



MISTAKEN



H A R P E R S E C U R I T Y O P S

A . K . E V A N S

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Harper Security Ops: Jax & Sophie

A.K. Evans



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H A R P E R S E C U R I T Y O P S

A.K. EVANS

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PROLOGUE



Sophie

“Hello, ladies.”

I let out a laugh and shook my head in disbelief. I never imagined I’d ever say those words unless I was speaking to a group of women. But life had taken me down this path, and I was doing my best to not only accept it, but to find some joy in it, too.

Admittedly, that was something I had to work for many days of the week, because it didn’t always come naturally to me. There were both good and bad days, but I was grateful those had shifted lately, with the scales favoring the better days more often.

And today, of all days, could have easily been one of the days that dragged me down completely into a pit of darkness and despair.

Because of him.

Because today was one of his favorites, and that always had the power to make me nostalgic and melancholy.

To walk into this building today and feel excited about the day ahead, to not feel strange that I was talking to nobody who could respond, was such a feat. I was proud of myself.

And I understood that was how grief worked.

It didn’t matter that this was the second time I’d be doing this or that it had been just over two years since I lost him. Grief came in waves for me, and I took it as it came.

Sometimes, it left me curled up in bed with a box of tissues by my side and my favorite movies on repeat. Other times, it had me working, finding a way to occupy my mind with something else. And there were the times it ate away at me, leaving me feeling consumed by anger and bitterness. Fortunately, the days of feeling such sorrow were few and far between, and the ones that left me feeling angry were even more infrequent.

The days like today were the ones I lived for, though.

It was a day like today that I believed helped lead me to having more of the same while the number of harrowing days was diminishing. Maybe that meant I was healing.

It certainly didn't mean that I was forgetting him. I could never forget him.

And today I was going to do something I'd started doing last year as a way to honor him.

My dad.

The man who raised me, provided for me, and gave me a life filled with so much love and laughter.

It was the middle of April in Steel Ridge, Pennsylvania, and that meant it was also the beginning of the car show season. For years, my father had always attended local car shows with one of the cars in his collection. I'd start seeing the light dancing in his eyes sometime in March, because he knew the first day of that season was right around the corner, and he simply couldn't wait.

But then he got sick.

And for the last year of his life, he couldn't bring his cars out.

I think that devastated him more than knowing he was dying.

He passed not long after the final car show of the season, and it destroyed me. I spent that holiday season doing nothing and going nowhere. And it took quite some time for me to get to a place where I had any desire to join the land of the living again.

By the time March hit that following year, something happened inside me. Just as the leaves started popping up everywhere, and everything that had been brown, dead, and dormant started showing signs of life again, I felt as though I was experiencing something similar.

And I could think of no better way to mark the new beginning than with a new tradition.

For the first time last year, I took one of my father's cars out to the first car show of the season. Though I was sad about him not being there to experience it, there was no question I had enjoyed myself.

I was doing it again this year.

My eyes moved through the garage at my father's impressive collection—a collection that was now mine. These were his girls, and I'd started referring to them as the ladies at some point in the middle of the year last year.

If I was going to get there on time, I needed to stop reminiscing while looking at them and start pulling them out of the garage.

There was one car that my dad always took out to the first show of the year, and I was set on continuing that tradition. I had to pull two other cars out to get that one, then get those back inside, so I could leave.

So, I got to it.

And before I knew it, after enjoying the drive to the car show's location, I was in the thick of it.

Rows upon rows of pristine cars, the sound of the engines as more pulled in, and the people. I'd never really understood it before, but I got it now. As much as my dad loved his collection, he really enjoyed the community he'd been surrounded by. Everyone was so kind, and their enthusiasm was off the charts.

Being here now, much the same as it had been last year, I felt closer to my dad.

“To say I’m beyond impressed by this one would be an understatement.”

I turned my head to look in the direction of the masculine voice that had just broken into my thoughts. A man who looked to be somewhere in his late forties or early fifties had been looking at my car.

“Thank you.”

The man brought his attention to my face. “This is yours?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes.”

When I’d arrived here last year and this year, I was welcomed with open arms. The organizers for the event must have known my father well, because as soon as they saw me coming, they bent over backward to make me feel welcome. Throughout the course of the event last year, many people had come up to me wondering how I’d convinced Gino Belmonte to sell his car to me. Of course, I’d shared the sad news with them, but it warmed my heart that so many people knew who he was and how much this car meant to him.

Obviously, not everyone knew him, and so it was generally a surprise when people learned I was the owner.

“Do you mind me asking where you found this? These are exceptionally rare.”

Smiling brightly at the man, I said, “It was my father’s car, but he passed two years ago.”

“Oh, I’m terribly sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks.”

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“She’s Sophie Belmonte,” someone declared before I had the chance.

My eyes shifted to the side, where I saw Kevin—a man I’d met at last year’s event. I smiled at him and said, “Hi, Kevin. It’s great to see you again.”

“Likewise, Sophie.” He turned his attention to the man who’d initially walked up to me and said, “It’s gorgeous, isn’t it?”

“Incredible,” the man marveled.

Kevin held out his hand. “Kevin Roberts.”

The man shook Kevin’s hand and replied, “Joel Meyer.”

After they shook hands, Joel looked at me and asked, “So, what are your plans for this, Sophie?”

My brows shot up. “Plans?”

He nodded. “Are you keeping it? Do you have any plans or interest in selling?”

I shook my head. “There are no plans to sell it. It holds a lot of sentimental value for me, so I’ll take it home, put it in the garage, and keep it there until the next time I’m ready to take it out for a drive, which probably won’t be for weeks.”

“That’s a bummer,” he said. “A car like this should be showcased regularly. Are you sure you don’t want to sell it?”

“I’m positive,” I replied.

“She isn’t going to get rid of it,” Kevin chimed in. “Especially because she seems to have the same attachment to it as her father did. I can’t tell you the number of people that tried to get him to sell this car to them over the years. He refused.”

Something moved through Joel’s expression before he reasoned, “Yeah, but everything is for sale at some point. Maybe nobody offered him the right price.”

Shaking my head again, I insisted, “I’m afraid it’s not about the money.”

“Listen to her, man,” Kevin added. “I did tell you she’s Sophie Belmonte. She’s Gino Belmonte’s daughter, and that means, she doesn’t need to sell this at all.”

Confused and perhaps a bit disappointed, Joel declared, “Well, I don’t know who Gino Belmonte is, so that doesn’t tell me anything. But that doesn’t matter.” He reached into his

back pocket, pulled out his wallet, and held out a business card. “When you change your mind and are ready to talk, please don’t hesitate to give me a call.”

I took the card, knowing I’d never need it, and offered a friendly smile. “Will do.”

Joel took one last look at the car and walked off. My eyes drifted to Kevin.

He let out a laugh and said, “This car always did get a lot of attention.”

“It’s a lime green Lamborghini Miura S, Kevin. If it’s not the name that draws the attention, the color certainly does the trick,” I joked.

The two of us laughed, and I spent the next few hours enjoying the rest of the event.



Six Months Later

“How was the trip?”

“We had the best time, Sophie. You have to go there at some point in your life.”

I’d just walked out of my house, locked the door, and started walking down to the detached garage. It was far enough away that I could have ridden the golf cart down there, but since it was nice out, and there wasn’t likely going to be too many more days with bearable temperatures, I decided to take advantage and go for the walk.

“I’m sure Bali is amazing, and maybe one day, I’ll visit, but if I’m leaving the country any time soon, I’m going to Italy, Nadia. But I’m so happy to hear you and Carson had such a good time.”

“It was the best. What have you been up to lately? Meet anyone yet?”

I rolled my eyes.

Nadia was my best friend. I’d met her in middle school, and we’d been close ever since. Sadly, after she got married to Carson four years ago and his job transferred him to Texas, I didn’t see or talk to her nearly as often as I would have liked.

Of course, every time I did talk to her, she always made it a point to ask about my love life. While there was the part of me that understood why she asked, there was another part that hated it.

Because Nadia knew how difficult it had been for me to find anyone.

To say I’d faced my fair share of judgment over the years would have been an understatement. The simple fact was that my father’s success had made it so most men who were love interests quickly became uninterested. I didn’t know if it was insecurity or them thinking I was accustomed to a certain lifestyle they’d never be able to give me, but it was disappointing either way.

I didn’t want someone for their money or lack of it. I merely wanted someone who had similar values as me, who cared about me, who made me laugh, and who would treat me with the love and respect I deserved. It didn’t seem like a lot to me, but perhaps I was being naïve.

So, as I was certain she already expected, I sighed and answered, “I’ve not met anyone yet. I’m actually heading out now to run over to my dad’s place before I head to the hospital, and then out to pick up some lunch.”

“Maybe you’ll meet someone today,” she said hopefully.

“I won’t hold my breath,” I muttered. “So, tell me about this trip.”

For the remainder of my walk to the garage, I listened to all of Nadia’s details about her romantic getaway with her husband. As happy as I was for her, I had to admit I was a bit jealous. It wasn’t the trip itself making me feel that way. It was

hearing about all the things she got to do with the man she loved.

I wanted that.

I wanted to do things like that with the man I loved. At this point, I was willing to settle for some cuddling while watching movies, or even a simple date night. I didn't need anything fancy, and yet, I wasn't sure I'd ever get what I longed for.

"Alright, well, I just got down to the garage, and I need to rearrange these cars, so I can head out," I started. "I'll give you a call next week to catch up."

"But if you meet a guy when you're out today, you need to call me sooner than next week," she demanded.

Laughing, I promised, "You'll be the first person I call."

Nadia and I disconnected, and I dropped my phone into my purse. After tossing it into the Lamborghini, I pulled out the two cars my dad had always parked behind it.

Dad was very particular about his cars, and he always liked to keep his Lamborghini pulled in first. I could never bring myself to do it any differently.

I didn't normally take my dad's cars out for a drive. But he'd taught me a long time ago about not only keeping them on a battery tender when they weren't being driven regularly, but to also get them out on occasion. Typically, I'd rotate through them and make sure to drive each of them at least once a month.

After getting the car I needed out of the garage, I pulled the others back inside, locked it up, and made my way back up toward the house. I ran inside, filled up the trunk with my donation for the hospital, and took off.

Before I made my way to the hospital, I needed to make a stop at Belmonte Stone.

Belmonte Stone was my father's company. Technically, it was now my company, but I never worked there. My dad's brother, Sal, ran the operation.

Dad and Uncle Sal were first-generation immigrants from Italy. When he was younger and in his early working life still living in Italy, Dad worked as a stonemason. He'd always been fascinated by the work, and he loved architecture. When he moved here years ago, he took a chance on himself and opened his business. He was exceptional at what he did, built a solid business, and eventually branched out. He worked with all types of stone, and he started getting into high-end projects.

He started to hand sculpt stone pillars. Someone wanted massive marble pillars in their home, and they hired him for the project. That guy had rich friends who wanted the same. From there, Dad's business exploded, and Belmonte Stone was now a multi-million-dollar company.

I made it to Belmonte Stone and wasn't surprised to be greeted with a bunch of smiling faces when I walked in.

My aunt, Ariana, was in the front office with one other front office worker. They handled customer service and administrative needs.

"Hey, Sophie," Aunt Ariana greeted me. "How are you doing?"

"I'm good. How's it going?"

"Things are great. Busier than ever," she replied.

"Hey Ari, we need—"

My uncle stopped speaking the moment he stepped out from behind the wall and saw me. "Sophie," he declared, making his way to me. He gave me a hug and a kiss. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to the hospital with another donation, and I needed a box to carry it in," I told him. "I didn't think it'd look really nice walking in with everything stuffed in a garbage bag."

He let out a laugh and said, "We've got plenty out in the warehouse. Come on out, and I'll get Diego or Bruno to dig them out for you."

Diego was Sal's son, and Bruno was Diego's cousin on Aunt Ariana's side of the family.

It might have seemed crazy or confusing to anyone else, but I loved that this was the company Dad built. Considering Nadia had moved away with her husband and Dad was no longer here, it wasn't difficult for me to feel lonely quite often. But then I'd make a trip here, and the family I had at this business would turn that around for me. They were all I had left nearby, and I didn't know what I'd do without them.

Uncle Sal and I made our way out to the warehouse, and he called out to Diego to grab some boxes for me to take a look at. A moment later, Diego dropped a bunch of boxes in front of my feet.

"How big of a box do you need, Soph?" he asked.

"Nothing too crazy," I replied as I looked through them. "I have to be able to fit it in the car."

"Aw, man. You brought the Lambo, Sophie," Bruno announced as he walked past the open garage door in the warehouse that overlooked the parking lot and toward us.

I smiled and nodded. "It was its turn to get driven. None of the cars will probably be out much longer at this point. It's going to get cold fast here."

"I'm surprised you brought it out. It's supposed to start raining soon, I think," Bruno said.

My head snapped in his direction. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah. I saw that this morning, too," Diego added.

My eyes nearly popped out of my head. "I hate to do this, but I've got to get going. I can't get this car wet."

Uncle Sal started laughing as Diego picked up the box I chose and carried it outside for me. "You're just like my brother," he said, as I started moving in the same direction as Diego. "Drive safe, Sophie."

"See you later, Uncle Sal."

After I made it outside and opened the trunk, Diego and I took everything I had inside and placed it in the box. Following a very quick goodbye, I took off for the hospital.

The last thing I wanted to do was rush my hospital visit, but I didn't want to risk getting caught out in a storm. Plus, I still had to pick up my lunch order from Grant's Deli on my way back home.

So, I ran in and wasn't in there more than ten minutes before I was back outside and heading to grab my lunch.

"Hey, Sophie. How are you doing today?" Mallory, the owner of Grant's Deli, asked when I stepped inside.

Grant's Deli was one of my favorite places to grab lunch from, which is why she knew my name when she saw me.

"Hi, Mallory. I'm doing well. Just rushing to get back home before this storm hits," I answered. "You look fantastic. Where did you get your tan from?"

"Oh, I just got back from my honeymoon," she replied as she set the bag with my lunch on the counter. "I got married a few weeks ago, and my new husband whisked me away for a bit. It was glorious."

"Congratulations. That's so exciting."

I was genuinely happy for her, even if I felt a pang of jealousy. Why did it seem as though everyone around me was taking trips with their husbands while I couldn't manage to nail down a boyfriend? Heck, I was having a hard time even finding someone who was interested in taking me on a date.

"Yeah, I wish I could go back for at least another week," she said.

"I bet." I pulled out some cash, paid for my lunch, and took the bag from the counter. "I'd love to stick around and hear all about it, but I've got to get back home."

"Next time," she replied as I turned and moved toward the door. "Have a good afternoon."

"Thanks. You, too."

With my lunch in my hand and my head down, I was digging through my purse for the car key as I moved in that direction. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going, and the next thing I knew, I ran into something solid.

"Oh, are you alright?"

"I'm so sorry," I said, looking up at the man. "I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

He shook his head and smiled. "That's okay. I wasn't paying attention, either."

I offered a friendly smile in return and moved around him. Then I made it to the driver's side of the car, and that's when I was halted once more.

"This is yours?" the man asked.

"Yes, it is."

His eyes shifted between the car and me several times. "No way. Are you serious?"

I held the key up and dangled it in front of me. "Yep. And I'm really sorry, but I'm kind of in a hurry right now."

"Wait. Wait. Where did you get this thing? I haven't seen one of these in person in so long," he declared, moving around the front of the car toward me.

The clouds were rolling in, and I knew the skies were going to open up at any minute. As I opened my door, I answered, "It was actually my dad's car, but he recently passed, so now it's mine."

I attempted to lower myself into the car, but the man came closer. He put his hand on top of the open door and asked, "Was he the original owner? How many miles are on this thing?"

"Sir? I'm really sorry, but I'm in a bit of a rush," I explained.

Seeming slightly offended, he jerked back and removed his hand from the door. "Right. Yeah. Okay."

As he walked away, I had to admit I felt bad. But I just couldn't risk getting this car wet. My dad had never taken it out in the rain, and I wasn't about to start.

So, I quickly pushed the guilty thoughts from my mind and raced home. I felt like I was racing against the clock to get there, and by some miracle, I managed to turn into the driveway just as I saw the first raindrop hit the windshield.

As quickly as I could, I made it to the garage and decided to just pull the car in. Normally, I would have pulled out the other two, so I could pull this one in first, but I'd have to come back in the morning and switch them around. It could start downpouring at any second.

I pulled the car in, locked up the garage, and ran back to the house with my lunch in my hand. Halfway there, it started raining, and I got drenched.

But at least the car was safe.

ONE



Jax

“Take a deep breath.”

I waited, but I never saw the change happen.

So, I added, “Just relax. Everything is going to be fine.”

Deep down, I knew my advice was simple, but I also knew it was solid.

It was the truth.

But with one look into my coworker’s eyes, it was all too clear the words weren’t penetrating.

I understood why.

In fact, I understood why probably better than most. But I also recognized the fact that staying where he was in his mind wasn’t going to help him, either.

Banks, a member of the kidnap and ransom team at Harper Security Ops, was out of sorts in a way none of us had ever before seen him. Then again, it wasn’t as though what he was going through was something any of us had ever experienced.

Just a couple of weeks ago, Banks became a newly widowed, single dad to a three-month-old.

So, when he walked into the Harper Security Ops office late this morning, it had taken everyone by surprise. He walked over to me and asked if I had some time to talk. Under normal circumstances, I would have offered a listening ear. In

this case, knowing what he was going through, there wasn't a chance I was going to turn my back on him.

The two of us came into my office, and for the last thirty minutes or so, I listened while Banks shared some of what he was feeling. I knew it wasn't everything, but it was something. And being held under that crushing weight of grief, anything he could unload was better than nothing.

I knew that's what this was for him. He needed to let go of some of what he'd been holding on to. Since this was the first anyone had seen him back in the office following his wife's death, I wondered how much he'd been able to share with anyone.

It was crazy to think that, just days before Banks lost his wife, they were both smiling and looking happier than ever at another coworker's wedding.

Days.

Just days after Nixon, another guy who worked in the kidnap and ransom unit, had gotten married and experienced one of the happiest days of his life, Banks experienced the worst of his.

The entire staff had been devastated for him, and we'd all obviously been there to support him as much as we could. But there was only so much comfort we could provide, especially in those first few days.

Now that some time had passed, I was happy to see Banks reaching out to us for help, and I'd never refuse to give that to him.

It was awful, though.

His grief was immense, and the guilt he felt was incomprehensible. I only hoped listening to him and offering words of reassurance would help.

Sitting in the chair on the opposite side of my desk with his elbows pressed into his thighs and his hands clasped together in front of him, Banks replied, "It doesn't feel like everything is going to be fine."

I took a deep breath, stood, and rounded my desk. I came to a stop beside him, put my hand on top of his shoulder, and squeezed. “Of course, it doesn’t. but that doesn’t mean it won’t. It’s going to take time, man. You need time.”

“I barely had any time to begin with,” he returned, the devastation dripping from his words.

He wasn’t wrong about that. So much of Banks’ whole relationship and road to fatherhood had been a surprise to us. It wasn’t until after his son was born that most of us learned Banks had gotten married. He was a private guy, but we hadn’t realized just how much of his personal life he’d kept a secret from all of us.

Banks had become a newlywed, a father, and a widow all in a matter of months.

I gave his shoulder another squeeze, let it go, and stepped back to lean my hips against my desk, where I crossed one foot over the other and allowed my hands to grip the edge of the desk.

“There are no words I can offer that are ever going to make this better for you, Banks,” I started. “I can’t tell you how to grieve. There’s nothing I can say that’ll take that pain away. Just know, you’re doing the best you can.”

He shook his head. “I’m trying, but I don’t know how I’m supposed to not want to stay in bed all day, every day.”

“You don’t have a choice, that’s why,” I reasoned. “Your little man is counting on you. Speaking of which, where is he?”

Banks sat back in his seat. “My mom is at the house with him. She kicked me out, telling me I needed to get some fresh air.”

I smiled. “And yet, you wound up here.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t know where else to go. And I just don’t know if I’m cut out for all of this.”

I tipped my head to the side and assessed him. “You don’t have a choice, Banks. You’ve got a good family, and you

know you've got all of us. Everyone will be there to help you through this. You know that. But at the end of the day, it's going to be you and your boy. He's too young to understand the pain you're going through now or the reality of the loss you have both suffered, and I think I'm right when I say we're all glad for his ignorance of it. If you want to make sure it stays that way, if you want to make sure he never feels the pain you're going through, you need to make sure that boy doesn't have his father taken away from him, too."

A light seemed to have switched on in his head, and following a beat of silence, he declared, "You're right."

I nodded slowly. "Yeah, and it sucks. I won't pretend to know how you feel, and it's easy to be me in this situation, standing here telling you what has to happen when I'm not the one suffering the way you are. But we understand loss, man. It's the sad reality of what almost all of us went through before we wound up here. Healing takes time, there's no doubt about it. But in your case, you don't have the luxury of curling up into a ball and allowing your grief to consume you for any real stretch of time. I'd never want to see anyone put such responsibility on a child, but I think you'll find that it's your son who pulls you out of this. Focus on him, and the healing will come."

Banks sucked in a deep breath, blinked his eyes rapidly a few times, and stood. "Maybe I should head back home."

"Your mom isn't going to yell at you, is she?" I asked, hoping to lighten the mood in the air.

For the first time since he'd walked into the Harper Security Ops building, I saw my friend smile. A small win, but still a win. I'd take it.

"Probably, but that's her job, I think," he replied. "Thanks for the talk, Jax. I really appreciate it."

"Anytime," I insisted.

Banks made his way to the door, and I thought it might help to give him one final piece of advice. "Banks?" I called before he walked out.

“Yeah?”

I hesitated for a moment. Then I said, “The best parts of her are in him. Try to hold on to that.”

Banks offered a small smile, dipped his chin, and walked out.

I stood there for a few more seconds, staring at the empty space where he’d just been standing. Eventually, I let out a sigh and rounded my desk again, prepared to get back to work.

For the next couple of minutes, I recalled all that Banks had shared with me.

I felt for him, knowing how much healing he had ahead of him. At the same time, I knew he’d eventually get through it. Because not only did he have a good support system around him, but he also had someone depending on him. And Banks was a tough guy who’d do the right thing for his son.

Even if I was concerned for him, I was also confident about my friend’s future. So, I had to put those thoughts aside and get to work.

But no sooner had I decided to do that, a beep came from my office phone, and Avalon’s voice came through the line. “Hey, Jax, are you available?”

“I am.”

“I’ve got someone here looking to hire a private investigator. Would you mind handling this one?” she asked.

“I’ll be right there.”

Without delay, I walked out of my office and made my way toward the front reception area, where I knew I’d find Avalon and our new client.

“Hey, Avalon.”

Our receptionist looked up at me, smiled, and held her hand out to the side as she said, “Jax, this is Sophie Belmonte. She’s looking to acquire some private investigation services, so I was thinking you might be able to help her out. Sophie,

this is Jax Turner. He can answer any questions you have and get the ball rolling for you.”

Sophie’s eyes met mine, and I couldn’t help but notice just how distressed she seemed. Wanting to offer any reassurance I could, I said, “It’s great to meet you, Sophie. Why don’t you follow me, and we can talk about what’s going on?”

“Sure,” she said with a nod, before glancing at Avalon. “Thank you for your help.”

“It’s no problem at all,” Avalon replied.

With that, I led Sophie back to my office. After she’d taken a seat in the chair Banks had been in not more than a few minutes earlier, I sat down in my chair behind the desk.

“Are you okay?” I asked, refusing to ignore the sight of her red-rimmed and puffy eyes.

Sophie shook her head. “No.”

I didn’t typically presume to know what anyone’s reason for coming to Harper Security Ops was until that person revealed it to me. For some reason, I had thoughts about why Sophie was sitting in my office now.

“Can you tell me what’s going on?” I pressed.

She dropped her gaze to her lap as she licked her lips. I did my best to ignore the sight of her pretty pink tongue and focus on the words she said next instead. “I spent the morning with the police at my house,” she started, returning her attention to my face. “I’ve filed an official report, but I know they’re not going to find it.”

Any thoughts I had about Sophie’s reason for being here flew out the window. Clearly, my assumption about her having a significant other she wanted me to investigate for suspicions of infidelity didn’t fit with the direction this conversation was heading. Of course, it was possible she had a significant other. It was just that I didn’t think he was her concern at the moment.

I shook my head, trying to rid it of the thoughts I was having. Why was I so concerned about Sophie having a

significant other?

“What did you file a report for? What do you need them to find?” I questioned her.

Sophie swallowed hard, her eyes pleading with mine. “I have a car that was stolen from me last night.”

My brows pulled together. “Okay.”

I wasn’t trying to be insensitive, but this really seemed like a case for the police. Could I handle it? Sure. But hiring a private investigator to find a car seemed excessive.

“Whatever it takes, Jax, I need you to find it. I don’t care what it costs,” she declared.

Despite what I thought about it, Sophie could spend her money however she chose to do it.

Nodding, I replied, “Alright. Well, I’m going to need to get some information from you. What can you tell me about the car? I’ll need to know the year, make, model, and color. Also, it’ll help to know where it was parked when it was taken?”

Though I believed my questions were reasonable, it was apparent Sophie didn’t think so. Because the next thing I knew, she buried her face in her hands and burst into tears. Quietly sobbing in that chair across from me, I couldn’t just sit there and watch her.

So, I stood, rounded my desk again, and sat down in the chair next to her.

I placed my hand on the middle of her back and gently stroked up and down, hoping to offer her some comfort. It took her some time, but she eventually pulled her face back from her hands, wiped at the tears running down her cheeks, and sniffled.

“I’m sorry. You probably think I’m such a big baby,” she murmured.

I shook my head. “No. No, it’s okay. I can understand that this is likely a traumatic experience for you.”

If I was honest, even if I could understand the emotions that resulted from the violation, I was never one to put too much stock into material possessions. I'd seen enough in my life, and at the end of the day, none of that truly mattered.

But everyone was different, so if Sophie wanted her car back, I'd do my job and locate it. I just needed her to give me the information I'd requested, or I wasn't sure I'd have any luck.

"The car is a 1967 Lamborghini Miura S. It's lime green."

Things were starting to fall into place. I had an appreciation for cars, so I knew about the car Sophie had stolen from her. If I was her, I might have been crying, too. The car was easily worth two million dollars, maybe more.

Trying to hide my surprise, I asked, "Okay. So, you said the police were at your house this morning. Are you telling me this car was stolen from your home?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Was it parked in a garage?"

"It was."

In an instant, I felt my body grow tense. Suddenly, I was more concerned with Sophie's physical safety. Not only had someone known where she lived and that she had this car, but they were also able to get inside her home. "You weren't harmed, were you? Did anyone come inside the house?"

Sophie shook her head. "No. I'm fine. The car was parked in the detached garage, so whoever took it never came inside my home."

I nodded my understanding, feeling a bit of relief sweep through me. "Do you have any cameras or a security system?"

"I do." When I shot her a questioning look, she added, "The alarm never went off."

Confusion washed over me. "Okay. So, whoever this was must have known what they were doing. I think the best thing for me to do, if it's okay with you, would be for me to come to your place, check out where the car was taken from, and see if

I can figure out how your security system was bypassed. After I do that, I can try to come up with a game plan.”

She nodded her head furiously. “Yes. Yes, please. Whatever it takes. I have to get that car back.”

“When would be a good time for me to stop by?” I asked.

Sophie didn’t hesitate. “When is the soonest you could do it?”

My brows shot up. “Now?”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

Relief swept through her. “That would be wonderful, Jax. I really appreciate this.”

I offered a smile and returned, “It’s not a problem at all. Let me grab my keys, and I can follow you there.”

The both of us stood at the same time, and for the first time since I’d laid my eyes on Sophie, she smiled at me. A genuine smile.

I couldn’t deny how it transformed her.

And now that she’d captured my attention like that, I couldn’t stop myself from taking in all of her.

She had dark hair pulled back away from her face, like she’d just thrown it up there in a hurry. She had almond-shaped eyes that were mostly green, with a ring of gold around her pupils. Hazel, I guess. She had a full lower lip, a perfectly shaped upper lip, and gorgeous cheekbones. As for her height, she was several inches shorter than me, maybe five feet five inches tall—a substantial difference from my six feet two inches. The rest of her body, though, it was hard to tell. She wasn’t wearing anything formfitting, so I didn’t know what was hiding beneath the layers of her clothing.

If there was one thing that was certain, Sophie was the opposite of me when it came to looks. While I guessed she could have had one that was hidden, I was willing to put

money on it that she didn't have any tattoos. And the way she dressed indicated she cared about her appearance.

It wasn't that I didn't give a crap about the way I looked. I made myself presentable, but clothing served its purpose for me. Functionality and comfort. That's all I needed.

Recognizing those obvious differences between us, it didn't make sense why I suddenly found myself attracted to her.

But attraction or not, I wasn't a fool. A woman like Sophie was unattainable. She'd never give a man like me a second look.

TWO



Sophie

They say it's best to never assume.

When my father died, I thought I'd experienced the worst of grief and despair I'd ever feel in my life.

I was wrong.

As I drove back to my house, the house we'd shared together for so many years and was now only mine, I realized just how wrong I had been.

It was gone.

Just like that, my father's most prized possession had vanished.

There was no word strong enough to express the level of devastation and hopelessness I felt right now. And the fear that moved through me this morning when I'd gone down to the garage to switch the cars around and saw it missing was something I knew I'd never forget.

Sick.

All day long, I'd felt nothing but sick.

When the police told me they'd do everything they could to locate it, I knew what they meant. Steel Ridge was a small town. The authorities could only do so much without the resources behind them.

If there was any hope of getting that car back, I was going to have to find someone who could dedicate their entire focus

to it. So, I asked the police about other options, and they urged me to contact Harper Security Ops, insisting if I had the means to pay for it, they'd be the guys who could locate it.

I didn't care what it was going to cost me; getting that car back was the only thing that mattered. And while I had already taken the steps to enlist the help of a private investigator, I also promised myself that I'd remain realistic.

This wasn't just a random attempt to steal a car. This was calculated, measured. Someone came onto my property and broke into my garage with the sole intent of taking what I had. Believing that was the case, I had to be honest. They likely already had a plan for that car, and it was that knowledge which put me on edge.

At this point, Jax was my only hope.

I sighed just thinking about him. When Avalon had first introduced him to me, I was too distraught, feeling a sense of fear building in my belly over not getting the car back, and I hadn't really made the effort to take him in.

But just before we left his office, I'd felt a bit of relief. While there was no guarantee he'd be able to recover the car, Jax had a plan. And that was a lot more than I'd had before I'd gotten to Harper Security.

In my slightly more relaxed state, I had given myself the opportunity to take him in. And I had to admit that what I saw was something I liked a whole lot—my second surprise for the day.

My eyes were immediately drawn to Jax's arms. He'd been wearing a short-sleeved T-shirt that fit his body exceptionally well. The way it molded to his shoulders, across his chest, and around his biceps was enough to have a girl feeling distracted, but it was colors of the ink on both of his arms that had me forgetting, even for a brief moment, all about the missing car.

I hadn't gotten an up-close look at them, but something inside me wanted the opportunity to inspect them.

When we stood in front of one another just moments before we left his office, our eyes met. I'd smiled at him,

partly because I was relieved he had a plan, but mostly because I felt nervous.

Jax had a handsome face, donning an angular jaw, pronounced cheekbones, and a set of lips surrounded by the hair of his goatee. As for his hair, it was shaved close on the sides, leaving just a bit more length on top, which he had clearly used some product in to style it back away from his face.

Everything about his face, even the way his lips pressed tight together, had a hardness. Like he'd been through or seen some awful things in his life. Maybe he had; I didn't know. The only thing that had me questioning myself was the softness I found lingering in his eyes.

Unaccustomed to being in such close proximity to a man who looked like Jax, I'd quickly torn my gaze away from him. And the next thing I knew, I was in my car with him following behind me to my house.

Now that we'd just pulled into the driveway, I started to feel some nerves taking over. It was the result of all I felt about being here with Jax and if he would be able to locate my dad's car.

In an effort not to waste any time, I drove all the way down to the detached garage, so Jax could see where the car was taken from.

We made it to the garage, and when I got out of my SUV, I looked back to see Jax looking all around. He obviously saw the garage, but there was a substantial amount of land surrounding the building. I could only imagine what he must have been thinking.

"This is the garage?" Jax asked after I made my approach toward him.

I nodded slowly. "Yes."

Glancing off into the distance, he jerked his chin in the opposite direction and asked, "Is that the house?"

I nodded again and repeated, "Yes."

He cocked an eyebrow, his eyes still focused on the house. Then he looked at me. “Could you open up the garage, so I can take a look inside?”

“Sure.”

I happily turned and walked away from him. It was far better to be busy doing something than it was to stand there wondering just how badly he might have been judging me.

Jax followed behind me, and a moment later, we had walked into the garage.

I watched as his brows shot up. He took in the sight of the other cars in the garage before he twisted his neck to look at me. “Are these yours?”

“They are,” I confirmed.

The look of surprise that washed over him was one I’d grown accustomed to seeing, especially from people who didn’t know me. Normally, I didn’t care, but in this instance, I felt compelled to offer some additional clarification.

“They were my father’s cars,” I said, my throat tight.

Something passed through his expression, something I couldn’t read, before he jerked his chin down and turned away from me. “So, where was the car parked last night?”

“Right here in this first bay,” I answered. “I normally pull the car in first, so it’s back against the wall, and then I pull the others in behind it. Unfortunately, there was a storm yesterday, and since I hadn’t been expecting one, I wound up getting back here just as it started to rain. My dad never took these cars out in bad weather, so I figured it was most important to just get it inside. I had planned to take care of it this morning, but when I came down here, it was gone.”

A look of concentration marred his features. “You drove the car yesterday?”

“I did. I don’t typically take it out, and I usually just keep them on the battery tenders, but once a month throughout spring, summer, and fall, I try to take each car out for a bit.”

His eyes narrowed, a clear indication he had some thoughts going through his head about what he'd just learned. I decided to wait for him to speak, since I didn't want to interrupt his thought process.

“You said you have some kind of security on this building?”

“Yes, but I turned it off when we pulled up,” I explained.

“From your phone?” he confirmed.

I nodded.

“Does it notify you in the event the system gets breached?” Jax questioned me.

“It does.”

Shaking his head as though he'd somehow gotten lost by the direction of our conversation, Jax said, “I don't understand. If that's the case, how did you not know before you got here that the car was missing?”

I shrugged. “Because of the internet.”

“What?”

I took a deep breath and blew it out. “I had two notifications on my phone when I woke up this morning. The first told me that the connection had been lost, and the second indicated it had been restored.”

Jax thought for all of a few seconds before he asked, “How much time was between the two notifications?”

Pulling out my phone to check, I said, “I didn't even take notice. Let me look.” I opened the app, checked the timestamps, and said, “It was about eight minutes.”

“So, enough time to steal a car,” he declared.

“What?”

Jax ignored my question and allowed his eyes to scan the ceiling and the walls before he moved toward the garage bay door and asked, “Do you mind if I open this?”

“Not at all.”

He pressed the button, the door went up, and Jax stepped outside to scan the exterior of the building.

I stood, motionless, as he did that, and gave him the time to do whatever it was he was doing without any interruption from me. A few moments passed, then he stated, “You don’t have any cameras.”

I shook my head. “No. It’s just the contact on the doors and a motion sensor, I believe, that has been here since my dad installed them.”

Jax dipped his chin with understanding. Following a few beats of silence, he asked, “Did anything happen yesterday while you were out?”

“What do you mean?”

“You mentioned you took the car out yesterday. Did anything unusual happen? Did you notice anyone following you?”

My eyes darted back and forth as I thought about my day out yesterday. “No. Well, I mean, I guess, maybe, there was one thing.”

“What happened?” he questioned me.

“I had ordered lunch before I left my house yesterday, so when I realized that a storm was coming, I raced over to pick up my lunch after running an errand. After getting my food, I walked back outside, and a man had stopped me. He’d been looking at the car when I walked out, but that’s not terribly uncommon given what the car is. I’ve had that happen before, so I didn’t think twice about it. Do you think it’s possible he had something to do with this?”

Jax shrugged his shoulders. “I can’t say. I’m just trying to gather some information at this point. What did the guy say to you?”

I shook my head as I tried to recall the conversation. It was so quick, and I was particularly distracted, nervous I wouldn’t make it back on time before it started raining. “I don’t remember anything that felt particularly out of the ordinary. He asked about the car, how I acquired it, and how many miles

were on it. Honestly, I wasn't paying much attention, and I cut things short with the guy, because I just wanted to get it back before the storm started."

"Okay. Where did you get lunch from?"

I had no idea what that had to do with anything. "Um, Grant's Deli."

Jax smiled. For the first time since I'd met him, the hardness I'd seen in his face had vanished. As breathtaking as it was, even if it caught me off guard completely, I was baffled by the sight of it.

"What does that look mean?" I asked, too curious not to know what made him smile like that.

"Mallory owns Grant's Deli," he announced.

My head jerked back. "You know Mallory?"

"Considering I was at her wedding when she married my coworker and friend just a few weeks ago, I'd say so."

"Wow, what a small world," I responded. "Forgive me, Jax, but I just don't understand what this has to do with anything."

Something warmed in his expression, something else I liked a lot, and he replied, "It might not be anything useful, and it might not amount to anything after I investigate, but Nixon put cameras up outside the deli. I might be able to get a good look at the guy from that footage and see if there's anything that'll help solve this case."

"Oh, okay. That sounds like a good place to start."

"Yeah, but I don't think that's all we should do," Jax returned. "This car of yours is extremely unique, Sophie. Something about this feels very calculated, and I'm thinking it might make sense to take some extra measures to secure this building and these cars here."

I tipped my head to the side, ignored how much I liked the sound of my name coming past his lips, and assessed him. "What are you suggesting?"

“Do you live alone?” he asked.

What did that have to do with anything?

“I do,” I answered.

He nodded and explained, “If you want, I can get some cameras put up both outside and inside this building. In addition to that, especially since you’re living on your own, and I’m not very keen on having you come down here from your house to meet someone looking to steal a car from you, it might be a wise idea to get a system like a Lojack on these cars.”

“A what?”

Jax let out a soft chuckle and replied, “Simply put, a GPS tracker.”

