter's attention." I smirk at my sister, then Carter, and my face sobers. "I guess she finally did." She stares at Carter with such love her in eyes, I could never stay mad at either one of them. "Taryn, Carter, you two deserve all the happiness in the world, and I wish you both a lifetime of love and joy. Hear, hear!" I lift my glass as everyone claps. I don't sip the alcohol when everyone else does, and I look down to see Christa with tears glistening in her eyes.

Aw, man. She's gonna make me lose it, too.

I sit and slide my glass toward hers, picking up my water instead. She squeezes my hand under the table and I squeeze hers back before leaning down and placing a soft kiss her on her lips.

I love you.

After spending an intense and frankly amazing night together, Christa leaves to go collect things from the mansion and drop them off at Taryn's place, as she and Carter are off to their honeymoon.

"You sure you don't want some help?" I ask.

She shakes her head. “No. I’ve got a whole team over there already. Go to the gym, I know you want to.” She smirks.

She’s not wrong.

“Okay,” I say with a chuckle.

I kiss her goodbye and watch her drive off in her little blue BMW that is for sure a chick’s car.

After taking my pre-workout drink, I drive to the gym, check in, choose the squat bar, and set my things down, and then strap on my back support. I look around the gym, grateful for such a nice place to work out. The prison yard had one set of weights held down by cable ties and were often confiscated or locked up when the inmates would misbehave. I shake my head at the memories of us filling up trash bags with water or rocks and tying them to the ends of broom handles during those times so we wouldn’t miss a workout. I even taught a few guys proper ways to work out, and was rewarded with commissary items. A few of them got super buff, and I wondered if I hadn’t made a mistake in helping them. They could one day turn on me, after all. Thankfully, that never happened. Aside from a tense confrontation on my first day with the leader of the Whites, where I had to prove I wasn’t a sex offender, I did okay, but I was more or less forced to only associate with my race. It absolutely sucked. I had a friendship with a Black guy who was in for almost the same thing as me, and we’d talk to each other while working out, but that was about it. I hoped he was doing okay, as two people had died as a result of his drunk driving and his sentence was much longer. I shake my head to clear it of the ridiculous and petty prison politics, glad I won’t ever have to go back there.

Someone taps me on the shoulder and says something to me, so I remove the earbud that’s playing loud metal because it helps motivate me, and smile. “Yeah?”

He’s a big dude, and could stand to cut back on the carbs, but massive anyway. “Can you spot me?”

I nod, take a swig of water, and shove my earbud into my pocket so I can hear him if he says anything. He lies down on

the bench and asks for 300 pounds, and after I oblige, I carefully lift the massively heavy bar and hand it to him.

“You good?” I ask, before lifting my hand off the bar.

He grunts, but slowly lifts, then hands the bar to me.

“...whose wife was the victim of a deadly drunk driving accident, was found dead in his home earlier today. The cause of death is not being released at the request of the family. Mr. Stamp leaves behind an eleven-year-old daughter.” A photo of him and her when she was about the age her mom died is up on the screen.

I snap my attention to the TV and almost drop the bar. The guy sits up and says, “Whoa! Give me that.” He places it back on the rack safely.

I assume. I’m not watching him. My eyes and ears are glued to the news. Without my permission, tears spring to my eyes.

Terrence Stamp is dead. I killed his wife and now he’s dead too, and it doesn’t sound like it was an accident. I literally want to throw up.

I’ve widowed a child, and while her life was already altered after her mom died, she’s now pretty much good and truly fucked.

I snatch my things and race out of the gym, where I sit in the driver’s seat of my car and fucking sob.

I’m not sure how long I sit there, but when I can finally see through the blur of tears, I wipe them away and speed home.

Pay attention to the road. Don’t be distracted, I tell myself. *This is how you screwed yourself seven years ago.*

I slow down and do the breathing exercises my therapist taught me.

My therapist. I have to call her immediately.

Or do I?

Fuck that. She’s just going to tell me it’s not my fault, blah blah blah. No. I think a bottle of whiskey sounds better.

I stop by the liquor store and buy a bottle of Jack, take it home, and drink it straight from the bottle.

I'm one hundred percent triggered. Anne told me to be careful about triggers, it only takes one to start drinking again. She knows I wasn't exactly a heavy alcoholic—more like a heavy social drinker—but she told me it was important I stayed away and kept my mind and body strong. And I agreed with her. But she was also right about the trigger.

“Oh, God... that poor kid,” I mumble, sitting on the sofa in my little condo. “I can't do this. What if she's next? What if she grows up, or even before she's grown, and takes her own life, or starts doing heavy drugs to drown out the pain? It will all be my fault. I can't live with that.

My phone rings. It's Christa. I decline the call. I refuse to let her see or hear me like this. She doesn't deserve this ugly, blubbering human I've become. In fact, I don't deserve her at all. She's too good and pure and beautiful and perfect, and I'm just a fucked-up piece of shit who will never pay his penance. Six years in prison and losing everything wasn't enough.

I should be dead, too. It's the only retribution I deserve.

The phone rings again, and it's Carter. Why the hell is he calling from his honeymoon?

I want to decline the call but curiosity and the pathetic need for the comfort of my best friend who knows me better than anyone overtakes me.

“Yeah.”

“I was calling to see if you heard the news... I guess the answer's yes.”

“Go back to your honeymoon,” I grouse.

“No, Taryn and I are flying home tonight to be with you.”

I stand up and slam the bottle on the table with enough force to have some slosh out onto my coffee table. “Absolutely not. If you come home, I'll be gone. You hear me? Stay in fucking Bora Bora, there's absolutely nothing you can do for me.”

“Taryn’s worried, man. Please go stay with a friend, or Christa. You shouldn’t be alone. We—”

“Shut up. I’m fine. I’m not gonna do anything,” I lie. I still haven’t decided.

“Eric,” Taryn says, her voice shaky. “Honey, please. I’m so worried about you.”

I close my eyes, not wanting my sister’s sympathy, it’s making me feel worse. “I’m fine, Tar. I didn’t kill the guy,” I lie again. Unless he had some freak household accident, he either overdosed or took his life, judging by the fact they won’t say how he died.

“But you’re not,” she replies.

“Stay on your honeymoon. Have a mai-tai for me. And turn off the fucking news or internet or whatever you guys are watching. Shouldn’t you be fucking like rabbits, not paying attention to the news?” I meant it in jest but it just came out bitterly.

“The TV was on in the bar—”

“You know what... whatever. Please have a good time. I’ll text you once a day that I’m fine. Okay?”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” I reply, ending the call and throwing the phone across the room.

“Fuck!” I scream.

I sit down and contemplate what to do. I know deep down I can’t take my own life. I can’t do that to Carter and Taryn. They truly care about me.

And what about Christa? Would she care? Doesn’t matter. She’s too good for me, and deserves a man who doesn’t fucking kill people.

I can’t go on like this. I have to do something. Prison and the hefty fine wasn’t enough, they didn’t do anything. They won’t bring that little girl’s parents back.

A conversation I heard around the water cooler at work comes back to me. Six men and women were leaving for Africa with the Doctors Around the World organization. I'd lost my doctorate license, and still had hopes to get it back, but I could help. I could do something—anything.

Seven

Eric

Two months later

Kenya, Africa

Here, I can actually breathe. I have a purpose. Nobody knows I'm a murderer. I'm just *daktari*, or dak for short. Doctor. Doc.

"Dak, my leg better!" A little girl looks up at me with a big white smile. Her shiny dark skin reflects the sun streaming into the tent.

"That's great, Afia. And it'll continue to get better if you eat your vegetables and drink a lot of water, okay? You'll grow up big and strong!" I pull up my arm in a muscle man pose and flex my bicep.

She giggles and hobbles off on her makeshift crutch.

"Eric, we just got in a trauma case, please come help me," says Dr. Jack Alsworth.

"You got it, boss."

I follow him to a room where there's a young boy, no older than ten, lying on a stretcher. One of the nurses injects him with what I assume is morphine and his whimpers and cries slowly fade, and he passes out, his dark cheeks stained white with salty tears.

I gasp as I look down at his ankle. It's facing in an odd direction and the bone is protruding, but hasn't broken the skin.

"Fuck," I curse.

Jack gives me a look. He doesn't allow cursing and honestly, I need to stop. These young ears pick up on everything. These children are learning English and I don't need to be the one who teaches them the F-word. Thankfully, it's just American and British adults in here at the moment, along with the patient.

“Fell off his motorbike that he wasn’t supposed to be riding. It landed on top of him after he snapped his ankle in the fall.”

I see large scrapes up and down his leg and some on his forearm where he must have put his arm up to break his fall. Poor kid.

“Set the foot, then we’ll try to cast it,” Jack instructs.

I look at him, incredulous. “You want *me* to set it?”

“Are you not a DPT?” he asks, referring to my doctorate certification of physical therapy.

“I was...” I answer.

“No,” he snaps. “You’re still a doctor. Pieces of paper don’t mean anything, especially over here. Or have you forgotten how to simply reset a bone?”

He’s got a point.

“No, sir. I absolutely have not forgotten. I just thought maybe you wanted to do it.”

He puts both hands on my shoulders and stares at me with intense brown eyes. “No. I want you to do it, Eric, and I’m going to watch. Not that I think you need supervision.”

It warms me to hear he trusts me. He’s been kind of busting my balls since I got here, and I took every whip and lashing because I deserved it. And I still do.

“You got it.”

“He completely out?” I ask the nurse, an older lady with a brown ponytail in dirty blue scrubs holding the needle.

She nods.

“One, two, three,” I say, then I forcefully twist the joint so it’s facing the right way. The boy doesn’t flinch, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I cannot imagine the blinding pain that would have caused if he was conscious.

I feel around the ankle and foot, and all bones seem to be in their place, except I can feel the break in the ankle bone.

“X-ray machine, please.”

The nurse scurries off and comes back wheeling a small, portable X-ray machine. The thing is a piece of shit compared to what we have in Denver, honestly, but beggars can't be choosers. I set his ankle on the machine and can make out the break. I shove his foot up a few inches so the breaks are lined up and put his foot back on the cot.

Another new doctor is watching, so I say, “Hey, what's your name?”

“Clive,” he replies.

“Clive, hold his foot just like this. Don't move until I get back.”

“You got it, mate,” he replies in a strong English accent, young and eager.

I help the nurse get plaster and strips of cloth together. She fetches a bowl of water that doesn't exactly look sterile, but again, I have to take what I can get. It's just being used to wet the strips anyway.

She fetches iodine and while Clive holds the foot, we slather the boy's foot in the orange antiseptic and then begin wrapping it up in a crude cast from toe to mid-calf, leaving his toes exposed to allow circulation.

“Treat those cuts and scrapes with antibiotic ointment, please,” I instruct the nurse. She nods and gets to work.

“Good job,” I tell everyone. I look over to see Jack standing there with a proud gleam in his eye. He nods once at me, and I swallow down a smile of pride.

I lie in bed and turn on my little clip-on reading light, a medical book in my hands. My living quarters are in a tent. I have next to no privacy, just some kind of makeshift walls that remind me of office cubicles. I have a bed and a dresser here, and we all share a bathroom.

I don't complain because again, I deserve to be uncomfortable. I deserve to be here, helping people and saving

lives. It's the least I can do. It's sort of my sentence for another life lost because of me.

My first week here I helped save two patients from dying from cardiac arrest. The AED machine is old, but it did the trick. It helped to heal my black heart to know I'd made a small difference.

And I continue to do so. I don't know how long I'll be here, but I'll stay until I feel like I deserve happiness and love. Right now, I don't. The crushing guilt over Mr. Stamp and his orphaned daughter haunts me.

This was how I felt in prison. Every night the little girl's blue eyes would haunt my dreams. I had nightmares about her dad sneaking into my cell and stabbing me. It took a couple of years inside that place for the nightmares to stop. Or maybe they hadn't. Maybe I just got used to them—knew I deserved them, and learned to live with them. Guilt and shame over distracted driving and not paying attention after a fun night out with the guys that had cost a woman her life.

“Distracted driving is just as bad as driving chemically impaired,” the judge lectured me at my sentencing hearing. *“Mix them together and it's a recipe for disaster. I sentence you to six years in a Colorado State correctional facility, with no possibility of parole until at least five years.”*

I close my eyes and try to shake off the judge's haunting words that plagued me every single day of my incarceration. But while there, I never denied what I did. When another convict would ask me what I did, I was completely honest. Some felt sympathy, others were disgusted. And rightly so. After all, what I did was disgusting. I was never bullied for it though, since a lot of them were in there for much more heinous things. The Whites would try to make me join in while “punishing” some of them with locks in socks and beatings to the body, avoiding the head and face so the staff wouldn't see. But I always refused. One of their beatings resulted in a death. I knew who'd killed the pedophile, I just played dumb when asked by the staff. His murder was still “unsolved” when I left.

I do not like thinking about those days. No matter what he did, it was disturbing to watch a man die, to see a human take his last bloody, frothy breath. To listen to his screams in the next cubicle until they were nothing but a gurgling cry that eventually stopped.

I blow out a breath and open the medical book. A lot of this stuff I already know, but my training in first-aid was brief as I was studying sports medicine. I didn't think I would need it, but I do here. Every one of us is a "dak" here and is expected to be able to treat everything from a scraped knee to a lung infection. Thankfully there are other doctors and nurses here who are more skilled at spotting that stuff, since our equipment is practically prehistoric.

I glance at the cell phone on my small dresser. It's plugged in to charge, but that generally takes all night, so I plug it in before I sleep. However, being the glutton for punishment I am, I reach for it and power it on to read over the texts.

Christa: *I hate you for leaving without saying goodbye.*

Christa: *I thought we had something, and you just left. I could have helped you through your pain, but you just left. You're a fucking coward, Eric.*

Christa: *I'm sorry for my last text. You're not a coward. I'm just hurting. I miss you so much. Can't we talk?*

I close my eyes and power down the phone. Yes, I want to talk to her. To hear her sweet voice, her boisterous laugh, her soft sighs. But I can't. She needs to move on from me and find a guy who isn't a murderer, because she's right. I *am* a coward. I couldn't face anyone so I ran away here to try to catch my breath and try to make amends for what I did to the Stamp family. Christa needs to forget about me, and just ghosting her calls and texts is best. Besides, the cell service over here is pathetic at best, and we pay by the minute on these phones designed specifically for the very few cell providers offered here in Kenya.

With the book open on my chest, I fold my hands over the top of it and close my eyes, picturing Christa's beautiful smile and her soft, curvy body with my hands around it. I sigh,

remembering her sweet kisses and the warmth of her chocolate-brown eyes with the little yellow flecks in the center. Her full red lips and the tiny smattering of freckles on her nose that only I could see because only I got that close to her face.

Her beautiful pierced pink nipples and her creamy flat stomach. Those thick, juicy thighs I couldn't get enough of.

I drift off to sleep and dream about the girl I can never have again because she's worthy of better. She deserves the world and I deserve hell.

Eight

Christa

Annoyed, I turn around to my boss. “What, Melinda? I’m busy.”

I immediately regret my snap, but I can’t care. She can fire me if she wants. Nothing matters.

“I’ll come back later, it can wait,” she replies, looking hurt as she turns to leave my office.

I immediately get up, cringing at how loose my pencil skirt is. It was skintight before Eric left, my curves filling it all in. Twenty pounds are gone in the past two months, all from my ass and hips. “I’m sorry, Mel. Please, stay. What do you need me to do?”

“I know I keep asking, but are you okay?” The sympathy and kindness in her eyes kills me.

“I’m fine. It’s just a breakup, I’ll live. I don’t mean to snap. I just need to get more sleep.” It’s partly true. I don’t sleep worth a shit but I’m also horribly lonely and sad while awake, and nothing makes it better. Not food, not alcohol, not girls’ night with my friends, not keeping busy. Nothing. All I can do is exist and hope this heartbreak mends soon or I might not survive.

“Have you talked to anyone, honey?” she asks in her motherly way. She’s in her fifties with thick brown hair, a kind smile, a husband of decades, older, unruly teens, and talks nonstop about retiring on a boat somewhere. Maybe she’ll take me with her.

“I’ll live. I just need to keep busy. Please tell me you have a project for me,” I reply in deflection.

She eyes me warily, wets her lips, then says, “Yes, we just took on a criminal case. It’s a home invasion robbery, but the client insists he’s not guilty. A case of mistaken identity.”

That sounds intriguing.

A lot of clients say they're innocent. Well, most of them do. When they hire us they think by being charming and manipulative, they will win us over and it'll cause us to work harder for them if we believe them as well. However, it just doesn't work like that. We're paid to defend them to the best of our ability and we're not supposed to care if they did it or not. I open the file and start browsing through the evidence.

"The client's in my office if you want to meet him."

I shrug and close the folder. "Sure, let me do that before I dive too deep into this."

Normally, I'm just the 'clerk'—paralegals aren't attorneys—but Melinda pays me well to do a little extra. I've studied law and am thinking about going to law school because this shit intrigues me, but I haven't taken the plunge yet. I really should look into it again. It's not like I have a husband and kids who need me. Might as well be a career woman at this point.

"This is Lance Johnson," she introduces, then looks at him. "And this is our best paralegal, Christa Alvarez."

I'm greeted by an attractive Black man in a sharp suit. He's got a clean haircut, warm-colored skin, and a perfectly white smile that he dazzles me with. I'm taken aback by how handsome he is, but I keep my professional mask in place. I don't miss how his gaze travels the length of my body then back up to my eyes, flirtation dancing in his.

"Hello, Ms. Alvarez. Nice to meet you." He shakes my hand and then sits only after I do in the chair next to his.

A gentleman.

Get your head in the game, Christa. He's a client.

Also, he's not Eric.

"So, I've read your file. Tell me your version of events, please," Melinda starts.

"Absolutely," he replies. "I was at my job at the bank two weeks ago when three Denver cops came in and immediately

put me under arrest. I was so confused. Not to mention embarrassed. I had no idea what was going on.

“They took me to the Jefferson County jail and booked me, fingerprinted me, stripped me out of my clothes, and put me in an orange jumpsuit, all without explaining how I’d been arrested for robbery when I’d never stolen a thing in my life.”

Typical arrest and booking process, I think to myself. “Go on, Mr. Johnson.”

“I sat there for two days, because it was a Friday when they arrested me, and some lawyer I never heard of or met before comes in and explains that a violent home invasion took place in Lakewood. I’ve never even been to Lakewood! I guess the victim picked me out of a photo lineup.”

Confused, I ask, “How did he do that? Do you have a criminal history?” They only use people who’ve been arrested and/or have been in jail and prisons for lineup photos.

“A DUI three years ago. I beat that charge too. I was a hair below the legal limit when I blew, so I got an attorney and got out of it. I didn’t hurt anyone.”

I’m reminded of Eric and push the thought away. It hurts too much.

“Did they bring you in for a physical lineup or just the photos?” Melinda asks, jotting notes as she talks.

“Just the photo, the public defender told me. Which is bullshit. Pardon my French.” He glances at me apologetically.

I force a smile. “No worries.”

“So, what can you do for me? I didn’t do this,” he says, sounding understandably distressed.

“Where were you the night of”—Melinda looks over the paperwork—“July twenty-third?”

He looks stressed again, glancing at me, then Melinda. “I was home alone. My girlfriend was out of town.”

He’s awfully flirtatious for having a girlfriend, but that’s a thought for another day.

“And no one else can vouch you were there?” she asks.

“Cops asked me the same thing. No, I was home alone.”

“It’s okay,” she soothes. “We’ll help you. Doesn’t look like they have much other than one person’s eyewitness testimony. That’s weak, at best, with no physical evidence.”

“Yeah, because I wasn’t there. I’m not a thief. I manage loans at a bank, I see my kid on the weekends, and I spend time with my girlfriend. That’s it. I’m a boring guy.” He looks frustrated and I don’t blame him, if he truly is innocent.

“I believe you,” Melinda says. And she always says that to make the client feel at ease, even if she doesn’t. “Our fee is ten thousand.”

He lets out a sigh. “It’s my whole savings, but I’ll give it to you if you keep me out of jail. One weekend was bad enough. I have no desire to revisit that shit again.”

I chuckle. “I don’t blame you.”

He stares at me intensely again. He’s definitely flirting, but I’m in no mood to be flirted with. Besides, he has a girlfriend and dating clients is absolutely forbidden.

He stands, we all shake hands, and he leaves.

“What do you think?” Melinda asks, her arms folded across her white blouse.

I chew my lip. “It’s hard to say. Did you run his record and check his financials?”

“Got ’em from the police. Everything he says checks out. Cell phone pings to his residence that night. Been an employee at Mountain Bank for four years. Has a three-year-old daughter he sees on weekends. Girlfriend is not the mother. She’s a flight attendant, gone a lot. Has eleven thousand in his savings.”

“Doesn’t sound like a petty thief,” I concur.

“Guess you didn’t read the whole file...”

“What?” I ask.

She pierces me with an intense stare. “It wasn’t petty theft. The three suspects committed a home invasion that left two elderly people in the hospital, husband and wife. The old lady is still in ICU. They beat them up pretty badly.”

“Dammit,” I reply.

After barely tasting dinner, I change into my pajamas and turn on the television, hoping for a few hours of escape. In the past two months, I’ve tried reading (fuck those romance novels), TV, meditation, and working myself to the bone. None of it helps. None. The only thing that barely touches the pain of Eric leaving is about half a bottle of wine and a very plot-heavy TV series that helps distract me.

Still, during the show, with the glass to my lips, something will remind me of him. An actor on TV or something they say. A couple going on a hike or eating Indian food.

A character in prison.

Everywhere I look are reminders of him, and the pain just floods in anew. I should probably go see a therapist, but I feel like all I’m going to hear is that the pain will subside with time. Well, it’s been nine weeks, three days, and... I look at the clock. Eight hours. When the hell is it gonna stop?

Masochistically, I pick up my phone and read my texts. All left on read. He saw them, but he chose not to respond. Was it rude of me to demand his new number from Taryn? Yes, it was. Do I give a damn? No, I don’t.

This has caused a strain in our friendship. She warned me... she fucking warned me to leave him alone. That people releasing from long prison sentences needed space. But I didn’t listen. I just fell head-over-heels for that beautiful brother of hers. And I truly believe he fell for me, too. It was more than sex. It was more than just fun dates and food and picnics and county fairs. We had a soul-deep connection and nobody will ever convince me otherwise. I feel like half my soul has been ripped out of my body.

That night, when I saw the news that the man whose wife died in the accident Eric caused passed away, I'd gasped. It just said the man died in his home, but was later reported it was a gunshot wound. They haven't reported if it was self-inflicted, but I guess it doesn't matter. I know Eric well enough to know that he blamed himself for it. That night changed him and the trajectory of our relationship forever. He barely answered my calls and texts after that. He refused to see me at all. Then, a week later, he was gone.

Just gone.

Taryn was enough of a friend to text me from her honeymoon and tell me Eric was fucked and that he needed space, and she begged me to give it to him. So, I did. So, I *do*. After the honeymoon, she came over and told me with a sad expression that he had left for Kenya to pay some kind of penance by joining Doctors Around the World.

At first, I was furious. Absolutely enraged. How dare he just leave me here! Hadn't I been the perfect girlfriend to him? Didn't he love me? Why not ask me to go? I'm no doctor, but I would have quit my job in a heartbeat to go over there and help. I can watch children, do paperwork, help cook, clean, whatever. Anything to just be with the man I love. But he hadn't. He just fucking left me here to pick up the pieces.

Then, I went from angry to sad. Sad for me, sad for him. What kind of pain had he been hiding this whole time? How much guilt had he been harboring that caused him to be triggered so? The death of Mr. Stamp literally caused him to snap. So, I put myself in his shoes and it helped me to understand a tiny bit of why he did what he did.

He blames himself for Mr. Stamp's death. Regardless if the man did it to himself, or someone else took his life, a child is orphaned now.

It doesn't lessen *my* pain, though. I thought I'd met *the one*, but now he's halfway around the world paying his dues for something he didn't even do, when he'd already paid for his sins behind metal and concrete for six years.

I just wish he'd respond to me. Reach out to me, so I can tell him I understand. So he knows I want to be here for him, that I can help absorb some of that pain so he doesn't have to roil in the agony of guilt and shame.

I just hope that when he comes back, he'll feel a little more vindicated, refreshed, and with a new perspective.

If he even comes back at all.

I lift the wine to my lips, hit *play* on the remote, and try to get lost in dragons and magic.

Nine

Christa

I don't know how to answer her question. I'm not even sure I want to share how I'm feeling with my best friend.

“Well?”

I stare at her as we sit on the bench in the middle of the mall. It's nice outside and I should go hike or something, but Taryn said we should meet here for some retail therapy. Two hundred dollars in shoes and handbags and I don't feel very therapized.

“I do love him, Tar. But no, I never told him.”

She looks at me sympathetically. “Did he tell you?”

I shake my head and fold my hands over my short skirt. “No, but I knew he loved me. I believe he still does.”

She grips my hand, and hers is warm. “I believe he does too. He just needs time. Give him his space and when he gets back, I'll see how he is.”

“And when is that?” I ask, tamping down my anger. I have no idea how long he'll be gone. I know nothing.

“He said something about a six-month stint.”

Disappointment floods me. I had hoped two or three months and he'd get it out of his system. “So, I'm just supposed to wait?”

She shrugs and looks at me with her kind amber-colored eyes. “I don't know. That's a decision you have to make. My best advice is to just not contact him for now.”

My chin wobbles. “Isn't he lonely and hurting though?”

Her eyes well with tears. “I'm sure he is, but he has to do this his own way. You're such a chocolate heart. Always wanting to fix everyone. I love that the most about you.”

I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or worse, but she means well. “Thank you. I think.”

She laughs a little. “I mean it in the nicest way possible.”

Then, I think of something. “So, he just quit his new job at the hospital?”

“Carter said Declan told him a group of them were going to Kenya for this thing, and they knew he wanted to go, so he quit. Declan wasn’t surprised. He knows what Eric’s been through.”

“Makes sense,” I murmur.

“Do you need chocolate?” she asks. “There’s a chocolate shop near the food court.”

“You read my mind,” I reply, standing and hugging her.

After some delicious truffles, we put our bags in the car and go back into the mall to do actual shopping, instead of the retail therapy we had been doing. As I look at watches in the jewelry store for my dad’s upcoming birthday, I get an ache that I want to buy something for Eric’s as well, as he’ll be in Africa for his. I know it’s stupid. He doesn’t need a watch nor does he need me. Six months puts him there during the holidays, too. What is he going to do on Thanksgiving? Will he even have a celebration? I have so many questions, and I wish he’d just get back to me so I can hear with my own ears that he’s okay.

But he’s not going to.

“Give him space.”

Okay, Taryn. I will.

I look at her as she admires necklaces in another case and she glances back at me. “What?”

“Just wish I could buy Eric a gift. Dumb, I know,” I confess.

“It’s not dumb. I’m gonna get him a birthday present, but he’s not getting it until he gets back.”

This interests me. “Really, what are you getting him?”

She lifts one shoulder. “Not sure yet. Definitely not jewelry.”

I smile, staring at the watches, and ask to see one I think my dad will like. The clerk unlocks the case and shows me the watch.

Taryn makes a face. “I don’t think my brother would wear that.”

I chuckle. “It’s for my dad.”

“Whew. I thought I was gonna have to tell you that you obviously don’t know Eric very well if you thought he’d wear that.”

“Are you saying my dad has bad taste?” I ask, biting back a smile.

She shakes her head. “No, it’s not that, it’s just that... that... I mean, Eric’s—”

I place a hand on her arm. “I’m joking. It’s for sure a sixty-year-old’s watch.”

She looks relieved, and after I buy the watch, we continue shopping. But it doesn’t matter what store we go into, there’s always something that reminds me of him and I wonder if I should seek professional help after all.

