

K. C.
CROWNE

my
EXBOYFRIEND'S
Dad



MY EX-BOYFRIENDS'S
DAD

AN AGE GAP OLDER MAN YOUNGER WOMAN
ROMANCE

K.C. CROWNE

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DESCRIPTION

**Never have I ever been hot and heavy over an ex's dad....
until now.**

My life is in danger.

In comes my ex's HOT dad.

Ex-military. Commanding. Total D.I.L.F.

Yes Daddy.

Jesse is a specimen I wouldn't mind being in close quarters
with.

Tall, dark, and incredibly built.

He takes control way that makes me warm all over.

But he's completely off limits... right?

Do I risk breaking a friendship and family apart?

**Or will none of it even matter when I find myself in a dark
room with a gun to my head? FML!!!**

CHAPTER 1

I left my cubicle for two minutes —*two minutes*— and what did I find plastered all over the background of my desktop when I came back? A collage of George Clooney against a vibrantly colored background. Mostly shirtless and entirely sexy, but definitely not appropriate to be looking at on a company computer.

And I knew exactly which one of my co-workers to thank for this mortifying display.

“Molly!” I gasped, frantically navigating to the settings window to change everything back. “You’re going to get me in trouble!”

Her suppressed giggles from the other side of our shared cubicle wall erupted into outright laughter. “What? I thought you said you liked older men like George Clooney.”

I groaned. “I told you that in confidence.”

“Daniel Day-Lewis. Does he do it for you, too?”

“Stop it.”

“Robert DeNiro?”

“I said older men, not grandpas.”

“Oh, lighten up. It was just a prank.”

“A prank that could get me fired.”

Molly twirled a lock of her curly red hair around her finger, leaning over the flimsy cubicle wall to roll her eyes.

“Ooh, I sure hope we don’t lose our co-op positions that pay us pennies on the dollar.”

“It could be worse,” I insisted. “We could be interns. They don’t earn anything at all.”

She curled her nose. “That should be illegal. You’d think a company as big as Blue Cloud Financial would be able to take care of its employees, interns or otherwise.”

I shrugged. “It’s always about the bottom line.”

“You don’t sound too bothered.”

“Of course it bothers me. That’s why I’m trying to learn as much as I can so I can open my own investment firm one day.” I tilted my chin up and grinned. “Everyone’s going to get paid when I’m in charge. Even the interns. It’s only fair considering how much work they do.”

“Well, ain’t you a saint?” Molly said dryly. “Don’t get too ahead of yourself, Viv. You’re not going to be the next Merrill Lynch overnight. We still have to get through our placement and then one more year of college.”

“You sound *super* excited about it.”

Molly slumped down into her creaky office chair, staring up at the fluorescent light panels above us while she spun around. “Early-as-fuck morning lectures, last-minute crunch sessions before exams, *and* we’re going to be a year behind all our classmates? Sounds great.”

“One, early morning lectures aren’t that bad. You need to fix your sleep schedule.”

“How dare you,” she replied, feigning offense.

“Two, you wouldn’t need to crunch for exams if you spread out your studying like I do.”

“We both know that’s not going to happen.”

“And three, why do you need the rest of your classmates when you have me?”

Molly sat up and smiled. “Alright, but that’s the only good thing to come out of this.”

One of the senior investment analysts who had a cubicle across from us cleared her throat. Her name was Marta, according to the metal nameplate sitting on her desk. Marta shot us a *don't-you-have-work-to-do* glare, prompting Molly and I to sit up straight and get back to the grind.

Naturally, Molly grumbled about the workload the entire time, but I didn't share the same opinion. I loved working for Blue Cloud Financial. We weren't allowed to handle the bigger investment portfolios—those were reserved for more practiced portfolio managers—but we got to handle the tail end transaction processing, which was mostly record keeping. Very straightforward, but I loved every minute of it.

Numbers had always made sense to me. Ever since I was a little girl, math was my favorite subject. I couldn't explain it even if I tried. Numbers and equations and formulas... they were beautiful. Structured. There was no grey area when it came to calculations. Just a right or wrong answer and a step-by-step roadmap of how to get to the right conclusions.

I probably would have pursued a doctorate in mathematics, but it didn't seem like the sensible thing to do. Even if I earned myself a PhD, the last thing I wanted was to be stuck in the void that was the doctoral tenure track.

I had bills to pay and dreams to fulfill.

“Vivian,” Molly hissed. “Earth to Vivian!”

I looked up, startled. “What?”

“Dude, I've been trying to get your attention for, like, five minutes.”

“Sorry, I was running everything through the processing form. What's up?”

“He's coming,” Molly said sternly. “Alistair McCloud.”

I finally noticed the low murmur of excited conversation. Our co-workers were running this way and that, organizing their documents and tidying up. Even Molly was busy straightening her skirt and smoothing out the wrinkles of her shirt. I promptly cleaned up my space—not that it was

particularly messy in the first place— in order to prepare for our boss’s arrival.

Alistair McCloud technically wasn’t our boss. He was our *boss’ boss*. The big man. The head honcho.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” he said as he stepped out of the elevator and onto our floor. “Would anybody care for a butterscotch candy?”

“Oh my God,” I mumbled under my breath. “He’s so adorable.”

“I know, right?” Molly whispered back. “I just want to pick him up and put him in my pocket.”

Alistair walked over, leaning heavily on his cane. At first glance, he could be mistaken for one of those cute old men who hung out in the park to feed breadcrumbs to pigeons. It was sometimes mind boggling to know that he was actually the Chief Financial Officer of Blue Cloud Financial. A self-made multi-millionaire and trend setter in the investment world.

He didn’t exactly look the part, though. When I first started my co-op, I expected to see nothing but a sea of black suits and red power ties. Alistair, on the other hand, could always be found wearing cable knit sweaters, baggy khaki pants, and sensible loafers. He looked like he just got back from the bingo hall, not fresh from the stock market floor yelling at brokers to buy, sell, or trade.

Maybe that was why I was so impressed by him. He was living proof that you didn’t need to be a cutthroat business snake to play in the major leagues. Alistair McCloud was someone I could aspire to.

Alistair came up to Molly and me with a big smile, handing us each a butterscotch candy wrapped in golden foil. “Hello, you two.”

I smiled back. “Hello, Mr. McCloud. How are you doing today?”

“Better now that it’s Friday,” he said, nudging Molly in the arm.

“I feel that on an emotional level,” she said with a giggle. “Any plans for the weekend?”

“I’m taking the grandkids to the lake house. Haven’t seen those little munchkins in months. I’ve been looking forward to it all day, and it’s all thanks to you, Vivian.”

I arched a curious eyebrow. “Thanks to me?”

“Oh, yes. Arty mentioned that you pulled an all-nighter last night getting those bi-weekly reports in. We were able to expedite the whole portfolio review because of your hard work.”

My cheeks warmed. Arty was my immediate supervisor. It was true that I pulled an all-nighter, but it was entirely by accident. Sometimes I got so wrapped up in the numbers that I lost track of time. I’d forgotten all about it, figuring at some point Arty would take the credit for himself.

“It was nothing,” I assured. “I was happy to do it.”

He crooked his finger at me. I stepped forward and leaned in a bit closer. “Between you and me, you really shouldn’t work so hard. Take it from me, dear. Life’s about more than just your career.”

I shrugged. “The markets never sleep, so why should I?”

“Ah, to be young and energetic again.” Alistair looked me over fondly. “I like you, Miss Jones. You remind me of myself when I was your age. Keep this up and you might find yourself with a full-time offer to join our Blue Cloud family.”

A giddy excitement rose in my chest, but I suppressed it to the best of my ability. I didn’t want to make a fool of myself in front of everyone. “Thank you very much, sir.”

He patted me on the arm before shuffling on, checking with some of his other employees. He was basically an A-list celebrity amongst our circles. Alistair stuck around for another ten minutes before waving and stepping back into the elevator, wishing us all a good weekend.

Molly took my hand and gave my fingers a squeeze. “Did you hear that?” she asked, jumping up and down. “You’ve got

a job offer!”

“He said I *might* have a job offer,” I corrected, sitting back down.

“Oh, please. That was totally a tap on the shoulder,” Molly squealed. “I’m so happy for you, and I’m not even jealous.”

I laughed. “Thanks, Mol. But I’m sure he’s going to give you an offer, too.”

Molly huffed. “Doubt I’ll take it.”

“What? Why not? People would kill to work for Blue Cloud.”

“We both know I’m only in the accounting program to please my parents. The second I graduate, I’m shipping off to New York to start my career as a model. Or have you forgotten?”

“No, I haven’t forgotten. I just didn’t think you were serious.”

“Don’t you think I’ll make it?”

I smiled at her. Molly was really pretty. Gorgeous, actually. Bright red hair and dazzling hazel eyes and legs for days. “I *know* you’ll make it. I’ll just miss you.”

“You could always come with,” she insisted. “While I’m walking runways, you can manage my books.”

“Tempting,” I said wryly, “but I’d rather stay in Chicago. I don’t think I’d last in New York.”

“Fair.” She tapped me on the nose. “Your book smarts won’t do you a lick of good in the Big Apple.”

“Ha ha,” I said. “Very funny.”

Marta cleared her throat again, more loudly this time. Molly grimaced and wheeled her chair back over to her desk. Even though I didn’t appreciate the attitude, Marta was right. It was time to get back to work. Quitting time wasn’t for another hour or so, and there was still an avalanche of numbers to crunch.

It was easy to fall into a rhythm against the soundtrack of clicking keyboard buttons, the ringing of distant office phones, and the soft murmur of water cooler conversation. I verified account balances and tallied up totals, cross-referencing transactions with notes listed in client profiles. Molly and I weren't allowed to participate in the actual trading of stocks. That wasn't our department. What we were responsible for was the diligent tracking of all funds, processing everything through the appropriate spreadsheets and forms to account for every single cent.

Some would consider it mind numbing work. I, on the other hand, ate it up.

Something caught my eye as I finished compiling everything for one particular client —The Azuras Association — near the end of my shift. Something wasn't quite right. There was a discrepancy of almost a hundred thousand dollars.

It was just... gone.

I frowned at my computer screen. Did I make a mistake somewhere? That didn't sound right. Not because I was being egotistical, but because I literally *never* made mistakes when it came to calculations like this. What was stranger still was the fact that the system didn't flag this for review. Blue Cloud Financial had dedicated software to ensure things like this didn't happen.

Leaning back in my chair, I peeked at Molly past the dividing wall. She was playing solitaire and losing, but that wasn't my biggest concern at the moment. "Hey," I said slowly. "Will you check this over for me? Something's not right."

Molly's eyebrows shot up. "That's rare coming from you."

"Just come over here and help me."

She rolled her chair over, parking next to me. Molly checked over everything, using the mouse wheel to scroll down and inspect the page. "Huh."

"I know, right?" I typed quickly into the computer, pulling up the last three months' worth of records. I tapped the screen

in different spots. “They were missing ten grand last month, too. And here and here.”

“Whoa. Why didn’t you notice this before?”

“Arty literally assigned them to me today.”

“Who was in charge of the portfolio before you?”

“I’m not sure.”

“We should report this. Who knows how far back this goes?”

My mind swirled. That was a lot of money to just sprout legs and walk away without a trace. I sincerely hoped it wasn’t due to a clerical error on my part. I’d be fired on the spot for something so egregious. “I’ll go let him know.”

“I’ll do it,” Molly offered, standing up. “*You* need to get to the Snapdragon and save us some good seats. I don’t want to sit right by the speaker again. The bartender couldn’t hear a word I said last time.”

I glanced at my watch. I’d totally forgotten that we’d made plans to go to the bar together. All the co-op students in our program liked to meet at least once a month for drinks to catch up. It was lonely sometimes, working at different companies and being so far away from peers. The Snapdragon just so happened to be a central spot for all of us and somehow became our gathering hub. They had great drink deals, but it personally wasn’t my idea of a fun time.

I groaned. “Do I *have* to go?”

“Yes,” Molly said sternly. “You ditched me last month. You said you’d make it up to me by buying me a pitcher.”

“But—”

“You pinky promised, Viv. I won’t take no for an answer.” Molly grabbed my purse out of the bottom drawer of my desk and gave it to me. “Come on. Up you go. It’s Friday! You need to learn to relax a little. I swear to God you’d live at work if you could.”

I sighed, reluctantly getting up to pull on my jacket.
“Alright, alright. I’m going.”

Molly winked at me. “I’ll meet you there.”

“You better not change my desktop background again,” I said over my shoulder as I left for the day.

“No promises!” she replied with a giggle.

CHAPTER 2

Ava showed me yet *another* picture of her daughter on her phone. Don't get me wrong. Cassie was cute as far as babies went, but this was officially the second straight hour of show-and-tell and I was, quite frankly, over it.

"We're thinking of enrolling her into baby swimming lessons," Theo said with a hint of pride.

"Isn't two a little young?" I asked flatly. I may or may not have checked out of the conversation two beers ago. I was now nursing my third, but it still didn't give me enough of a buzz to safely endure the evening.

I loved my niece very much, but this was supposed to be our big night out, a chance to let loose. Cory and Cassie were over at a friend's house being babysat, which gave us adults the rare opportunity to catch up, especially now that Theo worked from home as a security consultant. I tried to give him an office at Pegasus Star Security, but he wouldn't bite. Mentioned something about wanting to spend more time with the family, yada yada yada...

"She's got a lot of energy," Ava continued, smiling at the picture of her daughter. "It might help to tucker her out so things are easier when we get home."

I chuckled. "I'm glad my kid's all grown up."

"How *is* Wally?" Theo asked. "I haven't heard you complain about him in forever."

"I don't complain."

“When is he going to hurry up and move out?” Theo mocked. *“I should start charging him rent. All he does is play videogames all day.”*

I sniffed. “I don’t sound like that.”

“Yes, you do,” Ava mumbled quietly, sipping her pretty pink cocktail.

I finished my third beer and pushed my glass away. When the waitress eyed it questioningly, I shook my head and sent her on her way. It might have been a Friday, but I still had to get to the office first thing tomorrow morning. I knew my limit.

“Doesn’t he have to take the MCAT soon?” Theo asked.

I nodded stiffly. “Yeah, but he hasn’t been making use of the tutor I hired him. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him sit down and study.”

“How are his grades?” Ava asked cautiously.

“Let’s just say I don’t know how he hasn’t flunked out yet. Wally needs to start applying himself or...” I trailed off, running a hand through my hair.

My son was a good kid. I knew he was smart. He was top of his class in high school. I couldn’t be prouder when he graduated with all those scholarships and bursaries. Whatever his scholarships didn’t cover, I’d foot the rest of the bill provided he kept his grades up and got into a good pre-med college program. Now we were in his fourth and final year, but with the way things were going, I was genuinely worried that he was dropping the ball.

“What does Melissa have to say about it?” Theo asked.

I glared at him. My ex-wife was a touchy subject. If he were anyone else, I would have told him to fuck right off. But Theo and I went way back. We served together, worked together. He was the closest thing to a brother I had, apart from my actual brother, Devin, but the metaphor still stood.

“Everything out of that woman’s mouth is a jab at me,” I retorted. “She thinks I’m being too hard on him, but what does

she know? She skipped off to Florida with that son of a bitch when Wallace was eleven and left me to do all the parenting. What she has to say holds no weight.”

Theo smirked. “Need another drink, bud?”

“No.”

He gave me a knowing look.

“Fuck it, fine,” I grumbled and waved down the waitress. One more beer wouldn’t kill me.

Ava smiled gently. “I’m sure everything will work out. Maybe he’s doing all his studying at school?”

“Doubt it. He’s been skipping classes lately.”

“Aren’t you at work all the time?” Theo asked. “How would you know? You’re not having one of the boys tail him, are you?”

“I don’t use my employees to keep tabs on my son. That’s ridiculous.” My fresh beer arrived, and I took a heavy swig. I could sense the faintest trace of a buzz coming on. I hated that I’d built up such a heavy tolerance over the years. What I wouldn’t give to be twenty-one and a lightweight again, just for the night. Just for this conversation.

“You’re right, I’m sorry.”

“I can just tell,” I said. “When I ask him how his day is, he avoids eye contact.”

“That could mean a lot of things.”

“I know my boy. He’s hiding something, and I think it’s that he’s been ditching class. He’s always home by the time I get back, and I know for a fact that his last class is a three-hour lecture that should end at ten in the evening.”

“Maybe his professor’s been letting them go early?” Ava suggested.

“Every class for a whole semester?”

Her brow furrowed. “Okay, you might have a point.”

I gave a little bow. “Thank you.”

Theo's phone pinged twice, alerting him to a text message. He reached into his pocket to pull his phone out, squinting at the screen in order to read. "That's our sitter," he announced. "Something's come up. We need to pick Cory and Cassie up early."

"So you're already sick of me, huh?"

Ava giggled, leaning over to kiss me on the cheek. "Don't be such a big baby. You're still coming over for a barbeque next weekend, right?"

"Wouldn't miss it." Theo was just about to pull out his wallet, but I waved him away. "I've got it."

"You sure?"

"I already gave the waitress my card. Everything's been put on my tab."

"Thanks, man. I'll get the next one."

"You'd better. Run along and give Cory and Cassie my love."

Theo slipped an arm around Ava's waist and kissed the top of her head. "Ready to go, sweetheart?" She nodded, smiling sweetly up at him before they left our booth and disappeared into the crowd.

I only had half a glass left, but I didn't feel like finishing it. It wasn't much fun drinking by myself, and the bar's demographic was slowly shifting from after-hours businessmen to the partying sort. I didn't feel like being caught in the transition, so I raised an arm to flag down my waitress. As I did so, something caught my attention out of the corner of my eye.

No, not something.

Someone.

A woman at the bar. She was short —barely five-foot-two— standing up on her tiptoes trying to get the busy bartender's attention. It wasn't working.

It was a Friday night, which meant the bar was packed. A younger crowd was taking the place of the early group, all dressed to the nines with the intention of pre-gaming before heading off to the local clubs to dance and mingle and whatever it was kids these days got up to.

I normally wouldn't pay her any mind, but she stood out like a sore thumb. While all the other young women here wore tight, revealing dresses of brightly colored fabric and sparkly sequins, she was in a... navy blazer?

Her dark black hair was up in a sensible bun, baby hairs loose near the nape of her neck. A practical leather messenger bag was slung over her shoulder. She was facing away, so I couldn't get the whole picture, but I figured she must have been at least in her mid-thirties.

Was the poor woman lost or something?

I heard her voice before I ever saw her face.

"Please?" she asked, desperation in her voice. "I just need to borrow your phone for two seconds to check on my friend. I swear I'm not going to run off with it or anything."

Light. Soft. Angelic.

She made my ex-wife sound like an out of tune tuba in comparison.

I'd never heard someone speak with such effortless eloquence before. She wasn't shy, just soft-spoken. I gravitated toward her without realizing. I wondered if she was as beautiful as she sounded.

A man sidled up to her by the bar, one elbow resting on the edge of the counter. A real slimeball of a character. He was decked out in black, greasy hair styled with way too much gel. "Hey, little lady," he greeted. "Let me buy you a drink."

"No, thank you. I'm just looking to borrow a phone."

"You can borrow my phone if you'd like."

"Really?"

"Sure. In exchange for your number."

The woman stepped back. “On second thought, I think I’ll manage.”

“Come on, baby. Don’t be like that.” The slimeball put a hand on her hip and attempted to pull her close.

She shoved him hard. “Piss off!”

He grabbed her wrist. “How’d you know I like ‘em feisty?”

My nostrils flared. I had no idea who this woman was, but I knew I needed to step in.

I closed the distance between us in four long strides, inserting myself between the creep and woman in question. He looked none too pleased, but I wasn’t worried. I had years of de-escalation training under my belt; one of the many perks of being the owner of a personal security firm.

Even if this did escalate to a fight, I could take him. My years serving with the Army taught me how to handle myself in combat. I wouldn’t break a sweat over something as measly as a fistfight in a bar. Hell, we weren’t even in the same weight class. The guy would be an idiot if he thought he could take me.

“What gives, bro?” he sneered. “Can’t you see I was talking to her?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. “Last time I checked, *bro*, no still means no.”

He got right up in my face, puffing his chest out in a laughable attempt to intimidate me. “We gonna have a problem, old man?”

I mirrored his stance, looking down my nose at him. “I don’t know. Are we?”

He tried to stare me down, but I didn’t budge. Just as I expected, he was the first to relent.

“Fucking whatever,” he grumbled, turning away. He slunk off, tail between his legs.

Only once I was certain the coast was clear, I turned to the woman. “Are you okay, miss—”

I stopped when I locked eyes with her dazzling green gaze. Her eyes were like two brilliant emeralds staring up at me. She had a button nose and soft, full lips. Now that I was up close and personal, I could see that she was dressed far more modestly than I first realized, with her high-collared, loose-fitting blouse.

There was something vaguely familiar about her, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

A flash of recognition washed over her face. “Mr. White?”

I frowned. “Have we met?”

Her cheeks turned bright pink. “Oh, I’m Vivian Jones? We met that one time for Christmas dinner? I’m Wally’s girlfriend. Well, ex-girlfriend, actually. We broke up about a week ago.”

I blinked. There was so much to unpack here and so little time to react.

Vivian Jones. My son’s ex-girlfriend. My son’s super gorgeous ex-girlfriend with the voice of an angel who was nearly half my age. Dear God, I needed to say something and say something fast or it’d look like I was having a stroke.

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that,” I muttered dumbly. And then, under my breath, “Wally never tells me anything.”

“It’s okay. We, uh... parted on good terms. We decided we’re better as friends.”

“I see.” I swallowed, unsure why I was suddenly so stiff. “I’m glad to hear it. Very... mature of you two.”

“Thanks. And for —you know— that.” She gestured vaguely at the air around her, referring to the slimeball from before.

“Asshole was lucky I have self-control.”

“Yeah, but I wouldn’t have said anything if you wanted to deck him, either.”

A chuckle escaped my throat. “What are you even doing in a place like this?”

Vivian sighed. “I was supposed to meet a friend here. Drinks after work, you know? She told me to come early so I could save us some good seats, but it’s been—” she checked her watch “—Jesus, over an hour. My phone died, so I was trying to use the bar phone, but the bartender’s too busy.”

“You can use mine, if you want.” I handed her my cell. “You don’t even have to give me your number.”

The corners of her mouth tugged up into a smile. “You heard that, huh?”

“Lamest fucking pickup line ever.”

“I *know*, right?”

“What ever happened to originality?”

“You’ve got me,” she said, punching in her friend’s number. She held my cell to her ear and waited, only to pull back after a few seconds with a disappointed look. “Weird. She normally always answers.”

“What are you going to do now?”

Vivian clicked her tongue, handing my phone back. “I might just go home. This isn’t really my scene. Mind if I make one more call to get a cab?”

An odd sense of protectiveness churned in the pit of my stomach. It was late and raining. We weren’t exactly in an unsafe part of town, but Chicago was a big place with its fair share of unsavory people. The creep from before was a perfect example. I didn’t like the thought of Vivian waiting out by the curb for a ride from some stranger.

“I’ll give you a lift,” I offered.

Her eyes widened. “I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.”

“It’s not an inconvenience.”

“Are you sure?”

“Wouldn’t have offered otherwise.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, shoulders visibly relaxing.
“Thank you, Mr. White.”

“Please. Just call me Jesse.”

CHAPTER 3

“So,” I started carefully, “is Jesse supposed to be short for anything?”

“James,” he answered, voice like rich honey, deep and smooth and mesmerizing.

I laughed nervously. “Isn’t that a syllable shorter?”

He shrugged his massive shoulders. His suit jacket looked like it was struggling to contain him. “That’s just what my mother called me. Somewhere along the line, it stuck.”

We walked alongside each other, a respectable foot and a half or so between us. Even still, I was enveloped in the scent of his cologne. It wasn’t overbearing, but subtle. Sophisticated. Manly. I knew for a fact that Wally still used that cheap Axe body spray, the type that hurt my nose when he used too much of it. Jesse, in contrast, smelled *good*.

And it was definitely more of a problem than I anticipated it being.

Something inside me was stirring that I couldn’t explain. Every time I glanced at him, the butterflies in my stomach went crazy. A tight, wet heat bloomed deep within my core. My fingers itched to reach out—just once—for the chance to touch him, driven purely by curiosity even though I knew it was wrong.

I couldn’t allow myself to feel... *whatever* I was feeling. Jesse was my ex-boyfriend’s father. I didn’t want to give in to temptation and become a walking romance novel cliché. Yet

my brain shut off every time he so much as looked at me. My breath caught in my throat every time he spoke.

Common sense, go ahead and throw yourself straight out the window.

I'd met Jesse only once before. Wally had invited me to meet his father some time around Christmas at a formal, get-to-know-you sort of shindig. If my calculations were correct—which they always were—we'd been dating for about two months by that point. It was high time Wally introduced me to his family.

It was alright. Uneventful. A little boring.

At least, that's what I told myself after the fact.

The truth of the matter was, I was so mesmerized by Jesse when I first met him, I could barely bring myself to utter a word. What was I supposed to do? Admit that I couldn't stop thinking about my then-boyfriend's father?

Yeah, no. Absolutely not.

I didn't think much of it after that. Once Wally and I broke up, I figured I'd never see Jesse again in such close quarters. Imagine my surprise when he swooped in at the bar to save me from being harassed. What were the chances that out of all the bars in Chicago, we'd end up running into each other?

We walked up to a white Porsche 911 GT3 in the parking lot beside the bar.

"Whoa," I gawked. "Damn. I wish I could afford a ride like this. It'd take me..." I did the math in my head. "It'd take me twenty-five and a half years to pay it off."

Jesse raised his eyebrows at me. "That's some quick calculating."

"You seriously drive this around? Aren't you afraid someone might steal it?"

He shook his head. "State of the art security system. Tracker's built right in. They wouldn't get far." He said this so casually that it took me by surprise. The nonchalance, the air of indifference despite the vehicle's value... must have been

nice. I hoped to one day achieve the same level of financial freedom.

He held open the passenger side door for me. “After you.”

A couple of onlookers were gathered on the sidewalk, staring at the two of us as we climbed into the vehicle. I felt simultaneously embarrassed and inexplicably... good? Excited. Important.

It was a fleeting sensation, though, once I slid into my seat and found myself inches away from Jesse. The smell of his cologne grew that much stronger in the enclosed space.

I was honestly afraid to touch anything for fear of breaking something. I’d never be able to pay for the repairs.

“Buckle up,” he ordered.

I tried to pull my seatbelt down, but the mechanism locked. I tried again, but it wouldn’t budge. Mild panic gripped my throat. Why couldn’t I handle something as simple as putting on my seatbelt?

“Um, Jesse? It’s not...”

“Here,” he said gently. “Sometimes it’s finicky.”

Before I had the chance to think, Jesse leaned over the center console and reached across my body, expertly tugging the seatbelt free.

He was close. *Really* close. So close I couldn’t help but stare at his lips and drown in the warmth that radiated off his body. I easily and willingly fell into his orbit, lacking the strength and willpower to pull myself away.

My face burned with the fire of a thousand suns when the softest of sighs bubbled past my lips. Jesse looked me in the eye. He definitely heard it. I tried to play the whole thing off with a dramatic stretch and yawn, taking the now free seat belt from him to buckle up.

“Goodness,” I said way too loudly, “would you look at the time?”

Jesse glanced at the time on the Porsche's bright display screen. It was only 10:00 p.m.

“Let's get you home, then,” he said without the faintest hint of judgement.

I was thankful he kept his eyes on the road the entire time, because I didn't know what I'd do if he realized just how red in the face I was.



I lived on the second floor of a small apartment complex on the corner of Western and Fifth. It was crammed between a massive skyscraper and a twenty-four-hour sub shop, the latter of which was a lifesaver when those late-night study session cravings hit. It wasn't exactly living in the lap of luxury, but it was comfortable enough.

After years of moving from house to house —family to family— this tiny, one-bedroom apartment was the first place I'd ever considered home. My scholarships could only cover so much, and housing subsidies only got me so far, but I was smart enough to start saving the second I was old enough to get a part-time job in high school. I had enough saved that by the time I signed my first lease, I could afford to decorate it from head to toe in whatever I could find and flip at the local consignment store.

The couch was lumpy. The accent rug in the living room was fraying at the ends. The dining table and matching chairs in the kitchen were covered in all sorts of scratches and dings. And the TV I found half off at a nearby pawn shop only had seven channels, all of which were grainy.

It wasn't much, but it was still *mine*.

Jesse pulled the car up to the curb. I fully expected him to say good night and peel off into the distance, but he parked and got out with me. He looked very out of place here with his high-end sports car and bespoke suit.

I finally had a good look at him. Things were so chaotic at the bar that I barely had time to register him and his sudden presence. One second I was fending off unwanted advances, and the next I found myself totally safe.

He towered over me like a mountain, every inch of him chiseled and refined. I didn't know what a man like Jesse would be doing at a bar like the Snapdragon. He would have looked much more at home at the Four Seasons or the Ritz.

That was the vibe I got from him, anyways. He liked the finer things in life. Hundred-thousand-dollar luxury car. Rolex watches that could pay my rent five times over. An air of power and control that followed him wherever he went.

It was hard to believe that he and Wally were related. They couldn't be more different. The first and most notable difference was that, unlike Wally, Jesse walked me straight to my door. Wally wasn't a jerk or anything, it was just a super archaic thing to do in this day and age. Gentlemen and the like were rarer than diamonds.

Jesse looked around as we strode down the hall together. My apartment was at the very end. He didn't say anything, but I could tell by the slight curl of his nose that he didn't approve of the place.

“Safe neighborhood?” he asked.

I nodded. “As safe as it can get in Chicago.” Even *I* knew that wasn't saying much. I unlocked the door quickly and looked up at him with a smile. “Well, this is me.”

Jesse scrutinized the lock. “That doesn't look very sturdy.”

“It's not, but I've got one of these.” I reached into my handy messenger bag and pulled my portable lock out to show him. “Pretty nifty, right? Bought it off Amazon years ago.” He didn't look convinced, but I pressed on. “Besides, my neighbors are all really nice. Except for that guy on the ground floor next to the boiler room. Pretty sure he's a drug dealer, but he's relatively harmless.”

Jesse frowned. “A drug dealer who's harmless. Talk about an oxymoron.”

I laughed. "I was joking."

"About a drug dealer living in your building or being harmless?"

"Which one sounds worse?"

"They both sound equally bad. You should report him."

"Charlie's not that bad. He helped me move some boxes when I moved in."

He raised an eyebrow. "Yes, that makes up for his morally questionable profession."

"Whatever pays the bills."

"You're surprisingly calm about it."

I shrugged. "I've seen much worse. Charlie keeps to himself, so—"

"Much worse?"

I swallowed. I didn't mean to let that slip. It was all in the past now, but I went out of my way not to think about my childhood, easier to ignore it if I did. Pretend it never happened. I made it out alive and well and not nearly as jaded as the others. I didn't get where I was today by letting it drag me down.

"Anyhoo..." I stepped into my apartment with a shaky laugh. "Thanks for the lift."

"I hope you hear back from your friend."

"I'm sure I will. Say hi to Wally for me?"

His shoulders tensed; the lines of his jaw suddenly hard. "Of course," he said curtly. "Have a good night, Vivian."

He walked away without another word, leaving me wondering if I'd accidentally offended him.

I retreated into my apartment, rubbing my cheeks with my palms. Did I forget to turn the heater down before I left? It was unbearably hot in here. Nothing a nice cold shower couldn't fix.

The first thing I did before hopping into the shower was plug my phone in. The screen lit up, the battery icon glowing a dim green. Once there was enough juice, I checked my messages. Molly was normally very good about texting me. If something really did come up, she would have let me know. I probably just missed her message because my phone was dead.

No new messages.

I frowned. That was weird. “Maybe she forgot,” I mumbled to myself.

I stepped into the shower and washed my hair, massaging my vanilla-scented shampoo against my scalp. I breathed in the steam as the hot spray trickled over my skin, trying not to think about the embarrassing reaction I had in Jesse’s car.

The graze of his hand against my shoulder. The tickle of his breath on my cheek. The intensity of his eyes, the weight of his gaze.