“Wait. Why would I need that? How is that going to help?”

Waving his hand out in front of him, indicating the cars in the garage, Jax pointed out, “Someone knew what they were doing when they came here, Sophie. Given the car they’ve already taken, I think they’d be fools to attempt to come back for more. But considering they managed to get in and out by blocking your Wi-Fi signal, so you wouldn’t know anyone was down here, I wouldn’t put it past them to come back. If that happens, it would be smart to have a camera or two up as well as a tracker on all of the cars, so I can see where it’s being taken if another one is stolen.”

Wow.

Wow, this guy was brilliant.

I mean, obviously, this was his job, but he was thinking so far ahead. Of course, there was one thing that bothered me about all of this.

“What are the chances of the person or people involved coming back here? Do you really think I have to be worried about them taking another car? What if they come back here tonight before you can put trackers on the cars or get the cameras up?”

As soon as the words spilled out of me, I realized just how panicked I was beginning to feel.

It was at that point when Jax showed me something else. From the moment he'd arrived here, he'd given me a surprised expression, a confused look, a focused one, and now, it appeared, he was slightly amused by me.

"I can get this all done for you today," he told me. "I'll need to run back to the Harper Security Ops office to pick up some things, but it won't take me more than maybe two hours to get everything done."

Blinking my eyes in surprise, I asked, "Are you serious?"

He nodded.

"Wow."

Jax's eyes roamed over my face for a few moments. Eventually, he asked, "Is it safe to assume you want to go this route?"

Without hesitation, I answered, "Yes."

"Okay. Then I'm going to head back to the office and get what I need. I'll be back shortly," he said.

"I'll be here," I told him.

At that, Jax held my gaze for a few moments before shifting his attention to the cars. Then he gave me one last look before he walked outside, got in his vehicle, and drove off.

I remained rooted to the spot for several minutes, a whole slew of emotions moving through me, and there was one I couldn't manage to ignore.

Everything felt like it was falling apart, and I had not a single person I could find comfort in.

THREE



Sophie

The knock came at my door long before I felt fully prepared for who I knew I'd find on the other side of it. Even though it had been just over an hour since Jax left, it hadn't been nearly enough time for me to come to grips with all that had happened today.

Between the emotional devastation I felt about my dad's car being stolen and the way I hadn't been able to stop thinking about Jax since the moment he left, it was safe to say I was feeling completely out of sorts.

It seemed impossible that I could be feeling such conflicting emotions, but I had to take a step back and look at what was happening. I was distraught over the car and doing my best to keep myself together. If I thought too much about the possibility of it being gone forever, the emotions bubbled up inside me. I wanted to throw things and scream. I wanted to curl up in a ball and cry. It was beyond overwhelming.

And Jax?

Jax was so many things I couldn't begin to process. He was levelheaded, focused, intelligent, and thorough. He was also sweet and mysterious and extraordinarily handsome.

If given the choice, I preferred to think about him, because at least when I did that, I didn't wind up feeling so disappointed with myself. I mean, I did feel frustrated when I thought about him, but that was a feeling I'd grown

accustomed to regarding a man I might be interested in. They never seemed to feel the same.

Realizing I couldn't make him wait outside forever, I moved to the door and swung it open. "Hi, Jax."

He smiled at me before responding in the strangest and most unexpected way. "I'm going to need your number."

My body tensed.

Maybe I'd been wrong.

Maybe not every guy wouldn't be interested.

Jax wanted my number.

"You want my number?" I had to admit I wished my voice hadn't given away just how excited I was about his request.

His brows pulled together as confusion washed over his face. "Yeah, I realized when I turned back into your driveway just a minute or two ago that I didn't have your number. If I did, I could have easily called to let you know I was back, so I wouldn't have needed to disturb you here. You could have disarmed the garage from your phone."

In an instant, the wind was out of my sails.

Here I was thinking Jax was feeling the same attraction to me that I was to him. I actually believed he wanted my number, because he wanted to take me out on a date.

Wrong again.

All he wanted was to communicate with me about my case. The disappointment was crushing.

"Right," I murmured. "That makes sense. I'll give it to you before you leave."

He tipped his head slightly to one side and gave me a quizzical look, but he didn't respond with words.

I decided I'd have to be the one to break the silence. "Were you able to get what you needed at the Harper Security Ops office to do what we discussed down at the garage?"

"I've got it all in a box in my truck," he replied.

Nodding my understanding, I said, “I can give you a ride down to the garage on the ATV, if you’d prefer to travel that way. Sometimes, I’ll walk down there, but usually I’ll just ride on the ATV.”

“I didn’t realize you had one of those, too.”

While I couldn’t exactly say I heard any judgment in his tone, I knew I didn’t like what his words indicated. My wealth was a turnoff.

It was just more proof I didn’t need to remind me I’d never have a guy like him want my number just to call me, simply because he wanted to get to know me.

“Yeah, I mean, if you’d rather not, I can—”

“It’s fine, Sophie. I’d be happy to ride down on the ATV, as long as you aren’t in the middle of anything,” he insisted, cutting me off.

Figuring it was best to take him at his word instead of questioning whether he meant what he said, I replied, “I’m not busy. I can happily drive you down.”

Minutes later, I’d gotten some shoes on my feet, and Jax and I had hopped on the ATV. I hadn’t been driving for more than a minute or so when Jax spoke. “So, how are you feeling?”

“Pardon?”

“With everything,” he clarified. “You obviously had a rough day today, an emotional one, if nothing else. I was just wondering how you were feeling now that you’ve had some time for all of this to sink in.”

There it was.

For at least the second time since I’d met him, Jax was proving he had a sweet side to him. The first time, I’d started bawling my eyes out in his office, and he came around his desk to sit beside me and comfort me. I was half tempted to do the same now, just so I could feel his hand on me again.

Jesus, was I that starved for affection?

I realized it had been years for me—several long years—but I didn't expect I'd have this kind of reaction to the first man I felt a level of surface attraction to. There needed to be more there, especially in my case. And the truth was, even if Jax had shown me some compassion, I'd seen the judgmental looks from him as well. Obviously, he didn't come right out and say anything rude to me, but I figured he had to maintain a level of professionalism for his job by keeping whatever personal opinions he had about me to himself.

Shaking off the ridiculous idea I had to bring the ATV to a stop and throw myself to the ground in a fit of tears, I decided it was best to offer a response to his question.

“That's very kind of you to ask, Jax. I won't lie and say I'm not upset. I'm actually quite embarrassed by this whole situation.”

“Why do you find this embarrassing?” he asked.

“My father had his collection of cars for years, and he never, not once, ever had anything like this happen to him,” I explained.

“I don't think that's anything you should feel bad about. If people see you out in any of the cars you have, it's going to draw some attention,” he reasoned. “None of that makes it okay, but someone might see you as an easy target.”

I pulled the ATV to a stop in front of the garage and mumbled, “Well, they clearly weren't wrong about that.”

When Jax didn't make a move to get off the ATV, I chanced a glance in his direction and found him studying me.

“What?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Nothing. I just don't think you should see yourself that way, despite what happened. You had no reason to think something like this would happen, since it never happened before. Now that it has, as upsetting as it is, you're taking steps to ensure there's at least a means to track the vehicles if someone attempts this again.”

That had been kind of him to say. “I appreciate you offering words to ease the guilt I feel. I'm not sure I'll ever get

over what happened to the Miura, but you're right. I'm doing something about the rest of the cars now."

"You can have a little bit of faith in me, Sophie," Jax said.

God, every time he said my name, it was like music to my ears. "What do you mean?"

His lips twitched, something I liked the look of a lot, before he answered, "You're talking about the Miura like it's gone forever. I just learned about what happened to it a couple of hours ago. Once I get things squared away for you here, I'm going to get to work on locating it. I intend to find it for you."

Something warm moved through me at hearing his resolve. Jax didn't seem like the kind of guy who went around giving people false hope, and his promise to find that car had me believing I might get to see it again, that I might be able to drive it again.

"Okay, Jax. I'll try to have a bit more faith in you," I said softly.

His eyes flashed with determination and a bit of something else. But instead of revealing whatever it was, he said, "I better get to work, so I can make sure that trust isn't misplaced."

At that, the two of us got off the ATV. After Jax grabbed the box carrying his supplies, he followed me to the door that led into the garage. I unlocked it, disarmed it, and we both made our way inside.

"Okay, so just to give you a quick rundown as to what my plans are, let me show you what I brought," Jax announced.

For the next few minutes, he took the time to explain what each of the items he brought was, how they worked, and what his plan was for each of them. I listened intently, partly because I knew it was important to understand what he was doing, but mostly because I liked the sound of his voice.

When he finished his explanation, I said, "So, do you need me to leave you alone, so you can work in peace?"

Jax shook his head. “You being here while I work will not bother me at all. That said, if you’ve got things to do and need to run back up to the house, you can do it. I’ll walk back up once I’m finished, and we can come back down here, so I can show you everything all set up, and so we can lock up.”

“I kind of can’t focus on much besides the car at this point, so…” I trailed off.

Jax offered a sympathetic smile. “Well, then I’d love to hear all about the man who amassed this collection.”

He wanted to hear about my dad.

I could have burst into tears on the spot. “Really?” I rasped, my throat growing tight.

“Absolutely. Any guy who has an appreciation for cars would want to know about him. That is, if you’re okay with sharing,” he returned.

Maybe he considered it to be just small talk, but it meant the world to me. I smiled at Jax and replied, “I’d love to tell you about him.”

As Jax got to work on installing the GPS trackers in the cars, after having promised the trackers wouldn’t damage the cars in any way, I opened up to him.

“My dad is Gino Belmonte. He was a first-generation immigrant from Italy, and he moved here when he was in his early twenties. In Italy, he’d worked for years as an apprentice at a company that did stonemasonry. And when he came here, he took the skills he’d learned and opened his own business. It started small, but eventually, he built it to become one of the biggest and best in custom stonework.”

“So, did he build houses?” Jax asked.

Even though Jax was focused on what he was doing, I still shook my head. “No. He certainly had an appreciation for architecture, but once things took off in the business, it was more about handcrafting custom pieces.”

“Like what?”

“Have you ever seen the big marble pillars some people put in their homes?” I asked, offering up the easiest explanation I could.

“Not in person, but I know what you’re talking about,” Jax returned. “Are you telling me he designed and cut those by hand?”

“He did. He developed a process, bought more equipment, and hired employees to help speed up his production. The company, Belmonte Stone, became wildly successful.”

For the first time since I’d started speaking about my father, Jax looked over at me. There was a bit of caution marring his expression. “How long ago did he pass?”

My voice was just a touch over a whisper when I responded. “About two years. He got sick and fought the good fight, but in the end, his illness overtook him.”

“I’m really sorry for your loss, Sophie. I assume you two were close.”

Smiling, I nodded. “We were thick as thieves. I was the utter definition of a daddy’s girl.”

Jax returned the smile before returning his attention back to the work he was doing. “So, I know the cars are his. Was the home his, too?”

“It was ours,” I answered honestly. “I never moved out. When I reached the age where it was probably appropriate for me to start considering finding my own place, he got sick. I didn’t want to be away from him, and it wasn’t as though there wasn’t plenty of space for me to stay right where I was.”

I watched as he nodded his understanding. He worked quietly for a few more minutes, but eventually broke the silence. “Can I ask about your mom?”

“She died.”

“Jesus, I’m sorry,” Jax lamented, his head snapping up.

Shaking my head, I insisted, “It’s okay. Truthfully, I don’t really remember her. I just know what I know from my dad and all the pictures he showed me. He met her not long after

he moved here, and they had a whirlwind romance. He said she was the best thing that ever happened to him.”

“What happened to her?”

“She was killed when her car collided head on with a cement truck. I was just a baby at the time, not even two years old.”

Jax stood up next to the first car he’d been working, Dad’s Ford GT40, and stared at me in disbelief. “That’s horrific.”

I nodded. “Yeah, it’s pretty gruesome.”

For a few seconds, Jax allowed his eyes to roam over my face. Then, like it pained him to do it, he looked away and focused on the next car. He didn’t say anything else, and I took a few minutes to sit there with him in silence.

The man intrigued me, and I was didn’t know if I’d get what I wanted, but I had nothing to lose. So, I asked, “What about you?”

“Me?”

“You work as a private investigator at Harper Security Ops,” I declared, telling him something he already knew. “Do you like your job?”

“I do.”

“And is my case a typical case you’d work on?”

He let out a laugh. “Not exactly. It’s not unheard of for someone to want us to locate something that’s been stolen, but it doesn’t happen too often. We take on a wide variety of cases and have some work that’s pretty standard or routine for private investigation, but a large chunk of what I do mixes in with some of the other departments we have at Harper Security.”

“You have different departments?”

“In addition to the private investigation unit, there’s one for kidnap and ransom cases, one that does bodyguard and private security, and another for self-defense and weapons training.”

My eyes widened in surprise. “I had no idea. The Steel Ridge Police Department didn’t give me that much detail.”

“Yeah, it’s a pretty sizable operation, and having different teams really gives us all the opportunity to utilize our best skills.”

The more I heard, the better I was beginning to feel. “So, what you’re saying is that I’ve got the best person on the job right now?”

Jax looked up at me again, held my gaze, and ultimately shrugged. “I won’t lie and say I solve every case that comes across my desk, but I will do everything I can to locate your car and bring the person or people responsible for taking it to justice.”

That determination.

I really loved seeing it.

Something about the way Jax was reminded me of my dad, especially when it came to his work. Even if something seemed impossible, he’d never let it get him down. He always believed he’d figure it out, and Jax seemed to have that same level of persistence.

“I really hope you can.”

He dipped his chin and got back to work. For a little while, we didn’t speak. I got caught up in so many thoughts while Jax worked diligently on getting everything installed and set up.

He occasionally would tell me what he was doing next, or he’d ask a simple question, but our moments of learning a bit more about each other seemed to have come to an end. I figured it was probably for the best, because there was no question if I learned more about him, I might find there was even more reason to be attracted to him.

Before I knew it, long before I wanted it to end, Jax finished up his work. He showed me everything I needed to know, particularly with regard to the cameras he’d installed. Then we were locking up the building and heading back toward the house.

“Alright, Sophie, I’m all done here. I’m going to head back to the office, and I’ll start working on tracking down this car,” he said.

I nodded, feeling a bit downtrodden. “Okay. Thank you for what you’ve already done here today.”

“It was my pleasure.”

He moved toward his truck when it hit me. “Jax?” I called.

Jax turned around to look at me. “Yeah?”

“I forgot to give you my number.”

He smiled and reached into his pocket. “That’s right. Sorry, my mind is all over the place right now.”

I insisted it wasn’t a problem and rattled off my number to him. Jax saved it into his phone before slipping it back into his pocket. “As soon as I have any information that’s worth sharing, I’ll give you a call. If you need anything between now and then, or if you have any questions, just give the office a call, and Avalon can pass you through to me.”

“I’ll do that,” I assured him, unable to ignore the fact that he didn’t offer up his personal number to me.

“We’ll talk soon, Sophie.”

“Okay. Goodbye, Jax.”

With that, he climbed into his truck and waved before he turned the truck around and drove away.

I stood there for at least a minute or two after he left, wishing his visit here had been for another reason entirely.

FOUR



Sophie

It was in the middle of the second ring when my best friend picked up the phone and said, “This is sooner than I thought I’d hear from you. Did you actually meet a guy?”

As upset as I was about so many things, I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. I had told Nadia I wasn’t going to call her until next week. It had been just three days, so it was only natural she’d assume I was holding up my end of the bargain to reach out sooner than promised if I happened to meet a guy.

She wanted good news from me, probably even more than I wanted to give it to her.

When I decided to give her a call this morning, I did it being fully aware the conversation we’d have was going to eventually lead into the discussion she’d been hoping to have with me. But I’d foolishly assumed I’d have been able to lead into it in a different way.

Though, knowing what I knew about Nadia and how she’d react, perhaps it was better to start off with what she’d consider good news.

“I actually did meet someone,” I confessed.

Nadia gasped. “Are you serious? I was just joking!”

Her shock and surprise left me feeling slightly amused, which I guess was better than the alternative. I’d been feeling so upset and conflicted, and completely out of sorts. Amusement was a welcome reprieve.

“Well, I don’t want to burst your bubble,” I started. “I haven’t exactly gone out with this guy on a date or anything like that. In fact, I’m relatively certain there is no romantic interest or physical attraction there.”

“Okay, that’s a lie.”

“What? What are you talking about?” I questioned her.

Nadia sighed. “Sophie, when will you learn just how gorgeous you are?”

I shook my head, feeling confused. “I’m not sure what that has to do with anything.”

“You just said you’re certain there’s no romantic interest or physical attraction. While I can see part of that statement being true, considering you just met the guy, you can’t honestly believe you can look the way you do and there not be an ounce of physical attraction,” she declared.

I rolled my eyes. “I love that you think I’m beautiful, Nadia, and I know I’m not unattractive, but let’s be honest here. Everyone has different tastes. It’s entirely possible that I’m just not this guy’s type,” I argued.

“That’s actually impossible.”

Laughing at her, I decided to change the direction of the conversation. “Can I tell you what’s going on?” I asked.

Without hesitation, she insisted, “I’m all ears.”

“My dad’s Lamborghini Miura was stolen,” I blurted.

“What?” she shrieked. “You’re talking about the green car, right?”

“That’s the one,” I confirmed.

“What happened?”

I took a deep breath, and a wave of sadness washed over me. “It happened sometime in the early morning hours, the day after I last talked to you on the phone. Long story short, I didn’t realize it was supposed to rain that day, and I made it back to the house seconds before it had started to downpour. Since I didn’t want to risk it being out in the rain any longer

than it already had been, nor did I want to get the other cars wet, I didn't rearrange the cars like I normally would have. When I woke up the next morning and went down to the garage to take care of doing that, the Miura was gone."

There was a long stretch of silence as Nadia was likely attempting to wrap her head around the whole situation. She knew how much that car meant to my dad and, consequently, me.

"Oh my God. Is it still missing?" she asked, her voice hushed. It was a stark contrast to the animated and exuberant version of her I'd been talking to only moments before.

"Unfortunately, it is. Of course, I called the police and filed a report, but when I stressed just how crucial it was that I get the car back, they highly recommended I visit a company called Harper Security Ops."

"What is that?" she questioned me.

I wanted to respond and tell her it was the place that employed the man who'd been incredibly kind to me, conversing with me in a way no guy had ever done before, but I didn't do that.

Instead, I shared, "It's a company that offers private investigation services, amongst some other things."

"Okay. Is this where you met the guy? Oh my God, Sophie, are you going to be dating a private investigator? That's kind of hot."

"Stop," I ordered, wondering how it was possible for her to flip the switch on her emotions just like that. "I was far too distraught when I wound up there, and I was not thinking about anything like that at all."

"Right. I get it. Knowing what that car meant to your dad, I'm not surprised. But it's been a few days, and even if the car is still missing, it's clear there's something else still going on here," she reasoned.

Nadia might have been overly enthusiastic about things like this, but her assessment of the situation wasn't that far off.

“Kind of.”

“Tell me what’s going on,” she urged.

I licked my lips and took a moment to consider if this was a smart move. Once I told her the truth, once I put it out there, I wasn’t going to be able to take it back. And when I finally accepted that Jax was never going to be anything more than just a private investigator who attempted to locate the car that meant so much to me, I was only going to wind up feeling that much more dejected.

But Nadia was my best friend, and I had nobody else to turn to with whom I’d feel comfortable sharing anything like this. So, I explained, “I don’t really know where to start. I should be here feeling nothing but despair over the car, and I keep finding my thoughts drifting to the man with tattoos covering both of his arms and a goatee surrounding his lips. I keep thinking about the way he attempted to comfort me that day, and how he seemed genuinely interested in hearing what I had to say when he asked me about my dad and my mom.”

“Oh, man. He’s checking off all the boxes, Sophie. I already like him. What’s the problem?”

I shrugged. But since we were talking on the phone and she couldn’t see that response, I said, “I haven’t heard anything from him since that day. He took my number, so he could reach out if he had any questions or had any new developments in the case, but there’s been nothing. So, I’m sitting here feeling sad about the car, believing I’m not ever going to see it again, all the while feeling even worse that I may never see Jax again.”

Nadia didn’t respond.

I wasn’t finished. “Tell me I’m crazy, Nadia. Tell me it’s too weird to feel like this after just meeting a guy. Tell me it’s just been too long, and I’m only feeling this way because I’m desperate.”

“Desperate?” she repeated. “Desperate for what?”

“Love. Affection. Companionship.”

The silence stretched between us again, making the reality of my situation that much more apparent.

“If I was there right now, I’d give you the world’s biggest hug,” Nadia murmured. “Since I’m not, the best thing I can do is be honest with you. This feeling of desperation isn’t necessarily a bad thing, Sophie. What you want is what any of us wants. To be loved and to know we’re cared for. There’s nothing wrong with you wanting that.”

“But I’m at a place where I think I want that more than I want the car back,” I revealed. “That should tell you something.”

“Wanting the car back isn’t about the car. It’s about your dad. It’s about wanting to hold on to all the pieces of him that you have. In essence, wanting Jax isn’t about you suddenly not caring about the car or what it means to you. It’s about finding something you lost so long ago, something a car can’t actually give you,” she returned.

I took a moment to allow those words to sink in. She was right.

God, I’d be devastated if Jax was unable to recover that car, but when it all boiled down, this was about me wishing I had my dad back. This was about the way he loved me, unconditionally and without judgment. I wanted to feel that again.

It had been so long since I’d felt that.

And if my last boyfriend hadn’t already made me feel awful about myself and things I had no control over, the last three dates I’d been on would have done the trick.

Sadly, it always boiled down to one specific thing.

I was too much for them.

Too rich and too perfect.

My ex-boyfriend couldn’t seem to get over the fact that I didn’t technically have to go to work at a nine-to-five job, and that I could use my time to do something I loved doing and donate.

Apparently, the wealth I had made me less and less desirable, because there was this belief that I'd be too difficult to please.

That had been bad enough.

But once that relationship ended, and I hit it off with a guy I'd started dating, he put the brakes on. I was just starting to get used to the dating scene again, and he crushed my hopes by the third date.

Not feeling the least bit of shame, the man came right out and told me that even though we'd been having a great time, he wasn't sure we'd be a good match. He believed he'd never be able to provide for me the way he thought I would have expected him to.

And it sucked.

Because it couldn't have been further from the truth.

I had no expectations about how someone needed to provide for me in the financial sense. Did I want someone who was hardworking, ambitious, and had a job? Of course. But I was willing to be an equal partner in that realm. I didn't expect it all to fall on the man's shoulders.

Money wasn't everything. More than that, I wanted the things I'd just confessed to Nadia: love, affection, and companionship.

It didn't matter how much money I had. Wasn't unconditional love the greatest thing any one of us on this Earth could experience? It was all I needed.

Sadly, as time went on, it became more and more difficult to have any hope.

"I don't know what to do," I rasped. "I can't stop thinking about this guy."

"Go to him," she declared, like it was no big deal.

"What?"

"As far as you know, he hasn't located the car, right?" she asked.

“Correct.”

“So, find a reason to call him, or go to where he works, so you can see him. Find some important detail you need to give him that might help with the investigation. It puts you in front of him again, and when you go there, make sure you arrive looking utterly delicious.”

That wasn't a bad idea.

I could easily handle getting myself dolled up. I just needed to come up with a tidbit of information to share with Jax.

Maybe none of this would work out the way I wanted, but at least I'd be able to breathe a sigh of relief once I saw him again.

“When did my best friend become so smart?” I asked her, feeling a renewed sense of hope.

Nadia started laughing, and I smiled. God, I missed her.

But at that moment, I missed Jax even more.

“I've got to go,” I told her.

“I want to know what happens, so you better keep me updated,” she demanded.

“I will,” I promised. “Love you, Nadia.”

“Love you, too, Sophie.”

With that, I disconnected the call and sat there thinking about my plan for all of a few seconds before I got up and made the effort to put it into action.

I only hoped it would have the desired effect on Jax.



Jax

For the first time in years, I was on edge.

It was a strange and unwelcome feeling.

I'd spent the better part of my adult life being unbothered. Stuff happened, and we all had to deal as best we could with whatever came our way. If I was alive and breathing, I really didn't think I was in a place to complain.

So, I tried to be laidback. I took everything one day at a time, and I found the relaxed mindset often paid off in both my personal and professional life.

But for the last three days, it was as though someone else was living inside my body. I was frustrated, annoyed, and seriously tense.

"Are you alright?"

That question had me stopping in my tracks. Literally.

I'd been pacing in my office, trying to figure out where to go next. I wasn't having much luck, and it seemed Nixon couldn't avoid stepping in.

"Is it that obvious?" I asked.

Nixon stepped into the room and lowered himself into one of the chairs on the opposite side of my desk, the same chair she sat in only a few days ago. "Of all the people in this building, you're the last one I think I'd expect to see pacing his office with a look of aggravation on his face."

I shook my head, feeling irritated. "You have no idea."

"No luck with the guy we found on the camera footage from the deli?" he asked.

"No. I located him, followed him, and did a substantial amount of research. Obviously, there's something I could have overlooked, but I'm relatively certain he's not the guy responsible," I answered.

Nixon dipped his chin and waved his hand out in my direction. "Okay. So, is that case what this is all about?"

I wished it wasn't.

I wanted nothing more than to just continue doing my work the way I always would whenever I was stumped, but it seemed that wasn't going to happen in this case. I'd been hoping for something, anything, just so I'd have an excuse to contact Sophie.

Granted, I could have picked up the phone to let her know I'd investigated the guy who'd stopped her outside the deli, but I prevented myself from doing that. The last thing I wanted to do was bring her disappointing news. I wanted to go to her with something worthwhile. I wanted to give her hope.

More than that, I wanted to give myself hope.

Sophie was who she was. And the little of what I'd learned about her was the opposite of who I was. She had a level of wealth I'd never hoped or dreamed to reach in my life. She had memories that made her happy; my past held nightmares I never wanted to relive or recount.

"I want to solve this case," I reasoned as I sat down in my chair again.

"Don't you want to do that with every case, though? What makes this one different?"

I could hear it in Nixon's voice. He already knew the answer to that question. Or, even if he wasn't entirely sure he was correct, he certainly had an assumption about why I was acting so much differently than ever before.

Even if I knew he'd see right through it, I lied when I said, "A car that's easily worth two million dollars has been stolen, Nixon. That's kind of a big deal, don't you think?"

He narrowed his eyes, his lips twitching. "Mmm, I don't think that's it, though."

"I'm just frustrated. There's not a single lead, and I've got nothing I can tell Sophie," I explained.

A full-blown grin broke out on Nixon's face. "Now we're getting somewhere."

"What are you talking about?"

“Don’t play that game with me. You know this is all about her.”

Of course, it was. I couldn’t tell him that, though.

I shook my head. “This is about having a client I can’t give any good news to about the whereabouts of a car that has a lot of sentimental value to her.”

“That’s part of the job, sometimes,” Nixon noted. “You’re great at what you do, Jax, but even you know it’s not possible to solve every case.”

He wasn’t wrong about that, either. But I couldn’t allow that to be what happened with this case.

I had to find this car.

“I have to find this car, Nixon,” I told him.

He nodded again. “I know you do. You want to find it, because you want her gratitude.”

“I’m not expecting anything from her,” I lied again.

“Why is that?” he wondered.

I shook my head, refusing to tell him the truth. I didn’t even like having to admit it to myself. There wasn’t a chance I was going to say the words out loud.

I needed to find the car, because it was the only chance I had. It was the only possible way I’d be able to get Sophie to feel something toward me. Maybe it wouldn’t be attraction, but maybe it could be appreciation. And if I was lucky enough to dazzle her with my mind, my skills, and my ability to find something that meant so much to her, maybe it would be just the thing I needed to get her to take another look at me.

“Because she’s a client, and I’m a professional,” I returned.

Nixon burst out laughing. “Yeah, okay. Like that has stopped anyone else who works here. What is it with the private investigators who work here? Royce also said he wasn’t going to get involved with a client, and look at him now. Married to Tarryn and loving every minute of it.”

I rolled my eyes and accidentally blurted, “Yeah, well, Sophie’s a bit out of my league.”

Nixon cocked an eyebrow. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t mean anything. I need to get back to work on this, so unless you’ve got some information you want to share...” I trailed off.

A lengthy silence ensued before Nixon broke it and said, “Wealth isn’t the only thing that matters. In fact, I’m inclined to say it doesn’t factor in at all when it all boils down.”

“Got it.”

Nixon threw his hands up in surrender. “Don’t shoot the messenger. I’m just saying, you’d be a fool to relegate yourself to being just the private investigator who got her car back for her.”

“Nixon, you haven’t even met this woman. You know nothing about her. I know almost nothing about her. How can you sit there and make statements like that?”

“Because a woman who can have this much of an effect on you isn’t something to just write off. The worst part about it all is that something tells me it would be her who suffers a loss she doesn’t even know about by not having you in her life.”

I sighed.

God, I wished that was the truth.

But from where I stood, there wasn’t anything I had to offer Sophie. Not yet, anyway. I needed to find that car.

I was just about to open my mouth to respond when I heard a knock at the door. My eyes went there at the same time Nixon twisted his neck to look behind him.

It was a good thing I was sitting down, because Sophie was there, and the sight of her would have knocked me on my ass, otherwise.

FIVE



Jax

Perfection.

There was no other word to describe her.

Sophie was standing in the doorway to my office, and if it weren't for the fact that I knew I was still alive and breathing, I would have thought I'd died and gone to Heaven.

She was an angel.

Curves and skin and that gorgeous face left me feeling momentarily lost and stunned. The dress on her body hugged her curves like a second skin, the scarf that seemed to be expertly tied around her neck covered the top swells of her breasts, and the boots she wore on her feet ended just below her knees, offering a glimpse of her toned thighs.

But it was her hair that did me in.

Fuck, it was gorgeous.

When I first met Sophie, her hair had been pulled back, away from her face. I'd suspected it was long, but I never imagined what was in front of me now.

It was long, falling several inches past her shoulders, just shy of grazing her elbows. There was so much of it. She had a mass of dark hair, full and wavy. Somehow, it looked like the combination of perfectly styled and effortlessly beautiful. It was entirely possible she'd spent substantial time fussing with it this morning, but it was also conceivable that she merely ran her fingers through it.

At that thought, my fist clenched. Would it feel as soft as it looked? Would she like the way it felt if I wrapped it around my hand and tugged on it to gain better access to her pretty mouth?

Damn.

Between the dress, the curves, and the hair, I didn't know where to look. I was vaguely aware of Nixon's eyes on me, but I refused to look at him.

Maybe Sophie wouldn't know what was going through my mind right now, but there wasn't a doubt Nixon would understand. He had Mallory, and he loved her to death. But that didn't mean he couldn't take one look at Sophie and easily understand why I was staring at her the way that I was.

I'd never seen anything or anyone more beautiful in my entire life. Days ago, I'd acknowledged my physical attraction to her, but that didn't come close to matching the pull I felt to her now.

Fuck, I needed to find this car.

It was then I snapped out of it.

"Sophie," I said, my voice giving away too much of my surprise and delight at seeing her.

Sophie remained standing in the doorway, looking a bit unsure of herself. Her eyes shifted away from mine, went to Nixon, and returned to me. "Oh, Jax, I'm sorry to interrupt. I didn't know you were busy. Avalon told me it was okay to come back here."

Before I had the chance to respond, Nixon stood, turned toward her, and said, "It's okay. I was actually just leaving."

As Nixon stepped away from the chair and moved in Sophie's direction, I said, "Sophie, this is Nixon Scott. He's Mallory's husband."

Surprise washed over her. "It's wonderful to meet you. I'm Sophie."

She extended her hand to Nixon, and I wanted to rip his head off when he engulfed her hand with his. Lucky for him,

he released it before I could even manage to stand up. “Likewise.”

Nixon held his arm out, gesturing to the chairs in my office, and urged Sophie to step forward. As she did that, he moved into the doorway behind her and shot me a knowing look.

“I’ll talk to you later, Jax.”

“Later, Nixon.”

I couldn’t miss the final look he sent my way as he pulled the door closed behind him.

When Sophie had finally settled herself in one of the chairs, I decided I needed to put all of my focus into being professional. The last thing I needed was for Sophie to think she’d hired some unethical sleaze to handle something so important to her.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you here today. What’s going on? Is everything okay?” I asked her.

She offered a small smile before her expression turned serious. “I assumed that not hearing anything from you meant you haven’t had any luck with finding my car.”

That was all it took.

One sentence proved I hadn’t been wrong to feel the way I had for the last several days. It told me I’d been right just minutes ago when Nixon was in my office. Sophie had been, understandably, waiting for good news. And now it seemed that she wasn’t exactly thrilled I hadn’t called to give her any. If anything, I’d left her feeling disappointed.

Time to man up and give her the truth.

I took a deep breath and rested my forearms on my desk, clasping my hands together.

“I wish I had something good to report, Sophie, but unfortunately, I don’t have anything like that yet. I did manage to locate the guy who stopped you outside of Grant’s Deli, and I’ve done quite a bit of research and surveillance on him.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “You have?”

Hating that I couldn't give her the news I had hoped to, I confirmed, “I have. And while it's possible there's something I've missed, I'm willing to say that I'm confident he's not involved. As uncomfortable as the encounter you had with him might have been, everything I've found so far tells me that he isn't the one.”

“Wow, I can't believe you've not only located him, but that you've already investigated him, too,” she replied.

Was she impressed by that? Or was it just wishful thinking?

“Yeah, fortunately, the cameras Nixon installed over at the deli made that easy for me. It just kind of sucks that I'm back to square one,” I returned. “I'm really sorry I don't have better news to report just yet.”

Sophie nodded her head. “As quickly as the car was taken from me, I didn't expect recovering it would happen overnight. Though, I will admit I'm worried that the more time goes by, the worse I feel about it ever being found.”

I didn't want to confirm her fears, but she wasn't exactly wrong in her line of thinking. As time went on, it was going to be more and more difficult to locate the car. Someone would have the time to alter it, paint it, or worse.

“I understand how you feel, but I want you to know that I'm not going to just give up on it, either. I'm determined to figure out what happened,” I promised.

“Well, that's kind of the reason why I'm here,” she said.

Damn it.

My body tensed.

I had this awful feeling she was going to tell me she didn't want me to work on the case any longer. Maybe she'd given up, or perhaps she'd found someone else she wanted to have investigate it for her.

Ignoring that fear, I dipped my chin and asked, “What's going on?”

“I thought of something,” she declared.

“What?”

“I was talking to one of my friends earlier about the car being stolen and how I’d hired you to try to find it for me, and she said something that made me think.”

Sophie paused a moment while she reached inside her purse. A moment later, she pulled out a card and held it out to me. I didn’t want to reach for the card that might have held the name of the new guy she’d hired to work on this case, but the expectant look on her face had me reaching out to take it from her.

“It might not be anything, but the guy on that card expressed interest in the car a couple of months ago,” she shared.

I reviewed the information on the business card. It was the contact information for a man named Joel Meyer.

“Do you know this guy?” I asked.

Sophie shook her head. “No. Well, not really. I met him once at a car show I’d taken the car to about six months ago.”

“When you say he expressed interest in the car, what do you mean?”

“He wanted to buy it,” she revealed. “I didn’t think much of it, because I’ve gotten that question before from people, and I know my dad spent a lot of time over the years turning down offers. In fact, there was another gentleman there that day named Kevin who happened to know my father. Even Kevin explained to Joel that I’d never get rid of the car.”

I was still caught up on Sophie being at a car show. She just didn’t strike me as the type, especially not with the way she looked right now.

“So, how did things end with Joel?”

“I mean, he didn’t get nasty or anything, but he seemed to think I’d eventually change my mind about selling the car. He gave me his card and told me to contact him when I was ready to sell.”

I tipped my head to the side and held the card up in front of us. “And you kept it all this time.”

“I wound up shoving it into my wallet that day, and I never took it out again until this morning.”

Nodding, I took a moment to consider this new information. If nothing else, it gave me something to work with. Of course, it was possible it'd amount to nothing. But if there was a chance this guy was involved, it was worth exploring. I had no other leads at this point.

Apparently, I'd taken too long thinking about my next move, that Sophie either got the wrong impression or grew impatient with me.

“I don't want to falsely accuse someone of something they didn't do, Jax, but I figured it might be worth mentioning this encounter, just in case,” she offered.

“It's okay, Sophie. I won't go accusing anyone of anything,” I promised. “Not yet, anyway. I'll look into this guy and see what I can come up with.”

She dropped her gaze to her lap in a move I thought made her look just as unsure and hesitant as she'd been when she was standing in the doorway.

What was going through her mind?

Silence filled the air around us, and it quickly grew awkward. For my part, I was too busy wondering what she was thinking. Sophie seemed like she had more to say and just couldn't bring herself to do it.

“Is there something else?” I asked, deciding it would be best to just open that line of communication. Maybe with that single question, it would give her the push she needed to share.

“Oh, um, no. No, that's all,” she said, rising to her feet. “I should probably get out of here, and let you get back to work. I'm sorry for just dropping in here. I can call next time, or well, you know, if anything else comes to mind.”

I stood, hating that she suddenly seemed so distressed and wanted to ease her concerns, and moved toward her. “It's

completely fine that you stopped in here today, Sophie. I was going to call to let you know about the guy from the deli, but I just didn't want to do that until I had some good news to give you along with it."

Her lips parted as I came to a stop in front of her, and her eyes roamed over my face. "You could have called me, even if it was only to tell me that guy wasn't responsible."

Right.

She wanted updates.

"I can do that moving forward," I promised, suddenly captivated by the scent of her. Damn. Why hadn't I smelled that aroma the first time I was around her? She'd probably been so distraught, and she never went about her normal routine that day.

But now?

Now I couldn't miss it.

The scent of her was intoxicating in the best way possible. Sexy, dark, smoky, and sultry. I didn't know how else to describe it other than to say standing next to her was like having a spiked hot chocolate right underneath my nose. There was a mix of cocoa, rum, and amber.

God, it was hypnotic.

Sophie gave me a slight nod and said, "Well, I should get going."

"You look like you're heading out on a date," I blurted.

Regret immediately consumed me. What the hell was I thinking, saying something like that to her?

"What?"