Then, I tell myself, for the tenth time, that it’s silly. It’s just a breakup. Did I get closure? No, but that doesn’t change the fact that Eric doesn’t want me and chose himself instead.

“So, how’s married life?” I ask her when we stop in a small store that sells handmade gifts.

She tries to hide her smile as she fingers some scarves with eclectic patterns on them. “It’s all right, I guess.”

“Just all right?” I nudge her with my hip. “I thought Carter hung the moon and the stars.”

She looks at me. “He does.”

“Then what?” I ask, suddenly worried about my friend. They’d had the most gorgeous, over-the-top mountain wedding in this huge mansion and then flew off in a helicopter after the reception. It was downright dreamy.

“I just don’t want to talk about how happy I am when you’re so miserable. I’m sorry.” She gives me a sympathetic look.

How sweet. “Please don’t do that. I need some kind of hope for the future. I’m almost twenty-eight, and was hoping to be married by thirty. Looks like that isn’t going to happen.”

She squeezes my arm. “Hey, you never know. This state is full of hot and sexy men. You’re gorgeous, Chris. You’ll meet someone. Someone who’s right for you, someone who treats you like a queen and who you’re compatible with in every way. Don’t worry.”

I want to tell her that I already had all those things with her brother, but for some reason she seems to be against him and me being together. When we were, she was so busy planning her wedding that we hardly went out as couples. I don’t know if she’s being overprotective or what, but it makes me sad that she wouldn’t be happy for us. I’m holding out hope that Eric will come home and be better, maybe feel like he’s vindicated himself and that little girl.

“Ooh, what about Declan? Do you want me to set you guys up? He’s single, good-looking, and successful. I mean, he’s a bit of a player, but maybe he just needs to settle—”

“No,” I cut her off. That guy is definitely a player and not my type. “I’m good. I’ll find someone. Thanks, though.” I force a smile and wander to the back of the store where there is handmade jewelry and T-shirts.

I need to break out of this funk, this depression. I keep wondering if I’d not be so down if Eric would at least talk to me. Somehow reassure me that he didn’t run from me, he just needed space. But I don’t know any of those things. Taryn says her conversations with him are brief and usually over text since their cell service is shit in Kenya, and also expensive. And he never mentions me.

I need a hobby. To get my mind off of this.

I see Taryn paying at the register and head to the front of the store so we can continue our shopping.

“How are you doing, baby?”

God, I hate that question. I force a smile at my mom at the dinner table. “Fine, Mom. I’m fine.”

She narrows her green eyes at me and points a pink-painted fingernail at me. “No, you’re not, Christa Marie.”

I glance at my dad, and he’s looking expectantly at me. My brother is also staring. “What?”

“Why you been so mopey lately?” my brother Brett, asks.

“None of your business, nosy.” I dip my fork in the mashed potatoes and shovel a huge bite into my mouth.

Brett makes a face and says, “You’re a pig.”

“No, *you* are,” I reply with my mouth full, like I’m seven years old again. He’s been calling me names since before I could even talk to reply. But I still love the jerk.

Brett’s girlfriend, Larissa, who’s seven months pregnant, slaps Brett’s arm. “Knock it off. Don’t call her that.”

“She’s used to it,” my dad chimes in, his brown eyes crinkling at the corners, his salt and pepper mustache lifting with a smirk.

“Eat your fried chicken, Dad,” I mutter, and he winks at me.

I love my family, and this kind of teasing is commonplace at Sunday dinners. I don’t always attend, but my little brother and his girlfriend never fail to turn up for a free meal.

“So, Larissa, how are you feeling?” my mom asks as she pokes her fork into some green beans.

She rubs her belly and leans back. “Really full.”

“That’ll happen the bigger you get. Baby’s squishing your stomach.”

She grins. “He’s squishing my bladder, too.”

I’m really happy for my brother, and I’m excited to become an aunt, but again, he has something I’ll probably

never have.

“So, Christa. You seeing anyone?” Mom asks, trying again.

“Nope,” I say, letting the P pop.

“Why not?” Brett quips. “Too picky?”

Hardly.

I lift a shoulder and let it fall. “I’m not looking for a relationship right now.”

“What happened to that Eric guy?” Brett asks.

I internally cringe. I told them we weren’t seeing each other anymore, but never elaborated on why. They don’t know about his past, either, and I planned to keep it that way. My dad’s a retired cop and he’d for sure hate it.

“We broke up. I don’t wanna talk about it.” I take a big bite of my chicken so I stop talking.

The rest of the dinner goes fine, and my dad tells us cop stories and it keeps my mind off of everything. The chocolate cake after dinner helped, too.

As I go to leave, my mom slips her shoes on and follows me outside. I stop on the porch.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” she asks, her light-brown hair streaked with gray and up in a bun that shines in the porch light.

“It’s just been a tough breakup,” I confess, looking down as my chin wobbles.

My mom and I have always been close and I mostly tell her everything, but this thing with Eric, I don’t feel like I can tell her everything. Not yet, anyway. I’m still holding out hope we’ll get back together and I don’t want to say anything negative in case we do. I don’t need my family having preconceived notions that he’s a jerk or a player or that he cheated on me or something. They never even met him—we hadn’t gotten around to the meet-the-family thing yet—but I wanted them to. I know my dad will remember his case, as he

was still a cop back then, and I wanted Eric to explain it to them, not me. It's not my story to tell.

“If you need anything, baby girl, just call. I'm a good listener,” she says, hugging me.

“I know, Mom. And I will. Thank you.”

Despite my sadness, I do feel better. I guess a girl is never too old to need her mama.

Ten

Eric

I turn around when a young girl comes running up to me waving something in the air. “Dak! Dak! Look, I lost a tooth!”

I chuckle. “That’s great, Zola.” I’ve been here three months now and have begun to learn the people’s names, especially the children who come and go. There are no real rules here, as long as they stay in the front part of the infirmary and not back where the sick people are. “Does the tooth fairy visit here?” I immediately regret the question because if she doesn’t, I’m going to have to explain how American children get money for lost teeth and obviously, these people don’t have money to randomly hand out to their children for such silly things.

“What’s a fairy?” she asks.

“So, what are you gonna do with the tooth?” I ask in deflection.

“Well, it’s from here”—she points to where the top front bicuspid is missing—“so we will throw it on the roof after supper!”

This confuses me, but I just smile. “Why?”

“It for good luck, Dak!” she says, giving me a wide toothless smile.

“So you just have a bunch of baby teeth on your roof?”

She furrows her brow as if she’s never thought of that before and then gives me a quick shrug. “I don’t know.”

Another child comes up and taps her shoulder, and she links hands with him and skips off in her pink dress.

“So cute and innocent,” Jack says, chuckling as we watch the children skip away.

“Yes, they are,” I agree.

He turns wise blue eyes to me. “Do you have kids?”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

“Don’t want ’em?” he asks.

“I’m not sure. Just never had the time.” And it’s kind of hard to get someone pregnant from prison. I keep that part to myself, of course. The doc knows about my past, but it makes people uncomfortable to talk about it. And by people, I mean mostly me.

“Let me show you something,” he says, and he leads me through the infirmary in this makeshift hospital that’s nothing more than a glorified tent with a straw roof and canvas sheets for walls. The doc has managed to set up departments, though. Children, elderly, the infectious, and then random other illnesses that may not be contagious, but still require monitoring. I had asked him where the maternity section was, because I’d never delivered a baby and was nervous about having to do it, but he simply told me the women give birth at home and only need doctors if there’s a problem with the mother or baby. “They want no part of men being involved in their birthing process,” he’d told me. “Probably better that way,” he added. I didn’t bother to ask if they ever required pain medication, because I learned on my first day how scarce it is, and to suggest it be “wasted” on childbirth would probably earn me a laugh.

We stop at the pediatric section. There are about a dozen children lying on cots. Some are sleeping, some are sitting up with books. There are a couple hooked up to IVs. One nurse I’ve already met, Amari, a native of the area, makes rounds, checking on them. The doc has mainly kept me in the front for triage and emergencies, but occasionally I’m called to do some light PT. Like the boy who broke his ankle. I didn’t have any other orthopedic patients, so the young man is going to make a full recovery with that ankle because I kept on top of his physical therapy and he promised he was doing the exercises at home.

“Do you want to start working back here, Eric?” he asks.

I feel intimidated, but I also want to learn new things.
“Sure, Doc. What would you need me to do?”

“Just help Amari. She can do most everything, but sometimes we require extra hands back here.”

“Okay,” I say. “I can do that.” I turn to him, “Do you want me to stay back here or just make rounds?”

“Just make rounds every hour or so. Amari mostly has it covered from seven to seven, and then another nurse comes in at night.”

I fold my arms across my blue scrubs and look down at my dirty Nikes. The women in the village wash our clothes for us, but these shoes are never going to be clean. I don’t even care. “Sounds good. I’ll hit you up if I have questions.”

He pats me on the shoulder in his fatherly way and smiles. “Thanks, Eric.”

I go say hello to Amari. I’ve met her once or twice but we haven’t had much interaction.

“Hello, Eric.”

“What do you need my help with?” I ask.

“Let’s make rounds and I’ll introduce you to the children,” she says in a heavy Swahili accent.

“This is Kwame, he’s twelve. He’s got the leukemia,” she introduces and I’m immediately alarmed. Cancer? How can we treat that here? I keep those questions to myself for now. I look at the IV in his arm and wonder what’s in it.

“Hi, Dak,” he says, waving. He is gaunt, his cheekbones making his eyes look sunken in, but he has a beautiful smile that makes my heart lurch. Poor fucking kid. He looks down at his coloring book and picks up a blue crayon to complete his picture.

“Hey, Kwame. How are you feeling today?”

He shrugs as he colors. “Da same.”

I don’t ask what that means, I’ll have a lot of questions for Amari when we’re done.

As we go around the room, she introduces me to all the children. They are as young as five and as old as sixteen.

Kwame is the only cancer patient, and the rest seem to be recovering from injuries or infections.

Once we leave the area and go behind a partition where the medical supplies are kept, I ask the nurse, “How are you treating his leukemia?”

She looks at me sadly. “Just making him comfortable.”

“So, no chemotherapy drugs?”

She shakes her head. “No, sir. Not here. It’s hard to get them here and we would need to be trained on how much to give.”

I don’t even ask about radiation because that’s obviously out of the question. I feel sick that that child is just going to sit there and die.

“Can’t we do anything?” I ask. “Get the drugs shipped here?”

She nods. “We have before, but no more have shown up. I don’t know where they come from.”

From the fucking big pharm in America, I want to say, but I don’t. Greedy bastards can afford to donate some. I know what I’m doing when I get back to my tent tonight.

I look at the clock to see that while it’s 7:19 p.m. here, it’s only 10:19 in Denver. I pull up my contacts and dial Declan Kelley, the assistant hospital administrator where I was working before I took off in a fit and moved halfway around the world. I’m sure he’s not happy with me for leaving right after he went out of his way to get me a PT job, but I would be doing a disservice to these kids, and these people, if I didn’t at least reach out.

His cell rings four times before he picks up. “Hey, Eric.”

“Hey, man. How are you?”

“I’m good. Busy as usual. How’s Africa?” he asks, and he seems friendly enough and doesn’t sound cross with me at all.

“It’s cool. I’m learning a lot here, and hopefully making a small difference,” I reply honestly.

“That’s great. Did you need something or just calling to chat?” He chuckles. “I’m secretly hoping you’re calling to tell me you’re coming home and want your job back. Which of course is an automatic yes from me. Just have to run it by the head of PT.”

That’s a surprise. “No, I mean, yes, I’ll be back eventually and will need a job. I’m just surprised you’re willing to give it back to me after I left so abruptly.”

“We all understand why you did it, bro.”

“That makes me feel better. Thank you. But the reason I’m calling is because I was wondering if you could help me out. We need chemo drugs over here. Among other things. I haven’t talked to the head doc over here yet, but how does that work, do you know? Surely some of the big names donate medicine and supplies over here and elsewhere.”

“As far as I know, they do. I’m just not sure about the process, but they do donate. I’m sure it’s built into their business plan and yearly budget. Tax write-offs and all that. Tell you what, let me do some research and I’ll get back to you. Do you have access to email there?”

“Yes, it’s spotty but I have it on my phone and the laptop I brought. It’s just pricy so I try not to use it, but I can get emails.”

“Okay, if I don’t have your email, will Carter have it?” he asks.

I think about it. The only time I’ve ever emailed Carter was from prison. “I doubt it. Here, can you write it down?”

“Sure,” he replies. “Go ahead.”

I rattle it off to him and he assures me I’ll have an email in a couple of days.

I smile, hoping I can help. What’s the use of coming over here to pay my dues if I can’t even attempt to maybe save one little boy’s life?

I flip my phone around in my hand and open Christa's texts and read them again.

Christa: *I hate you for leaving without saying goodbye.*

Christa: *I thought we had something, and you just left. I could have helped you through your pain, but you just left. You're a fucking coward, Eric.*

Christa: *I'm sorry for my last text. You're not a coward. I'm just hurting. I miss you so much. Can't we talk?*

I want so badly to reach out to her. Those texts were over three months ago. She's got to be angry and cursing me for ghosting her, but I miss her so damn much I'm afraid if I reach out, she'll cry and I can't handle that. I'll want to ditch the work I'm doing here and rush home to comfort her. I don't want to do that. I have to stay strong and finish what I came here to do. It's too late to help one little blue-eyed girl back in Colorado, but maybe I can make a difference here with some of these children. I'm glad the doc assigned me to help there.

I pull up my photo gallery on my original phone and stare at a photo of Christa and me with the mountains in the background. She's smiling that big, beautiful smile of hers, and I look happy too. I never smiled like that in prison. Smiles were rare, and sometimes if a really good joke was told by another inmate, I'd laugh. Other than that, it was a miserable place—as it should be. I run my finger over the screen, wishing I could touch her. But I can't. Not now. I contemplated early on contacting her and asking her to wait for me, to promise her weekly phone calls and texts or face-time calls if possible. But I realized that was a distraction I didn't need. It wasn't fair for me to ask that of her either. She needs to move on and find someone else. I can't hold onto the hope that she'll be there waiting for me when I get back. She deserves better and I deserve nothing, as badly as that reality crushes my heart and soul, I know it's for the best.

Eleven

Christa

Taryn glares at me. “It’s freezing out here. Why did you drag me hiking? You hate exercise.”

“It’s not freezing, you baby. Maybe if you had some more meat on your bones.” I pinch her thigh through her yoga pants.

“You should talk. You’ve lost too much weight,” she comments as we trek up another stretch of rock. She wears a Columbia jacket I’m sure she’ll be shedding soon.

“I’m just not hungry,” I say with a shrug. While the weight loss has tapered off, I’d rather put a few pounds back on. “At least my double chin is gone.”

She snorts. “You never had one.”

“Yes, I did. Ever open your phone and the camera’s on selfie mode? If you haven’t, you’re lucky. My God, I thought Ursula the Sea Witch had hacked my phone! But it was just me!”

She laughs and says, “Let’s take a break.”

I nod and sit, pulling a water bottle from my small pack, and she does the same.

“So, this hiking thing is new,” she says, and she sounds suspicious.

I shrug. “Eric turned me on to it. As you know, not big into exercise, but I lost all that weight so fast, and I need to tone things up, and the gym is not my scene.”

“Eric always loved to hike,” she comments, looking out over the large canyon from where we sit. “It was his outlet. He and Carter would go camping, hunting, and fishing. Neither had dads who cared in their lives, so they taught themselves everything.”

Eric had told me about growing up, his mom raising them both, as his dad wasn’t really in the picture. And Taryn told me Carter’s parents were alcoholics and he damn near raised

himself and spent a lot of time at Eric and Taryn's growing up. It made me sad because I have a loving family and had a great childhood.

I briefly wonder what Eric does for an outlet while in Africa, but put that thought aside for now since there's no use in dwelling on it.

"You know, I was thinking..." Taryn starts. I stay quiet and let her continue. "I told you about the Mile High Rooms, didn't I?"

"Yes, after I dragged it out of you," I reply, opening a peanut butter protein bar. I offer my other one to Taryn, but she shakes her head. "Why?"

"I can put the app on your phone," she offers.

My best friend is a computer scientist and is married to a millionaire app developer—Eric's best friend. He developed an app rich people use to access a secret sex club that rotates around the Mile High City's area every month, an app that costs thousands a year. As far as I know, Carter doesn't run the club, he just does the app part for the owner. Then, I remember something.

"I thought you said some congresswoman caught her husband there and demanded it be shut down," I comment, then take a bite of the bar.

She shakes her head. "No, she tried, but they got rid of the sex workers so there was no justification to shut it down. It's a legit club. Everything's on the up and up, I promise."

"Okay. What makes you think I want the app?"

She shrugs casually and then meets my gaze with her honey-colored one. "I thought maybe you could go in there and have a peek. See if it might be something to do. I mean, you're not going to meet *the one* there, but it might take the edge off your loneliness. And of course, the sex is super fun. I'm sure you're feeling deprived."

I, of course, never talked to Taryn about my sex life with Eric because I certainly wouldn't want to talk to Larissa about hers with my brother. But she knew we were intimate. It was

impossible not to be with how sexy Eric is. We're drawn together almost organically. Chemically. It was impossible to not want to share that with him. Plus, I loved him.

Love him.

“Eh, I don't know. I don't think it's a good idea. What if Eric comes back and finds out?”

She gives me a side eye and then looks out over the canyon again. “Well, he has the app on his phone, too, so...”

I gasp. “He does?”

“Yeah, Carter told me he asked for it when he... got out.”

“Has he ever gone?” I ask.

She turns back to look at me. “I can honestly tell you that I don't know. I never asked.”

I stay quiet. I feel a little hurt but I can't put my finger on why this hurts me. I'm sure he just wanted to get laid after being in prison for so long, so if he did use it, that's none of my business. It would have been fun to go there with him, though. I think. Taryn says it's pretty kinky in there. My curiosity is piqued but I'm not sure I would have the balls to go in there by myself.

“What if I see someone I know?” I ask. “I've lived here my whole life. I have tons of clients at the firm, too. Wouldn't that be weird?”

“You can wear a mask.” She shrugs.

“I can? Do a lot of people?”

She nods. “Yes and no. About half.” She looks at my arm. “But your tattoos won't be able to hide you. You should wear long sleeves.”

I ponder this. I miss sex but I miss sex with Eric. I'm done with random hookups. That was my past before I met him. I don't think I could do that. Would it be cheating? No, it wouldn't. He left me and went halfway around the world without so much as a goodbye. He doesn't love me and never

did. I bite my lip to stay the tears at that thought. I'm literally free to do whatever I want, and I don't want to.

"Let's keep going. You're gonna love the gondola lift. It's breathtaking!"

She smiles and stands, shoving her water back into her pack and we head up to the top of the mountain.

I sip my coffee as I look over Mr. Johnson's home invasion case. I certainly believe the guy is innocent. They have no evidence except Mr. Larsen, who picked him up out of a photo lineup, and honestly, for him to have had to spend the weekend in jail over that is bullshit, even if he's guilty. They certainly aren't going to convict him with just that. As I read over the case, it's so full of holes, I could drive a truck through it.

I go into Melinda's office and knock on the doorframe. "Got a minute?"

She nods and indicates the seat in front of her desk. "Sure, whatcha got?"

"The DA has nothing on this case for Johnson. I think you should make a motion to dismiss."

"Really? There's nothing at all?"

I shake my head. "No. The old guy can't describe the suspects properly, and the old lady is unfortunately still in a coma. None of the stolen items have been recovered or reported from pawn shops. They only took cash from their safe and wallets, so no credit cards to trace."

She looks at the file, then at me. "What do you think? Do you think he's guilty?"

This question surprises me because she usually doesn't ask this. So I say, "Well, like you say, it doesn't matter. Our job is to get him off."

"I know." She smiles knowingly. "I'm just curious what you think."

“I mean, after meeting him and talking with him, I don’t think he is. And the evidence is pointing the same way.”

“I feel the same way, but we can’t make a motion to dismiss until Mrs. Larsen wakes. And if she doesn’t... it’s now a murder case. That will extremely complicate things.”

“Damn. I hope not. Poor lady.” I look down.

“Why don’t you go down to the hospital and talk to the old guy?”

I look up at her. “I thought he was discharged. Just a broken arm and some bruises, right?”

She nods. “Yes, he was, but he’s at her bedside when he’s not sleeping.”

Damn.

“Okay, what hospital?”

“Denver General. She’s in room 600. I’ll call ahead and let them know.”

I nod and leave her office. I grab the file before getting into my BMW and heading to the hospital.

I quickly locate Mrs. Larsen’s room and stop short at the door. Mr. Larsen, in a plaid button-up shirt and khaki slacks, sits next to his wife’s bed in a wooden chair with red cushions. He holds a book with one hand, and is reading quietly from it. His other arm is in a cast, being held by a navy blue sling.

I glance at his wife. She looks peaceful, her head is wrapped in a bandage, and the covers are pulled up to her chest covered by a floral blue hospital gown. There’s an IV on a pole, connected to her arm. A machine beeps softly in the background.

I can’t quite hear what he’s reading but she doesn’t react at all. She just looks to be in a deep sleep.

I knock softly on the doorframe. “Mr. Larsen?”

He turns and looks at me, narrowing brown eyes at me.
“What?”

“I’m Christa Alvarez, with the attorneys’ office. Can I have a word with you, please?”

“Attorney? For who?” He does not seem happy to see me. I cannot blame him.

“For Mr. Johnson. I need to ask you some questions.”

He scoffs and turns back around. “No. Fuck off, lady.”

Surprised by his profanity, and for some reason, trying not to laugh, I clear my throat. “I just need to ask you some questions. I assure you I want justice for you and Mrs. Larsen. I’m just here to make sure we have the wrong guy, so the police can get busy finding the third suspect. From what I understand, the other two confessed, but Mr. Johnson insists he’s not it. And the other two aren’t talking.”

He turns around again, placing a napkin in the book to hold its place, and sets it on the tray that holds various items like a tissue box, a remote for the bed, and a plastic cup of water. “Let’s go into the hallway.”

I thought the room was quieter and more private, but maybe he thinks his wife can hear us.

We find a discrete corner and he waits until I sit before he does, and it reminds me of Eric briefly, until I tell myself to get my head back in the game.

“I’m sure you’ve been over and over this, but can you walk me through the night of the invasion?” I ask.

He blows out a breath and pierces me with watery light-brown eyes. “Maureen and I were watching television in the living room. As soon as I turned it off so we could head to bed, we hadn’t placed one foot on the stairs before our front door was blasted open. I was so startled I almost fell. Three men came inside and ordered us onto the ground as they held guns.”

“Were they wearing masks?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No. The taller of the three went after me first, hitting me over the head and telling me to shut the fuck up, and if I called the cops, he’d put a bullet in Maureen’s head. Then he asked where the safe was and the combination. So I told him. I just wanted those animals out of my house.”

“Maureen must have had a delayed reaction or something, because she started screaming as loud as she could. One of them kicked her in the ribs, then the head. I got up and grabbed the baseball bat I kept behind the door and took a swing at him. He grabbed it from me, and hit me with it. I blocked it with my arm.” He holds up his slinged arm.

I cringe. Poor guy.

“Then, he hit Maureen in the head with the bat. She immediately went unconscious. While they ransacked the house, I called 911 from my cell phone that was in my pocket. They took everything in the safe and a box of real silverware passed down to my wife from her parents. She’s gonna be so upset when she wakes up.”

“How much did they take, Mr. Larsen?” I ask as I jot down notes on my notepad.

“I had eight thousand in the safe, and some jewelry, that Maureen is also going to be upset about. Her mother’s wedding ring, and a few other things.”

I lift Lance Johnson’s bank employee photo out of my purse and show it to him. “Is this one of the men?”

He takes it from me and pulls his reading glasses from the front pocket of his shirt. He studies it a long time before saying, “I’m not sure.” He hands the photo back to me.

“You identified him from a group of photos the police showed you.”

He looks up at me and removes his glasses. “All those guys were in orange jumpsuits. This guy’s in a tie.”

“Right, so that made a difference in identifying them for you?”

He shrugs. “I’m not sure. This guy”—he points at the photo in my hand—“doesn’t look like any of the ones they showed me. Plus, it was dark. I only can say that two were White and one was Black.”

“Did you see what kind of car they got into?” I ask, even though it’s in the report. I want to see if his memory is the same as that night.

He nods. “Yes, a small dark green car. I remembered some of the license plate and I think that’s how they got the other two.”

He’s right, it is.

“Very well,” I say. I stand and put the notebook and photo back into my oversized purse.

Mr. Larsen stands as well.

“Thank you for your time, sir. I’m very sorry about what happened to you. I hope we can find the third guy, and I’ll say a prayer for your wife that she gets better.”

His eyes fill with tears. “I appreciate that. You really don’t think that Lance guy did it?”

“I’m not sure,” I reply. “That’s why I’m here. If he didn’t, he doesn’t deserve to go to prison for something he didn’t do. If he did, well, then, I hope he gets prosecuted fully. In the meantime, we have to be sure. You understand?”

He nods. “That makes sense. I’ll try harder to remember what he looked like. He was kind of off in the background, you know? One of the White guys was the one who hurt me and my wife with the baseball bat while the others took the valuables and cash.”

“I understand.” I squeeze his hand and leave the hospital, fairly sure the police have the wrong guy.

Twelve

Christa

I sit at home on a Saturday night feeling like a complete loser. I need to get out. I won't bug Taryn to go out with me but maybe my friend Lauryn will. I shoot off a text.

Me: *WYD?*

Lauryn: *Hot date in 30.*

Me: *No way. With who?*

Lauryn: *Coworker. Dumb, right?*

Me: *Not unless he's a dweeb.*

Lauryn: *LOL trust me he's not.* She includes a fire emoji.

Me: *You have fun. We need to catch up soon.*

Lauryn: *Thanks. Most definitely.*

I sigh and set the phone down. I have a brief thought of going and hanging out with my parents because I'm so bored. But I'm not *that* bored.

I remember what Taryn said about the Mile High Rooms. I could just check it out, right? I don't have to do anything.

Curiosity and boredom win out, and I click on a no-name text.

DownloadMe: *Taryn Lockwood has invited you to download an app!*

I click on the link and suddenly feel nervous as the app installs itself on my phone.

Taryn: *Username: TattooedHoney. Password: haRd2get!*

Taryn: *Delete that last text!*

I chuckle at her silliness and delete the message, and once the app's installed, I log in. It's not a normal app that's user-friendly, and it takes me almost fifteen minutes to figure out how to navigate it.

Then, bright red words suddenly pop up on the screen:
GOLDEN TICKET

Unsure what else to do, I tap on it and see a Westminster address. I take a screenshot of it and a popup comes up:
Screenshots are not allowed for safety reasons.

Dammit. I scramble to find my notepad and pen out of my big-ass purse and jot the address down, along with *golden ticket*, whatever that means. There's a time listed as well: *9pm-3am*.

Interesting.

I want to text Taryn and ask her what it all means, but I won't. I'll figure it out.

I look at the clock to see it's 7:20 p.m. I head to my closet and wonder what I should wear. When she said people can wear masks, I'm assuming a party-type mask and not something Halloween-ish?

I find the feathered mask that only covers my eyes and nose and ties around the back. It's white with black sequins along the edge, and I wore it once for a themed Christmas party we did one year at the firm.

Deciding to keep it simple, I locate one of my many little black dresses, and choose the one covered in black sequins to match the mask. The strappy black stilettos are a no-brainer to go with it.

Then I remember my tattoos. I thankfully find a long-sleeved lace top that is open at the front and buttons over the boobs, if I want.

I don't want.

I don't want to do this at all and I should just crawl into bed.

But loneliness and curiosity win out in the end.