I held my head under the showerhead and set the water to cold. I was still inexplicably warm by the time I got out.

CHAPTER 4

I've seen much worse.

Her soft voice played on repeat in my mind. Gentle. Kind.

The faintest trace of something sad.

I rode the elevator from the underground parking garage all the way up to the twentieth floor. The doors opened directly into the penthouse suite, which could only be accessed via a programmable fob I had attached to my car keys.

It was only fitting that the head of a security firm outfitted his home like a fortress. Safety was always top of mind for me. And speaking of safety...

Vivian.

Her entire neighborhood —not just her building— was questionable. I counted no less than seven broken streetlamps, only two patrol cars making their rounds when there should have been at least five, two shady deals in dark alleyways, and a significant homeless population camped out in the nearest public park.

Her apartment was also super sketchy. No doorman or concierge. No security cameras out front to keep an eye on people's comings and goings. Her door was flimsy at best, though it was the door *frame* I took issue with. Medium density fiberboard. Cheap shit used to save contractors money. If someone wanted to get in, all it would take was a few good kicks. Her portable lock was laughably cute, though I silently gave her props for being prepared.

I knew it shouldn't matter to me. We didn't really know each other. It wasn't my place to tell her how to beef up her security or recommend she carry around mace. But something deep down, some tiny voice in the back of my head, felt compelled to make sure she was alright. The logical side of me said I'd be overstepping. The illogical side...

The illogical side wanted to know what she had hidden under her shapeless blazer. Why would a gorgeous angel like her want to hide beneath such a modest getup? Its only purpose was to let my imagination run wild.

The penthouse lights switched on automatically as I passed through the living room and traipsed toward the kitchen, shrugging off my suit jacket and folding it over the back of the bar stool. I poured myself a finger of whiskey from the small liquor collection on my island bar. The liquid burned all the way down.

I had to stop thinking about her. I had to stop thinking about the way she smelled of vanilla and the way her cheeks and the tips of her ears turned pink when she was caught off guard. I had to stop thinking about the sound she made in the car, the light hitch of her breath when I reached over to help her.

Luscious black hair. Full, pink lips. Doe eyes with long, curling lashes that made my chest tighten. I could have kissed her right then. I'd wanted to. But that would have been wrong. Maybe that's what I found so appealing.

I shook my head and finished my whiskey.

Something was wrong with me. It was inappropriate, being this turned on by someone so young. This desire I felt was alarming. Had I finally hit the threshold of becoming one of those dirty old men? My half-hard cock certainly thought so.

She was just so magnetic. Enticing. Good enough to eat.

My phone rang. I answered immediately even though it was well after business hours. The thing about being your own boss was you never had a day off. I was on-call at all times

just in case one of the bodyguards on my roster needed assistance.

“Hey, Jesse,” came the overly sweet voice I recognized in an instant.

Melissa. Talk about a boner killer.

“What do you want?” I snapped.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Melissa cooed. “I just wanted to check on you.”

If that wasn’t a red flag, I didn’t know what was.

“You never check up on me unless you want something.”

“That’s not true, Jesse.”

“Get to the point or I’m hanging up.”

She sighed dramatically. “I need to borrow a thousand dollars.”

Red flag number two.

“Borrow? Or spend and never pay me back.”

“Look, I’m in a bit of a bind.”

“Not my problem. I already pay you alimony out the ass. Go ask that son of a bitch boy toy of yours.”

“Alexei isn’t a boy toy.”

“Goodbye, Melissa—”

“Wait, wait!” she exclaimed. “Come on, Jesse. Won’t you please be reasonable? You make tons more now than when we got divorced. A grand means nothing to you.”

“You’re right, it doesn’t.”

“So can’t you spot me the money?”

I pinched the bridge of my nose. “What do you need it for?”

“I made a bad bet,” she replied coolly. “Thought I’d try my luck at my girlfriend’s poker game. I just wanted to have some fun, but I wound up losing more than I bargained.”

“This sounds like a *you* problem.”

“Jesse,” she said, lowering her voice. “Please? For old time’s sake? You used to take care of things like this for me all the time when we were together. Didn’t all that time mean anything to you?”

I had to give credit where credit was due. Melissa always knew how to get me right in the gut.

Of course our time together meant something to me. In fact, it had meant *everything*. I’d loved Melissa with all my heart. She was the first and only woman I’d ever truly loved. I was poorer then. Just an Army man counting down the days I had left on each tour to motivate me until I could get back to her. I wanted to give her everything. Would have worked my hands to the bone to give her a good life.

Then I came home early from overseas to find her in our bed with another man.

She tore our family apart. She destroyed our marriage. And worst of all, she broke *me*.

And if she thought she could weaponize what I once felt for her into doing her bidding, she was more of a brazen idiot than I gave her credit for.

“No,” I said flatly. “Out of the question.”

“Jesse—”

“I said *no*.”

The line went so quiet I thought Melissa hung up on me.

“You’re a prick, you know that?” she seethed. “I never ask you for any favors. I just need your help this one time, James. I should have known you’d be this cold, you selfish asshole.”

I didn’t say anything. There wasn’t any point. Melissa would only scream over me, and I’d rather not waste my energy or breath attempting to get a word in. It was much more entertaining to listen to my ex-wife make a fool of herself. Her venomous words didn’t affect me like they used to. I was numb to her criticisms at this point. Like listening to

white noise. I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of breaking me again.

"You're so fucking self-centered, you know that? Alexei's more of a man than you'll ever be."

I forced a smile and spoke through gritted teeth. "Then why don't you ask to borrow *his* money?"

"Listen here, you son of a—"

I hung up and tossed my phone onto the counter. God. What a way to end the day.

The elevator *pinged* softly, alerting me of someone's arrival. Only two other people in the world had programmed fobs that gave them access to the penthouse: the building manager and my son.

Wally strode in, a heavy backpack slung over his shoulder. He dropped it by the couch and toed off his shoes. He looked disheveled with his baggy jeans and oversized band t-shirt. I would never understand my son's insistence on wearing gold chains and his hair up in a bun. He looked like he lived at a skatepark, not in a luxury condo on the upper-class side of Chicago.

"Hey, Dad," he said groggily.

"Hey. How'd that biology test go?"

He handed me a handful of papers, all of them stapled neatly in the upper left-hand corner. Red check marks littered the pages, a massive *100%* scrawled on the front. A perfect score.

I flipped to the back and frowned. "You didn't get the bonus?"

Wally rolled his eyes. "Nobody did."

"You're smarter than them," I insisted. "You should have been able to get it."

My son groaned. "Would it kill you to tell me I did a good job? Or would you require a blue moon?"

I nodded slowly. "No, you're right. Good job, kid."

He looked at me expectantly. “But?” he supplied.

“But I heard back from Mrs. Packer today. She called the office and let me know you skipped MCAT tutoring again.” Wally tried to walk right past me and head to his room, but I put a hand on his shoulder and reeled him in. “Come on, man. We talked about this. You need the extra practice.”

Wally chewed on the inside of his cheek. I didn’t understand why he looked so nervous. “About that... Dad, I wanted to talk to you about—”

I snapped my fingers, a thought suddenly occurring to me. “Actually, I just remembered... I reached out to Vincent Hargrove this morning.”

Wally frowned. “Vincent Hargrove? As in the head of the Department of Health?”

I nodded. “He hired Pegasus Star at the last minute to run point for his daughter’s security team while she’s visiting Seattle. He owes me a number of favors, so I asked if he could give you a summer internship working for him.”

“Dad, I don’t—”

“You’d start in May, once the semester’s over. It’d look great on your applications to med school.”

Wally grimaced. “You really shouldn’t have, Dad.”

“Anything to give you a leg up. Trust me, it’s not what you know, but who you know.”

“No, I mean you *really* shouldn’t have, Dad. I already have plans for the summer.”

I set my jaw. “Doing what?”

He scratched behind his ear. “Well, there’s actually this program in Paris that I really want to attend.”

I smiled, pride rising in my chest. “That’s great.”

“It is?”

“Yes, of course. I’m glad you’re finally taking some initiative with regards to your career. What hospital is it with?”

I guess nothing beats field training—”

“It’s not for med school,” Wally snapped, exasperated. “It’s for a culinary program.”

“A culinary program?” I echoed. Disbelief washed over me. This was coming out of left field and I wasn’t prepared to make the catch. “Why would you want to attend a culinary program? That wouldn’t benefit your resume in the slightest. I’m not paying for you to goof off.”

“Oh my God, Dad,” he grumbled.

“What?”

“You never *listen*.”

“What are you talking about? I’m listening right now, and what I’m hearing is that you don’t want to apply yourself and do something beneficial for your future.”

“No, you’re not—” Wally huffed. “Never mind. Forget it.”

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“To bed. I’m tired.”

He stomped down the hall and slammed his bedroom door shut behind him. It was the last I saw of him all evening.

CHAPTER 5

When I walked into work on Monday, I was startled to find that Molly's cubicle was cleaned out. Empty. Not even so much as a bright neon pink Post-It Note left. Her computer had been reset to the company's default profile, and all her drawers were empty.

I discreetly pulled out my phone and tried texting her. I normally didn't condone phone use while on the clock, but this was important. An entire chain of my unanswered messages from the weekend filled the screen.

Hey, where were you last night?

Did you get lost somewhere?

I'm at work. Where's all your stuff?

Helllloooooooooooooo Is everything alright?

No response.

A sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach crept up on me, slowly but surely, dragging me under. Something wasn't right. I could feel it in my bones, but I had no words to describe it properly.

I peeked over the edge of my cubicle, peering at my co-workers. Everyone had their heads down, focused on work, staring at their computer screens. The distant ring of office phones, the low murmur of conversation from the water coolers, the click-clack of people typing furiously to meet deadlines... it all seemed so ordinary.

And yet it was also off-kilter; wrong ever so slightly.

I leaned back in my office chair and whispered to Marta. “Hey. Do you know where Molly is?”

“How should I know?” she grumbled indifferently, returning to her work.

I sighed. I should have known better than to ask Marta for help.

The squeaky wheels of the janitor’s cart reached my ear. I flagged him down. “Excuse me? Do you know where all of Molly’s things went?”

The janitor, an old man with bushy white eyebrows and thin lips, tilted his head like I’d asked a strange question. “I’m not sure who Molly is,” he said, “but I was instructed to clear out that desk this mornin’.”

“Who told you to do that?”

“No one specifically. I get work order requests through that there system and then I go an’ clean whatever needs cleanin’.”

I swallowed, my throat uncomfortably dry. Confusion washed over me. This was so weird. First, she didn’t show up to drinks, then she wasn’t answering her phone, and now her workspace was cleared out? What the hell was going on?

I rose from my chair and walked over to my supervisor’s office. A metal name plate was drilled into the side of the frosted glass wall, the title *Floor Supervisor* engraved in cursive lettering just below his name. I knocked on his door and peered inside.

“Hey, Arty?”

He looked up from his work. “Ah, Vivian. Just the gal I wanted to see. Come on in and shut the door, would you?”

My stomach flipped, but I did what I was asked. I stepped inside and closed the door behind me, freezing when I realized there was another person in the office already: Alistair McCloud.

“Hello, dear,” he said with a kind smile.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you were already in a meeting. I can come back and—”

“No, no,” Arty insisted. “We were actually just about to get you.”

“Me?”

Alistair patted the free chair beside him. “Come and take a seat, dear. We won’t take up too much of your time.”

I sat next to him, picking at my fingernails.

Arty nodded, warily eyeing Alistair the entire time he spoke. “I’m sure you’re curious about Molly.”

I held my breath. “I am. Where is she? Did something happen?”

Alistair chuckled. “Everything’s fine, dear. We simply transferred her to a different division for her co-op placement. I thought it would help her take in all sides of the business better. Expose her to new departments and connections. Networking is half the battle in this line of work, as I’m sure you know.”

“Yes,” I mumbled, though deep down, I didn’t understand in the slightest.

None of this was adding up. Molly would have told me the second she found out she was moving departments, probably in an attempt to get me to come with her. We texted all the time, so why hadn’t she answered her phone? It wasn’t like her to keep secrets. This wasn’t right.

“I understand that you must be disappointed,” Alistair said gently. “I’ve heard you two are very close?”

I nodded. “Yes. Molly’s my best friend. We… tell each other everything, which is why I’m confused here.”

I didn’t miss the way Alistair stole a glance at Arty.

“Everything?” Arty asked.

I licked my lips. “Yes.”

Alistair leaned in, bracing himself against his cane. “Did she, by any chance, mention anything to you that seemed... strange? Out of the ordinary?”

My heart railed inside my rib cage. The whole conversation was making me uneasy. “Out of the ordinary?” I echoed. “What do you mean?”

“She often gets you to check over her work, right?” Arty asked.

“Sometimes.”

“Did you notice anything off? In her work, I mean.”

Something in the back of my head clicked. The fudged ledger numbers I’d shown her Monday. Her sudden disappearance and supposed transfer. Upper management sniffing around and asking weird questions. This was all chalking up to be suspicious, and I didn’t like where this was going at all. Something was afoot, though I couldn’t say for sure what it was.

I had to think of something and fast; otherwise they’d know I knew more than I was letting on.

“Now that I think about it,” I said innocently, “Molly did mention that she was experiencing a really heavy time of the month.”

Arty sputtered. “E-excuse me?”

I nodded and smiled sweetly. “Oh, you know. Periods? She told me she was having really bad cramps and asked me if I had a Midol, but I didn’t, unfortunately. I normally always carry some just in case.”

Alistair cleared his throat, obviously unnerved by the subject matter. “Oh, that’s, uh...”

“Oh, sorry,” I said with a giggle. “It’s a girl thing. You wouldn’t understand.”

Art cleared his throat. “Well, um... If you remember anything, just let us know, alright?”

“For sure. Does this mean I’m free to go?”

“Yes,” Alistair said, still squirming in his seat. “Have a good day, dear. Thank you for your, er... *time*.”

I smiled as wide and chipperly as I could, leaving the office and returning to my cubicle. I knew talking about good old Aunt Flo would freak them out enough to let me go without further scrutiny.

I kept a low profile for the rest of the workday. It was probably the paranoia talking, but I could have sworn I was being watched on all sides by *someone*. Not just Arty, but my co-workers, too. Every move I made felt heavy. Judged. I couldn't shake the feeling that something bigger than myself was going on.

The portfolio I showed Molly... Did it have something to do with her disappearance?

I scrolled through my work pipeline and pulled up the files I'd been reviewing yesterday. My guts tied themselves into an impossible knot when I realized that the files were now password protected and impossible to access without the right clearance.

This was getting really freaky.

Had I stumbled onto something I shouldn't have? Was Molly missing because of me? I had to get to the bottom of this, but not here under Blue Cloud Financial's nose. I wondered if they had keystroke monitoring built into their computers. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if they did. If I tried accessing the files now, would they know I was snooping around?

I couldn't risk it.

I proceeded with caution, going about my regular tasks with the same level of care and attention I always used. I was already dangling above a pot of boiling water. Any deviation from the norm could land me right in the middle of it.

Arty was by no means a negligent floor supervisor, but I could have sworn he was hovering more than usual. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as he came and went from his office, strolling casually past us in our little cubicles.

He was lingering, I realized, whenever he reached my section of the office. I kept my eyes forward, making sure to look totally engrossed in my work. A gnawing paranoia ate away at the pit in my stomach.

The second it was time to clock out, I gathered my things and logged out of my computer. I held my breath and walked briskly, hurrying for the elevator. I didn't stop to talk to anyone, leaving without a single *see you later* like usual.

Even when I exited the building, I couldn't relax. Every fiber of my being was tense, threatening to snap. I trusted my gut, and right now, my gut was telling me I was still being watched.

I needed to get as far away from Blue Cloud Financial as I could. I needed to find Molly. I needed *help*. Fumbling for my phone, I called the only person I could think of. He answered on the fourth ring.

“Hey, Viv. What's up?”

“Wally,” I gasped. “Wally, I think I'm in trouble and I need your help.”

CHAPTER 6

If Pegasus Star Security was my castle, then my office chair was my throne. A throne that my younger brother, Devin, had no problem marking up with his dirty shoes.

“For the love of God,” I grumbled. “Would you sit like a normal human being? You’re going to ruin your back like that. Not to mention destroy the leather. I had this chair imported from Italy, you know.”

Devin scoffed but didn’t budge. He was too preoccupied with whatever was on his laptop, which was perched precariously on the tops of his knees. “Whatever you say, *Mom*.”

“Grown-ass man, but you sit like a child.”

“I’m doing you a favor here,” he pointed out. “Do you want me to help you set up a new cybersecurity division or not? I’ve got plenty of offers from other companies in Chicago who are willing to pay me way more.”

I clicked my tongue. I loved my brother, but sometimes he could be the world’s biggest pain in the ass. If I wanted to give Pegasus Star a leading edge against other security firms in Chicago, I needed to branch out and offer my clients digital protection as well as physical. We both knew that he was the leading expert in cybersecurity analytics from here to Dallas. I wouldn’t find anyone better.

Growing up, Devin had always been considered the intelligent one. We were both smart, but he was *sharp*. Too much for his own good, in my opinion. It got him into his fair

share of trouble with the other boys in the trailer park. Most of them didn't take too kindly to being shown up time after time.

And while Devin had excellent wit, he wasn't so good with fists. That was where his big brother came in. I dragged him out of more fights than I could count. I won far more often than I lost, but one thing remained the same: no matter how much of a pain in the ass he was, we'd always be there for each other.

Which was exactly why I knew Devin was full of it.

"Please," I said with a snort. "If you wanted to work with someone else, you would have done that already. Didn't Google offer you a hefty paycheck to join them?"

Devin's fingers flew over his keyboard. He was coding a new server system for my firm. That, or hacking into the Matrix. Both were perfectly valid options.

"I don't like working for suits," he muttered.

"You work for *me*."

"No, I work *with* you. There's a difference." He pressed the *Enter* key several times. "If I'd taken that job with Google, there would have been some supervisor with a superiority complex because they graduated from MIT breathing down my neck the whole time. I prefer freelancing."

"What makes you think that *I'm* not going to breathe down your neck the whole time?"

"Because you know for a fact I would never put up with that shit, so you're not going to try in the first place."

I rolled my eyes. "You're so fucking annoying."

"Right back at you."

"How's everything coming along? You going to take much longer?"

Devin glared at me. "This isn't like the movies. I can't create an entire security server with a couple of clicks. It's complicated. You wouldn't tell a brain surgeon to hurry up in the middle of an operation, would you?"

“I might. If they had their damn feet up on my desk.”

My brother hummed. “Jesus.”

“What?”

“Your calendar’s awfully full.”

I frowned. “The hell are you doing going through my calendar?”

“I’m waiting for my codes to load.”

“That’s not an invitation to go snooping. It’s supposed to be password protected.”

Devin shot me an *are-you-kidding-me* look. “As your future head of cybersecurity, it’s my recommendation that you don’t set your password as *password*. That’s asking for trouble.” Before I could get a word in, Devin continued, “Seriously, Jesse. Look at this. Do you even have time to breathe?”

I paced around my office. “It’s none of your business.”

“Training new hires... Client briefings... Even your meals are scheduled.”

“By design,” I noted. “It’s the nature of running a security firm.”

“When was the last time you took a vacation?”

“I don’t need one.”

“That wasn’t my question.”

I thought about it briefly. The last time I had a real vacation was when Wally was eleven. Melissa and I were still married, albeit our relationship had taken a turn for the worst. We were as emotionally distant as two people could be, hanging onto the threads of our marriage for Wally’s sake. I took them both on a trip to Paris for two weeks. It was fun for the most part, as long as I deliberately ignored all of Melissa’s passive-aggressiveness. It was the last trip we ever took as a family.

I found Melissa in bed with Alexei five months later. I filed for divorce by the end of the day.

“Years,” I grumbled.

Devin set his laptop down on my desk and —*finally*— put his feet on the floor. “Look, man. I’m not telling you what to do, but you should take a break every once and a while. You’ll go bald faster if you’re under constant stress.”

“My hairline is fine, thank you.”

“Seriously. It’s not good for your health. Remember what happened to Dad?”

I set my jaw. I didn’t like talking about our father. “Dad did everything he could to provide for us.”

“Yes. And he worked himself to the grave.”

“He had a heart attack. It happens.”

“He had a heart attack because he was pulling triple shifts four times a week.”

“To put food on the table,” I snapped. “To buy you those advanced textbooks you wanted. To give us a *better life*.”

“I know you looked up to him—”

“Of course I did. Dad gave up everything for us so we could succeed. He taught us that hard work was the only way out of that dump of a trailer park. Now look at us.” I gestured vaguely about the space. “We did it. We got out. The only way to have a good life is to work hard. Making excuses and taking breaks... That’s the fastest way back to that hell hole.”

Devin closed his laptop and exhaled slowly. “You really believe that?”

I pressed my lips into a thin line. I could still remember the late nights when Dad would come home well after midnight exhausted, dripping in sweat and hands covered in grime. He’d pass out on the couch so he didn’t have to disturb us as he passed our room. At the crack of dawn, he was up again to take a quick shower and scarf down a bowl of cereal before heading off to his morning job.

We didn't have much. Prospects were limited. Money was always tight, and bills were always paid a day or two late. When I turned sixteen, I offered to drop out and get a job. Do the honorable thing. Devin had all the smarts, anyways. He had a way better chance of getting into a good college than I did. Dad wouldn't have any of it.

"Hard work is the only way to get out on top," I said.

A long pause settled over the office. My brother simply sighed and stood up. "If you say so," he mumbled, clearly not wanting to drag this out any further. "I'm done for the day. I'm going to have to come back tomorrow to finish up. Whoever you hired to install your firm's firewall were idiots. They left a huge backdoor. Anyone with intermediate coding experience could get through and gain access to all the files they wanted."

I frowned. "That's a security breach waiting to happen. Did you—"

"Already took care of it. Don't worry. I'm not even going to charge you extra. Consider it a family discount."

"Thank you for your generosity," I replied dryly.

"All work and no play makes Jesse a dull boy," Devin muttered amusedly to himself as he left.

I pretended to ignore him. There was too much work to do.

CHAPTER 7

I asked Wally to meet me at a coffee shop on campus. A huge wave of relief washed over me when I spotted him seated at the back table, the one furthest from the front entrance near the glass display case full of cakes and cookies fresh from the bakery. It was our old spot, where we used to share late-night coffees and last-minute study sessions when we were still seeing one another.

We texted on and off since our breakup a couple weeks prior, but this was the first time seeing each other in person since then. I thought it would be awkward to see him again, but it wasn't. He smiled wide when he saw me, standing as I approached. He hugged me tight, like two old friends reuniting after years apart.

I shouldn't have expected anything less. Wally was always easy to be around. He was a good listener, a kind soul. He was a genuinely wonderful person.

I knew lots of people would probably take issue with us *just being friends*. Exes who could maintain a platonic relationship and an above average level of decency were rare in this day and age. But nothing ever happened between us that warranted maliciousness.

The truth was, Wally and I broke up because we wanted different things. I wanted to stay in Chicago and build an investment firm from the ground up. He wanted to travel the world and immerse himself in other countries' cultures, specifically interested in their foods. He wanted to cook, to one day run his own kitchen.

Our paths were heading in different directions, and we both knew it from the start. I couldn't fault him for wanting to follow his dreams, just as he couldn't fault me for following mine. When we broke up, we promised to support each other no matter what. It was the mature, adult thing to do.

"How're you doing, Einstein?" he asked, a twinge of concern in his words. "You really freaked me out over the phone. Is everything alright?"

I glanced over my shoulder. I could have sworn someone was watching me. "Molly's missing," I whispered. "And I think... I think I'm next."

Wally blinked, looking at me like I'd lost my mind. "Sit down. Tell me everything."

I sat on the edge of my seat, knees bouncing, wringing my fingers together. "Friday at work, I noticed something. Money was missing from one of the client accounts. Lots of it. At first, I thought it was an error in the system. Molly volunteered to bring it up with our supervisor. She didn't show up for drinks that night like we'd planned, and I couldn't get ahold of her all weekend. Then, when I came in to work today, she was gone. They told me she was transferred to a different department."

His brow furrowed. "You don't believe it?"

"Fuck no," I mumbled hurriedly. "That much money. Gone without a trace? And then Molly disappears without a word? She'd never not tell me something like that, and she's not answering my texts. That's not a coincidence. I think something terrible happened to her, and Blue Cloud Financial is covering their tracks."

Wally paused, staring at me like I suddenly grew a second head. And then he started laughing. "Hilarious as always," he said, wiping the moisture from his eyes. "Have you finally made the leap from genius to insanity?"

I gripped the edge of the table and leaned in close. "I'm not crazy, Wally. I wouldn't lie about something like this. You know I wouldn't."

“Okay,” he said softly, patting me on the forearm. “Okay.”

“You believe me?”

He sighed. “I mean, I believe *you* believe you’re in trouble.”

“Wally—”

“Do you have proof?”

I attempted to swallow, but my throat was squeezed tight. The encrypted files. All the proof I needed was there, but I couldn’t get to them without the password. I left in such a hurry that I didn’t even think to make a copy, but the thought of going back to work made my heart race. What if they caught me? What if they did to me what they did to Molly?

“No,” I mumbled through gritted teeth. “No, I don’t have any proof. Except that Molly ghosting me is not normal.”

He sighed, running a hand through his dark curls. “That’s not ideal.”

I slumped in my chair. “I know, but I—”

The soft chime of the bell just above the coffee shop’s door reached my ear. I looked over Wally’s shoulder and saw a man standing at the entrance. Any other day, any other time, I wouldn’t have batted an eye. But the alarm bells in the back of my mind went off, a deep-rooted impulse that told me there was nothing ordinary about him.

He was tall, intimidatingly wide with an oddly small head. He wore sunglasses despite the fact that it was an overcast day. He wore an all-black ensemble —black shirt, black pants, black shoes— as if that wasn’t the universal uniform for bad guys everywhere.

“Hi!” the barista behind the counter greeted with a chipper smile. “What can I get for you, sir?”

He didn’t answer. He scanned the inside of the coffee shop, his gaze stopping on me. The man took a single step toward me and I knew I was in trouble. I grabbed Wally by the hand and dragged him out of his seat, dashing toward the back exit.

“We have to go!” I exclaimed, heart pounding in my ear.

“Viv, what—”

There wasn't time to explain. I pulled Wally through the narrow back exit and out into the alleyway around back. It was filthy, commercial garbage bins full and awaiting pickup and graffiti all over the place. We ran as fast as we could, reaching the main road and slipping into busy pedestrian traffic.

My heart was in my throat, blood rushing loudly past my ears. My chest burned, my calves cramped. We made it a good five or six blocks before taking a sharp right corner, hiding behind a massive concrete building. Wally bent forward, hands on his knees as he panted harshly.

“What the hell was that?” he wheezed.

“We were being followed!”

Wally looked incredulous. “By *who*, Viv? No one's even here. What's gotten into you?”

I turned. The man was nowhere in sight. We either lost him or...Or he wasn't following us in the first place.

“I could have sworn that he...” I took a deep breath.

Wally put his hands on my shoulders. “You're being paranoid, Vivian. No one's after you, alright? Whatever you're going through, I promise to help, but you're totally safe. Do you understand?”

My mind swirled. None of this made any sense. Maybe Wally was right. Was I losing it?

I nodded slowly. “Okay,” I whispered. “Okay, I'm sorry.”

“Let me walk you home. Come on.”

A storm was brewing in my chest. My stomach churned, threatening to make me ill. Maybe what Arty and Alistair told me was true. Maybe Molly really had been transferred. It just didn't make sense that she wouldn't tell me, or that she would ignore my texts. Did our friendship really mean so little? The thought stung more than I wanted it to.

“I’m sure there’s a perfectly normal explanation,” Wally said as we walked back the way we came. “Let’s stop by Molly’s apartment, hm? Did you think to check in on her in person?”

“I... No. I didn’t.”

“I’m sure everything’s fine. She probably just lost her phone or something. You know how forgetful she can be.”

“That’s true.”

We took another few steps but stopped short when a man halted in front of us. He came out of nowhere, silent like a shadow. There was nothing particularly memorable about his features. If I were tasked to pick him out of a lineup, I wouldn’t be able to do it. The one thing that *did* stand out was the snake tattooed on the side of his neck. It curled around the front of his throat, slithering all the way behind and circling back like an ink noose. Most notable of all were the deep crimson of the animal’s eyes.

He loomed over Wally and me, staring down his nose at us. “Vivian Jones?” he asked, voice low and gravelly.

I shook my head, taking Wally’s hand to try and go around. “Sorry. You’ve got the wrong person.”

“She’s lying,” came another man’s voice.

I turned and saw the man from the coffee house. He somehow got behind us. Now that I got a closer look, he also had a snake tattoo wrapped around his neck. Was this some sort of gang symbol?

It was then and only then that I realized Wally and I were standing next to a big white van next to the curb. Its side door slid open. A third and final man appeared, approaching with an alarming amount of speed. He was trying to shove us inside.

I whipped my messenger bag at him, smacking him across the side of the head with enough force to knock our attacker off kilter. I kicked his knee with all my might and watched him tumble to the ground.

“Run!” I shouted at Wally.

This time, I didn’t hear a lick of protest.

I hit my second wind, dodging other pedestrians on the sidewalk as we evaded our assailants. They were hot on our tail. No matter how many turns we took, no matter how fast we ran, they continued their pursuit. Considering they were willing to make such a scene in public, I knew I was in bigger trouble than I’d originally thought.

“What the hell’s going on?” Wally demanded. “Who are these people?”

“Less talking, more running!” I snapped. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the ascending stairs that led to the train. “This way!” I shouted at Wally.

We shoved past people trying to get through the ticket stall.

“Come on, come on, come on,” I said, mostly to myself in a panic.

The train was seconds away from leaving. Wally and I practically tripped into the last car as the doors slid closed, sealing us in and separating us from the platform. The men with the snake tattoos came up right to the door, one of them pounding the glass window in frustration. The train pulled away with an electric screech.

We were safe.

For now.

I nudged Wally in the ribs with the tip of my elbow. “Do you believe me now?”

He nodded, catching his breath. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

“We need to call the police. We need to—” I reached for my phone in my messenger bag, but grimaced. My bag was gone. “Shit. Shit, shit, *shit*.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I threw my messenger bag at them. I lost it all.”

“All?”

“Everything, Wally. My phone. My wallet. They have *everything*.”

Wally hushed me gently. “Hey, it’ll be okay, Vivian. You’ll come with me. You’ll be safe.”

“I don’t know. I’ve already dragged you into this. I don’t want you to be in more danger than you already are.”

“You’re forgetting something very important, Viv.”

“What?”

Wally smiled. “My father’s a bonafide badass.”

CHAPTER 8

I got home early, around 9:00 p.m. I had a productive day, banging through my to-do list with impressive efficiency. There was an issue with payroll that I sorted out during lunch. I had a total of four client meetings in the afternoon, all of whom signed Pegasus Star as their primary security service once I was done pitching. My teams were all organized, the new hires were undergoing a strict training regime that I came up with, and all my dispatched bodyguards reported a total of zero hiccups.

Everything was running smoothly. Easy, predictable clockwork.

Just how I liked it.

I stepped off the elevator and into the penthouse, shrugging off my suit jacket from over my gun holster and loosening my tie. I was exhausted, more so than usual. Maybe Devin had a point about taking a break, though I'd rather die than admit that he was right. I could already imagine the smug look on his face.

I paused in the living room, noting a shuffling sound coming from the kitchen. From where I was, I could see that the fridge door was open, a pair of bare legs visible just below.

A pair of female bare legs.

Did Wally have a guest over? He knew the rules —no overnight guests without letting me know first. He wasn't prohibited from bringing people over; I just wanted a little heads up so I could avoid awkward situations like this one.

I approached the stranger and cleared my throat. The woman yelped despite my caution.

“Holy shit!” she shouted, slamming the fridge door closed. “Don’t *do* that.”

I recognized her voice first. Soft and delicate.

“Vivian?”

She gave me a sheepish smile. “Hey, Mr. White.”

“What are you doing here?”