I was losing my mind. This woman had thrown me off kilter from the start, and now that she was here—all curves and hair and seduction personified—it seemed impossible to keep my cool.

Shaking my head, I apologized. "I'm sorry. I just... you're all dressed up. I shouldn't have said that."

Sophie dropped her gaze from mine and looked down at her body. When she returned her focus to my face, she explained, “Oh. Well, yeah, I kind of have a... lunch thing.”

I couldn't stop myself from assuming her lunch thing was actually a date with another guy. A pang of jealousy hit me in the gut.

Why did I hate that so much? What did it matter if she had a date?

I barely knew her.

And the reality was that as soon as I solved this case, no matter how much I wanted to believe it would get her to see me as someone worthy of her, Sophie would never look my way again.

The sooner I came to terms with that, the better off I was going to be.

“Okay. Well, I won't keep you. Thanks for stopping by with this information. I'm going to go grab some lunch myself, and then I'll get right on this as soon as I'm back,” I shared.

She hesitated briefly, something I couldn't read moving through her expression. Whatever Sophie was thinking, she never shared.

“That sounds great, Jax. I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me today.”

“It was not a problem at all,” I assured her.

“I'm glad. I hope to speak to you soon.”

“I promise I'll do my best to make that happen.”

With one final nod and an uncertain smile on her face, Sophie finally turned and walked out of my office. I watched her go, forcing everything in my body to remain rooted to the spot. If I didn't put my focus there, I was convinced nothing would have stopped me from chasing after her, dragging her back to my office, and bending her over my desk.

On that thought, I twisted my neck in the opposite direction and envisioned that very thing.

That thought of that woman with those curves and all that hair spreading her legs to take my cock had my pants growing tight around the groin. And the groan of frustration that came from somewhere deep inside me had me wishing she'd closed the door behind her when she left.



Sophie

A lunch thing?

Where the hell had that come from?

I didn't know what it was about this man, but for some reason, I became a bundle of nerves whenever I was around him.

Jax had indicated he thought I was going on a date, and I actually told him I had a lunch thing. Why would I have done something so stupid?

For someone who wanted to entice a guy to ask me out or show some interest in me, I was doing a heck of a job of making myself appear the exact opposite of single and ready to mingle.

He'd given me the perfect opening to invite him to join me when he said he was going to grab some lunch, too. I should have just extended the invitation and admitted the truth.

I had no lunch thing. I was going to drive myself home and wallow in self-pity.

I let out a frustrated groan and dropped my head forward on the steering wheel.

Yep. I was still parked in the Harper Security Ops parking lot, recalling just how unprepared and foolish I'd been.

Gripping the steering wheel tightly in my hands, I lightly tapped my forehead on the top of it.

Nadia had given me the best idea, and I hadn't successfully accomplished what I'd set out to do. Sure, I'd gotten myself all dolled up and gone to his office with that card, but I didn't actually believe that guy Joel was responsible.

I only wanted Jax to see me.

Not wanting this whole thing to feel like a complete waste of my time, I had to find the silver lining. I was surprised to discover there was one.

The one and only good thing that had come out of this was that I'd finally seen Jax for the first time since he left my house three days ago.

But as wonderful as that was, my mood quickly shifted again when I started to wonder just how long it would be before I'd get to see him again.

Given that he was a private investigator, I didn't think I'd be able to hide in the parking lot just to get a glimpse of him and not be seen by him or anyone else who worked here.

So, on that thought, feeling particularly downtrodden, I turned on my car and drove myself home to my big empty house.

It was crazy.

I was someone who had the ability and means to get myself whatever I needed, and yet, the one thing I wanted seemed to be completely out of reach.

Was I ever going to get the chance to fall in love, or was I destined for a life of loneliness?



Sophie

The sound of bells forced my eyes open, pulling me from my slumber.

What was that?

The room was dark, save for the light coming from the bedside table.

My phone. Someone was calling me.

Still out of it, I rolled to the side, reached for the phone, and slid my finger across the screen. As I lifted the phone to my ear, not paying attention to the name or number on the display, and fell to my back again with my eyes drifting shut, I answered, “Hello?”

Silence came through the line.

Having been woken by the call, my voice was still raspy from sleep. I assumed the caller hadn’t heard me and was about to offer a second greeting when I heard, “Sophie?”

My eyes shot open, darkness surrounding me.

No other words needed to be spoken. It was Jax on the other end of the line. Two days had passed since I went to his office to see him. Two days since I’d last heard his voice or seen his handsome face. This was the first means of communication we’d had since then, and it immediately struck me as odd, considering it felt like the middle of the night.

“Jax?” I responded.

“Yeah, it’s me,” he confirmed, sounding a bit out of breath and wide awake. “First, I want to make sure you’re home.”

“Yeah, I was sleeping, but I’m home.”

“And are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Is there some reason you think I might not be?”
I returned.

No sooner had I asked that question, it dawned on me. Jax wouldn’t have just called for no reason. Something was happening, and he believed I might not be okay. Suddenly, I was beginning to think I might need to change my answer, because I was feeling unbelievably tense.

“There was another break-in at your garage, and I’m currently tracking a car,” he answered.

I gasped and sat up in the bed, clutching the blanket to my chest. Fear and despair moved through me.

No.

No, no, no.

“Another car has been stolen?”

More silence came through the line, which didn’t lead me to feeling good things. Though it wasn’t more than a few seconds, it felt like whole minutes had passed before Jax revealed, “From what I can tell on this end, it was more than one.”

“Oh, God,” I rasped, my insides beginning to tremble. “Are you serious?”

My words were shaky, and Jax seemed to notice. “Sophie, listen to me,” he ordered.

I didn’t respond.

My fingers on one hand curled around the phone tighter, while those on the other hand gripped the blanket firmly.

“Sophie?” Jax called. “Are you there?”

“I’m here,” I whispered.

“Listen, I know you’re probably trying to process all this, and it’s making you upset, but I need you to make me a promise,” he begged.

Jax needed me to make him a promise?

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’m tracking the cars now, and I’m going to get them back for you. I’m making you that promise, but I need you to make me one, too.”

“Anything,” I told him, thinking that there wasn’t much he could ask me to do that I didn’t think I’d turn down.

I heard a door slam and the sound of an engine, indicating a car was coming to life. Then Jax asked, “Will you stay put?”

“What?”

“I need you to promise me you’re going to stay home,” he said.

I swallowed hard when I heard the uneasy edge to his tone. Jax sounded worried, concerned.

“I’ll stay home,” I assured him.

“And don’t go outside,” he ordered. “I know you probably want to head down to the garage to see what happened, but I’m asking you to promise me you’ll wait until I can get there and do it with you. I don’t want you out alone, in case these guys go back there.”

“I can stay inside,” I declared.

Jax didn’t immediately respond. I didn’t know if that was because he was busy driving somewhere or if he was trying to determine whether I was being truthful or not.

“Keep your doors locked and your alarm on,” Jax demanded. “Please do not go out. And if anything happens, if anything doesn’t feel right, you call the police.”

“Jax, you’re scaring me,” I admitted. “Am I unsafe right now?”

“I’m sorry, honey. I’m asking you to make these promises out of an abundance of caution. I want to tell you that you’re safe, but I don’t know what or who I’m dealing with.”

Honey.

In the midst of this awful situation, Jax threw out that word like it was second nature, like he’d been doing it his whole life. And hearing that single word from him helped to ease the tremors wreaking havoc on my body.

I remained silent for so long, wanting to hear him call me that again, that Jax took the opportunity to speak once more.

“I need to focus on what I’m doing to get this case solved, and I can’t do that if I’m worried about you making it easy for yourself to become a target,” he shared.

“I’ll get my dad’s gun,” I told him. “Just to be safe.”

“You know how to use it?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Following a beat of silence, he replied, “That’s good. Don’t go looking for reasons to use it. If something feels off, call the police. And if you wouldn’t mind, just send me a text to this number every ten or fifteen minutes to let me know that you’re alright. I won’t be able to respond, but it’ll help ease my mind. I’m going to be sending one of my guys over there to make sure nobody can get to you. He won’t come in. You probably won’t even know he’s there.”

“Okay.”

“I’m going to go, and I’ll reach out as soon as I can.”

“Jax?”

“Yeah?”

I had a million things I wanted to say to him, but I knew he had to go. So, I went with the one thing I thought was most important. “Please be careful,” I asked.

His voice was just a touch over a whisper when he responded, “I will be.”

“Okay,” I whispered back.

“Alright, Sophie. I’m going to hang up now.”

“Okay.”

A moment later, the line went dead.

For a few seconds, I sat there, continuing to hold my phone in my hand while I worried about Jax and if he’d be okay. Then I thought about how he was wide awake, knew my cars had been stolen, and was already on his way to hopefully recover them. My mind moved to the fact he was overly concerned about my safety, to the point he was going to have one of his guys come over and make sure nobody could get to me.

He was doing all of that, and I was sitting safely in my bed.

Whether he retrieved the cars or not, I had a feeling I was going to need to find a way to show him just how much his diligence meant to me.

On that thought, I did what I promised him I’d do.

I tossed the blanket back from my body, ran to my father’s gun safe, and pulled out the gun. Then I went back to my bedroom and sent Jax the first of many, many text messages. And with each one I sent, I couldn’t stop myself from wishing he’d respond, if only to let me know that he was okay.



Jax

Patience had always been a virtue of mine.

I didn’t rush.

I didn’t panic.

At least, not until I met her.

Now, I was sitting here in my truck outside of a warehouse—one that appeared to be abandoned—and I had no choice but to wait.

Because there was no other option. I'd tracked the location of two of Sophie's cars, and they'd led me here. But I was just one guy, and I wasn't quite sure exactly how many guys I was going up against. Since I didn't know what I would find once I got inside, going in alone wasn't an option.

So, I had to call in reinforcements.

On my way here, I'd called Forrest. He worked in the bodyguard and private security unit at Harper Security Ops. I gave him Sophie's address and told him I needed him to cover her place until I could deal with this and get back there.

Then I called Nixon, explained what was happening, and asked him to rally some troops.

I got here, gave them my location, and was watching the warehouse while I waited for them to arrive.

It wasn't easy, because I wanted nothing more than to get Sophie's car and close this case for her.

Thinking of her was the only thing that made the time in my vehicle more bearable. Then again, I'd been doing nothing but thinking about her ever since she stopped into my office a couple of days ago.

When I got the notification of the cars I'd put the tracking devices on being moved, my immediate concern was her. I wanted to believe she was fine and safe in her home, just like she'd been when the first car was stolen, but I refused to make assumptions.

So, I called, and hearing her raspy voice first thing in the morning saying my name nearly had me stopping in my tracks. Fuck, that sound had me thinking twice about chasing after the cars. I wanted to go to her, join her in her bed, and sink my cock between her beautiful legs just so I could hear that voice moaning in my ears.

It was a wonder how I managed to get the words out to ensure she was safe and communicate precisely what was

going on and what I needed her to do.

And now that I had nothing to do but sit and wait, I'd been hearing the phone buzz in the center console every ten or fifteen minutes with what I assumed were texts from Sophie. No matter how badly I wanted to look at them, I refused.

Because not only did I need to keep my focus on what was happening around the warehouse, so I wouldn't set myself or the rest of the guys up for an ambush, but I also knew that I'd be too tempted to respond to her. And if I did that, there was no question I'd set myself up for an even bigger letdown when this whole thing was over.

That, of course, was the other thing I had going through my mind as I waited for my team. Sophie's cars—at least two of them—were inside this building. I was willing to bet the Lamborghini was there as well. And if my suspicions were correct, this would likely be the last day I'd ever see or talk to Sophie. If I allowed myself to think too much about it, it put me in a bad mood.

Fortunately, it wasn't much later when I saw Royce, Nixon, and Jake pull up beside me in Royce's truck.

No sooner did we all get out and congregate behind mine when Royce asked, "What do we know?"

"I've tracked two of Sophie's cars here," I started. "I'd like to think the other one is inside that warehouse, too, but I don't have confirmation of that. Obviously, at least two people are involved. It's probably not a stretch to think there are more than that, especially because I saw three cars leave here not long after I arrived. They could have had multiple people in the cars, but it was too dark to make out anything. I don't know what or who we're walking into when we go in there."

"Alright, well, this sounds like it's right up my alley," Nixon declared.

"Yeah, and you know I'm always down for a fight," Jake added.

I couldn't help but let out a laugh. Being in the kidnap and ransom unit, it was safe to say Nixon was well versed in

walking into uncertain situations. Jake was a member of our self-defense and weapons training team. He was an expert shooter, and he could fight like nobody else. If we got into something inside the warehouse, I had no doubt about his ability to handle himself.

“Alright, let’s make our approach, check things out from all sides, and stay in contact,” Royce declared. “Nobody goes in until we know the lay of the land.”

And then there was Royce. Part of the private investigation team like myself, he was also the owner of Harper Security Ops. Getting the job done was important to him, but he also wanted to make sure we were all being smart about it.

With that, the four of us made our approach to the warehouse.

Our time in the military, instinctive nature in situations like this, and years of working with each other made it so we all just knew where to go and what to do with a couple of looks and hand signals.

The sun was just starting to rise, which was both a good and bad thing. On the one hand, we could see one another easier, but it also made us more easily seen by others. For the next few minutes, the guys and I surveilled the outside of the building, making note of the exits. There weren’t any cars parked immediately around the warehouse, so unless they were parked inside, I had hoped we might have been there alone.

Either way, we needed to be prepared.

Unsurprisingly, Nixon found an entry point that would allow us to gain access to the building without needing to break a window or shoot a door.

We got inside, and there was nothing.

No sound.

No lights.

“I think we’re alone,” I said, my voice just slightly over a whisper.

“Yeah, we’re clear on this side,” Jake returned.

“Same here,” Royce added.

Barely a second later, the lights went on. I braced and immediately scanned the space. Then I realized it was Nixon who’d turned them on, confirming we were the only ones there.

“Looks like you were right,” Nixon declared.

“Yeah,” I muttered, taking in the scene before me.

“It also seems like there’s something much bigger happening here,” Royce noted.

“How many cars did you say were stolen?” Jake asked.

“Three were taken from Sophie,” I replied.

“Well, the good news is that you’ve located them, right?” Nixon questioned me.

He wasn’t wrong. Sophie’s lime green Lamborghini, along with two of the others I’d put the tracking devices on were here. And from what I could tell, they hadn’t been tampered with.

But the bigger problem was that I had only anticipated finding Sophie’s cars here. I wound up getting so much more than I bargained for.

“This is your case, Jax. Where do you want to go with this?” Royce asked.

As my eyes continued to move through the space, I said, “I think we might need to call the police now.”

“Good call.”

“On it,” Jake declared as he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone.

At that point, I moved forward and started walking through the warehouse. And as I did it, I let the reality of the situation sink in.

While I couldn’t be absolutely certain just yet, I had an inkling I was standing in the middle of the home base for

something far worse than just the place Sophie's cars were being held.

Sure, I'd located her cars.

But that wasn't all.

Given I was surrounded by dozens of other exotic vehicles, one thing became clear. Somebody was rounding these cars up, and I had a feeling they intended to make a lot of money off of them.

SEVEN



Sophie

Hours.

So many hours had passed since Jax had called to check that I was safe at home.

Hours since I'd heard his voice. Hours that I'd been texting him every fifteen minutes to give him the peace of mind he needed to do what he'd been on his way to do.

I didn't mind.

I was happy to give him what he needed. Going into what I could only assume was a tense situation, I was willing to do anything to make it easier for him.

But it had been hours, and I hadn't heard anything from him. Not a word. He hadn't called; he hadn't sent a single text. Granted, he said he wasn't going to be able to do either of those things, but I truly hadn't believed it would have taken this long. Then again, it wasn't like this was my line of work to have any understanding of the amount of time necessary to complete the job.

This whole day had been awful.

I was beyond nervous, incredibly tense, and I couldn't manage to sit still long enough to even attempt to fool myself into believing I was calm and relaxed.

I felt a battery of emotions moving through me, and there was no question just how much guilt I felt. I'd been feeling that for what felt like weeks now. Initially, that guilt had been

mixed with despair over losing my father's car. He'd owned that car for years, and it seemed I was responsible for it for such a short time when it was taken.

But now, things were different.

After the day I'd had today, the guilt was about something else entirely.

Worry collided with the guilt I felt now, and it had everything to do with Jax. I hated that I'd pulled him into this mess. I didn't know what I'd do if something happened to him. There was no question I'd never forgive myself.

In the midst of all of my pacing I'd done today in between the text messages I'd been regularly sending to Jax, I'd decided that if things didn't go according to what I presumed was his plan today, I had a decision to make.

It was clear to me just how dedicated Jax was to his job, and I knew that unless I specifically told him to forget about this case, he wasn't going to stop.

After hearing him on the phone this morning, there wasn't a chance I could allow this to continue.

Jax had not only been going off to do whatever it was he intended to do to locate my cars, but he was taking precautionary measures to keep me safe. I think it said a lot about the kind of guy he was, and I just didn't have it in me to continue to expect or hope that he'd decide to let up on this case on his own.

And while I'd be devastated over losing something that meant so much to my dad, I'd never be able to live with myself if an innocent man got hurt attempting to find some of my material possessions.

So, it had to come from me.

Obviously, if he didn't ever call me to let me know that he was okay, I wasn't quite sure how I'd ever get the chance to put a stop to this.

It was at that moment my doorbell rang.

My body tensed as my head snapped in that direction. There was no way that could have been Jax at the door. I'd been texting him just like he'd asked, and he hadn't responded. Surely, he would have done that before he'd just show up here.

My initial thought was that it was the guy Jax had sent here to keep an eye on things, in case whoever had stolen the cars this morning happened to return. Was it possible that guy had received some communication from Jax or someone else from Harper Security Ops, and now he was going to fill me in on it? What if he was going to tell me that something had happened to Jax?

That was when another thought popped into my head.

What if Jax's concerns weren't unfounded, and some guys had come back here? Could they have attacked his coworker? Were they now coming for me?

Figuring it was best to be on the safe side, I grabbed my father's gun, which had been within reach ever since I got it this morning, and moved toward the door. I did it slowly, as though I was expecting someone to burst through it at any moment. Or maybe that wasn't it. Perhaps it was more that I didn't want whoever was on the other side to know that I was here, and I thought that if I crept over to the door, they'd never know I was inside the house.

I was only a few feet away when the bell rang again, followed by three loud raps on the door. "Sophie?"

I came to a halt and blinked in surprise.

I knew that voice.

Without thinking twice, I ran the remaining distance to the door and flung it open.

There he was.

Standing in front of me, seemingly whole and unharmed, was Jax.

I'd been consumed with anguish and despair for hours. I was willing to bet it not only could be felt by me throughout

every inch of my body, but it was also probably written all over my face and visible to Jax.

“I found some things that belong to you,” he said softly.

Then he shifted his body slightly to one side and revealed what he'd found. Sitting there in the driveway were all three cars that had been stolen. There was also a truck with a couple of guys standing around it, and I immediately assumed those men must have driven the cars back here with Jax.

My hand still firmly gripping the gun, I stepped out of the house, staring straight ahead. My eyes moved through the collection of cars in the driveway. They were all there, and they seemed to be in perfect condition.

Jax was standing beside me, and he hadn't been hurt.

A sound I didn't recognize escaped, and my free hand flew up to my mouth. Barely a second later, I felt Jax's fingers gently brush against the skin on my forearm as he took the gun from my hand.

That touch.

That one simple touch did me in.

Without thinking, I turned to face him and threw my arms over his shoulders, bursting into tears the moment I felt his arms come around me and hold me tightly.

“Thank God,” I cried, holding on to him in a way I knew I never wanted to let go.

“Shh,” Jax hushed me. “It's okay.”

My body trembled with the force of my sobs, and Jax didn't once loosen his hold on me. If anything, he attempted to offer more comfort.

With one arm still wrapped firmly around my waist, the palm of his opposite hand stroked gently up and down my back.

It took me some time, but I eventually pulled myself together. When I did, there was no choice but to loosen my hold and let him go.

I did, but that didn't mean I liked it one bit. Being held in his arms, even if I was consumed with emotions, left me feeling something more than just comfort. It gave me a hint of something I hadn't had in years, and I longed to keep it.

"Are you alright?" Jax asked when I took a step back.

Unable to look at him, I wiped at my cheeks and said, "Yeah. Yeah, I'm sorry about that."

"It's okay, Sophie," he assured me, his voice soft and sweet.

Once he said my name, I had no choice but to look at him. My eyes roamed over his face for a long time. I wasn't quite sure if I was still trying to come to grips with him actually being there and being okay, or if it was something else, something I didn't want to allow myself to think about.

Recognizing the fact that I couldn't continue to stand there in silence, I waved my hand out to the side and said, "I can only assume this means everything went well."

He nodded. "It did."

"Are you able to tell me what happened?" I asked.

"Yeah. So, basically, I tracked the two cars this morning to an abandoned warehouse just outside of Steel Ridge," he started. After I offered a nod of acknowledgment, he added, "I wanted to go in immediately, but knowing that multiple assailants were involved, I had to be smart."

Just hearing those few words, I was growing more and more concerned. Obviously, on some level, I knew what he had been doing was dangerous—I hadn't been able to settle myself down all day long worrying about him—but until he'd started making mention of assailants, I hadn't allowed the reality of the danger to penetrate.

My brain had just started to absorb those words when Jax began speaking again. Jerking his head in the direction of the truck that was also parked in the driveway, he shared, "I had a couple of my coworkers meet me at the warehouse, and the four of us made a plan to enter the building. I won't bore you

with the details of all of that, but I will tell you that what we found once we got inside was not what we expected.”

My eyes were riveted to him, my ears hanging on to every word he was saying. “What happened?”

He shook his head. “Nothing. We expected to find at least a handful of people inside, but it seemed they’d all left.”

“Oh, wow. That’s good, right?”

Jax’s lips twitched as he jerked his chin down. “Yeah.”

“So, then the Lamborghini was also in the warehouse,” I stated, assuming that had to be the case.

“Yes, but that’s the thing I kind of wanted to talk to you about,” he advised.

My brows pulled together. “What is?”

“Well, I think I’d like to put a GPS tracker on that car as well. I left a spare one in the garage, so that once we recovered the car, I’d have it there to install. At the time, I thought I’d be doing it mostly for peace of mind.”

“And that’s not the case now?” I asked.

“Now, it’s about being proactive,” he explained.

Shaking my head, I confessed, “I don’t understand.”

Jax sucked in a deep breath, which only allowed me some time to assess the situation. I had no idea what he was going to tell me, but I had a feeling it wasn’t going to be good.

“Your cars weren’t the only ones in that warehouse, Sophie,” he revealed.

My eyes widened in surprise. “What?”

Nodding, Jax explained, “There were at least a dozen other exotic cars there.”

I took a moment to let that news sink in, and I wasn’t sure I liked what I thought that meant. “Does that mean—”

“Yes. We’re relatively certain there’s a black market for exotic cars, and yours were just some of those targeted. We called the authorities in, but as of right now, there are no

suspects. I do need to grab the footage from the cameras outside the garage. Even if there are only two or three guys on the cameras, it'll be a good place to start, and hopefully we'll be able to identify them.”

“Oh my God, this is awful,” I declared.

He shrugged. “It’s not the worst of what I’ve seen and dealt with over the years, but it definitely raises some concerns about security moving forward.”

It wasn’t the worst of what he’d seen.

A shiver ran down my spine at the thought of Jax having been in worse predicaments. “Do you think I have to be concerned about them trying this again?”

Jax offered a sympathetic look. “I wish I had a solid answer for you, Sophie, but I don’t. My guess is that these guys won’t return any time soon, but we don’t know what their situation is right now. If someone else is running the show, someone who’s ruthless, there’s no telling what lengths people will go to just to save their own ass. Until we get confirmation that they’ve been apprehended, it’s better to play it safe.”

“That makes sense. I completely understand.” He looked away from me, and I noticed the guys were still there. “They’re waiting for you.”

He nodded. “It wasn’t easy, but I had to pull some strings to get them to release your cars to me. Since it’s an ongoing investigation, they’re technically part of the evidence right now. We work closely with the Steel Ridge Police Department, so they knew they could trust the promises I made to them. I had the guys bring the cars back here with me, but that means I need to hitch a ride back to that warehouse to grab my own car. Anyway, after the guys and I drive the cars down the garage and we get them back inside, I’m going to need you to promise you won’t take them out for a drive until we get the all-clear from the authorities.”

“I can do that.”

“Thanks.”

For a moment, I stared into Jax's handsome face. He'd pulled strings and made promises to law enforcement officials, so he could bring my cars back to me. It was enough to make me want to kiss him.

"We should probably head down there now," he suggested.

I shook my head and blinked my eyes as though trying to rid my mind of the thoughts I'd had of kissing Jax, and stammered, "Yeah, right, I'm sorry. Let me grab the key, since I don't know what the status of things is down there."

"Can I give you this back first?" he questioned me as he reached behind his back and pulled out the gun he'd taken from me. He held it out to me with the barrel pointing away from my body.

Nodding, I took it from him. "Thanks."

"No problem. Are you cool to follow us down on the ATV?" Jax asked.

I wanted to ride in the car with him. "Sure," I lied.

"Great, we'll meet you down there."

He didn't give me a chance to respond before he turned and walked down the stairs. I kept my eyes on him for a few seconds, watching him go, but once I realized his buddies were watching me do that, I turned and ran inside.

The next thing I knew, I had driven the ATV down to the detached garage and was opening the doors, so we could get the cars pulled in.

"How do you want these in here?" Jax asked.

"The Lamborghini first. Then the GT40 before the 427 AC Cobra," I told him.

Without delay, Jax and his guys pulled the cars in. Once they did, he said, "Sophie, this is Jake. You've already met Nixon, and that's Royce."

I offered a wave and a smile. "It's lovely to meet all of you. Thank you for helping Jax out with this."

“It’s not a problem,” Royce assured me. “We’re just glad your cars were recovered.”

“Sweet rides, by the way,” Jake declared.

“Thanks. My dad had great taste,” I replied.

Clearly not interested in entertaining any idle conversation, Jax said, “Alright, so I’m going to install the tracker on the Lamborghini quickly. Royce, do you want to grab the footage from those cameras?”

The guys immediately dispersed, Royce moving to get the footage while Nixon and Jake made their way back outside. Jax held my gaze briefly before he grabbed the spare tracker and went to the car.

And as he worked on that, I realized I could no longer avoid thinking about what I’d been avoiding all day long.

This was it.

Short of someone coming back here to attempt to steal one of the cars again and me needing to enlist his help once more, this was going to be the end of my interaction with Jax.

I wasn’t going to see him again.

It was then that I wished I’d taken the time to think about this before now. If I had, I might have been able to come up with some way to make sure I could see him once more. But I didn’t.

And now I was here, feeling the pressure, and couldn’t seem to think straight at all.

Before I knew it, long before I wanted it to happen, Jax moved in my direction and said, “We’re all set.”

I nodded and forced a smile. “Thank you, Jax. I really appreciate all of your hard work.”

He returned the smile, his seeming genuine, and replied, “You’re welcome. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to call.”

“I’ll do that. Thanks.”

With that, Jax's eyes roamed over my face once more, something I couldn't read lingering in his stare. "Goodbye, Sophie."

My throat was tight, and my voice was just a touch over a whisper when I replied, "Goodbye, Jax."

The next thing I knew, he was gone.

And once again, I was left with no hope of ever finding the happiness I wanted to find in a romantic relationship.

EIGHT



Sophie

This was either going to be the best decision of my life or the worst.

I was hoping the words my nonna had said to me a long time ago were true: the way to a man's heart is through his stomach.

It had been three days since Jax located my cars and returned them to me. Three days since I'd last seen or heard from him. Of course, I hadn't expected that I was going to hear anything, considering there was no longer any reason for that to be the case.

And it sucked tremendously.

Despite all that I'd done to try to distract myself—and I'd done a lot—I couldn't stop thinking about the way it felt when Jax touched my arm or when he held me tight to his body seconds later.

Since I believed I knew better than most just how short life could be, I decided I needed to take a chance. Maybe things wouldn't go the way I hoped they would, but I had to try. I was incredibly nervous, of course. Unfortunately, if I didn't do this, I'd regret it.

So, I took one deep breath in an attempt to prepare myself and get that final boost of confidence. Then I reached across the center console, grabbed the container, and exited my car.

Seconds later, I walked through the front door of Harper Security Ops for the third time in my life. On that thought, I felt another wave of confidence move through me. Third time's the charm, right?

No sooner had I walked inside when Avalon looked at me and said, "Hi, Sophie. You're back."

I nodded. "I am. You're probably sick of me by now."

She shook her head. "Absolutely not. Is everything okay?"

"Yes. Yeah, I don't have any actual problems or information for a case or anything like that, but I was curious if Jax was around," I explained.

"Jax?" she repeated.

I held up the container in front of me. "I wanted to give him a little something extra as a token of my appreciation."

Avalon's face lit up in a way I hadn't been expecting. "I think Jax just got back from lunch a few minutes ago. You're more than welcome to head on back to his office."

"I won't be interrupting him if I do, will I?" I asked.

She shrugged. "Even if you do, he's not going to care."

If she'd been trying to shock me, Avalon was doing a great job. I wanted to ask her if there was a specific reason she'd said that, but I wasn't entirely sure I wanted the answer. So, I gave her a nod and replied, "Okay. Thank you."

"Oh, you're welcome. Let me know if you need anything else."

I couldn't miss the look of utter delight on her face before I walked away. She seemed like a real sweetheart, but I had to admit her reaction left me feeling slightly baffled. Why did she seem so giddy?

Remembering the route to Jax's office, I left thoughts of Avalon behind me and focused on the task at hand. When I made it there, I knocked on the closed door.

"Come in," he called out from inside.

I licked my lips, turned the knob, and pushed the door open. Jax's eyes immediately met mine, but I didn't give him a chance to say anything. I closed the door behind me and held up the container. "Special delivery."

Jax seemed amused by my entrance as he stood and asked, "What's this?"

I held the container out to him and said, "It's just a small token of my appreciation for what you did for me. I wanted to find a way to tell you how grateful I am."

"Sophie, this is very sweet of you to do, but it really wasn't necessary. I know that you're grateful," he assured me as he took the container. "Would you like to have a seat?"

Relieved he was inviting me to stay, I nodded and moved to the chair as Jax made his way back to his on the opposite side of his desk. Once we were both seated, I shared, "I was actually going to ask you if I could take you out for dinner, but I thought you might think that was weird, so I decided to bring you some homemade cannoli instead."

"Homemade?" he repeated, his brows shooting up in surprise.

I smiled at him and confirmed, "Homemade."

"By you, at your house?" he pressed.

"Yes."

Seemingly impressed, Jax opened the container and looked inside. He didn't hide the fascination he felt when he saw what I'd made. "You made these?"

"Why does that surprise you so much?" I asked, after letting out a laugh.

With his head tipped to one side, his eyes roamed over my face. "I don't know. I just didn't picture you as the kind of woman who liked to bake."

It was at that point when I wished I wouldn't have asked. Because Jax's response was precisely what I didn't want to hear. It was becoming clearer and clearer just how much he'd judged me. If he already believed he knew what kind of

woman I was, he had to be basing his thoughts off of what he knew about me. Obviously, I had money. I was a product of generational wealth, and he hadn't really asked me when we had spoken to one another that day in the garage about what I liked to do in my spare time, so for all Jax knew and probably believed, I was just a spoiled rich girl.

I allowed the feeling of disappointment to move through me for just a few seconds before I decided I wasn't going to accept that.

I didn't want to call him out on it, but I intended to have fun proving him wrong.

"Well, if you try these and like them, my tiramisu is to die for," I fired back. "And as great as my desserts are, they don't even come close to the Italian dinners I make."

Jax blinked in surprise, a small smile playing on his lips. He reached into the container and took out a treat before holding the container out to me.

I shook my head. "No. I made those for you."

"And I appreciate it very much, but I want to share them with you," he returned.

When he put it like that, I couldn't say no. So, I took one out, held it up, and grinned at him. I could have sworn I saw Jax's body freeze for a moment as something I couldn't read washed over his expression, but it was gone so fast I thought I imagined it.

A moment later, Jax and I took simultaneous bites. No sooner did he sink his teeth in, he moaned. Even if I wouldn't come right out and gloat, I didn't make the effort to hide my smile.

Once he swallowed his first bite, Jax immediately took another. Only after he swallowed the second bite did he speak. "This is incredible. I'm really impressed."

"You shouldn't have underestimated me," I advised.

Nodding slowly, he replied, "You're right. I'm sorry. But I'm also really glad I was wrong."

Jax took another bite, swallowed that, and asked, “What else did you say you could make?”

Victory.

I was one step closer to getting in there with this guy. And when he ate my desserts like he was, looking and sounding the way he did, I absolutely wanted to get in there with him.

“I only mentioned the tiramisu by name, but that’s really just scratching the surface,” I answered. “If it’s Italian food, I can make just about anything you could ever want.”

“Where did you learn?”

“My nonna.”

Jax’s brows shot up, silently questioning me. When I didn’t elaborate, he asked, “Is that your grandmother?”

I let out another laugh. “Yes.”

There was a beat of silence as Jax assessed me once more. Then he said, “I don’t have an Italian grandma, but I’ve got to believe that if you’ve got one who gave you cooking lessons, you’ll never go hungry.”

“It’d be an impossibility.” Jax swallowed the last bite, opened the container, and grabbed another. Seeing that, I said, “If I knew you were going to eat them all in one shot, I would have made more to last you for a few days.”

“Ah, I’ll save the rest, but you couldn’t honestly expect me to eat just one of them,” he returned. “So, this nonna. Does she live here in Steel Ridge?”

Something warm moved through me at hearing Jax call my grandmother nonna. And it was good that he’d done that and given me that feeling, because my response was going to make me feel a bit sad. “She doesn’t. She lives in Italy,” I shared.

“Oh, wow. So, you’ve visited before, I assume?”

“My dad took me there every summer as far back as I can remember. We’d stay for a few weeks, and I always had the best time there.”

Jax gave me a nod of understanding before he asked, “When was the last time you went there?”

“It was summer, one year before my dad died.”

“Shit, Sophie, I’m sorry. I didn’t think,” he immediately apologized.

I loved hearing the concern in his voice, but more than that, I loved that Jax and I were having this conversation at all. He could have easily taken the cannoli and sent me on my way. Or he could have not accepted them at all.

That he was willing to take time out of his workday to sit and have a conversation with me about my Italian heritage, especially after the way he grew quite distant before he left my house a few days ago, meant the world to me. I liked knowing he could just go with the flow and accept my impromptu visit.

Not only that, but he wasn’t rushing me out the door, either. Of course, I knew I couldn’t just stay here all day—despite how much I might have wanted to. But there was no denying how great Jax made me feel.

And for that reason, I didn’t want him feeling bad about something he didn’t need to be. “It’s really okay. I’m not upset.”

“So, are you planning to go back?” he asked.

“To Italy?”

“Yeah.”

I shrugged. “I really want to, but I’m just not ready to. I always went with my dad, so the idea of making the trip alone is just a bit too much for me to consider right now, even if I know that my family will all be there for me when I arrive.”

Jax studied me for a long time, the silence stretching between us. I didn’t know if I had said something that made him uncomfortable, but I squirmed under the intense scrutiny of his gaze.

Finally, after what felt like hours, he asked, “Do you think you’re struggling to go with someone else, since it’s something you always did with your dad?”

I shook my head. “No. No, I think if I knew I’d have someone with me, I’d make the trip.”

“And you’re telling me you don’t have anyone willing to take the trip with you? Not even your boyfriend?”

Now, it was my turn to stare at him in silence. Jax had just asked me about a boyfriend. He wouldn’t have done that if he wasn’t interested in knowing whether one existed, right? Because Jax could have easily asked about whether I had a friend that could go on the trip with me, and he didn’t.

I didn’t want to get my hopes up, but it was a little difficult not to. Maybe nonna was right, and the cannoli had worked.

“I’d have to have one of those before I could convince him to take a trip with me,” I shared.

A small smile formed on his face as he sat back in his chair. “I see. What about your friends?”

That smile.

It had to mean something.

He was happy to know there was no boyfriend. I was absolutely certain of it.

“My best friend got married a few years ago. There’s not a single doubt in my mind that she’d go with me, but she and her husband just got back from a trip, and they’re living in Texas right now, anyway. Logistics of planning that trip wouldn’t exactly be easy. Plus, even if I know she’d go with me, I don’t suspect Nadia will want to leave her husband for several weeks. And in my opinion, if you’re going to visit Italy, you can’t go for just a handful of days.”

“That makes sense.”

“Yeah.”

The silence stretched between us again for a few moments, and I was beyond curious about what was going through Jax’s mind. A big part of me was hoping he was sitting there trying to pluck up the courage to ask me out on a date. Considering I’d already mentioned I wanted to take him out for dinner but

decided to bring him dessert instead, I figured that had to be enough of an indication that I was interested.

When too much time passed without a word from him, I knew the window had closed. If he hadn't asked by now, Jax wasn't going to, and I couldn't continue to sit there, wasting his time and my own.

Feeling a bit disappointed, I took a deep breath and said, "Well, I should probably get going and let you get back to your work."

Jax seemed a bit caught off guard, like my voice had interrupted some deep thoughts he'd been having. Should I have waited just a bit longer to give him the chance to speak first? I'd never know now. "Right. Yeah, I should probably get back to it here," he said as he stood.

Jax rounded his desk, and by the time he'd made it to the opposite side, I had stood and moved away from the chairs.

He closed the distance between us and said, "Thanks for stopping by today, Sophie. It was nice to see you."

"It was my pleasure, Jax. It was great seeing you as well."

This was it.

I knew we hadn't had an official date or anything like that, but this felt much like the end of one. And to say it was beginning to feel awkward would have been an understatement. Not only that, but it also felt like one of those dates where both parties seemed to be well aware that another one was not in the cards.

That didn't seem to matter to me.

I realized this was my last chance.

If I'd done this, making it clear I wanted to keep this connection to him, and he didn't take the hint and do something about it, I knew I wouldn't be able to continue trying. I wanted a chance to get to know him better, but I still had my dignity. And maybe Jax wouldn't be downright rude to me by telling me to leave and never come back, but I'd be

nothing more than a fool to continue to be the one who made all the moves.