I shower, do my hair and makeup, and decide because I'm feeling playful and put in my blue contact lenses over my brown eyes. If they can only see my eyes, it'll add to the mystery. After they're in, I get dressed and look in the full-

length mirror. Wow. I feel sexy and my stomach turns over with nerves.

Am I really doing this?

Clock reads 9:02 p.m. I guess I really am.

I pull up to a warehouse-type structure and park the car. There are about a dozen people in line, and most of them are couples.

“You got this,” I whisper to myself in the rearview mirror after applying another heavy coat of red lipstick. It contrasts nicely against my pale skin and I throw it back in my purse. I tie the mask around my eyes and adjust it so it’s not crooked. I’m going to have a bump in my straight, sleek hair by the end of the night from the ties.

Now... Do I bring a purse inside this type of place?

I didn’t think so. I put my ID and debit card into the case holding my phone and get out of the car, tucking the key into my bra. I feel like I’m 19 all over again, sneaking into the nightclub with my fake ID.

The night is cold and I try not to shiver as I wait in line. A full October moon overhead lights the parking lot and a few wispy clouds play in front of it. When I’m about the third one back, I pay attention to what they’re telling the doorman, a guy dressed in a black suit and a sharp haircut.

“Password?”

Shit. Oh! “Golden ticket?”

He chuckles and says, “ID?”

I pull it out and show him.

“App?”

“I’m sorry?” I say, trying not to panic.

“I need to see your app.”

It takes me a second before I realize he wants to see the “secret” app. “Oh, sure.” I pull it up and show him. “I need the QR code.”

“I’m sorry, dude. First time.”

He smiles. “No worries. May I?” He points at the phone and shows me how to access the QR code, then he scans it with a device in his hand that looks like what the servers at restaurants use when you pay.

“Enjoy yourself,” he says as he hands me the phone back.

I head up the wooden ramp leading into the warehouse door and walk down a long hallway. At the end, it opens into a very large room with some very... questionable things going on.

People are literally having sex, in one way or another, all over the fucking place.

I close my mouth and hold my head high as I walk slowly. My first instinct is to look away, as if I’m not supposed to watch, and then realize that’s the opposite of what I should be doing. These people are fucking and sucking out in the open because they want to be watched.

Each “station” is separated by what looks like a wooden coral gate, but that’s the only thing that separates them. My gaze is stuck on three people. The completely naked woman straddling a man on a mechanical bull that isn’t moving. Her feet are in the stirrups and she holds onto the saddle-horn with her head thrown back. I startle when the bull starts to move slowly, and she squeals in delight, as the movement is forcing the guy’s dick inside her with jerky movements. The other woman wears all black leather and holds a leash attached to a collar around the man’s neck. Every time he moans, she whips him with a long leather whip, and he cries out and jerks, which causes the woman on top of him to squeal.

Wow.

Another couple is having oral sex, her underneath him lying flat on the ground as he fucks her mouth as a man pounds into him from behind. The man getting the blow job slides a huge purple dildo in and out of her pussy as she blows him.

Looks complicated.

There are many scenarios like this, some all men, some all women, but most a combination of both. There are sometimes just two people all the way up to five in one “coral” and it’s quite interesting and I would lie if I didn’t say my panties weren’t getting damp from watching it. The whole room smells like booze and sex. Total debauchery.

I go up to the bar and wait in line to order something to help me relax because I’m fairly wound up.

“Hi,” I hear behind me.

A woman in a long white dress stands behind me. I can see her dark nipples through her dress and I’m fairly sure if I stared long enough, her dark bush as well.

“Hi,” I reply.

“You here alone?” she asks.

She seems a little older, maybe mid-forties, and pretty.

Unsure how to answer, I say, “Something like that.”

“Are you here to just watch or do you wanna play? My partner and I are looking for a girl and you, my dear, are quite delicious.” She eyes me from my toes to my head and even though I’m not into girls, it’s kind of hot.

“Well, I’m not into women.” I feel stupid and lame at that answer.

“Oh, that’s fine. I’d love to watch him fuck you. He loves the curvy girls.” She slides her hand down my waist to my hips and then around to my ass where she squeezes.

“Oh... um...”

It’s my turn to order a drink and I do so quickly. I’m stupidly uncomfortable with the conversation and I tell her I’ll think about it. Again, lame, I know.

I walk away with my vodka martini and find a corner to watch from. I’m more comfortable watching for now, and hope nobody else approaches me. I have no idea what it would be like to have some guy have sex with me while his wife watches. Would it be a turn-on? I guess it depends on the guy.

Taryn told me they have darkrooms here too. Pitch black can't-see-your-hand-in-front-of-your-face dark, to just a red light, to full lights. What would it be like to have sex with a stranger in the pitch black, not even knowing what they look like or how big their dick is?

A sign reading *Viewing Rooms* catches my eye, and I wander over there. It's an area that leads to a hallway of rooms. There's a male attendant dressed like the doorman.

"Evening, miss," he greets. "Looking for anything in particular?"

He looks kind and friendly, so I admit, "It's my first time. What's this?" I point to the hallway.

"It's our voyeur area. You can watch couples who choose to lift the screen."

"Oh, okay," I reply as if I have any idea what he's talking about. "So I just choose a room?"

He nods. "Yes, miss. The available rooms have the door open."

"Cool, thanks."

"Close and lock the door behind you if you don't want anyone with you watching. No activity allowed in the viewing rooms."

"Got it." I step into the hall. The walls and doors are painted black and there's one red light hanging from the ceiling. There are probably ten doors and I count four open. I wander into the first one and close and lock the door behind me.

A window about the size of a small TV is at the end of the room with two chairs set in front of it. I open it, using the handle to lift the screen up, and gasp when I immediately see two people going at it.

Not sure what I was expecting and why I gasped, but hey, I'm new.

The room they're in, also with black-painted walls and a red light, is large. A huge bed takes up the middle and the

woman is lying on her back, her legs spread open. His dick glides in and out furiously as he twists the clamps on her nipples. She looks like she's crying out but I can't hear anything. I look to the side of the window and find a speaker. I adjust the volume and listen to her cries as he breathes hard while their bodies slap together. He pulls out his enormous dick and reaches over to a table I just noticed that has a plethora of toys set up. He grabs a small vibrator and some lube. After flipping it on, he squeezes the lube onto it.

"You're gonna take this in the ass like a good little slut, aren't you?" he says to her.

She bites her lips and nods. "Yes, Daddy."

I raise my eyebrows as I watch him slowly insert the smooth pink dildo into her ass. Her head cranes back and she moans. "Yes, Daddy. I love that. Give me more."

He leans down and begins furiously eating her pussy while he slowly slides the dildo in and out of her ass.

Now... I've done a lot of fun stuff and have experimented, but I've never gotten off from the ass play. Maybe I just didn't have the right person doing it to me. Eric and I sure never experimented like that.

"I'm gonna come!" she screams, and she's so close to the window I see her pussy pulsing as he backs off and immediately shoves his huge condom-covered cock into her. He reaches around and continues to thrust the vibrator into her ass as he fucks her and I realize this feels good for him too.

"Yes," he groans, pumping in and out of her. He lets go of the dildo and it falls out as he grabs her hips and thrusts furiously. "Fucking slut, you feel so good. You want my load, you little whore?"

"Yes, Daddy, give me your cum. Yes!" She claws at his back and rolls her hips in time with his. "Oh, your huge cock feels so good." Then, she screams like she's being murdered right as he halts his movements, grunting loudly as he comes.

Goddamn, even I need a cigarette after that!

“Hope you loved watching us,” the man says, looking straight into the window.

Oh, my God, can he see me?

I quickly close the window and put my hand to my face to ensure my mask is still in place. I relax when I feel it is, but hope they can't see me. I'm sure it's a two-way mirror, with only one side being able to see—like in the police stations. That would be the smart thing to have in here.

I get up and leave the room, intent on watching another couple. I find another open room and see a woman sitting at the window. She raises it and turns up the speaker.

“Sorry,” I mutter and go to leave.

She says, “You can stay if you want.”

Do I want?

No, I don't want to watch live couples with anyone else.

It's then I decide I've seen enough of the voyeur area.

I leave and head to another section that has a similar setup. The sign just reads *The Rooms* though.

“Hi, are you meeting someone?” the attendant asks me.

“No. First time here, just exploring,” I answer honestly.

He smiles at me. “These rooms are used for couples and throuples. You need a partner to go in.”

“I see,” I reply. “So, what if I'm looking for a person to use the room with?”

“Then you'll need the discreet rooms.” He points to damn near the other side of the warehouse with a big *DR* sign. “Those have people waiting in them for someone to join them.”

I glance at it then back to him. “Interesting. Thanks for your time. It's hard being the newbie.”

He winks and I walk off.

The DR rooms are what I'd want if I came here again.

But could I?

I sip my drink and wander around the club some more, watching everyone have sex. I'll for sure need my toy when I get home because this whole night has been a big turn-on, but I don't have the guts to find someone here to work out my sexual frustration.

And I don't want to.

There's only one person I can do that with, and he's a million miles away.

I get into my car and leave, a tear trailing down my cheek as I put the car into drive and head home. Alone.

Thirteen

Eric

I grin down at the young girl. “You’re going to be A-OK, little miss.”

She beams up at me and smiles. “Tank-you, Dak!” She scurries off the table and heads back outside to play.

A lot of the children who play in the village will come to our tent for minor scrapes and cuts. It’s adorable and we don’t mind putting on some antiseptic and a Band-Aid for them. Heck, you never know what can get infected these days.

“I’m gonna go make rounds, I’ll be back,” I tell Dr. Alsworth and Clive, who stand about three feet away discussing something. They both nod and go back to their conversation.

“How are you doing today?” I ask Kwame.

“Hi, Dak. I’m tired,” he answers honestly.

And he looks it. It’s been a week with no email from Declan, so I started doing my own research. Jack told me they can get shipments and he’s already ordered a lot of medication, including cancer drugs, but it’s slow-going.

Well, I’m not that patient. I refuse to sit here and watch this kid die.

I pull my scrubs pants up a bit so I can crouch down and get to the boy’s eye level. “I want you to hang in there for me, okay? I’m trying to get some medicine sent so we can help you with the leukemia.”

“Thank you, Dak.”

I want to sob at the hope and gratefulness in his eyes. I squeeze his bony shoulder. “Are you hungry?”

He shakes his head. “Not really.”

“Well, you should still eat something.”

“Okay, Dak.”

I move on to the next patient, a little girl waiting for surgery. We're in a small village outside of the main city so when the kids here need more medical attention than we can provide, we keep them here until a spot opens up. In her case, she needs a heart murmur fixed, so she's going to have to be sent to a hospital that can do that sort of advanced surgery. Until then, we keep her away from the public in general. An infection could harm her heart.

"How are you today, Eshe?" I ask.

"I'm A-OK, Dak!" She gives me a thumbs up and I laugh. The kids heard me say it a few times and now they love to repeat it back to me. "You feeling okay, though?"

"I just tired," she replies.

I reach into my bag and pull out a brand-new coloring book and box of crayons. "Do you want to color?"

Her eyes brighten. "Yes!"

I set the items down in front of her and squeeze her hand before going to the next patient.

After I'm done with rounds, I go back to the main part of the tent.

"Hey, we're doing a vaccine clinic tomorrow, I'd like for you to be here," Dr. Alsworth tells me.

I grin. "Where else would I be?"

He chuckles. "That's what I like to hear."

"Have you ever given a vaccine before?" Clive asks.

I shake my head. "A shot, yes. Not an actual vaccine."

"Good, it'll be easy," he assures me.

I'm not too worried about it. I've given cortisone injections into major large joints, I can handle a little stick to the arm. "I'm sure."

"A little tougher on kids because they're scared of needles and cry."

"So do adults," I quip.

They both chuckle. “That’s true.”

Though, seeing a kid cry and making them hold still will be a lot harder.

I look at my watch and see it’s almost 7 p.m. Except for the inpatient people, the clinic is quiet. The 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. doctors and nurses have already arrived for the night, so I walk the dirt road back to my tent.

I open my laptop and am happy to see an email from Declan from about an hour ago.

From: Declan.Kelley@cuhealth.org

To: EricAndrews@pmail.com

Subject: Sources

Hey – sorry it took me so long to get back to you, I had to ask quite a few people around here if they knew how this worked, and finally got an answer. I had my secretary compile a list of sources at the major pharmaceutical companies. I hope these will help. These aren’t public record so keep the phone numbers and email addresses to yourself, please. I practically had to bribe someone for them.

Let me know if any of these help. If not, I’ll keep digging.

Hope you’re doing well. I know everyone misses you around here.

Best,

Declan

I shoot off a quick reply thanking him and am excited to go to work. There’s obviously no printer here, so I pull up the list and keep it on the screen, knowing making these phone calls is going to eat up all my minutes, but I don’t care. I’ll just add more. It’s not like I spend money on anything else. The organization provides me with food and shelter. Occasionally, if I’m just tired of the food, I’ll catch a ride into the main city and hit the little grocery store for snacks or meat I’m craving.

Workouts have been near nonexistent and I miss them dearly. My bulk is gone, but thankfully I haven’t added much

fat, mainly due to the diet here. It's been an adjustment, but I'm mentally more focused and don't ever feel sluggish after a meal. There is no alcohol or any sort of recreational drugs here either, so my mind's been clear.

Almost too clear sometimes. There are nights I long to drown my sorrows in some liquor, and quickly realize I don't need it. Even at home, I'm not supposed to drink being on parole. I'm honestly shocked my P.O. signed off on letting me come here. I keep expecting to get a phone call that I'm needed back home and that my parole has been revoked.

But that hasn't happened yet. She just required that I check in with her by phone once a week and by email as well, detailing what I did that week. At first, I was annoyed, but after the first couple of weeks, I realized it was almost therapeutic, and that by sending her these detailed emails, it was like journaling. I type them in a word processing program titling each one with a date, and send them to her that way so I can keep a copy for myself, should I ever accidentally delete my emails. It wouldn't be the first time that's happened. I am not like my sister. Computers hate me.

I pull up the first contact, Anco Pharmaceuticals, and dial the number. It rings three times.

"Mr. Anco's office, how can I help you?"

"Hello, I'm Eric Andrews with Doctors Around the World. Can I speak to Mr. Anco?"

"He's in a meeting, but I can have him call you back."

Shit.

"Well, I'm actually in Africa at the moment if he doesn't mind calling international."

"That's fine, sir. Go ahead with the number when you're ready."

I prattle it off to her and we hang up with a promise that he'll call me when he's done.

Two more phone calls go about the same way, and I pray at least one calls me back. The third one I let them know that we

have some urgent patients here in need of life-saving medicines, hoping to appeal to their human side.

We'll see.

I close the laptop and head to the mess hall, excited to see they have chicken, pasta, and corn. Sometimes we don't get a really good solid protein. I take the plate the attendant dishes up, and sit at one of the many tables.

I see Clive headed toward me with his plate and a glass of milk.

"How's it going, mate?" he asks in his strong accent.

"I'm good. It was a good day. How about you, man?" I ask, cutting into my chicken breast when I'd rather pick it up and devour it like a caveman.

"I almost lost a patient, it was dreadful," he replies, looking sad.

"Wow, I'm really sorry to hear that, but it sounds like they're gonna live, huh?"

He nods. "Yes, but it's touch and go, you see. Just like the kid from a few weeks ago, this one also fell off his motorbike but this was an adult. Head injury and broken clavicle, and as you know, nothing can be done for it, so he's going to be in quite a bit of pain."

"Did you give him morphine?" I ask.

He nods. "A bit, but we're running low, so we got to ration it some."

I cringe. A broken clavicle is very painful and aside from a sling to keep the arm from jostling it, there's no real treatment but painkillers. I feel a little angry we're low on meds again. What the hell is taking so long to get this shit here?

"How's the head injury?" I ask.

"Hard to say, I saw brain swelling on the X-ray but of course, I'd rather an MRI be done. Not going to happen, I know," he replies, spooning some corn into his mouth.

“Maybe he should be transported to the main city,” I suggest. Of course, if I had my way, I’d have them all sent to the big city for better care. Kwame first.

“I tried, they said the hospital’s full and to just monitor him here. Sucks, mate.”

“I agree. I’ve got a leukemia patient getting no treatment in the kids’ ward,” I mutter, taking another bite of chicken.

“Kwame, I’ve heard. Nice kid. It’s too bad, really. Horrible, actually.”

After a few minutes of eating in silence, I ask, “How long have you been here, Clive?”

“About five months,” he answers.

“Yeah? How long are you gonna stay?” I ask.

He lifts a shoulder and I notice even he looks thinner than when I first met him a couple of months ago. He’s already a thin fella, too-long light blond hair and blue eyes, and a slight build. “Not sure. When I feel like I can go home again, I guess.”

This interests me. “Why wouldn’t you be able to go home?”

He looks up into my eyes and there’s true, horrific pain in his. “Lost me wife and child a few months back. She stroked out while givin’ birth. Baby suffocated before we could get ’im out. Did CPR on ’im until they had to pull me away. I’m a fucking doctor. This shouldn’t have happened on my watch.”

I want to cry for the guy.

“Damn, I’m so sorry, man.” I put my hand on his in a comforting gesture and watch as tears splash his food. “I’m sorry I brought it up. I shouldn’t have pried—”

He swipes his face. “No, it’s okay. I haven’t talked about it since... and I need to. It’s not healthy to keep it in.”

“You are right about that. It’s hard to talk about pain, especially for us big, tough strapping men.” I make a muscle man pose.

He laughs, his eyes glistening. “You got that right, mate.”

I take a drink of my water.

“What about you? What brought you here?” he asks.

I knew it was coming so I decide to be upfront. “Since you shared, I will too. Seven years ago, I was out drinking with some friends. Left the bar to drive home and dropped my phone into the floorboards. While I was fumbling around for it, I went around a bend on the wrong side of the road, and there was a car. I corrected at the last minute and ended up ramming the driver’s side. The woman was thrown from the car and died in my arms. Left behind a husband and small daughter, about five.”

“Bloody hell,” he says. “That’s awful. I don’t blame you for coming here.”

“Oh, no... that’s not what made me snap. I served six years in prison for that. About three months ago, the husband was found dead from a gunshot wound. I don’t know if he offed himself or what, but I couldn’t handle it. Even if it was someone else who killed him, there’s now a little girl who’s orphaned because of me. If I hadn’t killed her mom, she’d at least still have her...” I trail off and clear my throat as I look down at my food, no longer hungry. I swipe my hand along the back of my neck.

“Bollocks,” he mutters. “You’ve sure been through it, haven’t you?”

“Yes, it seems.”

“You know the dad dying isn’t your fault, though. Right?” he asks, his brow raised.

“You know your wife and baby dying isn’t your fault either, right?” I counter.

He nods.

“We’ll be forever paying for sins we feel responsible for,” he murmurs.

“That’s right. We can come here and help the less fortunate, then go back home and do the same, but the guilt

will never go away. This is our prison. Though, I deserve mine. You don't."

He shoves his food away. "You don't either. You paid for your crime, and nothing will bring them back. Maybe you can find a way to help the little girl."

I had that thought before, and had already vowed I'd try to do something for her once I got back Stateside.

Fourteen

Christa

Five months.

Five months of no contact.

Five months of loneliness.

Five months of wondering if he's okay.

Five months of tears.

Every day I cry. And I'm not a crier. When I broke up with my ex, Richie, it sucked and I shed a few tears, but after two or three weeks, I'd completely moved on. This is nothing like that. I have good and bad days, and unfortunately, today is a bad day.

A really bad day.

It's been a long, hard week at work with the DA continuing on to officially indict our client for the home invasion robbery when we don't believe he did it. How they conjured up the evidence, I don't even know. The case is flimsy but meanwhile, a man's life is being ruined. With how emotional I've been lately, I sometimes I want to cry for the guy.

But I can't. I'm all cried out over own stupid personal issues. But Melinda and I will fight hard to keep him from getting convicted. I just have to dig up more evidence. The temptation to go to talk to Mr. Larsen again is strong, but he needs his space. Thankfully, Maureen came out of her coma and is left with some permanent injuries like memory loss and headaches, but she did pull through.

I sit on my sofa eating chocolate ice cream and drinking wine. Yes, it's gross together. No, I don't care.

The series I'm watching isn't keeping my attention. I'm PMSing but I'd rather wallow until I'm through it. Taryn hinted at maybe trying some antidepressants, but I don't want to. Something inside of me tells me I need to feel this. Because

if I don't, I can't move past it. Trust me when I say, I'd rather just numb myself with the meds, but I won't. I've also lost another five pounds, not sure how since I eat nothing but junk, it seems. Hiking is out of the question, as November weather sucks big donkey balls here in Colorado. I'm sure the seasonal shit is adding to my depression. Outside is dreadful sometimes. We get sunshine but it's cold and blustery and it makes me want to go back inside. I long for warmer days but that will be months from now. It would be so much easier to weather the winter if I didn't have to do it alone, but instead, snuggled up against a warm, hard chest and being held by strong arms as I sleep.

I scoop another bite into my mouth. What is Eric doing? Is he safe over there? Is he helping people? Will he be better when he gets back? *Is he coming back?*

Taryn gives me bits and pieces. He's working with the medical staff in basically a medical tent tending to the locals' health problems. He's not even in the big city of Kenya, he's outside in some village. I'm grateful for the updates she gives me during our rare girls' nights out, but I don't ask anything past that. She knows I'm a miserable bitch and I hope that's enough for her to see that I love her brother. I'm giving him his space, as she's asked, but that doesn't mean I don't love him and long to see him.

I think about the sex club I visited. The loneliness is eating at me, and I long to be held by strong arms and feel wanted. Every month, when the app alerts me of the new location, I itch to get dressed up and go there, but I don't. I tell myself that empty, meaningless sex isn't going to fulfill me, and I need to wait until he gets back.

It's been five months... Will he be back in a month—mere weeks?

Next time Taryn contacts me, I vow to ask her. After what I've been through, I'm owed that, at least. I have to prepare myself for his anticipated rejection, the one I know is coming when he returns. No way he still wants me after all this time. If he did, he'd have at least contacted me.

My phone dings with a text.

Lauryn: *Wanna hang out? I have gossip.*

Me: *Fuck yeah. Where?*

Lauryn: *Meet me at Silverbacks downtown*

Me: *See you in 30*

I don't care that it's snowing out. I need to get the hell out of here and stop wallowing. I don't even care if she tells me she's getting married to whatever coworker she's dating. I need this.

Silverbacks is Silver Breweries' latest new bar and grill. Taryn's husband is friends with one of the CEOs of Silver Breweries and their places are always top-notch, high-class breweries. I haven't been to this newest downtown location, but as I walk in, holy crap. The entire place is remodeled and classy as hell.

Lauryn waves me over and I wave back as I head toward her. I chose black jeans, a red cropped sweater, my black leather jacket, and matching high-heeled boots to accessorize it.

"Damn, you look fierce," she comments as I sit, eyeing me head to toe.

I'm secretly grateful she's alone and not with whoever she's been dating.

"Thanks, girl. You look great, too." I take in her blue jeans and black zip-up, skin-tight shirt. I see a purple jacket hanging over her chair. Lauryn's nursing salary affords her all the nice shit. As does mine.

A server comes over and greets me as soon as I sit. She puts a napkin down and then a glass of water. After setting a menu down, she says. "Look that over, we have some specials tonight."

I glance up into her kind brown eyes and say, "Thank you."

"I'm Maria. Let me know if you have any questions."

“Thanks.”

I set the menu down, not interested in food, and say, “Vodka martini, two olives, please.”

“You got it,” she replies, typing into her little handheld device.

“So, how have you been?” Lauryn asks.

“Fucking miserable,” I answer honestly. “What about you?”

Her beautiful smile falls. Lauryn’s one of those lucky bitches with porcelain skin, bright crystal-blue eyes, and warm, dark hair to contrast. Full lips and long, natural eyelashes everyone is jealous of. “What’s wrong?”

“Just missing Eric. It’s not something I need to talk about.”

“Are you sure?” she asks, looking stressed.

“Yeah... we had it good and then we didn’t. He left for Africa to atone for sins he already paid for and left me wondering what happened.”

“I know,” she replies.

This surprises me. “What do you mean, *you know*?”

Maria sets my vodka martini in front of me, and I thank her before she collects the menu and walks off. I take a sip, waiting for Lauryn to explain.

“You have to understand that what happened when Dr. Andrews was hired in the physical therapy department at the hospital...”

“Eric? What do you mean?”

“Well...” She looks around as if someone is going to hear her. “He got hired... and all—and I mean, *all*—the nurses, CMTs, clerks, every female, and some males, were drooling over him. Then, he just left. I knew you were dating him, so I told them to back off. Like, hey, he’s got a girlfriend, give a rest, *chicas*.”

I’m so confused. “Are you serious?”

She nods exuberantly. “Yes! I totally defended you. I know Taryn set you up with him, and I knew y’all were happy, so I kept telling them to back off, he’s taken.” She takes a sip of whatever pink drink she’s got in front of her. Lauryn’s a frou-frou drink type so I imagine it’s probably a raspberry lemon drop, but I don’t ask because I don’t care enough.

“So, what gossip do you have?”

She eyes me warily, then almost stutters out, “This nurse I work with, Mariana... she says Eric’s coming home in December and they’re gonna hook up. That she’s been talking to him while he’s been in Kenya working with kids. She brags about how kindhearted he is and how he’s constantly messaging her, that he can’t wait to get home to see her, and they’re gonna be together.”

My blood heats, and I’m sure my face turns so red it’s probably purple. “You have got to be fucking kidding me. Who is this bitch?”

“Just some nurse. Trust me... I don’t believe a word she says. I think she’s BSing everyone. I think she’s just trying to get attention, calling dibs, that kind of thing. But I wanted to give you a head’s up.”

I nod, fighting back tears. He’s been messaging someone else this whole time, while ghosting me?

Lauryn grabs my hand. “I know that look, Chris. It’s not like that. This chick is a total slut. She is just saying that to get the jump on when Eric returns. It’s not true.”

I look up at her with tear-filled eyes. “How do you know that?”

“Remember that date I had a while back, when you asked me to hang out and I couldn’t?”

I nod.

“That date turned into something serious. I’m glad I took a chance on Dane. He’s a fellow nurse, we’re pretty serious.”

I force a smile. “I’m happy for you.” And I mean it.

“Well, she used to flirt with Dane. I told her to back the hell off. She did. But Dane tells me she still flirts. Mariana’s a bitch. Please do not think that she’s telling the truth about talking to Eric. How would she get ahold of him anyway? Didn’t you tell me he had a different phone number because of the service providers over there?”

I nod. “Yeah, Taryn gave it to me. But she could have contacted him another way. They have wi-fi and internet service there. Trust me, I Googled it,” I say sheepishly.

“Yeah, but I doubt it. She’s so gross and pathetic.”

I lift my martini and drain it. I can’t handle this. There’s no way he’s been talking to some random while I’ve been here alone, writhing in pain.

“I appreciate your honesty. I need friends like you,” I confess.

She reaches across the table and grabs my hand. “I’m gonna get to the bottom of it for you. Shifts have been slow and sometimes boring in the ICU. I’ll get the truth out of her. I promise. In the meantime, are you okay?”

I shake my head and glance around the bar until Maria’s eyes meet mine. I lift my empty glass and she gives me a thumbs-up.

“That bad, huh?” Lauryn asks.

“You have no idea.”

After Maria refills my martini, I completely spill every last sordid detail to Lauryn. In fact, by the end of the night, I’m so tipsy, that I even confess about my night in the Mile High Rooms—something I haven’t even told Taryn about.

Fifteen

Christa

I have a decision to make. I have about three weeks until Eric's six-month supposed stint is over. I can't stand the not-knowing, so I drive to Taryn's house. The badass, beautiful house Carter had built for her.