She was wearing one of Wally’s t-shirts. My son was by no means a large man, but it looked massive on her, practically swallowing her whole. I did my best not to stare, but it was hard not to. Her skin looked soft and warm.

I forced myself to look down the hall toward Wally’s room. “Are you two back together or something?” I wasn’t sure why I sounded so disappointed.

“Ah, no. Nothing like that.” Vivian shook her head, her long black locks swaying elegantly over her shoulders. It was the first time I’d seen her with her hair down.

“So you’re here raiding my fridge because...”

“Because I’m stressed as hell. And we can’t really call it raiding because there’s nothing to raid. Why’s there so much tofu?” Vivian quickly swept her hair up into a bun, securing it atop her head with an elastic.

I frowned. I had so many questions, but the only thing that came out of my mouth was, “What’s wrong with tofu? It’s healthy.”

She put a hand on her hip. “I can’t stress eat tofu.”

“Why are you stress eating at all?”

Vivian nibbled on her supple bottom lip. “It’s a long story. It’s actually why I’m here.”

“What’s going on, Vivian?”

“Dad?” Wally stepped out from the guest bedroom, hands busy fluffing a pillow. “I’m glad you’re back. I’ve been trying

to get a hold of you for hours.”

I checked my phone. There were three text messages and four missed phone calls. “I was in meetings all day,” I said with a grunt. My mind immediately went to the worst-case scenario, attempting to fill in the gaps. “What’s going on? Don’t tell me you got her pregnant.”

Vivian’s face turned bright red. “What? Oh my God, *no*. That’s what you think this is about?”

I crossed my arms. “My son brings his ex-girlfriend home out of the blue... What am I *supposed* to think?”

Wally groaned. “Vivian’s in danger.”

I regarded her carefully, observing her from head to toe. Now that I had a moment to properly take her in, she did look rattled. Her shoulders were slumped, and she couldn’t stand still, toeing one foot with the other while biting her lip. She didn’t have any visible injuries, but it was obvious how shaken she was mentally.

I moved to pull up the nearest chair for her to sit down. She seemed grateful, immediately sitting down and pulling her knees to her chest. She was wearing a pair of shorts. Short shorts. I looked away out of decency, uncomfortably warm all of a sudden.

“What kind of danger?” I asked, pressing on.

Vivian took a deep breath. “I work for an investment firm with my friend, Molly. The other day, I noticed something weird about one of the accounts. Money was missing. Lots of it. Molly volunteered to bring the error up with our supervisor, and now she’s missing. They told me she transferred, but I don’t buy it for a second. She’s not answering my texts. And then earlier today when I went to speak to Wally, we were chased—”

“Chased,” I said. “Chased by who?”

My son shrugged. “A group of men. Three of them. Looked like thugs.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I *tried*.”

A pang of guilt twisted in my chest. Right. I put my phone on silent mode so I wouldn't be disturbed.

“What did they look like?” I asked, getting back to business.

“Big, dressed all in black. They all had matching tattoos.”

“Describe them.”

She nodded. “They all had snakes that wrapped around their necks.”

A chill scraped its way down my spine. “Snakes,” I repeated.

“Yes.”

“Black ink with red eyes?”

She took a deep breath. “Yes, that's right.”

I stared at her, both stunned and alarmed. What the hell had she gotten herself into?

“Dad?” Wally said. “Do you know who they are?”

“Have you ever heard of the Azure Cartel?” I asked, my voice low.

Vivian arched an eyebrow. “No, but the account I flagged belonged to a company called the Azuras Association. Are they connected somehow?”

“I'm not sure, but I know for a fact that you should never mess with the Azure Cartel. They've been running rampant in the Chicago area for years. They mostly deal with weapons and drugs, but I have it on good authority that they've been branching out into human trafficking.”

Vivian visibly paled. “They tried to shove Wally and me into a van. Do you think...” She shuddered. “How do you know it's even them?”

“Those tattoos are a part of their initiation process. New recruits earn their tattoo once they've successfully—” I licked my lips, struggling to find a delicate way to put it.

“What?” she urged.

“It’s like a badge of honor,” I said. “One they earn after their first successful kill.”

I expected her to cry. I expected her to squirm in her seat. Any sane person would be rightly worried for their lives.

Vivian didn’t so much as flinch. “We need to go to the police,” she decided firmly. “If they have Molly... We need to get her back as soon as possible.” A fire ignited behind her eyes. Sheer determination in the face of the looming unknown. It was startling.

And sexy as hell.

The Azure Cartel meant business. If Vivian was telling the truth—and I had no reason to believe that she’d lie— this was no joke.

I knew that the smart thing to do was let the police handle this, but I also knew from experience that if I wanted something done right, I needed to do it myself. If the cartel really was after Vivian and had already gotten their hands on her friend, there was likely next to nothing the cops could do. As grim a truth as it was, people went missing under police protection all the time. Sometimes, unfortunately, with their cooperation.

“You’ve made up the guestroom for her?” I asked Wally.

He nodded. “Yep.”

“We’ll file a missing person’s report for your friend first thing in the morning. You’ll stay here until the authorities get to the bottom of this.”

Vivian’s eyes widened. “You mean... You mean I can stay here?”

“Would you rather go it alone?”

“No, I...” She inhaled through clenched teeth. “Thank you.”

“We’ll have to establish some ground rules,” I continued firmly. “Until we know that you’re out of harm’s way, you will

not be permitted to return to your place of work. If your employers are somehow linked to the cartel, returning would make you an easy target.”

“Won’t people be suspicious if I don’t go?”

“Better safe than sorry. You can call in tomorrow morning and tell them you’ll be taking an extended leave of absence due to a family emergency.”

“O-kay,” Vivian said slowly. “Anything else?”

“You will not be permitted to leave this penthouse without supervision.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“You were almost kidnapped in broad daylight,” I pointed out. “They got within inches of you, correct?”

She nodded stiffly. “Yes.”

“It will feel restrictive at first, but it’s for your own good. As far as I’m aware, the men who are after you don’t know you’re here. The penthouse is a fortress. It’s the safest place for you to be, even at the cost of your usual freedoms.”

Vivian closed her eyes and breathed deeply. At first, I thought she was going to protest. It wasn’t uncommon for me to receive a great deal of pushback from my clients when they came under my security detail. The people under my care were of a specific demographic, one used to getting what they wanted when they wanted. I was no stranger to their moaning and groaning about *cramping their lifestyle*.

“Alright.”

That was a lot less resistance than I thought. “Good.”

“How much will I owe you?” she asked, totally serious. “Do you offer payment plans? My budget’s kind of tight, but I can probably scrape together the funds to—”

“I’m not charging you.”

“You’re not?” She eyed me suspiciously. “Why?”

The businessman in me told me I was being stupid. Pegasus Star Security was the go-to security firm for the elites, and that, therefore, came with a hefty price tag. It wasn't just for show, either. Every penny went back into the business for funding training, upgrading equipment, gathering reliable intel. Agreeing to protect someone pro bono wasn't in my or my company's best interest. It wasn't personal, just business.

But the longer I stared at Vivian, the more I couldn't bring myself to ask her to pay. That'd be a dick move, to be honest. She was scared. She was way in over her head. And the thought of someone nearly getting their hands on her made my blood boil.

"You need help," I stated. "And I can provide it. It's as simple as that."

Wally breathed a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Dad."

"Get some sleep. Both of you."

"Do you think it'd be possible to stop by my apartment?" she asked. "Just to grab a few things. Clothes and whatnot."

"Give me your address. I'll pick them up for you."

Vivian grimaced. "Can't I just come with you? You'd count as supervision, right?" And then, under her breath in embarrassment, "I'd rather not have you going through my underwear drawer."

My mouth was suddenly dry. She had a point. The thought of rummaging through her drawers, sifting through her panties... My pulse raced at the thought.

"I... Yeah, alright. You can come with me. But we leave now. The sooner I get you back, the better."

She nodded. "Alright. Just give me a few minutes to get dressed."

CHAPTER 9

The Chicago streets were different at night. I couldn't see the stars above. The lights of the city were just too bright, but there was still something comforting about the warm golden glow of streetlights as we drew closer to my apartment building.

We drove in silence.

I didn't know what to say. Jesse was being so incredibly patient and kind, but he was super quiet the whole time. I wondered briefly if I was a burden to him. Of course I was. Suddenly having protection duty thrust upon him must have thrown a wrench in his usual plans. It was almost midnight. He'd probably be asleep and in bed by now if it weren't for me.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled quietly. The low rumble of the car engine almost drowned me out. "For being such an inconvenience."

Jesse's eyes remained on the road, but I couldn't help but notice the way his grip tightened around the steering wheel. Knuckles white, shoulders tense. "Your safety is never going to be an inconvenience, Vivian."

I watched him out of the corner of my eye. There was a strength to his presence, a self-assuredness in the way he carried himself. It was his stillness I admired the most. Unwavering. So damn serious. Was he always like this? Or was it because he was on high alert, bodyguard mode?

"I have a few more rules for you," he said sternly.

“I’m listening.”

“You’re not allowed to go anywhere without me.”

“What if I have to go to the bathroom?”

He huffed. “You can obviously go to the bathroom. You know what I mean.”

I suppressed a giggle. “Got it.”

“When we’re out in public, you have to remain ahead of me at all times.”

“So you can keep an eye on me?”

“Precisely. The only exception is when we’re entering or exiting a room. I’m always first through the door.”

“What happened to ladies first?”

“It’s so I can take a bullet for you.” He said it so bluntly that it took me by surprise.

“You’d really take a bullet for me?”

“Yes,” he answered in a heartbeat.

“But why? You don’t even know me?”

“That’s the job.”

I squirmed in my seat, unsure why my heart was racing. The AC was on, but my skin was on fire. What was I expecting? Of course that was his answer. I just didn’t expect him to be so clinical about it. In fact, Jesse made the whole notion of being a bodyguard sound rather boring. Mundane. Like taking a bullet was as easy as clocking in to work in the mornings.

“Have you ever been shot at before?” I asked.

“You’re a morbidly curious little thing, aren’t you?”

My face pooled with heat. “Maybe.”

“Yes,” he said, flicking the turn signal before pulling left. “I’ve been shot at a few times, actually. A couple of close calls while I was serving overseas, but I’ve been lucky enough not to be hit.”

“Was it scary?”

“The first few times.” He shrugged. “It’s hard to explain. You get desensitized to that sort of stuff really quickly. It doesn’t serve me to be scared.”

“So you’re never scared?”

“Nope.”

I thought I saw him grin, but then we pulled up to the curb just outside my apartment building. Jesse killed the engine but didn’t unlock the door.

“One more thing,” he said. “When I give you an order, you obey it. When I tell you to run, you run. When I tell you to duck, you duck. When I tell you to stay, you stay. Do you understand?”

“The world’s strictest game of Jesse Says? Got it.”

“I’m being serious, Vivian. You shouldn’t make light of the matter.”

“I know, I know.” I sighed heavily. “I’m just... This is a lot to deal with. I’m really worried about Molly. I’m scared. And I guess the way I deal with it is by making jokes. I’m sorry. I swear I’m paying attention.”

Much to my surprise, Jesse reached over the center console and placed his hand on the back of mine. His was massive in comparison, his palm and fingers blanketing mine. I held my breath, startled by the thrill that shot through my veins. Jesse was warm, and he smelled utterly delectable. It was the first time all day that I felt even remotely close to alright.

“Don’t be scared,” he said gently, holding my eyes. “I’ll protect you. You just have to promise that you’ll do as I say.”

I nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Jesse pulled away and cleared his throat. I could have sworn I saw redness creeping up the back of his neck, but he got out of the car before I could tell. He circled around front and opened the passenger-side door for me, looking left and right in search of danger.

“Fifteen minutes,” he said gruffly. “Pack your things in fifteen minutes or less.”

I wasn't about to argue. I wanted to get the hell out of there just as much as he did.

As promised, Jesse was first through the door of my apartment. Nothing was out of place, nothing out of the ordinary. I watched him work, mesmerized by his efficiency. He checked the windows for tampering, searched every room for threats. He was a shark, nothing but cold eyes and steely focus, moving with speed and precision.

“All clear,” he said, waving me in.

I didn't dawdle. It wasn't like I had much to bring with me to begin with. After grabbing a duffle bag from the hallway linen closet, I made straight for the bedroom to pack my clothes. I picked up my toothbrush from the bathroom, my laptop from off the coffee table, a book or two from my bookshelf. I wasn't sure how long I was going to be in Jesse's care, so I figured bringing some light entertainment couldn't hurt.

“I think I'm good to go,” I said.

“You sure? What about those pictures over there?”

He was referring to the framed family pictures lined up above the kitchen table. I shook my head. “They're not real.”

“What?”

“I bought them at Walmart. Those pictures came with the frames. I don't actually know any of the people in them.”

Jesse looked understandably confused. “Why—”

“To spruce the place up. Makes it less dreary.”

He opened his mouth as if to ask a question but refrained. Even if I wanted to tell him, now was hardly the time to give him my backstory. We were running out of time.

“Let's get going,” he said, taking my duffle bag from me.

The apartment door burst open, shards of the frame flying from the force. On the other side, stood three burly men.

Snake tattoos choked their necks, blood red eyes staring me down like lasers.

In that moment, sound ceased to exist. Time slowed. My body dragged, heavy with fear and shock. They'd found me. They were here, in my home, a place I always thought I'd be safest. It was more than jarring.

The only thing I could register was Jesse's hand grabbing mine, yanking me back with alarming force. He screamed something at me, but I couldn't hear him over the rush of blood in my ears.

I read his lips instead.

Run.

CHAPTER 10

They ganged up on me all at once, throwing their hands and gnashing their teeth. That was their first mistake. It was all for show. They might have looked tough, but they were inexperienced fighters.

I may have been outnumbered, but they were sorely outmatched.

The first guy ran up and tried to lock me in a sleeper hold. I kicked him in the groin as hard as I could before he could get to me, immediately moving into his space to connect my knuckles to his jaw. The crack was swift and deafening. He was out like a light before he knew what hit him.

The second guy whipped out a gun, but he moved too slow, his size more of a burden in such close quarters. I was on him in milliseconds, knocking him against the side of the head with a nearby table lamp. It shattered, breaking into sharp pieces. He fell to the floor, his gun slipping out of his grip and sliding beneath the couch. He was down, but not out.

I'd deal with him later. I had to deal with the third assailant before he got to Vivian.

The second I told her to run, she made a break for the bathroom down the hall. It was a good call. It had a sturdy lock and a window leading out to the building's fire escape. With any luck, Vivian was already climbing down and putting as much distance between her and her apartment. Either way, I had to finish this up quickly and get to her. She'd be exposed without me.

I ran after the third man, tackling him to the floor. I landed harder than I wanted to, my joints cracking for my efforts. I'd spent too long behind my desk at the office, but it felt strangely good to be back at it.

I pinned the guy down, but not before his fist connected with my jaw. The sting made my eyes water, blurring my vision. He wailed on me again and again until our positions were reversed. He had me on my back, shielding against his blows with both my arms out in front of me. This wasn't ideal.

In fact, things were going south and fast.

I was getting tired. My movements were sluggish, my limbs heavy, my breathing tight. I was taking more blows than I was dealing. My age was catching up to me, but I couldn't give up. I wouldn't. Not when I knew Vivian might still be on the other side of that door.

The image of her cowering in the bathroom flashed across my mind. Those big doe eyes full of fear. Shaking uncontrollably. Her face drained of color. I couldn't go out like this. I needed to get the upper hand.

For her.

I caught my second wind, a sudden burst of energy numbing the ache in my bones and spurring me on. I managed to turn the tide with a swift punch to the man's throat. He recoiled, gasping for air. It gave me just enough time to kick him in the chest. He went flying, hitting his head against the wall next to us. It left a dent in the drywall. This time, he was knocked unconscious.

I dragged myself onto my feet, bones creaking. The assailant with the gun was already standing, dashing toward me. He punched me in the gut, knocking the air from my lungs. I was dizzy, the taste of iron that coated my tongue making me nauseated. I wasn't out of the woods yet. My concentration was slipping, my hits weren't connecting.

The attacker managed to get behind me, locking my head in a chokehold. He squeezed hard, crushing my windpipe.

There was a sudden pressure behind my eyes, in my skull. I couldn't see straight.

The sound of something cracking reached my ears. The man released me, and I could suddenly breathe again, gasping for air. I turned to find him unconscious, flat on his face. Above him was Vivian, toilet tank cover—the half that hadn't broken off—still in hand.

“Holy shit,” she breathed, rushing to me. “Holy shit, are you alright? Your nose is bleeding. Here, tilt your chin up.” She cupped my face and wiped at my nose with the sleeve of her sweater.

“I told you to run,” I said, voice hoarse and barely recognizable in my own ears.

“I wasn't leaving you behind.”

“I gave you an order.”

Vivian rolled her eyes, but her shaky hands gave away her composure. “You can be angry at me about it later.” Her fingers grazed my cheek as she inspected me. The cool touch of her skin was a greater relief to me than an ice pack. “Good. I don't think your nose is broken. Quit squirming, you're going to ruin your shirt.”

I grasped her hands. “Why didn't you listen to me? You should have at least stayed in the bathroom.”

“You'd be dead if it weren't for me.”

“I would have been fine.”

“Oh, yeah,” she quipped dryly. “Fine and blue in the face.”

“This isn't up for debate. You said you'd obey my orders.”

“Jesus, would it kill you to say thank you?”

“I'm not going thank you for being reckless.”

“Reckless? You're telling me that taking on three gang members all by yourself isn't reckless?”

“I told you already. It's my job.”

Vivian's nostrils flared. “I was just trying to help.”

She was probably trying to come across as serious and angry, but I got more of a pouting puppy impression. She was just so small and beautiful and wide-eyed that I wasn't intimidated in the slightest. Still, there was no missing the way her eyes grew glassy and red at the corners, tears of frustration welling up.

I swallowed, ignoring the urge to dry her tears. "Thank you," I mumbled.

Vivian sighed. "Was that so hard?"

"Yes."

"Shush. Let me get you a cloth for your nose."

I shook my head. "It's fine. Bleeding's stopped, I think."

"We should get you to a hospital. What if you broke something?"

"Trust me, I would know if something were broken." I grunted as I got up. I was going to feel it in the morning.

"Jesse, you really should—"

The gang member that Vivian nailed across the back of the head with the toilet tank cover groaned. He stirred, about to come to.

"We need to go," I said. "If they don't check in within the next couple of minutes, the Azure Cartel will send more of them after you."

"How do you know all this?"

"Chalk it up to experience. You picked the wrong people to piss off."

She glanced at her shoes, indignant. "It's not like I did it on purpose."

I took her hand and led her out the way we came. She had no qualms about stepping over the unconscious man at her feet. In fact, she looked like she enjoyed it. A little slice of revenge for the turmoil he'd brought down on her.

When we got outside, I made sure the coast was clear. There weren't any suspicious vehicles nearby, but I had no plans of sticking around and waiting for cartel reinforcements to show up. I helped Vivian into the passenger seat before tossing her duffle bag into the back.

We sped off into the night by the skin of our teeth.

CHAPTER 11

The guest bedroom was nice. Lavish. More than what I was used to. The bed's silk sheets and goose-down duvet felt like laying on a cloud. After the exhausting day I had, I should have been able to drift off without a hitch.

Instead, I tossed and turned all night, unable to still my mind.

I thought about Molly, how terrified she must have been. I wondered where they were keeping her, if the cartel had hurt her, if she was even alive.

I shuddered, hiding my face in my hands. The thought was chilling. What if they'd killed her just because she pointed out an error in the books in my place? It should have been me. It should have been me who marched into Arty's office. It should have been me who had to suffer the consequences, not her.

I thought about Wally. I didn't mean to drag him into all this. He was the only friend I thought I could turn to, the only one I believed would listen. Now I'd exposed him to the cartel, as well. What if they decided to go after him, too? What if they took him like they took Molly?

Guilt churned in the pit of my stomach.

And then there was Jesse.

I couldn't stop thinking about him. How powerful he was. How he'd fended those men off long enough for me to come to my senses and help. I was adamant about staying hidden, about running, just like he ordered. But hearing him struggle, fight for not just his life, but mine... I couldn't cower in the

bathroom like a frightened little girl. I knew I had to do *something*.

And that something was grabbing the heaviest thing at my disposal and knocking the daylights out of a man who looked like he was two seconds away from murdering Jesse.

His reaction to the who situation was frighteningly sexy.

I pressed my face into my pillow and groaned. That was *not* what I should be thinking about. I should be thinking about how grateful I was that he was there, not swooning over how devilishly handsome he looked with his messy hair and sleeves rolled up to the elbow. I shouldn't be thinking about how good he looked, fresh from the fight and sweat covering his brow.

He smelled musky, but only in the best of ways. He smelled like strength and something feral and strong. Jesse looked at those men with fury in his eyes, like he wanted to rip them apart. But when he saw me...everything about his eyes changed. He looked at me like I was something precious, something to hold and care for and be tender with. Even his posturing was different. Relaxed. Cautious, like I was a deer he was afraid of spooking.

When he held my hands, I almost lost it. We were so close, gravitating toward one another, stuck in each other's orbit. I never wanted him to let go. His hands were rough from the fight, but oh-so-delicate while holding mine.

The duality wasn't lost on me. I knew he could feel it, too, whatever this electricity between us was. I just didn't know what to make of it, if I should act on it. There were so many unspoken questions up in the air, but I was too overwhelmed to ask any of them.

I rubbed my knees together and nibbled on my bottom lip, remembering how Jesse leapt into action. *God*. Nobody had a right to look that sexy. Even when he was upset at me afterwards, he spoke in a low tone. He was keeping it together for my sake, refusing to raise his voice despite his obvious disappointment.

A warm ache bloomed between my legs.

You said you'd obey my orders.

I groaned, frustrated and tired and distressingly turned on. Now was most certainly not the time to be thinking dirty thoughts about a man who was literally doing me a favor by housing me and keeping me out of harm's way.

Rolling onto my side, I glanced at the digital clock on the bedside table.

5:34 a.m.

"Fuck," I grumbled.

I threw the covers off and swung my legs over the edge of the mattress. Maybe a glass of water would help calm my thoughts.

Padding down the long hall, I noticed that a light was on in the kitchen. I approached quietly, not wanting to disturb, sticking as close to the wall as possible. Jesse was seated at the kitchen island with his laptop open. He was typing away, a pair of reading glasses balanced on the bridge of his nose. I liked the way they made him look. Distinguished. Intelligent. Charming.

I rubbed my knees together, shifting my weight from foot to foot. Seriously? What had gotten into me?

When Jesse moved to rub the back of his neck, I spotted several bruises running up the length of his forearm and bicep. They were large and red, purpling at the edges. My heart twisted in my chest, realizing that he must have gotten them in the fight. His knuckles were bruised, too, and his jaw was a little swollen from taking a punch or two to the face.

He was engrossed in whatever he was working on, typing for a good minute or so before he finally looked up and noticed me. "How long were you standing there?"

"Not long."

"Need to get you a damn bell."

"Sorry. Just wanted something to drink."

He moved like he was about to get out of his seat, but I noticed the way he winced. Jesse must have been in more pain than he was letting on.

“Let me,” I insisted. “Where do you keep your glasses?”

He exhaled softly. “Cabinet above the sink.”

I moved swiftly, retrieving two glasses and filling them at the fridge’s water dispenser. “And your ibuprofen?”

He arched a concerned eyebrow. “Cabinet to your left there. Why? Are you hurt?”

I shook my head, retrieving the medicine and walking to him, tapping two small pills out onto my palm. I handed them directly to him. “They’re for you,” I explained.

I think he would have laughed if it didn’t hurt him to do so. He popped the pills into his mouth and drank his water greedily. I tried not to stare—and failed—at the way his Adam’s apple bobbed as he did.

“What are you doing up so early?” I whispered, not wanting to disturb the stillness of the morning air.

Jesse glanced at his wristwatch. “Oh. I haven’t gone to bed yet, actually.”

I gawked. “All this talk about eating tofu and being healthy, but you haven’t slept yet?”

“Lost track of time.”

“What are you working on?”

“Organizing a cleanup crew. I’m sending a couple of my guys to your apartment to see if they can find anything about the men who attacked you.”

“We already know they’re with the cartel.”

He nodded. “Yes, but I need to know more than that.”

I sat down next to him, barely a foot of space between us. Our elbows were almost touching as I leaned in to read what was on his screen. “Criminal record... Gun make and model... Registered vehicles?”

“Most of the time it’s a dead end because the police won’t release that information if an investigation is ongoing, but it doesn’t hurt to try. The more I know, the better I can do—”

“Your job,” I finished for him. “I know, you’ve said.”

The corner of his lip pulled up into a smirk. “Are you normally cheeky so early in the morning?”

“Definitely. But wait until I’ve had a cup of coffee. That’s when I unleash my true power.”

“Thank God I don’t have any coffee, then.”

My mouth dropped. “You’re kidding, right?”

“If it’s caffeine you’re after, you’re better off drinking tea. It’s much—”

“Healthier. Yeah, yeah. I’m sensing a pattern with you. All this health-nut stuff must be why you’re in such good shape.”

He stretched his arm. “Not as good a shape as I thought.”

I smiled playfully. “Cut yourself some slack. There *were* three of them. Most senior citizens would have been crumpled by a strong breeze.”

Jesse placed a hand over his heart and grimaced. “Ouch. Senior citizen?”

“How old are you?” I asked, fishing.

“Forty-three.”

I nibbled on my bottom lip, deep in thought. Forty-three. He was exactly twenty years older than me. “I see,” I mumbled softly.

“What about you?”

“You’re not supposed to ask a lady that question.”

He snorted, though he didn’t appear to be as miffed as he sounded. “Double standards.”

I giggled. “I’m teasing. Just turned twenty-three.”

“Hm,” was all he said.

A pregnant pause filled the room. Neither of us made a move nor said a word. We just sat in the quiet. It wasn't awkward by any means. In fact, it was sort of nice. After all the chaos we'd been through, being able to just sit and *be* was a nice change of pace.

"What are you doing up?" he asked after a while.

"Couldn't sleep," I said. "I'm really worried about my friend."

He nodded. "We're going to figure this out, Vivian. The men who attacked you are in custody. You'll get her back."

I managed a small smile. "Thank you. For earlier, too. I don't know what I would have done if those guys came after me and you weren't there."

"Just part of the..." He thought for a moment. "Occupational hazard."

I laughed. "Boy, I'll say. You should really—" I noticed a bit of red trickle from his nose. "Oh!"

"What?"

"You're bleeding again." I reached for him, grabbing a couple napkins from the holder on the kitchen island. "Here, let me—"

He tried to wave me away. "I'm fine, Vivian. You don't have to do this. It's nothing to worry about."

"Would you just shush and let me help you?"

Jesse pressed his lips into a thin line but didn't argue, finally allowing me the opportunity to assist him. I cupped his cheek in my free hand and tilted his head back, determined to keep the blood from dripping onto his shirt. He was surprisingly pliant beneath my touch, moving where I needed him to go with next to no resistance.

He watched me the whole time, deep eyes focused on me and me alone. I didn't shy away, too occupied with the task at hand.

"You're pretty good at this," he commented.

“The kids I grew up with got into all sorts of trouble,” I said absentmindedly. “Scraped knees, the occasional fist fights... That sort of thing.”

“The kids you grew up with?” he echoed. “You mean siblings?”

“No, not siblings. Not really.” Once I was satisfied that his nose was okay, I lowered my gaze. “It’s a long story. Wouldn’t want to bore you.”

He grasped me gently by the elbows. “You could never bore me.”

I licked my lips, a thrill shooting up my spine when his eyes were immediately drawn to them. I stared at his in turn, curious to know what they’d feel like. If he kissed me, would he be rough and hungry? Or would he be gentle and sweet?

I desperately wanted to find out and leaned in, drawn to him like a magnet. Where was the harm in a simple kiss?

Jesse stood up abruptly and pulled away, nothing but cold air remaining in his place. “You should go to bed,” he said, clearing his throat. “We’ll be going to the police station in a couple hours. They’ll have lots of questions for you.”

My stomach flipped as my face filled with heat. I’d never been so embarrassed in my entire life. “R-right. Yeah, I’ll—” I slipped off my seat, my legs like jelly beneath me. “Yep, mm-hmm. You should go to bed, too.”

Jesse nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. “I will.”

I scurried back to the guest room and crawled beneath the safety of the sheets. Thankfully, sleep dragged me under so that I only had to dwell on our almost-kiss in my dreams. Either way, my heart was racing and aching for more.

CHAPTER 12

That was close. Too close.

But *God* did I want to kiss her. I could have easily leaned in, circled my arms around her waist and held her against me. I couldn't bring myself to do it, though, no matter how much I craved to know the taste of her lips.

I'd been burned before. I wasn't willing to do it again.

Besides, getting involved with my client was a recipe for disaster. I needed a clear mind and unshakeable focus, not to be distracted by a pair of pretty eyes and a dazzling smile. Giving into my desires would be... reckless.

The police station was a cacophony of noise and movement and unpleasant smells. Phones rang off the hook. Police chattered over their radios. Drunk tank imbeciles yelled through the bars demanding release. The whole place smelled of burnt coffee, printer ink, and sweat. If I found the place deplorable, I couldn't imagine what Vivian must have thought.

This was no place for a sweet young thing like her.

Some greasy looking thug smacked his lips, whistling at her. "Hey, baby. Why don't you come over here and take a look at a real man?"

I clenched my fist and set my jaw. What was with all the catcalling these days? First the bar, now here. Vivian couldn't escape it. Men had no fucking honor. This wasn't how they were supposed to treat a lady.

I was about to step in when she snapped, “And risk going blind? I’ll pass.”

I smiled, oddly proud. She could handle herself just fine.

A police officer guided us to a private interview room in the corner of the precinct. It wasn’t a grimy interrogation room, but a small office complete with a desk, two comfortable guest chairs, a couple of potted plants, a wall lined entirely of grey metal filing cabinets.

The man behind the desk —Detective Anderson Monroe— looked like he was fresh from the set of a noir mystery film. A thick moustache wedged between his nose and upper lip. A beer gut that the buttons of his shirt strained against. All that was missing was a lit cigar between his fingers and a dame out front working reception.

“Miss Jones,” he said. “Have a seat. I’m going to have to ask you to leave your friend outside.” Detective Monroe jabbed a chubby finger in my direction.

“I want him here,” Vivian insisted. She looked at me, like she wasn’t sure I’d stay.

“I’ll be a fly on the wall,” I said.

Detective Monroe huffed. “Whatever. Let’s get to work. I’ve got four other cases I need to attend to.” He slid three mugshots across the desk to show Vivian. “Do you recognize these men?”

“Yes. They’re the ones who attacked me.”

“Are you sure?”

She frowned. “Without a doubt.”

The detective hummed. “They’re confirmed members of the Azure Cartel. They’re facing aggravated assault and outstanding drug distribution charges, but I doubt anything’s going to stick.”

“Why not?”

“The people they work for can afford to hire really good lawyers. They’ll make bail easy.”

Vivian shifted in her seat. “Does this mean they’ll try and come after me again?” She sounded so small and afraid. I fought the instinct to wrap her in my arms, keep her safe.

“They won’t get to you,” I assured her.

Detective Monroe shifted through his paperwork. “Now, it says here your friend’s missing.”

“Yes. Her name’s Molly Burke. I haven’t heard from her in days.”

“And you think the cartel has something to do with her disappearance?”

“I *know* they do.”

“Do you have any proof?”

She sucked in a sharp breath through gritted teeth. “No,” she mumbled in reply.

“Your friend’s case will be handed off to Missing Persons.”

“You’re not going to handle it?”

“Without proof, your friend’s disappearance is circumstantial. I have no evidence or reason to believe that the cartel did something.”

Her shoulders tensed, concern wrinkling her brow. She had the same look in her eyes from before. Fiery. Determined. “That’s... No, there has to be something you can do.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Jones, but there really isn’t.”

“So, what? I’m supposed to sit around and wait for Missing Persons to find Molly?”

“That’s how it works, yes. They’re going to look into it.”

She stood up quickly, very clearly holding back something venomous. “Will that be all?”