So, if he wasn't interested, I had no choice but to move on.

But before I did that, I wanted to feel it one more time.

I didn't know how he'd react to it, but I was going to go for it anyway. I lifted my arm up in a move that could not be mistaken for anything other than what it was and stepped forward. I wrapped an arm around him. "It was really nice talking with you today, and I'm glad you enjoyed the cannoli. I'll give Nonna your stamp of approval the next time I talk to her," I promised, trying to remain upbeat as I hugged him.

Jax let out a laugh, both of his arms coming around me. "That sounds great. I promise the remaining cannoli won't go unappreciated."

God, it felt so good to be in his arms. I didn't want to let go, but I knew if I held on much longer, I might not ever release him. And then things would really get awkward.

"Take care, Jax," I said softly after loosening my hold and stepping back.

"You, too, Sophie."

I offered a small smile and a nod in return.

And a moment later, I walked out the door.

I had intended to ask him about the case and whether he'd heard any news, but I wound up forgetting until after I was already out of his office. Going back now was no longer an option. So, if it got to the point where there was news to share with me on that, I hoped Jax would take the opportunity to reach out to me.

Truth be told, I was hoping he'd reach out just because he missed me.

NINE



Jax

I could still taste the dessert.

It had been two days since Sophie stopped into my office to bring me cannoli—cannoli I went on to finish later that same night after I'd had dinner, dinner I ate alone.

I still remembered every bite I'd savored from the desserts she'd unexpectedly brought.

Then again, there wasn't much about her I didn't remember.

I could recall the taste of her cannoli, the words she'd said to me, and the feel of her body against mine when she hugged me for the second time ever.

The woman was doing a phenomenal job of continuing to shock me and throw me off balance.

That was what happened the first time she'd hugged me, but I could easily understand why she'd done it then. Sophie was overcome with emotion at seeing her father's cars back at her house, where they belonged. Understanding what he meant to her, knowing they were his prized possessions, her reaction to seeing them made sense.

And I loved what I got out of it—the opportunity to touch her, to have her gorgeous body pressed tightly against mine.

After that day, I'd been struggling. In fact, the battle I'd been waging started just before I left her place that day. As happy as I was to have gotten the cars back for her, I hated it at

the same time. Because that meant she wasn't going to need me any longer. I'd have no reason to communicate with her, and the likelihood of her ever wanting to speak to me again was slim.

Or, so I thought. I hadn't expected to see Sophie ever again, and yet, two days ago, she waltzed right into my office with a container of desserts.

I knew she believed she was showing her gratitude by taking the time to make the cannoli for me, but the truth was that the greater gift for me was being able to see her and talk to her again.

And I didn't hesitate to talk to her, no matter how much she affected me, because I wanted to know everything about her. The more I learned, the more surprised I was. Nothing that I had presumed was the case with her wound up being accurate. All of my assumptions being wrong was a great thing, too. Because over the last two days, I started to think that perhaps I stood a chance.

I hated that it had taken me so long to figure it out. Unfortunately, when Sophie hugged me before she left my office a couple of days ago, it threw me.

She hadn't been overwhelmed by something traumatic, so I never expected her to initiate the hug. And just like the first time she'd done it, I relished every single second of it. But considering I had already been trying to come grips with the fact that she had been there at all, when she hugged me, it became impossible for me to do and say all that I should have said, all that I wanted to say.

Now that I'd had some time to think about it and replay our conversation over and over in my head after she left, I came to one conclusion.

I had to let her know it wasn't weird.

She brought me desserts because she thought I wouldn't have agreed to going out to dinner with her, and nothing could have been further from the truth. As it was, I spent an

unreasonable amount of time trying to work out how I could ask her out on a date.

Because even if I didn't want it to be the case, there was still that doubt lingering in the back of my mind. How would a woman like Sophie ever be interested in a man like me?

It seemed I was about to find out if that was a possibility. I was going to do something about it, and I was going to hope for the best.

I lived with enough regret in my life; I didn't need to add to it.

It was Thursday evening, and I'd just left work. I had considered calling Sophie, but I quickly decided against it. Given that she'd randomly dropped in to see me at work on two occasions, regardless of her reasons for doing so, I figured it was only appropriate I do the same.

Once I pulled into her driveway, I thought I'd start to question what I was doing.

I didn't.

From the moment I first laid eyes on Sophie, I was attracted to her. Talking with her the day I'd installed the cameras in her garage and the trackers on the cars, that attraction went a little deeper. But after she showed up in my office and had a conversation with me, I knew this woman was the one I wanted. Maybe she wouldn't want me back the same, but I refused to reconsider my decision to approach her now.

Before I knew it, I was standing outside her front door, hoping she was home. It was about thirty seconds after I rang the doorbell when I heard the sound of her lock.

A moment later, Sophie had pulled the door open and was staring at me with a look of disbelief written all over her face.

I probably should have found a way to speak immediately, but I couldn't. I needed to take a few seconds to come to grips with how adorable and effortlessly sexy she looked all at the same time.

All that gorgeous dark hair was pulled back away from her face, a few loose strands having escaped from the confines of the band holding the mass of it loosely in place. She had some mascara on, but otherwise, her face was free of makeup. On her legs she wore a pair of loose-fitting lounge pants. It was what she had on her torso that had me fighting every urge inside me, begging me to drag her into my arms to kiss her. She was wearing a formfitting shirt beneath a slightly oversized open-front cardigan.

Nothing was particularly special about the outfit. It was what was beneath it that had captured my attention.

Sophie wasn't wearing a bra, and with the cardigan open and hitched back from the angle of her arm holding the door open, the light blue shirt beneath left little to the imagination. One of the things I knew for certain, the October air had Sophie feeling a bit of the chill.

Her nipple was hard, straining against the fabric, and even if I knew it had nothing to do with me standing there, there was no question I had desperately wished she was instantly turned on at the sight of me.

Not wanting to come across as a total creep, I forced my eyes away from her chest, focused on her face, and smiled at her. "Hi, Sophie."

She returned the smile. "Hi, Jax. What are you doing here?"

Immediately, I lifted the empty container between us. "I wanted to get this back to you."

Sophie took the container from my hand at the same time she declared, "Oh, you didn't need to bring this back to me. I have about a million of these things."

"That's not really the reason I came here," I revealed, seemingly prepared to cut to the chase.

Her entire expression changed. She went from being carefree to something else. Hopeful? Concerned? I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Studying her expression, I searched for an answer. Was I going to wind up making a fool of myself by doing this?

I found no answers, and with Sophie looking at me expectantly, I had no choice but to just go for it. “It’s not weird.”

Confusion washed over her face, marring her features. “What?”

I cleared my throat, something about being in her presence making it impossible not to be affected by her. “When you came to my office the other day, you said you had wanted to take me out for dinner but thought I might think it was weird. I’m here to tell you that I don’t think it’s weird at all.”

Sophie’s gorgeous lips parted in shock, and her breathing changed. I couldn’t help but notice the increased pace of the rise and fall of her chest. “What are you saying, Jax?”

Smiling at her, hoping she wouldn’t freak out completely when I answered, I replied, “I’m saying I’d like to come back here tomorrow around six o’clock to pick you up and take you out for dinner, Sophie.”

For the first time since she opened the door, Sophie stepped away from it completely, allowing her cardigan to fall back into place. When she was a matter of inches away from me, she asked, “Are you serious?”

“I am.”

Her eyes searched my face as she bit down on the corner of her lip. Seconds passed, and she finally asked, “Why do you want to take me out?”

I hadn’t been expecting that question. The shock and surprise I understood, so confirming that I’d been serious about wanting to take her out made sense. Asking me why I wanted to take her out wasn’t something I had been anticipating her asking me. Did she already have an idea in her mind as to why I’d want to take her out?

Figuring it was best not to leave anything up to chance or interpretation, I decided to be honest with her. “Because I like you. Because I enjoyed having a conversation with you in my

office just a few days ago. Because I loved the cannoli you made. Because you are absolutely stunning. And because I've had a hard time not thinking about you ever since you walked into Harper Security Ops weeks ago."

Sophie's lips had parted somewhere in the middle of my declaration, and by the time I finished speaking, her jaw was practically on the ground. She was in utter disbelief, and I found that to be not only amusing, but ludicrous.

It seemed impossible to me that this woman didn't know just how extraordinary she was.

I watched as she closed her mouth, opened it again, and closed it once more. It was obvious she was searching for the right response to my words and having a hard time finding them.

Ultimately, she said, "You're joking with me."

I shook my head, my lips twitching. "Not in the least. Why would you think I'd make that all up? Does it seem that unbelievable?"

Sophie tore her gaze away from me, her eyes moving toward the landscaping surrounding her house. I don't think she was focused on any one thing outside. She just couldn't keep her attention on me as she allowed herself to process what I'd just said to her. I was happy to give her the time to do it, because it meant I got to study her for longer. I watched the way the corners of her eyes narrowed and the way she scrunched up her nose. I saw the way the corners of her mouth tipped up slightly and the light in her eyes when that happened.

When she dropped her head back a touch to look at me once again, she finally answered, "I'm so used to people judging me before they get to know me, and they generally don't have very good thoughts."

Wanting to be honest with her, I confessed, "I wouldn't say I had specific thoughts about you that were bad, but I certainly didn't do this sooner, because I was convinced you'd never give me a second glance."

Her brows pulled together, forming a crease between them. “Why?”

“You’re gorgeous and sophisticated. You’re sweet and inspiring. You’re everything that I’m not, Sophie,” I explained.

“You’re crazy, do you know that?” she fired back, humor laced through her tone.

“At least I’m something,” I teased.

Shaking her head, Sophie took one more step forward, touched her fingers to my arm, and said softly, “You’re mistaken, Jax.”

I swallowed hard at the feel of her gentle touch on my skin. “About what?”

Her fingers pressed in, a feeling I liked far too much, as she smiled and shared, “Just because you think you don’t have the same qualities as me doesn’t make you any less worthy. And it certainly doesn’t take away from who you are. You’re handsome and intelligent. You’re strong and determined. You’re a lot of things that I’m not.”

Something squeezed in my chest.

I barely knew this woman, and at that moment, I knew she was a woman I wanted to have in my life.

My voice was thick with emotion when I asked, “Are you going to let me take you out tomorrow, Sophie? Are you going to let me learn more about the woman you are?”

Her lips formed into a smile. “Only under one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“You have to give me the same opportunity to learn more about the man that you are,” she returned.

I’d tell her anything she wanted to know. I was an open book as it was, so if there was something Sophie was curious about, she didn’t have to worry I wouldn’t share it with her.

Instead of telling her that, I grinned and asked, “Will six o’clock be alright for you?”

“Six o’clock is perfect for me.”

Nodding, I said, “Okay. I’m going to go now, before I do something inappropriate.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Like what?”

“Like kiss that beautiful mouth of yours before I’ve taken you out on a proper date,” I answered honestly.

She shivered. Then Sophie took that opportunity to lick her lips, a move that forced my eyes to them, before she rasped, “Okay.”

At that, no matter how much I didn’t want to, I took a step back, turned, and moved toward the stairs. When I got to the bottom of them, Sophie called, “Jax?”

I stopped and looked back. “Yeah?”

“How should I dress for tomorrow?” she asked.

Unable to stop myself, my eyes roamed down her body and back up again. Then I asked, “Do you remember what you were wearing when you came into the office to bring me that business card?”

“Yeah.”

A mischievous grin spread across my face. “If you wear something like that, I promise it won’t go unappreciated.”

She bit her lip again, this time in an attempt to stifle a grin. It didn’t work. “Prepare yourself to be pleased, handsome.”

Jesus.

This woman.

Maybe she was right.

Perhaps I had gotten it all wrong.

Because from where I was standing, she was perfect for me.



Sophie

There was nothing, absolutely *nothing*, that was going to put a damper on my mood.

All day long, I'd been trying to stop myself from jumping for joy.

I was so excited for tonight. It was a wonder I'd gotten any sleep last night.

Tonight, I was going out on a date with Jax. Just the thought of it had me wanting to dance around the room.

To say I'd been surprised to open my door yesterday and find him standing on the other side would have been an understatement. Two days earlier, I'd been feeling so disappointed after I left his office, and I was convinced he wanted nothing to do with me.

Now, I knew that wasn't the case.

I'd replayed our conversation from yesterday over and over in my head throughout the day today.

He'd said so much to me, and I loved all of it, even if some of it broke my heart. Because at least I was able to share some truth with him. And best of all, although he'd shared some heartbreaking words, it gave me some insight as to why he held himself back when I was convinced there was a mutual attraction between us.

All dressed up and ready to go on our date tonight, I kept looking outside. This was the adult version of being like a kid

on Christmas Eve, too excited for Santa's arrival to fall asleep.

I couldn't wait.

As much as I was looking forward to going on this date, I was even more excited for the date to end. Not because I wanted it over with or because I didn't want to spend time with Jax. I merely wanted to get what he'd promised: a kiss after he'd taken me on a proper date.

I had no clue how I was going to wait until Jax brought me back home. Would he think I was crazy if I jumped him while we were out to dinner?

No matter how many times I asked myself that question, no answers came. And at that moment, I looked out the window for what had to be the eighty-fifth time and saw Jax's car pulling up in front of the house.

I did not hesitate.

I was far too excited.

Maybe he would think I was nuts, but it was better for him to draw that conclusion now.

I moved to the door, yanked it open, and stepped outside just as I saw the door on his vehicle open. Standing there at the top of the stairs, I couldn't miss the way my body trembled with anticipation.

Jax exited his car, looked up toward the house, and spotted me.

I had expected him to close the door and walk my way.

He didn't.

Jax simply stood there, staring at me. I was puzzled by his inaction for a second, but then I realized he was having a reaction to seeing me all dressed up. The only question remained whether it was a good one or not.

But it seemed I was about to get my answer.

Because the next thing I knew, Jax slammed his car shut and started prowling toward me, like he was a hunter, and I was his prey. He was so focused on me, on the dress and my

body, that I don't think he even managed to blink his eyes once.

Jax climbed the stairs and came to a stop in front of me, something dark and intense swirling in his eyes. I was beginning to think Jax liked my dress.

It was emerald green and long-sleeved, with a neckline that plunged down so low between my breasts, it could only be described as daring. I didn't have a bra on, and with ample breasts, there was a healthy and enticing amount of cleavage on display. The skirt of the dress was ruched down the sides and hugged my hips and thighs in a way that showed off every curve. The only piece of jewelry I wore with it was a diamond choker around my neck.

"I'm sorry," Jax apologized.

Confused and slightly concerned by his reaction, I jerked back. "Why are you sorry?" I asked tentatively, praying he wasn't going to cancel our date.

"I told you I wasn't going to do anything inappropriate until I took you out on a proper date, but I can't wait," he replied.

My lips parted as he reached out, snaked one arm around my waist, and drove the other into my hair. He tugged my body toward his and angled my head, so I was looking up at him.

"I need to kiss you now, Sophie," he whispered.

His reaction, the way he was holding me and the desire in his eyes, had my belly trembling uncontrollably. "So, what are you waiting for?" I whispered back.

Jax's fingers pressed in at my hip just as his mouth dropped to mine. Nothing about his kiss was gentle. It was wild and possessive, rough and claiming.

I loved it.

I loved the way he hummed against my lips and the way he held my body close.

I loved the way he tangled his hand in my hair and the minty taste of him.

I loved the way his tongue dueled with mine and the moan that bubbled up from somewhere deep inside me.

Most of all, I loved the feeling of him hard between us.

By the time Jax tore his mouth from mine, we were both panting and out of breath.

“Do you like my dress?” I asked.

He growled, actually growled like an angry bear. “Fuck, Sophie, I’ve never seen a woman so goddamn sexy in my whole life. The dress is gorgeous, but it’s nothing without you. Jesus, I don’t know how I’m going to make it through dinner.”

“You aren’t the only one who’s going to struggle,” I revealed.

Jax smiled. “That only makes me feel marginally better.”

One of my hands that had been pressed against his chest slid up the side of his neck and back into his hair. I urged his mouth toward mine, Jax making it easy on me. After pressing a chaste kiss to his lips, I whispered against them, “The sooner you take me out and feed me, the sooner you can bring me back here and kiss me again.”

Jax gave me another peck on the lips as his arm around my waist gave me a squeeze. Then he loosened his hold and urged, “Lock up.”

So, that’s what I did.

I grabbed my purse and keys, then locked up.

And before I knew it, the date continued into its next phase of awesomeness.

After opening my door for me, Jax got in behind the wheel and started up his truck. No sooner had he done that, he reached across the center console for my hand. He linked his fingers through mine and drove the entire way to the restaurant without letting go even once.

In fact, not only did he not let go, but he also stroked his thumb back and forth along the skin on the back of my hand. I wondered if he realized he was doing it, because at the same time, he'd been discussing the restaurant he was taking me to.

Our conversation throughout the remainder of the drive had been related to the thing that had put us in each other's lives to begin with. I was curious, so I asked Jax if he'd heard about any new developments in the case. There hadn't been any news reports that I'd been made aware of, and nobody had called me about it, but I figured since he was closer to all of the investigative stuff, he might have heard something.

He hadn't, and as far as he knew, no suspects had been apprehended.

Before long, Jax and I had arrived at the restaurant, and he didn't hesitate to walk around to open my door for me. I loved seeing the contrast between how he'd been when we were standing outside my house—possessive and slightly untamed—to how he was being in public—caring and courteous. It led me to having thoughts about how he might be when we were alone, in private, with nowhere to go.

Once we were seated and had perused the menus for our dinner selections, Jax and I stared at one another for several minutes, exchanging looks of hunger that had nothing to do with needing to eat food.

Eventually, I broke the silence.

“Will you tell me something?” I asked.

“Sure.”

I waited for more, but nothing came.

Shooting him an expectant look, I pressed, “So...”

“I thought you had a specific question,” he replied.

I shook my head. “No. I was just wondering if you could tell me something about you. Even though we haven't spent a lot of time talking to one another, I feel like all of it has been spent with you learning all kinds of stuff about me. I don't

know much about you beyond the fact that you're a private investigator."

Jax thought for a moment before he shared, "Well, like you said, I'm a private investigator. Considering my job, you might think I'm uptight, but I'm rather laidback and like to take each day as it comes." He held up his arms and twisted them back and forth, so I could see the front and back of them. "I've got a bunch of tattoos, I'm not strict about the food I eat, and I have an appreciation for the life I have, considering I had an awful experience when I was enlisted."

I loved how Jax had given me a bunch of random information about himself. While I wanted to dive into all of it, I couldn't help but focus on the last bit of what he said. "I didn't know you were enlisted. What happened?"

"We were over in Afghanistan, and we got ambushed. I was one of three men who just barely survived it. All of my closest buddies were killed that day," he shared.

My heart ached for him, and something cold settled in my belly at the thought of him barely surviving. Granted, if he had died, I would have never met him or knew that he existed, but now that I knew him, now that he'd kissed me, I just couldn't imagine not ever meeting him. "I'm so sorry, Jax. I didn't mean to press you about it."

He shook his head. "It's okay. While it's not pleasant to think about, I also don't shy away from talking about it. I find that it reminds me not to waste any of the opportunities I have, because those guys will never have that chance."

"I'm glad you've found a way to turn something that has got to be painful into something positive."

"Life is filled with moments that can lead us to feeling disappointed, or even worse. The way I see it, we can either roll over, accept defeat, and be miserable, or we can find a way to turn it into something uplifting or useful."

I smiled at him, because for a guy who thought we were so very different, it seemed Jax and I had at least that much in common.

Before I could respond, our waiter arrived with our dinner salads. After he left, Jax declared, “So, I’ve got a question.”

“Okay.”

“What’s this thing about you, a set of stairs, and your teeth?”

It was strange that I knew exactly what he was talking about without understanding how he knew to ask what he had. I dropped my fork back to the plate, sent him a questioning look, and asked, “Just how good are you at your job?”

“What do you mean?” he countered.

“What I mean is that you know this random thing about me, and you could have only learned that by investigating me. Although, I’m still confused, because what could you have possibly investigated to get information like that?”

Jax looked at me like he thought I was crazy while he chewed and swallowed a forkful of his salad. “Are you serious?”

“What?”

“Sophie, honey, did you forget about all the text messages you sent to me?”

As soon as he asked his question, it all came rushing back in my mind.

Jax was referring to the day he’d asked me to text him every fifteen minutes, just to give him the peace of mind that I was okay while he was tracking my cars and attempting to recover them for me.

At first, I’d just sent him messages indicating that I was fine, or that I was still alive. But after a while, those texts started to feel redundant and boring.

While Jax had requested the texts and indicated he wouldn’t respond, as more and more time passed, fear crept in. I thought if I started asking him questions, maybe he’d find a moment to respond, which would at least give me some indication that he was okay and hadn’t been harmed in any way.

Sadly, he never replied, and after he'd returned with my cars that day, I had assumed he never wound up reading the texts I'd sent.

I loaded up my fork with my salad and shoved it into my mouth as I tried to recall everything I said to him. While I knew what I'd said as it related to this, I was trying to remember just how much I'd shared.

No matter how hard I thought or the fact that I'd taken another bite of my food, I couldn't manage to remember any specifics. At that, and with no salad left to distract myself with, I realized I had no option but to respond.

"It got boring sending you messages that were just me telling you I was still alive," I defended myself.

His lips twitched. "I could tell. The conversation took a turn in there somewhere."

"I can't believe you actually read those texts," I sighed.

"Why wouldn't I? You sent them," he countered.

"Well, you never responded."

Something moved through his expression, perhaps a wave of regret. "I was focused on what I was doing at the time I asked you to send them, but trust me when I say, I was paying attention to the buzz of my phone against my leg every fifteen minutes, telling me what was most important at that time. You were safe, and that was all that mattered. I didn't actually read any of what you sent until after I'd left, retrieved my car, and gone back home."

"And now you think I'm crazy?"

Shaking his head, the look on Jax's face indicated he was happy. "Absolutely not. I've never been so amused by a one-sided conversation in all my life. I was just curious now how the conversation veered off in the direction it had."

I licked my lips, recalling just how panicked I'd been that day. Though I knew he was okay and sitting across from me now, my emotions still got the best of me. I took a sip of my

drink in a futile attempt to alleviate the strain in my throat. “I was scared,” I rasped.

The amusement was gone from his face in a split second. “Scared about what?”

“I was afraid you were going to get hurt or something worse was going to happen to you,” I started, just as our waiter came back and collected our salad plates. When he took off again, I continued, “So, I had to do something to occupy my mind and tell myself I was being crazy. That’s why I started telling you about my irrational fears.”

Jax’s features softened as his eyes roamed over my face in a way that made it seem as though he was trying to figure out if I was real or a figment of his imagination. “Is that why you hugged me?”

“What?”

“When I finally made it back to your place that day, you walked outside and stared at the cars in the driveway before you turned toward me and threw your arms over my shoulders. I thought you were feeling emotional about the cars.”

I shook my head and confessed quietly, “I was relieved to see you’d gotten them back, but my reaction was the result of spending hours worrying that something bad was going to happen to you.”

Jax reached out and covered my hand with his. After giving me a reassuring squeeze, he promised, “I’m very good at what I do, Sophie. Things can happen, but I make every effort to be smart. That said, I can’t tell you how good it feels to know you were worried about me like that.”

I couldn’t ignore the comfort I felt by simply having his hand on mine. I wasn’t sure why, but it was more reassuring than the words he’d given me. “If you hadn’t recovered the cars, I was going to tell you to stop the search,” I revealed. “What happened that day put everything into perspective for me.”

“Lucky for us, I found them. Now, honestly, I want to hear about this irrational fear you have,” he declared.

I pressed my lips together as the heat of embarrassment hit my cheeks. “I’m horrified I’m going to trip and fall going up a flight of stairs, and I’ll smash my face so hard against them when I go crashing down that I’ll either break a bunch of my teeth or lose some of them completely.”

Jax studied me for a moment before he reasoned, “I don’t think that’s an irrational fear. I feel like most people would be afraid of having that happen.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “To the point they think about it happening every time they climb a set of stairs?”

He tried to stifle his laughter. It didn’t work.

“See? You think I’m nuts,” I declared.

Jax lifted my hand up, kissed the back of it, and returned, “I think you’re perfect.”

The sweet gesture mixed with his words caused my belly to dip. The more he looked at me, the more he talked to me, and the more he put his lips on me, I stood no chance of not envisioning what might be ahead for the two of us tonight.

God, it had been so long, and Jax was doing a heck of a job building the anticipation and desire for me.

“And I think you’re incredibly sweet,” I remarked.

Just then, our waiter reappeared with our entrees. After setting them down and confirming we didn’t need anything else, he took off. And that was the point at which our conversation segued into something else.

Because I wanted to know more about the things that made Jax the man that he was, I asked him to tell me more about the work that he did and how Harper Security Ops operated. He’d given me a very brief rundown before, but throughout dinner, I’d learned a lot more. Not only had I learned about the technical aspects of his job, but Jax had also shared some stories about a couple of his coworkers with me, stories about how some of them had come to find themselves in their current relationships.

That had been something that had me intrigued. Because after learning that they'd all wound up with their significant others after there had been some stressful, horrific, and tense situations, I wondered if he believed we were being brought together in the same way and would have a similar happy ending.

Before I knew it, we'd finished our meals, and our waiter returned. "How was everything?"

"Wonderful," I replied.

Looking between Jax and me, he asked, "Can I interest you in any dessert tonight?"

Jax began nodding, but I said, "Not tonight. Thank you."

Following a nod of understanding, the waiter said, "I'll be back with your check shortly."

When he walked away, Jax asked, "You aren't interested in having any dessert?"

"I am."

"So, why did you decline?"

Grinning at him, I shared, "I thought since you were bringing me out for dinner, I'd make dessert. I have something waiting for us back at my place, if you'd like."

His face lit up. "I'm definitely interested in whatever you've made."

"Lemon ricotta cake," I revealed.

"Ricotta? You mean, ricotta cheese?" he pressed.

"Jax, I'm Italian. Ricotta cheese is like a staple ingredient in my house, and I promise it makes the cake so moist, sweet, and delicious."

He threw his hands up in surrender. "You're the expert. I trust you."

I giggled, and a few minutes later, our waiter returned with our bill. Jax paid, and before I knew it, we were back at my place, where I was pulling out plates for our dessert.

“So, what do you think?” I asked after he’d taken his first bite.

Instead of responding, Jax put another bite in his mouth. I watched, trying to read the look on his face, but he gave nothing away. Only after he’d swallowed his second bite did he answer. “This is excellent, Sophie.”

“Yeah? You like it?”

He nodded, swallowed another bite, and confirmed, “I love it.”

Feeling glad, I decided to let Jax enjoy the rest of his cake in peace. When he finished, I asked, “Would you like another slice?”

“I want to say yes, but I should probably say no.”

Smiling, I stood, took his plate, and grabbed him another slice.

Once again, Jax and I ate in silence. Though we didn’t speak, Jax and I were still aware of one another in the room. Each time he placed another bite of his cake in his mouth, he looked at me. I couldn’t read his expression, but it was clear he had some thoughts running through his mind.

We eventually finished our desserts, and I asked, “Can I get you anything else? Would you like a coffee?”

He shook his head. “No, thank you. I’m good. The cake was delicious. Now I just need to work out whether I like the cake or the cannoli better.”

I couldn’t stop the laughter from escaping. “I’m so glad you liked it.”

He smiled at me, and things got a little awkward between us. I’d had such a great time with him, and I didn’t want the night to end on a sour note. In fact, I’d had such a good time, I wanted to be certain we could do it again. I just needed to be sure he was interested.

“So, what did you think?” I asked.

Confusion instantly washed over him. “It was delicious, Sophie. I already told you that.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m not talking about the cake. I was wondering about me. Do you like me? Would you be interested in seeing me again?”

“Is that a serious question?”

My eyes darted back and forth as I tried to figure out what I could have possibly been missing. No matter how hard I searched, I couldn’t find anything, so I replied, “Uh, yes?”

“I had a fantastic time with you tonight, and I like you a lot. Nothing would make me happier than to see you again.”

My belly flipped, and my heart began pounding wildly in my chest. He liked me, and he wanted to see me again. I felt like I’d just won the lottery.

“Can I cook for you?”

“What?”

I shrugged. “If you don’t have any plans for next Friday, I’d love to have you over for dinner. I’ll cook for you.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Didn’t you say your meals were even better than your desserts?”

Nodding my head slowly, I confirmed, “I did.”

“I’d love to come over on Friday for dinner.”

I perked up, and my body was practically bouncing with delight. “Perfect.”

With that out of the way, relief settled in, and desire started to build. In the looks we exchanged, I was convinced our night was about to get a whole lot better.

But I couldn’t have been more wrong.

Several beats of silence passed before Jax announced, “Well, I should probably get going.”

“Oh, no. Really?”

I hadn’t wanted to sound so devastated, but he’d caught me completely off guard. If he liked me and wanted to see me

again, why was he ready to leave?

Jax initially hesitated to respond, his eyes lingering a long time on my face, but ultimately answered, “Yeah, I think so.”

“I thought you might want to stay for a little while,” I said, doing my best to sound seductive.

Something shifted in his expression, and his features softened. “I really appreciate the invite, but I think it’s time to call it a night here. I’m looking forward to seeing you again next weekend, though.”

Well, that was that.

We’d had a wonderful evening together; it was the best night I’d had in years. Jax claimed he had a great time with me, but he obviously wasn’t interested in prolonging our night together tonight.

No matter how much I wanted him to stay, no matter I didn’t want to be alone, or that I had hoped he’d want to sit beside me on the couch and make out, he’d made things clear, and I had no choice but to respect that.

So, I stood up from the couch a bit faster than I probably would have in any other situation. “Right. Well, thank you for dinner, Jax. It really was a lovely night.”

He stood, something else moving through his features, and after taking a few seconds to assess me, he asked, “Will you walk me to the door, so I can kiss you before I leave?”

A shiver ran down my spine.

Judging by the look on his face, Jax didn’t miss it.

Eager to get his mouth back on me again, even if I was disappointed it seemed that was all I was going to get, I turned and moved toward the door.

Once there, Jax effortlessly pulled me into his arms. With my body pressed tight to his, my palms flattened against his solid chest, I watched as the corners of his mouth tipped up in a smile.

A moment later, his mouth was descending on mine as his free hand drove into my hair. The next thing I knew, the sound of Jax's groan mixed with my moan as his lips captured mine. His lips were so soft, yet so demanding. And mine easily succumbed, giving him whatever he wanted to take.

As Jax kissed me, his tongue sweeping into my mouth, I found it impossible to ignore everything else. The scent of him held me captive, and the way he hugged me tight to his body left me feeling desired.

The only thing that had me questioning everything was the feel of him hard between us. Jax evidently liked kissing me and holding me. I couldn't miss the way his fingertips pressed in on my hip.

With the physical attraction obvious between us, I couldn't begin to understand why he wouldn't want to take things to the next level.

Long before I wanted it to happen, Jax begrudgingly tore his mouth from mine. His grip tightened in my hair as he rested his forehead against mine. "God, you're so fucking sexy."

"You could stay," I offered, figuring he seemed to be struggling enough with going that I might have been able to convince him to stay.

He touched his lips to mine in a chaste kiss, pulled back, and said, "I'd love nothing more, Sophie. But I really need to go."

Well, I tried.

"I understand," I lied.

At that, Jax released me and turned to open the door. He stepped through, turned back, and gave me one final kiss. "Goodnight, honey."

"Goodnight, handsome."

The next thing I knew, Jax was gone.

And I spent the rest of the night wondering if Nonna had any recipes for desserts so seductive, the man would never

dream of walking out the door.

ELEVEN



Jax

I felt the familiar buzz of my phone against my leg just as I was about to get out of my car to head into work.

I wasn't necessarily against receiving communication from anyone on any given day, but now, I was finding that I actually looked forward to that feeling.

Because it meant that Sophie could have been reaching out to me, and there was nobody in the world I wanted to hear from more than her, especially first thing in the morning.

It was Monday, a few days after I'd taken Sophie out for dinner and had the best date of my life.

Now, I was back at work, and if I knew anything, it was that I was going to pull out my phone and see a text there from her.

Sure enough, it was just as I suspected.

SOPHIE

What's been the best part of your day so far?

A smile automatically formed on my face. There was no easier question she could have asked, so I quickly tapped out a response.

JAX

Receiving that message from you.

SOPHIE

No offense, but that sounds kind of boring.

The smile on my face turned to laughter. How had I survived this long without having this woman in my life?

JAX

It's still early. What's yours?

There was an extended pause before I even saw the bubble pop up with those three dots to indicate she was preparing her response.

SOPHIE

Waking up just a few minutes ago and touching myself while I thought about you.

Jesus.

This woman was going to kill me.

She had to know what she was doing to me. From the moment I pulled up outside her place to pick her up for dinner, I'd been in a perpetual state of shock.

For as long as I lived, I knew I'd never forget getting out of my truck and seeing her standing there in that fucking dress.

The last thing I needed to do now was to start thinking about how unbelievably sexy she looked that night. I already knew how beautiful she was, but I never expected that dress or the confidence she had wearing it.

I loved it.

And now she was doing this to me. Telling me about waking up and touching herself while she thought about me.

I didn't know what was wrong with me. If I had wanted to take things to that next level with Sophie the night I took her out to dinner, I could have. I held myself back for reasons I couldn't even begin to think were smart now.

What was my reason for wanting to be noble?

Was it because I liked her too much?

That made no sense, especially when Sophie seemed to have no issue with taking that step. I saw the flicker of disappointment in her eyes that night. And considering she seemed hellbent on turning me on at every chance she got, I was starting to regret not giving in and giving us both what we wanted that night.

I had no choice but to play this game with her now, so I sent her a response.

JAX

I never thought you'd be such a troublemaker.

SOPHIE

Me? You started it with all that stuff two nights ago.

She couldn't be serious.

JAX

Did you forget about that dress? How much torture did you expect me to take?

SOPHIE

None. I loved your reaction, but if you were going to kiss me, you could have made it so neither one of us was left feeling frustrated.

The last thing I wanted was for Sophie to feel any measurable level of disappointment with me. And I knew that once we took that step, it was going to be better than she was probably expecting. So, the best I could do now was make promises I intended to keep.

JAX

What if I promise to make Friday night the best night of your life?

She didn't hesitate to respond.

SOPHIE

That sounds nice.

For a moment, I considered my options. I could leave it at that and follow through later in the week. Or I could play with her a bit and make it that much more enjoyable for the both of us.

I decided to go with option two, so I tapped out another response.

JAX

Okay, but there's one condition.

SOPHIE

What is it?

JAX

You can think about me all you want this week, but you're not allowed to touch yourself. The next time you come, I want to watch.

Sophie didn't respond, and I knew I'd already started winning this game with her. Wanting her agreement, I sent another text.

JAX

Are you good with the terms?

SOPHIE

Are you serious?

JAX

Promise me you won't touch yourself, Sophie. I want to be the one to make you come next, and if you wait, I promise to make it happen repeatedly.

SOPHIE

Repeatedly?

She was doubting me. Time to kick things up another notch.

JAX

Yep. Using my fingers, my mouth, and my cock. Now, do I have your word?

I was gripping my phone so tightly; it was a wonder I didn't manage to crush it. Waiting for her response was a modern-day version of torture.

Or so I thought.

Because Sophie seemed to know exactly what to do to make sure I'd spend the week suffering just as much as her. She sent me a selfie. It was her, in her bed, looking sexy as hell and like she'd just been freshly fucked. I knew that wasn't the case and that she'd only taken care of herself minutes before, but it still didn't change the fact that I didn't want her looking like that unless I was there to make it happen.

Beneath her picture was one final text.

SOPHIE

I promise I'll be good.

"Fuck," I muttered as I took a few more minutes to sit in my car and stare at her picture.

I didn't know how I was going to make it through the week. Friday couldn't get here soon enough. So much about

this woman was unexpected. There was so much I hadn't anticipated, and I loved it.

Best of all, I was convinced I'd barely scratched the surface of all that made up Sophie Belmonte.

On that thought, I let out a deep sigh and made my way into the Harper Security Ops office building.

Suffice it to say, I struggled to get through thirty minutes of work without needing to pull out my phone to look at her.



“Are you still being a good girl?”

Ever since Sophie had used those words, it seemed it was all I could think about. The thought of her being my good girl was a nice one, even if it felt like the cruelest form of torture.

It was Wednesday evening, and I'd gotten home from work just a little while ago. Ever since we'd made the plan to get together this weekend, I had considered making an impromptu visit to Sophie's place. I figured she wouldn't mind, and the two of us could relieve some of the tension that had built up between us.

But I ultimately decided against it. In the end, I figured it would pay off in a big way for us if we continued to let the sexual tension build.

And that wasn't hard to do when Sophie and I either texted throughout the day or made the effort to talk on the phone in the evening. One way or the other, we hadn't missed a single day or opportunity to connect.

Tonight, I'd decided to have a conversation over the phone. I wanted to hear her voice.

“I have,” Sophie replied. “But it hasn't been without a little bit of struggle.”

“What does that mean? What’s been happening?” I questioned her.

There was a brief moment of hesitation before she shared, “I think about you all the time. I think about a lot of stuff, but I seem to recall the moments when you were kissing me the most. And that’s a huge turn-on. So, I’ve been doing things every day to keep myself busy. Unfortunately, it’s miserable having to get out of bed the second my eyes open, so I can make it.”

I chuckled. “You’re making your bed, so you’re not tempted to crawl back in?”

“Yes and no. I mean, I always make my bed as soon as I get up. That’s not the problem. It’s that I know if I allow myself to linger there for too long, I won’t be able to stop my hands from venturing into places they’re not allowed to go right now.”

As had happened several times since she’d revealed the truth to me on Monday, the vision of Sophie masturbating in her bed while thinking of me danced in my mind. I intended to live out the reality of watching that at some point, but the fantasy I had in my mind wasn’t necessarily a bad one.

It would have been easy to embark on this journey with her now over the phone, but I had a feeling I’d wind up feeling only more sexually frustrated. So, I decided to focus on something else she said instead.

“Wait. Are you serious? You always make your bed as soon as you wake up?” I asked.

“Yeah. Don’t you?”

If she was at my place right now, she’d see that my bed was precisely how I’d left it that morning when I got out of it. “Not usually.”