I ring the doorbell and Taryn answers almost immediately, in yoga pants and a sports bra. "Chris... what are you doing here?"

"I need answers, bestie."

"Come in," she gestures, opening the door wide for me.

I walk into her massive gourmet kitchen that makes my tiny, rented house look like a hovel, and set my purse down. I plop my ass in one of the barstools lining the kitchen island. I cross my legs, my new skirt tight against my thighs and ass, and look down at my black heeled mary-janes.

"What's going on?" she asks, pulling two bottles of water from the fridge and handing me one.

"When is Eric coming home?" I ask bluntly, ignoring the sweating water bottle on the white marble kitchen island.

"I..." She pauses for a drink as if buying her some time for an answer. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do." I spy her phone sitting on the island and grab it. "I bet it's in here."

She snatches it back, opens the fridge door, and sets it inside.

"Did you just put your phone in the fridge?"

Taryn crosses her arms. "Yes, I did. I'll give it to you straight, you don't need to snoop through my texts."

"Well, I wasn't gonna snoop, I was gonna go through them with you watching."

She narrows amber eyes at me. "Not cool."

I stand from the barstool and pace. “I need to know, Tar. Please tell me. I need closure, or to be prepared, or whatever.”

She eyes me speculatively, and then blows out a breath. “I’ll tell you, but I’m going to stick by what I said. Give him space.”

At that, I stop pacing, and explode. “Are you kidding me!” I snap. “Give him space? I texted him after he left—which he never fucking responded to, mind you—and since then I’ve given him his goddamn space. And you’re gonna stand there and tell me to *give him space*. You have lost your mind!”

Her eyes widen and she takes a step back. “Whoa, Christa, I had no idea... I thought y’all were just hooking up...”

“No. For fuck’s sake.” I slam my fist on the kitchen island and run my fingers through my hair. “No, we were not just hooking up.” Tears form in my eyes and I blink them back. I slump into the barstool chair, bury my face in my hands, and start to cry. “I’m miserable, Tar. Miserable. I can’t eat or sleep. He left me without so much as a goodbye, and all I’ve been told over the past months was to leave him alone. I did that. I did as you asked, out of respect for you, out of respect for him, but I can’t do it anymore!” I cry harder, my tears dripping fast and splashing onto the white marble. “I need to know if he’s coming back to Denver so I can be prepared, but you’ve done nothing but block me at every turn.”

She stares at me from where she stands near the fridge. I look up at her through blurry eyes. “Christa... I don’t know what to say.” She offers me a box of tissue and I snatch one.

“This wasn’t a fling. I kept what we had private because... because... just that. It was private and I didn’t think you wanted the dirty details, but I fucking love him, Tar. I can’t breathe or eat or sleep or drink or function. I’m a zombie.” I cry again, the tears falling hard and fast, and I hate how vulnerable I feel.

“What the hell is all this shouting?”

We look over to see her husband standing there in workout clothes, heaving breaths.

“Carter... I’m sorry. We’re having a heated discussion. Go back to your workout.” Taryn gives him a look.

They have a full gym in their basement, and I know this because Eric and Carter used to work out down there while Taryn and I would drink wine and watch reality TV up here in the meantime.

Things have changed so much since I fell in love with her brother and then he just up and left the country.

“What’s the problem?” he asks, heaving while sweat coats his gray Under Armor sleeveless tee.

“Christa’s going through some stuff—”

“I’m in love with Eric and nobody can tell me shit!” I cry, raking a hand through my hair. “When’s he coming back? I need to know! Please!”

Carter’s eyes widen and he immediately blurts, “December tenth.”

Finally! A fucking answer.

“Thank you,” I say. “Where’s he gonna live?”

“His lease was up on the condo, but he’s renewing it... for now. He didn’t tell you?”

She turns to me. “We had to do it for him, but he’ll be in the same place for now.”

I stand and pull at my hair. “You seriously kept all of this from me?”

“No, we weren’t *keeping* anything from you. I didn’t know—until today—that you were *this* miserable about Eric. Damn, Chris. I’m so sorry.”

I don’t know how to feel. I’m elated that the love of my life is coming back in less than a month, but I’m also extremely upset that Taryn wants me to leave him alone, that she kept all this from me so I would back off, that she’d lie about having known about his homecoming that I had to come here and pitch a bitch fit to find out the truth.

As I gather my purse and head toward the front door, I turn around and say to Taryn, “Don’t forget that your damn phone is in the fridge.”

I hear, “What the fuck?” from Carter as I walk out.

I get into my car and slam the door.

I’m still crying for some stupid reason, but I’m blaming hormones. I’m usually not this emotional. I think all the stress and not knowing has gotten to me. My hair’s been falling out, probably from the sudden weight loss too, and I feel overall gross about myself.

As I drive, for some reason, I think back to the Mile High Rooms and how I was propositioned. Sure, it was just for sex, but it did give my self-esteem a little boost.

I head into my house, kick out of my shoes, and set my things down, then plop down on the couch. I pull my legs up to my chest and wrap my arms around them. I’m so tired of crying, and now I’m doing it again because I feel bad for being a bitch to Taryn. She’s trying to protect her brother—and also, I feel like she has some misplaced loyalty to do so because he’s her husband’s best friend—but even Carter was more forthcoming when I asked a question. I hope whatever I did there tonight sparks a conversation between them.

I don’t want Eric coming back and feeling like I’m smothering him, so I’ve made the decision I’m not going to contact him at all. If he wants to see me, he will. If I don’t hear from him, then I can truly move on.

It’s going to be a long three weeks.

“I don’t understand how this is happening!” Lance says, running a hand over his shaved head. “I didn’t do this!”

“We know, Mr. Johnson. We’re going to challenge the DA’s evidence when we get to court.” Melinda pats him on the shoulder.

“How did they even have enough to indict me?”

“The lineup photo and the fact you have no alibi,” I answer. “But it’s weak and flimsy.”

He blows out a breath and sits back in the chair. “But my cell phone records show I was at my house.”

“You could have left it there while committing the robbery,” I say.

He shoots me a filthy look. “I didn’t.”

“I know that, we all know that. Hey, I just thought of something. Do you have a doorbell camera?” I ask.

“Yeah, why?”

“That would show what time you got home from work that night and that you never left,” I offer.

“Yes, but he could have left out a back door or a window to do the crime.” Melinda holds her hands up. “Even though we know you didn’t.”

“I don’t really have a back door. It’s a two-bedroom apartment with a balcony.”

“That’s good news!” I say, looking at Melinda. “Think it’ll hold up?”

“We’ve used doorbell cameras before, but I’ve heard of people disabling it,” she replies.

I pace the room in my shiny black heels and long skirt, my finger to my mouth. “Aren’t there records that show when it goes offline? Like when you pull it off to charge it or when the battery dies?”

Lance nods. “Yes, there is.” He looks at Melinda. “Can we use it?”

She smiles. “We most definitely will. I’ll file a motion to get the recordings and online/offline time directly from the company.”

“I would also like to call Mr. Larsen in for a physical lineup. See if he picks out Mr. Johnson or someone else.”

“I’m down. Whatever helps, I’ll do it.”

“They’re going to dress you in the same type of clothing the robbers wore,” I tell him.

“I don’t care. Let’s do it,” he says excitedly.

“Don’t they usually do lineups when they are sure they have the guy and just need a positive ID? This might hurt him,” I say.

“Or it could help him,” Melinda says. “What the cops need to be doing is pressing the other two suspects harder for a name.”

“I take it the Larsens don’t have a doorbell camera?” Lance asks.

“No,” Melinda and I answer in unison.

“The detective already asked,” she comments.

“Though, I’m sure they’ll be getting one now,” I murmur.

“They’d be smart to,” Melinda says.

Mr. Johnson leaves and goes back to work at the bank, and I sit in my office, tapping my pen against the desk and staring off at nothing.

I get why the DA has a hard-on for my client. He is new and trying to prove to everyone that he’s successful and not soft on crime. The last district attorney was too soft on crime with no bail laws and letting people get away with robbery and no consequences. We took on a wrongful termination case last year where a woman was fired from a major electronics store for reporting a robbery, even chasing them out and getting the license plate number for the police. They were forced to prosecute but the store had a no-report rule, and she broke it. Still, she won the lawsuit because it’s ridiculous to let people get away with things, and she’s now \$150,000 richer.

I would have asked for a million. But she just wanted to teach them a lesson. She’s using the money to go to college and get a degree so she won’t ever have to work retail again if she doesn’t want to.

My mind, of course, drifts to Eric again, and I think about what Lauryn told me, how that slutty nurse is trying to claim

dibs on *my* man. I get so mad I want to leave early, go down to the hospital, and pummel her.

But of course, I won't.

What would I say, anyway? That he's mine? Because as much as I think of him that way, deep down he isn't.

Melinda calls me into her office and I put my head back into my work, a little break for my heart to not have to think about him.

Sixteen

Eric

I finish applying another crude cast to the wrist of a sixteen-year-old who jumped off a roof, for whatever reason, and my phone rings.

“Clive, could you finish?” I ask.

He rushes over and takes the last of the material, wrapping it around the kid’s arm. I wipe my wet hands on my scrubs and pull out my phone. It’s a U.S. number.

“Eric Andrews,” I answer.

“Hello, Mr. Andrews,” says a female voice. “This is Stacy with Anco Pharmaceuticals. I have Mr. Anco on the line for you. Please hold.”

My stomach flips with excitement. It was a week ago I’d made all those phone calls.

“Mr. Andrews, how are you?” he asks.

“I’m good, sir. I’m glad you called me back.”

“You had some questions about chemotherapy drugs for your project there in Kenya?” he asks.

“Yes, we are in dire need. Do you donate?”

“Yes, we donate all over the world to the less fortunate. In fact, Stacy is handing me the numbers right now.” I hear a paper crinkling. “Let’s see here... We sent hundreds of doses to Kenya two weeks ago. Did you not get them?”

I rub my hand along the back of my neck. “I don’t think so. All I know is we don’t have any here. I mean, it’s possible it all got distributed to the main hospital there. But I’m in a small village clinic outside of the main city.”

“Can you go there and ask them for some?”

“I did, last week, they said they had none to spare. So I told them I was sending my patient there then. I can’t sit here and watch this twelve-year-old die a slow death.”

He pauses, and says, “I understand. Tell you what, after I vouch for you—because we have to, you see—I’ll have another batch sent over addressed to you personally. I don’t know what the postal system is like over there, but you may want to meet the shipment yourself. I can have Stacy send you exact estimated delivery times, if that helps.”

“That would be very helpful. Can you spare any morphine, fentanyl, or Demerol as well? We are very low and have to ration it, which is obviously heartbreaking to watch people in pain. Especially children.”

“I’ll definitely look into it. I’ll patch you back to Stacy and she can get your email and other information, okay?”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “Thank you, Mr. Anco. The people here will be so grateful.”

“You’re welcome. Thank you for what you do over there. It takes a special person to be so selfless and dedicate their time and sacrifice a salary to do that.”

Well, I don’t deserve to be comfortable.

I swallow hard. “Appreciate it, sir.”

After Stacy gets back on the line, I give her my information and hang up, breathing a sigh of relief.

I go back to my broken wrist patient. His face is twisted in pain, and because it’s not as dire as some, I offer him ibuprofen and hope that will help for a few hours.

He swallows the pills. “Thanks, Dak. How long I wear this?” He holds up the cast.

“Six weeks. And no jumping off of roofs. What were you thinking?”

His gaze cuts to another boy about his age he came in with. “Samual dared me.”

I look scoldingly at Samual. “No more dares. He could have got hurt way worse.”

“Sorry, Dak.”

“Don’t apologize to me!” I bite back a smile.

I walk to our supply drawer and pull out a black Sharpie. For some reason, we have boxes of them. I hand it to Samual. “After it’s dried, you can write a message to Omari here on it. And have other people sign it as well.”

His eyes light up as he takes it. “Thanks, Dak!”

The boys walk off chatting excitedly about what is going to be written and how many people they can get to sign it.

I chuckle and head to the children’s ward.

I see Kwame sitting reading a book, but his eyes droop like he’s about to fall asleep. “Hi, young man. Feeling about the same today?”

He looks worse and I cringe inside.

“Very tired, Dak.” He attempts a weak smile.

I put my hand on his arm. “Well, I have good news. I talked to someone in America. We have some medicine coming, but I’m gonna need you to hang in there, okay?”

“I promise,” he says weakly, then closes his eyes. I listen to his heart and lungs as he rests and his heartbeat is weak.

I look at Nurse Amari. “Answer me this: Have you guys ever just dropped a patient off at the main hospital in town? Even if they try to refuse?”

She looks at me apprehensively and shakes her head. “We not allowed to do that. They told us not to, that they already too crowded with patients and not enough beds or medicine.”

“Well, I was told that shipments of chemotherapy drugs were sent here two weeks ago. I don’t know exactly where, but I’ll ask when I get the email I’m expecting. An American company is going to be sending more drugs and possibly some narcotics, too.”

Her eyes widen and she smiles. “Really?”

I nod and squeeze her shoulder. “Yes. In the meantime though, I think Kwame needs treatment now, like today. I’ll run it by Dr. Alsworth but I think I’m going to transport him to

the main hospital. This is ridiculous. He shouldn't be suffering like this."

She frowns and shakes her head. "That is not allowed."

I smile at her. "I don't give a shit. His life is more important than their rules. Surely there can't be so many people more sick than him that there's not room. You and I both know he doesn't stand a chance here. We have to try."

She nods. "Okay. I help you."

I finish my rounds and then find the doc.

"What's up, Eric?" Jack asks cheerfully.

I decide I'm going to tell and not ask. "I'm going to transport Kwame to the main hospital in town. Can I have the van keys please?"

He shakes his head. "The hospital's full."

"I don't care. That kid is gonna die if we don't do something." I tell him about my conversation with Mr. Anco.

His face gets red. "Those supplies were supposed to come here. The main hospital has to share whatever comes in from the pharm companies. That's infuriating!"

"Which is why I'm moving Kwame there. They want to take our drugs, they can treat him with them."

"Agreed." He reaches into his pocket and plunks keys into my hands.

I look at Amari and nod.

I open the back of the van and we use male village volunteers to help us load Kwame's cot and IV into the van. We have to disconnect the pole and lay the IV bag on his chest, but it'll work. The men ride with me the thirty minutes over horrid, bumpy dirt roads.

There's an Emergency Department entrance and I stop the van, putting it in park. I instruct one of the villagers to stay in the driver's seat because I don't trust it'll be here when we come back out.

Four of us carry his cot into the hospital.

“What’s happening?” Kwame asks groggily.

“We are getting you to the big hospital so you can feel better, okay?”

“Thanks, Dak. You da best.” He smiles weakly.

I want to fucking cry.

An American in a white lab coat stops me. “Whoa, whoa! What are you doing?”

“Where’s your cancer ward?”

He glances at the young boy, then at me. He puts his hand out. “Dr. Mark Smith.”

“Eric Andrews, I’m with Doctors Around the World. This is Kwame, twelve years old, advanced leukemia—we think. We keep waiting for cancer drugs but they never arrive. I have a feeling someone from the area has been taking our shipment but that’s a discussion for another day. Where do you want us to put him?”

He looks stressed, but he can tell by the look on my face I’m not leaving with Kwame. “Follow me.”

He leads me to a section of the hospital where there are more cots set up because all the beds are full. People of all ages are hooked up to IVs.

“You have chemotherapy drugs?” I ask.

He nods. “Yes, they are in low supply but we hopefully have some more coming in soon. What stage is his cancer?”

I shake my head. “We don’t know, we have only very crude supplies, and one small X-ray machine.”

He looks at a nurse in dark-green scrubs. “Get him to MRI.” He points at Kwame.

She looks stressed and flicks her gaze to me, then back to him. “Doctor, MRI line very long.”

I put my hand on Dr. Smith’s arm. “It’s okay, let the other patients have their turn, but try to get him in soon.”

He looks at the nurse. “Go find out how long, please.”

She nods and leaves.

The doctor finds a pole and hangs Kwame’s IV on it, and then instructs another nurse to get him some painkillers. They can’t administer the chemo until they know how much to give.

I thank the villagers and ask them to go wait in the van. I turn to Dr. Smith. “Can you take my cell phone number and update me?”

“Sure,” he says, pulling out his phone and handing it to me. I put in my name and contact number and hand it back.

“So are you a doctor, or a volunteer, or what?”

“I’m actually a DPT, but not doing much physical therapy over here. I’ve been doing more first aid—casts, taking care of the sick kids, that kind of stuff. Whatever I can do.”

“I’m sorry, I should have addressed you properly earlier,” he says.

“No, it’s okay. My DPT expired and I don’t... have it back yet,” I say vaguely.

An alarm beeps loudly through the loudspeakers. Someone shouts, “Code blue, room eighteen!”

“I gotta go. I’ll text or call when I have an update!”

I watch him and some other medical staff run off, and head back out to the van.

The thirty-minute drive is done quietly, and when we get back to the village, I thank the guys and they leave.

Later that evening, I check my email and I’m happy to see one from Stacy. The attachments state what drugs they’re sending, how much of each, and the label information—made out to me with an address to the local airport. There’s a tracking number, and it takes forever to load, but I see they sent it out three-day air, so it’ll be here in a few days. I will be there to pick it up when it arrives. I reply and thank her.

This is such good news. I’ve had a good day. A text earlier from Dr. Smith told me they were able to get Kwame an MRI

a few hours after I left, and also some extensive bloodwork. They determined it's about stage two and are starting the chemo immediately.

I don't regret what I did, in fact, I hope my decision will have saved his life.

A few days ago, I'd asked Amari why Kwame never had any visitors. A lot of the other children had frequent visits by their mothers or grandmothers, sometimes older siblings. He never had anyone. I was told he was orphaned, which explains why he had nobody to fight for him. Well, he does now. I'm going to make that bumpy thirty-minute ride as often as I can to go check on him. He shouldn't be alone, but I have hope that he'll pull through.

Seventeen

Eric

Three days later, I borrow the van and make the trip to the hospital to see Kwame. I frown when I see him, but know why he looks so poorly.

“Dak,” he says weakly, his lips dry and his eyes bloodshot. “You visit me.”

I hug him gently and say, “Of course, I wanted to see how you were doing.”

“I don’t like these drugs, Dak. They make me throw up.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, my guy. Would you believe me if I told you that you have to feel worse before you feel better? The drugs are killing all the bad guys in your blood that made you so sick, but unfortunately, it’s also making your tummy upset. You told me you’d hang in there for me, remember?”

He grins weakly. “I do it for you.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and force a smile. “You better! Are they treating you okay in this dump?” I ask, pointing around.

His eyes widen. “It’s not a dump, Dak!”

I chuckle. “It was a joke, silly. I’m glad we were able to get you here. You’ll get all better, then you can go back to the village and to school. They miss you there!”

He smiles. “They do?”

“Of course. They all want you to get better. So don’t let them down, okay?”

“I won’t, Dak.”

I squeeze his shoulder. “I gotta go now, buddy. I’ll be back, though.”

“Bye, Dak.”

I grin at him and head back out to the van. I follow a crude paper map to the airport, where my shipment is set to arrive. I checked the tracking on my laptop before I left and it was still on time for a 2:45 landing time.

I reach the airport, park, grab a dolly from the back, and lock the van. I head toward a large structure. I ask a man working where the shipments arrive, and he shows me to a door leading to a tarmac.

I wait inside. It's warm but I'm thankful it's winter. The summer was horrid. There's no A/C anywhere in the village and it was miserable. The winter here is mild.

The sound of an engine catches my attention and I see a small single-engine plane land on the tarmac.

I head out, hoping that's my shipment. I have no paperwork to prove it's mine, but I hope using my name and driver's license as ID will be enough for them to give it to me.

After the plane looks stable and parked, and the engines have been shut off, I run out with the dolly as the belly's door lowers and men begin offloading boxes onto an electronic golf cart-type vehicle.

These men work very fast. They almost have the whole thing unloaded as I reach them.

"Who are you?" one man with a bald head and yellowing teeth asks me. He wears an airport uniform.

"Hi. I believe one of those boxes is mine."

He doesn't even look. "No, all these are ours." He points to the two men who had helped him unload.

"I understand, but if I could take a look, it should only be two medium-sized boxes."

"No, fuck off," he tells me in broken English.

Oh, so that's how this is going to go?

"I'm afraid I must insist." I set the dolly down and approach the cart, looking at the boxes and see the top two have my name on them.

One of the men pushes me away.

The bald guy snaps, “I said no. Now go away or I call police.”

I laugh. “Oh, you’re gonna call the police? Well, two of those boxes are mine and you’re stealing. So go right ahead and call.” I pull out my phone. “Or better yet, let me.”

I have no idea if the police will even show up. I don’t even know the police’s phone number, as I assume it’s not 911 like back home, but the little Blackberry does have an emergency call icon.

“No, no police. Go away and we won’t whoop your ass.”

My eyes widen. “Are you serious?”

The other two guys hop on the cart and I yank one down and throw him to the ground. I didn’t want for this to get physical but there’s no way I’m leaving without these drugs.

The guy I grab punches me in the face but I recover quickly and punch him back. The other guy lunges for me but I duck and take him down with a leg sweep, then kick him in the stomach. He groans while the first guy tries to hit me again, but I knee him in the balls for the simple reason to get him to stay on the ground this time.

The man who first talked to me tries to punch the gas and go, but unfortunately for him, this cart looks exactly like the ones we used in the laundry department, after we’d wash clothes and bedding and had to distribute them around the prison compound, so I’m aware of exactly what pulling that big black cord will do. I quickly kill the battery with one yank and he hops off, infuriated.

We hear shouting and both look over to see two airport police running our way.

Good.

I stand with my hands up.

They shout in Swahili and I inform them I only speak English.

One says, “What is happening?”

“They’re trying to steal my shipment. I’m an American doctor and we have very sick patients in the south village. Please. All I want is to get my two boxes in peace and I’ll be on my way.”

The cop eyes me speculatively, then says, “Juma, you stealing this man’s things?”

“No! He lies!”

I carefully pull out my ID and show it to the cop, then I ask him to follow me to the cart. I show him the two boxes with my name on them. “I had these arranged personally because I had a feeling this was happening. These guys are stealing medical supplies. Do what you want with that information, but I’m leaving.”

I heave the two boxes onto my dolly and walk calmly off the tarmac, smiling when my back is turned.

My hand and jaw throb, and I taste blood, but I don’t care. It was worth fighting for.

The next few days are quiet. On my way back to the village, I found a small store and bought a couple of hardware kits with padlocks for the door where we keep the drugs. After that interaction, I’m taking no chances. I won’t ever find out why they were stealing the drugs, but I can guess. Especially the narcotics. I know a criminal when I see one and their intentions aren’t difficult to figure out.

I take a set of keys for the padlocks and give them to Jack. “I’ll let you decide who keeps a key.”

“Appreciate it, Eric. For everything. I had no idea the drugs were being stolen. I thought the main hospital was just hoarding them.”

“Did you ever ask anyone there to let us have some of their supplies?” I ask.

“Yes, they always said they were short and couldn’t share. Which is true, I’m sure, but now we know why they were

short. I mean, they did give us a few things when I would ask, but nothing like narcotics or chemo drugs.”

“Shouldn’t cancer be monitored in a bigger hospital, anyway?” I ask, having always thought it was odd that people going through such things should be convalescing in a hospital, not a village clinic.

“Yes, once the type and severity of the cancer is determined, they are allowed to get treatment here, since we have the IVs and the nurses. But it’s getting the blood tests done to check the progress that is the challenge.”

We have a village member who runs blood we draw to the main hospital for testing, and usually they call Dr. Alsworth with any results. Kwame’s blood hadn’t been tested in a while, which was why we didn’t know what stage it was, only that it was leukemia.

“Kwame’s already doing better, they tell me. And a delight to the other patients,” the doc says.

“I’m glad. He needs to be around other people. I imagine being an orphan is terribly lonely.”

“A family friend of his parents took him in, so hopefully he can go back there once he’s better.”

“No grandparents?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “They died young, then the parents passed. Dad died in the river trying to rescue a large animal, I’m not quite sure of the story. Mom had, what we can best guess, was a stroke.”

“Sad,” I comment.

“Right. So, are you excited to go home?” he asks, changing the subject.

“I have mixed feelings about it,” I tell him honestly.

He nods in understanding. “Well, of course we’d love it if you’d stay.”

“Trust me, I’ve been thinking about it. But I do think my time here is done for now, which isn’t to say I won’t be back.

You have a new group of people coming in Monday, right?”

“Yes, two doctors and two nurses. I’m very excited. I’ve also petitioned the organization for more supplies, and after your ordeal, I’ll personally be going and picking up shipments from now on.”

“Take a couple of big, strong villagers with you. I don’t trust those creeps I ran into.”

“I plan on it.”

Dr. Alsworth, his wife, and two teens have been here for two years. They are missionaries of sorts, him working as a doctor and she teaches school to the village kids, English mostly. They hold Sunday services, which I mostly attended with them. They were sobering experiences, and I hoped my prayers for forgiveness did not go unheard.

After changing out of my scrubs for the last time, I put on some sweatpants and a tee, and head to the mess hall tent for dinner.

“Well, it’s your last night eating this stuff. Bet you can’t wait to get back to the States and all that delicious food,” Clive says as we sit and eat.

I shrug and poke my pork chop with my fork, lifting the whole thing to my mouth. “I won’t lie and say I don’t miss a good Mexican... meal.” Or a beautiful Mexican girl I think about every day.

“Ah, never tried it, but I do want to visit America one day.”

“I really hope you do. Come to Denver, I will show you the most beautiful mountains in the world,” I tell him, biting into the chop.

He looks at me and makes a face. “We have knives, you know.”

I shrug. “I know, I’m starving.”

He chuckles and takes a bite of sweet potato. “I’d love to see Colorado. Got any pretty ladies there?”

It makes me happy to know he's thinking of moving on, and I answer honestly. "The most beautiful in the world. I've never seen an ugly woman there."

He laughs. "Do you have your own? Woman, I mean."

I hesitate and pull out my regular cell phone. I keep it charged up to access the photos and contacts on it, but I have to use my little Blackberry for phone for calls and texts because mine wasn't compatible here, nor was there data service. I swipe through photos and pull up one of Christa and me at her company picnic last summer.

Clive takes the phone and whistles under his breath. "Wow, what a knockout, mate. Love the tattoos. Very colorful and sexy. She's a curvy one, eh?" He hands it back to me.

I smile. "That's just one of the things I love about her."

"That's great. Bet she's missin' ya something fierce, eh?" he asks, picking up his milk.

"I don't know. We... haven't spoken."

He pauses the scratched plastic cup at his lips. "What? Why not?"

"I couldn't ask her to wait six months for me. I'm assuming she's moved on."

Clive shakes his head. "You are downright mad. Why wouldn't you keep in touch? Don't you love her?"

"More than anything."

"And she loves you, too?"

I nod. "Yeah. Well, I think so."

"Then what's the problem?" he asks.

I blow out a breath. "I don't deserve her. She can do much better than me."

"Bollocks." He shakes his head. "Even you don't believe the words comin' out of your mouth, mate."

"It's true, but I appreciate the vote of confidence."

"Does she know you're comin' home?"

I lift a shoulder. “I don’t know. I assume my sister probably told her. They’re good friends.”

“And she hasn’t tried to contact you at all?”

I pass the phone back to him and let him read the texts. He gives it back to me.

“Ouch. Those are from months ago. All I’m going to say now is—good luck. You’ll have a lotta grovelin’ to do.”

I swirl my sweet potatoes in a circle like I’m ten years old at Thanksgiving, hating sweet potatoes and forced to eat them anyway. “I doubt she’s still around. I’m sure some lucky guy snatched her up already.”

“Not if she loves you. She’s probably as miserable as you are.”