Detective Monroe nodded. “Yes. I just needed a positive ID. You’re free to go.”

Without another word, Vivian turned on her heel. I pulled the office door open and stepped through first, ushering her

before me so we could leave.

“Useless,” she grumbled the second we were outside the police station. “What a waste of time.”

“I know,” I said, helping her into the car. “Try and stay calm.”

“Calm?” she shrieked. “How can I possibly stay calm? Molly’s out there somewhere! Those cops are going to—” I closed the door on her and circled around front, slipping behind the wheel. She was still going off, furious as all hell. “—and did you get a load of that guy’s porn ‘stache? Who the fuck does he think he is? Why not have another donut, you washed up desk jockey?”

“Vivian—”

“And what does he mean the charges aren’t going to stick? They attacked us. They attacked *you*. How is the system so broken? This is totally unfair!”

“Vivian.”

“What?”

“Are you hungry?”

She frowned at me. “Huh?”

“I asked if you’re hungry.”

“I...” Vivian took a deep breath and slumped in her seat. “Yes, actually.”

I kind of figured that was the case. I was trained to look for signs of distress, and Vivian was checking all the boxes. Difficulty sleeping. Bursts of —frankly understandable— anger.

I pulled up to the nearest Burger King drive thru. “What do you want?”

“Fast food? Don’t you find this sort of thing sacrilegious?”

“Don’t be dramatic. It’s fine in moderation, and I need to get your blood-sugar levels up.”

Vivian licked her lips. “Are you sure you don’t want to go to that vegan place around the corner?”

“Do you want a burger or not?”

She paused, glancing between me and the massive menu structure past the speaker box. She leaned forward, pressing against me to shout out the window. “Can I get a number four and number six combo with a side of onion rings, chicken strips, and a large strawberry milkshake?” She turned to me. “Do you want anything?”

I shook my head. “I’m good.”

She ripped into her food the second she got it, the whole car smelling like grease and seasoning. I normally had a strict rule about eating in the car, but I was willing to make an exception for her. Vivian had an impressive appetite, and I wasn’t about to put my life on the line by telling her to wait until we got home.

Vivian ate in silence, chowing down with gusto. As I suspected, she perked right up after finishing her burger, moving on to munch on her fries. She was lost in thought, staring out the window while she chewed.

I was busy running through my regular checks as I drove. The most dangerous time for any client was during transit. I had to worry about other drivers on the road as well as the possibility of being tailed. It was a masterclass in multitasking. I was so focused on the road and getting us back to the penthouse that I didn’t even register that Vivian held a fry to my lips until I was swallowing the food.

She laughed softly. “Not bad, huh?”

“It’s alright.”

“Liar. You think it’s delicious. Here, try the milkshake.”

Vivian held up her cup, sticking the straw in front of me. It seemed silly to be fixated on something so small. It was just a damn straw. The straw she was just using. The straw that her lips were wrapped around not seconds before.

I took a sip. Strawberry coated my tongue. I grimaced. “It’s too sweet.”

Vivian shrugged. “More for me, then,” she said calmly, bringing it to her lips to drink.

I swallowed, concentrating on keeping my breathing even. Did she know what she was doing to me? The glint in her eye told me she did.

I gripped the steering wheel tighter, determined to get home sooner rather than later.



Wally was seated in the living room, playing a video game, *Fortnight* or *Call of Duty* or whatever it was. They were all the same to me. A mess of colors and too much noise and an overall waste of time.

“Whoa, where’s mine?” he asked when he saw Vivian’s Burger King bag.

She smiled. “Sorry. Didn’t know you wanted some.”

“Can I have a bite? I haven’t had lunch yet.”

“We both know I don’t share.”

I walked past them and shrugged off my suit jacket, ears tingling. Was that true? Vivian didn’t seem to have any qualms about feeding me. I felt oddly special.

I opened my laptop, checking if any of the security sensors leading to the penthouse were tripped. Nothing on the CCTV cameras, no alarms triggered. We were in the clear for now.

“How did things go at the station?” Wally asked Vivian.

She huffed. “Fine, I guess. They’re going to look into it or whatever.” She sighed heavily. “The detective says I need proof to connect the cartel to Molly’s disappearance, but I don’t have anything. I’m just so exhausted.”

“It’s going to be okay.” Wally hugged her, patting her on the back. A pang of jealousy festered in my chest. Seeing them

so comfortable around one another... For a moment, I wished that I could take my son's place and be the one to hold her.

"Go lie down," I told Vivian. "Get some sleep. We'll discuss how to move forward from here once you've had some rest."

She hummed. "A nap sounds nice, actually." She gave Wally's hand a squeeze before she ventured down the hall to the guest room, disappearing from sight.

Wally crossed his arms and regarded me curiously. "Can't imagine what she's going through."

"What are you doing home?" I asked, changing the subject. "I thought you had a full day of classes."

My son shifted. "I did, but I thought I should be home for her just in case."

"I have everything under control."

"I'm just trying to be a good friend."

"I know you are, but you still have your studies to think about. There's a reason you entrusted her with me. You should be in class."

Wally rolled his eyes. "It's not like we were going over anything important. It's stuff I already know."

"What about that group presentation for biology you were telling me about?"

"We were going to meet up later to put it together before class."

"Individually marked?"

"Yes."

"Good. I expect you to pull your weight."

He shook his head and sighed. "There are more important things going on right now, Dad. Vivian—"

"Is in good hands," I interrupted. "Her being here shouldn't affect your studies."

“I can never talk to you,” I thought I heard him grumble before storming off.

I found myself alone in the kitchen, the low hum of the air conditioning in my ear. There was so much that I had to do. Important emails to send, security teams to check in with, clients to proposition. I didn't get around to any of it. For the first time in forever, I didn't want to. In a rare turn of events, running my business was the least of my concerns.

Looking after Vivian was the only thing on my mind.

CHAPTER 13

I napped for all of fifteen minutes. I was beyond exhausted at this point, existing in an in-between state where I was both sluggish and alert. I paced around the guest room, mulling everything over.

The missing money. Molly. The Azure Cartel. Something big was going on, but what?

What if Blue Cloud Financial was in on it? What if they knew about the missing funds and took Molly to keep everything hush-hush? If word got out that Blue Cloud Financial was laundering money on behalf of a dangerous criminal organization, that'd drive the company's reputation into the ground.

A part of me didn't want to believe it. It was such an out there, ridiculous notion that I almost dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. I thought about Alistair, about how sweet a mentor he'd been to Molly and me over the past few months. There was no way he could be involved in all of this.

But what other explanation did I have?

I wished I had proof.

Proof.

I exited the guest bedroom just in time to see Wally leaving, the elevator doors sliding shut with a ding. "Where's he off to?" I asked Jesse, who had once again taken up his spot at the kitchen island. His laptop was open, as per usual.

"School," he answered flatly.

“Is it safe for him to go?” I asked. “What if the cartel goes after him?”

“I doubt they will. It’s pretty clear their interests lie with you.”

I nodded slowly. “Right. About that...”

“Yes?”

“Can you drive me to the office?”

Jesse set his jaw. “No.”

He got up out of his seat and circled around the island. I followed him, determined not to let him slip through my fingers.

“Just hear me out. Detective Monroe said I needed proof and I can get it. I just need to download the encrypted files from my computer and—”

“I said no. You’re honestly telling me you want to go *back* there?”

“If it’s the only way to help Molly, yes. It’ll blow the investigation wide open. The police will—”

“Out of the question, Vivian.”

“Jesse, *please*.”

“You said yourself that the files are encrypted, right? You don’t know for sure what’s on them.”

“Are you suggesting it’s a trap?”

“It’s not out of the realm of possibility. What if they’re fake files that were created to entice you to come in? It’s called bait. Whoever’s really behind all this has probably destroyed the evidence already.”

“Why do you sound so sure?”

“Because...” Jesse sighed heavily. “Look, I’ve been in this business a long time. I’ve seen some shit. The cartel doesn’t play by the rules like we do. They think they’re above the law. They do whatever the hell they want, and they don’t care who gets hurt in the process as long as they come out on top.”

I took a step closer, looking him over. “You sound like you’re speaking from experience.”

He nodded tightly. “A long time ago, when I was first getting into the business. My first contract as a bodyguard.”

“Can you tell me about it?” I whispered, drawing near.

“I was protecting a family seeking asylum. They were on the run from the Azure Cartel. I was specifically tasked with watching over their daughter. She was ten.”

A chill slithered down my spine. I sensed his tension, his guilt.

“I made a bad call,” he said simply. “I underestimated the enemy. You’d think a goddamn playground was off-limits.”

My stomach churned. “They attacked her while she was at the playground?”

“I didn’t want to let her go, but she’d been cooped up in the safehouse for months. Things had been really quiet. I thought maybe the cartel had finally given up. I figured a few minutes of fresh air couldn’t hurt. Plus, she was really good at nagging, and I may or may not have had a bit of a soft spot for her.” He shook his head and laughed bitterly. “Didn’t think they’d stoop to planting a car bomb.”

I placed a tentative hand on his broad chest. “I’m so sorry.”

“So my answer is no,” he said calmly. “You’re not going back to Blue Cloud Financial to look for evidence. You’ll leave this matter to the police. Do you understand? This isn’t a game.” He stepped closer, trapping me against the counter.

“I never said it was.”

“Then you’ll do the smart thing and listen to me, Vivian. You’re going to stay here where I can keep an eye on you. So I can protect you.”

I swallowed, throat unbelievably parched. I shouldn’t have liked being cornered like this, pressed up against the counter, but I did. Jesse was so unbelievably close. The heat of his skin soaked into mine. His breath tickled my cheek. His eyes pierced into mine, serious and impossibly gentle.

I lifted a hand to trace the line of his jaw with my fingers. His stubble was rough to the touch, but more than a welcome sensation. I admired the shape of his lips, grazing my fingers over his bottom one. Jesse didn't pull away. Instead, he leaned into it. His pupils were blown wide open as he studied me intently.

"Vivian," he said gruffly. "We shouldn't."

I searched his eyes. "Then tell me to stop."

Conflict flashed across his face, torn between resistance and giving in.

I knew what his decision was the second he leaned in and crashed his lips to mine.

The kiss was bruising at first. Desperate. Eager. Our lips slotted into place, hot breath mixing together. The hard press of his body against me set my core on fire. I dragged my fingers through his silky hair and moaned. Our tongues swept over one another, fighting for dominance. In the end, I was the one to give in, melting into his touch.

He kissed me just like he searched a room. Efficient, alert, moving with purpose. Jesse grabbed greedily at my thighs, my waist, hungry for more. I was still pinned to the counter, but I had no intention of moving out of the way. I could feel him better this way. Strong muscles beneath taut skin. When he rolled his hips against me, the hard press of his cock against my thigh made me moan.

Hot, wet desire pooled between my legs. My pussy ached to feel his touch, practically quivering for him as he moved to nip at my neck. He sucked at my tender skin, hard enough to leave a mark. I didn't even care. It felt so good to feel something, feel *him*. His weight was a welcome comfort. A warm blanket on a cold winter's night.

It was dizzying. All encompassing. Overwhelming in the best of ways. I was electric. Sparks leaped from nerve to nerve. My skin was alight with soft fire. And just when I thought I couldn't get enough, Jesse spun me around, my back

to his chest. He pressed feverish kisses to the back of my neck, his arms wrapped around me.

“Are you sure you want this?” he asked, voice a low rumble.

“Yes. Yes, I’m sure.”

“You have to understand I don’t do things in halves.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

“It means,” he said, slipping a hand down the front of my jeans. His rough palm against my stomach was everything. “It means you’re in for a long night.”

I was feeling brave. Braver than I ever felt in my entire life. “Are you going to spend the whole night talking? Or are you going to put your money where your mouth is?”

Jesse chuckled, combing his fingers through my hair and undoing my bun. He grasped at the roots, not hard enough to hurt, but firm enough to tell me exactly who was boss. “Naughty girl,” he murmured against the crook of my neck. “You’ve got quite a mouth on you. I’m going to have to teach you a lesson.”

“You’re *still* talking,” I retorted, grinding my ass against him. His arousal was apparent, and it made me that much wetter to know how badly I was affecting him. “You’re all talk and no action, Jesse.”

“That’s *sir* to you.”

I licked my lips. “Yes, sir,” I whined, my knees trembling.

“That’s much better. Spread your legs for me. There you go, just like that.”

Jesse slipped a finger between my lips, rubbing circles against my sensitive clit. I gasped, pleasure spiking straight through me. I moaned, gripping the edge of the counter for dear life.

“So nice and wet for me,” he growled, grinding against me while drawing even tighter circles. “Not so sassy now, are you?”

“Jesse, I—”

“Sir,” he corrected.

“Please, sir, I need—” I could barely string together a coherent sentence. “I want to come,” I blurted out. “I want to come, sir. *Please*.”

“I don’t know if you deserve to.”

Desperation clawed at my core. I was close, teetering on the edge between sanity and pure bliss. “Please, sir, please. Oh, my God, right there. Right there—”

He stopped, finger hovering above my aching bud, refusing to move. I clenched around nothing, a frustrated groan ripping from my throat.

“Why?” I demanded, indignant. My cheeks were hot, my blood was thrumming. I was so *close* that it almost hurt when Jesse pulled away.

He kissed my cheek. Tender, teasing. “Like I said, you’re in for a long night.”

Without another word, he picked me up with ease. I wrapped my legs around him, eagerly kissing him in the hopes of enticing him back into action. Jesse didn’t seem the least bit phased, carrying me all the way down the hall toward his bedroom.

It was almost double the size of the guest bedroom, but twice as empty. I wasn’t exactly paying attention to the decor, though. My interests lay solely with the location of his bed and the way he laid me down like delicate crystal.

“Take off your shirt,” I demanded, increasingly aggravated by his level of dress.

Jesse clicked his tongue. “Is that what you want?”

I nodded. “Very much.”

He smirked, slipping his hands beneath my sweater. “No, I don’t think I will.”

“Jesse—”

“I don’t reward impatience. You’re going to have to learn.”

He lifted my sweater up and over my head, before undoing my bra and throwing the offending garment to the side, exposing my skin to the cool bedroom air. He dipped down to kiss a line up my stomach, between my breasts, nibbled gently on both my hard nipples, sucked at my collarbone and worked his way up to my lips.

He grinned, clearly pleased with himself. His cockiness was almost enough to piss me off. Almost.

“Beautiful,” he murmured. “Why do you hide under such large clothes?”

I would have blushed were it not for the fact that I was already red in the face. “I know I have a... fuller figure. I used to, um... I used to get ogled a lot. Figured I could avoid repeating the experience if I covered up.”

Jesse’s brow furrowed. “I’m sorry to hear that. You shouldn’t be made to feel uncomfortable.” He kissed my stomach. “Although, I think *this* is a much better look for you. Lift your hips for me.”

I did as instructed, giving him enough space to tug off my pants. He hooked his hands around my thighs and dragged me to the edge of the bed where he kneeled, kissing my hip bones while looking me over ravenously. He pulled my panties down and tossed them over his shoulder, lost somewhere to the floor.

“Is this still okay?” he asked gently. “We can stop if you want to.”

I nodded, reaching down to comb my fingers through his hair. “I want this,” I insisted. “Please. I need you.”

It was all the permission he needed.

CHAPTER 14

I was going to have my way with her, but I needed to take care of her first.

Vivian was putty in my hands. Pliable. A willing participant who moved with me, a dance partner in the dark. She was quiet in the beginning, hiding her moans of pleasure behind a hand clasped over her mouth. I was about to tell her not to hold it in, but it brought me a great sense of achievement when I touched her just so and unleashed a languid groan. At some point, I took it as a challenge to get her to scream with just my tongue.

The sounds she made, every whimper, every pant, every soft *oh* was music to my ears, high-pitched and angelic and somehow the dirtiest thing I'd ever heard. She gasped with every flick of my tongue against her, she whined with every circle I drew. Her knees shook. Her back arched. These were the sounds of a woman experiencing ecstasy.

Vivian tasted like a dream. Sweet. Uniquely her. There weren't enough words in the English vocabulary to even begin to describe how wondrous she was. I adored the way she writhed beneath me, hips bucking in pursuit of climax.

She was soaking wet, pussy glistening with want. A lesser man would have been chasing his own high by now, but I was not a lesser man. Vivian deserved to be taken care of first. Nothing brought me more joy than the thought of fucking her silly, but there was no thrill in cutting to the chase. This was far more entertaining.

Her pleasure was my pleasure.

“Tell me what you need, angel,” I said, kissing her inner thigh. She was so fucking soft.

“I...” Her breathing was tight. “I don’t know. I don’t, uh...”

“Talk to me.”

“I don’t usually get to this part.”

Bracing myself up on my elbows, I looked up at her. “What do you mean?”

She swallowed, nibbling her bottom lip. Fuck, I loved it when she did that. “The guys I used to see... Old boyfriends, they...” She cleared her throat. “They never did this for me.”

“You mean go down on you?”

Vivian covered her face with her hands and nodded. “Y-yeah.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“I don’t know. I never asked. And the few times they did, it wasn’t, uh...”

I chuckled. “Now’s hardly the time to be shy, Vivian. Just tell me.”

Old boyfriends. Was Wally one of them?

I shook my head, ridding my mind of all thoughts. The last thing I wanted right now was to think about my son and whatever the hell he did—or didn’t—get up to while he was dating Vivian. All that mattered right now was us and this moment. Dwelling on the past or worrying about the future was the fastest way to kill the mood.

She lay back down, head resting against one of the many pillows beneath her.

I returned to tease her clit with the tip of my tongue, carefully pressing a single finger against her entrance. She was wet and ready for me, so it went in easily. I curled at the knuckle in a beckoning motion, aiming for her sweet spot. I

started slowly, testing the waters, reading her reactions like lines from a book.

What she liked, what she didn't... It was evident in the way her breath hitched, in the way she gripped the sheets. In the way her knees squeezed together to keep me right where she wanted me.

“Do you think you can handle another finger?”

“Y-yes,” she shuttered. “Yes, sir.”

I pressed a second finger into her and felt how well she stretched to accommodate me. Her walls fluttered, an indicator of how close she was to finding release. I really wanted to see her come on my fingers.

I redoubled my efforts, my tongue and fingers working in tandem to drive her wild. She babbled incoherently, breaths coming quick and tight. Her toes curled and her body spasmed as climax took her, her sweet juices coating my tongue as she unraveled around me. Vivian's mouth fell open, a yelp turned laugh bubbling from her lips.

I chuckled. “That good, huh?”

She nodded, smiling. “I'll say.”

“You're welcome.”

“Cocky bastard.”

“Such a filthy mouth you have. I'm going to have to put you over my knee.”

I sat down on the edge of the bed and patted my lap, relishing the sight of Vivian as she crawled on top, supple ass in the air. “Feeling adventurous, are we? Does my angel need a good spanking?”

She let out a shaky breath, gripping my thigh with anticipation. “Yes, sir.”

I massaged her cheek, warming up her skin. An inexperienced partner might go straight into it, but I wasn't foolish enough to have Vivian jumping into the deep end without first getting her toes wet. I needed to ease her into this

sort of thing, teach her that sometimes it paid to have a bit of patience.

I clapped her ass, just a quick swipe. She sucked in a sharp breath but didn't cry out. "How was that?"

"Good," she said, voice tight.

"You're being honest? I don't want to hurt you, Vivian."

"I'm being honest. It was good. Just surprised me, that's all."

"Thank you for telling me." I spanked her again, this time with a bit more force behind the swing.

She let out the tiniest yelp, followed by a deep moan. "*Oh, God.*"

"You're enjoying this?" I asked, spanking her again. "Such a naughty girl, getting off to being punished."

"Is that all you've got?" she taunted. "Come on. You can do better than that."

I spanked her again, harder. Her skin was turning red, so I switched to her other cheek to even things out. "I'm going to have to teach you some manners."

"And this is how you plan to do— *Ah!* — it?"

"Don't worry, angel. This is the fastest way to get my lessons through to you."

Vivian gripped the fabric of my pants, body trembling. She was tense all over. I stopped immediately to check on her, afraid I'd pushed her too far and she failed to tell me.

"Are you alright?" I asked, dropping the game momentarily.

"Yes, I'm just..."

"Do you need a break?"

"N-no, that's not it." She looked up at me, wide-eyes beautiful and full of want. "I'm really close to coming again. Please don't stop."

My cock throbbed painfully at the realization that she was getting off to this, and I wanted her to finish. I growled, hungry to make her mine, but only after I gave her exactly what she was looking for. I adjusted my grip on her so that I could use my other hand. I reached between her legs and found her sweet spot, then circled it with my finger. I used my left hand and spanked her once, twice, three times, each with good follow-through.

“My little angel wants to come again?” I asked. “Should have known you liked it rough. You’ve got that look about you. So sweet and cute on the outside, but deep down, you’re just a naughty little girl.”

Vivian moaned loudly, trembling violently as orgasm ripped through her. After a few moments, she went lax against me. I made sure to rub her gently, soothing her reddening skin.

“Beautiful,” I murmured softly. “There you go. Just breathe.”

“Oh, *wow*,” she sighed contently. “I’ve never done that before.”

“Never?”

“I’ve never trusted anyone enough to do it.”

A smile stretched across my lips. “I’m glad to know you trust me.”

Vivian sat up and straddled my lap, circling my neck with her arms. She kissed me slowly. “Now it’s your turn.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to do anything, Vivian.”

She frowned, appearing rather put out. “What?”

“You don’t have to feel obligated to sleep with me. I just wanted to make you feel good.”

“Has it ever occurred to you that maybe I want to make *you* feel good, too?”

I was entirely prepared to stop things there. I’d let things between us go far enough. Vivian owed me nothing. As much as I wanted her, I still couldn’t shake the baggage I carried

with me. I was worried about what might be lying in wait for Vivian and me if we crossed this bridge together. Not to mention the fact that she used to date my son; what would Wally think if he knew about this?

“I don’t want you to do anything you’ll regret,” I told her. “If we do this, there’s no going back.”

She pressed her fingers to my lips. “I want to, Jesse. I want this. But it sounds like you’re the one who doesn’t want to do anything *you’ll* regret.”

I shook my head. “It could complicate things.”

“Then we’ll figure it out.” Vivian kissed the corner of my mouth. “Please, sir. I need to feel you inside me.”

I took a deep breath in through the nose, drinking in the scent of vanilla. I couldn’t take the throbbing in my pants any longer. Screw the future, screw the past. I had to have her.

Our lips slotted into place, kisses no longer as hasty as before. We could take our time.

Vivian made quick work of the buttons on my shirt, popping them off one by one before practically tearing the fabric off me. She dragged her hands over my chest, my abs, tracing the lines of my muscle with her fingers. She stopped every now and then to avoid a bruise, pressing the softest of kisses to the purpling skin.

I lay her down gently, removing my pants and boxer briefs to allow my erection to spring free. It pulsed, begging for release. I retrieved a condom from the bedside drawer and rolled it on, returning to Vivian swiftly. She parted her legs for me so that I could settle between them, scooping her up in my arms to hold her close.

“Ready?” I asked against her lips.

She kissed me sweetly. “Ready.”

I aligned myself and pressed into her slowly, inch by inch. I marveled at how good she felt, warm and tight and good. Vivian clung to me, dragging her nails down my back as she groaned.

“You’re so big,” she whined.

“Do you need me to stop?”

“I just need a second.”

I brushed her hair away from her face, admiring her eyes. “Take all the time you need, angel. I’m not going anywhere.” I kissed her cheek. “How do you feel?”

“Full,” she muttered.

“Good. Hang on to me.”

She wrapped her arms around me as I picked up my pace, thrusting in and out of her with as much care as I could muster. Vivian was able to take all of me, her pussy fluttering around my cock as I aimed for her sweet spot.

“Look how well you take me,” I grunted, listening to the slap of skin on skin and our combined panting. “Such a good girl. You feel so fucking good. So nice and wet for me.”

“Just like that,” she whimpered. “Oh, right there, sir.”

“Right here?”

“Yes!” she exclaimed. “Oh, *God*, I think—”

“Do you think you can come for me a third time?”

“I don’t know. I’m so—”

“Relax, angel. I’ve got you. Close your eyes and feel me.”

I thrust into her harder, faster. A tight coil deep within my gut grew hotter and brighter with every thrust. It was enough to drive me wild, the building anticipation pushing me closer to the edge.

She screamed as she came, holding onto me for dear life as pleasure gripped her tight. Her walls clenched around me, providing me with the sweet friction I needed to fall right after her.

I held her close, kissing her hair while stroking her cheek. She was still breathing hard and sensitive to my touch.

Vivian fell asleep before me, a blissful smile upon her lips. I stayed with her until I was sure she was in a deep slumber

before peeling away, a sudden clarity sweeping across my mind.

What the fuck have I done?

CHAPTER 15

When I awoke, Jesse was gone.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't disappointed. Our time together had been unlike any other I'd experienced. I couldn't remember the last time a man managed to make me feel that way. Jesse was sexy and attentive and always seemed to know which of my buttons to press to drive me crazy.

And now he wasn't here, and it sucked because I really wanted to feel him hold me for just a few more minutes.

I looked at the clock on the bedside table. I'd fallen asleep for four hours. It was almost six in the evening, and I expected that Wally would be returning shortly from school. I had to make a hasty exit and get back to my room before he could suspect something was up.

I quickly gathered my clothes and pulled them on, combing my fingers through my hair in an attempt to straighten it. I checked my reflection in a nearby standing mirror in the corner of Jesse's massive bedroom.

Something about me was different. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, though.

I looked good. Practically glowing. My hair was mussed up, sure, but it kept falling in a super glam way. I inspected my neck closely for any signs of love bites but found none. Jesse was far too careful and considerate a man to leave marks. Deep down, however, it was kind of a letdown to see I had none. If Molly knew about this little dalliance, she'd tease me relentlessly.

I froze.

Molly.

Guilt ate away at me, gnawing at my heart.

How could I feel alright about all this? Here I was enjoying myself when she was out there somewhere, alone and afraid.

I scuttled out of Jesse's bedroom in a hurry, heading to the living room. I found him sitting on the couch. His laptop, much to my surprise, was nowhere in sight. Maybe he was finally taking a day off. He was reading a good old-fashioned newspaper, his reading glasses nestled on the bridge of his nose.

I cleared my throat, not wanting to startle him.

When Jesse looked up, he smiled. "You're up," he observed.

"Yeah."

"How are you feeling?"

"Good, I guess?"

Jesse patted the couch cushion beside him. I obediently walked over and took a seat to his right.

"That was fun."

"It was."

I sighed. "Is this the part where you tell me we're not going to do it again?"

Jesse nodded gravely. "It is. I know that's probably not what you want to hear, but we really can't do that again."

"Because of Wally?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "One of the reasons, yes."

On some level, I could understand. It was difficult not to compare them to one another during, and it was especially difficult not to compare them now that I wasn't otherwise occupied. Wally was sweet and caring, but Jesse took those concepts and raised them to an entirely new level.

He knew what he was doing. He knew what he wanted. He knew what *I* wanted even when I didn't. It was amazing, and a little voice in the back of my head was cheering for a repeat.

"You didn't regret it, did you?" I asked because my brain apparently didn't have the benefit of an off switch. "Us..." I gestured vaguely between us.

"No, Vivian. I don't regret it."

"Then why can't we do it again?"

Jesse folded his newspaper and set it aside, removing his reading glasses. "First and foremost, it's a conflict of interest. Getting involved with you could put you at risk. In order to be able to do my job properly, I can't afford any distractions. Growing attached could compromise the decisions I make when it comes to your safety."

I hated to hear it, but I knew Jesse was right. He spoke with such clarity and sound logic that it was impossible to argue. "And Wally was the second reason?"

Jesse nodded. "What do you think's going to happen if he finds out about us?"

"He'd be upset."

"I'd rather avoid that conversation. What we did... It was a one-off, alright? It's better this way."

I huffed. I wasn't sure what I was expecting when I gave in to my baser desires. To make matters worse, something new was bubbling just beneath the surface. Was it terrible of me that I only found Jesse that much sexier now that I knew he was off-limits? Why did I desire him more now that he'd drawn the line in the sand? I was obviously going to respect his decision, but *damn* if I wasn't already hooked.

"Okay," I said softly. "I understand. We won't speak of it."

"Thank you."

Just then, the elevator doors slid open. Wally emerged, backpack slung over one shoulder. He looked exhausted. I couldn't help but notice the handful of pamphlets in his grip.

“Hey,” he greeted, looking between us suspiciously. “How’ve things been here?”

“Uneventful,” I lied fluidly. “Your father was just reading me my horoscope.”

Wally gave me an amused look. “You don’t believe in that crap.”

“True, but we were bored and I didn’t want to hear him read last week’s baseball statistics.”

“How was the group presentation?” Jesse asked.

Wally’s whole demeanor shifted when his father addressed him. He was suddenly very stiff and still, peeking at Jesse like a schoolboy being scolded. “It was fine. We won’t get the marks back until next week. I’m sure I did well, though.”

Jesse nodded his approval. “Good.”

“What do you have there?” I asked Wally, looking at the pamphlets.

He immediately stuffed them into his jacket pocket. “Nothing.”

“What are you hiding?” Jesse asked curiously, though he used a more serious tone than was necessary.

“It’s nothing important,” Wally answered in a small voice. “Just information about culinary schools in the area.”

“This again?” Jesse snapped. “I thought we agreed to drop this.”

“I didn’t agree to drop anything.”

“You’re not going.”

Wally’s jaw tightened and released before he spoke. “Dad, can’t we talk about this?”

“We’re not having this discussion—” Jesse tilted his head in my direction “—in front of our guest.”

Wally stepped forward, holding up a pamphlet. “Just hear me out, okay? There’s this great program in New York. Tuition for a full-time program would cost a fraction of what it’d cost

to send me to medical school. The deadline to apply is next week, so I thought I could fly out and—”

Jesse rose from his seat, slow and in control and brooding. I remained seated, awkwardly trying to shrink into myself. I felt like I wasn't supposed to see this side of him. It was like staring at an eclipse, frightening yet beautiful. He overshadowed the little moon that Wally was, staring down his nose at his son with a level of frustration I'd never witnessed. Even when I disobeyed his orders and ran out to help him when we were being attacked at my apartment, Jesse never got this upset with me.

“Do you honestly think cooking food all day is going to help you make a living? Long hours stuffed inside a hot kitchen, doing the bidding of others. Does that sound like a career to you? You may as well flip burgers at a fast-food joint because there's literally no difference.”

My ears burned with second-hand embarrassment for Wally. The window to excuse myself had long since passed, so I was stuck here, longingly looking in the direction of the guest bedroom and wishing for an escape.

“You're too smart to work in a kitchen,” Jesse continued. “You'd be wasting your talents. Wouldn't you rather be saving lives as a doctor than having patrons snap their fingers at you because their steak's undercooked?”

Wally stared at his father for what felt like an eternity. The pamphlet he had was now a crumpled mess in his fist.

I'd seen him stressed before. We were classmates in a couple of introductory courses in our first year of college, so I got to see firsthand how he dealt with extreme pressure. Last-minute cram sessions were a breeze for him. No question too complicated, no essay answer too long. But this?

This was white hot rage.

He stormed off, muttering under his breath. When he slammed his bedroom door closed, it shook the whole penthouse.

I looked at Jesse, frustrated. “Where’s the harm in at least listening to him?”

He shook his head. “This is a family matter, Vivian. I’d prefer it if you didn’t get involved.”

My heart stung. Was this where we stood? Did I even have any right to be mad?

Yes. Yes, I did because Wally was, first and foremost, my friend. Regardless of what happened between Jesse and me, I knew when someone was being a jerk.

“Have you ever even seen him cook?” I asked, a bit more bite to my tone than I intended.

“No. Have you?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. He cooked dinner for me all the time when we were still seeing each other. It was delicious. He’s very talented.”

Jesse froze. I wasn’t sure if it was because I dared to speak up or because I mentioned the fact that Wally and I dated. Either way, it was awkward as hell. Not knowing what else to do, I shuffled off down the hall to check on him, leaving Jesse alone to brood.

I knocked on Wally’s door. “Hey, it’s me.”