“Oh my God. I could never,” she gasped.

I laughed at the sound of her surprise. “What? This has to be a joke.”

“It is not,” she insisted. “I can’t go on with my day until I’ve made my bed. Are you honestly telling me you just get up and get moving?”

Sophie’s tone indicated she was horrified by what she was learning. “I’m honestly telling you that.”

“So, you *never* make your bed?” she pressed.

“I do. Just not always, or even regularly. When I change the sheets, I make it then. And I occasionally will make the effort on the weekends when I don’t need to head into work. But for the most part, it’s really not a big deal to me.”

Silence came through the line for several beats before I heard what seemed to be bordering on a full-on meltdown. “Tell me you do the same thing with your dishes,” she ordered.

Confused, unsure what she meant, I asked, “What about my dishes?”

“Do you go to bed at night with dirty dishes still in your sink?” she interrogated me.

God, I loved the sound of her so riled up over something so insignificant. “Well, I wouldn’t say I go out of my way to leave dirty dishes in the sink, but it does happen. Why?”

“Oh my God,” she murmured.

I couldn’t help myself. I burst out laughing. “This is really causing you some distress, isn’t it?”

“Just a little,” she admitted.

This was more like what I’d expected.

When I first met Sophie, I had envisioned her being a bit more uptight about things. And up to this point, she’d really surprised me. Especially when it came to showing just how much she was looking forward to the two of us taking that next step between us. I never thought she’d be as forward as she was about it.

Hearing her reaction now, knowing she was the way I’d imagined her to be about things that really didn’t matter, was not only amusing, but I also found it endearing.

“Didn’t I tell you that you were everything I wasn’t?”

“Jax,” she returned, her voice sounding a bit wounded. “You didn’t say that about stuff like this. You were saying it about stuff that was much more important.”

And that right there was all I needed. “That’s good to know, honey.”

“What is?”

“That you believing I’m a slob, which I’ll do my best to impress upon you, is not actually the case, isn’t a deal breaker for you.”

“Hey, if this thing between us goes the distance and we wind up in a committed relationship, it won’t upset me if you don’t make the bed in the morning or clean up the dishes at night. We’d be a partnership, a team, and as far as I know, not everyone on the team can play the same position, right?”

She was perfect in every way imaginable.

We’d had one date, a few kisses, and not quite a full week of getting to know each other over the phone and through text messages. That was all, and she was already thinking about a future together and how to make it work.

I didn’t think there was anything I wouldn’t do to see to it that Sophie and I had that future.

“You’re absolutely correct.”

“Good. But maybe just so I know exactly what I’m getting myself into, would you mind telling me what other things you don’t like to do that should always be done?”

Another laugh escaped.

And a moment later, I went on to tell her all about the things I believed she’d mark as awful, unhealthy, or horrible bad habits.

It was the most ridiculous conversation I’d ever had in my life, and I couldn’t have enjoyed it more if I’d tried.



Sophie

When his name came up on my phone's display, I felt my heart flutter.

I'd never experienced this kind of excitement over getting a phone call from a guy, but it seemed that was all that had been happening for nearly a week now.

To say I'd been disappointed when he'd taken me out on our date and didn't push to take things to the next level would have been an understatement. But there was no question now that he'd made the right choice. He obviously knew what he was doing.

I was captivated by this man, loving everything about the way he made me feel.

After sliding my finger across the screen, I held the phone up to my ear and said, "And to think I thought you were going to let a day go by without reaching out to me."

"You're crazy if you think that would have been possible. I'm fighting to not call you more frequently."

Instant swoon.

It seemed impossible to have this kind of connection with a man so soon after starting to get to know him, but it was there. Though I'd felt a pull to him from the start, there was no question it had all been physical then. What I felt now went well beyond that. It was about the man I was getting to know, and the more I learned, the more I realized there was so much more to him to be attracted to.

He had a confidence about him, not just in the work that he did, but in the way he carried himself and spoke to me.

The way he was, the way he seemed to have no problem entertaining my crazy conversations, meant everything to me.

“Well, other than fighting that urge, how was your day today?” I asked him.

“It wasn’t bad. I think a big part of the reason for that is knowing what I get to do to you tomorrow.”

And then there was that.

Jax excelled at making me feel comfortable and at ease no matter what we were doing or talking about, but he was also capable of turning me on with just a handful of words. All he had to do was hint at what was in store for me, and I was turned on.

This had really been the only source of contention for me. Because I had craved having something physical with Jax right away, and he was content to hold back just a bit. Fortunately, even if I felt like he was testing the limits of my self-control, Jax made it so waiting wasn’t the least bit boring.

Wanting to tease him back, I countered, “I really hope you’re planning to follow through with all these promises you’ve made. Do you have even the slightest idea what you’ve done to me all week long?”

“You haven’t touched yourself, though, have you?” he asked.

I wanted to.

God, I’d wanted to.

“No, but if you keep talking to me the way you have been, I’m not sure I’ll make it,” I informed him.

His soft laughter came through the line. I couldn’t stop myself from smiling at the sound. “Alright. So, let’s talk about something else then,” he suggested.

I thought for a moment. “We’re approaching the end of the year. What is the biggest lesson you’ve learned this year?”

“Wow, somebody’s getting philosophical on me.”

There wasn't much I wasn't willing to try, especially if it meant I wouldn't need to spend another night trying to distract myself from the growing ache between my legs.

"Not really. I merely want to know if there's something you know now that you didn't when the year started?" I reasoned.

"Okay. Well, I don't know that I can say it's something new that I've learned, but there's definitely been a lesson that's been reinforced," he shared.

"What is it?"

"Life is short. I think I've made it clear I've known that for a very long time, but it's been really reinforced this last year. Some of my coworkers dealt with circumstances in their personal lives where the women they loved were in immense danger. If that wasn't bad enough, another coworker lost his wife this year, only a short time after they'd gotten married."

Maybe I should have reconsidered my discussion. This was awful. "I'm so sorry, Jax."

"Don't be. It's horrible. All of it. But it also reminds me to be thankful in my own life. What about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Is there some big lesson you've learned this year?"

Without hesitation, I answered, "Yes."

"I can't wait to hear it."

There was no missing just how eager he was to hear what I had to say. I loved the interest he showed in me.

"I've learned two things. The first is that it's okay to go after what I want."

"That sounds interesting," Jax noted. "What do you mean?"

"Well, there are things I've wanted for a long time, but it wasn't until recently when it felt right to go after them."

And that was the truth.

Just as I'd said to Nadia recently, I had been worried I was feeling the way I did about Jax because I was desperate for love and affection. She made me realize that what I was feeling was what so many other people feel, too. Wanting what I wanted, especially after feeling so alone for so long, it was okay to take charge and find a way to get it.

"And did you get them?" Jax asked.

My lips twitched. "I'm still working on that, but it looks promising."

There was an extended silence on the other end of the line, and I had a feeling Jax understood what I'd been referring to the entire time. Instead of commenting on that, though, he asked, "What's the second thing you've learned?"

I laughed. "That no matter how hard I try, the second there's a chill in the air, I'm always going to turn on the heat. It feels too early to have it on, but I couldn't stand it. I was freezing."

"Is it safe to assume you prefer the summer?" he pressed.

"No. I mean, I love summer, but that doesn't mean I despise any other season. I just don't like feeling like I'm freezing," I explained.

There was another pause before he declared, "Then I've got a big cozy hoodie with your name on it when I come over."

Something tightened in my chest.

Jax wanted to give me his sweatshirt. I was no longer a teenager in high school, but at that moment, I certainly felt like one.

"Some would say that's something only a boyfriend would do for his girlfriend," I declared.

"Maybe I'm interested in making that happen," he fired back, his voice having dropped a couple of octaves.

Okay.

Yep.

I'd officially lost the ability to keep this conversation from entering dangerous territory that would ultimately lead to me squeezing my legs together all night long in hopes of finding some relief.

Realizing it wouldn't be fair if I was the only one struggling, I allowed my voice to get quiet, too. "If that's the case, I'm looking forward to all the ways you plan to warm me up, especially after I feed you."

Jax groaned.

I smiled proudly.

And for the next thirty minutes, the two of us stayed on the phone with one another, doing everything we could to work each other up through innuendo.

I had a long night ahead of me, but at least I'd finally be able to find some relief in less than a day.

TWELVE



Sophie

When the doorbell rang, the excitement I'd been feeling ratcheted up a notch. I'd been a bundle of nerves all day today.

Because it had finally arrived.

It was Friday evening, and Jax and I were having our date night at my place. I'd cooked a dinner that I hoped he was going to love, and Jax had been teasing me all week about the night he had planned for us.

So, I was certainly ready for the night to begin.

And since I'd just finished setting the table for us, Jax's timing was perfect.

I moved to the door, opened it up, and didn't even have a chance to say a word before Jax stepped inside, captured my face in his hands, and planted his lips on mine.

Sweet relief.

There was nothing better than the feel of his lips pressed firmly against mine as he held my face in his hands.

Or, maybe there was. But I hadn't experienced it just yet. Perhaps tonight, Jax would show me what I'd been missing. I didn't know how I'd survive it if he made me wait again, but I assumed that wouldn't happen, since I had kept the promise I made him earlier in the week, Jax seemed like a man of his word.

When he pulled his mouth back, he rested his forehead against mine and said, “I’m really surprised you weren’t waiting outside for me when I pulled up.”

I had a feeling Jax knew precisely the effect he had on me. I mean, it wasn’t as though I’d done a very good job of hiding it. Earlier in the week, I came right out and shared just how much I’d been thinking about him, and Jax didn’t seem the least bit bothered by using that information to his advantage.

I was doing the best I could to give back as good as I was getting, but sometimes, it was difficult. I was drawn to him in a way I hadn’t been drawn to any man before him.

“Oh, don’t you worry, Jax. I was busy finishing up in the kitchen, but I’ve been looking forward to your arrival tonight.”

His lips formed into a knowing smile before he pressed a chaste kiss to my lips. When he pulled back and released the hold he had on my face, he took in my entire appearance. “You look really nice for dinner at home.”

I cocked an eyebrow, tilted my chin up to the side, and held one finger out to him. “We might be staying in tonight, but this is still a dinner date. I’m not cutting any corners.”

“It should be noted that your efforts are appreciated,” he said.

That was nice to hear. I hadn’t gone as seductive with tonight’s look, but it was still sexy, and I hoped later, he’d see exactly what kind of surprise I had in store for him with my outfit selection. I was wearing a burgundy-colored wrap dress that hugged my curves nicely, crossed at my chest, and landed just above my knees.

“I hope you’re hungry.”

His eyes darkened. “Starved.”

Smiling at him, I reached out for his hand and said, “Come with me.”

Then I led him through the house toward the dining room.

“Wow, you went all out for this, didn’t you?” he asked, marveling at the sight of the table with the lit candles.

I stopped moving and turned myself in his arms, a place I was learning was one that I liked being in a whole lot. “I wanted it to be perfect.”

With one arm wrapped firmly around me, Jax lifted the other to the side of my face, where he gently stroked the back of his finger down my cheek. “You’re here, so it already is.”

God, this man.

He could send shivers down my spine with just a single look. With a gentle caress on my cheek like that, it was a wonder I was still standing. And it made me more eager to see what tonight would bring. Jax had made me a promise, and he didn’t seem like the kind of guy who was interested in breaking promises.

“Dinner first, handsome.”

“What can I do to help?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing. It’s all ready. I just need to bring it in. You can have a seat.”

“I don’t mind carrying something in,” he offered.

Smiling, I replied in the most seductive voice I could muster up. “I appreciate that, but I’d like to serve you tonight, Jax.”

The arm he had wrapped around my waist tightened just a touch before he released me.

A few minutes later, I was sitting down to eat with Jax. He was seated at the head of the table, and I was in the end seat on the left side of him. We were close enough that we could have held hands all throughout dinner. While I didn’t suspect we’d do that, I loved how intimate it felt.

“This looks incredible,” Jax said before he’d even taken a bite.

“Thanks. I hope you like it all. Everything is homemade.”

He chuckled. “I hope I can fit it all.”

Admittedly, I’d gone a bit overboard. Then again, I’d learned from the best, and that was how Nonna had always

done it. Even when it was just Dad and me here, I cooked big meals. My hope was, one day, the table would be filled not just with the guy I had started talking to and me, but that it would be my husband, my children, and my in-laws. I wanted that. I wanted the big, loud family, so I could cook them big Italian dinners.

Tonight, I'd made us a ravioli dinner. Of course, it wasn't just some pasta I'd thawed out and put on a plate.

Nope. I'd made it all from scratch.

Plus, I added some homemade focaccia bread, a side of prosciutto-wrapped asparagus, and a Caesar salad.

"I have faith in you," I told him.

With that, he dug in. And after taking two bites, he dropped his fork, looked at me, and asked, "Do you cook like this all the time?"

"I did when my dad was still alive. But now that it's just me, I don't go crazy. I mean, I don't really know how to cook small, but I will make less when I'm cooking for myself. So, for example, if you weren't here with me tonight, I would have made myself just the ravioli."

"Jesus, Sophie, this is excellent. If you ever want to make a big meal and are worried it'll go to waste, I'm your guy," he said.

I wanted to tell him I would have liked for him to just be my guy period, but I held myself back.

"I'm glad you like it."

For the next few minutes, Jax and I ate in silence. I wanted to give him the time he needed to try everything I'd made and thoroughly enjoy it. Eventually, though, he broke the silence. "So, I have a question."

"Okay. What's up?"

He glanced around the table at all of the food and noted, "I'm guessing something like this takes time, especially if you're making it all from scratch. But I'm curious what you do

when you're not cooking big meals or making desserts that I can't seem to forget the taste of."

"I've been texting you or talking to you on the phone," I reminded him. "That's been a whole lot of fun."

He shot me an amused look. "Right. I know that. But what did you do before I came along?"

"Crochet."

The second the word passed my lips, Jax started laughing. He was laughing so hard, he threw his head back and brought his hand to his abdomen. I sat there, staring at him, thinking he was having the strangest reaction I'd ever witnessed.

After a while, he glanced at me, noticed the look on my face, and immediately stopped laughing. "Holy shit. You're not joking."

I blinked my eyes and jerked my head back. "No. Why would I be joking about that?"

"You crochet? Like... like blankets and scarves?" he questioned me, the disbelief written all over his face.

"Technically, I crochet, and I knit, depending on what I'm making." Jax stared at me with a dumbfounded look on his face. I offered a small smile and asked, "Will you excuse me for a second?"

That snapped him out of it. "Is everything okay?"

Nodding, I replied, "Yes, but I'd like to get something."

"Okay."

With that, I pushed my chair back, stood, and walked out of the room. As quickly as I could, I went to retrieve some of my work, so I could rejoin him at the dining room table. Barely a minute after I'd walked out of the room, I entered it again, carrying three items. I walked over to the table and set them down. There was an octopus, a crab, and a turtle.

"I've been on a sea creature kick lately," I told him.

"You made these?" he asked, picking up the turtle to inspect it.

“I did.”

I watched with avid fascination as Jax turned the sea turtle over several times, his lips forming a smile when he stared into the little guy’s face. Then he returned his attention to me. “So, you make these and have a whole room in this house dedicated to displaying them?”

Now, it was my turn to laugh. “No. Jax, I’m a grown woman.”

Realization dawned. “Oh, you sell them?”

I shook my head.

A crease formed between his brows. “You’ve lost me.”

I swallowed a bite of my ravioli and took a sip of my drink. As I set the glass down, I shared, “When I was a little girl, only five or six years old, I wound up in the hospital. My dad had noticed my legs were bruising very easily. I’d been running in the house one day and slipped. My legs went beneath the couch, and my shin hit the bottom edge of it. It resulted in a bruise that was not consistent with what actually happened. Then, he noticed tiny bruises on my earlobes, and he became particularly concerned. So, he took me to a doctor, they did blood work, and referred me to a specialist upon getting those results. At the time, I remember my dad being really scared. He didn’t say that he was, but I could feel it.”

The concern was written all over Jax’s face. “What was wrong?”

“Well, the doctor I’d been referred to worked in oncology, so immediately the thought was leukemia. Again, at the time, I didn’t know what was happening, and my dad really did his best to shield me from it. I was too young to understand, anyway. But eventually, after more testing, it turned out I had what’s commonly referred to as ITP. Without getting into technicalities, it’s a blood disorder that left me hospitalized for just over two weeks back then. My dad never left my side the entire time I was there, so I was never really alone, but I’ll never forget when they gave me a stuffed animal to keep.

Other than my dad, it was the only thing that made that hospital stay better.”

I paused a moment, giving Jax some time to process all that I’d just shared. Of course, I shouldn’t have been surprised that he asked, “Are you okay now? Health wise, do you have any issues? Is there anything to be concerned about?”

“No. I’m all good now. There are no lasting problems.”

He smiled. “Good.”

Jerking my head toward the animals, I continued, “Anyway, I make these guys, and then I donate them to the hospitals, so they can give them out to the kids there. In fact, the last time I took a donation to Steel Ridge General was the day before the Miura was stolen.”

For a long time after I’d finished speaking, Jax didn’t respond. Not only that, but he also didn’t even continue to eat his food. He merely shifted his attention between the sea creatures sitting on the table and me. Eventually, he kept his focus on my face, and something warmed in his features. I desperately wanted to know what he was thinking, but I believed Jax would share when he was ready.

So, I waited.

And just as I had suspected, he spoke several seconds later. “Do you know just how incredible I think you are?”

“What?” I whispered.

“You’ve done nothing but blow me away from the very first day I met you,” he started. “You are so unexpected in the very best way possible. You’re not anything like I thought you would be. A week ago, I told you why I held myself back from pursuing you. No matter how much of a physical attraction I felt to you, I believed we could never be together. We were too different. To some degree, especially in my work, I pride myself on accurately assessing a situation. I’ve never, not in my whole life, ever been so happy to be so wrong about anything. I was wrong about you. I was wrong when I said that we’d never be right for each other. I don’t care how many things seem to be the opposite on the surface.” He covered my

hand with his and squeezed. “Deep down, Sophie, you and I are the same. You live your life just the same as I do. You might have your quirks and your likes or dislikes, but when it all boils down to the important stuff, the things that really matter, you know what to appreciate. I love that.”

It was a good thing I hadn’t had any food in my mouth, because a lump had formed in my throat. It would have been impossible to swallow.

I didn’t know what Jax’s intentions were in saying what he said, but if he’d been trying to make me cry, he was going to easily accomplish what he set out to do.

“That was very sweet of you to say,” I rasped.

“I meant every single word of it,” he assured me.

At that, Jax and I got back to our dinner. We finished eating, eventually turning the conversation to another topic when I’d asked him about his day at work. We finished, and Jax didn’t hesitate to help me carry the plates and serving dishes to the kitchen.

“I hope you don’t mind that I’m cleaning up these dishes before I break out the dessert,” I told him.

“I know how important it is to you, so it doesn’t bother me at all,” he returned. “Besides, I’m thoroughly stuffed. Dinner was excellent, Sophie.”

“I’m so happy you enjoyed it. I’ll pack up some of the leftovers for you, if you’d like,” I offered. “You can take them to work with you next week.”

He grinned at me. “If you’re expecting me to turn that down, you’re going to be waiting a long time.”

I loved it.

I loved that he wanted to take my food home with him.

Nonna’s advice was totally paying off.

With Jax’s help, I got the dishes all cleaned up in record time. I turned toward him and said, “Since I told you about it

that day I brought you the cannoli, I figured it was best to do the tiramisu for dessert tonight.”

Jax, who had been leaning his hips against the counter, started moving toward me. He took slow, deliberate steps in my direction. When he was mere inches away from me, standing so close I had no choice but to drop my head back to look up at him, he drove his hand into my hair.

“Will it stay?” he asked.

“What?”

“The dessert,” Jax clarified. “If we don’t eat it right away, will it still be okay to eat in, say, an hour?”

He must have been too full from the dinner. “Of course. I guess that’s what I get for overdoing it with the main course. You need some time to let the food digest.”

The grip Jax had in my hair tightened. “Sophie?”

“Yeah?”

“There was nothing wrong with dinner,” he insisted. “I loved it. And I’m very much looking forward to having dessert with you tonight. It’s just that... well, I kind of have a taste for something else right now.”

My lips parted in shock, excitement building as butterflies danced madly in my belly.

“I’d be happy to feed you anything you’re hungry for.”

With a mischievous grin on his face, he said, “Good. Because I plan to devour every single inch of your body before the night is over.”

I was no genius, but I had a feeling Jax was interested in fulfilling his promise to me, starting right now. Who was I to stop him?

THIRTEEN



Sophie

I was a smart woman.

God, was I smart.

When Jax took me out to dinner a week ago, I'd worn the dress I did, because he'd made it clear a nice dress wouldn't go unappreciated. I figured I'd give him plenty to appreciate. And it paid off in a big way, when he prowled toward me like a lion going after its prey and apologized for not being able to wait until after our date to kiss me.

Then I spent the entire week doing everything I could to make Jax wish he would have done more than just kiss me that night. There was no mistaking the sexual tension between us all week long. There had been text messages, the phone conversations, and even the gentle touches or knowing glances all throughout the night tonight that made it clear just how much the desire had built between us.

But nothing I'd done had been smarter than what I did tonight when I put on this dress. My initial reason for wearing it had been just as I'd told Jax when he arrived. It didn't matter that we were going to be staying in. This early on in whatever this could be called developing between us, I still considered it to be a date for us tonight, and I wanted to look nice for it.

Apparently, I'd made a stellar choice.

Because when Jax stepped close to tell me he planned to devour every inch of my body tonight—something I was looking forward to—evidently, his hand had reached out to tug

on the bow resting just above the side of my waist. Part of the dress fell away from my body, but I was still mostly covered. And for the first time since he'd made his declaration about how he planned to devour my body tonight, Jax's eyes left my face.

They drifted toward my hair, where he still had one of his hands. Only now, he'd gone from simply gripping it firmly in his grasp to wrapping it around his knuckles. A shiver ran through me at the thought of why he'd done that.

But I couldn't focus on my hair for too long, because Jax lifted his free hand. With the other half of the dress still covering part of my body, Jax flattened his palm on the top of my chest, just beneath the indentation at the base of my throat.

In a move I hadn't been expecting, Jax tugged firmly on my hair, forcing my head to drop back, expose my neck, and make room for his hand when it glided up from my chest to curl around the skin at the front of my throat.

Suddenly, I got the answer I'd been seeking about why he had my hair wrapped around his fist, and there wasn't a damn thing I didn't like about it. Especially not when I could feel that slight tug on my hair as his fingers pressed in around my throat while he lowered his head to mine and captured my lips in a kiss.

I loved the way he kissed. Like he needed to make it the best kiss of his life for fear he might not ever get another taste otherwise.

And he started fulfilling his promise almost immediately, because as his tongue drove inside my mouth, he devoured me. His kiss alone had the power to consume me. Overwhelm me. *Destroy* me.

He was taking everything he could get from me, and I was all too eager to give him whatever he wanted. Whatever he needed.

A moan escaped, and Jax took that, too. He swallowed it down, continuing to possess my mouth.

Jax's hand slid up the front of my throat until I could just feel his fingertips grazing my jaw. Only when he had a firm hold on me there did he tear his mouth away from mine.

His gaze shifted between my eyes and my mouth, heat and desire swirling in his irises. His stare ultimately rested on my lips as his thumb shifted up over my jaw and toward my mouth. Jax watched as he dragged his thumb along my bottom lip. "The things I want to do with this mouth."

The deep sound of this voice mixed with the intention behind those words forced a shiver down my spine.

Jax noticed, and one half of his mouth tipped up in a proud grin. "She likes that."

"Jax, please," I rasped.

He returned his focus to my eyes and asked, "What do you want, Sophie?"

I wanted it all.

Everything.

But I was afraid if I said that, he might change the course of what was happening, and I'd wind up missing something I didn't want to miss.

So, I decided to leave it up to him. "I want whatever you're going to give me."

A delighted, even if a little mischievous, look washed over him. "You really are trying to be a good girl, aren't you?"

"You promised me good things if I was," I reminded him.

He dropped his head down again and brushed his lips gently against mine before pressing another kiss there. Then he pulled back and asked, "Are your panties wet?"

A victorious smile spread across my face. "No."

"No?"

The look of confusion and disappointment on his face was almost too much to bear, so I quickly put him out of his misery. "I'm not wearing any panties, Jax."

Heat and desire and a touch of surprise flooded his features. Keeping his hands where they were, he demanded, "Show me."

Without delay, I lifted my hand up to untie the bow just above my waist on the inside of the dress. Once I'd done that, I grabbed both sides of my dress, opened them up, and allowed the dress to fall down my arms and to the floor.

My eyes never left Jax's face as his gaze dropped down my body and confirmed that what I'd told him had been the truth.

"Jesus," he whispered.

In an instant, he released his hold around my throat, and loosened his grip on my hair while keeping his fingers threaded through my strands.

Then I started to squirm. Because Jax's hand began a slow descent down my body. The feel of his hand on my skin and the anticipation of having his hand slip down between my legs was making it impossible to stand still.

I wanted more. Needed it.

Jax's hand drifted to one side, over the rounded flesh of my breast. "These are perfect," he said, squeezing one and then the other, the tone of his voice deeper and huskier than usual.

He was turned on, and I loved knowing I'd done that to him.

"God, I can't wait to taste every part of your body," he groaned.

"So, do it," I urged him, wanting to feel his mouth on me. "Suck on them."

Jax shook his head. "You're getting my hands first, Sophie. Just my hands. Just my fingers."

"But I need more," I whimpered, hoping he'd show me some mercy.

Suddenly, it was Jax wearing the victorious expression. "Trust me. You've been such a good girl already. I'm not

going to deny you anything tonight.”

Why did I like it so much when he called me a good girl? Was it because I was that eager to please? Did I get off on having his approval for the things I did for him?

This was new territory for me. Nobody else had ever been like this with me, and considering I was pressing my legs together as tightly as I was in an effort to find some relief, I could only draw one conclusion.

If the way he kissed me and spoke to me were anything to go by, Jax was going to be a man whose skills when it came to sex would be unparalleled.

After paying special attention to my breasts, Jax’s hand continued its journey down my body. He didn’t waste time or take any detours. His eyes were on the prize. He was nearly there when he ordered, “Spread your legs for me.”

I instantly complied with his demand.

Jax didn’t instantly touch me, though. Instead, he tugged back slightly on my hair, angled my head the way he wanted it, and kissed my lips. “So perfect.”

A moment later, he did it.

His fingers dropped down between my thighs, slipping through the wetness, and applying gentle pressure right where I needed it most.

A guttural moan tore up from the back of my throat. “Oh, God.”

His head was next to mine, his face positioned in a way that had his mouth at my ear. And that’s where he whispered, “It’s a good thing you didn’t wear panties, Sophie. They’d have been soaked.”

“Jax, please,” I begged him.

“Do you want to come?” he asked me, one of his fingers coated in my arousal and gently rubbing me.

I couldn’t take it any longer. One of my hands flew to his waist, gripping the material of his shirt, as the other went to

the shoulder on the arm that was currently playing between my legs. My head dropped forward, colliding with the front of his shoulder, and I moaned again.

Jax continued what he was doing, his fingers working their magic, and I was powerless to stop the feverish movement of my hips. He hadn't plunged any of his fingers inside me, and despite how badly I wanted to feel that, I knew I wasn't going to need it.

It had been building for a while, and I was nearly there. "Look at me, Sophie."

I heard his words, but I couldn't do what he wanted. I just kept up with the movement of my hips as my fingernails dug in deeper.

Then it stopped.

Jax's hand was gone, and my head flew back in despair. "What are you doing?"

"Keep your eyes on me. I want to see your beautiful face when you come," he answered.

Okay.

Okay, I could do that.

I'd do anything to have his hand back.

"Please," I whispered.

He smiled at me, brought his fingers back, and started building me up again. "Isn't it so much better when I'm the one touching your pussy instead of you?"

"It's the best," I admitted, sounding like I'd just finished running a marathon.

With that, Jax applied that last bit of pressure I needed and circled hard. Everything in my body convulsed and tightened as each wave of pleasure crashed into me. One after another, as Jax's finger continued to move against me, it seemed to go on forever.

And somewhere at the tail end of it, Jax captured my mouth in another kiss. His tongue drove into my mouth, and

he groaned. I gave it right back to him, wanting him to have it all. But before I could come anywhere close to giving him anything near what he'd given me, he separated his mouth from mine.

Then I was up in the air with both of his hands beneath my arms. Jax lifted me onto the counter of the large island in the center of the kitchen. As he tugged his shirt ruthlessly over his head, he ordered, "Lay back, legs spread."

I couldn't move.

I was too busy taking in the sight of his beautiful physique. For a man whose body I'd just filled with more pasta than any one person should have been able to consume, there was no evidence of it on his frame. Jax's torso was solid, muscular, and lean. His tattoos ran up the length of both arms all the way to his shoulders, and more ink covered the skin across his chest. The colors were gorgeous, but that was as far as I got, because Jax grew impatient.

"Sophie?" he called.

My eyes flew to his face. "Yeah?"

"Be a good girl, lay back, and spread your legs for me. I want to eat your pussy."

I was back, resting on my elbows, with my legs spread barely a second later.

And Jax? Well, Jax slipped both arms beneath my thighs and wrapped them around to the front of my body, where he grabbed ahold of my breasts. Then, with the back of my legs resting on the tops of his shoulders, he twisted his neck to one side and kissed my inner thigh.

Everything clenched in my body.

Jax shifted his focus to the opposite leg and delivered another kiss there. I trembled at not only the feel of his lips on me, but the way his facial hair tickled the skin there.

After, he turned his gaze center and allowed his eyes to travel up my body to meet my stare. He kept his eyes on mine

as he shifted forward slightly and ultimately put his mouth on me.

His tongue flicked over my clit several times before he began to suck. As I moaned, my hands clenched into fists.

I should have known with the way he kissed that Jax would be spectacular at this, and maybe, on some level, I did. But there was no question I'd seriously underestimated just how wonderful he'd be.

For a long time, he ate and kept his eyes on me. I knew that meant he wanted to see my face, so as difficult as it was, I kept my head forward and watched him work more magic between my legs.

But there came a point in all of it when even Jax became so engrossed in what he was doing that he could no longer hold my stare. He closed his eyes, somehow managed to bury his face deeper, and ate ravenously.

Jax's hands played with my breasts, his fingers tweaking my nipples, and his groans mixed with my moans.

He'd spent so much time praising me for following simple orders, and I was convinced we'd gotten it all wrong. If anyone deserved the compliments and acclaim, it was him.

The man was worshipping me.

Giving me everything.

And he was getting off on it.

Seeing that, hearing it, it came as no surprise that I felt that familiar pull deep in my belly.

"God, Jax, it's so good," I panted, my hand slipping down between my legs to thread through his hair.

He kept at me.

More licking.

More sucking.

More *feasting*.

"You're going to make me come," I warned him.

Jax groaned again, but he did not relent. If anything, the way he went at me next was almost as though he was trying to beat a clock, attempting to get the last bits of me he could get before his time was up.

And it was that determination which sent me soaring mere moments later. Jax worked me all the way through it, and by the time it left me, I was torn between two conflicting feelings.

There was the part of me that felt utterly sated and satisfied. That part of me could have curled up into a ball and fallen asleep.

But the other part of me still hadn't had enough. That part wanted more of Jax; specifically, his cock.

And that was the part that won out.

Because instead of falling to my back on the counter, I sat up on the edge of it, reached for him, and kissed his mouth. I could taste myself on his lips and tongue, and that only served to enhance my need for more of him.

Jax's hands roamed over my body for some time as we kissed, but I eventually lost them. When I pulled back, I saw why that was. He reached into the pocket of his jeans, pulled out his wallet, and opened it up.

"Sophie, I can't wait another minute to get my cock inside you, so I need you to help me out here," he revealed.

Knowing what he wanted, I did not delay.

My hands drifted down the heated skin of his torso to the waistband of his jeans. I unbuttoned and unzipped them before pushing them down over his ass. As they fell to his ankles, Jax shifted back and forth on his feet, kicking off his shoes. With the condom in one hand, Jax reached down with the other and pulled off his socks.

Then it was my turn to get to work again.

I reached for the elastic band of his boxer briefs and slid my hands beneath it at his hips. Then, I slid them to the back of his body and squeezed his bare ass in my hands before pushing his underwear down over the rounded flesh. Moving

my hands back to the front, I freed his cock from the confines of the material.

Since I was sitting on the counter and was too high up, I couldn't push the underwear down his legs. So, while he took over that job, I concentrated my efforts on his hardened length.

I curled my fingers around him, squeezed, and stroked.

He groaned and gave me all of a few seconds to play before he pulled his hips back. As he rolled on the condom, he said, "Sorry, honey, you'll have to wait and play later. I need to feel your pussy wrapped around me."

By the time he'd gotten out that last word, he'd rolled the condom on. He reached out for me, lifted me in his arms, and my legs instinctively went around his waist.

Then we were moving. Loving the position I was in, I didn't pay attention to where he was taking me. I simply used my mouth to kiss the skin along the top of his shoulder and up the side of his neck. Then I nibbled on the lobe of his ear before I felt myself going back.

I landed on top of the dining room table and barely had a moment to allow that to register before Jax was driving inside.

"Oh, God," I moaned.

"Fuck, Sophie," he growled, planted deep inside. "Fuck, you feel perfect."

The next thing I knew, Jax was standing at the side of the table, thrusting into me, pounding mercilessly. His hands roamed, squeezing my thighs, massaging my breasts, toying with my nipples, and circling my clit.

I hiked my thighs up, high and wide, wanting him to have all the unhindered access he needed.

My hands reached for him, touching his arms and shoulders, whenever and wherever I could.

And all of it consumed me in a way I hadn't been prepared for. Feeling him drive inside, rough and unyielding, I got caught up in all of it. The emotions were taking over. There was undeniable heat and desire between us, but there was so

much more. All of it came flooding back at that moment. The soft touches, the sweet words, the laidback conversations.

Jax had been giving me things I'd been missing in my life for so long and things I'd never had.

He was perfect.

He was everything.

And I never wanted to let him go.

Harder and harder, he kept at me. And I relished the feel of each and every one of his brutal thrusts. It was just what I wanted, exactly what I needed. And even if I thought nothing could make it any better, I would have been wrong.

Because despite the fact that he was working exceptionally hard to build the both of us up, I could see something soft and tender in his eyes. There was something happening there, and I wanted to know exactly what it was.

But that was going to have to wait, since I wound up on the verge of my third orgasm. My breathing grew shallow, and my body felt wholly unprepared to experience another shot of pleasure like Jax had already delivered.

There was no stopping it, though.

With Jax's determination, it was building in a way nothing would stop it.

"Jax," I panted. "Jax."

"Come on my cock, Sophie," he demanded.

I didn't need any additional instruction. I came, and I did it hard.

And as each wave of pleasure moved through me, I bathed in the praise Jax delivered. "That's my good girl."

Only when I'd reached the end, did Jax see to himself. He powered forward several more times, harder than ever, and it took hold of him.

I watched as the muscles in his torso flexed and listened as his groans of pleasure filled the air around us. Nothing had

ever held me so captive before in my life.

God, he was beautiful.

It was right then and there that I'd made a decision. For the rest of my life, I wanted this man with me, and I was prepared to do anything to keep him.

FOURTEEN



Jax

“That was nice.”

I had to stop myself from bursting into a fit of laughter. If it weren't for the fact that Sophie was currently sitting in my lap with her body cuddling close to mine, I might have allowed myself to give in to the amusement I felt.

Sophie hadn't said anything wrong. It was just that I wasn't exactly sure *nice* was the word I would have used to describe what the two of us had just shared.

I felt like I was in my glory. Nothing could have been better.

Because Sophie was perfect.

I thought it was strange I was constantly thinking or saying that, but there was no other way to describe her. I was still in disbelief about all of it, namely that she seemed to be as into me as I was into her.

Our current physical closeness was just more proof of that.

Sophie and I had gotten ourselves cleaned up, but instead of her putting her dress back on following what happened in the kitchen, then on the dining room table, she confiscated my T-shirt and pulled it over her head.

Now, we were in her family room, her ass was in my lap, and I was relishing the way she seemed to like to touch me and be close to me.

“I don’t know about all that,” I said, the doubt evident in my tone.

Sophie flattened her palm against my chest, pressed into it, and pulled her face away from the spot she’d been resting it in the crook of my neck to look at me. A look of horror had washed over her. “What? You... you didn’t like it?”

Grinning at her, I insisted, “Oh, I liked it. I’m just not sure that *nice* is the correct word to describe what we just had. I mean, I thought it was nice to meet you. But there is a whole host of other adjectives I’d use to describe what it was like to finally fuck you. Plus, all the stuff that came before that—watching you come for the first time, eating you until you came a second time. None of that was just nice.”

The tension eased in her body as she replied, “No, I guess you’re right. *Nice* is not the right word to use for all of that.”

With my arm draped over her bare thighs, I gave her a squeeze before my thumb started stroking along the skin on her outer thigh. “I’m glad you liked it and enjoyed yourself.”

Smiling at me, she asked, “What would you use?”

“What?”

“What word would you use to describe what just happened?”

I had at least a dozen words in my mind to choose from that might accurately describe the feeling I had about it all, and it was difficult to pick just one.

“That’s tough to answer, but I’d say it was no less than phenomenal, even if so much of it was unexpected.”

“Unexpected? What do you mean, unexpected?”

“You seem horrified by that word,” I noted.

Sophie cocked an eyebrow. “You told me that nice wasn’t a good word to use for all of that, but I think unexpected is even worse. You can’t honestly believe that’s a good choice.”

I shook my head. “I think it’s one of the more perfect words to use.”

Though I could see she wasn't genuinely angry, Sophie narrowed her eyes at me, assessing me, perhaps. "I think I'm going to need an explanation, because I'm utterly confused. I was confident you and I both came into tonight with similar expectations about what would happen between us. Hell, you promised me how well you'd take care of me as long as I promised not to touch myself all week long."

"If I thought you were here, taking care of yourself every morning on your own, I would have likely been here sooner than tonight."