Eighteen

Eric

The Colorado December sky is gloomy, the cloud I flew over covering the sun that shone so brightly through my airport window seat. As the plane touches down, I feel oddly nervous. I'm exhausted from the 17-hour flight and am ready for my own bed. I managed about six hours broken up so that will have to do. Taryn has texted nonstop about how excited she is that I'm coming home and will be waiting for me at the airport.

I didn't ask if Christa would be there, too, because I already knew the answer.

The whopping two times I asked about her over the past six months, I was given generic answers. "She's fine" and "She's keeping busy"—nothing at all to indicate how she really was. I'm sure if I would have asked the right questions, I might have gotten more in-depth, honest answers, but I didn't.

Of course, I could have simply asked her myself but that would have opened up things I wasn't ready to deal with. I'm not sure if I'm ready to deal with them now, but I have to. All I need to know is if she moved on.

My body's sore and stiff as I collect my bag from the overhead bin and make my way off the plane along with the rest of the travel-weary people. The airport is a too-loud zoo. It overstimulates me and I take deep breaths to calm myself. I'll have to get used to the noise of civilization again.

I exit into the main airport area and Taryn squeals, running up to me and leaping into my arms. I swirl her around and hug her. Her scent is familiar and it feels so good to have close human contact. I see Carter in the crowd.

"I missed you so much!" my sister says, kissing my cheek and grabbing my hand.

I smile at her and look at Carter. We're about the same height and tower over the women. I shake his hand and he pulls me in for a back-pounding man-hug.

"Glad you're home. This one wouldn't shut up about it."

I chuckle. "I know."

"Guess what?" Taryn says.

I smile and look down at her. "What?"

"I'm pregnant!" She rubs her very flat stomach.

My eyes widen. "Oh, my God! I'm gonna be an uncle?"

"Yes!"

I shake Carter's hand again. "Congratulations!"

"Thanks. I'm nervous as hell, but it'll be okay. Right?"

I put my hands up in surrender. "Don't ask me, dude. I don't know the first thing about kids."

Which is partly a lie now. The best experience I had in Africa was treating the children. I even got to witness an emergency C-section. Woman was rushed to the clinic from the village with a breech-presenting baby. I had to hold the little guy's bottom in the mother while Jack cut the baby out so he could be delivered safely. I cringe, remembering how the poor mom had no time for pain medication. She'd passed out from the pain. But the baby boy was delivered safely and she'd come back a few weeks later to show off the little guy and thank us.

"I'm happy for you, sis," I tell her honestly, feeling a small flame of hope bloom in my chest. A new life always brought new possibilities, to be the person we wanted to be before we made all our mistakes, and I vow to be the best, most fun uncle ever.

After I pluck my suitcase from the carousel, we drive in Carter and Taryn's brand new Escalade he bought when he found out he was going to be a dad. I plan to stay with them for a few days, as I missed them and wanted to catch up before

going back to my little empty condo. They promised to feed me too.

He parks in the massive garage and Taryn shows me to the guest suite that has its own bathroom. I look at the bed and groan. I want to fall into it and sleep for days. That damn cot with the makeshift mattress I slept on for six months did no favors for my back.

“Get comfy, I’ll order us some dinner.”

“Haven’t you learned how to cook yet? You’re gonna be a mom. You better learn,” I tease her.

She sticks her tongue out at me, and I’m reminded of her twelve-year-old self. “Carter cooks. I do laundry and dishes.”

“You must be so proud,” I say dryly.

At least she isn’t hiring a housekeeper and doing the stuff herself—not that I’d blame her if she did. Carter’s loaded.

I set my bag and suitcase down and plop onto the bed. My eyes roll back in my head and I groan in pleasure at the luxurious comfort, then, I immediately feel guilty. There’s nothing like this where I was, and there probably won’t ever be for the poor villagers who only seem to work to live.

I pull my cell phone out and read Christa’s texts for the hundredth time, wondering if I should shoot her a text.

Fuck it.

I hit reply and type:

Me: *I’m back Stateside.*

I backspace and delete that.

Me: *I’m back in Colorado and I want to see you.*

Again, I delete it.

Me: *I’m home. I’m sorry. I need to see you.*

I let that one linger a few moments before I delete it.

A text is lame, and it’s not enough.

I decide that it's been six months and I can wait another day or so before I decide what to do about Christa. I should probably talk with my sister first.

After a hot shower that felt like a dream, I put on some sweats and a tee and head into the kitchen, where the smell of tomato sauce and pasta hits my nostrils.

On her massive marble kitchen island is a spread of pasta, bread, and vegetables.

"Smells amazing," I comment as Carter spoons more broccoli into a dish and throws a pat of butter and some garlic salt on it. He puts it with the takeout.

"From Marisios?" I question.

"Of course. Where else?" Taryn answers with a chuckle.

Carter kisses her temple and she looks up at him like he hung the moon and stars.

I'll never get used to them together, but my best friend treats my little sister like she's his world, and I'm forced to shut the fuck up. For the rest of my life.

I grab a white porcelain plate and dish up some pasta with a vodka tomato cream sauce and a big helping of broccoli. I leave the bread alone because my body needs a serious tune-up and those kinds of buttery carbs along with the pasta aren't going to help my goal. I take my plate and a bottled water to the massive dining room table that looks out to a sparkling pool in their backyard.

I scoop a bite of pasta into my mouth. An explosion of flavor hits my tongue and I bite back a groan when it hits my senses. More guilt floods me as I remember what the villagers ate back in Africa.

Ignoring that, I use my fork to indicate the yard. "So, she finally talked you into a pool, huh?"

Carter chuckles. "What Taryn wants, Taryn gets. Even if we can only use the damn thing for like four months out of the year."

“Five, if the weather’s nice in October,” she chirps. “Grumpy.” She leans up and kisses his stubbly cheek.

“Well, I’ll be utilizing it the summer. Along with your basement gym,” I comment, savoring the garlicky butter on the broccoli.

“Anytime, man.” Carter looks at his wife. “Get him a house key.”

“Already on it,” she says, jumping up and digging in her purse on the entryway table I can see from the dining room. She returns with a gleaming gold key. “Here you go, bro.”

I chuckle and shove it into my sweats pocket. “Thanks.”

Taryn reaches over and squeezes my bicep. “No gyms in Africa?”

I frown. She has no fucking idea.

“Only my own workout. One hundred push-ups, one hundred sit-ups, and a jog around the camp every night.”

Carter smirks. “I don’t expect anything less from you, my friend.”

No, my arms aren’t as yoked as they were when I left, but a few weeks of weights will rectify that. I continue to eat.

“I want to hear all about what you did over there,” Taryn says between bites.

Do you, though?

I smile and say, “I *will* fill you in, but not tonight, sis. I’m thoroughly exhausted.”

She nudges me and cuts a piece of lasagna with the side of her fork. “Come on. I’m dying to know.”

I glance at Carter, whose jaw ticks as he cuts his gaze to his wife. He forces a smile—a move I’ve seen him do a hundred times—and says, “Tar, hon. Let’s let him tell his story when he’s ready, huh?”

“I guess,” she replies. “You do look tired, Eric.” She places a hand on my arm.

I take another bite of food and a big swig of water, trying to muster up the courage to ask the next question. As the sounds of clinking and scraping fill the silence, I decide to ask.

“So, how’s Christa?”

They both freeze, and I realize I’ve asked the wrong thing.

“What?” I query.

“Why do you ask?” Taryn responds.

I drop my fork and stare at her, incredulous. “Why do you think? I fucking miss her.”

She cuts a look at Carter, and then looks back at me. “Well, she’s... coping. Keeping busy.”

“That’s the shit you texted me when I was halfway around the world. How is she *really*?” I ask, my jaw clenching at her elusiveness.

She looks at her husband again.

“Ya know what?” I say, standing. “It’s fine. I don’t need to know. I get it. I fucked up. I’m gonna go lie down.”

Without waiting for a response, I put my plate, fork, and cup in the sink and skulk to my room.

About an hour later, as I’m lying in bed with the television on the sports channel I don’t really pay attention to, I hear a knock at the door.

“Come in,” I call, grateful they knocked at all.

Carter walks in wearing a pair of black sweatpants and a tank top like he’s ready to work out. “Can I sit?” He gestures to the loveseat situated in this massive guestroom.

I nod and sit up, smoothing my hair down.

He sits there silently, almost to the point where it’s uncomfortable, and I just wait. I’ve known Carter for over half my life, and if there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that the strong man needs a minute to gather his thoughts.

Finally, he starts, “Listen. Don’t be hard on Tar, okay? She has this fierce protectiveness over you. She’s confessed to me

that she's scared of you and Christa together. Like... if you two didn't work out that she'll be stuck picking sides. I tried to reassure her that her brother will always be her brother and that her best friend will always be her best friend, but still, she persists. So, I'm going to be the bearer of bad news so my wife doesn't have to."

I swallow hard, not sure I want to hear what's coming next.

"Go on," I encourage, even though my insides are screaming in terror.

"Bottom line? Christa's a fuckin' wreck, man. Ever since you left, she's dropped significant weight. She doesn't ask Taryn to go out anymore. She barely calls or texts. A few weeks ago, she came storming in here, demanding to know when you'd be back. Taryn was hesitant, but I thought... fuck that. It's not fair for her to be in the dark. If Taryn had left me for months with no contact, I'd be going out of my mind insane. I knew that was how Christa was feeling. So I only told her when you were coming back. She cooled down after that. Because she needed to know."

Like a punch to the chest, I shrink back to the bed and dip my head low, unable to look my best friend in the eye. "Fuck."

He chuckles. "I knew that'd be your response. But, bro... she's in a bad way. She hasn't been herself. Though, she seemed better when she left, knowing you were coming back. My question is... what the fuck is your problem?"

My head whips up. "What?"

He pierces me with those intense blue eyes. "Taryn said Christa texted you while overseas and you haven't so much as responded. No replies. No calls. No snail mail. No carrier pigeon messages. What the fuck, man?"

I blow out a breath. "She deserves better. I only asked about her earlier at dinner to make sure she's okay. I hoped this whole time she'd found someone else. A good guy who wanted to take care of her."

Carter shakes his head. "Nope. Bullshit. I'm calling bullshit."

I furrow my brow. “Why?”

“You don’t want her to find another guy. You want her miserable and wanting you.”

I sit up and point a finger at him. “No, the fuck I don’t. How could you say that?”

He smirks at me. “Because I know you, bro. You’re trying to be this... this... martyr. Like, you’re so bad and she should find someone good. But that’s not what you want at all. You want her to be here waiting for you, just so you know she’s here, but not to be with anyone else, because for her to be with anyone else would be like a shock to your heart. You can stop me anytime.”

I shrink under his scrutinizing gaze. This is not and has never been the shit we talk about. Girls. Feelings. Hell, we never even talk about sex unless it’s vague and only a mention about how it was. But that’s not what’s going on here. Carter looks pissed at me for treating Christa the way I have.

I blow out a breath. “Dammit.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

I stare at him. “What do I do?”

He stands with his hand leaning on the edge of the loveseat. “Honestly? I came in here to tell you that you fucked up and there’s probably no hope for the two of you, but when I saw the look on your face when I mentioned her name and the absolute pain she’s been in, that all changed. I mean, I still think she’d be fucking stupid to love you after how you treated her, but hey. I don’t know chicks that well. I only know your crazy sister and that’s how I plan to keep it.”

I laugh without humor. “Yeah, she’s crazy.”

“I’d suggest Taryn as the first place to start.” He walks out the door, closing it with a quiet click.

Hope blooms in my chest that Christa still wants me, but then the dark cloud of guilt I live with daily makes its appearance and lets me know that I fucked up royally and I’d be lucky if she gives me another chance.

As I slump back onto the bed, I'm reminded again that I don't deserve Christa and that if I leave her alone, she'll get over the fucking heartbreak I caused her and move on to find someone good, shiny, and new.

Nineteen

Christa

One week.

It's been one week since Eric's been back Stateside. I told myself... if he doesn't contact me within a week of being back, that I was done. It was time to move on. I knew he needed time to adjust to being back, but a week was enough to decide if he wanted to see me. But he didn't.

So, I'm fucking done.

So fuck him and fuck *everything*. Tonight, the app notified me that the traveling erotic circus, also known as the Mile High Rooms, was in town and I've been sex-deprived enough.

Glad that I had that first experience, I knew what to expect. I wait in line wearing a skin-tight black sleeveless dress and the highest heels I own—bright red patent leather peep toe pumps that show off my new pedicure with painted toes to match the shoes. My mask is secured around my eyes and nose, and I smile.

“Well, hello. Password?” the front door attendant greets.

He's damn hot in his suit so I smile flirtatiously at him. “Santa Baby.”

“Perfect. App?”

I already have it on my screen. I bring it up and he scans the QR code with his device. I tap my debit card against it for the cover charge, and I'm inside.

The same smells of salaciousness surround me. It's crazy to me that a completely different warehouse in a completely different town can look so similar. It explains why the app and cover charge are so high. This is a highly orchestrated thing.

I walk through the main room, where there are lots of people engaging in all kinds of things. This time, I waited until after 11 p.m. to indulge, and I'm glad I did. The place is so much more crowded.

Throng of people crowd around each station, or corrals as I call them, watching people fuck. One particular crowd is large, and I wander over in curiosity to see what is going on. I peer over the shoulder of a nice-smelling man and watch as four people engage in a big ol' orgy. There's a very good-looking buff man with black hair fucking a woman from behind who is on her hands and knees. Her face is buried between the legs of a woman, who clutches the woman's hair, but can't cry out because her mouth is full of a huge cock slamming in and out of it from behind her head. They make eye contact as he fucks her mouth, before looking up at the guy fucking the woman who's eating her out. He leans over carefully and kisses him, and it seems they have the perfect train. Not one part of it is not connected, and I admire their engineering.

I would love to be a part of that.

So hot.

I pass another station where two women are heavily engaged in some sort of sexual tryst. One lies on the massive fancy white couch while the other eats her. The one on the bottom has her arms craned above her head, her mouth dropped open in pleasure. Behind the woman eating is a man fucking her pussy furiously from behind. The man fondles the breasts of the eater, while his other hand stimulates her clit.

The guy pumps furiously into her pussy and I watch to see which one is going to come first. I wish so badly I could be one of those women—I don't care which one.

“Fucking hot,” someone whispers in my ear.

I turn to see a guy about my age smiling at me. He's got warm brown eyes and full lips that immediately draw my attention. He looks dapper in a black suit and gold-colored tie.

“Christa,” I introduce, my hand out.

“Rafael,” he responds. “*Eras tan hermosa.*”

My lips tip up at his compliment that he thinks I'm beautiful, and I respond to let him know I appreciate him. “*Gracias, guapo.*”

My Spanish sucks, my dad opting not to teach us to be fluent, but I took a few years in high school to learn the basics.

“You want to be fucked like that?” he asks, jutting his chin at the throuple.

I shrug and purse my lips. “I wouldn’t mind giving it a try.”

He runs his hand along my waist and down to my ass. “And I wouldn’t mind fucking your juicy pussy and ass.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

Rafael spins me around and pulls me flush to him. “Yes, gorgeous. I’d love to taste every inch.” He runs his nose up my neck and then plants a small kiss at the base of my ear.

I stiffen at the use of the word “gorgeous” and pull away. Only one man gets to call me that—even if that man doesn’t want me.

“What’s the matter, baby?” Rafael asks.

“I... I need to go.”

I suddenly want to hide. I look at the area where the viewing rooms are, but decide to hit the gas tonight. I walk quickly to the DR rooms and ask the attendant which rooms are available.

“Single males in rooms three, ten, and thirteen. Single females in rooms two and seven.”

“Thanks.”

I slip into room three and am greeted by a man wearing a full hood over his face—like an executioner. I hear him gasp audibly when I enter the room and grin. I just need to get fucked. The room is dark, save for a small red light in the corner that allows me to see his hood. The rest of his body is obscured by the covers of the black sheets he hides under.

He whips the covers back and growls, “Get in here.”

I obey, crawling on top of him. I kiss his neck and his smell seems familiar. I die all over inside when I realize he wears the same cologne as Eric. I watch as he takes a remote

and clicks off the red light—the only source of illumination—and we're plunged into pitch-black darkness.

It's better this way, I tell myself.

“Ride me,” he demands in a low voice, almost a whisper, as he shoves my dress up and groans when he feels I have no panties on. I hadn't worn any. Why bother?

“Fuck,” he murmurs, sliding his thick finger along my slit. I shudder as I'm aroused by what he's doing.

I feel his rock-hard dick underneath me, and I moan when he pulls my dress up higher to expose my braless tits. He twirls his fingers along my right one, flicking the piercing.

“Yes, pinch them,” I whimper, sliding along his hard length while his other hand plays with my clit. “Make me come, Daddy.”

I use the terminology I heard the couple I watched the last time I was here.

The guy freezes his ministrations. “Daddy?” he whispers.

“Yes,” I reply quickly. “Make me come, Daddy, please. Then you can fuck my pussy so hard.”

His fingers move quickly while I slide along his dick that lays against his stomach. My fists try to grab bunches of his chest as I get close to climax, but it's so firm, I fail.

Faster and faster he swirls his finger on my clit.

“Oh, my God!” I scream as I come, my whole world swirling and dizzying.

Immediately, he pulls back to put a condom on, then lines up his cock at my entrance. I happily slide down onto it. I cry out in relief. I need this so bad.

He whimpers as I slide up and down along his length, my shoes still on as I push them into the bed for purchase.

His strong hands grip my hips and squeeze almost painfully as he thrusts up into me. I imagine it's Eric under me, fucking me hard and fast as I ride this random guy's cock. I arch my head back and tweak my nipples between my

fingers, chasing that second orgasm. My toys at home hold no candle to the way this guy's dick fills me up. He fucks like Eric, but as I run my hands over his shoulders and biceps, I feel that he's smaller than Eric in the chest and arms, and his stomach is a little softer too. I moan as he hits the right spot, and warmth swirls in my stomach as I feel another climax building.

“Come on my cock,” he murmurs in that low, growly voice I can tell he's faking. “Squeeze that cunt around me, baby.” His breaths pick up along with mine.

His dirty talk spurs me on. I ride him hard, sweat dripping down my brow as I ride like I've never ridden before. His dick jerks a few times as his fingers squeeze my nipples, and I cry out as another orgasm crashes over me.

“Oh, my God, I'm coming!” I scream loud as my release crests over me, not caring who hears because this is the place for it. The guy squeezes my nipples with his rough fingers as they peak hard with my orgasm.

“Fuuuuuck,” he groans, thrusting up once as he comes, squeezing my hips so hard I'm sure my hipbones will be bruised tomorrow. But I don't care. That was such an intense climax, I can't wipe the smile from my face, even if I did picture it was Eric under me the whole time.

I collapse onto the bed, panting.

He does the same, his breaths coming out hard.

Realizing I just fucked someone I didn't even know—someone who isn't Eric, I slide my dress down, scramble off the bed, and bolt out of the room without a word.

What did I do?

I wipe my hands across my lips, not sure why because I hadn't even kissed the guy, and try to walk with as much dignity as I can, my head held high, as I stroll through the room. Once I'm out of the warehouse and into the parking lot, I fish my key from my dress, quickly disarm my little BMW, and slide inside. I can't seem to catch my breath, my vagina

and hips aching as the reality of what I did comes rushing back to me.

I just fucked some guy. Some random I don't even know.

And all I could do was think about Eric the whole time. How is that fair to him... to Eric... and to me?

I try to remind myself that Eric doesn't want me and that we're not together. That he had his chance, and that he's home now and never bothered to contact me. That Taryn told me Carter confessed to him what had been going on with me and he *still* didn't bother to get in touch. That I deserved this tonight and needed it. Sex deprivation sucks and I'd put up with enough.

I blow out a breath and drive home, feeling like shit and missing Eric more than ever. To have imagined him being the one I had sex with tonight—the one I took out all my aggressions and frustrations out on—did that make it okay?

I'm not sure.

I slam my hand against the steering wheel and drive faster, taking out my anger on the car now, wondering why I should be feeling guilty for this when Eric proved for the last six-plus months that he didn't want me. That he was fine the way he was, wallowing in his own misery and not letting me or anyone else help him.

I speed faster toward my house and tears blur my eyes.

What have I done?

Twenty

Eric

I whip off the hood and use the remote to click the red light back on. I peer around the black-painted room to ensure I wasn't dreaming. Had I just fucked Christa in this room, without her knowing it was me?

Or had she known?

A spicy mix of emotions overtake me.

The first one is elation. I had sex with my girl! The very thing I'd been dreaming about and jerking off to for the past six months. But that high is quickly deflated when I realize she was here, in the Mile High Rooms, willing to fuck a totally random stranger.

What had she been doing while I was gone? How many times had she been here?

Sure, it was obvious how she got access—clearly my sister hooked her up. But why?

Why not? My brain taunts me. You fucking abandoned her, you idiot. You have no right to judge.

My conscience is right. I really don't. It still stings, though.

I heave out a sigh and get up, get dressed, and leave this room of pleasure and pain before someone else comes in. I glance at the many tools and whips hanging from a board in the corner and shudder. *Not my scene.* I secure the mask back over my head, made of thick black cloth, with two holes cut in for the eyes.

As soon as I leave, two women in French maid costumes swoop in and go to work changing the linens.

I wander around the club looking through the two small holes of the mask. I'm not sure why I feel the need to obscure my identity, but it seems tonight it was a win.

Or was it?

I stalk out the front door and suck in a lungful of the cool Colorado night air. I'm glad it's not snowing as I whip off the mask, fold it, and shove it into my pocket. My Audi waits for me and I get in, punch the gas, and head toward my condo.

Carter had installed that app on my phone a long time ago, right before I got with Christa. So I never used it. I've been back a week and never had the balls to use it until tonight. I hadn't heard from Christa since I returned, and I lost my nerve to contact her, unable to hear that she had most likely moved on, so I decided to go to the Mile High Rooms for a release. I never thought in my wildest dreams that I'd see her, but there she was. That mask hid nothing from me. I'd know her body anywhere—albeit a bit thinner than I remember.

I can't even smile at my time with her because she thought she was fucking some random, and I had gone there hoping for the same. I'm a terrible person, undeserving of her. But did she really think she could hide those tattoos?

We both suck. But me more.

I park in the garage and close the door, heading into my house. I toss my things on the kitchen counter and grab a glass of water from the fridge dispenser. I lean against the counter as I sip it, wondering what I should do.

The Mile High Rooms won't be around for another month now. It's not like I could go there tomorrow and see if she shows. It's one night a month. I have a brief thought of driving to her house and confessing everything. Guilt starts to sink in that I'd deceived her. Purposely deepened my voice and spoke low so she wouldn't recognize me. Flipped off the red light so we could be plunged into darkness while we fucked. I was afraid she'd recognize me and this wasn't how our first reunion was supposed to go.

“Fuck!” I slam the cup into the sink instead of throwing it against the wall like I want to.

I stalk to my room and quickly change into loose shorts and a T-shirt, then grab my keys, wallet, and phone, and drive to the 24-hour gym.

Getting back into working out has been hard. I'm sore all the time because I'm pushing myself. I need to get my bulk back, I seem scrawny when I look in the mirror and my stomach is too soft for my liking.

I spent six months without access to a gym, and I need to be kinder to myself. Hard runs over rocky dirt ground and some sit-ups and pushups were all I managed in Kenya, and as I lift the weight over my head, there's nothing like the resistance of weights that my muscles need to attain the physique I want.

After thirty minutes of weights, I run on the treadmill for another twenty, trying to sweat out my horrible behavior from earlier tonight. To try to expel the thoughts of the way Christa's fingers ghosted over my chest as she rode me. The feel of her sweet pussy fitting my dick so perfectly. The moans that spilled from her lips.

I shake my head and increase the time, running faster until my lungs burn and my thigh muscles smart with every pounding step. I up the volume of "Bodies" by Drowning Pool blasting in my ears. I gaze at the television mounted a few feet away showing some kind of cooking show.

Anything to get my mind off of what I did.

But it doesn't matter. What happened is going to be forever burned in my brain, and what's more infuriating is the fact that I don't want to forget it. That first burst of pleasure after so many months of deprivation was what I needed. And it was with the girl I wanted it with. I'd just deceived her, even if she was there of her own volition.

How am I going to make this right?

I wake up Monday morning realizing I have to be at the hospital at ten for an interview. Even though I'd already worked there, I hadn't been there long enough to allow a six-month leave of absence and I now had to start the hiring process all over again. I was looking forward to it, though.

After a shower and shave, I open my laptop to update and then print out my résumé, and see an email from my sister. What is she emailing me for?

To: EricAndrews@pmail.com

From: TarynL@nvite.com

Subject: You're invited!

Carter and Taryn request your presence at their baby's Gender Reveal party on Saturday, January 29 @ 2:00 p.m. at their residence.

Click here to accept nvite!

Click here to decline nvite!

I roll my eyes. What's with all the parties and shit all the time? Can't she simply send a text and tell us if it's a boy or a girl?

I click *accept* because I obviously have to go, plus there will probably be a killer food spread.

Once my résumé is updated, I print it and take it with me to the interview. They said I didn't need to bring a paper copy but I guess it's habit. Is 36 too young to consider myself old and set in my ways?

After trying to remember how to get to HR, I finally found it after two elevator rides. I sit in the office waiting for them to call me back for my interview. I'm nervous, glad I wore the black button-down and silver tie because I'm stupidly sweating.

"Mr. Andrews," a woman calls from one of the many doors. "Right this way."

I stand and head there, and then enter a room with a large conference table and four people dressed professionally sitting at it. The woman leaves, closing the door behind her.

Each person shakes my hand, remembering me from my short employment from before I took off halfway around the world.

I hand Dr. Turner my résumé and he looks it over. “I see you gained quite a bit of experience in Kenya.”

I nod. “Sure did.”

“Tell us about it, in your own words.”

“Sure,” I begin. I talk for about ten minutes about everything I did and saw there and the impact it had on me. I shared the story of Kwame and the incident at the Kenya airport with the drugs, acknowledging that it’s going to be an ongoing problem and I felt frustrated because I didn’t have the resources to make it better. Only a beef up in law enforcement or maybe private security would do that.

“And how is the young boy doing now? Do you get updates?” Dr. Turner asks.

“I got a text from Dr. Smith yesterday that his bloodwork is improving, and that the cancer is dwindling. Not out of the woods, but it was a relief, nonetheless.”

The doc and the other three smile, seemingly invested in my story. “I’ll keep you guys updated when I hear something. I mean, if you hire me back that is.” I throw them my most charming smile.

“Of course we’re going to hire you back. You’ll be PTA status, but that’s until you can get your DMT reinstated. Any news on that?”

I shake my head as my cheeks heat. “Unfortunately, they’re still refusing. I’m going to try again in a few months, maybe show them the time I donated overseas. I’m hoping it’ll help, but that’s not why I did it.”

“How are you adapting to being back home?” Dr. Turner asks.

“I’m okay, it was an adjustment, but it’s been almost two weeks so I’m getting back into the swing of things. Getting used to the food, too.” I pat my stomach. “It’s nice to be able to go to the gym. The little things.”

“Totally understandable.” He stands and we all follow suit. “Let’s get your paperwork done, then you can start whenever

you're ready."

"I can start tomorrow if that's okay. I really want to get back to work."

He nods. "Perfect."

We leave the conference room and the doctor tells the lady who'd greeted me that I'm hired. I fill out a bunch of paperwork on the computer and put in my bank info again for payroll, and then I'm done.

"You'll start tomorrow, Dr. Turner told me?" she says.

I nod. "Yes, I'd like that."

"Great. Stop by here first for your ID badge and then you can head up to PT."

"Thank you." We shake hands and I leave with a smile on my face.

My next stop is my parole officer's office. I head downtown and pay to park in a garage because I don't want to deal with finding a spot on the street. I'm thirty minutes early but I'll wait.