He opened it, but only by a crack. “Hey.”

“Are you okay? I just wanted to check on you.”

“Dandy. Sorry you had to see that.”

“It’s fine. For what it’s worth, I think you’d do great at culinary school.”

“Thanks. Doesn’t matter, though. He won’t pay for me to go, and I certainly can’t afford to pay for it.”

“Do you want me to talk to him?”

Wally laughed bitterly. “I appreciate the offer, but it’d be like talking to a brick wall.”

“I don’t know. I think I could get through to him.”

“Don’t waste your breath, Viv. I’ll just have to figure something else out.”

“Don’t give up, okay? I know you’d be a fantastic chef.”

“You’re the only person who believes that.”

“Because I’m in your corner. Always will be.”

He gave me a wry smile. “Thanks, Viv. You’re the best.”

“I try.”

CHAPTER 16

3:00 a.m.

I was most productive at night. I didn't buy into this modern-day notion that you had to be an early riser and get straight to the hustle. I knew my body, what I was capable of. I'd prefer working late into the evening over dragging myself out of bed any day.

Except today was different. Today my mind was foggy, and my eyelids were heavy. I was on my fourth cup of tea, but it didn't help much to stave off the threat of sleep. I couldn't go to bed, though. Not when I was juggling a million things at once. A part of me was worried that if I relented and took a breather —just as Devin had been telling me to— I'd never find the strength to start back up again.

It was better this way. I'd rather barrel through, full steam ahead.

Between managing things at the firm, dealing with my son's acts of rebellion, and constantly checking in on the perimeter of my penthouse turned safehouse, I also found myself distracted by memories of Vivian.

The smell of her hair. The silky softness of her skin. The taste of her lips. The way she threw her head back and sighed in contentment when she came.

The look of disappointment she gave me.

I huffed, rubbing my eyes. I had a nasty headache thanks to the glare of my laptop's screen.

I wasn't sure why it bothered me so much, Vivian looking at me like that. But what else was I supposed to do? I needed to put my foot down for Wally's sake. I found no joy in being the strict parent, but he would thank me later.

I knew firsthand just how hard life could be without a good education and a secure job. I watched my father toil away, day in and day out, struggling to scrape together enough funds to keep food on the table. We lived paycheck to paycheck, barely getting by. It was no way to live. There was no freedom in it. I was only trying to make sure that my son was set up for a comfortable future.

Why couldn't he understand that?

It would be too easy to blame Melissa for Wally's behavior. She'd always been a free spirit. The fun mom. The good cop in all our disciplinary scenarios. She was the first one he'd go to when he wanted something, or when I told him no. Melissa never had any qualms about being the favorite.

I rubbed my temples. The pressure behind my eyes was excruciating, but I still had several emails to draft and a day of plans to approve for my security teams out in the field on active details. It was hard doing this from home. I had none of the resources I needed to do my job. Confidential files stayed at the office. I could access them remotely on my laptop, but only after jumping through several hoops to make copies and destroying them the second I was done.

I made a mental note to ask Devin to make a work portal of sorts for remote work. It could prove beneficial for my employees. I sent him a quick text before I could remember what time it was. My phone pinged a second later.

Go the fuck to sleep.

Maybe he had a point. I wasn't sure when it happened, but I somehow hit the point where my efficiency rate dropped off and took a steep skydive into nothing. As much as I hated to admit it, I was exhausted. I could keep working, but the chances of making mistakes were exponentially proportional to how tired I was.

Behind me, shuffling footsteps caught my attention.

I closed my laptop and turned, spotting a familiar bun of shiny black hair. Vivian yawned wide, stretching her arms as she did. A simple white tank top and a pair of neon pink shorts caught my eye. Individually, they were harmless articles of clothing. On her, it was enough to give me a heart attack. No amount of tofu and a healthy diet could prepare me for the way my pulse spiked.

“What are you doing up?” I asked.

She smirked. “I was about to ask you the same thing.”

“Work. You?”

“Anxious.”

I frowned. “Talk to me.”

Vivian shrugged, walking toward me. “I don’t know. If you told me a week ago that I’d be on the run from a powerful cartel, I would have laughed and told you to ease up on the sauce.”

“I call that a regular Tuesday.”

She laughed softly, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “I’m scared for Molly. Can’t stop thinking about her. I really hope she’s alright. I think I feel guilty, too, because I’m safe here with you and she’s—” Her voice choked, a mixture of anger and sadness in her eyes. “We were placed in the same foster home. We were both seventeen, about to age out of the program. I think that’s why we got along so well. Kindred spirits, about to brave the unknown.”

“Foster home?” I echoed, curiosity piqued.

Vivian nodded, leaning against my arm slightly. “My parents weren’t... the best people. Scumbags, to tell you the truth. Addicts, though I’m not sure what they were addicted to. Whatever they could get their hands on, I guess.”

A boiling rage brewed in the pit of my stomach. The thought of Vivian, young and helpless, clawed its way through my mind. All alone. Nobody to take care of her, to protect her.

“Did they ever hurt you?” I asked through gritted teeth.

She took my hand and squeezed my fingers. “No. Don’t worry, Jesse.”

“It’s inexcusable.”

“And that’s why social services took me away.”

She said it so simply, without a hint of emotion. Just another boring fact like the sky being blue and that birds could fly and bad parents had their children taken away to live elsewhere.

“How old were you?” I asked.

“Eight. Spent the next ten years going from home to home.” Vivian smiled gently. “It wasn’t so bad. Some families were really nice. Three square meals a day. They let me go to school. Bought me new clothes when I outgrew my old ones. Almost got adopted by a family once.”

I held her hand tight. “What happened?”

“They wound up getting pregnant. They’d been trying for years. And, well... there was no longer any need to keep me in the picture. With their miracle baby on the way, they didn’t feel like they had the space to take care of me anymore, so I was shipped off to the next place.”

The air in my lungs burned. How could someone do that to her, to any child?

“Stop.”

I blinked. “What?”

“I know that look. I don’t want you pitying me.”

“It’s not pity,” I insisted.

“Then what is it?”

I didn’t have an answer. There were no words to describe what I was feeling. Frustration. Horror. An overwhelming need to protect her.

I settled for pulling her into a hug instead. Vivian settled against me, burying her face in the crook of my neck. She

smelled divine, as always. Warm like the summer sun.

I wasn't sure how long we were locked in each other's embrace. A few seconds. A few minutes. A whole hour. It didn't matter. What did matter was that she felt so unbelievably right in my arms. Deceptively small and soft, but I knew better. She was a firecracker with a sharp tongue and a quick wit, which made it even more fascinating to see her so vulnerable. Just for me.

"Do you think we can watch a movie or something?" she murmured against my skin, her breath hot against my neck.

I was about to tell her that it was too late for that sort of thing. If anything, the stimulation of all the colors dancing off the screen would keep her awake. There was also the added issue of noise. I didn't want to risk waking Wally, even though I knew for a fact that my son was a deep sleeper.

But she peered up at me with her doe eyes and I realized I was overthinking. For her, I'd make an exception. All the exceptions.

I took her hand and guided her to the living room. She curled up against me when we sat down on the couch, pulling her knees close to her chest while fitting in the crook of my arm. She frowned at the far wall.

"Uh, where's your TV?" she asked.

I picked up the remote from off the coffee table and pressed a button. The projector screen lowered, unfurling from the mount on the ceiling. The projector suspended above our heads flicked on, specks of dust glittering in its light beam.

"Fancy," Vivian commented. I couldn't tell if she was genuinely impressed or being sarcastic.

"What do you feel like watching?"

"Something where I don't have to think too hard."

I surfed the channels until we found a late-night run of a nature documentary, the British narrator's low voice commentating as various animals traversed the length of the frame.

This was all so strange, and at the same time, not at all.

I couldn't remember the last time I actually sat down to watch TV. I was so used to my rigid routine that something as simple as a documentary made me feel restless. I had things to do, work to take care of, security cameras to check. What was I doing watching giraffes eating leaves off tall branches when I could be—

“I can hear you thinking.” Vivian watched me intently, an almost studious level of concentration in her gaze.

“I wasn't thinking about anything,” I insisted.

“Liar.” She snuggled even closer. “Just try to relax.”

“I *am* relaxed.”

“Do you want to know what your tell is?” Vivian grinned. “Whenever you lie, your voice gets really flat. Like you're afraid your intonation will give you away.”

“Have you been studying me?”

“Maybe.”

I leaned in a little closer. “You think you've got me all figured out, don't you?”

Vivian nibbled her bottom lip. “I have a pretty good idea.”

“Enlighten me.”

“When you're stressed, you hold your breath. I don't think you're aware of it. You clench your jaw and carry all the tension in your shoulders.”

“Most people tend to.”

“And when you're happy or when something pleases you, you have this crooked little grin.” Vivian brought a hand up to trace the corner of my mouth, the caress soft and fleeting. “I think it's cute.”

I swallowed, hypnotized by her sweet scent. “What else?” I whispered.

“When you're turned on...” she said softly, eyes searching my face. “When you're turned on, your pupils blow wide.

Your throat gets dry, so you swallow more, and when you look at me..."

"What?" I urged.

She placed a hand on my knee, sliding her palm up the inside of my thigh. "You look at me like you want to devour me whole," she mumbled against my lips. Not quite a kiss, yet somehow so much sexier.

I held back a groan. "Vivian, we can't."

She shrank away, small and defeated. "Is it because you don't want me?"

"Because I won't be able to stop myself." I cupped her face to keep her from retreating any further. "Because..."

"What?"

I sighed. "Because I want to bend you over the back of this couch and have my way with you. I want to pin you to the wall and make you scream with pleasure. I want to rip those fucking shorts off and live between your thighs until you're sick of me."

Vivian bit her bottom lip, her cheeks and neck flushed with heat. "Then do it."

"You don't know what you're asking, Vivian."

"Yes, I do."

We were at a standoff, but we both knew the truth. I was hanging on by a thread. I wanted her, and she knew it. She wanted me, and I knew it.

On the screen, a lioness was prowling her territory, her lion circling nearby.

"Get up," I ordered, not a hint of regret for caving in so easily.

CHAPTER 17

Jesse's eyes were impossibly dark. This was a man grasping at the last straws of self-control.

A shiver slithered down my spine. Fuck. I could feel myself grow impossibly wet as we made our way into his bedroom.

I very slowly dropped to my knees, hooking my thumbs through his belt loops to drag him close. Jesse put up no resistance. In fact, he helped me undo the front of his pants so I could pull them down easier.

I kissed his cock through the fabric of his black boxer briefs, relishing how he sucked a sharp breath in through gritted teeth. It would have been nice to tease him for a while longer, but my need to taste was greater than my need to play. I pulled his underwear down and freed his long, hard shaft, moving in to wrap my lips around him.

He was salty and sweet and uniquely him. I swirled my tongue around his head, pleased with the way he stifled his groan into the back of his hand. Jesse combed his fingers through my hair, keeping his hand on my head to act as a sort of guide.

“Good girl,” he praised. “So pretty with my cock in your mouth.”

His approval made me unbelievably wet, the slick heat between my legs too difficult to ignore any longer. I hollowed my cheeks and sucked him deep, bobbing my head in a rhythmic fashion. I wrapped my left hand around the base of

his length, stroking him in tandem. He throbbed against my tongue, hot and delicious.

“Touch yourself, angel,” he ordered. “Touch yourself while you suck me off.”

I obliged, slipping my free hand down my shorts to play with my sensitive bud. It was crazy how I loved this. Being told what to do, yet knowing I always had a choice.

It was just a game, one we were both happy to partake in.

I picked up the pace, bobbing my head and stroking him with determination. I really wanted to see him unravel, see him relax. I should have known better, though, because Jesse tapped my chin and shook his head.

“Up.”

“But I’m not done with you,” I protested.

“Neither am I, but I want this to last.” He outstretched his hand and helped me stand. The second I was on my feet, he scooped me up in his arms and lay me down on his bed, shucking off my shorts like they were the most offensive thing in the world. “Where do you even buy something like this?”

“Victoria’s Secret. Why?”

He tossed my shorts over his shoulder. “So I can buy you one in every color available.”

I smirked. “Hate to break it to you, but that particular line’s been discontinued.

Jesse pulled off his shirt as he crawled on top of me. “Shame,” he murmured against my lips. “I guess you’ll have to do without them.”

I giggled. “Cheesy.”

He hushed me as he pulled my underwear off, pushing my knees apart before dipping down to return the favor. He licked a stripe up my lips and teased my clit with the tip of his tongue, humming in satisfaction.

“My girl’s already so nice and wet for me. What’s got you so excited?”

“You know—” I gasped, pleasure pulsing through me “—why.”

“You have to be a lot quieter than that, angel.”

Wally was only a few doors away. If I made so much as a peep, he could wake up and discover me with his father.

It was dangerous.

It was exciting.

His skillful tongue teased and prodded and circled, sending pleasure spiking through me at a relentless pace. My knees shook, my breathing was ragged. The only reason I didn't grip the sheets for stability was because I was too busy claspng them over my mouth to keep from screaming. I whimpered through the climax, bright, hot, blinding heat sapping every ounce of strength from my body.

Jesse propped himself up on his elbows and smiled, looking very much like the cat who got the cream. “You're welcome.”

“Are you going to say that every damn time?” I asked dryly, though there wasn't any heat behind it.

“Yes. You better get used to it.”

I didn't know what excited me more, his cockiness or the implication that we'd be doing this again.

Because I won't be able to stop myself.

We stripped out of the rest of our clothes, immediately falling into each other's embrace. Our lips connected like magnets, two pieces of a puzzle that fit perfectly together. His kisses were greedier than last time. Feverish and needy. He barely gave me time to catch my breath. I was dizzy and confused and desperately reaching out to make sure I stayed anchored. I had a feeling Jesse liked me that way: at his mercy.

He left me for only a few seconds to retrieve a condom from the bedside drawer, returning to me before I even had time to determine which way was up. Just when I gathered my bearings, he gripped me by the waist and flipped me onto my

stomach, pressing kisses against my spine as he grabbed my ass in his massive hands.

“Enjoying the view?” I murmured against his pillow. I loved that it smelled like him.

He spanked me, swift and painless. “Quiet,” he warned.

But I didn’t want to be quiet. “You know, those aren’t even my shortest shorts.”

“Is that so?”

“I’ve got a pair that barely fits me.”

I heard him inhale through the nose. “You wear them *out*?”

“Sometimes. When it’s too hot for pants. One time at the beach, too, but there were these guys who wouldn’t stop staring and—”

Jesse pressed his cock into me without warning, the stretch somehow too much and not enough at the same time. He reached around with an arm and held me to his chest, covering me with his weight. He pressed a kiss into my hair and practically growled in my ear. “Nobody gets to look at my girl, you understand? Nobody but me.”

My walls fluttered around him, so sensitive to his touch. “Jesse,” I whined as he pulled almost all the way out.

He clasped a hand over my mouth to keep me quiet, so I had no choice but to groan into his palm. Jesse pinned me to the bed with his body, keeping to shallow thrusts. It was impossibly cruel and maddening all the same. I craved more, but he quite literally only gave me an inch.

I gripped the sheets, writhing beneath him. I bucked my hips, hoping he’d plunge into me all the way. I needed more friction than this. I needed him deep inside me, but he wouldn’t. Every shallow thrust drove me closer and closer to desperation. I tried saying his name, but his hand prevented me from getting a proper sound out.

Jesse clicked his tongue. “You teased me, now I get to tease you.”

I whined, both frustrated and painfully turned on. Who gave him the right to be so distressingly sexy?

“Your pussy’s dripping for me,” he mused. “You must like this a lot, hmm? Maybe I’ll just keep going like this.”

When his hand finally came free, I hissed, “Don’t you fucking dare.”

“What’s wrong, angel?” he asked innocently. “Are you not enjoying yourself?”

“Jesse,” I rasped. “Jesse, I want you to fuck me. I want you deep and hard. Come *on*, I need—”

“You know what the magic words are. You’d better use them.”

“Please, sir, make me come. Please, just—”

He grabbed me by the hips and pulled me upward, holding me in place as he pistoned into me. The head of his cock swept past my sweet spot again and again and again. The explosive release that crashed into me was shocking despite its inevitability.

“Good girl,” he said with a chuckle.

I pounced on him, moving with such speed he had no time to react. I had him on his back, straddling him. “Don’t patronize me,” I said. “I’ll have you know that I fight back.”

Jesse smiled, amusement glinting in his eyes. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

I carefully lowered myself on his cock, moving at an excruciatingly slow speed. Mostly to allow myself time to accommodate to the new angle, but also to give Jesse a taste of his own medicine. I rocked my hips back and forth, clenching around his length with the aim of driving him crazy.

He didn’t seem phased, looking up at me with adoration rather than torture. “You’re fucking beautiful,” he whispered.

“You can flatter me all you want, but I’m not going to go any faster than this.”

He reached up and massaged my breasts, shamelessly teasing my hard nipples between his fingers. “Fine by me. I’m enjoying the view.”

He kissed my throat as he thrust up into me. His stamina was really something to behold. “You always wear your hair up because you think it’s in the way.”

“It *is* in the way.”

“But I like it down because I can do this.” Jesse reached around to grip my hair gently, tugging my head back to better expose my neck. He sucked at the delicate skin hard enough to leave a mark.

I instinctively held onto his shoulders, digging my fingers into his skin.

“Oh God, I think I’m going to—”

“Me, too. Hold onto me.”

I did, clinging to him with all the strength I had left as we tipped over the edge together. The ecstasy was blinding, white spots twinkling across my vision.

He rolled me onto my side and covered me over with his blanket. I loved the way he played with my hair, stroked my back, held me like I was his forever.

And just like that, I was out like a light.

CHAPTER 18

When I woke up, the first thing I saw was Vivian, her hair a mess, mouth hung open as she snored like a chainsaw. A spot of dried drool pooled at the corner of her mouth. She'd also managed to hog the blanket, her arms and legs tangled up in the sheets.

I smiled.

Gorgeous.

The clock on the bedside table read 7:42 a.m. I was usually already up and about by now, but I allowed myself a few selfish minutes. I admired Vivian for a little while longer, noting the three freckles scattered over her left eyelid. I hadn't noticed them until now, and the discovery left a giddy bubbliness in my chest.

I eventually summoned the willpower to peel myself away and get dressed. It was the start of a new day and there was lots of work to do. First on the to-do list was check the security footage from around the building's perimeter. Nothing ever got past me. If the cartel somehow discovered Vivian's location and was spending this time casing the joint before making a move, I'd know in a heartbeat.

When I walked into the kitchen, I was surprised to find Wally already there. He was seated at the head of the table, dark circles under his eyes. His fingers were threaded together in front of him, his chin resting on top. The frown he wore was deep.

“What are you doing up so early?” I asked, heading to the stove to make myself a cup of tea.

“We need to talk,” my son said flatly. “About what happened last night.”

I froze mid-reach. Did he know about Vivian and me? Were we not as quiet as I thought we were? I turned, leaning against the counter and gripping the edge. “Listen—”

“No, *you* listen, Dad. I’m tired of you brushing off my wanting to go to culinary school.”

I exhaled, shoulders slumping. “Oh, that’s all?”

Wally glared at me. “What do you mean, that’s all? This is important to me, Dad.”

“It’s too early for this. We’ll talk about this later.”

“No, we’re going to talk about this now. This is exactly what I mean by you brushing me off.”

I rubbed my eyes. I didn’t feel like dealing with this headache. “You’re too smart to waste your life working in a kitchen.”

“What if I were stupid, hm? Would it be fine with you then?”

“You’re not making sense.”

“If I suddenly stopped going to classes and flunked out, would you finally get the point that medical school isn’t what I want?”

I clenched my jaw, molars grinding against each other so hard they squeaked. “Don’t you dare throw away your future like that.”

“I don’t want to be a doctor, Dad! I don’t want to spend the next seven years of my life working towards a medical degree. I want to be a chef.”

“What in God’s name for?”

“Because I love to cook!” Wally exclaimed, rising from his seat at the table. “I love food, Dad. I love trying new recipes

and inventing my own dishes. I love plating things in visually interesting ways. Being a chef is so much more than just flipping burgers and taking orders. It's *art*."

I scoffed. "When did you even learn to cook?"

"I taught myself," my son said with a huff. "You wouldn't know, though, because you're literally never around. This is the most I've seen you in years, and you're still technically on the clock protecting Vivian!"

"This is out of the question. I've worked too damn hard sending you to the best schools, hiring the best tutors. Are you telling me I wasted my time and money so you can become the next fucking Chef Boyardee?"

Wally's face turned bright red. "Oh my God, this is exactly why Mom left you, you know that?"

I blanched, his words a slap to the face. "What the hell did you just say to me?"

"I said this is why Mom left. You never *listen*."

"She didn't leave me. I left *her* because she was cheating on me."

"Because she was miserable," Wally snapped. "Because you were always working, always going back to serve another tour even though you promised you'd spend more time with the two of us."

"I don't know what poison she told you, but I continued to serve so I could earn a paycheck to put food on the fucking table."

"She didn't want that. Neither of us did." Wally's eyes were wet with the threat of tears, but his lip was curled up with pure anger. "She was so fucking lonely, Dad. But you didn't know because you were always gone. I can't tell you how many nights I walked in to find her crying. She missed you so much, but you couldn't be there for her because the job was always more important. It's *still* the most important thing to you. You basically live at the office, and you don't give a fuck about what I want."

“How the fuck did we make this about me?”

“Because it’s always been about you, Dad!” he exclaimed. “It’s always been about what *you* want. You want me to go to medical school. You want me to become a doctor. Did you ever stop and think about what *I* wanted?”

“Listen here, you ungrateful little—”

“Jesse?”

I turned, startled to hear Vivian’s voice drift into the kitchen from the hall. She stood at the kitchen entrance, hiding behind the tall steel of the refrigerator. Vivian looked between Wally and me, concern written into the tight line of her lips.

“Did we wake you?” I asked softly.

She nodded.

“Sorry, Viv,” Wally mumbled. “We’re done talking now.”

I turned back to face him. “No, we’re not. Far from it.”

“Yes, we are.”

I inhaled deeply. I didn’t want to lose it in front of Vivian. “I didn’t work hard and come from nothing just so you could throw everything away.”

Wally didn’t scream. He didn’t raise his voice. Instead, an intense calm took hold of him. “You know what? I’m done.”

“Done? What do you mean you’re done?”

He gestured vaguely about the space. “With all this. I’m going to pack some of my things and stay with a friend.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“I think you’ll find that I am.”

I crossed my arms. “Fine. Leave. About damn time you moved out, anyways.”

“I’m glad we can at least agree about that.”

“Good luck paying rent on a fry cook’s salary.”

Wally’s mouth dropped open like he was about to throw back another snipe, but he closed it and stomped past me. I

heard him shuffling in his room, no doubt stuffing a bag — which I wanted to mention that *I* technically bought for him— before trudging to the elevator and getting inside.

“Sorry Viv, but this is exactly what I told you he was like. Good luck dealing with him.”

The penthouse, once consumed with noise, was now uncomfortably quiet.

Vivian stood there staring at me.

“What?” I grumbled.

“He could do it, you know,” she whispered.

“What are you talking about?”

“Average rent in Chicago is about two grand, depending on the area. The average annual salary of a fry cook is just shy of forty thousand. If Wally finds himself a roommate and splits living costs, he’d get by just fine.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I work —worked— for an investment firm, remember? It’s literally my job to understand what people earn and how they can maximize their dollar.”

I shook my head. “I don’t want my son to *get by just fine*, Vivian. That’s no way to live. I just want what’s best for him.”

“By pushing *your* dreams onto him?” Vivian asked quietly. “Look, this is none of my business. Or maybe it is, I don’t know. I get that you think you’re doing the right thing, but if you don’t stop and put yourself in Wally’s shoes, you might push him away forever. I don’t want to see that happen to you. To either of you.”

As much as I hated to admit it, Vivian had a point. Maybe I *was* pushing my dreams onto Wally.

“I grew up with nothing,” I said. “I don’t want Wally to know what that’s like.”

Vivian stepped forward and entered my space, reaching up to brush her fingers across my jaw. “You’re a good father, Jesse. Take it from someone who knows firsthand what a shit

parent is. I understand you're trying to protect him, but at some point, you need to let Wally make his own choices."

I kissed her palm. "How'd you get to be so wise?"

She shrugged. "I read a lot."

"I'll talk to him. But I think we both need to calm down first."

"That's a good idea." Vivian turned toward the stove, hands on her hips. "Now. How about some pancakes?"

"I don't have pancake batter."

"Okay. What kinds of cereal do you have?"

"Raisin Bran."

She wrinkled her nose in pure disgust. "What is *wrong* with you?"

I chuckled. "How about you get back into bed and I'll order us something for breakfast?"

"Alright," she said coyly. "But don't you dare feed me something weird like tofu toast."

"Actually, I know a fantastic spot that has that on the menu."

"Absolutely not."

"It's delicious."

"You're wrong."

"Have you even tried it?"

"Nope, and I don't have to. I'd like eggs benedict or bust."

I kissed the tip of her nose. "I guess I can brave runny eggs for you."

"My hero," she said dryly, but her bright smile gave her away.

I was about to tell her to lose the clothes when my phone started to ring. I didn't want to answer, not with the promise of Vivian naked in my bed dangling before me, but I answered the call off muscle memory alone. "Hello?" I greeted gruffly.

“I ran into an error while implementing the new server,” Devin said, launching into his spiel without so much as a *how do you do*. “I had to do some overhauling last night.”

“Good for you?”

My brother clicked his tongue. “No, not good for me. Now I need you to come in and give me final approvals to all the changes I made.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Vivian tossing off her shirt and bra, leaving it behind her in the hall.

“You have my approval for everything, bye.”

“Wait!”

“What?”

“What’s gotten into you? You’re normally breathing down my neck about stuff like this.”

“I’m busy.”

“With?” Devin scoffed. “Look, I need to show you these changes before I launch the server. Just because I’m head of cyber security doesn’t mean you leave everything to me. You’re the head of the whole firm, so you need to know what’s going on.”

“Fine, fine. I’ll be there in half an hour.”

Vivian re-emerged from my bedroom in nothing but those stupidly sexy pink shorts, leaning casually against the door frame. She raised her eyebrows at me expectantly.

“Second thought, make that an hour.”

“Okay. I’ll see you then—”

I hung up and marched to her, picking her up and slinging her over my shoulder in a fireman’s hold. She giggled brightly, the sound of her laughter ringing in my ears.

“Change of plans, angel. We’re grabbing breakfast on the go. I’ve got some work at the office.”

“And you want me to come with?”

I set her down on the edge of the bed. “How else am I going to keep an eye on you?”

She tapped her nose. “Gotcha. But do you think we still have time to—”

I kissed her firmly on the mouth, sucking on her bottom lip until it came away red and swollen. “Definitely,” I answered before diving back in for another kiss.

CHAPTER 19

“Wow,” I gawked. “Just... *wow*.”

“It’s just an office,” Jesse insisted as he took off his suit jacket and slung it over the back of his leather executive chair.

“This isn’t an office. This is bigger than my apartment.”

“I guess it’s pretty spacious.”

“Ah, so humble,” I teased.

“Make yourself at home. This shouldn’t take me too long.”

“There’s no rush.”

“There kind of is. I need to get you home sooner rather than later.”

Home.

He didn’t refer to it as the penthouse or the safehouse, but home. I knew it was probably a silly thing to fixate on, but the word made the butterflies in my stomach take flight.

I sat down on the couch facing the busy street below. I couldn’t get over the view. Traffic looked miniscule, people walking along the street like ants. Jesse didn’t pay it much mind. I assumed it was because he was so used to being this high that it wasn’t as fascinating to him anymore.

The glass doors leading into his office swung open. The man who entered didn’t bother to knock. The second I laid eyes on him, I understood why. He looked almost exactly like Jesse. The same dark eyes, same dark hair. A little smaller and less muscular, but just as tall and present. He wasn’t dressed as

formally as Jesse, opting for a pair of dark blue jeans and a tight black shirt. Several ID badges dangled around his chest on a Pegasus Star Security lanyard.

“About time you got here,” he grumbled, marching over with his laptop. He set it down on Jesse’s desk, turning the screen toward him. “Alright, so I pretty much had to restructure the mainframe from scratch. Whoever you hired to do this work before me was abysmal—”

Jesse cleared his throat, tilting his head in my direction. “Devin, this is Vivian Jones. Vivian, this is my younger brother, Devin White.”

I gave him a polite wave from across the room. “Hello, Devin. It’s nice to meet you.”

Devin looked me over, squinting. His scrutiny was unnerving. After a few moments he said, “Nice to meet you, too.” He returned his attention to the laptop screen, consumed with his work once again. “Were you aware that someone tried to hack into the firm’s server last month?”

Jesse frowned. “No. I didn’t receive any alerts. Did they get anything?”

“No, lucky you. They tried to breach but were unsuccessful. The failsafe I installed booted them out before they could try again.”

Jesse grunted. “The guy I hired before you really *was* abysmal.”

“Good thing you have me.”

“Yes, yes. Pat yourself on the back a little harder.”

“You could just thank me by giving me a raise.”

“No.”

“You didn’t even think about it.”

“Don’t have to.”

Their back and forth was amusing. I observed quietly from my spot, listening to them talk about... whatever. Something super techy and out of my area of expertise. Jesse had no

problem keeping up with all of Devin's jargon. At least, it looked like he was. Maybe he was just really good at pretending.

Either way, he was fascinating to watch. The concentration. The poise. The confidence imbued in the way he stood. He owned the room. In fact, he owned the whole damn building. This was a man in his kingdom, in his element. Seeing him at his place of work, I was finally offered a glimpse of a shark in open waters.

There was a knock at the door. Jesse was obviously one hell of a busy man. It suddenly made sense why Wally said he was always at work. Something or someone constantly demanded Jesse's attention.

Another large man entered the office at Jesse's beckon. Behind him was a young woman, probably only a few years older than me, with a baby strapped against her chest in a carrier. A boy followed close behind.

"Glad to see you're still alive," the man said with a chuckle, voice deep and booming. "When Devin told me you were away from the office, I thought you were sick or dying."

Jesse rolled his eyes but clapped his friend on the shoulder. "I never get sick."

"Hi," the woman said to me. She had a very sweet smile. "I'm Ava."

I rose and shook her hand. "I'm Vivian. It's lovely to meet you."

"Where are my manners?" Jesse said quickly. "Vivian, this is my second in command, Theo Phillips. And this is his wife, Ava, and my favorite niece and nephew, Cassie and Cory."

The boy smiled. "We're your *only* niece and nephew."

Jesse ruffled the kid's hair. "Such a smarty pants."

"Do you work here, too?" Ava asked me.

I shook my head. "Oh, no. I'm, uh..." I wasn't too sure how to bring up the fact that I accidentally uncovered the money laundering efforts of a dangerous cartel to her. She

seemed like a nice lady, and I didn't want to freak her and her children out by saying the wrong thing.

Ava tilted her head to the side and smiled gently. "It's okay. I understand. I'm no stranger to being under a protection detail."

I arched a brow, whispering, "You mean..."

She joined me in the sitting area while the men talked shop. "Theo was my bodyguard a little over a year ago, so I get it."

"And now you're married?"

Ava smiled. "Yes, we are. It's a long story, but it had a very happy ending."

"I'm glad to hear that." I glanced between the two of them, nibbling my bottom lip.

"You have questions," she observed.

"I don't want to come across as rude."

"Believe me when I say very little fazes me these days."

"It's just... You're so young, and he's—"

"Almost twice my age." Ava nodded.

"Same as—" *Same as Jesse and me.* "Nothing."

She gave me a knowing look. I didn't detect a hint of judgement. She really did seem like a wonderful person. Understanding. Patient. "There's nothing wrong with it, you know. Being into silver foxes."

I coughed. Or maybe I choked. All I knew was that I made an unattractive and embarrassing sound that caught Jesse's attention from over by his desk. He arched a brow at me. I waved him off, breaking into soft laughter.

"Sorry," Ava said with an amused glint in her eye. "I'm just teasing you."

"It's fine. You just surprised me is all. You remind me of..." *Molly.*

"I remind you of who?"