Apparently, that had been the wrong thing to say. Sophie's eyes widened. "Wait, so if I had told you I wasn't going to listen and decided to take care of pleasuring myself whenever the mood struck me, which let's be honest, at what you put me through this week, was often, you would have just come here sooner than tonight?"

"Probably," I admitted.

She gasped. "Are you kidding me? Why wouldn't you have told me that was an option?"

As my eyes roamed over her face, loving the constantly changing expression, I lifted my hand that wasn't stroking her thigh into her hair. As much as Sophie seemed to enjoy being close enough to touch me a lot, I had just as much of a fascination with doing the same to her. One of the things I had a tough time holding myself back from doing was touching her hair. It was just as soft as I'd imagined it would be from the start, and I liked having my fingers in it.

"Did you forget?"

A crease formed between her brows. "Forget what?"

"When I had my hands between your legs in the kitchen a little while ago, you told me it was better than you touching yourself," I reminded her.

"Of course, it is. What does that have to do with anything?"

My lips twitched. I loved seeing her all riled up about this. "Sophie, honey, I made you come three times tonight, and I'm

not even close to being done. Are you telling me that I haven't made the wait worth it yet?"

At my question, Sophie shrank back and murmured, "I'm not saying that. I just might be a little annoyed that we could have had it sooner than tonight, and you didn't tell me."

Using my hand that was in her hair, I urged her head in my direction. After pressing a kiss to the side of her head, I revealed, "I had fun this week."

"Fun?"

Though I kept my fingers in her hair, I had loosened my hold enough that she could pull back a touch and look me in the eyes. That's when I shared, "I don't know about you, but as awful as it might have been to have to wait for what we had tonight, I kind of like the way things played out between us over the last week. Do you know what your texts did to me? Do you have any idea how much I enjoyed hearing your laughter come through the phone?"

Something seemed to have taken hold of her. Sophie clearly had questions of her own swirling in her mind after my admission, but she couldn't seem to ask them. I didn't mind, because I wasn't quite finished anyway.

"It was a wonder I got any work done this week for how often I reached for my phone to pull up that photo of you looking all kinds of cute and sexy with the words 'I promise I'll be good' beneath it."

I paused a moment, seeing the heat and something else building in her stare.

When she still made no move to speak, I continued. "I never thought a conversation about making beds and doing dishes would ever be something I'd find even remotely interesting, and yet, when I had a conversation with you about those very topics, I was hanging on every single word you said."

Sophie's eyes grew wet, and I knew it would have been foolish to think she'd respond to me now. So, I ended, "That's why this week was fun for me. Because instead of just diving

in with sex, which I already knew was going to be fucking amazing, I had the chance to get to know the girl I wanted that with. And you should know that when you were on your back spreading your legs for me, you were doing that with a man who took the time and had the opportunity to develop feelings for you. You mean something to me, Sophie. And I'm not sorry that we gave ourselves the time we did. In fact, even if it would have been a struggle, I probably could have done what we did this past week for a couple more before having sex with you and still loved everything about it just as much."

If there were words she wanted to say, Sophie didn't.

Instead, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to mine. Feeling like she had something she wanted to communicate, I didn't do what I had wanted to do. I didn't take over and lead us.

I allowed Sophie to set the pace. I gave her the opportunity to give me whatever she felt compelled to give. And it was nothing short of spectacular. Her lips were soft, her mouth was hot, and her kiss was sweet.

At some point, she separated her mouth from my lips, but rested her forehead against mine, where she whispered, "Are you for real?"

I let out a laugh. "I am very real."

"I don't know if I can be as eloquent with my words as you were, but I think you should know that when you were driving your cock inside me, you were doing that with a woman who feels like she found something she didn't even know she was missing in her life." She paused a moment before she added, "And for the record, I'm so glad you made us wait."

I touched my lips to hers once more before I pulled back and looked her in the eyes. "I like what's happening here between us, Sophie."

"I do, too, but I..." She trailed off, looking away.

"What? What is it?"

Sophie's expression twisted in a way that indicated there was something she was trying to work out. "I guess I'm still

not sure I understand.”

“Understand what?”

“I can appreciate and agree with your description of tonight being phenomenal, but I’m still not sure I understand how you can say it was unexpected,” she replied.

The corners of my mouth tipped up in a smile. “I don’t mean that it was unexpected in that I thought it wasn’t going to happen,” I started. “I meant that you were unexpected. There was a lot that I never anticipated about how it all went down. Like you not wearing anything beneath that dress. That was nice. But there was also the way you didn’t seem to hesitate at all to give me anything I asked for. It felt like you were eager to please me, and for someone who came here, intent on giving you everything, it was unexpected that I’d get the very same in return.”

Sophie squirmed a bit in my lap, easily distracting me from the conversation and returning my attention to the fact that she still wasn’t wearing any panties.

“See, that’s where we disagree,” she said. The seductive smile on her face told me she was feeling playful, and things were about to take a turn.

“Why is that?”

Sophie shifted her body, forcing me to lose the hold I had on her hair. I might have been upset about it, but when she wound up turning her torso fully and swinging one of her legs out, so she could straddle my lap, I got over it.

Once she was where she wanted to be with my hands resting on her bare thighs, Sophie answered, “Well, the way I see it, I got far more than you did tonight.”

“What? No way.” I wholeheartedly disagreed with her.

“You gave me three orgasms,” she noted.

“I’ll give you at least three more before the night is over, too,” I promised.

Desire swirled in her eyes as I felt her thighs press in tight against me. Evidently, Sophie liked the idea of at least three

more orgasms.

“I’d like to give you another one now,” she said softly.

My hands drifted up her thighs and around to her ass, where I sunk my fingertips into her flesh. “What did you have in mind?”

Sophie licked her lips. “I was thinking I could use my mouth on you.”

To say the anticipation skyrocketed would have been an understatement. The thought of Sophie wrapping her gorgeous lips around my cock was a pleasant one, one where I believed the reality would far exceed the fantasy.

“What’s stopping you?” I asked, releasing her ass from my grip and snaking my hands up her sides.

She licked her lips again, not doing anything to help alleviate the strain against the fly of my jeans. “I wanted to make sure you were okay with it.”

Cocking an eyebrow, I kept one hand on her waist and lifted my thumb on the other to stroke along her bottom lip. “Did you forget me telling you I had things I wanted to do with this mouth?”

She shook her head. “I can’t stop thinking about it.”

Not that there were any, but if I’d had any lingering doubts about Sophie, they would have gone right out the window then. I didn’t know what I’d done to deserve her, but there wasn’t a chance I’d ever give her up.

Realizing she was waiting for me to lead her, I gave myself a moment to bring my hands to the cotton material covering her breasts. As my thumbs brushed gently over her nipples, I said, “Nothing would please me more than for you to suck me off while you’re wearing my tee.”

That was all I needed to say before the look of utter determination washed over her gorgeous face. From that point forward, Sophie was a woman on a mission. She smiled at me for just a few seconds before she leaned forward, one of her

hands gliding up into my hair while her lips began kissing the skin along the side of my neck.

I tipped my head to the side to give her easier access as I removed one of my hands from her tits, so it could drift down her body between her legs. I knew she wanted to deliver her own brand of pleasure to me, and I had every intention of allowing her to do it. But there was no way I could keep my hands off of her.

The second my hand slipped between her legs, Sophie's body tensed a bit. "What are you doing?"

My fingers began rubbing her as I replied, "I can't not touch you. Don't you like it?"

"I do. But this is supposed to be about you," she noted.

I lifted my other hand to the side of her face and tilted her mouth in my direction. After kissing her lips, I urged, "Let me do this first."

"Jax," she whispered.

"Lift the shirt up, Sophie. Don't take it off, but I want your tits in my face."

Sophie instantly complied with my request and lifted the shirt to expose her breasts to me. While my hand played between her legs, I captured her nipple in my mouth and brought my other hand down to the soft skin there.

She moaned. "Oh, Jax. Baby, you're so good to me."

I loved her voice. I loved the sounds she made. And I especially loved just how wet she was.

My fingers worked their magic between her legs—rubbing, circling, plunging inside—and it wasn't long before Sophie was panting and writhing over my body, on the verge of another orgasm.

I took her there, groaning as I listened to her come apart. And when she'd finally made it to the other side, Sophie wasted no time.

She dropped down to her knees in front of me and frantically worked at the fly of my jeans. I did my best to help her, lifting my hips and pushing my clothes down my legs, but they'd barely gotten to my knees when Sophie's mouth was on me.

And she wasn't just on me. She'd taken me so deep into her mouth, I could feel myself going down the back of her throat.

"Fuck," I growled. "Jesus, Sophie. Fuck."

She moaned against me as she pulled back and lifted her gaze to meet mine. What she didn't do was release me from her mouth.

This woman.

This woman was everything and more.

Eager.

Enthusiastic.

God, there was no way to describe the absolute fervor in her quest. She wasn't the least bit shy about what she was doing.

Unable to stop myself, needing it, I reached down and grabbed a fistful of her hair. Sophie did not stop. She did not relent.

Her mouth was wet and hot, and my girl was hungry.

Sucking me in deep, greedy for every inch of my cock she could take in her mouth, Sophie did not disappoint.

I didn't know how I didn't come down her throat in a matter of seconds, it felt that good.

After working me for a long time, Sophie freed me from the confines of her mouth, but she didn't stop completely. Her tongue swirled around the head several times before she licked and kissed all along the side. At the same time, her hands had joined the party. And while they didn't feel nearly as good as her mouth had, they still felt unbelievable.

Whether she'd wanted to switch it up for a bit or she merely wanted to give her jaw a break, Sophie's digression only lasted for a minute or so, and then I was right back inside her mouth.

Her tongue.

Her lips.

Her eyes.

The way she hollowed her cheeks, and how her hair felt in my hand.

It was gorgeous. All of it.

And as much as I wanted it to continue forever, it was impossible.

"Sophie, I'm going to come if you want to stop," I warned her.

She moaned and kept going, her eyes lighting up.

"Fuck, you're unbelievable," I growled. "Such a good fucking girl."

Sophie went faster, sucking harder. And then it happened.

My orgasm hit, tearing through me and spilling into her mouth and down her throat. Sophie took it all, eagerly draining me of every last drop.

And after she'd gotten it all, she kept a firm grip on me, released me from her mouth, and smiled at me. "I think you need to let me feed you dessert now, so we have some energy to go another round or two."

Perfection.

That was the only way to describe her.

I reached down, urged her up into my lap, and kissed her. "I don't know what I did to deserve you, but I'm warning you now. I'm never letting you go, Sophie."

She smiled against my lips and whispered, "That's good. Because I wasn't planning on leaving."

We kissed each other again, then made our way to the kitchen to have dessert.

I wasn't surprised it was exceptional.

But then again, I was quickly learning that with Sophie, everything was exceptional.

Even the two rounds we had after we'd made it to her bedroom following dessert.

FIFTEEN



Sophie

“I’ve been dying to hear from you.”

“I know. It’s been a mix of a few things going on here that’s kept me from reaching out to you sooner.”

It had been far too long since I’d called Nadia. The last time I’d spoken to her was when she’d convinced me to find a reason to go to Jax. That was the day I’d gotten myself all dolled up and paid him a visit to deliver a business card someone had given to me six months earlier.

That felt like a lifetime ago. So much had happened since then, and Nadia didn’t know anything about it. There was plenty for me to update her on.

And since it was a Wednesday afternoon, and I was in the car on my way to Belmonte Stone, I figured there was no time like the present to bring her up to speed on everything that was happening in my life.

“A mix of things?” she countered. “Listen, Soph, the only real important thing right now is the guy. I know I should probably be worried about the car, too, but I just want to know what happened with Jax. Did he take the bait when you went to him?”

“Nope.”

“Oh no,” she murmured. “What happened?”

“Well, there’s a lot to tell, but two more of the cars wound up getting stolen,” I shared.

“What?!” she shrieked.

I couldn't say I was surprised by her reaction. Anybody who knew my dad knew how much his car collection meant to him. As my best friend, Nadia was very familiar with it. Knowing that three of the cars from his collection were gone was bound to cause her to react like she just had.

“Yep. And I'll give you all the details in a minute, but if I'm cutting to the chase, here it goes. Jax got them all back for me and left. I missed him, so I made him cannoli to thank him, and then he came by to return my container, so he could ask me out to dinner. We did that, then I cooked for him a week later, when things got pretty serious between us. Now, we're officially together, and I'm the happiest I've ever been in my entire life.”

“You're joking.”

“I am not.”

There wasn't an ounce of hesitation when she demanded, “Tell me everything.”

So, that's what I did.

I gave Nadia the full story, sharing everything that had happened ever since I'd last spoken to her on the phone. She occasionally interrupted to either ask for clarification on something or to share her delight.

As for me, I loved being able to share the news with her. It had been so long since I'd had the opportunity, and I had a feeling Nadia was just as excited about it as I was.

When I finally finished, which happened to be right about the time I pulled into the parking lot outside of Belmonte Stone, she declared, “Oh, I'm so excited for the Christmas break. I can't wait to meet him, because he sounds absolutely perfect for you.”

“That's because he is,” I assured her. “I swear, Nadia, I've never met a man like him before. He really is the best thing that's ever happened to me.”

There was a moment of hesitation before she returned, “I’m so happy for you, Sophie. Nobody deserves this more than you do.”

Warmth moved through me. I knew she’d be ecstatic for me, and even though she wasn’t here in Steel Ridge, she knew how to make sure I still got all the support I needed.

“Thanks, Nadia. I really hope things continue going well for us and that we’re still together at Christmas, because I really do want you to meet him.”

“Well, we’ll be in a little earlier this year than usual. We both took some extra time off from work, so we’re going to make the trip up there sooner than we normally would have been.”

I couldn’t wait to see her. I hadn’t seen Nadia since she and her husband had been here last Christmas.

“I miss you so much. I can’t wait to squeeze you.”

“Me too. But at least I can rest a little easier now knowing you’ve got a guy there to give you all the love and affection you deserve,” she declared.

Love.

The word caught me off guard.

While there was no question Jax and I both had feelings for one another, I wasn’t quite sure if what he felt for me was love. Even for myself, I didn’t know if that’s what it was. What I was absolutely certain of was that what I had with him was unlike anything I’d had with anyone else. Nobody had ever made me feel the way that Jax did, and for now, that was more than enough for me.

“Hey, Nadia, I just got to Belmonte Stone, so I need to head inside now, but I’ll reach out soon,” I promised.

“Okay. Sounds great. And if you don’t get a chance immediately, it’s okay,” she replied. “I’m okay with not hearing from you if it means you’re spending time with your new guy.”

“You’re the best.”

“I know. I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Okay. Love you, Nadia.”

“I love you, too.”

With that, I disconnected the call with her and got out to head into the building.

No sooner had I stepped inside, Aunt Ariana greeted me. “Hey, Sophie. How’s it going? We haven’t seen you in a while.”

“I know. I’m sorry. There’s been a lot going on lately,” I explained. “How’s everything going here?”

“We’re all doing well. Everything’s been steady, so we really can’t complain.”

“Hey, so I wanted to ask you—”

“Sophie! My favorite niece.” That came from Uncle Sal, who’d just entered the front office and moved in my direction. “How are you doing, kiddo?”

“Good. Great, actually. I stopped by for a couple of reasons.”

“Do you need more boxes?” he asked.

I nodded. “You know me too well.”

The truth was that since I’d been spending so much time at home, I was now at a point where I was going to need to make another trip to the hospital. I’d made so many stuffed animals, and they were starting to take over too much space in the house, particularly in the room where I kept all of my supplies. While I had no plans to go to the hospital today, I still needed to get them loaded up into a box and out of the house. At least if I had them in the car, I could make the trip to give my donation whenever I happened to be out and about.

The front door opened just then, and I turned around to see both Diego and Bruno walking in.

They must have been coming back from lunch.

“Hey, guys,” I greeted them.

“Hi, Sophie,” Diego returned.

“You brought the boring car today,” Bruno noted. “I thought you’d be taking advantage of this last little bit of nicer weather before winter hits and would bring one of the cool cars out.”

Offering a sympathetic look, knowing how much Bruno enjoyed talking with my dad about his cars, I explained, “I would have, but I’m technically not allowed to drive a few of them right now.”

“What do you mean? Why can’t you drive them?” Diego questioned me.

I glanced around the room at my family, terrified of telling them the truth. It didn’t matter that I’d gotten the cars back; it was that I’d managed to have them stolen in the first place. But now that I’d said what I had, there was no choice but to own up to it and explain everything.

“The Miura was stolen,” I blurted.

My aunt gasped.

“What?” my uncle asked, horror in his tone.

Nodding my head, I repeated, “The Miura was stolen. It happened the same night I had it out and stopped in here to pick up a box a few weeks ago. Then the GT40 and the AC Cobra were stolen shortly afterward.”

“Are you joking?” Bruno asked.

“You don’t have the cars anymore?” Diego pressed.

I held my hands up in front of me, hoping they’d all calm down. I couldn’t say I didn’t understand their reactions. My father would have been the same way. Hell, I’d just been on the phone with Nadia—a woman who didn’t care about cars at all—and even she had been horrified. But I already felt bad enough about what happened, and I couldn’t handle their disappointment with me. That was why I wasn’t thinking when I said what I said next.

“I have the cars back. My boyfriend found them.”

Like they hadn't just been devastated over what happened to the cars, my family nearly lost their minds. They'd all started speaking at the same time.

"Boyfriend?"

"When did you get a boyfriend?"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. What's going on?"

"Who is this guy? Is he Italian?"

At the barrage of questions and outrage, I rolled my eyes. I couldn't decide if I was happy or relieved that the status of the cars was no longer a concern to them.

"I don't think he's Italian," I started.

"You don't *think*? Sophie, how could you not know?" Aunt Ariana asked. She was utterly dismayed.

I let out a sigh and said, "Right. He's not Italian."

"What about his family? Who are they? What does he do?" Uncle Sal pressed.

I pressed my lips together, attempting to stifle the laughter threatening to bubble out of me. I loved these people. *Loved* them. There was not a doubt in my mind that they, especially Uncle Sal, were doing precisely what my father would have done if he were still alive.

"I have not met his family, so I can't really speak about them yet. And Jax is a private investigator."

"Jax? What is this name? He sounds no good for you," Uncle Sal declared.

I shouldn't have been surprised he was making a judgment call on Jax before he even met him. It had nothing to do with Jax's name. It was about him feeling responsible for protecting me.

"Uncle Sal?" I called.

"What?"

I moved toward him, slipped my arms around his rounded waist, and tipped my head back to look up at him. "He's really

good to me, and he makes me so happy.”

“I want to meet him.”

I knew that was coming, so I gave him a nod, smiled, and promised, “Soon.”

I’d been a daddy’s girl growing up, so I’d mastered the art of knowing what to do when the grown men in my life worried for no reason.

Uncle Sal’s chin jerked down before he asked, “So, he’s a private investigator?”

“He is.”

“And he got the cars back?” he pressed.

“He did.”

That’s when Diego chimed in. “What happened?”

I shook my head. “I don’t really know. There’s still an ongoing investigation.”

“They haven’t caught the guy responsible?” Bruno questioned me.

I shook my head again and sighed. “No. Apparently, this is a bigger deal than Jax had initially presumed. I guess, given what the Miura was, it wasn’t unreasonable to assume someone had stolen it for that reason. But apparently, it’s much worse. When Jax finally located all three cars, he and his team learned there was something much more sinister going on.”

“What do you mean?” Aunt Ariana asked.

My eyes moved through each member of my family before I answered, “Evidently, there’s a market for rare and exotic cars. It looks like someone was planning to make a lot of money.”

“You have the cars back with you now, though, right?” Diego asked.

Nodding, I confirmed, “I do, but only because Jax was able to pull some strings. As part of the agreement he has with the

authorities, I just can't drive them right now. Not until the investigation has been completed."

"This is awful," my uncle declared. "People work hard all their lives, starting from the bottom and doing what they can to build the life they want for themselves and their family. And then somebody comes along thinking it's okay to take a piece of that away. I'm just glad you weren't hurt. Nobody came to the house, did they?"

I shook my head. "No. No, I was fine. And when Jax learned about the other two cars being taken, he sent one of his men over to stand guard while he did his job to recover them."

Surprise and a bit of appreciation washed over my uncle's face. Clearly, I should have shared that tidbit of information about Jax from the start.

"I want to meet him, Sophie. I want to meet him, so I can thank him."

"I'll tell him," I assured him, feeling relieved the meeting might not be awful for Jax. While I didn't doubt he'd be able to hold his own, I still didn't want him to have to endure an unnecessary interrogation.

Several moments of silence stretched between us. "You need boxes?"

Grinning, I answered, "I do."

Keeping his arm wrapped around my back, he lifted his gaze to Diego and Bruno. "Let's go get Sophie some boxes."

With that, the four of us made our way out into the workshop, where Diego and Bruno got me some boxes, and my uncle held on to me for just a little bit longer.



"Can we do something different this weekend?"

Jax shifted his attention away from the television and dropped it down to his lap, which was precisely where my head was resting. It was Thursday evening, and he'd come over to my place after work to have dinner and spend some time with me.

Over the last week and a half, we'd fallen into a bit of a routine. On very rare occasions, Jax went home and would call me. We'd talk on the phone about our days or anything else on our minds. The only reason that ever usually happened was if he'd had a particularly long day at work and didn't get to leave at a reasonable hour.

In most scenarios, Jax came to me. After work, he'd come to my place, where he'd shower, and we'd have dinner together. Then we'd cuddle up on the couch and watch a movie, or we'd go to my bedroom and have sex, if we could even make it to the bedroom before going at one another. Most days, it was a combination of it all: cuddling, movies, and sex.

But I'd started thinking about something, and I decided there was only one way to get it.

"What do you mean?" he asked, concern littering his features.

"I want to go to your place," I told him. "Can I spend the night with you in your bed?"

His brows shot up in surprise. "You want to do that?"

"I do."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "I'd like to see where you live. You don't mind, do you?"

He let out a laugh, his hand that was draped across my abdomen tenderly stroking the small patch of skin that was exposed at the hem of my shirt. "I don't mind at all, but it's nothing special."

I cocked an eyebrow and noted, "You said something similar about yourself at the beginning of this, so I'm not sure I can fully trust your judgment."

Jax rolled his eyes. “Okay, honey. Whatever you say.”

At that, I sat up, twisted my body, and rested my hands on top of his shoulder. With my face just inches away from his, I said, “I’m serious. You downplay yourself all the time, and I think you’re spectacular. I want to see where you live, so I can have an even deeper understanding of the man I’m waking up next to nearly every morning.”

“I can tell you anything you want to know,” he offered. “You don’t need to make a trip to my house in an effort to uncover something. I’m not hiding anything.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “I’m beginning to think I won’t just find an unmade bed or a sink full of dirty dishes there.”

“Oh, yeah? Considering I’ve spent nearly every night here with you, the sink is surprisingly empty.”

“Is that okay?”

“What?”

“Do you like spending every night with me? Do you want free time to yourself to do things with your friends or something?” I asked him.

Jax lifted his hand to the side of my face and cupped my cheek for a moment before driving his hand back into my hair. “If I didn’t want to be here, Sophie, I wouldn’t be. I’m exactly where I want to be, where I’m happiest.”

I smiled, leaned forward, and touched my lips to his. Then I whispered against them. “I still really want to see your house.”

“Then pack a bag, honey. I’ll pick you up after work tomorrow and take you there,” he promised.

“Okay, handsome.”

At that, the conversation was done. Because Jax had decided we were done watching a movie. But he didn’t carry me upstairs to have sex with me. Instead, he shifted me in his arms, swung his legs up and onto the couch, and stripped me out of my clothes, so he could make love to me right there.

Only after he'd done that did he carry me upstairs and to my bed, where he held me in his arms as we both fell asleep.

SIXTEEN



Jax

One look at the bright, smiling face as I stepped through the front door, and I knew I wasn't going to be able to sneak away.

“Good morning, Jax.”

“Good morning, Avalon,” I replied.

I had immediately moved past her desk to head to my office when she asked, “Are you in a rush?”

I stopped, pulled my brows together, and answered, “No. Why? Did you need something?”

She shook her head. “No. I mean, I don't need anything, but I was just curious about something.”

“Sure. What's going on?” I asked.

Avalon cocked an eyebrow, a knowing look on her face. “I don't know. What *is* going on?” When I shot her a confused look, she huffed, “Why do I always have to spell it out for the guys that work here? I'm talking about Sophie. What's going on with the two of you?”

I should have known.

I was a private investigator, and Avalon made no secret of the fact that she lived for office gossip. Unfortunately, in most cases, because she worked with nearly all men, gossip wasn't abundant. Or, I didn't use to think it was. Ever since she started working here so many years ago, that all changed.

Avalon knew about things that were happening in the lives of others who worked here before just about anyone else did.

But that's probably because she was who she was.

Even if we weren't keen on sharing all the details of what was happening in our personal lives with everyone, Avalon had this way about her. She always managed to squeeze out a bit of information when she put in the effort.

And it seemed that this morning, Avalon was interested in getting the scoop from me about my relationship with Sophie.

When I spent too much time thinking about all of this, Avalon decided she needed to offer some additional encouragement. "Look, Jax, if you're struggling in any way with where things stand between the two of you, I'm happy to offer some insight. I think you should know that you've got nothing to be worried about if you attempt to pursue her. She's into you."

While that was something I already knew, I was curious about what had given Avalon that impression. "Oh yeah? How do you know?" I asked her.

"Jax, you did your job, and you did it well," she started. "That should have been the end of it. But then Sophie found a reason to come back here to bring you desserts, because she wanted to give you some extra special tokens of appreciation. She likes you. Then again, I was aware of that when she came in here the time before that and was all dolled up. Though whatever happened between the two of you that day did not give her the good vibes she'd been hoping for."

Now, I was intrigued. "What do you mean?"

Avalon smiled at me and swung her arm out in the direction of the front door. "Do you not see my view? When she left here that day, she got in her car and sat there for a long time. I watched as she eventually banged her head against the steering wheel. Whatever you said, or didn't say to her that afternoon, left her feeling frustrated."

Sophie sat in the parking lot banging her head on her steering wheel that day? Was Avalon being serious?

Before I could respond to her, my phone rang in my pocket. I pulled it out, looked at the display, and saw Sophie's name. Since I knew there was no way I'd get out of this conversation without sharing the truth, I figured this would be the best way to accomplish it.

"Hey, honey. Everything okay?" I greeted her.

Instantly, Avalon perked up as the surprise washed over her face. If I'd been intrigued before, it was her who was fascinated by what was happening now.

But I couldn't pay too much attention to Avalon's reaction, because Sophie started speaking. "Hi, Jax. I'm sorry. I know you just left here not that long ago, but I was thinking about what I need to bring with me for this weekend, and I'm having a tough time deciding."

"Deciding on what?" I repeated.

"Well, dinner, of course. I have everything planned out for tomorrow night. I was thinking we could make homemade pizzas. Homemade pizza dough, ripe tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, and some basil if you want to go traditional, and I've got some other ingredients if you prefer variety. Anyway, that's tomorrow. I was trying to decide what to do tonight, and I've narrowed it down between osso buco and rosemary mushroom risotto. Which would you prefer?"

This woman.

The way she made me feel was indescribable, and the more time I spent with her, the more I was around her, the harder and faster I could feel myself falling for her.

There was so much about her that I adored, and as though the woman she was wasn't enough, she was a phenomenal cook, too. She was constantly cooking, and every night I'd spent at her place and had dinner with her, she'd always send me off to work the next day with leftovers. I never expected or demanded it, but that didn't mean I didn't absolutely love it.

Sometimes, I found myself wondering if that was how it would always be. Sophie was someone I believed I could see spending my life with, and if things went that far, would I

come home to her and her meals? Would she send me off to work the next day with leftovers? Or was it happening now because it was new between us?

I wasn't sure it mattered either way. I would never presume to have her waiting on me hand and foot, but it filled me up in a way I hadn't been expecting when she went out of her way to please me, not only when it came to cooking food, but in the bedroom as well.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, Sophie, but I don't know what either one of those are," I confessed, noting the look of delight that washed over Avalon's face.

"Are you serious?" Sophie countered.

"I'm not making it up."

I listened as she took a deep breath before she revealed, "Well, osso buco is veal shanks slow cooked in white wine and tomato broth. I'd probably pair that with some mashed potatoes. And rosemary mushroom risotto is the Italian way to make rice. I'd use arborio rice and cook it in a broth until it becomes creamy. Obviously, in this case, I'd add mushrooms and rosemary, but it's a dish that can have other ingredients to flavor it. I'd likely pair that with some chicken, if you want to try the risotto. Either one works for me, and they're both delicious, but I figured I'd leave it up to you to decide what you want."

It all sounded great. Truth be told, I didn't think there'd ever be a day when Sophie could feed me something she'd made that I wouldn't like. I definitely wanted to try both meals, but another idea popped into my head.

"Why don't you stick with just the pizzas for tomorrow, and instead of you taking the time to cook today, you spend your time picking out one of your dresses to wear, so I can take you out for dinner?" I advised.

At the same time Avalon clapped her hands in front of her excitedly, Sophie replied, "Are you sure? You know how much I like to cook for you. I really don't mind."

“I know, Sophie, and I appreciate it, but nothing would please me more than to see you all dolled up for dinner out tonight,” I told her.

I swore I could see the hearts forming in Avalon’s eyes.

But it wasn’t just Avalon who had reacted to my words, because Sophie immediately declared, “I’ve got a really great dress I could wear out tonight, if that’s what you want to do.”

“I can’t wait to see it,” I told her.

“Alright, well, that makes my life much easier,” she said. “I’ll let you get back to work, so I can get busy packing up everything else I need before I settle in to do some crocheting this afternoon.”

“That sounds good. I’ll pick you up after work,” I promised.

Sophie’s voice dropped an octave or two when she replied, “I’ll be waiting.”

With that, we said goodbye and disconnected our call. I’d barely slipped my phone back into my pocket when Avalon bubbled, “Oh, man, this is so exciting. You two are already together.”

“We are.”

“How long?”

While some of the guys would keep things from Avalon, I didn’t feel it was necessary in this instance. The reality was, I didn’t feel as though it was anything to hide. I liked the idea of sharing the truth of my relationship with Sophie with anyone who wanted to listen. But beyond that, Avalon was a good woman. She merely wanted to see everyone happy, and I knew this news would only serve to brighten her day more than it already was.

“Since about two days after she came here with those desserts,” I revealed.

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

“Yep.”

Avalon's face lit up. "I'm so happy for you Jax, especially because it sounds like things are going very well for the both of you."

I nodded. "If I'm honest, I didn't ever think I'd find someone like her, but she makes me very happy."

"That's all that matters. And not for nothing, but after she came in here wearing that dress she did when you were still working on her case, I can't say I don't understand why you'd want her to get all dolled up, so you can take her out and show her off. She's gorgeous."

"Who's gorgeous?"

At that question, I looked to my side and saw Damon had walked up. After years of dancing around something we could all see was meant to be, Damon and Avalon had finally admitted their feelings to one another. They were together now, and it was no surprise he'd walked up to join the conversation, considering he was the one who was usually standing beside her desk every morning.

"Jax's girlfriend," Avalon revealed.

Damon looked at me. "Girlfriend?"

I didn't get a chance to respond before Avalon explained, "Her name is Sophie, and she came in here a few weeks ago needing the help of a private investigator. Jax got the job done, and it seems that Sophie wasn't quite ready to let him go. Now, they've been seeing each other for a couple of weeks, Jax is picking her up after work today, and he asked her to get all dolled up, so he could take her out to dinner. Trust me, Damon. She's so beautiful. I can see exactly why Jax wants to show her off."

I hadn't exactly thought about it like that, but when she said it, I had to admit she wasn't wrong. I liked the idea of Sophie being mine and showing her off. I felt beyond lucky to have her.

"Congrats, man. That's awesome. I'm happy for you," Damon said.

"Yeah, thanks."

“You guys are all dropping like flies,” Avalon murmured.

“What?”

The smile that formed on her face said it all. This made her whole day. “Jax is now the eleventh guy here at Harper Security Ops to fall for the girl who needed his help. Before you know it, everyone is going to be spoken for. This is incredible. I can’t wait to see who’s next.”

I shifted my attention to Damon as my lips twitched. “I’m not touching that one, so I’ll leave you two to figure it out.”

“Well, if I don’t manage to see you again before you leave, have a great time tonight with your girl, and enjoy your pizza tomorrow,” Avalon bubbled.

Laughing, I returned, “Yeah, I will. Thanks.”

With that, I turned and walked away to head toward my office. And as I did that, I couldn’t stop the words Avalon had said from popping into my head. She’d said I was the eleventh guy to fall for the girl who needed help.

Was that what happened?

Had I fallen?

I couldn’t say for sure, but I knew that what I felt for Sophie was unlike anything I’d felt for anyone else.

That had to mean something, didn’t it?



There was no question about it.

Sophie’s life mission had to be her efforts to force my heart to stop with the way she dressed and waited for me outside her front door when I pulled up in my truck.

I had to do a double take, because for half a second, I thought she didn’t have anything on.

But upon further inspection, I realized it was just the dress.

I exited my truck and moved toward her, taking it all in. As I did that, I realized this was something I could absolutely get used to. Nothing would have made me happier than to come home from work every day to find this woman waiting outside for me.

Sophie's gorgeous mass of hair was cascading down her back and over her shoulders, the silhouette of her body perfectly outlined in the form-fitting dress she had on. The neutral color of the dress, just a shade or two lighter than her skin tone, came to a stop just an inch or two below her knee. The fabric hugged her body, and though it was long-sleeved, those sleeves started just beneath the outer cap at the top of her arms. Her shoulders were bare, and the skin along her neck and collarbone was exposed.

Coming to a stop in front of her, I asked, "Is there anything you put on that doesn't look stunning on you?"

Her eyes twinkled. "Do you like it?"

"Like it? Sophie, every time I think I understand what I've got sleeping beside me, you find new ways to show me just how beautiful you are. I love it."

She smiled at me, flashing her brilliant white teeth. "I thought you'd appreciate it. I'm all set, but I could really use your help carrying my things."

As she turned to move back inside the house, I reached for her wrist. Sophie stopped moving and turned back to look at me.

I cocked an eyebrow. "Forgetting something?"

"What?"

"Honey, kiss me."

A sheepish look washed over her. "Sorry."

Turning fully, Sophie stepped forward, placed her hands lightly on my shoulders, and lifted her mouth to mine. She gently brushed her lips against mine before going in for the full kiss.

Her lips were so soft, and she smelled fantastic. It was no wonder my hands were gripping her hips so tightly. I had to exercise every ounce of self-control I had in order to not strip her dress off of her right there.

When she finally tore her mouth from mine, I suggested, “You better show me what you need me to carry, because if we don’t get out of here now, we’re not going to leave.”

“I’d be alright with that,” she insisted.

Something squeezed in my chest. This woman deserved to have the world handed to her on a silver platter. Hell, most people would say she’d grown up with a silver spoon in her mouth. But none of that mattered. Because Sophie was as real as they came. She was humble, thankful, and easygoing. And it was all of that which made me want to give her everything I could.

So, I shook my head. “I’m taking you out tonight, Sophie. That dress deserves a proper date.”

“Okay.”

At that, Sophie turned and moved toward the door. I followed behind her, so I could grab her things. Then we were in my truck on the way back to my place, and I was looking forward to whatever the night was going to bring.

SEVENTEEN



Sophie

This had been the right decision.

No matter how hard he'd tried to talk me out of it, this was absolutely necessary. I was so glad I'd urged Jax to bring me to his place, because I'd gotten this. *This* being what I was getting now.

Insight into the man I was quickly beginning to fall for.

After picking me up at my place, Jax didn't immediately take us out for dinner. He brought me back to his house, so he could shower and change his clothes from work. While he took off upstairs to do that, I went about unloading the bags he'd carried in for me—the ones containing all of the ingredients we needed for tomorrow's dinner and dessert—and put everything that needed to be there in the refrigerator.

Since that only took me a couple of minutes, it was no surprise that Jax hadn't yet finished and joined me again downstairs. So, I took the time to walk around and check things out. I found I enjoyed having the time, because it was then when Jax's initial reaction to my request to come here made sense.

Jax didn't go over the top with decorating his home. He stuck to the essentials and had the basics of what he needed for furniture, but he didn't have any accent pieces or art covering his walls. There were no knick-knacks or decorative pieces.

But what Jax did have was, arguably, better.

He had photos.

God, there were so many photos everywhere.

And though I'd spent the time inspecting as many as I could while I waited for him to return, the truth was that I started to get antsy. I wanted to ask him about all the people in the photos, because from where I stood, people didn't wind up in framed photos around anyone's house unless they were important.

With so many picture frames around, I had assumed I'd seen the same people over and over again.

I was wrong.

There were pictures of him with groups of people, and there were pictures of him with individuals. Several of them looked like they'd been captured while he was deployed, as the men in the photos, Jax included, were all wearing their military fatigues.

Seeing those particular pictures made my heart squeeze in my chest. Were these guys the ones he'd served with who lost their lives? Were they his buddies he'd told me about? It was heartbreaking to know he'd suffered that kind of loss. At the same time, if these were those men, it said a lot about the kind of guy Jax was that he wanted to keep their memory alive and present in his house.

In addition to this, there were also many frames that held images of Jax with a variety of people wearing civilian clothes. There were photos of him with groups or men and woman, and there were some of him with just one guy or one girl. Not that I thought I was the jealous type, but I really hoped the pictures of him with other women weren't his ex-girlfriends. As someone who moved on after a relationship ended, preferring to leave it all in the past, something hit me.

There were a lot of areas in our lives where Jax and I could easily be described as opposites. Was this one of them?

Until I had answers from him, I figured it was best not to speculate.

So, I continued to peruse the pictures until I landed on four that held me captive for a long time.

The first was one of Jax standing with an older couple. While I couldn't be certain, I had a feeling they were his parents. If that was the case, nothing would have made me happier. Because he seemed to be incredibly happy, and I hoped he still had a wonderful relationship with them.

The remaining three frames held photos of Jax with children. Young children. The youngest had to have been a matter of a few months old, while the oldest couldn't have been more than three years old. While anyone could look at the pictures and decide they were the kind to evoke a smile and an overall feeling of good, they did something else to me.