Thankfully, it's only about fifteen minutes before she comes out after another guy leaves. "Mr. Andrews, right this way."

My P.O., Lisa Price, is a tough woman in her fifties. I don't know her very well, but she seems hard, but fair. I learned early on—just do what's expected of me and she won't bust my balls.

"So, how are you doing?" she asks as I sit in a chair that looks like it's seen better days. Her office is tiny, only a desk and a chair, a laptop sits on top of the desk. A couple of personal photos not facing me are on her desk as well, and her college degree is framed on the beige wall behind her.

"I'm good," I answer.

She opens the laptop and puts on reading glasses before squinting at it and asks, "So, since you got back from Africa,

have you secured employment? Or were you going back to”—she scans the screen—“CU Health?”

“Just had an interview this morning, ma’am. They’re hiring me back and I start tomorrow.”

“Perfect. What’s the pay on that?” she asks. At first, I want to tell her it’s none of her business, but I know why they ask that. When she makes home visits and see my assets, she’ll ask how I can afford things on a certain salary.

I answer her, and then add, “I could make literally double that if the state would let me take the DPT test and give me my doctor’s license back.”

“I understand, but reinstating doctors after a felony is tricky.”

I sigh frustratedly. “My crime wasn’t related to my profession. I did some reading. I understand if I had prescribed something that killed someone, or I was abusing my power by writing prescriptions for narcotics, but I didn’t do any of those things. My crime was an accident”—I stop and clear my throat—“excuse me, a *mistake* that I paid for and continue to pay for.”

She removes her glasses, closes the laptop, and folds her hands on top of it. “Listen, Eric. I know all of these things. I want to help you get your doctor’s license back, but it’ll take time. I tell you what; I’ll write a letter on your behalf, letting them know you’re walking the line, staying clean, and that you even spent six months of unpaid time volunteering in Africa. Would that help?”

A smile I can’t stop spreads. “I would love that, Ms. Price. I would greatly appreciate that.”

“You email me the state medical board’s information and I’ll get it sent over, okay?”

Knowing I’m risking my luck, but seeing that she seems to be in a fairly good mood, I say, “Can I ask you something?”

She chuckles and opens her laptop again. “You sure can ask.”

“Do you have the resources to tell me how Mr. Stamp died? I mean, I know it was a gunshot, but...”

“Mr. Stamp?”

I nod.

“Oh, the victim’s husband in your case, that’s right.” She looks at me and I think I see a small bit of sympathy there. “I heard about that, but did not investigate further. The police never put out another statement?”

I shake my head. “No, after I went to Africa, my sister told me they came out and said it was a gunshot, but didn’t say if it was a home invasion, a domestic issue, or if was... self-inflicted.”

“That happens sometimes. The family will request or even threaten the media if they keep reporting on it, so they aren’t allowed to say.”

“That sucks. I’d like to know.”

“I’m sorry, there’s no way for me to find out.” I think there is, but I’m not going to push her or my luck.

“It’s okay,” I reply. “Anything else?”

“No, I think that’s it. Keep up the good work. Oh, and stay away from alcohol and obviously drugs. I just have to remind you.”

I nod. “I am. Haven’t had anything to drink since I got out. Okay that’s a lie, I had like half a beer the day after.” And the few swigs of whiskey the night I found out about Mr. Stamp, but I keep that to myself. I still have the whole bottle at home. I need to take it to Taryn’s or somewhere.

She grins. “Don’t worry about that. Just keep up the good work.” She reaches into a drawer, pulls out a plastic cup and a sticker, uses a Sharpie to write my last name and register number on the sticker, and hands it to me. “UA time. Use the bathroom on your way out, and seal the lid with the sticker.”

I take it from her. “Yeah, I know the drill.”

Twenty-One

Christa

I grab the envelope from Taryn and tuck it into my purse. “I’ll keep it safe, I promise,” I assure her.

She squeezes my hand. “Thank you. You don’t know how hard it is not to peek at the gender.”

“Well, you’re not getting it out of me.” I zip my lips with my fingers. As soon as I’m home, I’m looking.

“I texted you the bakery’s number and the pinata place, right? Call them ASAP so they can get the right color.”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, only like ten times. I got this, Tar. Chill!”

We laugh as we’re led to a table in the sushi restaurant, only the two of us. “I’m starving,” I say, looking at the menu.

“Me too. Nothing raw though, it sucks.”

“Oh, you can’t eat raw stuff while pregnant? I think I’ve heard of that before.”

“Or shellfish or any fish that might contain mercury.” She pouts.

I look over the menu and say, “You could get a cucumber roll. And some teriyaki chicken.”

“I know, but I really wanted some unagi and sashimi. Oh well, after the baby’s born. He or she is worth it.” She smiles and rubs her tiny bump you wouldn’t know was even there unless someone pointed it out.

“I’m really happy for you, Tar.” I set the menu down and grab her hand. “I’m sorry I’ve been such a reclusive bitch lately. I’m trying to snap out of it, and I think I’m doing better,” I lie. I’m not, but no need to take my misery out on everyone else.

“You know, I wanted to apologize too.” She looks down, then slowly gazes up at me through her lashes. “I’m just

protective of my brother, but I'm also protective of you, too. I didn't want to see either of you hurt," she confesses.

"Well, it doesn't change the fact that I loved him. I still do."

The server comes over and sets down tea and soup and we give her our orders.

Taryn takes a cautious sip of tea. "Has he contacted you?"

I shake my head once. "Nope. Obviously, he's over it. I have to get there myself."

"What about a dating app?" she suggests.

"No, but wanna hear a secret?" I look around like I've got the state secrets I've been dying to spill.

Her eyes widen. "Uh, yeah."

"I went to the Mile High Rooms, hooked up with a random."

Taryn gasps. "You did? How was it?"

"It was pretty awesome, I won't lie. I mean, I had to imagine it was Eric, but whatever."

She makes a face. "Ew."

"Sorry," I reply, pink heating my cheeks.

"What did he look like? Was he hot?" she asks, eyes wide as she spoons soup into her mouth.

I lift a shoulder and let it fall. "Don't know. He wore a mask and was under the covers when I got there, then he turned out the red light. There was something mysterious and sexy about not knowing. So it's not like I could try to find him again if I went there. Not that I really want to. I shouldn't have done that."

"Well, if it helps you get over Eric, that's all that matters."

That stung for some reason. "No, it completely made it worse, and now I feel guilty," I confess.

She looks at me apologetically, holding her teacup. "You don't need to feel guilty. I get why you did it."

I sigh. “Tell me something. Do you really think he hates me? I mean, I didn’t do anything, and yes it’s his issues he’s got to work out, but to just go no contact... It hurts.”

She smiles sympathetically. “He doesn’t hate you. He even asked Carter about you.”

My stomach does a little flip. “He did?”

“Yes. He asked how you were doing, we told him you were fine.”

But I’m not fine. I’m so far from fine I can see fine from the other side of the country.

“That’s it?” I ask, disappointed.

She hesitates for a minute and says, “Do you want me to talk to him?”

“Why would you do that? I thought you wanted us apart.” And miserable.

“Look, Chris... since he got back from Africa, he’s different. He seems... better. All I want is for both of you to be happy, and it’s obvious you’re not and he’s not when you’re apart, so it’s time I back off and let you both do what you want to do.”

“I would have done what I wanted to do, anyway, Tar—full disclosure. It’s him who doesn’t want me.”

“I know, I know,” she murmurs, drinking some tea.

I lift the spoon to my mouth. “Besides, you said he was better... or seemed better.”

“I said he was better... mentally, I mean. He doesn’t beat himself up about what he did and he’s lost that heaviness on his shoulders. I don’t think he’s truly happy, and I get the feeling that something’s missing from his life. Maybe it’s you.”

Tears well in my eyes. Not that she’s finally acknowledging that we belong together—though, that’s a relief—but because he seems sad, and that he appears better in other ways. I have to see it for myself.

I set the spoon down. “What would you say to him?”

Taryn stares at me for a long minute and says, “That you have the same look he does. Like someone’s other half is missing. I don’t know if you two are fated to be together, but if it takes you two being together to at least see, that’s what I want. I want everyone around me to be happy and positive, even though that can be a pipe dream sometimes.”

“It’s not a pipe dream. You choose who to allow in your circle, and you’re smart enough to know that people go through shit in their lives, and you’ve always been a very supportive friend.” *Well, mostly.*

The server interrupts with our meals, and after she walks off, I continue.

“Listen, I’m not mad at you. I was a little bit, but I knew you were simply looking out for Eric.”

“And you, too. Like I said, I’m a fiercely protective friend. I don’t want you to get hurt by some guy who’s emotionally unavailable and fucked up. Even if that guy is my brother. I think now that he’s been out and back into society, that he’s adjusted. He even got his job back, not sure if I told you that.” She picks up a cucumber roll with chopsticks and pops it into her mouth. “Mm. So good.”

I grin and pick up a spicy tempura tuna roll, shoving it in my mouth. “Mm. So good.”

She laughs at my mimic and says, “So, do you want me to?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want him contacting me because you told him to, or thinks he has some obligation.” I shake my head.

“Then text him,” she suggests.

“I did. Three times. He never responded.” I’m starting to lose my appetite, not that I had a big one to begin with.

“Chris, come on. That was, what, almost eight months ago? He’s different, I’m telling you.” She stops and looks off

into the distance. “Wait. Obviously, you’re coming to the Gender Reveal and so is he.”

I almost choke on my bite. “What?”

“What what? Did you not think he’d be there?” she asks, incredulous.

“Honestly, it didn’t cross my mind.” And it hadn’t. What had I been thinking? The brain fog recently has been out of control. I need to take more vitamins.

“Well, there you go,” she chirps with a smile. “You guys can talk then!”

She changes the subject to baby showers and Lamaze classes and I can’t think of anything except Saturday—just three days from now.

Holy shit. I’m really going to see him.

The minute I’m home, I rip open the envelope. I smile when I see what my best friend and her husband are having. I’m so excited for them.

My stomach turns over in knots about Saturday.

What if he doesn’t show?

What if he ignores me?

What if he—oh, my God—brings a date!

Surely, this isn’t a plus-one kind of thing, right? I should check. I will die if he shows up there with someone else.

No, I refuse to fret over this for the next three days, I’ve lost enough hair and weight as it is.

I wander to the freezer and pull out a pint of chocolate peanut butter swirl and eat some straight out of the carton. Most girls are constantly dieting. Not me. I don’t appreciate the twenty-five pounds I’ve lost, and if I could get at least fifteen back on, I think I’ll be happy. At least my arms aren’t as chunky anymore, but I miss my round hips and bubble butt. They’re so small now.

I lick my ice cream and look at Eric's social media page—he only has one. I never officially followed him but I can see everything. It was dead silence those six months, but when he returned, he apparently had taken a bunch of photos with an actual camera and put them on his Instagram. My heart broke for all those sick children—well, the people in general—and while there's only a small handful of him in any of the pics, my God, he looks so sexy in blue scrubs. His hair was longer too, not opting for regular haircuts, I assume, but he was and still is beautiful.

I zoom in on his face and a tear falls into my ice cream.

I miss him so fucking much it hurts.

Upset at myself for crying, I swipe the tears away and set the phone down. I put the lid back on the ice cream and return it to the freezer. Picking up my phone, I put a reminder into it to call the party store and bakery tomorrow so Taryn doesn't hound me.

I look at the multiple wine bottles and decide I'm not in the mood. The vodka looks better. I pour a couple of shots into a glass and splash some orange juice in it. I down it in one gulp.

I have got to stop drinking. I'm ridiculous.

The warm numbness spreads through my body and I wander to the couch, turn on the television, and search for something distracting until it's time for bed.

Twenty-Two

Christa

I drive to the bakery, stressed to the max. I know how particular Taryn is. She didn't tell me what the cake was supposed to look like, only that the inside of it was supposed to be pink or blue according to the results.

I park and get out, heading inside.

"Hi, can I help you?" an attendant asks with a smile.

"I'm here to pick up a custom order," I reply.

"Name?"

"Taryn Lockwood."

She said she was going to pick this up herself, but I don't trust her ass not to cheat and peek. Though, how could you? It's not like I can cut into the damn thing to make sure it's blue or pink.

"Be right back," she says.

She quickly returns holding a large pink box. She sets it on the counter and opens the lid carefully. It's a round white cake with pink and blue piping along the edges, and *Baby Lockwood* written in the middle, the *baby* in blue and the *Lockwood* in pink. It's adorable. I verbally confirm the correct color is inside, and the baker eases my mind by pulling out her phone and showing me a video of the cake as it's being frosted, and then the end result.

Wow, very classy, and awesome.

She informs me it's already paid for. I thank her, leave, and then head to the party supply store.

A pink and blue pinata the shape of a baby rattle waits for me at the customer service counter, and I gently pry my finger into one of the seams to see the appropriate-colored candy inside and then squeeze it back together, hoping none leaks out. It's the same color as the body of the pinata, the trim being the other color, so nobody's going to notice anyway.

With my supplies, I drive to Taryn's, nervous as hell but so excited.

I park in the Lockwoods' circular driveway and retrieve the items from my backseat. Carter greets me and takes the large pinata from me.

"I better string this up before people start arriving," he says. "Thanks for picking it up."

"Sure, no problem," I reply, closing the door with my hip.

"If you could put the cake on the kitchen island, that would be great."

"Sure," I say, carefully carrying the giant pink box into the kitchen.

There's a ridiculously huge spread of food on the island and some on the dining room table. Geez! How many people are they expecting?

I shove a plate of cold cuts aside to place the box.

"Oh, good, you got it!" Taryn says, coming into the kitchen wearing a long beige strapless maxi dress. She's barefoot, and her bump sticks out a little.

"You look adorable," I say, hugging her.

"So do you," she replies, pointing to my red floor-length spaghetti-strap dress. It's a casual type, so I paired it with black flats. I was tempted to wear pink or blue, but thought that would have given too much away.

"I think this should probably stay refrigerated," I say, pointing to the cake.

"Good point." She opens the fridge and begins to make room for it.

The front door alarm softly beeps and I hear, "Hey, sis."

I freeze and my stomach turns over.

Turning around, I see Eric coming from the entryway hall and into the kitchen in a light-blue button-down and black jeans. "Where should I put—"

He holds a bottle of whiskey and stops talking when he sees me. My heart lurches in my chest as we lock eyes.

Oh, my God. He looks amazing. So sexy. I want to launch myself into his arms and kiss him everywhere.

Of course, I don't do any of those things.

Beautiful blue eyes that haunt my dreams stare back at me. Sandy hair in a nice, neat haircut. The hint of a beard trying to grow in, a little gray peppering the light-brown graces his face.

We stand in silence, so long and so heavy in the air, that even Taryn turns around at the tension cutting the air like a knife.

“What...” She eyes the both of us. “Oh.” She forces a smile. “Put the booze on the table.” She inclines her head at the dining room table.

He doesn't look at me again as he goes into the dining room.

I suck in a breath I'd held, and say, “Excuse me.”

I speed-walk into the guest bathroom and close the door. I slam the toilet lid down and sit, my face in my hands.

What I really want to do is scream. My body reacted to him immediately, and then I froze up because I couldn't think of a single fucking intelligent thing to say. Would “hi” have been too difficult, Christa?

My head swirls with so much emotion. Seeing him was harder than I thought. I didn't think he could still have this effect on me, but he did, and now I don't know what the hell to do with it.

I take in deep, slow breaths, telling myself it's okay. That I merely have to get through today and then I can go back to my silent wallowing.

A knock sounds at the door, and I freeze. “What?”

“It's me, Chris. Let me in.”

I get up and unlock the door, opening it far enough to let Taryn in. I plop back onto the toilet lid.

“You okay?” She bites her lip.

“I don’t think so,” I answer honestly.

“He asked where you went, you know,” she confesses.

I look up at her. “He did?”

“Yes, he asked if you left the party. He seemed... upset.”

“What did you say?” I ask.

“That you didn’t, and you probably were in the bathroom. And I was right.” She folds her arms across her chest. “Go out there and talk to him. At the bare minimum, he needs a friend.”

I want to cry, but I hold in a sob. “I can’t just be his friend. It’s impossible to be around him and not want him. You understand we’re like magnets? Drawn to each other by force. The air is electric when he’s anywhere near me. It’s horribly painful and I don’t think I can do this.”

She blows out a breath, takes a step toward me, and grabs me by my upper arm. “Christa Marie Alvarez, get the fuck up off this damn toilet and face the music. You’re not gonna die if you have to be in the same room as him. Just. Fucking. Talk. I’ll slap you if I have to. In fact, I’ll slap you both.”

At that, I laugh. Taryn’s so docile, she’d never lay a hand on anyone. I stand on shaky legs and smooth down the cotton dress.

She envelops me in a hug and I return it, feeling calmer now. “I’m sorry I’m being a baby.”

“You’re not. Now, let’s go have a party. I’m dying to find out if this little one is a boy or a girl.” She rubs her bump, and I put my hand on it as well.

“You’re gonna be so happy.”

As we leave the bathroom, I lift my chin up and hold my head high. I see Eric in the backyard holding a water and talking to Carter.

I bravely approach him—because I can’t not be near him when the universe is magnetically pulling us together—and

put on a smile. “Hi, Eric. How have you been?”

It’s polite, considering I would rather say, “*Why the fuck did you ghost me?*” But, of course, I don’t.

He squeezes my arm and kisses my temple and I want to melt into a puddle. “I’m good, Christa. How have you been?”

I’m dying inside, thanks for asking.

“I’m okay,” I say instead. “How was Kenya?”

Oh, my God. I did not simply ask him that.

“It was... eye-opening,” he replies.

“I’d love to hear about it sometime,” I reply honestly.

“I’d like that,” he says, gazing into my eyes.

Really?

Carter’s voice breaks us out of our stare-off. “Okay, everyone, gather ’round. We’re going to beat the shit out of this thing until it explodes, so we find out if our baby is a boy or a girl.”

Carter and Taryn stand next to the pinata, and Carter holds a baseball bat. “Who wants first the try?”

“Me,” Eric offers quickly, heading toward them.

Wow, he sure wanted away from me quickly.

Asshole.

Eric recaps his water bottle and throws it to the ground before grabbing the proffered bat. He winds it up and does a few practice swings before he slams it into the pinata. It sways aggressively, but doesn’t break.

Carter stops its momentum and steps back. “One more try, bro. Make it count.”

I peer around to see Taryn and a bunch of other people I don’t recognize, probably coworkers and acquaintances of Taryn and Carter. They all look on with smiles while I’m literally dying inside.

Smack!

The pinata explodes, blue candy flying everywhere, and I smile and clap with everyone else.

“Oh, my God! It’s a boy!” Taryn squeals, hugging her husband.

I’m happy for them, even if I do think this whole thing is a bit cheesy and over-the-top, but I rush up to hug her.

“Congratulations. I’m so happy for you!” I tell her honestly.

I pull back from the hug to see Eric watching us closely, a look of what can only be described as longing in his eyes, and he’s not looking at his sister or best friend. His gaze is narrowed in on me.

I offer him a small smile then look at my friend again.

“C’mon, y’all, food and cake inside!” Taryn calls.

I load up a plate with all the food offered and sit on the sofa while I eat.

“Hey,” Taryn says, coming to sit next to me holding a sparkling water and cake.

“Hi. How stoked is Carter getting a son?” I ask with a smile.

I’m acutely aware that Eric is in the kitchen talking with someone, but I refuse to look his way.

“He’s very stoked. Now the fight over names begins,” she says with a laugh.

I cross my legs and grab a handful of cheese cubes from my plate. “Really? Why?”

She shrugs. “He hinted at wanting a junior. Not sure I want to deal with that confusion.”

“Carter’s a nice name,” I comment.

“It is,” she agrees, bringing a piece of blue cake to her lips and taking a bite. “This is so good. Did you get any?”

I look down at my food. “No, I’ll try some later.”

We chat some more, and when someone calls her over, I get up and throw my plate away in the kitchen trash. My eyes—more like my heart—scans the room, but there's no sign of Eric.

Whatever.

I head to the restroom to use it for real this time.

No more crying, Christa, I tell myself as I lock the door and handle my business.

After washing my hands, I exit the bathroom and hear voices down the hall. I freeze when I hear my name.

“You don't get it, dude. Christa was in the Mile High Rooms. We fucked.” Eric's voice.

I gasp, slapping my hand over my mouth, and my eyes fill with tears. *Oh. My. God.*

“What? How did she not know it was you, man?” Carter's voice.

“It was dark, I wore a mask. I just... I don't know what to do. I feel like shit. I want to tell her, but I'm afraid she'll hate me for keeping it from her.”

“Why did you even go there? You could have called her instead.”

“I have no reason except that I'm stupid and just wanted to take my aggressions out on someone—not her. Also, I didn't think she would want me. Afraid of rejection and all that bullshit.”

Carter sighs. “I told you, man, that she did and does still want you. Jeez. You're a just a pussy.”

It sounds like he chuckles. “I guess I am. I made a mistake, but it turned out. Sort of. Since she doesn't know it was me.”

“So, what, she just walked in there and didn't disguise herself?” Carter whispers.

“No, she had on a party mask, but come on, dude. Those tattoos and honestly, that body. There was no mistaking her. Then, when she opened her mouth and spoke, I knew it was

her. I should have told her right then, or at the very least, walked out and left, but I couldn't. I was weak. What do I do?"

Carter literally chuckles. "You're so fucking immature, Eric. Just go out there and tell her. Y'all are ridiculous. I swear to God." I hear the door open and I bolt down the hall toward the front.

So I do the only logical thing I can think of: I snatch my purse from the entryway table, bolt out the front door, and get into my car, zooming off in the early evening Colorado sunset.

Twenty-Three

Eric

The conversation with Carter helped me. He was right. I was being immature and ridiculous. I'm going to tell Christa it was me last Saturday night in the Mile High Rooms and if she hates me, well, then that's that. But at least I'll have been honest.

With a resolved attitude and smile, I exit the bedroom where I'd been talking to Carter and scan the main room for Christa. But she's nowhere.

I approach my sister, who's talking to Declan. "Hey, where's Christa?"

She peers around the room. "Uh, I don't know. We were just chatting on the couch, but she's obviously not there."

"Why?" Declan asks. "Do you *like* Christa?"

I bite back a smile. "Yes, dude, I *like* Christa. I need to find her."

"I think she left," she says.

"What?"

Taryn walks out of the kitchen toward the entryway hall and comes back. "Her purse is gone."

Fuck.

Now what do I do?

Disappointed and unsure how to handle it, I stay until the party is almost over, and then congratulate my sister and best friend on their upcoming son before leaving.

I drive home upset. I again wonder if I should head to her house and get this all out in the open.

Of course, I don't. A part of me wonders if I should basically let this go. Our exchange was awkward and honestly painful today, but at the same time, I felt like us talking was unavoidable. I tried my hardest not to make everyone else

uncomfortable, but I'm sure I failed. Our chemistry is electric and I knew not being that close to her was absolutely impossible.

My phone chimes with a text. At the red light, I pick it up to see it's from the secret app for the Mile High Rooms. Curiously, I click on it. It's barely been a week since the last one, and the texts don't normally come until about a week before the next monthly event.

MHR: Good news! On an experimental basis, the Mile High Rooms have been expanded to weekly for the month of love—February! Your password and QR code will be sent in a separate text. Enjoy!

Well, that's weird.

Guess I know what I'm doing Saturday night. I'm going back there to find her and tell the truth.

I smile down at the text.

Dr. Smith: Good news, we're fairly sure Kwame is in remission or will be soon. The kid's a tough fighter.

Me: That's great. I really appreciate the updates.

Dr. Smith: You're welcome. Also, his aunt and uncle have been coming in from the city, so we're fairly sure he's going to have a home when he's done.

Me: That's awesome. So glad to hear it.

I slip the phone into my pocket and go back to work. I've been keeping so busy I haven't had much time to fret over what Saturday will bring. Is she going to show up, hoping to hook up with a "random stranger"? What if I get there and she's already hooking up with someone else?

I don't have time to dwell on it though, because my days are busy from the time I get to work until I leave—sometimes hours after I was supposed to. But I don't complain. I like being busy and it helps pass the time. Plus, I'm still learning. I haven't forgotten what I learned before, but there was a lot of knowledge I hadn't yet been taught before I left for Africa.

I miss that place, crazy enough. Life is simple there, with no relationship or “first world problem” complications. Just treating the sick and injured and trying to make a difference, as little as it was.

I sit and dictate notes in an office all the PTAs share, when I hear a knock at the door. I look up and see Mariana, a nurse from the ICU, standing there with a smile.

“Hi, come in,” I tell her.

She helps herself to one of the chairs in front of the desk and I look at her, waiting for her to say something.

The woman’s a relentless flirt, and while I appreciate the attention, she always lays it on thick and comes off as borderline slutty. Which is fine, but not my type. At all.

“So, what are you doing?” she asks, pointing to my tape recorder.

“SOAP notes,” I reply, refraining from sounding sarcastic or rolling my eyes since she knows exactly what I’m doing.

“Oh, I hate those.”

I didn’t know nurses did them, but I keep that to myself. “So, what can I do for you, Mariana?”

“Well, I just got off work, and was wondering if you wanted to join a bunch of us for drinks down at The 303?”

I force a smile. “I appreciate the offer, but I don’t drink.”

“Oh, they have food there, too.”

“I know,” I reply. “But you guys have fun.”

“Well, if you change your mind, we’ll be there.” She gets up and winks at me, then walks out.

I rub the back of my neck. She’s a pretty girl—blonde, big tits, nice ass—but way too forward. Someone should tell her she doesn’t have to try so hard. I have no doubt she gets hit on often, probably trying to land herself a doctor. And I bet she will. Maybe I’ll subtly remind her next time that I’m not one.

After my notes are all imputed into my electronic tablet, I submit the reports and grab my jacket, heading for the door.

As I drive home, the temptation to join my coworkers at the bar looms, because I feel like all I do is work, go to the gym, and hang out at home alone. But I don't want the enticement to drink, nor do I think Mariana was being very truthful about a group of them going out. She probably wanted to pretend there was to get me alone.

Once home, I change into my workout clothes, mix up a pre-workout drink, and sip on that on the way to the gym. Once there, I frown at how crowded it is. I usually like going later at night, but it's Friday and it'll be crowded then too, I'm sure of it.

I have to wait for a few machines, but I eventually do my weight routine, and then luck out when a treadmill opens right when I'm done.

As I work out, I again get inside my head, since I can't seem to stay out of it. There's a lot going on and I feel like I have to concentrate on one thing at a time. Right now, the new job takes priority, followed by my physical well-being. My bulk is starting to return and I'm happy about that. My sister and Carter are having a baby and I'm really glad for them. I can't wait to be an uncle, but that's one thing that has to take a backseat in my mind.

It sucks that I can't put Christa on the back burner as well, but I absolutely cannot. She consumes my thoughts. The memory of our tryst in the Mile High Rooms drifts into my mind as I pound the treadmill, but the memories of us before I left—before we broke up—are the strongest, seared into my brain and stamped onto my heart like a tattoo that will never go away.

Because Christa will always have my heart, and that's not going to change.

I hope tomorrow night, if she's there, that I'll have the balls to tell her I see her and that she's coming home with me.

Twenty-Four

Christa

I've never been so torn in my life. I sit here, all dressed up and ready to go, but I don't know if I can.

Will Eric be there, ready to screw another stranger—or stranger-me? Or will I go there with the sole purpose of seeking him out, just to find him fucking someone else? My heart couldn't take that.

Had he done it before? Not before me—I don't care about that—but since he got back from Africa. There's only been two monthly events since he got back, the latest one was with me. But before that?