“Just a friend. She used to tease me all the time about...” I lowered my voice, “liking older men.”

Ava shrugged. “What’s not to like? Mature. Confident. And they know what they’re doing.” She winked. “If you catch my meaning.”

I giggled. “I’m picking up what you’re putting down.”

“So, how long have you and Jesse...you know.”

“It’s all still very new. Complicated.”

Ava hummed. “When is it not?” The little girl in her arms cooed, waking up from her nap with a whine. “Oh, sorry,” Ava apologized. “I think someone’s a little hungry. We’ll gossip when I get back.”

She excused herself, leaving the office to find a private spot to feed her baby. Meanwhile, I sat there in stunned amazement.

Ava and Theo were married? If I closed my eyes, I could imagine Jesse and me in their shoes. A house in the suburbs. A couple of kids running around. None of this life and death business with an angry cartel hunting me down.

But the more I allowed my mind to wander, the more doubt crept in. Was that something I even wanted? I was far too young to think about settling down. I had goals. Dreams. Things I wanted to accomplish by thirty. There was no doubt that I was attracted to Jesse, but that didn’t equate to a future together.

I meant what I said to Ava. What Jesse and I had was new. Complicated. We were walking down the same path, but there was no telling if or when we’d hit a fork in the road. Why couldn’t we just enjoy the present? If Molly were here, she’d never let up about the fact that—

Molly.

She was still missing. What the hell was I doing here? Why was I sitting around in this lavish office when the cartel had her holed up somewhere dark and dingy? If she was even still alive.

I needed to do something. Anything. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if something happened to her and I did nothing to stop it. If that detective at the police station needed proof, I'd get him proof. This was the first time I'd been allowed out of the penthouse, and I wasn't going to throw the opportunity away.

I cautiously watched Jesse. He was engrossed in whatever Devin and Theo were talking about. Something about security perimeters and bodyguard rotations and payroll, yada yada yada. The subject of their conversation was irrelevant. All that mattered was that Jesse was distracted and I was alone. This was likely my one and only chance to slip away.

The second Jesse's back was turned, I made my escape.

I'd ask for his forgiveness later.



My heart was pounding. My palms were sweaty and cold. It was a weird feeling, being out and about without Jesse directly behind me to keep me out of harm's way. The one good thing about all of this, though, was that no one seemed to be following me. I was in the clear for now, so I needed to move quickly.

I hopped onto the bus and rode it all the way to Blue Cloud Financial. It was the middle of the day, so the front lobby was busy with workers eager to get to the cafeteria for lunch. I slipped by easily, blending in with the crowd. I was technically a familiar face here. Nobody would suspect anything as long as I kept moving and didn't draw any attention to myself.

I held my breath as I took the elevator up to my floor, like it would somehow help me disappear. When the doors opened, I stepped out and made my way swiftly to my cubicle.

It had been cleared out.

None of my things were there. The pictures of Molly and me that I'd pinned to my cubicle wall were gone. The drawers were empty of all my pens and pencils. Any paper documents

that I'd been holding onto for filing were also gone, likely shredded for security purposes. When I attempted to log into my computer, it gave me an error message. My credentials had been wiped from the system.

Not good.

Did this mean the encrypted files for the Azuras Association—or whatever they called themselves—were gone, too?

“Shit,” I hissed to myself.

I peered over the cubicle wall toward Arty's office. His lights were off. Out to lunch maybe? I turned in—what used to be—my office chair. Marta was away, too. Much to my relief, she'd accidentally forgotten to lock her desktop.

I wheeled over and searched through her top drawer, pulling an old USB stick from her desk organizer and plugging it into the computer tower. I searched for the files with shaky fingers, dreading how slow the loading bar filled. The computer eventually dinged, alerting me that it had found what I was looking for.

The encrypted files were now hidden in a folder within a folder within a folder. Someone was desperately trying to make sure that, while they couldn't destroy these records for the sake of their own bookkeeping, nobody could accidentally stumble upon them again like I did.

I downloaded everything I could. Once it was done, I snatched the USB and tucked it safely into my back pocket. I needed to get the hell out of there.

I half-jogged, half-walked back to the elevator, keeping my head down and eyes to the floor. No time for small talk. No time to stop. I had to get as far away from this building as I could before—

The elevator doors slid open.

On the other side stood five tall, boorish men with matching snake tattoos with red eyes wrapped around their throats.

CHAPTER 20

“**W**hat do you mean you don’t know where she is?” I asked Devin as he pulled up the building’s surveillance footage.

“Look, we were all busy with the same thing. I didn’t realize I had to babysit.”

“Just *find* her.”

“There,” he said, pointing at one of the many video boxes on his screen. It replayed Vivian waltzing right out of the front doors of Pegasus Star Security. None of the men I had posted at the front desk even batted an eye. I made a mental note to berate them for it later.

“Right under our noses,” Theo commented, sounding almost amused.

“Dammit,” I hissed. “I looked away for two minutes. *Two minutes.*”

“Relax.”

“Don’t tell me to relax.”

“What’s the problem, man?” Devin asked. “Maybe she wanted to take a little stroll around the block. She’ll be back.”

“She’s not supposed to be out by herself.”

“Why the hell not? It’s the twenty-first century. Women can do whatever they want.”

“Because it isn’t *safe!*”

Devin and Theo stared at me. I could hear the gears grinding inside their skulls.

“She’s a client,” Theo realized aloud. “Under your protection.”

Devin frowned. “Why weren’t we informed? She’s not on any roster. This should have been done by the book.”

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “I’m watching her as a favor. Pro bono. I’ve been using my penthouse as a safehouse location.”

“Jesus,” Theo mumbled. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“There’s no time to explain. We need to get her before they do.”

“Who’s *they*?”

“The Azure Cartel.”

Devin gawked. He never gawked. “What the fuck kind of shit is she in?”

“The deep kind,” I muttered, teeth grinding so hard my jaw was sore.

“Where do you think she’d go?” Theo asked, ready to jump in. I could always count on him to act first and ask questions later. That’s what made him my second in command. He was reliable, honorable.

Ava had been quiet for a while, watching everything unfurl. She held Cassie, patting her back gently in a soothing pattern. “She mentioned something about her friend,” she said. “I don’t know if that’s relevant or not.”

I knew exactly who Vivian was referring to. “She’s going to try and look for her friend,” I said. “She needs proof. Proof that can only be obtained by going back to her place of work.” I snatched up my jacket and pulled it on. I pointed at Theo. “Hold down the fort until I get back.”

“Will do.”

“Where are you going?” Devin demanded, but I was already out the door and running to unlock my Porsche.

As far as traffic violations went, I made about a hundred of them. Speeding through red lights. Failing to brake at stop signs. Almost running over a hipster who wandered too far from the bike lane.

I could see Blue Cloud Financial's massive logo on the side of its operations building, a beacon of sorts. When I screeched around the corner, I arrived just in time to see a group of men attempting to shove someone into the back of an unmarked white van. There were people around, but they did nothing. Just took out their phones to record what was going on.

Fucking bystanders.

I didn't slow down. Instead, I slammed on the acceleration and braced for impact.

Glass shattered.

Metal crunched.

Tires squealed.

I took out the front of the van with my car, rendering it useless. They weren't going anywhere. I made sure of it.

I somehow managed to drag myself out of my Porsche. Disoriented. Ears ringing. Joints aching. It was a miracle nothing was broken. The adrenaline coursing through my veins numbed any injuries I might have sustained.

The only reason I was able to stand up straight was because my vision was locked on to Vivian like a hawk. They had their filthy fucking hands on her, and that wasn't going to fly. Not now. Not ever.

One of the men had been hit in the crash, knocked over and unconscious on the pavement. That left only four. Two of them peeled off while the other two grabbed Vivian by either arm and attempted to drag her off. She kicked and screamed and scratched, managing to hit one of them in the gut with her elbow.

I took care of the first pair. They were fast, but I was furious. I landed a swift throat punch to the guy on my left,

followed by an unforgiving kick to the chest of the man on the right. They keeled over, winded and incapacitated.

The fourth assailant let go of Vivian's arm and charged me, brandishing a knife from his pocket. He had the advantage and we both knew it. There was no time for me to draw my gun, and even if there had been, I wasn't going to risk opening fire when so many civilians lingered around. That was a recipe for disaster.

He swiped at me ferociously, the blade whizzing past my ear on numerous occasions. I managed to duck out of the way. This wasn't a fair fight at all. I was too distracted with the fact that Vivian was still struggling in the arms of her captor, failing to free herself from his knuckle-white grasp.

"Vivian!" I shouted out to her.

I knew it was a mistake to get distracted the second my attacker swiped at me. His blade sliced past my upper right arm, the sting excruciatingly deep. The smell of rust and salt filled my nose. Red soaked into the fabric of my jacket, streams of it trickling down the length of my arm and dripping from my fingers.

I avoided taking another slice but received a kick to the inside of my knee instead. My legs buckled out from under me. My assailant swung his closed fist, knuckles connecting with my jaw. My skull vibrated. Everything hurt. I was seeing double.

"Jesse!" Vivian screeched.

The man trying to drag her away made the mistake of clasping his hand over her mouth. She opened wide and chomped down with all her might. He yelped in agony and recoiled, giving her just enough space to punch him square in the nose. He fell back and hit his head on the curb. Out cold.

She ran to me but couldn't get past the knife-wielder. He glared at her, murderous intent in his eyes.

"You stupid bitch," he hissed. "You and that redhead pain in the ass are going to pay."

“Redhead?” Vivian panted. “You mean Molly? She’s alive?”

“Not for much longer. Not if I have anything to say about —”

I lunged at him, batting the knife out of his hand and trapping him in a chokehold. I squeezed with all my might, counting the seconds until he was perfectly still. He wasn’t dead. Unfortunately. But at least he was no longer a threat.

Vivian ran to me, inspecting my arm. “Oh my God, Jesse. You’re bleeding.”

“It’s fine.”

“Fine? How is this fine? We need to get you to a hospital.”

“No. You’re coming with me back to the safehouse.”

“Look, I know you’re mad at me, but you really need to see a doctor.”

“I’m not mad, Vivian.” I stared her down, barely able to keep my voice level. “What I am is really. Fucking. Disappointed.”

“Jesse, I—”

“Stop. Talking.”

I looked her over. Apart from the emotional and mental trauma of almost being kidnapped —*again*— she seemed alright physically. Still, Vivian was on the brink of tears, the rims of her eyes red and whites glossy. Any other day, I would have scooped her up and kissed her until she felt better. But this was different.

“What you did was stupid,” I said, reaching into my pocket for my phone. I called Devin, who answered in a hurry.

“Did you find her?”

“Yeah. I need you to send a car and a cleanup crew to my location. Have them deal with the cops when they get here. I’m taking Vivian back to the safehouse.”

“Send a car? What happened to yours?”

“Totaled it. Which reminds me, call the dealership. She’s going to need a new... everything. Copy?”

“Jesus. Yeah, copy that.”

I ended the call and shoved my phone back into my pocket, turning to check on Vivian. She was trembling, clutching something tightly in her hands. I was too angry to ask her about it. Instead, I covered my wound with my palm and applied pressure to staunch the flow of blood. I wasn’t going to lose the arm, but it still hurt like hell.

“We really should take you to the emergency room,” she said, voice so quiet and small I barely heard her over the gathering crowd. Some of them were taking pictures. Not good.

I shrugged off my jacket and draped it over her head, pulling her close to my chest. I still had a job to do, and that was making sure my client was secure. I couldn’t risk anyone getting a good look at Vivian. There was no telling who was watching. It was highly likely the cartel had members nearby, keeping a finger on the pulse. She was exposed out here, a lamb with a target on her back.

Her wellbeing came before mine.

That was the job.

CHAPTER 21

I didn't know what upset me more: the fact that Jesse was suturing his own wound at the kitchen table, or the fact that he refused to even look at me.

I sat across from him, squirming in my seat, not because his at-home surgery was freaking me out, but because it looked painful, and he wouldn't let me come anywhere near to help.

Jesse winced as he applied antiseptic.

I reached out to him. "Please, just let me—"

"No."

It was difficult to breathe past the sticky lump lodged at the back of my throat. I hadn't been able to stop shivering since we got back. I wasn't cold, just nervous. My body couldn't tell the difference.

He winced again while trying to apply his own bandage. No surprise. Conducting medical care with one hand was difficult to begin with. Being both doctor and patient was an added complication.

"Please," I said firmly. "Just let me do it."

The muscles in Jesse's jaw tightened. He turned away slightly, but grumbled a bitter, "Fine."

I moved with nimble fingers, applying the fresh bandage as delicately as I could. My heart twisted in my chest. He still wouldn't look me in the eye. My fingers lingered on his skin

when I was done. Tentative. Questioning. “Jesse, I can explain —”

He stood up abruptly, ignoring me, and stalked over to one of the many kitchen cabinets and fished out a bottle of ibuprofen. He unscrewed the cap with one hand and took two pills dry. He remained at the counter, breathing deeply. Every muscle in his back was tight. The silence around us was crushing.

I wanted to cry. I couldn't stand the thought of Jesse being upset with me. Disappointed in me. It made me sick to my stomach, even though I knew I did what had to be done.

“Reckless,” he hissed. “You were absolutely reckless today.”

“Jesse, I was only trying to—”

“Don't. I don't want to hear it.”

“I needed to find proof so I could help find—”

“To help find Molly? By going back to the first place the cartel would think to look for you? Did it ever occur to you that they'd have men ready to steal you away the second you stepped foot through their doors?”

“Steal me away?” I echoed. “What? Are they thieves in the night?”

“I'm not fucking joking, Vivian. Take me seriously.”

“I *do* take you seriously.”

“Then why didn't you listen to me?”

“Because I feel fucking useless, alright? I need to do something to help her!”

“You're not qualified to handle a situation this delicate.”

I stood up, fury rising in my chest. “She's the closest thing I have to a family, alright? She's my *best friend*. It's my fault they took her. If anything happens to her, I—” My throat closed up, a terrible pressure building behind my eyes. “They should have taken me. I was the one who discovered the

discrepancy. She'd be fine if it weren't for me and it's all my fault."

"You can't help her if you're dead!" Jesse snapped. "Do you have any idea how fucking worried I was? You might not care what happens to you, but I do."

"Why?"

"Because!" he bellowed.

"Because why?" I yelled back.

In three long strides, Jesse closed the gap between us and pulled me into him, his lips crashing against mine. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. Heated beyond measure. Desperate beyond sense. He pushed me back until my hips hit the edge of the table. There was no place left to go, leaving his body to press flush against mine.

His tongue swept past my lips and over mine. Demanding. Obsessive. He swallowed every little whimper and moan that escaped my lips, leaving me no time to catch my breath. I was dizzy. Seeing stars. Clinging to him like a lifeline.

Jesse picked me up by the waist and placed me on the table's surface, making quick work of my pants, practically ripping them off in his haste. I spread my legs for him, the tips of my fingers and toes tingling with excitement. Heat pooled between my legs, my pussy already aching for his touch.

There was nothing elegant in the way I took off my shirt and bra. It didn't matter. The time for games was long gone. This was pure carnal desire. Screw eloquence. Screw seduction. I just wanted to feel him filling me up. Jesse pulled his cock out of his pants and plunged into me, ripping a loud groan from my lips.

"Jesse," I whined, breath shaky and thin. "Jesse, fuck yes —"

"Quiet," he snapped, claiming my mouth in yet another bruising kiss.

He fucked me against the kitchen table, stretching me wide. The head of his cock swept over my sweet spot

repeatedly. An alarming heat bloomed in the pit of my stomach, an intense flame turned uncontrollable wildfire. His pace was relentless, each thrust of his hips met with the sound of skin slapping skin. The table squeaked in protest beneath our combined weight, but we didn't stop. We wouldn't.

I threw my head back and screamed as climax rippled through me, crashing over my senses like a tsunami. There was no fighting it. I drowned in pleasure, emerging to the surface for air a few minutes later when I finally came back to reality.

Jesse was still going strong, beads of sweat forming across his brow from the exertion. I reached up to stroke his face, but he knocked my hands away. "No," he said gruffly, turning me so he could bend me over the edge of the table.

He plunged his cock back into me, the new angle unlike anything I'd experienced before. I was still sensitive from my first orgasm; stars scattered across my vision. My toes curled as he pounded my pussy from behind, pulling my hair back with one hand so he could suck marks into the side of my neck.

My walls pulsed around him, the familiar boiling heat once again pooling deep within my core. I was desperate for something to hold onto, but the table was too smooth to offer any support.

Jesse held onto me as my body trembled, the orgasm hitting me like a bomb. Explosive. Bright. Brilliant. Almost devastating. I'd never experienced such a release before. I knew it was a cliché, but I honestly felt like a brand-new woman.

He pulled back and allowed me to touch my feet to the floor. I turned to him, knees suddenly made of jelly.

"Wow," I breathed. "That was amazing."

He chuckled, something deep and dark and amazing. "Oh, you thought we were done?"

My breath caught in my throat. "A-are we not?"

“Not by a longshot,” he said right up against my lips. He held my gaze, unwavering. “I’ve been too lenient with you. Turns out, you’re a bad girl, and bad girls get what they deserve.”

“Are you going to teach me a lesson?”

“That’s right.”

“What are you going to do to me?”

“Nothing you won’t enjoy. Now—” He picked me up and slung me over the shoulder of his good arm. He smacked my ass hard and without warning, the sting making me impossibly wet. “Let’s go somewhere a bit more comfortable, hm?”

“But I kind of liked the table.”

Smack!

“Don’t talk back to me.”

My pussy quivered, a shiver rushing through my system in its wake. “I’m sorry, sir.”

“That’s much better.”

He carried me to his bedroom, practically tossing me onto his bed rather than placing me down as he had before. I glared at him. “I don’t appreciate being manhandled.”

Jesse pushed my knees apart and grazed my pussy with the tips of his fingers, gathering the wet heat gathered there. “I think you like it just fine. Now, stop with the backtalk and lie down.”

I licked my lips. I lay down with his pillows propped behind my head and back. Jesse crawled onto the bed after me, pulling off his tie before taking my wrists and crossing one over the other.

“This is a special kind of knot,” he explained matter-of-factly. “The second you’re uncomfortable, all you have to do is let go.” He placed the tail end of the tie in my palm. “Demonstrate so that I can see you understand.”

I complied, releasing his tie. My wrists immediately came free. “Did they teach you this stuff in the army?”

“I was a boy scout, actually.” Jesse re-tied my wrists. “That’s enough talk out of you. The only thing I want to hear out of your mouth from here on out is if you want me to stop.”

“Why would I want you to stop?”

“In case it becomes too much. Tell me to stop, and I will. You’re in control. Do you understand?”

My heart railed against my ribcage. I’d never done anything like this. Maybe once with a pair of cheap handcuffs, but those had been a gag gift. No prior thought or conversation went into that particular romp, and it had been understandingly disappointing. But this...

This was something else. This was exciting and new and strange, but I felt totally safe with him. I trusted Jesse more than I could ever put into words.

“I understand, sir,” I said, shivering with anticipation.

“Good.”

And then he got up off the bed and started out the door.

“W-wait!” I yelled. “Where do you think you’re going?”

He smirked at me. “I have to clean up your mess,” he explained simply. “Do you think unconscious gang members and totaled cars clean themselves up? Do you think the police are just going to drop this because you’re safe now?”

“But what about *me*? You can’t just—” I kicked my legs in frustration. “You can’t just leave me here.”

“I think you’ll find that I can.”

“Jesse—”

“Like I said, you can let go at any time. But if you do, that’s where it ends. Keep holding on, and I’ll show you what other tricks I have up my sleeve.”

My cheeks burned. “This isn’t fair.”

“You already came twice, angel. I think that’s *more* than fair. Be good. I’ll see you in...” He checked his watch. And

then shrugged. “Whenever I feel like you’ve learned your lesson.”

I squirmed, rubbing my legs together. I was in for an excruciatingly long wait.

“Oh, and another thing,” he said, stopping at the door. “You’d better not touch yourself without my permission. You won’t be able to tie yourself back up without help, so I’ll know if you let go at any point.”

“You’re enjoying this *way* too much, sir.”

His eyes raked over my naked body. “And by the looks of it, so are you.”

CHAPTER 22

This was as much a test of patience for Vivian as it was for me.

If I hadn't been so hell-bent on teaching her a lesson, I would have taken her then and there, regardless of the restraints play. It seemed tame enough. Nothing too wild. Just a simple quick release knot and a tie. Child's play, really. What this was really about was the dynamic. The suspense.

And it was killing me just as much as it was likely killing her.

I meant what I said, though. I had a mess to clean up.

News outlets were all over it, though my preliminary search failed to pull up any images or video of Vivian specifically. That helped. I could focus more on damage control. Luckily, I had an entire legal department at Pegasus Star organized to deal with this sort of thing. They'd liaison with the police on my behalf, which freed up my time to handle the business side of matters.

And to handle the angel naked in my bed.

I took my sweet time. I was still annoyed as fuck that Vivian would do something so monumentally stupid. I was angry at first. Furious, actually. But only because I couldn't stop thinking about all the awful things that could have happened to her. Things that I could have prevented if only I'd been paying more attention.

It wasn't productive to dwell on the *what if* scenarios. It was one of the first things I trained my bodyguards to master

before I put them out in the field. They needed to be present, focused on the now and prepared for anything, not bogged down in what could have been done differently.

Yet here I was, thinking about what could have been done differently.

It was a mistake to take my eyes off her. I should have known better. Vivian was much too fiery to let out of my sight for too long. What if I hadn't managed to get there on time? What if the cartel hadn't sent five men, but twenty? What if I had been stabbed instead of swiped? What if they managed to get Vivian into that fucking van and drive off to God knew where?

I glanced at my watch. I figured it best I didn't keep her waiting any longer, or she might fall asleep on me.

The first thing she did upon my arrival was kick a pillow at me with impressive force.

"You *jerk*," she grumbled. "You were gone for *two* hours."

"Are your arms alright?" I asked. "Numb or sore at all?"

"They're fine."

"Then I guess I could keep you waiting a while longer."

"Don't you dare!"

I chuckled. She looked delicious like this. Hot and bothered and the mildest bit crazy. "If it bothered you so much, you could have just let go."

"Didn't want to give you the satisfaction."

"You know, this exercise was supposed to make you more compliant. I see that it's had the opposite effect. Maybe I *will* wait another hour."

Vivian tossed her head back into the pillow and bucked her hips, sighing and growling and whining all at once. "Please," she begged. "Please, don't go. I..."

"Say it."

"I need you, Jesse. I need you to fuck me so bad."

I swallowed. The sound of her pleas went straight to my cock. “Alright,” I said, stripping out of my clothes slowly just to torture her. “I guess I can do that for you.”

I climbed onto the bed and kissed her breasts, teasing her nipples between my teeth as I stroked my hands down her waist. I gripped her waist and nudged her knees apart with my shoulders, settling between her legs.

She was glistening with want, her clit swollen with arousal. I drew lazy circles against her sensitive bud with the tip of my tongue, memorizing the sound of her satisfied sigh as her knees trembled on either side of my head. I liked how soft she was. Couldn’t get enough of the way her legs felt when hooked over my shoulders. Everything about her was sweet, like fruit and vanilla mixed into one.

Her breathing grew ragged and high-pitched. I could sense that she was close by the way her body grew tight and rigid, bracing for the inevitable explosion of ecstasy.

So I stopped.

“Jesse!” she moaned. “*Why?* I was going to come!”

“This is what happens when you sneak away,” I said simply. “This is your punishment.”

“You intend to edge me as punishment?” she asked, incredulous.

“Smart girl. Now close your eyes and concentrate.”

“So you can pull the rug out from under me again?”

“Yes. Trust me. I’ll make it worth your while, angel.”

With a frustrated grunt, Vivian lay back down. She still hadn’t let go of my tie that was binding her wrists together. She gripped the end tight, making sure not to release the knot.

I continued my fine work, moving on to use my fingers as well. Her walls fluttered around my fingers, growing tighter and tighter until I had her wound so tight I was sure she was about to explode. Once her telltale signs of ragged breathing and rigidity came back, I stopped and pulled away.

She was a mess. Hips bucking, toes curling, eyes screwed shut while her mouth hung open with a silent scream.

“Please,” she blubbered. “Please, Jesse, I need...”

“What, angel? What do you need?”

“I’m sorry, okay. I’m really sorry.”

“For what?”

“For... For leaving. For going out on my own.”

“For putting yourself in danger.”

“Yes. Yes, that. I’m sorry, alright? I’ve learned my lesson. I swear I won’t do it again.” Her voice was high and tight. She was getting far too worked up for my liking. It was time to give her what she wanted.

I left her for the briefest moment to retrieve a condom, rolling it down my throbbing cock before returning to my rightful place. I kissed her tenderly on the lips, pressing my forehead against hers so I could look her in the eye.

I snapped my hips into her, her slick heat making it an easy task to enter. She was so ready for me, stretched and needy and perfect. I stroked her hair. Kissed her face. Thrust into her in search of that sweet friction we both needed.

“You feel so fucking good,” I grunted against her cheek.

Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, nothing but overwhelmed panting escaping her lips. She came so hard that her back arched and body shook.

“C-can I let go of the tie now?” she asked. “I really want to t-touch you.”

“Sure, angel. Let go. I want you to touch me, too.”

Vivian released the tie and wrapped her arms around me. She continued to kiss me, tired but eager. She dragged her fingers down my back, combed them through my hair, touched whatever she could get her hands on. She was exceptionally gentle when it came to my injury, hovering right over it to avoid unnecessary contact.

The tight coil in my gut grew hotter and brighter. Every thrust pushed me closer and closer to the peak. There was no point staving it off. Pleasure soared through my veins and left me high for what felt like hours, when in reality was only a few beautiful, brief seconds.

I rolled onto my side and pulled Vivian to me. She was still shivering from the aftershock. I kissed her forehead, the tip of her nose. I covered her in my blanket, creating a protective burrito of sorts.

“Are you okay?” I asked softly. “I know that was harder than usual.”

“I liked it,” she whispered with a sleepy smile.

“Are you sore anywhere?”

“No. Just tired.”

“Go to sleep, angel.”

“Will you stay?”

I held her tighter. “Of course.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m really sorry about what happened.”

“Can you understand why what you did made me so upset?”

“Yes. I could have gotten people hurt.”

“*You* could have been hurt,” I corrected. “My job is to keep you safe, Vivian. But I can’t do that if you run off.”

She snuggled in close, her nose pressed to my chest. “I won’t do it again. Promise.”

I kissed the top of her hair. “Thank you.”

It didn’t take her very long to doze off. She was understandably wiped. I didn’t understand how someone could look so sexy and so disarmingly cute at the same time.

I rubbed my hands over my face, a realization dawning on me.

I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I lost Vivian. If anything happened to her. If she'd been hurt, I'd blame no one but myself for failing to protect her because this beautiful, infuriatingly cheeky, intelligent woman meant more to me than I first realized.

She was, slowly but surely, becoming everything to me.

And this was dangerous.

Because once upon a time, I thought the exact same thing about Melissa. I was convinced she was the love of my life. I gave her everything. Opened up to her. Let her see a side of myself I never showed anyone else. I worked my hands to the bone to provide for her, give her the life she deserved. And in the end, it turns out I gave her nothing but grief.

She was so fucking lonely, Dad.

But you wouldn't have known because you were always gone.

I never thought about it that way before. All I ever wanted was to give Melissa and Wally a good life. *That's* why I worked so damn hard. Could they not understand that I was sacrificing my time for their sake? Was it really my fault that they came to resent me? I was only trying to do right by them.

Would Vivian come to resent me, too?

I didn't want to find out. My heart wouldn't be able to take it. Not again. Not ever.

I needed to put an end to things before there was no turning back.

CHAPTER 23

I noticed it first thing in the morning. He was exactly the same, but... *different*. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. Conversation was light. Friendly. Perfectly normal, if you were to look at the interaction from the outside in.

Jesse made me breakfast. Eggs Benedict with a side of hashbrowns and freshly squeezed orange juice. He moved about the space with confidence, handled his utensils with care and precision.

"You're awfully good with your hands," I said suggestively, eyeing the way he chopped up bits of potato.

"Thank you." His voice lacked any trace of warmth. I thought maybe I misheard him over the rush of the hood fan over the stove.

When he plated up our food, I asked, "Do you think we can eat in the living room? Watch something on TV while we eat breakfast?"

"I have some things to take care of," he said firmly. "I'll give you the remote. I'm sure you remember how to use it."

"Can you show me one more time? Help me refresh my memory."

"Sure."

I sat down on the couch and set my plate on the coffee table in front of me. Jesse didn't take up his usual spot to my right. In fact, he didn't even bring his food. He bent over, picked up the remote, pressed a couple of buttons. The

projector screen unfurled from the ceiling and the default channel turned on. He handed me the remote.

Perfunctory.

“Uh... thanks.”

“You’re welcome. I need to make a phone call in the other room.”

I gestured like I was zipping my lips. “I’ll be quiet.”

I tilted my head up, fully expecting him to dip down and kiss me. It was just an automatic reaction at this point. He’d spoiled me with little pecks before, so I figured he’d do it again without issue.

Except he turned away and disappeared down the hall.

I sat there, frowning up at the screen.

What the hell?

I shook it off as best I could. Jesse was an important man with important clients. I wasn’t the only one he had to tend to. Maybe this phone call was important. Too important to waste the precious seconds it would take to plant a kiss on my forehead.

I turned off the TV and ate my eggs Benedict in silence. There was nothing good to watch this early in the morning, anyways.



The second time I noticed it, it was just after dinner. He’d spent the whole day locked in his home office.

Not literally. The door was open by a couple of inches. Probably so that he could hear me if I called for help, but he didn’t reemerge from his phone call earlier that morning.

Jesse had given me a number to call to order food. There was a system, apparently. I could order whatever I wanted through the security firm. The food would be picked up by an employee at Pegasus Star, who would then in turn deliver it to

the safehouse. This way my location would remain anonymous to outside parties.

I ordered a pizza with extra cheese, pineapple, and banana peppers. A weird combination, but downright delicious. It was my go-to combo during my first year of college. Inexpensive. Filling. And a great conversation starter. It helped me weed out the weirdos who were too snooty to like pineapple on their slices.

I approached Jesse's office with a piece of pizza on a plate. I doubted he'd accept it with him being a health nut and all, but I wanted to offer it to him all the same. The low murmur of his voice reached my ear as I drew closer. He wasn't speaking English, but Spanish.

“Déjame saber cuando puedes. Gracias, Roberto.”

I poked my head in, transfixed with the lilt of the language rolling off his tongue. “I didn't know you knew another language.”

Jesse didn't look up at me, distracted by whatever he was reading on his computer. I wasn't sure why it annoyed me so much. “It comes in handy sometimes.”

“Where'd you learn to speak it?”

“School.”

“Oh? That's all?”

“Practiced it with one of my neighbors growing up, too. I think that helped.”

“What was your neighbor's name?”

“Marco. He lived in the next trailer over.”

I raised my eyebrows, curiosity hitting an all-time high. “You grew up in a trailer?”

Jesse finally glanced at me, looking very much like I said the wrong thing. “Yes. In a trailer park just outside of Austin.”

I grinned. “You're originally from Texas?”

“Is that so surprising?”

“I don’t know. Don’t Texans have a drawl?”

“Trained myself not to.”

I tilted my head. “Why?”

Jesse shrugged. “Just because.”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek as the silence lengthened. “Hey, Jesse?”

“Hm?”

“Did I do something wrong?”

“No.”

“You’ve been kind of... weird. Short with me.”

“Just tired. That’s all.”

I didn’t believe him for a second, but I didn’t know how to press him for answers. Maybe he was telling the truth and needed some time alone. “I brought you dinner. I know you don’t eat stuff like this, but—”

“I’m not hungry but thank you.”

I ignored the uncomfortable tightness in my chest. It was hard to not take his attitude personally. Something was bothering him, but he wasn’t telling me what.

“I’m going to bed,” I muttered. “Good night.”

“Night.”



It went on like this for another two weeks. I couldn’t wrap my head around it. This distance. Where the hell did it come from? Was Jesse still mad about me running off to Blue Cloud Financial and just wasn’t telling me? I thought we were past that. I promised never to do it again and meant it, so what was eating him?