Because Jax looked not only happy, but completely at ease, too. My heart pounded wildly in my chest. I didn't think they were his children—God, I hoped he hadn't hidden anything like that from me all this time—but it was obvious they meant a great deal to him. And seeing that, seeing him captured for a moment in time with these babies, an overwhelming sense of longing moved through me.

I wanted that.

I wanted the man in these photos to be part of my life in a very permanent way.

I was quickly caught up in the fantasy, envisioning a future for myself that included not only Jax but the babies we could make.

They'd be beautiful. We'd have a gorgeous family.

Realizing I was entering dangerous territory and needing to stop myself, I shook the thoughts from my head and continued to scan through the frames in the room. I hadn't managed to get through all of the photos when I heard Jax descending the stairs. He made his way into the room wearing a smile on his face and looking more handsome than ever.

Ignoring everything in the room, he kept his eyes pinned on mine and walked right toward me. Jax didn't hesitate to slip

his arms around my waist, so he could tug me close and press a tender kiss to my cheek.

“Hey, handsome. You look nice,” I told him.

“I’m glad you think so. I wanted to look like I belonged with you,” he replied.

He smelled so good, it was impossible not to touch my mouth to him, so I could inhale the scent of him. I kissed his cheek, moved to his jaw, and finally made my way to his neck. One of Jax’s hands drove into my hair and began to get tangled in my locks as I allowed my lips to linger on the skin at his neck.

I pulled back just a touch, my lips taking a journey toward his. Once they found his mouth and were just barely brushing against his lips, I whispered, “You smell fantastic.” I pressed a kiss to his mouth. “And you always look like you belong with me.”

His expression warmed, and his features softened as he loosened the grip he had on my hair. “Did you get all of the food put away?”

“I did.”

“Are you ready to go?”

I turned slightly, keeping the side of my body pressed against his. “Yes, but I wanted to ask you about these pictures.”

“What about them?”

Palm facing up, I swept my free arm out in front of me. “Well, who are all of these people? Are they your friends? Family? I feel like I’ve been talking to you for so long about my dad, my nonna, and my aunt and uncle, and I don’t know anything about the important people in your life. Clearly, you’ve got a lot of them.”

He chuckled. “I do. But that’s just par for the course when you’re from a big family.”

Intrigued did not begin to describe what I felt in that moment. “A big family? How big?”

There was a split second of hesitation, like Jax wasn't sure how I'd react to his response, but he moved past whatever was holding him back. "I'm one of six kids. I've got three brothers and two sisters. Two of my brothers are older, and one sister is older. Then I've got one younger brother and a younger sister."

I could feel my eyes dancing with excitement. "So, are the babies in the pictures your nieces and nephews?"

Jax's face lit up. "They are some of the best humans in my life. One niece, two nephews. And there isn't anything I wouldn't do for those kids."

He was making my entire night. "And are these your parents?" I questioned him, pointing to the photo of him with the older couple.

"Yep."

"So, you're close with your family?"

"I am. I always have been."

My eyes roamed over his handsome face. "I love that you've got a big family and have a great relationship with them. Will you take me to dinner and tell me all about them?"

The corners of his mouth tipped up. "Nothing would make me happier."

At that, Jax reached for my hand, linked his fingers through mine, and led me out of the house. Then he took me to dinner, where I spent the entire time learning all about his family, his childhood, and the people who'd helped to make Jax into the man he was today.

And it was somewhere in the middle of it all when I no longer had any doubts. Going to Jax's place was the best idea I'd had. Because learning as much as I did, it all became clear.

Jax was the man meant for me.



“Do you like that?”

I’d dropped down to my forearms, my ass in the air, and attempted to brace for more of his thrusts. My hips in his hands, Jax was powering his cock into me from behind.

He was going so hard, so deep.

Twisting my neck to the side, I tried to look back at him. “I love it.”

Jax’s fingers squeezed my flesh tighter in his grasp, like he was afraid if he didn’t, he might somehow never be able to touch me again.

I hated to think he might have had that thought.

Because that couldn’t have been further from the truth, especially now. Especially after tonight.

I’d gotten so much more than I’d bargained for tonight at dinner. I’d already been feeling something extraordinary for him, but when he’d shared all that he had with me about his family and the relationship he had with them, I melted even more.

It was no surprise we’d barely gotten through the door to his place when I’d attacked him. I wanted him in the worst way, and Jax didn’t seem to have the slightest problem with giving me what I wanted.

We’d only managed to make it to his living room, where he’d expertly undressed the both of us while I struggled to keep my mouth from kissing every part of him I could. Once we were naked, we went at each other, and we’d done it hard.

Reckless.

Wild.

“I know you do, Sophie. I know how much you love my cock.”

I did.

I loved his cock.

“Jax,” I moaned, lost in all that he was giving me.

Though he kept one of his hands planted there, he loosened his hold on my hips. “Show me,” he demanded, slowing the pace of his thrusts while his other hand began gathering my hair and wrapping it around his knuckles. “Show me how much you love this and ride my cock.”

Jax’s pace had slowed to a stop, forcing a whimper of displeasure to escape. But I knew if I wanted it back, if I wanted him to give me what I knew he’d always give me, I had to find a way to give him what he wanted.

So, I got to work.

Balling my hands into fists, the edge of the couch cushion firmly in my grasp, I began riding him. I worked myself over his length, and I didn’t hold back in my effort to deliver something I believed he’d enjoy.

“That’s my good girl,” he growled. “Showing me how much your pussy loves my cock.”

“Do you like it?” I panted.

I hadn’t relented in my movements, always eager to please him the same way he was with me.

“There’s nothing better than watching you take me like this. My hands on your ass and in your hair while I watch my dick sliding inside you, Sophie, there’s nothing better.”

He was right.

Even if I couldn’t watch in this position, I’d watched in others. There really wasn’t anything better.

After allowing me to work him for just a bit longer, Jax brought my movements to a stop, holding me firmly against him. With his cock deep inside of me, I didn’t mind. I’d have stayed like that all night.

But Jax wasn't interested in keeping me like that all night. He wanted what I knew we both wanted just a touch more of.

Removing his hand from my hip, he snaked it around the front of my body, at the same time, he tugged back on my hair, forcing my arms from the couch. A moment later, my back was pressed against his chest, and Jax's hand got tangled deeper in the mass of hair on my head, angling so my face was pointed in his direction. Then, after squeezing both of my breasts, his other hand slid down my body and went right between my legs.

With his mouth right against mine, Jax spoke. "Let me take us there, Sophie. Let me give you what you want."

"Please," I begged.

"You want it?" he asked.

"Always."

He smiled and began driving his hips forward. "Such a good girl."

Jax's fingers rubbed me right where I needed it while he filled me from behind. And his mouth claimed mine in the most possessive and greedy way.

I happily let him.

Because it was glorious. Magnificent.

Though it had always been like this with him, it still blew my mind, sometimes. Because it just seemed to keep getting better and better.

Being here with him like this, willing to take whatever he wanted to give, and eager for more, as long as he wanted to give it to me, I realized nobody would ever compare.

The physical relationship we had was just one small facet of the bigger thing that was building between us.

And it suddenly occurred to me that perhaps what was happening wasn't just about the physical connection between us. Jax had been stellar from the start. Things had been hot

from the beginning. Maybe this was about something else entirely.

Something I was finally ready to admit to myself.

Jax meant the world to me. Everything.

Our connection went deeper than that. The pull to him was stronger and stronger with each day that passed, and my heart was caught up in something I never wanted to be without.

No matter what life threw my way, I wanted Jax there with me through it all. I didn't want to lose him ever.

I wanted him. I wanted to meet his big family. I wanted him to meet my family.

I wanted the sex with him, but I wanted the cuddles, too.

I wanted the phone conversations and the laughter.

I wanted endless dinners together.

I wanted everything with Jax.

Because I'd fallen in love with him.

And it was on that thought when it happened.

My orgasm hit, and pleasure ripped through my body. Shuddering and trembling, the force of it so strong, I had no choice but to rip my mouth from his in an effort to catch my breath.

It was so powerful and lasted so long that somewhere in the middle of it, Jax found his own release. I only knew that was the case when I felt his teeth sink into the skin on the top of my shoulder, right where it met my neck.

And once the high of it left us, the both of us collapsing to the couch, I had to fight every urge inside of me, desperately wanting to tell him how much I loved him.

It was only by some miracle that I succeeded.

EIGHTEEN



Jax

It was the smile on her face as she lifted the basil leaf up to her nose and inhaled.

It was the way she found such joy in the smallest things.

It was her generous and compassionate heart.

It was her zest and appreciation for life.

Mostly, though, it was the way in which she looked after me.

And I didn't care how that made me sound. I liked the idea of her looking after me, because the way in which she did it was the kind of thing that would only make me a better man for her.

Because this was a two-way street.

She might have taken care of me the way she did, but it was no more or less than the way I looked after her. The way I'd protect her and keep her safe. The way I'd comfort her and hold her. The way I'd talk and laugh with her.

So, it was all the things I'd gotten from Sophie from the first day I met her until now, when she was standing in my small kitchen, preparing pizza with me like it was the best thing she'd ever done, with a smile plastered on her face that I felt in my dick, that forced the words past my lips.

“I love you.”

Everything came to a halt.

Sophie's body tensed, and the smile was gone. I didn't take it to mean something bad. I knew it was merely her feeling shocked by what she heard, perhaps questioning if she'd heard me properly.

Slowly, she lowered the basil from in front of her face and twisted her neck, so she could look in my direction. Her eyes roamed over my face, searching for something. Seeking answers to the questions that were likely rattling through her brain.

When she got none, and I made no move to speak again, she whispered her response. "What?"

Just as I had suspected. The hushed sound of her voice indicated she had heard me, but the word she spoke revealed her disbelief.

Something swelled in my chest as I took in the sight of her beautiful face. Then I took two steps toward her and closed the remaining distance between us. I leaned my lower back against the counter, crossing my ankles in front of me and keeping my eyes on hers. Sophie was still gripping the basil firmly in one hand as both of her forearms came to rest on the cutting board.

She was holding her breath, hanging on until I gave her what she needed.

"I love you, Sophie."

The air left her lungs. "You... you do?"

The corners of my mouth tipped up. "I do. Since the moment I met you, I knew there was something about you that was special. When I wasn't around you, I couldn't stop thinking about you. Now that we're together, that hasn't changed at all. From the start, I had all of these thoughts about the kind of woman you were. And while I was right about some of it, there was a lot that I'd been mistaken about. You were so unexpected, honey."

"Jax..." she rasped, her voice trailing off.

I didn't mind that she was struggling to find her words. I had plenty more to share. "There's so much about you to love.

You never hold yourself back from saying or acting precisely how you feel. A woman like you would have every reason to be uptight, and you're the exact opposite. You didn't care that it was our first date. You didn't need to wait inside until I came up the stairs to knock on your door. You walked right out to greet me outside the moment I arrived, because you were that excited to see me. As much as I'll never forget the dress you wore that night, it's you waiting there for me when I got out of my truck that'll be burned in my brain forever. Like me, you realize just how precious life is, and you want to make sure you live it to the fullest. You don't dwell on the things that don't matter, and the way you care about people, the way you care about me, makes it impossible not to fall in love with you. All that you are, I never stood a chance."

Unshed tears were in her eyes, and her lips had parted slightly. The silence stretched between us, and all I could bring myself to do was wait. If I knew anything about Sophie, it was that she had something to say and simply needed a minute to pull herself together to share it.

A minute later, she proved I wasn't wrong.

"I love you, too," she blurted after she dropped the basil and placed her hand on my arm. "I was attracted to you from the start, but I knew it was so much more than that the day you called to tell me you were tracking the cars. I was terrified something would happen to you. And ever since that first date, you've done nothing but make me feel like I'm the best thing that's ever happened to you, like you believe you're the lucky one. As I got to know you and learn your heart, I found myself desperate to be a woman worthy of your love. I would have failed miserably at trying to play hard to get. There was no way I could do that with you, because that's how badly I wanted you. But you've made the effort worth it every single day, Jax. I'm so in love with you, and I'm afraid you'll never feel even a fraction of it."

That was it.

There was nothing left to say.

I didn't care that the oven was on, waiting for the pizza to be put in.

This was far more important. This was something I refused to pretend didn't matter.

So, I didn't waste a second.

I lifted my hand to her cheek and urged her to lean in my direction. Then I captured her mouth with mine as I pushed off the counter, slipped my other arm around her waist, and lifted her.

Sophie let out a moan and instantly wrapped her legs around my back. Since the counter space was lacking in the kitchen, and most of it was already covered with our dinner preparations, I began moving.

As I walked out of the kitchen, Sophie's mouth separated from mine and moved to my neck. She began to lick and nip at the skin there while I climbed the stairs to head to the bedroom.

Her lips made their way to my ear, where she whispered, "Where are we going?"

"To the bedroom, honey. I want to do this differently," I explained.

There was no denying that Sophie and I had our fair share of sex since that first time. More often than not, it happened somewhere other than the bedroom. That wasn't to say that it never happened there, but generally, we were in the kitchen, on the couch, in the shower, against a wall, or just about anywhere else that the mood happened to strike.

It was often playful, sometimes rough, but always unbelievably good.

Today, especially after we'd both just shared all that we had, I thought it was necessary to express it physically. For once, I wanted to take my time with her. I wanted to go slow. Be gentle. The two of us deserved to have it all.

Sophie might have had a different idea in her head or simply not realized what I had in store for her, because by the

time I'd made it to the top of the stairs, she was already using the strength in her legs to help her move her hips and seek out that friction.

It seemed I was going to have to take charge, like I usually did, to make sure we both got what I wanted us to get out of this.

Carefully, gently, I lowered us to the bed. Sophie's limbs continued to cling to my body, like she'd lose me forever if she let me go.

I pulled my head back just enough to capture her mouth with mine. And for a long time, all I did was kiss her.

Kiss her and relish the sounds of her moaning as her hands roamed over my body. Eventually, I rolled us, going to my back and allowing her to be on top. We were still fully clothed, but Sophie didn't seem to care.

She was eager.

Enthusiastic.

We continued to kiss as she frantically worked her hips over me.

And after she pushed my shirt up my body and ripped it over my head, forcing the first break in the connection between our mouths, I took the opportunity to do the same with her.

With both of us naked from the waist up, Sophie attempted to dive right back in and go for the gusto.

I appreciated her impatience, feeling a bit desperate for more myself, but I wanted something else just a bit more.

So, I rolled us again.

I began trailing kisses down her body, taking my time to lavish her breasts. I hadn't quite gotten my fill when I went lower, my mouth moving across the soft skin of her belly, and over to the opposite hip.

My hands curled around the material there and began dragging it down her legs. Once it was gone, my own clothes

were gone, and I'd rolled on a condom, kissing up her legs. It was a slow process, and Sophie was groaning. "Jax," she moaned.

I smiled against the skin on her inner thigh, feeling her muscles trembling beneath. Wanting to work my way over to the other side, I didn't avoid touching my lips to her pussy. It was a featherlight kiss, one that had Sophie reaching down to grasp me behind my head. I lifted one of my hands to her wrist, removed her hand, and offered her a swipe of my tongue. Then I shifted my head to the opposite thigh, paying special attention there.

After teasing her there, I went back to her pussy. Once again, I was gentle, barely applying any pressure with my mouth before I kissed up her body, stopping once more at her breasts.

Only when my mouth had made it to hers did I reach down between us, position myself, and slid inside.

I couldn't describe the sound that came from her. It was raw, guttural.

"Honey," I whispered against her lips as I began to thrust slowly into her.

"Jax," she panted. She attempted to move her hips against me frantically. "Faster, handsome."

I shook my head. "No, Sophie. We're going slow."

She tried and failed once more to work up to a faster pace. "Please."

"Do I always take care of you?" I asked, completely stopping the movement of my hips.

Sophie froze and rasped, "Yes."

"I'll take care of you now, too," I promised. "But I want this. I want slow and sweet with you now. Give me softness. Tenderness. Can you do that?"

Instantly, she complied, her body melting beneath mine.

I smiled and whispered, "Good girl."

And then I gave us both what I wanted us to have. I moved slowly and offered gentle caresses and tender touches. Sophie did the same, allowing me to give what I was giving while submitting her own brand of sweetness to the mix.

She kissed.

God, she kissed so much.

And her hands moved on my skin in a way I'd never forget.

Time passed, it felt like it had been hours, and somehow, it still didn't feel like nearly enough.

With all that we were both feeling not only in our bodies but also in our hearts, it was nearly impossible to stave off the inevitable.

We came together, our eyes locked on one another in what was easily the most intimate moment we'd ever experienced with each other. I'd never witnessed anything more beautiful in my entire life.

"I love you, Sophie," I said when we'd both made it to the other side.

I was still inside her when she replied, "I love you, too."

We kissed each other again, neither of us able to stop ourselves from moaning.

"It's a good thing we didn't put the pizza in the oven, because it would have been burnt by now," Sophie declared when we begrudgingly tore our mouths from each other.

"Yeah. But it's even better that we've worked up an appetite now, don't you think?"

Her eyes darkened. "I always feel hungry when I'm around you."

Okay, so it was that, too.

That was just one more reason to love this woman. She loved our physical relationship, and she wasn't shy about sharing that.

“Then let’s go back down so you can eat, and later, after we watch a movie, I’ll make sure I feed you something else. But fair warning, I’ll probably need a taste of you first.”

A shiver ran down her spine. Sophie was obviously on board with my plan.

So, the two of us got up, got cleaned up, and made our way back downstairs. And before I knew it, we were sinking our teeth into the homemade margherita pizza.

I moaned after I’d taken the first bite, wondering if I’d ever get used to the way I felt every time I tasted a new food she’d made. “This is so good, Sophie.”

“You like it?”

“No, I love this. Everything you’ve ever made is delicious, but this is definitely in the top three,” I explained.

Smiling, she promised, “I’ll put it in the regular meal rotation, so you can have it more frequently.”

Just like that.

Without a second thought, Sophie was already working out how to give me more of something I liked. Acts of service seemed to be the way Sophie showed her love, and I wanted her to know how much I appreciated it.

“Sophie?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t know if I’ve ever communicated this to you in the way that I’m about to, but I think it’s important you hear it,” I declared.

She set her piece of pizza down on the plate in front of her and sent a curious look my way. “Okay. What’s going on?”

My eyes roamed over her face, taking in every gorgeous feature and feeling nothing but love and gratitude. “The way you seek to please me is a massive turn-on. I love it. I love that you can hear me say how much I like a particular food, and you’re already thinking of how or when you’ll make it for me again. If that isn’t enough, there’s the way you are in the

bedroom. I see the way you trust me with your body and your pleasure. It means everything to me to know you have that level of confidence in the man I am. I think it's important that I tell you not only how much it turns me on, but also that I'll never exploit that. I'll never use it against you. Whether it's food, sex, or anything else, you'll always be safe with me."

Her features softened, and her expression warmed. "Maybe it's crazy, but for some strange reason, you've always made me feel that way. And when it comes to romantic relationships, I've never felt that way with anybody else. It means the world that I have it with you."

The two of us started eating again, and though I spent a large chunk of time enjoying the food I was putting in my mouth, I'd have been lying if I said I wasn't enjoying sitting across the table from her even more.

This selfless woman had turned my whole world upside down in the best way possible, and I was convinced I'd never get used to the feeling.

"Jax, can I talk to you about something?" she asked, her voice breaking into my thoughts.

"Honey, I just told you, you'll always be safe with me. You can talk to me about anything," I assured her.

She nodded slowly, a cautious look donning her expression. "I've been thinking a lot for the last few days, and after what we just shared today, I can't seem to get it out of my head."

Suddenly, I was feeling nervous. I hadn't noticed any change in Sophie over the last several days. She'd always been her happy, bubbly self, seducing me or feeding me at nearly every turn. Had I been so caught up in everything she was giving to me that I'd overlooked something?

"What's going on?" I asked.

She sucked in a deep breath, took a sip of her drink, and focused her attention on me. "Since they're approaching, I was wondering what the holidays look like for you. Do you have any traditions with your family?"

“We always get together and celebrate, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Sophie nodded her understanding. “Okay. And is it a big celebration? Do you have multiple meals a day for each of the holidays? Is it always done at your parents’ place, or does it change every year?”

Tipping my head to the side, I assessed her. I didn’t think there was anything wrong with what Sophie was asking, and I was more than prepared to answer all of her questions, but I had the sneaking suspicion this wasn’t just about her trying to learn more about me.

“What’s this really about?” I asked her.

She dropped her gaze and shrugged. “Nothing. I was just curious.”

I reached across the table and placed my hand on top of hers. Stroking my fingers back and forth along the skin there, I urged, “Sophie, look at me.” She brought her eyes to mine. “You want us to spend the holidays together, don’t you?”

Her teeth bit down on the corner of her lip, forcing my eyes to drop to it. Only after she released it did she respond. “I wanted it before, but after today, there’s nothing I want more than to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with you. But I realize this is new, and you might have traditions with your family that might make it impossible. I’m just trying to work out when you and I could celebrate together.”

“What do you normally do?”

I braced myself for her response, because it dawned on me that she had lost her father a couple of years ago. If she told me she spent the holidays alone, I was convinced I might be sick. Nobody deserved to be alone on the holidays, but I especially didn’t want it for a woman like her, not when she was as compassionate, caring, and loving as she was.

“Well, I always used to celebrate with my dad. We’d do our own thing, just the two of us, every holiday, and then we’d alternate between going to my aunt and uncle’s house or having them come to ours. The year he died, I didn’t do

anything. I stayed home and grieved, despite my uncle's insistence that I join them. I just couldn't do it. But the year after, I spent part of the day alone and joined them later in the afternoon."

God, I didn't want that for her. "Do you want to spend part of the day with my family and part of it with yours this year?"

Hope surged in her. "Would you be okay with that?"

My lips twitched. "Sophie, I'm learning very quickly, there isn't much I won't do for you."

Tears filled her eyes. "I love you."

Hearing that, out of the blue, something tightened in my chest. It was just one more thing to add to the list of things I'd never get tired of when it came to her.

"I love you, too."

She nodded. "Yeah, you make it impossible not to know that."

The moment she said those words, I realized I wanted more. I wanted her to always feel that way, and the only way I could ever make that happen was to know what she wanted.

"I have another question."

"Okay."

"If you could paint the perfect picture of what your holidays would look like five years from now, what would I see?" I asked.

Nerves consumed her. "You really want me to be honest about that?"

"Honey, how can I give you everything you want if I don't know what it is?"

"You're going to make me cry," she rasped.

I squeezed her hand. "Don't cry. Just tell me how it would look."

"I'd be at my house with my husband and our babies," she started, her voice slightly shaky. "We'd do things just like I did

with my dad, spending our time together as a family in the mornings. But then the rest of our family, every single one of them, would join us for lunch and dinner. And we'd eat and talk and laugh and make memories. And we'd be exhausted by the end of it, but we'd love every moment of it."

"That's what you want?" I asked.

She nodded. "I have that big, empty house, Jax. I want to fill it with love and family."

I smiled at her. "How many babies?"

"As many as my husband wants to give me."

Fuck.

Jesus, fuck, I wanted to be the one to give her all of that.

Squeezing her hand one final time, I promised, "I'll see what I can do to give you all of that by next year."

"Jax, I wasn't—"

"No, Sophie. It might be new between us, and we have some time still, but I've been around long enough to know what's important. I'm not interested in letting you go, so if all that you just shared is what you want, I'm going to give it to you."

She stared at me for a long time, unable to move or speak. I wondered if maybe I'd given her too much too soon.

Of course, that thought flew out the window when she asked, "Can I come over there and kiss you?"

"Honey, don't ever ask me that question again. Next time, just get up and come over here."

Sophie didn't hesitate. She stood, rounded the table, and came to a stop beside me. I pulled her into my lap and allowed her to kiss me.

"I love you, Jax."

I grinned against her lips. "I love you, too."

After we kissed again, Sophie spent the rest of dinner sitting in my lap, kissing me in between us taking bites of our

pizza. Nothing had ever tasted so delicious.

NINETEEN



Sophie

“I’m going to miss you.”

With my arms thrown over Jax’s shoulders, I relished the feel of his strong and comforting embrace.

It was Monday morning, and he’d just brought me home. We’d spent the entire weekend together at his place, and it had made up some of the most magical days of my entire life. The time we spent together, the memories we shared, and most importantly, the words we’d said, were all things I wouldn’t soon forget.

Now, even if I knew he had to return to work, I still wanted him to know how much I wished he could stay with me.

Jax’s arms tightened around me. “I’m going to miss you, too. But I promise I’ll be over here as soon as I leave work.”

I didn’t know if I could wait that long. And considering all that Jax had done to leave me feeling satisfied all weekend, right up through this morning, I had to wonder how Jax was going to make it. Because no matter how hard I tried, it seemed impossible for me to deliver anywhere near the same number of orgasms to him that he’d given to me.

Realizing just how much of a struggle it was going to be for me, I wanted to make sure Jax wouldn’t suffer the same fate.

So, I loosened my hold around his neck and slid my palms down his chest as I pulled my face back to look at him. “How

would you feel about a special sendoff this morning?"

"What?"

I began swaying my hips back and forth, a smile tugging at the corners of my mouth, and allowed my palms to drift down his torso. When my hands made it to his waist, they shifted to the fly of his jeans. "I just think I need to drop to my knees and give you something, so you'll remember me today."

"Sophie, there's not a day that goes by when I don't think about you," he assured me.

I unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans, then I dropped to my knees. As I began dragging his jeans and underwear down his legs, I replied, "I know. But I'd like for you to have really nice thoughts today."

Without waiting for his response, I curled my fingers around the base of his cock, parted my lips, and took him in my mouth. The second I had him inside, I moaned.

Jax's hand was immediately in my hair, and when I glanced up at him, the look of adoration on his face made my belly clench. "I love your mouth, Sophie."

I knew he did.

How could I not when he looked at me like that?

Wanting to give him the best I had to give, I took him in deeper. Sucking harder, moving faster, I did not relent. Deeper and deeper, until I could feel him moving down the back of my throat, I was fueled by the overwhelming desire to please him.

The faster I moved, the more suction I applied, the tighter his grip on my hair and the louder his groans.

Knowing how turned on he was, loving that I'd done that to him, I couldn't stop myself from moaning.

"Fuck," he growled.

I kept at him, using my tongue and hollowing my cheeks. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do to enhance the

experience for him. Whatever he wanted, whatever it was going to take, I was going to do it.

“You’re going to make me come, Sophie,” he warned me. “Do you want it in your mouth?”

I worked him harder and moaned in response.

Jax’s fingers pressed firmly against the back of my head. “Hold still. Let me fuck your mouth.”

Instantly, I stopped moving.

As Jax held my head in place, he thrust his hips forward, doing it gently. “Good girl, Sophie. You’re such a good fucking girl.”

Every time he said that to me, I felt a spasm between my legs. But I couldn’t focus on that for very long, because before I knew it, Jax was groaning as he spilled his release down my throat. I took it all, every last drop, because there was nothing he could give me that I wouldn’t take.

Jax finished, pulled his hips back, and reached down for me. “Come here,” he ordered gently.

I rose and leaned my weight into his body. “Was it nice?”

He flattened his palm against my belly. “Spectacular. Now, it’s your turn.”

As he slid his hand down into my pants, I argued, “But this was supposed to be for you.”

He dropped his forehead to mine. “And you should know I’m never going to take and never give back to you. It’s just not in me to do that.”

Jax’s fingers slid between my legs, forcing a moan to escape.

With expert-like ease, Jax built me up. The man had finesse, and he wasn’t afraid to demonstrate precisely how good he was at what he could do.

Touching.

Rubbing.

Swirling.

Circling.

There wasn't anything he didn't do.

And while he did that, his mouth kissed mine. His tongue drove inside, exploring and tasting.

He gripped my hair firmly in his hand, winding a fistful of it around his knuckles. And as he tugged back on it, tearing my mouth away from his, he began biting the skin on the front of my throat.

His fingers between my legs never stopped moving. They continued to touch and tease until he eventually drove two of them inside of me. The limited space resulting from my pants still being on only served to make the angle of his hand that much more enjoyable.

Jax knew exactly what to do, and he did it well.

It felt like he'd just gotten his hands on me when I felt something else start to take over me.

Wanting it, needing it, I chased after it. My hips moved frantically, riding his fingers in search of my orgasm.

And when his mouth moved to the side of my neck to kiss and nip the skin just beneath my ear, it happened.

Moaning, my hands flew to his shoulders, and my nails dug in firmly—the only thing that would stop me from collapsing to the ground.

Jax saw me through to the end, working me through each wave of pleasure.

Only after I'd made it to the other side and the both of us had made ourselves decent again did he speak. "Now, what are you going to do with your day?"

Grinning, I countered, "You mean, besides counting down the hours until you're back?"

His lips twitched. "Yes, besides that."

“I’ve got a donation of stuffed animals I’m planning to deliver to the hospital today, and then I’m going to stop at Belmonte Stone to pick up a package that is supposed to be delivered this morning. After that, I’ll probably just head back here, call Nadia, and start making more stuffed animals.”

“More sea creatures?” he asked hopefully.

I shrugged. “I’m thinking I’ll start making some holiday-themed characters.”

A proud look washed over him. “That sounds like a great idea. I’ll see you tonight, honey.”

“Okay, handsome. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

With that, Jax gave me one final kiss and left.

Once Jax left, I spent the next little while taking care of a few things around the house. I did some laundry, cleaned the bathrooms, took out a few items I’d need for dinner later, and changed my clothes.

Then I was out the door and on my way to the hospital. As was always the case, the stuffed animals were a welcome gift. I didn’t stay long, just enough to give what I came to give and to see how few animals were left from the last time I’d brought in a donation. Granted, I was happy they were being given away to the children who came into the hospital, but I hated that so many were used in such a short time.

Once I left the hospital and was back in my car, I decided to call over to Belmonte Stone. Since I’d be going farther away from my house to get there, I figured it was best to check on the package first.

“Good afternoon. Belmonte Stone. This is Ariana. How can I help you?”

“Hi, Aunt Ariana,” I greeted her.

“Sophie?”

“It’s me.”

“What’s going on, dear? Is everything alright?” she questioned me.

I might not have had my mother around growing up, but Aunt Ariana was the next best thing. She’d filled a role in my life that my father, no matter how much he had wanted to, would have never been able to. I loved that she was still just as concerned for me now as she had been when I was only a little girl.”

“Everything is fine,” I promised. “I just wanted to see if a package I had shipped there arrived. It was supposed to be delivered today, and I’m out running around, so I thought I’d stop by to pick it up.”

“Oh, I’m not sure. Let me check with the boys in the shop,” she replied. “Ah, perfect. Diego and Bruno just walked in. Hey, guys, do you know if a package was delivered for Sophie today? She wanted to check before she ran over here.”

I listened and could just barely make out the response.

“No, I don’t think so,” Diego said.

Bruno added, “We got a shipment today, but it was all for the upcoming projects we’re working on.”

“Did you hear that?” Aunt Ariana asked me.

“I did. If it shows up later this afternoon, will you give me a call, so I can come to pick it up?”

“Of course.”

“Thank you.”

With that, I disconnected the call with my aunt and headed home. I grabbed myself some lunch, wishing Jax was there to share it with me. Afterward, I started doing some planning for the next batch of donations I wanted to deliver.

It was late afternoon, about two hours before I was going to put the crocheting aside and start preparing dinner, when my phone rang. Jax’s name, along with a picture of his face, came up on the display.

“Hi, handsome.”

“Hey, honey. How’s it going?” he returned.

“Okay. I spent some time this afternoon planning my holiday-themed projects to crochet, and I just got started on the first one a little bit ago. How’s work?”

There was a brief pause before he replied, “That’s kind of the reason I’m calling you. It pains me to say this, but I don’t think I’m going to make it there tonight. I definitely won’t be there for dinner.”

“Oh, no. Really? Is everything okay?” I asked.

“I’m fine. But I need to help out on a case here, and from the looks of it right now, it’s going to be a late night.”

To say I was disappointed wouldn’t have come close to accurately describing how I felt. “That’s a bummer.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him. “You’ve got to do what you’ve got to do. I’ll be fine.”

“I appreciate you being understanding,” Jax replied. “If it’s not too late, I’ll call you when I get home tonight, but no matter what, I’ll come by tomorrow after work, so I can spend the night with you.”

I wanted nothing more than to see Jax tonight, but I realized he had to work. Making him feel bad about not being able to come and see me wasn’t going to make either one of us feel very good. “That sounds like a wonderful plan. And if it’s too late tonight when you get home, will you at least call me in the morning to talk for a few minutes?”

“I can absolutely do that for you, Sophie.”

“Thanks, Jax.”

“Alright, I need to get back to work here, but hopefully, I’ll talk to you later.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Jax and I disconnected our call, and for a few seconds, I sat there and allowed the disappointment to move through me. Afterward, I got up and put away the things I'd planned to use for dinner. I'd save them for tomorrow night.

Then I got back to work on my project, hoping I'd have something to show Jax by the time he came back to see me.

But much later this evening, hours after I'd spoken to Jax and believed I wasn't going to see him tonight, it happened. My doorbell rang.

I picked up the remote, paused the movie, and plastered a smile on my face as I made my way to the front door.

Opening it up, I was poised to see Jax staring back at me.

Unfortunately, Jax wasn't there.

It was Bruno.

"Bruno. What are you doing here?" I asked him.

He pointed to the box in front of his feet. "Didn't Ariana call you? She said she was going to reach out to let you know that your package had arrived, and that I was going to drop it off for you tonight."

I shook my head. "No, she didn't. She must have forgotten."

Bruno shrugged, bent down, and picked up the box. "Where do you want it?"

After taking a step back, I opened the door wider and said, "Here, just inside the front door, is fine. I'll take care of moving it tomorrow."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Did you want to come in for a bit? Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

He shook his head. "No. No, I've got to get going. "

My eyes did a quick scan, and I realized Bruno was not still wearing his work clothes. He'd clearly gone home,

showered, and gotten himself ready to go out. “Hot date?” I asked, cocking my eyebrow.

He let out a laugh. “Something like that.”

“Alright, well, have a great time. And thanks for dropping this off.”

“It’s no problem. Talk to you later, Sophie.”

“Bye, Bruno.”

As he turned to descend the stairs, I closed the door and locked it. But I hadn’t managed to get back to the couch when another knock came at the door. I started laughing. He probably forgot to tell me something.

But a moment later, it happened.

I opened the door, expecting to see Bruno, and I didn’t.

Or, I didn’t immediately see him.

The biggest reason for that was because my body went flying backward as a man shoved the door open, sending me to my ass. My body landed with a thud, and I only had a second to look outside and see that Bruno was being escorted with his hands bound behind his back into a black SUV.

I’d barely taken that in when the man who’d forced his way into the house came over and yanked me up to standing by my arm. “Let’s go.”

“What? No!” I shouted, yanking on my arm in a vain attempt to free it.

When that didn’t work, I swung my other arm up and clocked him in the face. It was just what I needed to get him to loosen his hold on me. And then I took off running. I went toward the couch, desperate to get my phone, so I could call for help.

But I hadn’t made it more than six or seven feet in that direction when I was tackled to the ground. My back whacked the ground so hard, and I might have allowed that pain to register, but I couldn’t, because I was too busy being worried

about my inability to breathe. The man's body was completely covering mine from behind, crushing me.

Fortunately, he got himself up, but only so he could grab a fistful of my hair and yank me up again. Then he started dragging me away. Though I tried to get free again, it didn't work. The way he was holding on to me made it impossible, so I had no choice but to do go where he was taking me.

There wasn't anything to be grateful for in this situation, especially not once they bound my hands behind my back.

But then they threw me into the same car as Bruno, who had also been tied up, and it was then I felt a smidgen of relief I wasn't alone.

TWENTY



Sophie

It didn't take long to learn why I was sitting in a car with my hands bound behind my back.

Or, I guess, it didn't take long to figure out part of the reason I was where I was. Because it seemed that no sooner had I been tossed inside and gotten my bearings, the Lamborghini, the GT40, and the AC Cobra were being driven down the driveway. The man driving the SUV pulled out behind them.

So, this was about the cars.

The thing I couldn't manage to work out was why I was being taken along for the ride. And Bruno. Poor Bruno had a date he was supposed to be going on, and because he'd been kind enough to drop off my package, he was now caught up in this mess.

"Are you okay? Were you hurt?" he asked me.

Not wanting him to be even more concerned than he already looked, I shook my head and lied, "I'm alright. What about you?"

"I'm okay, I guess. What's going on? Do you know where they're taking us?"

"No, but everything is going to be fine."

If there was something I could give Bruno, at least there was that reassurance. My heart was pounding, and my belly was trembling with the fear I felt about what might happen

next, but there was reason to hope. Because I knew the cars still had trackers on them, and I didn't doubt Jax would be able to find us.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Trust me, I—"

"Shut up!"

That came from the guy that was driving. Evidently, my conversation with Bruno was making it difficult for him to concentrate on following the guy in front of him.

I gave him what he wanted for a few minutes, convincing myself to take the time to try to come up with a plan to get us out of this. As confident as I was in Jax, I didn't think it would be a bad idea to have a backup plan.

The problem was that I wasn't quite sure how I could come up with a plan when I didn't have the slightest clue where we were going and why they'd decided I needed to come along for the ride.

So, even though I realized it probably wasn't a smart idea to start questioning these men, I decided it was more important to try to get some information. And maybe if I distracted them enough, I'd get them to slip up and reveal something that might help me escape.

"Where are you taking us?"

I was surprised I received the response that I did from the guy sitting in the bench seat in front of Bruno and me. "You'll see when we get there. You'll know exactly where you are as soon as we arrive."

While that didn't help me at all, it at least told me I might be able to keep pushing for more information. I mean, they hadn't told me to shut my mouth.

I glanced over at Bruno, saw the worry in his eyes, and spoke again. "You have the cars. What do you need us for? You can let us go."

"You're the insurance."

“Insurance? What does that mean?”

The man turned around, stared me square in the eyes, and seethed, “In case your boyfriend wants to mess things up for us again. You’re the insurance. Though, I’m not sure we’ll need it, considering the timing.”

My eyes darted back and forth as I attempted to work out what that meant. I was insurance in case Jax attempted to mess things up for them again.

How did they even know Jax had done anything the first time? I hadn’t seen any reports about the situation that ever mentioned him by name. There was no way these guys could have known that.