I don't know, and I can't sit and dwell on it. If he has, then what's done is done. He's a guy, they don't get emotionally attached during sex like we do—well, not usually, anyway. And random hookups are simply that. They're what the Mile High Rooms are made for. It's not a place to meet and fall in love. To search for a future spouse. It's just sex and a place to work out your kinks.

As I think back to last Saturday night, my finger finds my lips, remembering how he touched me. It wasn't overly personal, but I have plenty of memories from before of how we came together so intimately. How much I felt his love and affection behind closed doors. The sweet things he'd say to me. How protective he was of me.

Even if I only get him for a few minutes, I need it. I need to feel him touching me, even if he thinks I'm some stranger in the dark. I stand and slide on the lacy long-sleeved coverup that hugs the curves of my black sparkly dress. I'm going to find him, and if he's alone, then I'll get to have him all to myself. If he's not, I have my answer.

When I arrive at the location from the app, I pull into the parking lot and let out a deep breath. I arrive at the exact same time I did last week just to be sure. I waste no time watching the show of people screwing all around the place and head for

the discreet rooms. The attendant tells me which rooms are open and I walk as calmly and smoothly to the room we used before. The door is cracked but not closed, so I push it open with my fingertips.

There's Eric, lying on the bed, under the covers, wearing the executioner's mask once again. My stress is instantly gone, and my stomach flips with excitement at seeing him again.

"Hello," he says in that deep voice. "Come here."

I obey, setting my small purse on the table. As soon as I'm near the bed, he uses the remote to flip the light out, and the room is plunged into absolute darkness.

I kick off my shoes and peel the lace coverup from me, tossing it to the floor. I crawl onto the bed and feel around for the hood. I immediately pull it off and run my fingers along his scruffy jaw.

His hands find my hips and while holding one, he uses his other hand to slide my dress up, and then touches me, sliding one finger along my soaked slit.

Deciding to take a chance, I lean down and kiss him softly on the mouth, groaning at what his fingers are doing and the electric feel of kissing Eric again. I've missed his kisses so much. He reaches around in a familiar move and wraps his big arms around me in a hug, kissing me frantically and loving at the same time. He suddenly moves so now I'm on the mattress and he's on top. He stops kissing and I hear a wrapper crinkling as he puts on a condom. He pushes my skirt up and slides inside, and we both groan. While he fucks me, I reach down and pull my dress over my head and it awkwardly sits like a scarf around my neck, but I don't care. I grab his hand and guide it to my breast, where he fondles the silver bar there.

I close my eyes as I revel in the feel of him filling me up so perfectly, the sensual slide of his cock bringing me closer to orgasm. I mewl and whimper, needing more of him, raising my hips to meet his as he grips one hip tight, playing with my nipple with the other.

But I need more. I love him so much and want every single piece I can get from him. My heart is stupidly full and I'm setting myself up for disappointment. But for now, I'll selfishly take every touch, kiss, and whisper.

"Kiss me," I murmur.

He lets go of both and places his hands on the bed, and his lips crash to mine. He doesn't stop his thrusts and I moan when our tongues tangle in this intimate and private kiss. I wrap my legs around his backside, using my bare heels to push his ass in harder.

The friction is perfect and I cry into his mouth as a wave of pleasure washes over me. I squeeze my pussy hard on his length while he speeds up his thrusts, chasing his release. I feel his dick get even harder and then he stills, moaning into my mouth as he comes, never breaking the kiss as his fingers tangle in my hair, and my hands explore his muscular back and shoulders.

Just like we used to.

We continue to kiss, we don't break it. We lie there kissing while his cock softens inside of me, but we don't stop. I'm not sure how much time passes, but we eventually break apart. I roll off the bed, sliding my dress down. I blindly locate my coverup, shrug it on, and then slip into my shoes. I find my way to the door as I listen to Eric breathing softly.

"I love you, Eric," I murmur as I leave the room, hoping he heard me.

I hear the sheets rumple like he's getting up—like he didn't realize I was leaving—but I close the door behind me, smoothing down my hair as I fast-walk out of the DR area, through the club, and out the front door like I just robbed the place.

Once I reach my car, instead of being upset that Eric fucked who he thought was a stranger, I smile, knowing he knew it was me, and now he knows that I know...

I turn the radio on and find the classic rock station, turning up the volume when "Bringin' On The Heartbreak" by Def

Leppard blasts from the speakers.

I sing along at the top of my lungs, zipping down the window and singing out into the night to whoever wants to hear my terrible off-key singing, with not a care in the world.

I pull up to my house and into the garage, rolling up the window and killing the engine. I snatch my purse from the passenger seat, and walk up to the inside door. As I'm about to stab the button to close the garage door, I hear, "Christa!"

I turn, alarmed because it's so late and dark, but my eyes widen when I see Eric standing there, his car still running, the door open.

I freeze, unsure what to do. My plan was to come home, sleep on it, and then tomorrow, devise a plan to contact him. Let him know I knew. That the way he made love to me—not just fucked me—told me he still loves me and that I won't stand for us to be apart anymore. All of these lines crossing and miscommunication is coming to an end.

"Can I come in?" he asks, his hands in the pocket of black slacks, a black V-neck tee hugging his body tightly.

I nod, hoping he can see me, and hit the garage door button. I enter the house and walk to the front door, unlocking and opening it.

His Audi has been turned off and parked and he stands on my porch looking ten shades of apologetic, and something else I can't place.

I open the screen door to allow him in, but he grabs me instead and kisses me silly. I gasp when his mouth recedes, and stare into his impossible blue eyes. "You're here," I breathe.

"Did you mean it?"

Confused, my brow furrowed, I ask, "Mean what?"

"That you loved me. Love me."

I lick my lips like I do when I'm stressed, not breaking eye contact, and nod slowly. "Since the day I met you, and all the devastating days since."

His face crumples and for a minute, it looks like he's going to cry, but I kiss him instead, not wanting him to speak or God forbid, break down. I drag him inside, shutting the door with my foot as we kiss.

“Bedroom,” I murmur between kisses.

Once again, we shed our clothes as we kiss. He pulls the covers back and lays me down, entering me immediately as we pick up where we left off earlier in the Mile High Rooms.

I wake up smiling, my mind immediately going to the night I've had. Blinking my eyes open, I look around and frown. The spot beside me—the chest I slept on—is gone. Sunlight filters through my bedroom window and I'm confused.

Where is Eric?

Did I dream last night?

No, I did not. The soreness between my legs and the stickiness on my thighs reminds me that I did not, in fact, dream that up.

The kisses. The touches. The way our bodies connected, over and over. His mouth on my pussy, giving me countless orgasms until I couldn't take it anymore. His lips sucking my nipples. The sting of my ass cheek as he spanked me while riding me from behind.

I don't think there's a position we didn't try.

I can't help the smile that finds my lips when I think about how loving he was, how tender each touch and kiss. Even when we were being wild and rough, it still felt loving. Every caress of my skin told me he missed me as much as I missed him, and that he never wanted to leave my side. The things he whispered are seared into my brain.

“I love you, too...”

“I missed you so much...”

“I can't stand to be apart from you, Christa...”

“We shouldn't be apart...”

So, where is he now?

I flip the covers back and wander out of the bedroom, praying he's in the kitchen, maybe making me breakfast or at least coffee.

But he's not. The house is deathly quiet. He's not here.

He's gone.

Twenty-Five

Eric

I drive home, angry.

Angry at myself for slipping out while she slept so peacefully.

Angry for even hooking up with her at all.

What was I thinking?

Carter said I was stupid and immature. To merely tell her how I felt. Well, I did. And she told me she loves me too.

So... what's the problem?

The problem is that I'm going to taint her. She needs a good man, not me and I had no right to indulge.

I was selfish to go to the Mile High Rooms last night, just to get a taste of her. And before I could tell her it was me, she somehow already knew, and then left. So, I chased her.

But honestly... how long did I think I could keep up the ruse and her not figure it out? Even in the pitch black, she knows every inch of my body, every smell, every curve of my face, of my intimate parts... like I know hers. There's no hiding yourself when that person knows you so well.

She said she loves me. I shouldn't be so closed off. I need to give her a chance, but I need time to think. Last night was a whirlwind of emotions. We fucked, she left. I chased her down and we came together, a wonderful, perfect night of love and catching up.

And then I bolted.

I scrub a hand along the back of my neck, and then rake my fingers through my hair. I punch the steering wheel.
“Argh!”

I shake my head as I drive toward home. My phone buzzes, and at a stoplight, I look at it.

Christa: *Whatever I did, or didn't do, I'm sorry.*

The fuck?

She thinks she did something wrong?

Of course she does, you idiot! my subconscious screams at me.

I throw the phone down and stew in my guilty thoughts until I get home.

“You really are a fucking idiot. What’s your problem?” Carter shakes his head and opens the fridge, then throws a protein shake at me. “Maybe your brain needs more protein.”

I catch it and crack it open as I sit at a barstool in his kitchen. We finished playing tennis at the country club and I asked to come back to their house so I wouldn’t have to wallow in my misery alone.

“If you break her heart again, I’m going to seriously hurt you,” Taryn says, coming out of the bathroom. “Damn, I’m sick of peeing every thirty minutes.”

“TMI,” I mutter, taking a big swig of the thick chocolate shake.

“You have no idea,” Carter murmurs, drinking his.

Taryn grabs a bowl of cut up fruit from the fridge, throws the plastic wrap covering away, and plops down next to me. “I’m just confused about this whole thing. Why aren’t you with her? Why did you leave her this morning?”

I’d already told them both about the entire interaction.

“Because.” I rake a hand through my hair. “Because... I don’t fucking know!”

She places a hand on my arm. “Because you’re scared, that’s why. Listen, brother. I told her to stay away from you. Over a year ago when you got out, I told her, ‘Leave my brother alone, he needs to find a way in this world, get back on his feet. Don’t distract him with sex or a relationship.’ Did she listen? No.”

“I’m glad she didn’t,” I say honestly. “She was what I needed at the time. And I still do. I think I’ve messed things up beyond repair.”

“Judging by that text she sent, she’s the one who thinks she messed things up, and that’s not cool, man.” Carter shakes his head and picks up his phone, tapping buttons for whatever he’s looking at. Probably the damn stock market.

“I don’t want her to think she did anything wrong,” I confess, taking another swig of the protein shake.

“Then go to her. You’re making this more complicated than it has to be. She loves you, Er. I swear it. She’s been miserable since you went to Africa. Like, her personality changed. I thought she’d snap out of it, that maybe what you two had was just a fling and she’d move on. But she won’t talk about it with me. She hasn’t, and she won’t, which is why I put my full support behind this relationship of yours.”

“I thought you females talked about everything together,” I comment dryly.

She shakes her head. “Not this. I’m sure if you weren’t my brother I’d get the full scoop, all the dirty details, but she knows I don’t want to hear those.” She makes a gagging noise, and I laugh at her.

“Now you know why I’m grateful my best friend didn’t spill his dirty details.” I glance at Carter, who’s still looking at his phone, but he wears a smirk because he really is listening. I make a gag noise.

Her growing belly is reminder enough of what they’ve been up to behind closed doors.

Gross.

“Give me your phone,” Taryn demands, her tiny hand out to me.

“No. Hell no.” I put my hand over my shorts pocket as if she could grab it.

“No, seriously. Let me draft a text you need to send to her, before you lose her altogether. I’m shocked I don’t have my

own text from her about what a fucking bastard you are.”

I narrow my eyes at her, then down at her belly. “Don’t cuss in front of my nephew.”

Carter snorts. “I’m fairly sure that kid’s first word is gonna be ‘fuck.’”

I laugh because I can’t help it. “To answer you, no. I’ll text her myself. You’ll make it sound too chick-ish, and she’ll know.”

She laughs. “You’re probably right. But if you don’t text her before you leave here, I’ll do it myself. I can hack into your phone, you know.”

Shit, she can.

My eyes widen. “You wouldn’t.”

My sister giggles, then pops a piece of watermelon into her mouth. She looks at Carter. “What’s for dinner?”

I stare at her, incredulous. “Do you ever stop eating?”

“Ohhhh, shit,” Carter says, setting his phone down and glaring at me.

I hop off the stool and toss the empty protein shake into the trash before she can slap me, jogging into their backyard to help myself to the swimming pool Taryn made Carter install. And I’m glad she did.

I kick out of my sneakers, whip off my shirt, toss my phone, keys, and wallet onto the table, and dive into the deep end for some laps. The water is freezing since it’s February, but I don’t care. I’m still hot from the tennis and my arms need the exercise.

After a few laps, I get out, dry myself off with a towel from the cabinet, and put my shirt back on. I check my phone. No more texts from Taryn, but I do have one from an unknown number.

Unknown: *Hey*

Curiously, I reply.

Me: *Who's this?*

Unknown: *Mariana from work.*

Me: *How did you get my number?*

It's rude but I don't care. I'm pissed she has the audacity to somehow sneak around to get my number—because the hospital wouldn't have handed it out—and then text me like we're friends.

Unknown: *I have my ways ;)*

Ugh.

I begrudgingly store her contact as *Mari-ho* so I can avoid the texts in the future without wondering who it is.

I don't respond, instead head inside where Carter is cooking and Taryn is yapping as usual.

She looks over lazily at me and says, "Did you decide what you're going to say to Christa yet? Time's running out." She points to her fitness watch. "And dinner's almost ready."

I glare at her. "No, I haven't."

"Tick tock," she says in a sing-song voice.

Then, she looks down at her phone. "Oh, surprise, surprise, she's texting me, calling you all kinds of names."

I try to snatch the phone but she pulls it away too fast. "Uh-uh-uh, big brother. I'm not fixing this for you."

"Yes," she says, typing with her thumbs, "he is a big jerk. I'm sorry he dined and dashed," she says as she continues to type.

Carter snorts and then starts laughing.

I bite back a smile. "I did not dine and dash! Also, that's gross, knock it off. Real mature."

She ignores me and keeps typing and talking. "I know, girl. I'll kick his ass for you. I hope you at least got yours!" She makes a gag noise again.

I lift my chin. "She did. Many times over."

Carter groans. “That’s enough phone time for you.” He tries to snatch the phone, but she again whips it out of his way.

She continues typing as she gets up and waddles toward the hallway, presumably to go to the bathroom or maybe her bedroom to continue shit-talking me.

“You look like a duck when you walk!” I call out, teasing.

She flips me the bird behind her head and then goes back to thumb-typing.

I laugh.

Carter plates up grilled chicken, asparagus, and red potatoes, and slides a plate to me before yanking off the towel hanging over his shoulder and wiping his hands.

He silently fixes a second plate, and places it where Taryn was sitting, then makes himself one. He sits at the other end of the bar and looks up at me. “I assume you know your sister well enough to know she’s not going to let up until you fix this shit with Christa, right?”

I nod. “Oh, believe me, I do.”

“Good, because if you don’t, and I have to listen to her endless drivel about it, let’s just say shit rolls downhill and I’ll be taking out my frustrations on you.”

I raise a challenging brow, a bite paused at my lips. “Is that so?”

He chuckles. “Oh, yeah. Boxing ring, tennis court, golf course, I’ll figure out a way.”

I snort. “Okay, bro.”

Carter drops his fork, loud and dramatic, and I look up. “I’m serious, you fucker. Fix it. Christa deserves better than you, but if she wants you, then you need to make it right. Worship her. All chicks want is for you to pay attention to them and take care of them. Give them what they need. If you don’t know what is, fucking figure it out.”

I swallow down a smile. He seems genuinely pissed, and that makes me secretly happy. He really does care about her—

both my sister and him. I also know he's right.

"Goddamn, this is delicious," I say honestly.

He narrows his eyes at me. "Kiss ass."

"No, I'm serious. It's good. I need the recipe."

"What are we, chicks? Google it," he says.

"Why are you so grumpy?" I ask.

He gives me a wry smile. "Pregnancy hormones. She's wearing me out, if you know what I mean. I need my sleep."

It's my turn to drop the fork. I make a face. "Ew, TMI."

He shrugs and goes back to eating. "You fucking asked."

"Touche."

On the drive back to my place, I decide they're right... I suck and need to do better. Instead of a text, I decide to call Christa.

It rings five times.

"What?" she snaps for an answer.

I purse my lips. Ooh, she's pissed.

"Come over. Please," I beg. "Or I can come to you."

She pauses for so long that I wonder if we're still connected. I hear her breathing—likely fuming—but I wait, putting on my blinker to get onto the freeway.

"Come to me and bring food." Then, she hangs up.

That, I can do.

Twenty-Six

Christa

I throw my cell down on my bed and race to the bathroom for a shower. My depressed ass has been moping around the house all damn day, still gross from my sexcapade last night, but not wanting his scent washed off, as mad as I was at him.

I shower quickly, wash my hair, and dress into black short-shorts and a pink tank top with no bra. I quickly dry my hair and forgo the makeup because it's not worth the effort.

When I saw he was calling earlier, I thought my eyes were deceiving me. I thought, *this can't be real*.

I debated on not answering, but of course my heart won out and I'm glad I did. I hope he's coming over here to apologize for ditching me this morning and not to tell me we can't see each other, but that doesn't seem to be his M.O. His sign that he's done seeing someone is to just ghost them. Or maybe it's only me he does that to.

I tidy up the living room, turn the television to the Netflix home screen, and quickly load the dishwasher.

Again, why am I trying to impress him?

Because I love him. And also, a messy house is *no bueno* regardless if someone's coming over or not.

Just as I'm folding the blanket to place over the back of the couch, my doorbell rings. I open the door, and can't help the smile as I see Eric standing there with bags from the local gourmet burger place he knows I love, and that we used to frequent together all the time.

"I come bearing gifts of groveling and apology." He fucking bows while holding the bags, and I shake my head.

"You're too much," I say, ushering him inside.

He sets the food down and grabs me, enveloping me in his arms. "I'm sorry."

I stare into his beautiful blue eyes, my gaze flicking back and forth. “You need to stop bolting every time you’re scared. I’m sick of it.”

His full lips lift in a smile and then he kisses me softly. I, of course, kiss him back because I’m weak for him. This man could tell me to drive the getaway car while he robs a bank and I would do that. And that makes me pathetic.

As he pulls back, I gaze into his eyes once more. “I know dudes hate these four dreaded words, but, Eric... we need to talk.”

He nods and sighs, resigned. “I know.”

I grab his hand and lead him to the couch, where we both sit, facing each other.

“Why were you at the Mile High Rooms last night?” I ask honestly.

He shifts uncomfortably but doesn’t look away. “To see you. Why were you there?”

“Same reason,” I reply. “What would you have done if I wasn’t there, and someone else walked in?”

“I would have left,” he answers immediately. “I wanted to see you.”

“You could have just called me. I don’t understand why you didn’t,” I say, frustrated.

“Didn’t think you’d want me.” He shrugs.

I stare at him for a few long, seconds, and ask, “Why were you at the rooms the first time?”

“To try to get you out of my system, but it was you there anyway, and there was no way I was going to not have you. It was cowardly, I know.” This time, he does look down. “Why were you?”

“Same reason, to fuck you out of my system. Turns out, I just thought about you the whole time, so that didn’t work at all and I’ve been feeling guilty about it since, even though we weren’t together.”

“Same here,” he admits. “I’m just glad it wasn’t anyone but you there. I’m deleting the app, by the way.”

“Me too,” I admit, because I’ve been thinking about it anyway. Meaningless sex is just that—meaningless.

We’re both quiet for a few minutes, his hand brushing mine.

Finally, I gesture to my body and I ask, “Do I look thinner to you?”

He looks stressed, not moving his gaze from my face. “Uh, this feels like a trick question.”

I chuckle a little, and say, “No, I’m being serious. It’s not a trick. It’s not like you can hurt my feelings either way.”

“Okay, full stop? Yes. You look thinner, and for the record, I don’t fucking like it.”

That makes me happy. “I don’t either. But I’ve dropped twenty-five pounds in the last eight months. Because of you. So... if you want these hips and ass back, you’re gonna have to do me a favor.”

Confused, he asks, “What’s that? Do you need a personal trainer? Because there are some exer—”

“Shut up.” I put my finger to his lips. “No, I don’t need a personal trainer. I need you... to stop. Fucking. Leaving me. I can’t eat or sleep or function when I think you hate me. When you disappear without an explanation. When I blame myself for you not being here. I can’t do... this”—I gesture around the apartment—“life without you. I’m miserable, Eric. Miserable.”

He stares at me. “I don’t hate you, and it’s massively upsetting to think that you thought I ever did. I honestly don’t hate anyone but myself. You’re beautiful, and perfect, and I don’t...” He blows out a breath, and I’m devastated to hear that he hates himself. “I don’t deserve you, Christa.”

A lump forms in my throat and I run my hand along his muscular leg, then slide it up his shorts without touching where I’m sure he wants me to, so I freeze at the top of his

thigh. I decide I'm going to unload on him while I have him here, because judging by his history, who knows when I'll have his audience again. "No, you don't deserve me." I start to cry and hate myself for it. "You broke my *fucking* heart, Eric." Tears form along my lashes as all the heartache and months of depressive sickness come crashing back. "But unfortunately for me, you still have it, as shattered as it is, and there's absolutely nothing I can do but let you. To keep it. I can't keep wanting you and being let down. I can't let you make love to me so beautifully, like everything is okay, and then just leave me, broken. So you have to make a decision. You have to make a commitment to be with me, or let me go."

He looks at me, the devastation and guilt I've seen so many times in his eyes, but this time, it's for me and not his past sins and crimes. "I'm so sorry. All I want..." He blows out a breath and looks up at the ceiling. "Fuck. All I ever wanted was to protect you, shield you, save you from whatever might come to harm you."

This warms my cold heart, and it starts beating a little faster now. "Look... I'm a big girl and can take care of myself. You know this. But you... I felt like you needed saving, but... so did I. Not from the same kind of things you've been through, but from loneliness. My heart would never open to anyone. So I waited. Then I met you, and the whole idea of love for a lifetime made sense because I'd met *the one*. You, Eric."

He presses his forehead against mine. "Listen to me, *please*. I need you to understand that I'm not good. I'm a self-recriminating asshole. The bad guy. You think I'm here to sweep you off your feet, and I tried. But, Christa. I'm not the hero. I'm the villain. It's why I've kept you at arm's length, but now I understand that this isn't about keeping you away from me or all the bad things I've done. It's about what *you* want. If you want the world, I will bust my ass to give it to you. I'll tear it down and rebuild it if I have to. You're not someone I can let go of, and honestly? I'm not willing to. Not now. Not. Fucking. Ever."

We lock eyes, and mine have tears leaking out and streaming down my cheeks. “You are not a villain, Eric. How could you think that?”

“Every day I was in Africa, I thought about you. I’m serious, Christa. Every day. I read your texts and you were right. I was an asshole and hoped you’d move on from me and be happy with a guy who wasn’t so tainted black, with a stained past that you shouldn’t have to deal with. When Mr. Stamp...” He stops, clearing his throat. “When he died, I basically just snapped. I don’t know if he shot himself or someone else did, but because of me, that little girl’s orphaned, and I just... I couldn’t deal with it. See, it doesn’t matter who pulled the trigger. Another life was ruined.”

I caress his face, running my fingers along his stubbly jaw. “His death was an accident, Eric.”

His eyes fly to mine and he gapes at me, alarmed. “What? How do you know?”

“I had Melinda pull the police records. He was cleaning his rifle. It was loaded and went off. He didn’t do it on purpose. The guy was just careless and obviously very... unlucky.”

“Damn,” he says, shaking his head. “That sucks, but his kid is still orphaned. Because if her mom was still around, she’d have her.”

I grab his face between my fingers, making him look at me. “Stop it, Eric. Stop it right now. I’m tired of hearing you talk like this. You can’t change the past, it’s done. She’s gone and isn’t coming back. You can only pray for the little girl, that she grows up to be strong and honors her parents’ memories.”

He nods. “I don’t know when the guilt is going to end.”

I wrap my arms around him. “Maybe you should talk to someone,” I suggest. “I can go with you if you want.”

Eric shakes his head. “I have been. I mean, Anne’s a court-ordered therapist, but I have talked, and it’s helped, but clearly, this is something I have to just live with, I guess.”

“It sounds like it, unfortunately. But I’m here for it—for you, so you know. I’m not going anywhere, as long as you stay by my side and support me too,” I tell him honestly.

He stares at me. “I’m not going anywhere, gorgeous. I promise. No more being stupid. You’ve proven you love me and are going to stand by my side, and it’s selfish of me to keep bolting every time I think you’re going to reject me or not want to be with me, or worse, realize you could do better than a convicted felon whose doctor license has been stripped. A man whose nightmares wake him. And for that, I’m really and truly sorry I hurt you. I hate that about me, so please tell me how I can make it up to you *Please, Christa.*”

I kiss his nose. “I forgive you. And while I won’t apologize for being so angry, I do feel bad for not pursuing you more, for not staying on you and letting you know how much I needed you and would be here for you.”

He shakes his head. “It wouldn’t have mattered. I had to dig out of this hole my own way and on my own timeline, but I promise that I’m done wallowing. My life is for you now.”

I smile, tears in my eyes once again, and kiss him softly on his beautiful lips.

“God, I love you,” he whispers, fighting emotion, and my heart flutters while my stomach turns over with happiness.

“I love you, too. Eric. So damn much.”

Twenty-Seven

Eric

Two weeks later, I'm on cloud nine. My life is going swimmingly well. The letter from my parole officer was emailed to me last week, and with Christa's help with wording and grammar, I sent off another official request for my Colorado doctorate license to be reinstated, including the letter from the PO. All I can do now is wait for a verdict on that, and pray for the best.

I'd been struggling with trying to learn the equipment used for PT, and finally something in my brain clicked one day, and now I've mastered it. I was so proud of myself, and my boss, Dr. Turner was, too.

"You're doing really well, Serina," I tell the patient who'd had a hip replacement. At forty-two she seems much too young to need one, but I learned she had been born with hip dysplasia and her hip sockets never formed correctly. She has since developed osteoarthritis at such a young age. Now, she's the proud owner of a hip made of plastic and titanium.

"Thanks, doc. You're the best," she replies, a bit of flirtation in her smile. I'm used to it, so I smile back. My heart only has room for one woman, but there's no harm in making a girl feel good about herself.

"Keep up those exercises at home, and ditch the walker. You definitely don't need it anymore. You need to keep the hip flexor stretched, or else it'll be stiff and one day you'll be wondering why you're grunting while trying to put on socks," I tell her while beaming my best megawatt smile.

"Well, I don't want that," she comments, grabbing her walker and heading toward the front of the "gym" we have set up for PT.

While it seems like all I've been doing are knee replacements, hip replacements, and shoulder surgery PT, I have gotten to do a few sports injuries, which is my passion. I won't lie and say the reason I was extra nice to Serina isn't

because she's one of the marketing execs for the Denver Broncos and that's my dream to work with a professional sports league, doing their physical therapy.

I gotta get in some points whenever I can.

I watch her leave and then groan when I see Mariana enter the gym in her pink scrubs, her hair and makeup done up like she's ready for a photoshoot.

I avoid making eye contact and turn to head back to the office, but it's too late. "Hey, Eric," she calls.

Ugh.

I turn and put on a fake smile. "Hey, Mariana. What brings you *all* the way up here from the ICU?" We're on the sixth floor, while the ICU is on floor two. She has zero excuse to be up here. Call me passive-aggressive, I don't care.

"Oh, just wanted to see if you had time to grab lunch together." She beams a smile at me, her blue eyes sparkling with mischief.

"I don't, I'm sorry. I have plans for lunch, but thank you." I turn my back on her. I'm not lying, Christa's bringing me Thai today, and I'm so hungry I can't wait to eat and of course see my woman. I also make a mental note to delete her texts from my phone before Christa accidentally sees them, even though I never responded.

I head into the office where Christa and I can eat in private instead of the breakroom where the other employees hang out.