Why was he being so cold?

He literally kept himself at arm's length. Whenever I entered the same room as him, he'd move to put space between us. It wasn't obvious at first, but now I was actively looking for it.

He wouldn't let me near him.

He wouldn't come close to me.

We were in each other's orbit, but our trajectories didn't allow us to collide. He was actively avoiding me and I was done with it.

Was he tired of me? Was that it? Now that he had his fill, he didn't need me around the same way anymore. Or maybe he was getting bored of playing bodyguard. He'd taken my case on as a favor to Wally, after all. And now that Wally had dipped, Jesse was tired of being stuck with me.

And it sucked. A lot. Because every time I saw him, the tiniest bit of hope kept me yearning. Maybe today he'd be in a better mood. Maybe today he'd tell me what was going on. Maybe today everything would go back to the way things were between us —fun and sexy and wonderful.

At some point, I started sticking to the guest room. Call it childish stubbornness. Call it a woman scorned. If Jesse didn't want to see me, fine. I didn't want to see him, either.

But staying in the confines of my room sucked, too. This penthouse was starting to feel a lot less like a safehouse and more like a prison. I wanted to go out, for a walk, to the park for a run. To a local coffee house for a hot beverage and buttery croissant. Heck, I even wanted to go back to work.

Maybe not at Blue Cloud Financial, but somewhere. Just to keep my mind busy. These periods of silence were getting longer and longer. There was even a day when Jesse and I didn't cross paths once, not a single word exchanged. I could imagine my brain turning into goop, so bored out of my mind that I could practically hear my synapses caving in on themselves because there was nothing else to do but listen.

That night, I treated myself to a hot bath. Borderline scalding. My skin was pink and tingling, scrubbed clean

within an inch of its life. It wasn't the same kind of warmth I found in Jesse's arms, but it would have to do. Sometimes I'd close my eyes and imagine him in the bath with me, not that he'd ever entertain the idea now.

"I'm just a job to him now, apparently," I grumbled bitterly to myself.

But the tiny voice in the back of my head told me that couldn't be true. I saw the way he looked at me. I remembered the way he touched me and kissed me and made me feel like a million dollars. What had happened between then and now to make him act so differently?

With a heavy sigh, I slipped a hand beneath the water and reached between my legs, recalling how attentive Jesse was whenever he ate me out. I tried to mimic the movements of his tongue with the tip of my finger, but it wasn't the same. Not even close.

I tried to think of his praises, the way he'd shower me in endearments.

Good girl. Smart girl. Angel.

When I came, it was underwhelming. Nothing could compare to his tongue and the stretch of his fingers.



I woke up on Monday feeling bloated. I did some mental math—an easy enough task for a math whiz like myself—and realized I was a couple days late. My cycles had always been really irregular, though, and it was safe to say I'd been under a lot of stress lately. As quickly as the concern crossed my mind, it faded into nothingness just as quickly.

I rolled over in bed. Flipped my pillow to the cool side so I could bury my face in it. In my palm, I held the USB I'd stolen from Blue Cloud Financial. The download, though rushed, had been successful. All the encrypted files I needed were on this drive. I didn't tell Jesse about it, though. He'd lose his mind. Maybe he'd be even angrier at me than he already was.

I had no way of decrypting the files, though. Math and coding used the same alphabet, but they were still two different languages. I supposed I could go online and try to learn a few things, but who was I kidding? I was an accountant in training, not some sort of hacker spy.

Anxiety consumed me. I was losing track time. Molly had been missing for a little over a month now. From what I'd seen on TV and in the movies, as well as read in books, cartel members weren't exactly famous for their patience and understanding.

What if I was too late? What if Molly was already—

An errant tear soaked into my pillowcase, darkening the fabric where it made contact. The tears wouldn't stop, nor did the sniffles. I tried to fight it, but I was tired. Tired of putting on a brave face. Tired of waiting. Tired of staring into an unknown future. My sniffles broke into uncontrollable sobs that I tried and failed to muffle.

There was a knock on my door. It was none other than Jesse. Of course it was. He was the only one else in this forsaken prison.

"Vivian?" I heard the door handle jiggle under his hand. "What's going on?"

"Don't come in," I snapped.

"I thought I heard you—"

"I said don't come in! Just leave me alone."

"Do you need anything?"

I wanted to scream. I wanted him to stop being such a dick. I wanted him to hold me like he used to. Tell me that everything was going to be okay. That Molly and I would be safe. That he missed me just as much as I missed him.

Fuck, did I miss him. And I hated that I did because it made me realize just how much I cared about him.

And now he couldn't even look me in the eye.

CHAPTER 24

JESSE

It was a herculean task not to touch her. I wouldn't allow myself to because touching her was a slippery slope. I told myself these boundaries were in place for both our sakes. I couldn't cave now, no matter how much I missed her.

I tried to use work to distract myself, finally putting my home office to good use. It was my little fortress, a place where I could zone out and manage the firm without constantly thinking about Vivian's plump lips or the sound of her cute giggle or how I went absolutely feral for her in those stupid pink shorts of hers.

God, I missed her in her stupid pink shorts.

But not just that. I missed her smile. Those three little freckles on her eyelid that were only visible close up. The way she fit in my arms so easily. Everything.

The last two weeks had been torture. Worse than that.

She was near. Only a couple of rooms away. Yet she was so impossibly far because I deliberately placed her there for her own good. I gave her space, respected her privacy. Made sure she had enough food and entertainment and whatever else she might need for a comfortable stay.

Even though I wanted to give her so much more.

For the first couple of days, I wandered out of the office late at night to find her in the living room, watching episodes of *Jeopardy*. She was good at it. Not so much with the history trivia, but everything else. I wanted to tell her she'd make a killing if she ever got to play on the show for real, but I

stopped myself. I didn't trust myself not to ascend into more flirtatious banter.

Best if I kept out of her way.

After the first week, I turned up the penthouse's main thermostat. Vivian never complained about it out loud, but I could tell she was cold, always shivering and teeth chattering. She bundled up in a sweater and sweatpants, though oddly enough never wore socks despite it being the smart and easiest thing to do to warm up. She was stubborn like that. I liked that about her, even if it was silly.

I gave her a phone number to call if she wanted food delivered. She ordered pretty much every night, opting to skip both breakfast and lunch in lieu of a snack around 5:00 p.m. and then a massive dinner around 8:00 p.m. Like clockwork. If I weren't so dead set on giving her space, I would have told her that having equally spaced-out meals and portions was better for her health, but I didn't want to overstep.

One thing I did notice was that she ordered tuna casserole from this Italian restaurant down the way frequently. Always with extra cheese and a bottle of Diet Coke. It must have been delicious because she could clear the whole dish by herself without any leftovers. For what it was worth, it smelled great. I wanted to ask her for a bite, just to try it, but decided against it. She obviously loved it, and I didn't want to take away from her favorite meal.

On Monday morning, I got the call. Melissa's name popped up on the screen. I nearly threw my phone out over the balcony.

"Now's not a good time," I grumbled into the receiver.

"When is it ever?" my ex-wife scoffed.

"If you're calling because you want more money—"

"I'm calling because of Wally."

The muscles in my neck tensed. "What about him?"

"He called me the other day and told me all about your argument. Why won't you let our son do what he wants?"

I laughed bitterly. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s always been like this. You always play the good cop and make me out to be the bad guy.”

“You *are* the bad guy, Jesse. Our son is out there fucking couch surfing because you’re too stubborn to let him live his own life!”

My blood boiled. “Don’t you dare take that tone with me, Melissa. You don’t get to patronize me after you ran off with the fucking dog walker. I was the only one providing structure in his life. I was the only one being a *parent*.”

“Not a very good one.”

“I’m hanging up.”

“You’re pushing your son away over something stupid, Jesse. You’re pushing him away, and one day, Wally’s never going to come back. Is that really what you want?”

I ended the call, but not before the sting of her words stabbed me straight through the heart. Of course that wasn’t what I wanted. Wally was my son. My boy. I loved him with every fiber of my being. But as much as I hated to admit it, what Melissa was saying rang true. I was pushing him away. I’d be heartbroken if I pushed him away forever.

God. I must have really fucked up if Melissa of all people was making sense.

Doubt crept in and festered in the crevasses of my mind. I allowed myself to imagine Wally pursuing culinary arts. He’d never expressed any interest in cooking before, but was that because I hadn’t been listening?

The more I thought about it, the more I realized just how little I knew my own son. I spent so much time away, working myself to the bone to provide him everything he’d need for a comfortable life. It was the same song and dance with Melissa, and I wound up driving her into the arms of another man.

Maybe Wally could make it. Maybe he’d become a world-class chef and open his own restaurant, even end up on one of

those reality TV cooking shows or whatever. He could be the next Gordon Ramsay, though without the British accent and significant anger issues. The chances of Wally reaching those heights seemed slim, but at least...

At least he'd be happy.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, but Melissa had a point. I'd rather Wally try to follow his passion than hate me. If on the off-chance things didn't work out, he could always give the medical career track another attempt. It wouldn't be the end of the world. I could see now that I was out of line.

I tried calling Wally, but he didn't pick up. I then proceeded to send him a few texts. Those were a lot harder to ignore since they tended to pop up on the lock screen.

Wally, come home so we can discuss things.

I've given culinary school some thought.

We can talk things through when you get here.

A few minutes went by, but I received no response. He was ignoring me.

How was I supposed to apologize if he refused to speak with me?

"Dammit," I grumbled under my breath. If he wasn't going to pick up the phone for me, who would he pick up the phone for?

I bet he'd answer if Vivian called him. It was worth a shot.

I ventured down the hall toward the guest room, hand hovering over the door to knock. I wasn't sure what I was going to say. Things between Vivian and I were...uncertain. I tried keeping my distance. I wanted to be respectful of her space. The realization that I felt more for her than I cared to admit had been a frightening one. I wasn't ready to take things further, maybe ever. So I thought pulling back was the best option for us both. Save us the heartbreak.

The softest sound reached my ears from the other side.

Sniffling, then outright sobbing.

My throat closed and my heart thudded.

“Vivian?” I called to her, attempting to open the door. It was locked. “What’s going on?”

“Don’t come in,” she snapped.

“I thought I heard you—”

“I said don’t come in! Just leave me alone.”

She sounded so distressingly small and upset that it made my stomach clench. “Do you need anything?”

“Go away, Jesse.”

“You know I can’t do that, Vivian. I need to make sure you’re alright.”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t *sound* fine.” I rattled the doorknob again. “Open the door, Vivian. I’m not playing around. I need visual confirmation that you’re—”

The door swung open so fast that the surrounding air rushed past me. Vivian stood before me, looking everywhere except in my eyes. Probably to hide the fact that she’d been crying even though it was written all over her face. The puffiness of her cheeks and the redness of her nose, the small beads of moisture caught in her eyelashes.

“There,” she snapped. “Happy?”

I tried to reach out, but she took a step back. “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Doesn’t look like nothing.”

“What do you care? You’ve been ignoring me for weeks.”

A pang of guilt bloomed in my chest. “I haven’t been ignoring you.”

“Bullshit.”

“I haven’t,” I insisted. “You’re all I can fucking think about.”

“Then why...” She shook her head. “I don’t understand. You’ve been avoiding me. Don’t you dare deny it.”

“I have been.”

“Why?”

“Because you scare me. In more ways than one.”

Vivian’s nose curled. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I’m scared of losing you,” I blurted out. “I’m scared of something happening to you. I’m scared of what I feel for you —”

“What you feel for me?” she echoed, so soft and confused and hopeful that it was suddenly hard for me to breathe. “What do you feel for me, Jesse?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “A lot of things. And what scares me is that I don’t know where this is going or if it’s going to go anywhere at all. I don’t want to make promises I can’t keep. And I’m scared you don’t feel the same way. I’m scared this isn’t going to work. I’m scared of hurting you. That’s why I’m keeping my distance. Because being with you... it’s too good to be true. And good things don’t happen to me, alright? The last time I allowed myself to feel what I feel...”

Vivian stroked my cheek, cool fingers grazing my chin. “I understand,” she said. “I’m scared, too. But please, don’t shut me out. That’s all I ask. I’ve missed you so much. There’s so much going on right now, and the only time I feel even remotely okay is when I’m with you. So please...” Vivian pressed against me, not an inch of space between us.

I caved like a house of cards.

I kissed her like it was the only thing I knew how to do. Her fingers combed through my hair as I circled her waist with my arms, pulling her against me. The sound of her soft moan was enough to make my heart seize. I didn’t want anything but this. I wanted to be selfish, even for just a little bit. Nothing else in the world mattered except the taste of her lips and the warmth of her skin.

There would be time to talk later.
For now, this was all we needed.

CHAPTER 25

It wasn't —by any means— some undying declaration of love, nor did it need to be. I understood Jesse from the depths of my core because his fears, his hopes, his hesitations were the same as mine. At this point, I'd give anything for the quiet comfort of his embrace and breathtaking kisses.

I guided him to my bed. I threaded my fingers between his and pulled him with me, sitting him down on the edge of the mattress before crawling into his lap. I straddled him and went straight back to kissing him, lips locked together in a perfect fit.

And he was gentle. So gentle and sweet in the way he stroked my back and cupped my cheek and sucked on my bottom lip. His large hands roamed freely, curious in their exploration, but not once was he rough with me. He handled me with care, like some precious work of art or fine crystal. It pleased me to no end that this strong, powerful man was nothing but tender when it came to me.

This man who'd saved me on more than one occasion. This man who'd put himself in harm's way for my sake. This man who was terse with others yet infinitely patient with me.

When he spoke, he spoke softly, a low murmur in my ear. Words an intimate rumble in my chest. When he looked at me, it was with nothing but adoration. Veneration. Borderline worship. His gaze had weight that lingered and traced over my form as I slowly undressed, peeling away clothes and discarding them to the floor.

He murmured sweet nothings against my skin, working his way down my neck to my collar bone to my chest. His warm breath tickled my skin, leaving goosebumps trailing behind him in his wake. And even when he held me close, it still didn't feel close enough.

I slipped my hands beneath his shirt and lifted it off and over his head, pressing against his chest to get him to lie down. He smiled up at me, almost in awe. He played with my hair, twirling my locks about his forefinger with an almost boyish bashfulness.

“You're the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere.”

“I mean it, angel.”

I leaned down and kissed his chest, working my way down to lick his abs. I slipped off his lap and knelt before him, pressing my lips to the bulge in the front of his pants. I hooked my fingers over his waistband and pulled them down, licking my lips as his cock sprang free. Jesse propped himself up on his elbows to watch as I teased his head with the tip of my tongue.

“You really don't have to,” he said.

“I want to,” I assured. “All those times you drove me crazy and made me beg... It's time you got a taste of your own medicine.”

His pupils were dark and wide. “My angel's turning out to be quite the devil.”

He grunted as I took him into my mouth. I hollowed my cheeks and sucked him down in earnest. No sooner did I start to swirl my tongue around to tease him relentlessly did I find his fingers in my hair, guiding me down the length of his shaft. I took him as deep as my throat would allow, but there was just too much of him to swallow. I stroked the remainder of his cock with my free hand, working in tandem with my mouth.

“That's my girl,” he cooed. “So fucking beautiful.”

I bobbed my head up and down, savoring the heat of his length on my tongue. It was fun watching him unravel, slowly but surely, with every pass.

“Slow down,” he warned, grasping my chin to pull me off. “It’s your turn.”

“I wasn’t finished with you yet.”

He helped me onto my feet, circling my waist with one arm. I stumbled into him with a light laugh.

“Lie down,” he said. “I need to go get a condom.”

“How do you want me?”

He leaned in close and whispered in my ear. “Surprise me.” The cheeky wink he gave after was the icing on the cake.

Jesse left briefly, but I wasn’t worried. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that he’d hurry back. A burning excitement filled me from head to toe, the anticipation enough to make me vibrate out of my skin. When he returned, he couldn’t help but smirk.

“Why are you still standing? Couldn’t figure it out?”

I tilted my chin up defiantly. “Didn’t you say something about wanting to fuck me up against a wall?”

He licked his lips. “Did I say that?”

“Don’t tell me it was an empty promise.”

Jesse walked into my space, confident in his advance. Every step he took forward, I mirrored and took one step back. We continued like this, eyes locked, until my back was pressed against the nearest wall.

“Is this really what you want?” he murmured against my cheek. He breathed me in slowly, strong hands sliding down my sides to settle on my hips. “Do you think you’ll be able to hold on?”

I circled his neck with my arms and kissed him deeply, tongue sweeping over his bottom lip. “I trust you.”

Without another word, he grabbed me by the thighs and hooked my legs around his waist, pressing into me slowly. He sheathed his cock within my walls, sliding in easily thanks to the hot arousal pooling between my legs. The angle set off a chain reaction, igniting sparks that arced from nerve to nerve, speeding all the way up my spine and into my skull where my thoughts swirled into one big explosion of color.

“Jesse,” I gasped his name into his mouth. “Oh, *yes*.”

“Feel good, angel?” he asked with a grunt, thrusting his hips against. The head of his cock swept past my sweet spot, making my core burn hotter and brighter with every pass.

“Yes, yes, *yes*. Right there, Jesse.”

“Love the sounds you make. So greedy for me.”

I dug my fingers into his muscular shoulders in search of stability. “Please, don’t stop. Fuck, you make me feel so good.”

“You’re getting so nice and tight around me. You must be pretty close.”

“I am. I really am. *Oh—*”

My walls fluttered around his hard cock as an orgasm rippled through me, a familiar warmth spreading through my body. Exhaustion took hold, sinking into my marrow. It was a good thing Jesse was strong enough for both of us, because I doubted I’d be able to hold on for much longer now that my bones were jelly.

I sighed, sated.

He kissed the corner of my mouth. “I’m not done playing with you, baby.”

Baby.

It was the first time he’d called me anything other than an angel. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t love it. It was sweet. It was sexy. It was just between us. He made me feel so safe and special that I was fairly certain I’d let him call me whatever he wanted and be fine with it.

Jesse carried me over to the bed and set me down. It was a wonderful feeling, being totally covered by his body. His kisses were gentler now. Sweeter. Like we had all the time in the world.

“Missed you,” he murmured against my cheek as he pressed back into me. His rhythm was a lot slower than before. Tender. Like he was telling me with his whole body just how much he cared. If he couldn’t quite put it to words, at least he could *show* me.

I ran my fingers through his hair, stroking the pad of my thumb across his cheek. “Missed you, too.”

When he pressed his forehead to mine, I closed my eyes, suddenly realizing just how in sync we were. Our breathing. The movement of our bodies. The soft caresses of exploratory touch. We moved as one unit, so in tune and on the same frequency that everything else in the world faded. It was just us, complete and full and so beautifully and wonderfully together.

I’d had a boyfriend or two in the past who tried to make love to me, as it were. But they were nothing compared to this. Nothing compared to Jesse. When I was with him, every question I had about the world suddenly had an answer. There was no right or wrong, just him and the safety of his arms. I felt nothing but an absolute oneness, a satisfying calm that I knew I’d never find anywhere else.

He was my one.

As easy as it would have been to spiral and worry about the future and what this all meant, I pushed the thoughts from my mind and focused solely on him. His smell, his taste, the way he always seemed to know where to touch me to drive me wild.

Jesse slipped a hand between us and rubbed his thumb over my clit, immediately sending me over the edge. I swallowed my scream of pleasure with a bruising kiss, one that left me dizzy and seeing stars.

“So nice and tight, baby,” he groaned. “You’re going to make me come.”

“Come for me,” I begged, voice barely a whisper. “I want to make you feel good. What do you need me to do?”

“Fuck, no, you’re perfect. Just— Can I go a bit harder?”

“Yes,” I breathed. “Please, Jesse, I want to feel you come.”

Now that he had my permission, Jesse’s pace quickened. His thrusts came faster, harder, the snap of his hips against mine ringing in my ear. He plunged into me, stretching me to my fullest. The drag of his cock inside me was punctuated with the wet slap of skin on skin and heavy panting. The mattress beneath us creaked in protest, but we didn’t care. He was too far gone, chasing the inevitable high.

He came with a shout, gasping into my hair as a shiver passed through him.

I drew mindless circles into his back with the tip of my finger, hooking my ankles together to lock him against me. I didn’t want him to go. I wanted to hold onto him forever. This strong, brave, powerful man was mine to protect, mine to keep. I wouldn’t have minded if the rest of the world melted away if it meant I could spend the rest of my life like this.

The world, unfortunately, didn’t work that way.

The sound of the elevator doors in the main living room reached my ears, followed by the shuffling of feet. Jesse and I looked at each other, alarmed. Someone was here, and they had literally caught us with our pants down.

“Dad?” Wally called from the entrance. “I’m here. You said you wanted to talk.”

“Shit,” Jesse hissed.

We immediately sprang into action, clumsily gathering our clothes and putting them on as quickly as we could. Wally appeared at the doorway, which Jesse and I mistakenly left open because we thought no one else would be making an appearance.

Wally looked to his father, then at me, then to the messy bed and tangled sheets.

“What—” He gawked at me, staring at my neck. “Is that a hickey?”

I clasped a hand over the spot in question. “N-no. Of course not.”

“What are you doing in Viv’s room?” Wally asked his father. “Why are you so out of breath?” Why—” Confusion twisted at his expression, followed by realization and rage. “Holy shit.”

Jesse put his hands up, as if taming a rabid animal. “Just let me explain, son—”

“Have you been fucking my ex-girlfriend?”

CHAPTER 26

There was no escaping his fury. Wally's cheeks were red, the vein in his temple threatening to burst out of his skull. Fists clenched, jaw tight, nostrils flared. My son was normally a well-tempered young man, but right now, he was understandably anything but.

"How could you do this?" he hissed.

"Wally, just calm down."

"Calm down? Don't you dare tell me to calm down! This is so messed up, I don't even know where to begin." Wally gestured in Vivian's general direction, unable to look her in the eye. "She's half your fucking age, Dad! What the hell are you thinking?"

I swallowed but found no reprieve for my dry throat. Our age difference had definitely crossed my mind on several occasions. It made me feel weird at first, but it quickly became obvious that Vivian was so much more than her age.

"We're both consenting adults," I argued. "It's what we both wanted."

"What about the fact that she's my ex-girlfriend? That she's my *friend*. Did it ever occur to you how uncomfortable that would make me feel? How... How *sick* that is?"

Vivian took a step forward, her brow knitted into a frown. "Wally, we never meant to hurt you. It just sort of happened."

"*Just sort of happened*," he echoed in disbelief. "What the hell, Viv? Did you not respect me enough to at least talk to me

first?”

“How was I supposed to bring something like that up?”

Wally shook his head. “How long has this been going on? How long have you two been doing shit behind my back?”

I glanced at Vivian. I had a feeling that any answer I gave would still piss my son off to no end. Our silence must have been answer enough because Wally threw his hands into the air and huffed.

“Fuck. This is my fault.”

Vivian took another step forward. “Please don’t say that, Wally.”

“But it is. I was the one who brought you here. I thought you’d be safe, but you wound up being preyed upon.”

I gritted my teeth. “I didn’t prey upon her,” I insisted.

“It was a mutual thing,” Vivian added.

“If that’s the case, Dad should have made arrangements for you to stay somewhere else,” Wally hissed. “You’re supposed to be keeping her safe, Dad. Isn’t that rule number one of being a bodyguard or something? I’m pretty sure you’re not supposed to fuck the client you’ve been charged to keep safe.”

“I need you to take a breath, son.”

He jabbed an accusatory finger at me. “What was the plan, huh? How long did you think this was going to last? Do you love her or something?”

I held my breath. I certainly cared for Vivian a great deal. Maybe I did love her, but this relationship was so new and our future too uncertain. We weren’t ready for that next step. Even if we were, Wally’s outburst only served as further proof that it wasn’t going to work out between Vivian and me. It was just too hard for him to accept, and I couldn’t even blame him for thinking this way.

“Vivian and I...” I started slowly, looking at her. “We have a connection.”

“Great,” Wally grumbled. “Just great. I hope your connection was fucking worth it.”

Vivian bit her bottom lip. “Wally, I know you’re upset, but —”

“But what, Viv? But what? What possible excuse do you have to justify this?” Wally ran his fingers through his hair. “Look, even though we broke up, you’re still my *friend*, Viv. And I expect my friends not to pull shit like sleeping with my forty-three-year-old father. That’s just...” His nose curled up in disgust. “What the fuck were you thinking? Did you think I’d never find out?”

Vivian didn’t answer.

Wally rubbed his hands over his face. “I can’t believe this. Not only are you unsupportive of my dreams, you just had to go and fuck my ex. Do you really hate me that much?”

“I don’t hate you, Wally,” I said.

“Really? Because these aren’t exactly the actions of someone you’re on good terms with. These aren’t the actions of a good father.”

“I don’t regret my time with Vivian,” I stated firmly. “Being with her is the best decision I’ve ever made, and I’m not going to apologize for that. Could I have handled the situation better? Yes. But what I have with Vivian... You’d never understand it, Wally.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Vivian give me the faintest of smiles. She reached out and took my hand, squeezing my fingers.

“I’m sorry you had to find out this way,” she whispered. “But I’m sure we can figure this out if we just sit down and talk.”

“No,” my son said flatly. “No, I’m... I’m done.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” Wally licked his lips and shook his head. “I found a place. An apartment. I’m going to move in with one of my classmates.”

“Son—”

“Don’t call me that. You don’t get to call me that.” His face screwed up in pain. “You’re the worst, Dad. The absolute worst. I get it now, why Mom left you.”

His words were a dagger through my heart. They shredded my lungs and left my ribcage hollow. The look in Wally’s eyes was one of pure disdain. My boy, the one who I loved and raised all these years, had transformed from my son to a resentful stranger. It wasn’t even a sudden transformation, but a gradual one, happening right in front of me. And now I was too late. I’d lost him.

“Don’t call me,” he said. “Don’t text me. Don’t try to find me. I want nothing to do with you, do you understand? And you can keep your fucking money. I’ll figure it out on my own. I don’t need you.”

The floor was crumbling beneath my feet. I was frozen in place, unable to move or utter a single word as Wally shoved right past me. He stormed out of the penthouse, and this time, I feared I’d truly never see him again. This was a nightmare.

Vivian peered at me, reaching up to caress my cheek. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. “He’ll be back. I promise.”

I could barely hear her over the rush of blood past my ears. I was exhausted. Drained. “I don’t think he will,” I mumbled as I sat on the edge of the bed.

The mattress dipped as Vivian took her place beside me, her thigh touching mine as she held my hand. “Don’t say that. I know Wally. He’ll be upset for a little while, but I’m sure he’ll come around.” Something in the way her sentence tapered off into nothing told me she didn’t believe her own words.

“I meant what I said. I don’t regret it.”

“Neither do I.” She frowned. “I’m sensing a *but* in there somewhere.”

I took a deep breath. “But Wally’s right. Being your bodyguard and your...”

“*Lover?*” she supplied, almost teasingly, but it didn’t sound like her heart was in it.

“Sure. Your lover.” I brushed a strand of her hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ear. “I can’t be both, Vivian.”

“So what do we do?” Her eyes welled up with tears, a sad smile ghosting across her lips. “You want to end this, don’t you.” A statement, not a question.

“I don’t *want* to, but it’s best. I can’t protect you properly otherwise. And even if I could...”

“Wally would never accept us being together.”

I nodded solemnly. “If it were anyone else, I’d choose you. I’d choose you a million times over. But Wally’s my son, and I can’t lose him. It’d tear me apart.”

“I understand,” she mumbled, bravely holding back her tears. “I don’t want to come between you two. I’d hate myself for it.”

I wrapped her in my arms and hugged her as tightly as I could, kissing her cheek and stroking her hair. It almost killed me to hear her sob against my chest, her whole body trembling as she tried to keep everything inside.

“I’ll call Theo,” I said softly. “I’ll have you transferred to his care temporarily until I can organize a new safe house and security detail for you. Shouldn’t take me more than a day.”

“Alright,” she replied meekly.

I studied her face, committing every last detail to memory before leaning in to kiss her. It was chaste and slow and heartbreaking. Because this wasn’t a kiss we’d ever shared before. This was our last.

A final goodbye.

When it ended, Vivian held onto me tight, burying her face in the crook of my neck. I wanted to be a selfish man. I wanted to keep her all to myself, screw the consequences. But I wasn’t a selfish man, despite how easy it would have been. I knew her through and through. If I kept her, she’d blame herself for my

fallout with Wally. The best thing I could do for her was let her go, no matter how painful it might be.

“In any other life,” I murmured against her ear, “it would have been you, angel.”

CHAPTER 27

The ride out to the suburbs was a tense one. Full of protocol, but more distressingly, an air of uncertainty. We both knew what was coming. After Jesse dropped me off in his friend's care, there was no telling when I'd see him again. *If* I'd ever see him again.

"They'll take good care of you," he said as he pulled into the cul-de-sac. It was a lovely area with nice big houses and manicured lawns and picturesque white picket fences. "I would have taken you to stay at my brother's since he's closer, but Theo's actually got the training. Plus, it'll be easier to hide you the further you are from the city."

I nodded absentmindedly. "Right."

"I'll send a replacement bodyguard to pick you up tomorrow morning. I'm getting the new safehouse ready for you as we speak. Shouldn't take too long to put together for you."

We pulled into the driveway of the Phillips' home. A lovely wrap-around porch had all manner of planters hanging from its railing, each of them hosting colorful flowers in full bloom. It was a lovely slice of normalcy despite all the turmoil boiling just beneath the surface of my skin.

We walked up the front steps of the house together, barely an inch between us yet worlds apart. Jesse wouldn't let me lift a finger, carrying my heavy duffle bag for me. He rang the doorbell, which chimed inside. It didn't take very long before we heard the shuffling of feet.

Theo opened the door, Ava standing just behind him with little Cassie in her arms and Cory at her hip.

“You made it,” Theo said pleasantly. “How was the drive?”

“Smooth,” was Jesse’s curt answer.

“Any tails?”

“No. Looped back four times just to be sure. We’re clear.”

Ava waved me inside. “Come on in, Vivian. I can show you to your room first, if you’d like.”

“Oh, thank you very much.” I turned to Jesse, carefully taking my bag from him. He was uncharacteristically stiff, his eyes dark and gloomy. “Thank you,” I mumbled. “For everything.”

Jesse simply nodded once, though I could tell he had so much more to say. What I wouldn’t give to hug him. But Theo and his family were watching, and I didn’t want to have this big emotional farewell with them here. It didn’t feel right when I turned on my heel to head inside.

Maybe that’s why I was so thankful when he reached out and took my hand, calling my name.

“Vivian, wait.”

I held my breath. “Yes?”

“If you need anything,” he said slowly. “Let me know.”

I was tempted to say that I needed *him*, but I didn’t want this to be any more awful than it already was. “I will,” I replied softly, giving his fingers one last squeeze before allowing Ava to show me inside.

The men spoke in hushed whispers at the front door while Ava guided me up the stairs and down the hall toward the guest bedroom. It was significantly cozier compared to my room in the penthouse. The walls were covered in various art pieces and the shelves were filled with all sorts of children’s books.

“I hope you’ll be comfy here,” Ava said, gesturing to the space. “The bathroom’s just across the hall, and Theo and I are

right next door if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I really appreciate it. I hope I’m not being too much of an inconvenience.”

Ava waved a hand dismissively. “Nonsense. We’re happy to have you.”

“I’m just worried about your kids. Jesse said I’d be safe here, but if—”

“Trust me, Theo made sure to turn this place into a fortress before Cassie was born. There’s no way anybody will find you here. You can rest easy.”

I nodded slowly. “A fortress, huh?”

Ava beamed with pride. “Yes. All the windows are tinted so no one can see in. They’re also bullet resistant. The doors are reinforced with steel locks, there are motion sensors around the perimeter of the property, and we’ve got an entire network of security cameras to alert us of an unexpected approach.”

“Oh, wow. No offense, but that feels a little...”

“Overboard? Yeah. I told him as much, but there’s no stopping my husband once he’s put his mind to something.” She winked at me. “Let’s just say we learned from experience.”