But insurance?

Thoughts and scenarios raced through my mind when it hit me. “You’re going to make him a deal, aren’t you?” I asked.

“We don’t plan on it, but if we have to, we will. We’ll give him the choice of either getting you back unharmed by letting us go, or he can risk your life and try to be a hero.”

I didn’t have to think twice about it. I knew what Jax would do, because the only thing that would matter to him in this situation was me.

I’d been so caught up in all that I was trying to do to come up with a plan that I hadn’t been paying close enough attention to where we were going. But when the driver spoke, my stomach sank. “And here we are.”

I looked out the window and saw it.

We’d pulled into the parking lot at Belmonte Stone, and we were following behind my father’s cars to the ramp that would lead up into the warehouse. At first glance, this might have seemed like it wasn’t a problem, because the cars would be inside a building I owned, but the problem was that the loading dock door was open, and a tractor-trailer was pulled up to it.

Shaking my head, feeling my emotions bubbling to the surface, I said, “No. No, why are we here? What is that truck

for?”

The man in the seat in front of us turned around and shot me a sinister smirk. “We’ve got a boat to catch.”

I blinked my eyes in surprise. “A boat?”

He nodded. “We don’t have a minute to waste.”

Seconds later, the SUV came to a stop, and I watched as the cars were driven up the loading ramp we generally used for the forklifts. Then I glanced at Bruno again, saw he’d grown even more concerned, and leaned toward him.

When the man in front of me started speaking to the driver, I ignored what he was saying and whispered to Bruno, “The cars have trackers. Jax and his team are probably already on their way here.”

“Are you serious?” he replied.

I nodded.

His eyes widened in shock and probably a bit of relief.

Seconds later, the garage door opened, and the cars pulled inside. It didn’t dawn on me until that moment how they’d managed to so easily get into the building. Then again, they’d broken into my garage three times now, so I shouldn’t have been surprised.

I wasn’t able to spend much time dwelling on that anyway, because the next thing I knew, the car door had been opened, and Bruno and I were being shoved forward toward the building. At least Bruno had sneakers on; my feet were bare.

Once we were inside, everything became all too clear. The cars were lined up, ready to be loaded.

“You’ll never get away with this,” I declared.

The men all laughed at me as Bruno shifted back and forth nervously on his feet.

“Just because you seem capable of breaking into places without alarms going off doesn’t mean you don’t have anything to worry about.”

“Oh, we didn’t need to break into this building, sweetheart,” the driver said.

My body tensed. “What?”

“Did you not realize the dock doors were already open with the tractor-trailers backed up to them? And you noticed how we easily came in and drove those cars into this building? We didn’t break in. We were allowed in.”

My lips parted as I stared up at him. “By whom?”

His eyes slid to the side and stayed there. I followed his gaze. A cold, hollow feeling settled in the pit of my stomach.

“Bruno?” I rasped.

He narrowed his eyes at me, but he didn’t respond.

“How could you do this? Why?” I questioned him, my throat tight.

“He didn’t just give us access to the building, Sophie. He was our headhunter.”

I snapped my head back in the man’s direction. “What?”

He tipped his head to the side, allowing his eyes to search my face, and explained, “How do you think we even knew about your cars?”

My body jerked back violently at those words, delivered calmly but with the resulting force of a physical blow.

Bruno had betrayed me.

He’d betrayed my father.

My eyes cut to his. “Why would you do this?”

Bruno looked away and revealed, “On the way here, she revealed there are trackers on the cars. Someone is probably already on the way here.”

The driver started shouting something at the rest of the men standing around, but I didn’t pay attention to any of it. I kept my eyes on Bruno. He refused to look in my direction.

“Look at me,” I ordered through the pain in my throat.

Slowly, he turned his head in my direction.

“Why?”

“I had no choice.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “There’s always a choice. I can’t believe you did this. You betrayed my father. How dare you?”

The words I was saying might have made it seem like I was feeling angry and strong, but the reality was that I felt like I was dying inside.

I’d considered Bruno family. My father had considered him family.

“Do they know? Do my aunt and uncle know about this?”

“They don’t know anything. They brought me here, so I could have opportunities, and where I am getting? I’ve been stuck here doing the same job, watching for years as your father flaunted his wealth with his fancy cars. I saw an opportunity, and I took it.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “And now you’ll pay for it for the rest of your life, because I can promise you won’t get away with this.”

There was nothing left for me to say after that. Because as soon as I got those words out, I was yanked by my hair and dragged across the warehouse to the opposite side. Then I was tossed into the back of the trailer with one of the cars. And just before the doors were shut, someone said, “Enjoy your trip. Let’s hope you know how to swim, or you’ll never make it back.”

A second later, I was plunged into darkness.



Jax

I had been looking forward to doing nothing but grabbing a shower, falling into bed, and calling my girl.

That was it.

But I had only just walked inside my house and kicked off my shoes when it happened.

I received a notification that Sophie's cars were moving. Immediately, my stomach sank, because I knew this was bad news.

Still, despite what I believed was the case, there was a part of me that wanted things to be different. So, I pulled up Sophie's contact on my phone and called her.

It wasn't early, but it definitely wasn't late, either. I expected her to still be awake for at least another hour or two.

The phone rang four times before it went to voicemail. And if I thought I'd been feeling sick when I received the notification about the cars, it paled in comparison to the feeling I got when she didn't answer.

Refusing to waste another minute, I bent down, slipped on my sneakers, and walked right back out the door. I attempted to call Sophie once more, but she didn't answer. I went back to track the cars and confirmed they were still moving and no longer at Sophie's house.

Right.

First, I needed someone to go and check on her. So, I called Forrest. "Jax, what's up?" he answered.

"I need you to head over to Sophie's place. I just got notification that a couple of the cars are moving at her place, and when I tried to call her, she didn't answer. I'm going to follow the cars. Can you check on her?"

"I'm tied up right now, but I'll send Jesse over," he returned.

"Thanks."

Hoping I could rely on the guys who helped me last time, I scrolled to Nixon's contact next. He answered after two rings.

“Hey, Jax.”

“You free?”

“Always. What’s going on?”

“Three of Sophie’s cars are on the move again. Can you assemble a team and track me?”

There was no hesitation. “I’m on it.”

I quickly disconnected the call, pulled up the current location of the cars, and started driving.

Not quite ten minutes later, I was still driving when my phone rang, and Jesse’s name popped up on the display.

“Is she okay?” I asked.

“She’s not here, Jax.”

“What?”

“There are signs of a struggle. Her front door was wide open. I think whoever took those cars made sure to take her, too,” he said.

“Fuck!”

“I’m heading out. I’ll find you and give you some backup,” he answered.

I didn’t respond. I disconnected the call and tried to remain focused on what I was doing. But it wasn’t easy.

It was one thing for me to track cars that had sentimental value to her, and it was something else entirely for the woman I loved to be caught up in the mix.

And though things were already bad, they took a turn toward critical when I suddenly lost the signal of the trackers.

My stomach clenched painfully with the understanding that not only would I fight to locate the cars, but worse, I’d also struggle to find Sophie. There had been a time when I couldn’t think of anything besides finding her car for her, and now, I didn’t care if they were lost forever, so long as I found her safe.

The only option I had at that point was to go to the last place I'd received a signal from. Hopefully, those cars—and Sophie—would still be there.

Only a few minutes later, I arrived. I hadn't realized where my search was going to lead me, but the second I pulled into the lot, I didn't get a good feeling. I was outside Belmonte Stone, and without even entering the building, something felt very wrong.

The garage doors on two loading docks were wide open, and there weren't any other cars in the parking lot. I drove around to the backside of the building and found another garage door open. In any other situation, I might have waited around for the rest of my team to arrive, but knowing that Sophie was missing, I couldn't.

So, I got out and made my way inside.

No sooner did I enter the building, I saw two things. The first was through the open loading dock door. The cars of several of my coworkers had pulled into the lot. The second thing was the tracking devices thrown on the ground.

Scanning the area, nothing else seemed out of order. When Nixon, Magnus, Jake, and Royce all came in, I felt my control slipping.

"They were just here," I told them.

"How do you know?"

I pointed to the trackers. "Not only did I put those on her cars, but I can smell them, too. Do you smell the fuel? That scent is lingering, so they had to have just left."

"Judging by the loading dock doors, I'm guessing we're going to be looking for some tractor-trailers now," Magnus noted.

I nodded. "It's worse than just trying to get the cars."

"What do you mean?" Jake asked.

"Jesse just called me. He went to Sophie's place to check on her, and she wasn't there. Jesse said there were signs of a struggle, and Sophie's front door was left open."

“Damn it,” Royce clipped.

“Where do you think they’re taking her?” Nixon asked.

I shook my head. I couldn’t think straight. “I have no idea, but something about this feels very strange. This is her father’s company. How did they wind up here? Worse, I don’t like how it seems as though they are rushing this. Her door being left open, and all of these doors being wide open. It’s almost as though they either don’t care if they get caught or they’re in a very big hurry.”

“They’re likely in a hurry,” Royce said. “There’s no chance they’d want to risk getting caught again. Unfortunately, they might be out of time. What do you want to do?”

Closing my eyes, my head fell forward. I reached behind my neck and squeezed. I couldn’t screw this up, but I didn’t have the slightest clue as to where to start.

Before I could come up with anything, my phone rang.

“Jesse?” I answered.

“I think I found her,” he said.

“What?”

“You need to start heading east,” he ordered.

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t say for sure, but my best guess is that we’re heading to a port in New Jersey. If you want to get Sophie out of this alive, and before they put her on a boat, I suggest you get moving now. There’s a lot of men involved, at least six or seven, and I’m alone. You know I’ll do whatever I can to rescue her, but the chances of her making it out unharmed are going to be seriously diminished if I don’t have backup.”

“Do whatever you have to do,” I demanded. “We’re on our way.”

At that, I disconnected and looked at the rest of the guys. “Jesse thinks they’re headed to one of the ports in New Jersey.”

“Fuck,” Nixon hissed.

Without another word, we all raced outside and sped out of the lot. I could only hope we were going to make it to Sophie before it was too late.

TWENTY-ONE



Jax

My heart was pounding so hard, I was convinced it was going to beat right out of my chest.

I'd been feeling horrible ever since I received the first call from Jesse telling me Sophie wasn't at her house, but it was about an hour and fifteen minutes into what was going to be a nearly two-hour trip that I felt things change for me.

It was an awful feeling to know I might not make it there on time.

I knew Jesse was close to her, and I knew he'd do everything in his power to make sure she didn't get hurt, but that didn't change the fact that I desperately wanted to be the one there instead.

Sophie was mine, and I knew she was depending on me to find her and bring her home safely.

But what if something happened before I could get to her? What if she'd already been badly injured? I couldn't bear to think that anything worse than that had happened to her.

God, I'd never survive it. I'd never get over it if she didn't make it through this, whole and unharmed.

I was speeding, the guys right behind me, and I still didn't think I was going fast enough.

I didn't doubt Sophie was terrified. I couldn't imagine what she must have been thinking. Did she know I'd be

looking for her? Did she know I wouldn't rest until I found her?

The miles felt as though they were going on forever. With each one that ticked by, I kept seeing Sophie's beautiful face flash in front of me.

My gut twisted painfully.

My hands gripped the steering wheel so tightly; it was a wonder I didn't split it in half.

"Hang on, Sophie. Please hang on," I begged, my plea the only thing filling the silence inside my truck.

After what felt like an eternity, I eventually made it to where Jesse had indicated the trucks stopped about twenty minutes earlier.

"You weren't spotted, were you?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. I kept my distance when we got off the interstate. They have no idea."

Royce, Nixon, Magnus, and Jake all walked up to us, but it was Royce who spoke. "We've got police on the way, and they're about ten minutes out. We don't want to wait to move and risk them showing up and blowing our cover. If that happens, it might not be good for Sophie."

At that, Jesse told us everything about what he'd observed. Two trucks had carried containers here.

Though we were quite a distance back to keep ourselves hidden, we could see from our vantage point where they were and how many men we had to contend with.

There were seven of them, and six of us.

It wasn't ideal, but we'd all been in worse situations. We could handle this.

So, without another minute to waste, the guys and I moved in on foot and got ourselves into position. With everyone ready to go, the blood rushing in my veins, I gave the signal. And it was just seconds after we surprised them and started our take down when I heard the sirens.

Perfect timing.

All I had to do was get through this with my team, and then I'd find my girl.



Sophie

My body ached.

Every part of it hurt so badly.

On top of feeling utterly petrified, I was also feeling very disoriented.

After being tossed into the truck with one of the cars and being locked in the dark, I found it impossible to move. I froze completely as I had what felt like a million thoughts running through my mind.

And my thoughts didn't even come close to touching the number of emotions violently coursing through my body. Terror. Betrayal. Nerves. Anger.

The list went on and on, and I was stuck in that spot wondering how this could have happened.

But those moments standing there, frozen to one spot, were short-lived. Because it couldn't have been more than two or three minutes later when I heard the truck get fired up and the steady hum of the engine vibrating through the back, where I was.

The next thing I knew, the truck had started moving. Unfortunately, the driver wasn't interested in easing out of the spot. As he pulled forward and turned to leave the lot, my body was thrown. I stumbled backward, fell, and whacked my head against the side of the truck.

For several seconds, I sat there and attempted to get my bearings. And by some miracle, I made it inside the car. I had

a feeling if we'd just barely started the journey to wherever I was being taken and I'd already been slammed up against the side of the truck, there was no chance I'd survive an extended trip.

So, I climbed into the car and pulled on the seatbelt. It felt like the safest thing to do in that moment. For what felt like endless hours, I stayed strapped in that seat, in the dark, feeling nothing but terrified.

Had what they said been the truth? Was I going to wind up on a boat? And was my only chance at survival going to be needing to know how to swim? Something told me I wasn't going to be so lucky to have them drop me into the ocean close to the shore. If their plan was to make me disappear, it was likely I was going to wind up in the middle of the sea with no land in sight. I shuddered at the thought. As tough as I thought I was, I wasn't sure anything frightened me more than the thought of being dumped in the open ocean.

I didn't want to cry. I didn't want to seem weak, but this was the most horrifying experience of my entire life. There was nothing for me to do. I couldn't fight. I couldn't scream. I couldn't attempt to find a way out.

There was no way out.

I couldn't even try to drive the car out of the back of the container if I wanted to, because the keys had been taken out of it.

I was truly out of options.

Then it happened.

I realized we must have been close to wherever they planned on taking me, because the movement in the truck had slowed. For a long time, I was convinced we'd been traveling on the interstate. The drive had been at a constant, steady pace. And now, it was anything but.

There had been several stops, many turns, and a growing sense of fear.

My time was nearly up.

And no matter how much faith I had in Jax or how long the ride I'd just been taken on felt, I just didn't think there had been nearly enough time for him to figure it out.

The worst part about it all was that I was not only worried about what was going to happen to me, but I was concerned for Jax, too. I couldn't begin to imagine how he'd survive.

He loved me.

The one thing I was beyond confident about was the amount of love he felt for me, and if the worst happened to me, there was no question in my mind he'd be devastated.

And that hurt my heart worse than anything else I'd been feeling.

Because Jax didn't deserve that. He suffered enough loss in his life, and this would just be one more thing. As strong as he was, as determined as he was about looking on the bright side of everything, this would break him.

I knew that was the case, because if the roles were reversed, it would be the very same thing for me.

Finding the love of my life, only to have him taken away after just a few short weeks, would shatter me. We'd talked about our future. He made the biggest and best promises about where our lives would be a year from now, and it devastated me to think that neither of us would get to experience it.

Tears continued to spill down my cheeks. I stopped trying to wipe them away, because no sooner did I do that, more took their place.

Eventually, the truck came to a stop. I sat there, waiting, and nothing happened for quite some time. Maybe twenty or thirty minutes.

Then I heard what could only be described as heavy machinery.

Was this it? Was this where the container on the back of the truck was going to be loaded onto a boat?

A moment later, I got my answer.

Because I felt whatever piece of equipment was being used, latch onto the container. It was loud and jolted everything inside.

I held on, bracing for whatever was going to happen next. I didn't know if I was being moved. I didn't know if it had already happened.

Time kept ticking by, and I finally understood the real meaning of the phrase 'sitting duck.'

Suddenly, there was a flash of light in front of me. It startled me, and I realized the light had come from somewhere behind me.

With the doors closed and the window up, the voice I heard was faint and muffled. "Hello? Sophie?"

I didn't recognize the voice partly due to being inside the car, but mostly because I knew nobody I knew would have found me here.

Twisting my neck, I glanced out the window, and that's when I saw someone I didn't know standing there with a flashlight.

The man was tall and built. Jax was muscular, but this man had to have had at least another thirty pounds of muscle on his body. He had dark, spiky hair and a concerned look on his face.

Once his eyes landed on mine, he looked away and shouted, "I've got her. Tell him she's here."

The next thing I knew, he opened the door and crouched down beside me. "Are you okay?"

My voice was trembling when I responded, "Who are you?"

"I'm Jesse. I work with Jax at Harper Security Ops."

That was it.

That was all it took for me to lose it worse than I already had. I burst into tears, burying my face in my hands. I felt his unfamiliar hand settle on the middle of my back, a vain

attempt to comfort me. I appreciated his efforts, but nothing was going to help me now.

Or, so I thought.

A moment later, Jesse's hand was gone, and I was being hoisted out of the car. I didn't need to pull my face from my hands, because I knew it was Jax. Not only did I recognize the scent of him and the feel of his hands on my body, but I also heard the words that he whispered against the top of my head.

"Sophie, honey, I'm so sorry," he apologized. "I've got you now. You're okay."

Needing to see him, I lifted my head and slid my arms around his neck. He stopped moving to look down at me, and even in the dark, I could see just how tortured he was. If I thought I'd been distressed from the moment I'd been attacked and dragged out of my house, there wasn't a doubt in my mind that it didn't compare to what Jax had been going through.

"You found me," I rasped.

He nodded and croaked, "I would have searched forever for you."

Jax started moving again and stepped completely outside of the container. I had to squint my eyes, because there were the lights on around the dock as well as what seemed like hundreds of police cars.

That's when it hit me.

"Did you find them all?"

"We've got everyone who was here," he assured me.

"What about Bruno?" I pressed.

"Who?"

"Bruno. He's my aunt's nephew, and he worked at Belmonte Stone. He was the one who set all of this up," I explained. "I thought he was an innocent bystander in all of this. I thought he'd been at the wrong place at the wrong time, but it turns out, he's the one who set me up."

Jax's hands flexed, his fingers pressing in on my body. He looked up and shouted, "Royce?"

I looked over to where Jax's gaze was directed. Royce had already started moving toward us. "Yeah?"

"We're looking for a guy named Bruno. He worked at Belmonte Stone, and he's the mastermind behind Sophie's cars going missing. He set this all up."

"I'm on it," Royce returned before turning around and moving in the opposite direction.

Jax returned his eyes to me. "Are you okay? Were you hurt?"

"I hit my head when the truck started moving, which is why I went inside the car. And that was after I was basically attacked at the house. I don't think I have any serious injuries, though," I answered.

His eyes roamed over every inch of my face, torment still etched into each of his features. "Let's get you checked out, just to be on the safe side."

At that, Jax carried me over to the ambulance I hadn't realized was even there. And for the next several hours, I'd not only gotten checked out, but I'd been questioned by the police over the whole incident.

The last thing I wanted to do was spend any more time with people I didn't know, but since Jax didn't leave my side, I found it wasn't so bad.



I woke up when I felt strong, familiar hands on me.

Blinking my eyes, I sat up and realized we were home.

I didn't know how long it had been, but Jax and I were finally given the all-clear to leave and drive home.

It didn't take long for me to fall asleep.

"Do you want me to carry you?"

"I can walk," I said, my voice raspy from sleep.

"Honey, you still don't have anything on your feet. Let me carry you."

Jax was right.

I was so out of it, I forgot I'd been dragged out of my house before I could put anything on my feet. So, I nodded my agreement. "Okay."

"Good girl," he whispered. "Put your arms around my neck."

I did as he asked and wrapped my arms around his neck. Then Jax lifted me out of the seat, closed the door, and carried me up to the front door.

Once we were inside, Jax set me down. He locked the door and set the alarm.

"You want a shower before you get into bed?" he asked.

My eyelids were so heavy, but I refused to get into my bed after having been tackled to the ground by one man and tossed into a shipping container by another, all while being barefoot. I needed to wash the filth away before I would climb into my bed and curl up beside Jax.

"Yes. Will you shower with me? I don't want to be alone."

"Anything you need, Sophie."

At that, the two of us turned off the lights and climbed the stairs. As I began stripping out of my clothes, Jax got the shower turned on. The next thing I knew, I was standing beneath the warm water with my eyes closed and hours of memories I wanted to forget. The sooner I got out of the shower, the sooner I'd be able to let sleep take me away from it all for a while.

But at some point, I opened my eyes, looked at Jax, and realized just how grateful I was to have him there.

And I took advantage of that. I stepped forward, slid my arms around his waist, and planted my forehead in his chest. His arms came around me, his hands stroking along the skin on my back.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

There was a much deeper tone to his voice than normal. He must have been having a similar reaction to the whole situation as I was.

I moved my head up and down against his chest. “I just feel so lucky to have you. I don’t know what would have happened to me today if you weren’t in my life.”

Before we left the port, I’d learned a few things about what Jax went through and how he’d found me.

As I had suspected, Jax knew the moment the cars had been moved, and he didn’t hesitate to spring into action. After calling me and not getting an answer, he’d sent Jesse over to check on me while he tracked the cars. Then Jesse called him, let him know I was nowhere to be found, and Jax nearly lost his mind.

Ultimately, Jax made it to Belmonte Stone, the last place the trackers had signal, and he saw everything opened up there. He had not a clue where to start searching for me, but ultimately got a call from Jesse.

As it turned out, Jesse had been on his way to meet up with Jax, and he wound up coming to a stop two blocks down from where the trucks had stopped. At some point in their journey, before they’d gotten on the interstate, the men responsible for stealing my cars and kidnapping me pulled over.

Apparently, that was when he saw them take Bruno and toss him into the back of the other container. While he didn’t know anything about Bruno or who he was, Jesse couldn’t miss the cars, and that’s when he decided to follow and call Jax.

The entire string of events led to me being here with Jax now, and I found myself struggling to come to terms with what

could have happened if it hadn't been for the man I had in my life.

One of Jax's arms tightened around my body, holding me close to him. His other hand reached up to the side of my face and brushed the wet strands of my hair back. His eyes roamed over me. "I told you I never would have stopped looking for you. I said that because it's the same for me, Sophie. I can't even bring myself to think what I would have done if something worse had happened tonight, if I couldn't have brought you home."

"I'm sorry you had to go through all of this tonight," I lamented.

"Don't worry about me, honey. As long as you're okay, that's all that matters to me."

Offering a sympathetic look, I said, "I'm still not sure how I feel about all of it, especially Bruno."

Jax nodded his understanding. "I get it. No matter what it takes, I'll see you through this. You're mine, and there isn't anything I won't do to protect you."

I smiled at him, the first I had since before he'd rescued me. Then I pressed my cheek to his chest, inhaled, and squeezed him a little tighter.

After giving myself a few moments like that, I released him, and we finished in the shower.

And it wasn't much later when Jax and I were curled up in my bed together. Given everything that had happened, I thought I might struggle to sleep or that nightmares would haunt me.

I was mistaken.

Because as long as I had Jax holding me close, I knew there was nothing that would ever harm me.

EPILOGUE



Jax

One year Later

“You’re exhausted.”

Sophie rolled her head along the back of the couch and looked in my direction. “You have no idea.”

“Was it worth it?” I asked.

A smile instantly formed on her face. “Every single minute of it.”

“Then you were right.”

Her brows pulled together. “Right? Right about what?”

I lifted my hand to the top of her head, stroked my fingers through her hair, and reminded her, “About a year ago, you told me you wanted this. You wanted to wake up and do your thing with your husband and your babies in the morning before every single member of both of our families came over to join us for lunch and dinner. You said we’d eat and talk and laugh and make memories. And even though we’d be exhausted by the end of it, you said we’d love every moment of it. While there’s one piece of all of that still missing, you weren’t wrong about how it would be.”

Sophie settled her hands on her belly and noted, “That one piece isn’t missing. This baby is here, and I can promise you that he or she was having a party in my belly all day today. I think it was the abundance of food.”

Something warm moved through me. Sophie was pregnant.

As it turned out, she'd gotten pregnant on our honeymoon to Italy right at the end of spring, mere days before the official start of summer. Our little one was due in March, and it was safe to say Sophie and I couldn't wait.

I'd made her a promise a year ago that I'd do whatever I could to give her what she wanted, and with the exception of the timing of the baby, I'd done it.

Last year, we'd done just as we said we would for the holidays, and on New Year's Eve, I proposed.

I realized it might have seemed quick, but there was nothing about the way I felt for her that was going to change in a way that would make me less interested in marrying her or giving her everything she wanted and deserved.

So, I didn't wait.

And roughly six months later, we got married. It was a small, intimate gathering. Sophie didn't want to do anything extravagant, not without having her dad there to walk her down the aisle. But she wanted it to be special, and she wanted our family and friends to be there.

It didn't matter to me what she wanted. As long as I wound up married to her in the end, I didn't care how it happened, especially when I thought about how it might not have happened at all.

Though it was rare, sometimes, I thought about the night I'd nearly lost her. I tried not to dwell on it, and I always did my best to find a way to see the bright side. It was tough in a situation like that, so it seemed all I could do was make note of the fact that it only solidified just how important she was in my life.

That whole situation hadn't been easy on her or her family.

Her aunt, uncle, and cousin were devastated when they'd learned about what Bruno had done. Sophie spent many nights upset or crying over the betrayal and what it had done to her family.

But as was always the case with things like that, time helped to heal the wounds inflicted. Maybe they'd all always have it pop into their minds—that's just how it was with life-changing experiences—but I believed they had all made peace with it as best they could at this point.

Bruno was an adult, and he'd made his decisions.

He and the rest of the men who'd been involved had all been apprehended. They were all facing varying degrees of charges and consequences.

For my part, I was relieved to know that I no longer had to worry about someone attempting to come after Sophie for the cars she had. Despite that, I revamped the entire security system on both her home and her garage. What her father had put in so many years ago might not have been bad at the time, but considering what he'd been trying to protect, it wasn't the best option.

Since I was intent on protecting Sophie, I refused to have anything but the best there to keep her safe.

And now I was here with her, on Thanksgiving Day, and the last of our families had just left to go home.

We were by ourselves again, and it was difficult not to feel anything but grateful for where my life had taken me. I'd spent so much time thinking about it all, Sophie decided to speak again.

"You've made my dreams come true, Jax."

"I hope you have more."

"What?"

"Dreams. I hope you have more, because I'm not done doing what I can to make you happy," I explained.

There was a twinkle in her eyes when she confessed, "There is something I've been thinking a lot about lately."

I cocked an eyebrow, wondering if whatever she was going to say was something I'd be able to give her as a Christmas gift. "What is it?"

“I’m not sure how it’s going to be this first year after the baby is born, but I want to start a tradition.”

“What do you want to do?”

Her eyes dropped down and watched as she stroked her hands over her belly. “I want our babies to have the same memories of their summers as I did. They won’t have my dad there with them, but they’ll have their dad, and I want that for them. I’d like us to start the tradition of taking trips every summer to Italy for a couple of weeks at a time.” She stopped speaking and lifted her gaze to mine. “Do you think you’ll be able to make that happen?”

I had to wonder if Sophie already knew what my answer was going to be when she asked that question. If there was one thing I’d made abundantly clear from the very start, it was that I didn’t care about a lot of the things many other people did. I didn’t get worked up over unimportant things.

People mattered.

Memories mattered.

Love mattered.

“I’m going to be a father, Sophie. Next to being a husband, there’s nothing more important to me. Giving you and our children a lifetime of fond memories is all that matters. You can rest assured I’m not only going to make it happen, but also that I’m going to make it count.”

Sophie’s face lit up. “You’re the best man in the world. I’ve known from the start just how perfect you were for me.”

I couldn’t stop myself from letting out a laugh. “I wish I had known the same and not wasted those few weeks after I first met you.”

“Yeah, but we’re here now, and if there was one thing I was wrong about, it was underestimating just how wonderful it would all be. You’ve exceeded all my wildest expectations.”

I leaned in toward her, bringing my mouth to within inches of hers. “You better hang on tight, honey. You’re in for the ride of your life.”

She moved her mouth closer to mine, our lips just barely brushing up against one another. “I’ll go anywhere as long as I’m with you, handsome.”

Without another word, having said all that needed to be said, I touched my mouth to hers. Resting my hand in her hair at the back of her head, I kissed her tenderly. And minutes later, she begged me to carry her upstairs, so I could make love to her.

That’s what I did.

And that’s what I continued to do every time she asked up until our son, Marco, made his debut a few months later.

If I was honest, I continued to do it after he arrived. And late that next summer, when Marco was just six months old, we started our new tradition of visiting Italy.

Having promised to give her everything she wanted, it was no surprise when Sophie came to me one week before Marco’s first birthday and told me she was pregnant. By the time the holidays rolled around later that year, our daughter, Giulia, had made her arrival.

And life just kept on getting better.

PREVIEW OF INTENTION

Prologue

Jake

“Stop fucking around.”

At the sound of our father’s command, my brother, Max, and I froze to the spot. We might have goofed off a lot, but when our dad’s deep, rumbling voice sounded, we knew he meant business.

Once he had our attention, Dad’s voice returned to a less threatening level, even if it was still just as stern. He pointed behind himself and said, “I’m heading over to start cutting those trees down.” Pointing in front of himself, behind Max and me, he continued, “I want the two of you to make sure you get all of last year’s wood moved out from underneath the awning there and taken down to the house using the tractor and wagon. When you’re done, come over to where I am, so we can start splitting and stacking what we’ll need for next year.”

“Okay, Dad,” Max said.

My dad’s eyes shifted between the two of us, finally settling on me. “You’re in charge. Stay on task, because we’ve got a lot of work to get done today.”

I nodded my understanding. “Got it.”

With that, he turned and walked off to the opposite side of our family’s farm, where he planned to cut down the trees we’d use for firewood for next winter. Max and I were responsible for getting the wood we’d cut, split, and stacked last year over to the main house, where we’d use it in our

wood-burning stove this winter. It was the middle of October, and this had sort of become a tradition for the Burns family.

While my dad, my brother, and I worked outside all day, our mom was inside doing her food prep. She liked to prepare large batches of some of our favorite meals, and then she'd freeze them, so we could eat them throughout the winter. Everyone chipped in, even if Max and I often wanted to be off doing something else.

"It's not fair that you get to be in charge all the time," Max declared.

I rolled my eyes as I turned toward him. "It's only because I'm older."

"It's still not fair."

He had a point. I was fifteen, and Max was going to be thirteen next week. He was just as capable as I was when it came to doing chores around the property. Shrugging my shoulders, I replied, "Okay. Then you be in charge. Where do you want to start?"

My younger brother's brows shot up. "Really? I can be in charge?"

"Why not? You know what we need to do," I reasoned. "The only thing you can't do is drive the tractor."

Max deliberated for a few seconds before he agreed, "It's a deal."

A moment later, Max hopped into the empty wagon that was already hooked to the back of the tractor. "Drive me over to the woodpile."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Listen, there's one other rule. You can't sit back and do nothing while I do all the work."

"It sounds like you're trying to be the one in charge, Jake," Max noted. "Drive me over to the woodpile, so we can both get to work."

My lips twitched as I moved to the tractor, fired it up, and drove over to where we stored our wood each year for it to dry out properly for the next year's use. We immediately got to

work on loading the wood from the massive pile into the wagon. With the amount we had, it was easily going to take us several hours to move it all, so we really didn't have any time to waste.

After we'd filled up the wagon for the first trip, Max hopped on top of it and demanded, "Take me to the house."

I rolled my eyes again and let out a laugh.

Max was, without a doubt, my best friend. We'd been inseparable from the moment he was born. I'd never forget when I moved on from elementary school to middle school, and he couldn't go with me.

He'd been devastated, hating I wouldn't be riding the bus to and from school with him every day. But he more than made up for it when he got home. He'd rattle on and on for what felt like hours about everything that had happened during his day. And after we both finished our homework, he was all about spending every waking second with me.

If it was nice out, we'd be outside doing something—playing catch, running around, or riding the dirt bikes or quads. On the days when the weather wouldn't allow it, Max and I often played video games or board games together.

When it came to days like today, we had no choice but to forget about anything we might have wanted to do, so we could help our dad get the work done outside. That didn't mean Max held himself back from complaining.

Once we got back to the house and started to unload the wood, Max groaned, "I hate doing this. I'd rather be doing anything else besides this."

"You could go inside and spend the day cooking with Mom," I suggested, knowing he'd like that even less.

"Ugh, no thanks."

"So, you'll eat the food, but you refuse to make it?" I asked, picking up a log from the wagon.

"Yep. It's too much work."

I wanted to laugh. While I could understand him not being interested in cooking, his excuse was not a good one. Though I knew how hard my mom worked to take care of us and our home, along with all the cooking, there was no question that the more physically demanding jobs were happening outside.

But that's how it was.

Dad had taught us from a young age what our responsibilities were, and there were certain things he'd never expect Mom to do. While she'd be outside in the spring and summer, planting her flowers and garden, the heavy lifting was a role my father had assumed, and it worked for our family.

"Well, then you have no choice but to do this instead," I told him.

Not the least bit thrilled about it, Max still did what needed to be done. And before I knew it, we were heading back across the field to load up more wood.

We repeated the same actions several more times, taking wood from the pile, moving it to the wagon, and delivering it to the storage spot closer to the house. We hadn't gotten quite halfway through when we'd gone back for another load, and something struck me.

"Hey, look at that," I declared as I turned off the tractor.

I glanced back at my brother to find he'd been laying down in the wagon. But at my declaration, Max sat up. "Look at what?"

Jerking my chin out to the side, I noted, "The wood pile. Your decision on where to take from each time we've come back here has made it look like a level in Super Mario."

Max studied the pile before his eyes widened with delight. "You're right. How cool?"

I let out a laugh as I stood up. "If only you were Mario himself, you could hop on each raised stack in an effort to get to the next level. Maybe then we'd be done with this sooner."

Standing up inside the wagon, Max proudly announced, “I could do it.”

While we both enjoyed playing video games, Max was a fanatic. He loved adventure style games, and if it had Mario, it was guaranteed to be a hit with him.

I made my way over to the pile and started picking up logs for our next run. Max moved slower, his eyes continuing to study what I was sure he thought was a masterpiece of a woodpile, as he carried wood to the wagon.

“I think one more log is all we’re going to fit,” I said, picking one up and pinning my eyes on Max.

“Okay.”

I turned to head back toward the tractor, noted Max wasn’t following, and asked, “What are you doing?”

“I’m going to try it,” he answered.

“Try what?”

I’d made it over to where I loaded the last log into the wagon when Max answered, “I’m going to be Mario.”

“Max, you’re not going to be able to do that. It’s a bad idea,” I warned him, moving to sit on the tractor. “Come on. We still have so much work left to do.”

“Oh, just once. Besides, now I have to prove you wrong.” I stared at him, sending an annoyed look his way. That’s when he reminded me, “You said I was in charge.”

I let out a sigh and shook my head. It didn’t matter what I said now. I’d pointed it out to him, and Max was determined. He’d never be swayed.

Starting on one end, Max climbed up onto the shortest pile. Like it was nothing, he pretended to hop to the next pile, but it was more like he’d reached his leg out and stepped onto it.

The next stack was higher, and there was a bit more space between it and the one he was standing on. Max sized it up and went for it. He had no choice but to hop to get to that one.

And though he wobbled slightly when he was there, Max got it under control and stood proudly. “What did I tell you?”

I threw my hands up and said, “Fine. You proved me wrong. Now, get down so we can finish.”

“One more level,” he returned.

Max bent slightly at his knees, preparing to launch himself to the next stack, and that’s when it happened.

It was the strangest feeling. Because while it happened so fast, everything felt like it was moving in slow motion.

One of the pieces of wood on the front side of the stack he was standing on fell forward, hitting the stack he planned to jump onto. The taller stack of wood fell in his direction, knocking into his already unstable stack. As the wood began falling out from underneath him, Max lost his balance. He fell backward, the base of his skull whacking the edge of the piece of wood on the stack behind him.

In an instant, he was down.

The wood was both beneath his body and on top of it.

“Max!” I screamed, bolting off of the tractor and running in his direction. “Max!”

My brother didn’t respond.

I made it to him and immediately began tossing the wood off of his body.

“Max, answer me,” I yelled, when I finally had his entire body exposed.

He didn’t move.

“Help! Dad!! Help!”

I prayed he could hear me, but I knew it was useless. He was using the chainsaw and had ear protection on.

My hands went to my brother’s chest, and I tried to rouse him. Max still didn’t budge.

“Max, please wake up,” I begged.

Yes, I begged.

I knew it wouldn't matter, though.

I didn't need my parents to confirm what I already knew was the truth.

My brother was dead, and I was to blame.

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Closer

Underneath It All

Terrible Lie

Complication

Harper Security Ops

Broken
Tempted
Conceal
Haunted
Sacrifice
Crushed
Distracted
Ruined
Salvaged
Silenced
Mistaken
Intention
Unharmmed

Road Trip Romance

Tip the Scales
Play the Part
One Wrong Turn
Just a Fling
Meant to Be
Take the Plunge
Miss the Shot
In the Cards
Only in Dreams
Break the Ice
In Plain Sight
Twist of Fate
Lock and Key
Crave the Love
What Comes After
Chase the Storm

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.K. Evans is a contemporary romance author of over forty published novels. While she enjoys writing a good romantic suspense novel, Andrea's favorite books to write have been her extreme sports romances. That might have something to do with the fact that she, along with her husband and two sons, can't get enough of extreme sports.

Before becoming a writer, Andrea did a brief stint in the insurance and financial services industry and managed her husband's performance automotive business. That love of extreme sports? She used to drive race cars!

When Andrea isn't writing, she can be found homeschooling her two sons, doing yoga, snowboarding, reading, or traveling with her family. She and her husband are currently taking road trips throughout the country to visit all 50 states with their boys.

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