"Oh? Whatcha havin'? I brought my lunch." She holds up a small purple insulated lunchbox and sits in one of the chairs. Then she has the gall to reach over the desk and grab my hand.

"What the hell is this?"

Mariana snatches her hand away quickly and we both turn to see Christa in the doorway in her work clothes. Tight black pencil skirt, red heels, and a lacy white button-up top. She looks absolutely breathtaking—and also furious.

I stand immediately and say, "Mariana, this is my girlfriend, Christa."

“Mariana?” Christa’s eyes dart from me to her, and she looks hurt. She drops the food into one of the chairs, turns around, and storms out.

I look at Mariana. “You stay here.”

“Of course, baby,” she purrs and I throw her a filthy look.

Christa hasn’t made it ten steps and I grab her arm. “Get back here. It’s not what it looks like. She literally just walked into the office and I was about to tell her to leave when you walked in. I have zero interest in her. In fact, I’ve been told by several coworkers I should probably go to HR and report her for harassment, but I haven’t and that’s my fault.”

“Why? Because you like the attention?” Christa fumes, adjusting her purse strap over her shoulder and folding her arms across her chest.

I shake my head. “No, because... I don’t do the whole snitching thing. It’s something I need to get over. You know, the whole snitches get stitches and end up in ditches?” I throw her a charming smile and see her try not to smirk.

“Lauryn told me about her while you were in Africa,” she confesses, glancing at the door to the office. “That... woman was telling everyone you guys were together and you were in constant contact with her while there, which of course stung, because I didn’t hear from you at all.”

My blood boils. “That’s absolutely not true, I hope you know that. I only met Lauryn once, though. What did she say?”

“That it wasn’t true, and that Mariana’s basically the hospital slut and wants attention.”

I chuckle “Come on, gorgeous. I’ll get rid of her.”

We walk back into the office holding hands. Mariana has her lunch spread out on the desk and pops a grape in her mouth when we walk in.

“Get out.” I point to the door.

She looks alarmed. “What, baby? I thought we were having lunch together?”

“Are you deaf, bitch? He said, leave,” Christa fumes.

Mariana narrows her eyes at Christa, then throws her stuff into her lunchbox and stands. “You two are just rude.”

“I’ll be going to HR if you don’t stop the harassment, Mariana,” I tell her honestly, cringing at the thought of being a snitch.

“Forget HR!” Christa snaps. “If I hear you’ve even *looked* at my man, let alone talked to him, you’ll be wearing wigs for months while your hair grows back.”

Her eyes widen. “Don’t you dare touch my hair.”

“Get out!” we both yell.

She snatches her lunch and stomps out.

I take Christa’s hand and kiss her softly on the lips. “Hi.”

She smiles. “Hi.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Sorry I stormed out. I’m still dealing with...”

“Abandonment. I know. And I’m sorry,” I confess.

“In the past. Let’s eat.” She grabs the food and we spend the next hour chatting and making plans.

She stands to leave, and I go to kiss her, and when she kisses me back, she reaches down and grabs my cock, which is permanently hard in her presence. I reach under her shirt and beneath her bra to give me access to her breasts, and she moans softly in my ear.

I glance at the office door, which I locked behind Mariana, and then the large full-wall window behind us. We’re on the sixth floor and have a great view of the city. I grab her hand and lead her to the window, pushing her up against it while I kiss her again. I unbutton her shirt and flick the front clasp to her bra, freeing her tits. She unbuttons and unzips my pants and pulls them down.

Flipping her around, I slam her against the window and pull her skirt up over her hips. She moans when I finger her

clit after pushing her panties to the side. With my dick in my hand, I kick her legs open and enter her from behind. Both her hands are splayed against the window, and I wonder if anyone in the other wing of the hospital that's connected by a footbridge can see us. Her nipple piercings clink loudly against the glass window as I grip her hips and fuck her hard.

I pump fast, wanting a quickie, and use my fingers to rub her clit while I pound into her in this position. She comes rather fast, and thankfully doesn't cry out, but I feel her orgasm. It only takes a couple more minutes and I'm there, spilling my cum and filling up her pussy with a grunt, my mouth falling open at the dizzying erotic feeling.

"Oh, my God," she breathes. "That was amazing."

I hand her the tissue box and she wipes up, then straightens her panties and pulls her skirt back down. Zip up and buckle, and help her get her bra and shirt back in order. I kiss her again because I have to, and pull back and look at her. "You should probably fix your lipstick, and here"—I reach up and smooth some of her hair down—"there you go."

She giggles and kisses me once more. "Where's the bathroom?"

"Next to the elevators," I reply.

She checks her reflection in the window and wipes off the rest of her lipstick with another tissue. "I'm sure I look a mess."

"You look gorgeous," I correct. "Freshly fucked is beautiful."

She grins. "I love you."

"And I love you," I whisper, my fingers on her jaw before I lightly kiss her one more time.

She gathers up the lunch trash and holds her head high as we unlock and open the door.

"Thanks for having lunch with me," I say probably too loudly. Not that anyone is paying any attention to us.

She smirks and waves, heading around the corner and out of sight.

I glance around to ensure Mariana has truly left, and go back to the office to check my tablet for the rest of the day's schedule.

Twenty-Eight

Christa

Back at work, nobody said a thing. I have left to have lunch with Eric a few times, and my bosses or coworkers never say anything.

“Christa, come here, please,” Melinda calls out as soon as I set my purse down.

I head over to her office. “What’s up?”

“DA on Lance Johnson’s case wants to meet.”

I cock an eyebrow. “Oh, really. Did they say why?”

“I think he wants to cut a deal. Johnson’s on his way here now. I’ll need you in the room to take notes and such. Can you make sure everything’s in the case file and have it ready in fifteen?”

“Absolutely!” I chirp, and I head to the room where we keep all the files, and pull his out. It’s not very big, as we don’t have a lot, but the doorbell camera sure helped. The photos show Lance arriving at his apartment door at 5:20 p.m. in his suit and tie from work, and not leaving again until 7:42 a.m. the next morning. None of the recordings were stopped or paused during those ten hours. The only action was a food delivery person at 6:46 p.m.

Once I make sure everything is in the file, I head to the conference room where Johnson and Melinda are already sitting.

After I sit, our receptionist escorts the District Attorney, Aaron Rodriguez, in and then shuts the door behind her.

“What’s this about?” Lance asks nervously as soon as the man sits.

“We wanted to offer you a plea deal,” Aaron starts.

“You already did that,” Melinda says. “We aren’t pleading guilty.”

“I understand, but you realize you’re facing twenty years, right, Mr. Johnson?” he asks, straightening his black and silver tie, and he honestly looks nervous.

Aaron Rodriguez doesn’t look like he’s older than forty, in fact, he’s probably not older than thirty-five, but he was a public defender, apparently, and then was promoted to DA after only a couple of years. He’s tough, I’ll give him that, and I appreciate what he’s done as far as not putting up with the amount of crime the last one did, but he’s wrong in this case. I can feel it.

“I’m not pleading guilty to something I didn’t do!” Lance blurts, clearly frustrated and stressed.

“Did you not view the Ring doorbell camera footage, and read the reports from the company? Zero activity except a food delivery that night, where you can clearly see my client opens the door, accepts the food, and signs the driver’s tablet.”

“That doesn’t negate the fact that he could have snuck out after that, perhaps through a back door.”

Melinda scoffs. “You’re implying that after eating, he changed into all-black clothing, snuck out his back balcony, jumped down three stories, and went to commit a home invasion robbery, then came back, climbed three stories, then went to bed, and got up and put on a suit and tie and went to work the next morning like nothing happened?” She shakes her head.

Rodriguez stares at Johnson. “It’s possible, but I do agree that’s a bit far-fetched.”

“You guys tossed my house and didn’t find shit. Where’s all this stuff I allegedly stole?”

“Most thieves tend to get rid of the merchandise immediately, on the street or in pawn shops,” he answers.

Melinda huffs. “Which all have cameras. You don’t have my client anywhere. This case is dead in the water, and you know it. Please use your time and energy to find out who actually did it. Your reputation precedes you, Mr. Rodriguez. I don’t think you want a wrongful conviction as one of your first

big cases as DA. Prosecute the other two, and press them until they give you a name. All you have is the eyewitness of an elderly man who was clearly traumatized and mistakenly picked out my client from a photo lineup. That's it, and it's not enough, and you know it."

He glances around the table at all of us, and I smile smugly at him when he stares at me, then looks back down at the case file. He flips through it again, while we all wait in uncomfortable silence.

He huffs. "Fine. You're right. There's nothing here except the eyewitness. You've given me a solid alibi, so I have no choice but to drop the charges."

"Thank fuck," Johnson mutters.

"Yay," I clap, totally unprofessional but I don't care.

Melinda chuckles at me, and then we all stand. She puts her hand out to the DA and he shakes it.

"A paralegal will have the paperwork drawn up and filed with a judge by close of business tomorrow. Apologies for all of this," he says to Johnson, who refuses Rodriguez's proffered hand and instead turns around and walks out.

Can't say I blame him. I'd be livid as hell if I was in his shoes.

Lance makes his final payment to us, and then he leaves, and I go into Melinda's office.

"That was awesome, we rock!" I say, beaming.

She nods. "I agree. And I felt so bad for the guy, that I only charged him five grand. Imagine using your whole savings just to stay out of jail based on someone's mistaken identity. It sucks, but it happens, but I want the guy to be able to be successful. Thank God he didn't lose his job."

"If he had, we could have taken his case again for wrongful termination," I quip.

She grins. "True."

“I hope they catch the guy who actually did it. Give Mr. and Mrs. Larsen some closure.”

“I agree,” she says. “Now, next case.”

She begins to tell me about a new client who’s been charged with distributing fentanyl, a nurse at a small hospital in Aurora, and after I read the case file, the guy is for sure guilty. Why waste money on a lawyer when you were literally caught on camera swiping from the medicine cabinet? What an idiot.

A few weeks later, I’m lying in Eric’s arms in a very spacious and luxurious bed in a ski resort suite.

I’m still a little out of breath from our hours-long tryst and I rest, running my fingertips around his chest. “I can’t believe I used my paid time off for this weekend and we’ve spent the entire first day of it in bed. We could have done this at home, you know,” I tease.

“You’re the one who’s bitching it’s too cold outside to ski, so I’m trying to warm you up,” he says with a chuckle, nuzzling his face into the crook of my neck.

“Totally worth it,” I say back, giggling when his whiskers tickle me.

“But seriously, we need to get up. I want to hit the slopes early.”

I lazily look at the bedside clock. “It’s ten a.m., I doubt that’s early in ski talk.”

He laughs again. “And what would you know about ski talk, little Miss I Hate Exercise?”

“I have a feeling you’re about to teach me!” I giggle again and kiss him. Then, I flip the covers back and stand up, stark naked. “Let’s shower, then you can show me how to ski, and then spend all of tomorrow nursing me back to health when I sprain an ankle, fall on my face in the snow, or hit my head on a tree.”

Eric shakes his head. “You watch too much TV.”

“You’re right. C’mon.” I drag him by the arm to the massive ensuite bathroom. I start the water and kiss him as we wait for it to heat up.

After another very nice orgasm thanks to his mouth, and a bunch of soap and shampoo, we’re both clean and dressed, ready for the slopes.

As a teen, I went on a few skiing trips with my class, but I never cared for it. I really don’t like the snow and cold in general, but I live in Colorado, so of course I tolerate it. I simply never wanted to visit the snow on purpose. But I’m dating a sports guy, who chartered a freaking helicopter to get us here, so the least I can do is go skiing with him, as much as I don’t like it.

We shuttle down to the ski rental, rent all the equipment we’ll need, and once we have it, Eric helps me get my skis on.

“I look ridiculous,” I say, looking down at the giant skis on my feet.

He chuckles and puts his on, locking the skis in place and standing. “Okay, let’s get on the lift.”

We wait in line, then jump on the ski lift. We hold hands and watch the scenery go by before the lift lowers.

“Okay, ready?” he asks.

I nod. “Ready.”

Once the lift reaches the ground, we plant our feet and slide to the top of the hill where there’s another line of people waiting to ski down.

“Thank you for taking me on the bunny slopes.” I grin at Eric.

He squeezes my hand. “Just once though. After this, it’s like riding a bike, and we’re heading to the more challenging hills.”

“Fine,” I grumble, secretly happy he wants to go on the other ones. This one is easy, that at least I remember.

I glide down the hill and remember how freeing it feels. Yes, the bitterly cold air bites my face and hurts my lungs but it's still a beautiful view and it's a rush to ski down regardless.

"I did it!" I exclaim when I get to the bottom and remove my goggles and the scarf that covers half my face.

Eric kisses me, his face flushed bright red from the cold and he also removes his glasses. "You did, gorgeous! Not that I didn't think you could."

"Good save." I punch him good-naturedly. "Now let's go to the next one!"

He laughs at my excitement and we find the ski lift and head to a different one.

Miraculously, we arrive back at the ski lodge five hours later with me completely unharmed. Well, except for that tree I almost hit, but I dodged it in time and only managed to whack my elbow on it as I skied around it.

"Bathroom," I say as soon as we enter the warm, posh-looking lodge where there's a fire in the hearth and people standing around the bar and sitting in chairs drinking.

"I'll be out here," he says.

Once I finally emerge, I come back out to find Eric at a table with two hot drinks in front of him.

"Oooh, what's this?" I ask, pointing at it as I sit. It's a creamy brown color with whipped cream on top.

"Irish coffee. It's a tradition, you have to drink one after you ski," he states with a smirk.

I lift it and take a sip. It warms my insides and is also sweet, but I taste liquor. "What's in it?"

"Uh, Irish whiskey, coffee, and whipped cream. Sometimes some kind of liqueur, too."

"It's delicious," I say. I point to his. "You got one too?"

"Yes, minus the whiskey."

"That probably tastes even better," I comment with a wink.

I've never seen him drink. Only the night we met at his coming home party when he got out of prison he had a beer or two. I remember I had invited myself, begging Taryn to let me come. First, because I love parties, and second because I really wanted to meet him. I didn't meet Taryn until a few years ago through our jobs when she did tech at the law firm, and he was already locked up. I'd seen photos though, and after checking out his case to make sure he was in for what she said he was in for, I knew I wanted to meet him.

I don't make it a habit to hang around convicted felons, in fact, in my line of work, I avoid them socially. But I've also learned that sometimes people basically make mistakes and have lessons to learn. Eric paid for his horrible mistake, and in my opinion, he's going to be paying for it for the rest of his life.

"Christa."

I glance over at him. "Huh?"

"Where'd you go? I thought I lost you for a minute."

"Nowhere." I put on a smile. "Just thinking about how we met."

His smile falters a little. "I wasn't in the best place back then. Thank you for sticking by me."

"I always will, babe. But tell me something. How come you never tell me prison stories?" It's a bold ask, but I want to see what his reaction will be. He never talked about things when we were first together—before he went to Africa—and I never asked. But now, I feel like we're strong enough where I can ask him these things.

"What do you want to hear?" he asks with a smirk.

I shrug one shoulder and lift the Irish coffee to my lips. "Anything funny you want to tell me."

"Hmm, let me think. Well, this isn't about me, but someone else. One time, this guy smuggled a cell phone into the prison. He used to keep it on silent and would hide it under his mattress when he charged it. Well, one day, he was fighting with his old lady on FaceTime, since count had just cleared

and we knew the officers wouldn't come by to make rounds for another couple of hours. He and a couple other of the inmates were bold like that. As tempting as it was to get myself a phone, I never did. I couldn't stand the thought of spending one extra minute in that place, let alone months or years if I got caught."

"Smart," I reply.

"So, this guy, he was fighting with his old lady, and we could all hear it because it was on speaker. She was telling him how she was gonna go fuck one of his friends while he was in there, and there was nothing he could do about it. Of course the whole pod could hear the conversation, and we were all listening because really, what other entertainment did we get in the place? And he told her he'd send so-and-so over to her house to fuck her up if she did."

"Oh, my God, he did?" I ask, horrified. "Was she scared then?"

He chuckles. "No way. These guys did that all the time, even on the inmate pay phones. They have no power inside, and try to control what happens at home. Except she laughed and said, 'Good, when he comes over, I'll fuck him too, then.' And we all started laughing. Then, one of the officers—he was one of these rookies who really loved to bust us doing stuff and would hold his keys flat to his pants and turn down his radio so we wouldn't hear him coming, well, he stood right behind the inmate who was on the phone, with his arms crossed. We all shut up and waited to see what would happen. The guy was still threatening her, and when he turned around, boom! Busted."

"How embarrassing for him," I said, laughing and shaking my head.

"Yeah, we didn't see him again, I think they shipped him off to a higher security prison. Heard he got charged with threatening bodily harm to his girl. You know, if he'd only texted her instead, when the officer came by he might have gotten away with keeping it by hiding it under his pillow or something. Idiot."

“I bet you have a lot more stories like that.”

“Yeah, six years’ worth, but I don’t want to talk about them.”

I smile and grab his hand, the coffee warming me in more ways than one. “I will never ask you again. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not worried. I know you respect me like that.”

EPILOGUE

Eric

Five Months Later

Carter's backyard is covered in red, white, and blue decorations.

Kids swim and splash in the pool and I have to make a wide berth around the deep end as an older child does a cannonball and practically splashes all the water out of the pool. He emerges with a flourish, and does a big victory shout with an air punch.

"David Chin, don't do that again!"

I look over to see Jeff, Carter's lead tech guy at his company, yelling at his son.

I chuckle. "Cut the kid a break, he's having fun," I say to him.

He smiles up at me. "I know. He's just so full of energy."

"Boys," I say with a wink behind my sunglasses, heading back to the chair next to Christa.

"I can't believe he invited his whole company over for the holiday," she says, popping a pretzel in her mouth.

"He only has like ten employees and they didn't all show up. I think it's a perfect crowd."

Taryn comes over to us, holding her three-month-old son, Killian, over her shoulder, patting his back. My nephew is as bald as an egg and has his dad's big blue eyes. He lets out a huge burp and then dribbles spit-up down her back.

I make a face. "Uh, I think he just puked on you," I tell my sister.

"Dammit," she says. She wipes his mouth with his shirt and plops him in my lap. "Hold him while I go change my shirt."

Christa laughs. “Well, aren’t you the cutest little thing ever.”

He sort of stands on my thighs, his tiny bare feet holding up his chubby body. He stares at me with his little rotund lips parted and blinks blond eyelashes. “I’m your Uncle Eric. If you’re nice and don’t puke on me, I’ll buy you your first electric toddler car when you’re old enough.”

He beams a big smile, milky drool dribbling out of his mouth. I copy my sister’s actions and wipe it with the little guy’s shirt that has an American flag on it.

“Gimme,” Christa says, lifting him out of my arms and sitting him on her lap. “You have to face him out so he can see everything. He’s a nosy little thing. I think he gets FOMO. That’s what Taryn says why he hates taking naps.”

I chuckle. “Oh, probably. Carter was hell of hyper when we were younger, never sat still. I’m sure his kid will be like that too.” I look over at my best friend manning the grill like a champ, his apron reading *The Grillfather* with a man’s silhouette wearing sunglasses and a bowtie under it, and bite back a smile.

“Hey, y’all!” I hear a woman call in a deep Southern accent. I recognize her as Carter’s friend Lincoln’s wife. She’s holding a little boy about two years old with red hair, and Lincoln holds another boy the same age, his hair is blond though. That’s right, she had twins a couple of years ago.

Carter and Taryn greet them, and I hear Lincoln say. “Here. Don’t ask me what it is. Some Southern dish, I was told to hold it.”

Christa’s brother and his girlfriend, Larissa, and her one-year-old nephew Brett Jr. were invited as well, and I watch as her brother holds onto him in the pool, giant floaties attached to his arms so he doesn’t sink. Christa was so happy when he was born, she cried, and we have watched him a few times so her brother and his girlfriend could go on dates. At this point, I might as well start babyproofing our new house.

“Wow, so many boys,” I comment, looking at Mr. Chin’s kids, and a few more employees, plus the little guy in my lap. “Someone needs to bring a girl into the mix,” I quip.

“I agree. Who should do it?” she asks, teasingly.

“We could try for one.” I kiss her nose.

She shakes her head. “Sorry, bud. Gotta put a ring on it first.”

“Don’t worry, I will.” I wink at her.

I’ve been hinting for weeks, but she simply waits patiently. I know she loves surprises and I don’t want to ruin it for her. My proposal involves another helicopter and a gondola lift, so when we hike up, I’m sure she’ll figure it out. I already bought a house and she’s been moving her things in slowly, as her lease on her tiny house isn’t up yet, plus she enjoys the solitude and alone time, even though we mostly spend every night together. She still does her girls’ nights with her friends, but they’re all married now, and she wants to be next.

Carter surprised me last month when he called me to lunch to tell me he had a gift for me. What I had ever done to deserve anything from him was a mystery, but over appetizers and drinks (tea for me) at the country club he belongs to, he told me he took the 190k and invested it while I had been in prison. He happily watched it grow, even through the dips and losses at times, and it was at over \$900,000 now. He handed me over all the log in and passwords and told me to do whatever I wanted with it. I had been shocked. I decided to let him keep some control over it, asking him to please keep doing those stock things, because I have no idea how they work. It grew to over a million by the time the new year hit the following year, making me now a baby millionaire.

I took six hundred out and bought a house for Christa and me. It isn’t a mansion but she picked it out and said it was perfect so it’s perfect in my eyes, as well. No swimming pool but we don’t want one, we have my sister’s to use whenever we want, and it’s only a mile or so away from our new house.

I took another \$200,000 out and used a hundred of it to set up an anonymous trust fund for little Andrea Stamp, so she could go to college once she graduates in a few years. If she doesn't want to go to college, I don't care what she does with the money and she will never know it's from me because I think it's better that way.

The other hundred I donated to the hospital where they were making a new critical care unit for brain injuries, and all the donors got their names put on plaques on the wall. I donated it in Jill and Terrance Stamp's name in their honor. Again, asking to remain anonymous, but that their names be used.

I don't feel like there's anything else I can do except live with my mistakes and hope that people are more careful when they drive. Surprisingly, I was asked to speak at an anti-drunk driving organization convention who puts on events around the country, and I didn't quite hold myself together when I told them my story, but I hope it had an impact, and drove home the point that distracted driving was as dangerous as impaired driving.

"Eric, how are you?" Declan Kelley greets me as I stand to get more food from the massive spread inside the kitchen. He holds a beer and piles his plate. He looks festive in khaki shorts and a white tee with an American flag on it.

"I'm good. Much better, I should say. And also, I don't think I ever thanked you for helping me get that job, and then getting my job back when I returned. It's really been a life-changer."

"Oh, hey, no problem. We need PTAs badly, and with your experience I'd be stupid to turn you down and not recommend you. I'm just glad it worked out. Any news on getting your state license reinstated?"

I set the food down and grab a glass of lemonade from the clear glass dispenser sitting on the counter. "Yes, I heard last week. The state board met and decided to give it back to me. I'm so relieved."

“Holy shit, that’s amazing! I’m sure we have a PT opening, if not several.” He fist-bumps me.

“That would be great. I’m going into HR on Monday.”

What I don’t tell him is that I called up Serina, my former hip replacement patient, and asked her if she knew if the Denver Broncos were hiring in-house PTs. She did some legwork for me, and sent me information to apply. That would be my dream job, and the pay is out of this world.

“That’s a great idea,” he says, looking at me with his light-green eyes. His dark-brown hair is purposely messy, and he’s got the start of a dark beard coming in. I’ve never seen him so casual. “I’ll put in a good word.”

“Thank you. You come here alone?” I ask. I’ve never seen him with a woman except once at Carter’s big birthday party Taryn threw him earlier this year.

“Yeah, I like it that way.”

“Terminal bachelor, huh?” I ask, taking a sip of lemonade.

He shrugs and picks up a cream cheese salami roll. “Something like that.”

Taryn walks in with baby Killian. “Hold him. I need to get more cold cuts out.”

She again thrusts the baby at me, and he drools all over my shirt. “This kid needs a bib,” I say, making a face.

Declan laughs and lifts up his plate. “Good luck with that, man.” He inclines his head at Killian.

“You are a drool monster,” Taryn says, whipping out a small terrycloth bib from a drawer and velcroing it around his neck. “There, better.” She kisses his nose and goes back to her task.

As I’m trying to work out how I can carry my plate, drink, and the baby, Christa comes in. Her patriotic dress hugs her curves and I watch as her hips sway as she heads toward me.

“There you are,” she says.

“Pick—food and drink, or the baby. I was just about to head outside to find you,” I say.

“Gimme that baby.” She lifts Killian from my arms and props him on her hip like a natural. I smile at how beautiful she looks and already know she’ll be a good mom. But first, like she says, I have to put a ring on it.

A month later

Christa

“I can’t believe what a perfect day it is out here. Not too hot, not too cold.” Yes, I’m warm from hiking, but dammit, this man of mine has made me love it, and now we go up here at least once a month during the nice weather months to hike. We don’t always go on the same mountain or trail, but this one is my favorite because it was where we had one of our first dates, and this one has the gondola that we can ride instead of hiking down.

The exercise has helped me tremendously, and it was Eric who told me about the benefits of not only my physique but mental health as well. And he’s right. I’ve healthily put ten pounds back on but I’m not as jiggly, not that that really bothered me, but more muscle and I’m getting my curves back.

I’m out of breath when we get to the top, and as I take in the breathtaking view of the cities below and the gorge on the other side, I smile. It’s so gorgeous I will never get tired of this view. I untie my shirt from around my waist and dab at my neck, where I’m perspiring a little bit. It’s so dry here, I don’t sweat a lot but that was definitely a healthy hike.

I startle when the sounds of a helicopter hit me, and I turn to see one flying really close. Not close enough to see inside, but close enough that its blades blow my hair back. I can also tell it’s not one of the bigger military ones I see fly over a lot. But of all the times we’ve hiked, even in other places, I’ve never seen one come this close. I put the flat of my hand over my eyes and squint to see who’s in it. As it gets a little closer, I could swear Carter and Declan are in the back. Carter holds up his phone like he’s filming.

“Eric, is that—” I turn to see him on one knee on the red rocks, holding something shiny between his fingers. “Oh, my God.” Tears immediately prick my eyes.

“Christa, I’ve learned over the last year that I absolutely cannot live without you. Even being away from you for a day is too much. You’ve stood by me when I didn’t deserve it. You’ve supported me when you should have just left. But I’m glad you didn’t, because I don’t want anyone else to have you. You’re mine and always will be. So, even though I don’t deserve you, I want to spend the rest of my life earning you. Will you please do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

“Oh, my God,” I repeat. “Oh!” I turn to look at the helicopter and the guys are waving at me, Carter still filming.

“Hurry up, my knee is killing me.” He chuckles.

I laugh. “Yes, yes I’ll marry you! Get up, silly!”

He slides a very large triangle diamond ring on my finger and hugs me. “I love you so much.”

“I love you more, Eric. So much.”

The helicopter flies away, and Eric says, “Once we reach the bottom of the canyon, the copter’s coming back, and we’re heading to Breckinridge for the weekend.”

“Oh, my God. We are? But I don’t have any of my stuff—”

“Taryn took care of it, it’s all in the copter. Now, let’s go!”

We hike a quarter mile to the gondola, where we wait a few minutes while people load. We hop on and as soon as we’re in the air, I scream, “I’m getting married!”

Everyone who can hear us claps, and Eric puts his arms around me, kisses me, and says, “I cannot wait for you to be my wife.”

“I’ll be the best one you could ask for.” I kiss him back.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carolyn lives in Colorado with her husband, who's delivered on his promise of a happily ever after, and their daughters, who spend their parents' money like broke little best friends instead of teenagers.

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If you like Carolyn's writing, you can find steamy paranormal romance and fantasy under her pseudonym, C.J. Pinard. Visit cjpınard.com for more info!

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