I was curious and wanted to ask her what she meant by that, but Cory tugged on his stepmother’s sleeve. “Can I show Vivian my art room?” he asked.

“She might be a little tired. We should let her get settled.”

I smiled as wide as I could. “I wouldn’t mind seeing your art room.”

Cory turned with a spring in his step. “Right this way!”

He led me to another room, this one far more spacious and filled to the brim with art supplies. Several easels with canvases on them sat around the room, a number of the projects mid-completion. There were also several award

plaques, ribbons, and trophies against one wall, all with Cory's name on them.

"Are these yours?" I asked, fascinated.

The boy nodded, chest puffed out with pride. "It helps that Ava's an art teacher. She knows all sorts of contests that I can enter."

Ava smiled sweetly, patting her baby girl gingerly on the back as she stirred. "Yes, but you're only allowed to enter them as long as you don't let your other grades slip. That's the agreement we came up with with Dad."

Cory shrugged, leaning toward me to whisper, "I'm not doing so great in math."

"I can help you with that," I offered. "I'm actually really good at math."

"Really? Maybe after supper? I've got two whole pages to finish. It's due tomorrow."

I laughed. "Sure. I'll see what I can do."

Ava held a hand out to her stepson. "Speaking of supper, why don't you wash up. We're having tuna casserole. I hope you like it."

"Love it, actually. It's one of my favorites."

With a twinkle in her eye, she said, "I knew I liked you."



Dinner was, for the most part, fantastic. It was surprisingly easy being here. Ava was so warm and welcoming that I'd sometimes forget why I was here to begin with. Theo's dad jokes were as terribly amusing as they could get. Cassie was adorable, seated in her highchair with a bright green bib around her neck in the shape of a frog. And Cory was a little chatterbox—not that I minded in the slightest—talking about how he was sure his science teacher was a vampire.

“He’s just so pale,” Cory insisted. “And he always has the blinds in his class closed.”

“Isn’t it because his classroom’s on the east side of the building?” Theo asked. “And your science class is in the morning, so it’s probably pretty bright.”

“But what about that one time Emilio had some garlic bread for lunch and Mr. Nostra freaked out?”

Ava hummed. “Mr. Nostra has an allergy to garlic, sweetie. That doesn’t mean he’s a vampire.”

“What about his pointy teeth? How do you explain that?”

I shrugged as I took a bite of tuna casserole. “Maybe he can’t afford a good dentist.”

“Hm, good point. Back to the drawing board.”

Their happy chatter was a welcome change to my ears. I’d been so cooped up in the penthouse that I’d almost forgotten what regular conversation sounded like. It was nice and warm here. Full of love and life. A part of me was glad for the change in scenery.

But the other part of me desperately wished that I could go back.

I sat at the dinner table, poking at a bit of my food, struggling not to think about Jesse all alone at home. Without Wally or me there, he had no one; he was isolated in his penthouse way up high.

My mind wandered.

What was he doing right now? Was he eating supper, too, or had he gone back to deliberately drowning himself in his work? Was he thinking about me as much as I was thinking about him?

I was about to take another bite of my meal when my stomach suddenly churned. I swallowed hard to fight the gagging sensation at the back of my throat, covering my mouth just in time to avoid making a scene. I wasn’t sure what was happening. Out of nowhere, my portion of tuna casserole smelled absolutely horrendous to me.

“Excuse me,” I muttered quickly, leaving the table. I prayed nobody noticed my odd behavior.

I ran to the nearest bathroom and locked myself inside, making it to the toilet just in time to hurl the contents of my stomach. The tile beneath my knees was cold and hard, and the porcelain of the toilet bowl was just as unforgiving. A few more dry heaves and I was exhausted, shivering from the exertion of being sick.

I frowned as I wiped my forearm across my sweaty brow. It was really hot in here. Was I getting sick? Did I catch the flu or something?

Eventually, I found the strength to pull myself up, gripping the edge of the bathroom counter for support. I studied my reflection in the mirror, unsure why I was so flushed. I felt my forehead. I didn't have a fever, yet my skin was sensitive and achy. What was going on? Was the tuna casserole bad? None of the Phillips family seemed to be having any of the same reactions.

And then it hit me.

I'd been feeling pretty bloated. That combined with my sudden aversion to one of my favorite foods... No, it couldn't be.

Could it?

I rummaged through the bathroom drawers. I felt bad for snooping, but I needed to know. Curiosity would eat me alive otherwise. I found what I was looking for at the very back of the drawer, a small box of pregnancy tests, still in their wrappers. I debated asking Ava for permission before using one, but I figured that since she had a newborn, the chances that she'd need these right away were slim.

I shakily ripped the test out of its packaging and headed to the toilet, sitting down with a heavy sigh. There was no way I was pregnant. Jesse and I had been careful. We always used protection. Surely, I was just being paranoid.

CHAPTER 28

I was aware of the disproportion. All this space, yet I was the only here.

Wally hadn't returned any of my calls or texts, I wasn't in contact with Vivian anymore, and the prospect of going to the office to work displeased me. I didn't feel like putting on airs, dealing with employees, running into clients. I didn't want to deal with anyone that wasn't my son or Vivian, and they were the only people I couldn't reach at the moment. Maybe ever again.

I tried slipping back into my usual routine, the one I followed religiously before Vivian waltzed into my life. A hearty breakfast. Rigorous workout. A hot shower. Then immediately answering urgent emails and approving security plans on my laptop.

It should have felt good to get back in the rhythm of things. I was good at this, the whole keeping to schedule and getting to the grind.

Yet I couldn't shake the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. Everything was just so bland and repetitive to the point of boredom. To make matters worse, the penthouse was too fucking quiet.

No matter what I did, I couldn't distract myself from her absence. I felt like there was a hole inside me, one I couldn't fill with menial tasks or other meaningless distractions. I couldn't count the number of times I turned expecting to see Vivian, only to find that she wasn't there.

I knew that getting involved was going to be messy. I should have known that I'd get burned again.

Except this time, it was my own doing. I really had no one to blame but myself.

The guest bedroom still smelled like her, the faint trace of vanilla lingering on the sheets and in the air. I stared at her empty bed, remembering the sound of her lovely laugh or the brilliance of her smile. It made my chest hurt, knowing I could no longer experience it in person.

With a heavy sigh, I wandered into the kitchen for something to snack on. Not because I was hungry, just because I was bored and needed something to keep me occupied.

Had I really stooped to the level of stress eating? Vivian would laugh if she knew.

"Why is there so much damn tofu?" I grumbled bitterly, slamming the fridge door closed.

I didn't like this. Any of it. Feeling listless... I wasn't used to it. I was the kind of man who had a plan and stuck to it. Followed and completed tasks step-by-step. Now I had nothing to do and I didn't know what to do with myself. It gave me way too much time to think, and being alone with my thoughts was proving to be a challenge.

My son wasn't talking to me.

I couldn't be with the woman of my dreams.

When did everything fall apart?

I nearly jumped out of my skin when my phone buzzed. Was it Wally? Was it Vivian?

Nope. Just Theo.

"Hello?" I greeted, gruffer than I intended.

He chuckled. "Did you just wake up or something? You sound like death."

"I'm fine. Anything to report?"

“All’s clear. Lance just messaged me. He’ll be arriving shortly to transfer Vivian to Ridge Point.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Lance was one of my more veteran bodyguards. He understood the ins and outs of the job, and most importantly, he was dedicated. If I couldn’t protect Vivian myself, at least I knew she was in good hands.

“Keep me posted,” I said.

“Ridge Point, huh?”

“Yes.” I squinted, unappreciative of his questioning tone. “What of it?”

“Oh, nothing. We normally reserve Ridge Point for our high rollers.”

“It was the only safehouse available on short notice.”

“Is that so? What about Bayview? It’s been sitting idle for months.”

“There’s too much traffic,” I argued. “It’d be a nightmare getting out of the area if she needed to make a quick escape.”

“Mm-hmm.”

I huffed. “What? You questioning my judgement?”

“Not at all. You’re the boss, you call the shots.”

“Damn straight.” Then, after a deep breath, “How is she?”

“Good,” he answered simply.

“That’s it?”

“Do you want a full medical and psychological report?” he asked, words dripping with sarcasm.

“Don’t be a dick.”

Theo chuckled. “Man, you’ve got it bad.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Bullshit.”

“You know what? Forget I asked.”

“Vivian’s good,” Theo said quickly. “She was feeling a bit ill this morning, but—”

“Ill? What’s wrong? Do we need to send the on-call doctor?”

“No, nothing like that. Dinner just didn’t sit well with her, that’s all. I love my wife very much, but sometimes her cooking can be a bit...” Theo made a sound, indicating his uncertainty. “Ava gave her a Tums. She’s much better.”

“Good, good.”

“What’s going on between you two?”

I stiffened. “Nothing.”

“How long have we known each other?”

“Too fucking long.”

“So you should know by now that I know when you’re lying.”

I smacked my lips, relenting. He was right. Theo was one of the few people in the whole world who could read me.

“I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, Theo.”

“That’s a first.”

“It just... It happened so fast. I didn’t mean for it to, but...”

“Have you told her how you feel?”

“What’s the point? We can’t be together.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Well, for one, she’s young. Really young. I don’t think she wants to settle down with someone my age.”

Theo outright laughed. “You’re so stupid.”

“Shut the fuck up. I’m being serious, man. She deserves to be with someone who isn’t going to weigh her down.”

“Jesse, I think I’m uniquely qualified to tell you not to worry about it. Trust me. The sooner you tell her how you feel, the better.”

“Believe me, I would if things weren’t so complicated.”

“What’s the problem?”

“My son. Vivian and Wally used to date. He found out about us yesterday.”

“And judging by your tone, I bet it went swimmingly.”

“Oh, yes,” I mumbled dryly. “So great. I don’t suppose you have any advice about seeing my son’s ex-girlfriend, do you?”

“No, sorry. You’ll have to figure that one out by yourself.”

“Thought so.” I ran a hand through my hair. “Keep me posted on the transfer. Let me know if she needs anything.”

“Will do, boss. Hang in there.”

I ended the call, tossing my phone onto the kitchen island. I couldn’t tell Vivian how I felt. Things weren’t that simple.

The truth of the matter was that I didn’t do things in halves. When I committed to something —*someone*— I committed wholeheartedly. Marriage. Kids. The whole nine yards. I could imagine her with a ring on her finger, pattering around a house that I bought for her to live comfortably. Maybe a bun in the oven.

But I didn’t know if I had the strength to do it all over again. I thought I’d found happiness with Melissa. I gave everything I could and that still wasn’t enough. I wasn’t as naive as I used to be; I wouldn’t let rose-tinted glasses skew reality anymore. What if things between Vivian and me fell apart like they did with Melissa?

And even if Wally were on board with our relationship, how would it work? Vivian was still in college. She had goals and aspirations. Her life was just beginning. I doubted she wanted to get married so young. I doubted she wanted children. She certainly never made any mention of it. What if we wanted different things? What if we got together and she eventually came to resent me for it?

I couldn’t stand the thought.

Vivian was beautiful. Intelligent. Funny and sweet and all things good. I was sure she'd eventually move on. Find someone more her speed, more aligned with her life goals. Vivian would settle down when she was ready, start a family with someone she could grow old with.

I convinced myself that it was better this way.

It had to be.

CHAPTER 29

The new safehouse was nice. Lance, my new bodyguard, was nice, too. It was all very nice.

But I was fucking miserable without Jesse. I missed him. Found myself aching for him. I couldn't count the number of times I caught myself thinking about him throughout the day.

I was in bed, curled up in a ball beneath the fine goose down duvet. I was surrounded by a mountain of fluffy pillows, smooth silk sheets gliding against my skin. My little nest was the only place I felt stable, safe. Lance would check on me every now and then, knocking on my door to see if I needed anything, but I always sent him away.

What I needed was to tell Jesse I was pregnant.

What I needed was for Jesse to tell me everything was going to be okay.

I'd consider Lance a miracle worker if he could get me both those things.

Gently rubbing my stomach, I wondered how my little one was doing. I was overwhelmed at first. I was being hunted by a cartel, for goodness' sake. The last thing I wanted was to drag an unborn child into the mix. The mental imagery of Chicago's criminal underbelly and cute baby showers clashed inside my brain. They were as opposite as opposites could get.

Yet the idea of being with child excited me. I was going to be a mother. There was life within me, a hopeful beacon of light despite the turmoil of my situation. The possibilities were endless. Thoughts of picking out schools and teaching them

how to ride their first bike and reading them bedtime stories every night brought a smile to my face.

I was sure I'd be a good mother. I learned by example exactly what *not* to do. My memories of my own mother were foggy, but what little I could recall wasn't the greatest. I wasn't addicted to anything like she'd been. I had an education. I was independent. I had a good head on my shoulders. As far as I was concerned, I was already leagues above her in the parenting department.

I'd always loved children, too. Growing up in different foster homes, I came across countless kids going through the same things I was. We looked out for each other. We understood the struggle of trying to fit in. I always paid particular attention to the younger ones, kids who were new to the system and afraid to open up. I did what I could to take care of them, help them along. If I could look out for them, I was sure I could look out for a baby of my own.

But not with the Azure Cartel keeping me on my toes.

I needed to deal with them as soon as possible. As long as they were still hunting me, that meant my baby was in danger, too. Whether it was self-perseverance or an innate motherly instinct, I threw my covers off and got to work. Enough was enough. They were going down.

I got out of bed and shifted through the contents of my duffle bag, retrieving the USB I'd swiped from Blue Cloud Financial weeks ago. I'd hidden it within the inner lining of the bag for safe keeping, afraid to lose it.

No progress had been made in terms of cracking open the encrypted files. I didn't know the first thing about computer programming, and I didn't come up with anything useful despite my extensive online research.

No. What I needed was a professional. Someone who knew what they were doing.

But who?

I rubbed my temples, fending off the impending headache I sensed coming. "If only I knew someone who worked with

computers for a living..." I muttered to myself.

And then I remembered.

Devin White. Jesse's brother. Wasn't he the head of cybersecurity at Pegasus Star? It hadn't even occurred to me that maybe decrypting sensitive files like these would be right up his alley. If I reached out to him, would he be able to help me? If we cracked open these files and sent them to the police, maybe I'd finally start to gain some traction against the cartel.

It was worth a shot.

I exited my room and found Lance in the living room, seated on the black leather couch. The TV was turned onto the news channel, volume on its lowest setting. He wasn't actively watching, instead scrolling through the news feed on his phone.

If I had to venture a guess, Lance was approximately ten to fifteen years younger than Jesse. Just as serious, but not as broad or commanding. He was a capable man, but I didn't get the same sense of confidence from him than I did with Jesse. Lance was a yes man, not the man being said yes to.

He noticed me out of the corner of his eye and stood, pocketing his phone. "Miss Jones. Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Um, yes. I was wondering if you could get a phone number for me."

Lance arched a brow. "Of course. Who are you hoping to reach?"

"Devin White."

He tilted his head, clearly confused by my request. "The boss' brother?"

I nodded. "Yes, that's him."

"I guess I could get you his number, but may I ask what this is pertaining to?"

I held my breath. Lance would have a field day if he knew I was in possession of proof of the cartel's illegal money

laundering scheme. Once I had access to the files, I'd be putting myself in danger. I said as calmly as possible, "I was just having some issues with my laptop. Thought he could help me."

"Oh, sure," he said, buying into my lie. "I'll write it down for you."

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

The second he gave me the number, I hurried back to my room and locked myself inside. That worked way better than I thought it would. A part of me felt bad for tricking him, but I figured there were more important matters to deal with. Hopefully Lance would understand.

I called the number he gave me but was immediately put through to a generic voicemail message. I tried a second and third time, only to have the same thing happen. Did I have the right number? Or was Devin out of the office?

I tried once more. This time, he answered on the first ring tone.

"This is a private number," he snapped gruffly.

"Devin? This is Vivian Jones. Do you remember me?"

"I remember you. You're Jesse's girl."

My heart skipped a beat. "Oh, uh... I mean, we weren't—"

"You were under his protection, right?"

I cleared my throat. "Yes. Yes, that's me."

"What do you want?"

I almost scoffed, indignant. They may have been related, but it was clear Jesse and Devin adopted an entirely different set of manners. "I'm calling to ask a favor of you," I said, getting straight to the point. "I have some files I need decrypted. Is that something you'd be able to do?"

Devin snorted. "Child's play."

"Does that mean you'll do it?"

"Didn't say that."

I groaned. “Devin, please. I know you’re probably a really busy man, but this is important. A matter of life and death.”

“I work in security. *Everything’s* a matter of life and death. What’s in it for me?”

My mind blanked. “What’s in it for you? I don’t know.”

“You called me on my day off asking me to do work, but you don’t have anything to offer in return?”

“How about a job well done and a pat on the back.”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Wait!” I exclaimed. “Please, wait. I don’t know who else to ask. You might be my only hope.” I unconsciously placed a hand over my stomach. “Please.”

After a long silence, Devin finally sighed. “Fine. Give me your email address. I’m going to send you a link that’ll give you access to a shell that’ll give me access to your laptop. I’ll be able to see the files in question.”

“Can’t I just send them to you in an attachment?”

Devin made a sound that was half-way between a laugh and a choke. “Absolutely not. That wouldn’t be secure in the slightest. If these files are sensitive, we can’t risk leaving a trail. Got it? Or do you need me to explain again?”

I huffed. It was nice to know that Jesse’s cockiness wasn’t *this* bad. “No, I’ve got it. How long do you think this is going to take?”

“Depends.”

“On?”

“A number of things. How many files, the kind of encryption language that was used, the size of the files, and so on. Why? Are you in a particular hurry?”

“Yes, actually. I was hoping you could get them done in a couple of hours.”

“This isn’t the movies. I don’t just type random things into my keyboard and *boom*. Hacked. I might need a day—”

“That’s not so bad.”

“—to a month.”

“A month?” I gasped. “I don’t have a month.”

“Look, you’re just going to have to be patient. It’s the way these sorts of things work, alright?”

I sighed. I didn’t have a choice in the matter. Devin was the only one I could turn to. “Alright,” I said. “But if you do manage to break through the encryption—”

“*When,*” he corrected.

“Yes. When you do, can you send the information inside to someone for me?”

“Sure. Who?”

“Detective Anderson Monroe with the Chicago PD,” I said. “He’ll know what to do.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“No, that’s—”

“Got it.” He hung up before I could finish my sentence.

“What a dick.”

A weight lifted off my shoulders. It wasn’t progress in leaps and bounds, but at least I was getting somewhere. If anything happened to me, Devin would deliver on his promise to send the account files to the cops.

I returned to bed, sitting with my back against the headboard with my knees pulled up to my chest. I was tempted to go back to sleep —my bouts of morning sickness really took it out of me— but I was also tempted to order something to eat. I had the weirdest craving for banana peppers and vanilla ice cream.

Before I could decide to indulge my peckishness, my phone rang. I checked the screen only to find that it was from an unknown caller.

“Hello?” I answered hesitantly.

“Vivian!” a woman cried on the other line.

A chill shot through me, chilling my blood and leaving goosebumps crawling up and down my skin. I'd know that voice anywhere.

"Molly?" I gasped, sitting up straight. "Molly! Where are you? Are you okay? I've been worried sick about you. Tell me where you are and I'll come get you—"

"Listen to me!" she shrieked. "Whatever you do, don't listen to them! It's a trap. Don'—" Molly wailed as she was silenced. It sounded like she was being gagged with something.

My heart was racing. I couldn't believe it. After all this time, Molly was alive!

"Molly? Molly, talk to me!"

"I know you have copies of the files," a man's voice intoned. He sounded familiar, too, but I couldn't quite place him past the ringing in my ears. "Listen to me very carefully, Miss Jones. I'm going to offer you a deal. Bring me that USB you stole, and, in exchange, I'll give you your friend."

Fire replaced the ice in my veins as I seethed. "You son of a bitch. Just let her go!"

"I won't hesitate to kill her here and now. Is that really what you want?" When I didn't answer, the man on the phone chuckled. "That's what I thought. I'll text you an address. Meet me there. Come alone. And if you go to the police, I'll —"

"Yeah, yeah, you'll kill her," I said fearlessly. "Got it."

The man hummed. "You have one hour. Don't keep me waiting."

My hands shook violently as I struggled to gain control over my breathing. My heart was erratic, beating so hard and so fast I thought it was going to pop straight out of my chest. I inhaled through my nose and concentrated on the facts.

Molly was alive. Her captor wanted me to bring the USB. I had one hour to meet him at his specified location. If I didn't comply, I might lose Molly.

My phone pinged, alerting me to a text from the same unknown number that called, citing the address to a restaurant downtown.

The tiny voice in the back of my head told me it was a trap. Molly told me so herself. But what other choice did I have? The smart thing to do would be to go to the police, but I wasn't going to risk Molly's safety. I only had an hour and dwelling on the best course of action would waste what little time I'd been granted.

Now was the time to act.

And the first thing I needed to figure out was how to get past Lance.

CHAPTER 30

I may or may not have camped out on the couch watching *Jeopardy* all day in lieu of work. I didn't even like the show, probably because I was terrible at trivia games. I watched regardless because it reminded me of her. It never ceased to amaze me what weird and obscure facts she could pull out the top of her head. Watching made it feel like she was still here.

I must have dozed off at some point because I awoke with a start at the sound of the elevator door sliding open. At first, I thought it was an intruder. Instead, it was Wally.

I sprang out of my seat. "Wally? What are you— I mean, I'm glad to see you. I need to talk to you about—"

Wally brushed right past me, headed toward his room. "I have nothing to say to you."

I followed, determined to get him to listen. "That's fine. You don't have to say anything, but please *listen*."

"No. I'm only here to get my things. Save your breath."

He slammed his door and nearly clipped off my nose. I pressed on. "I'm sorry. I'm really truly sorry, alright? Vivian and me... I didn't plan on anything happening. It just sort of did."

All I could hear inside his room was shuffling and rummaging through drawers. I spoke a little louder to make sure I got through.

“I care about her, Wally. A lot. And fuck! I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but I haven’t felt this way about anyone in a really long time. Vivian’s... special.”

“I’m *not* listening,” my son shouted.

“I didn’t want you to find out the way you did. I swear, it was never my intention to hurt you.”

He yanked the door open furiously. “Hurt me? Do you have any idea how screwed up this all is? What the fuck did you think was going to happen, Dad? Were you going to sit me down at a family dinner and let me know that you’ve been screwing my ex behind my back and expect me to be okay with that?”

“No, that’s not—”

“Vivian’s still my friend, alright? I brought her to you because I thought she’d be safe.”

“You make me sound like a fucking predator.”

“I mean, she *is* half your age.”

“Don’t you fucking go there,” I hissed. “This was something that we both wanted. I didn’t mean to fall in love with her, alright? But I did and I don’t regret it. I want to keep her safe just as much as you do, so don’t—”

“You’re in love with her?” The question was deafening.

The words fell out of my mouth before I had a chance to think, but they rang true. I was in love with Vivian. I loved her more than I ever thought possible.

I nodded slowly. “I love her.”

Wally pressed his lips into a thin line. “And does she love you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where is she?”

“I sent her away. She’s at a different location with another bodyguard.”

“Why?”

“Because when we saw how upset you were, we decided we weren’t going to work.”

My son shifted his weight from foot to foot, anxiously crossing his arms over his chest. “You sent her away because of *me*?”

“She didn’t want to get in the way of family. And I wasn’t going to risk losing you, so...” I rubbed a hand over my face. I was weary to the bone. “So I sent her away. Because you’re the most important person in my life, Wally. I know I haven’t done a very good job of making that known, but you are. You’re my son. And if my being with Vivian makes you that upset, then I won’t see her anymore.”

Wally frowned. “But you love her.”

“Yes. But I love you, too.”

My son stood there for a long time, studying me from head to toe. He searched my face for something. A crack in my resolve, perhaps. Or maybe a hint that I might be lying, which I wasn’t.

“Does she make you happy?” he asked after a while.

“Yes,” I answered without hesitation. “Happier than I’ve been in a very long time. And it kills me that she isn’t here. But if you never want me to see her again—”

“No, don’t...” Wally sighed heavily. “Don’t do that.” He leaned against the door frame, glaring at his shoes. “I just... I thought you were just screwing around. I didn’t know you loved her.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it does, Dad.” He looked me in the eye, unwavering. “I reacted the way I did because...it was a shock, alright? I thought maybe you were mad at me about the whole culinary school thing, and I thought you were trying to get back at me by sleeping with Vivian.”

“I would never do something like that, Wally.”

“I know, I know. It sounds stupid in hindsight. It’s just what I was thinking.”

“What are you saying, son?”

“If Vivian really makes you happy and you really do love her, I don’t want you to *not* see her for my sake. I mean, it still kind of weirds me out. Really weirds me out.”

“Okay,” I said quickly, cutting him off. “I get it.”

Wally shook his head. “I’ve never heard you talk about anyone like the way you do Vivian. Not even Mom. I can see now how much you care. It’s... I’m just going to need some time to get used to it, I guess.”

“Thank you,” I whispered. “I mean it, Wally. Thank you.”

He chewed on the inside of his cheek. “I’m still moving out.”

“Oh. I see.” I took a deep breath. “Well, I’m... I’m proud of you. It’s a big change.”

He shrugged a shoulder. “I figured it was about time. Spread my wings, or whatever the clichéd saying is.”

“If you need anything, please let me know. If you need help with the move, I can always outsource my guys at the firm.”

Wally chuckled lightly. “I might take you up on that, actually.”

I swallowed. “Listen, about culinary school—”

“We don’t have to talk about it.”

“No, I think we should. I’ve been giving it a lot of thought. If it really means that much to you, then I’ll support your decision.”

A smile crept onto his lips. “Seriously? What about medical school?”

“Something to fall back on, if need be, but I doubt you’ll need to.” I smiled at my son. “You’re a smart kid. Smarter than I give you credit for.”

“Gee, thanks,” he replied dryly.

“What I mean is you’ll land on your feet. No matter what you end up doing with your life, I know you’ll give it your all. I know you’ll make me proud—”

Wally lunged toward me, throwing his arms around me to pull me into a tight hug. I laughed softly, patting him on the back. I couldn’t remember the last time we’d hugged like that.

“Fuck, when did you get so tall?” I muttered, ruffling his hair.

“I’ve always been this tall. Maybe you’re shrinking in your old age.”

“Watch it, kid.”

When he let go, he took a step back and said, “Thanks, Dad. I promise to work hard. This isn’t some throw away thing. I really want to be a chef.”

I nodded. “I know. You’ll do great. You have my blessing, not that you need it. I’m sure you would have gone regardless of my opinion.”

“True, but it means a lot.”

“Do you still have those pamphlets? I’d love to take a look. Unless you’ve already got a school in mind?”

“I’ve still got them. My heart’s kind of set on this school in London.”

“England?”

“Ontario, Canada.”

“Ah. When do you think you’ll go?”

“Not until the next school year, I think. I’ve only got a few more months here. I might as well finish my undergrad.”

I nodded. “Very sensible. I approve.”

Wally rolled his eyes. “Listen, I haven’t eaten yet today. I know you don’t do junk food, but there’s this artisanal pizza place that I’ve been dying to try. Feel like grabbing a bite with me before I have to pack?”

I patted him on the shoulder. “You know what? Sure. Sounds good. Let me just grab my coat. Now, what exactly makes a pizza *artisanal*?”

“Oh, gosh. A number of things. How it’s made, the types of ingredients...”

“Sounds like a ploy to charge customers more.”

“Also that.”

We started toward the elevator when my phone started to ring. I was tempted to ignore it and spend some quality time with my son. Our relationship was far from fully repaired, but this was a step in the right direction. We could heal from this. Learn from it. Maybe start to see things eye to eye.

I answered anyways, only because I noticed Lance’s caller ID pop up on screen. He wasn’t due to make his check-in call for another hour, and he was never one to call just for the hell of making conversation. Something must have happened.

I answered quickly, concern rising into my throat. “Talk to me.”

“—slipped me somethin’,” Lance said, words slurred.

“What? Is everything alright?”

“Oh, fuck,” he blurted. “What the fuck did she give me?”

“Do you mean Vivian? What happened? Is she okay?”

“She’s... gone, Jesse. I, um, can’t find her anywhere.”

“What do mean she’s gone?”

“She, uh, made me some tea,” he mumbled. “Next thing I know I’m wakin’ up on the floor and—”

“I’ll be right there,” I said, hanging up. I looked at Wally and said, “I’m sorry, but I have to go. Can I get a rain check on that pizza?”

“Sure, I understand. Need me to come with?”

“No, I think it’s better if you stay here. I’ll take care of her, don’t worry.”

“Be careful, Dad.”

I nodded. He didn't have to tell me twice.

CHAPTER 31

All I had to do was wait for Lance to conk out before I swiped his car keys and made for the door, pulling out of the driveway with ease. Did I feel bad about slipping him enough sleep aids to tranquilize a horse? Of course. Was I worried that it would be enough to kill him? Not at all. I made sure to double check my math before slipping the medication into his tea, which I offered him politely as a kind gesture. I'd apologize once this whole ordeal was over and done with.

I followed the navigation app on my phone to the exact location Molly's kidnapper requested. Much to my surprise, it led me straight to a busy restaurant, which was a relief. I thought for sure he'd want me to go to some abandoned warehouse or some other textbook villain hideout location.

There were tons of people inside, plus a handful of waitstaff. If anything went sideways, at least there'd be plenty of witnesses to call 9-1-1. A part of me did wonder why he'd choose somewhere so public. Maybe he didn't want to make a scene. Maybe all he wanted was the USB in exchange for Molly, no funny business.

Either that, or he was trying to lull me into a false sense of security. I proceeded with caution.

I walked up to the hostess standing behind her podium. Before I could even open my mouth, she smiled and said, "Welcome, Miss Jones. We've been expecting you. Right this way, please."

She led me to a table near the back of the restaurant where it was quieter. Not quite closed off but definitely designed for the fancier guests. We reached a booth in the far back corner where a man was already seated, his back to me.

I recognized the cane next to him, leaning against the table. I slid into the booth across from Alistair McCloud, staring him down.

“Where is she?” I demanded through my disbelief. I couldn’t believe the kindly old man was a criminal mastermind.

Alistair casually flipped through the pages of the menu, unperturbed. “She’s somewhere safe.”

“I’m not here to play games,” I snapped. “Release Molly. I’m the one you’re really after.”

“Oh, I know. We realized very early on that she didn’t know what she stumbled across. Not very bright, that friend of yours.” He held his palm open expectantly. “Hand it over.”

I remained perfectly still, poised and ready to react. On the surface, I was calm. I refused to show him just how rattled I was. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he’d gotten what he wanted.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Not until you let Molly go.”

“I have the patience of a saint, dear. I’ll wait until you feel ready to give me the USB.”

“What’s stopping you from taking it and offing Molly and me right after?”

His nostrils flared. “It brings me no pleasure to do any of this. I’m trying to *help* you.”

“Help me?” I scoffed. “You’ve got a pretty fucked up definition of *help*.”

“You’re in over your head, Vivian. The Azure Cartel wanted to kill both of you on sight. If it weren’t for me and my intervention, Molly would be rotting at the bottom of the bay by now. I convinced them to keep her locked away, but their

patience has worn thin. Give me the damn USB and I might be able to convince them to let the two of you go.”

I shook my head in disbelief. “I can’t believe I used to look up to you. Did you know you were my role model? How did you even get involved with all this mess?”

The old man stared past me, appearing lost in thought. “Back when I was still new to the world of investing and my firm was but a business venture, back when Blue Cloud Financial was a name no one had ever heard of, I was struggling to get clients. After all, who wanted to invest with an underdog with next to no track record?”

“A member of the cartel approached me. He said he’d happily give me a large cut of every investment I purchased on their behalf. It was a win-win. They got to launder their money, and I got a healthy paycheck I could then use to build my empire.” He shifted in the booth as he continued.

“I refused at first. I wasn’t a criminal. I didn’t want to stoop to such horrid tactics. But I can’t stress this enough, Vivian. Being in business for yourself is hard. Very few of us actually make it. You don’t get to the top without a little help. I brushed the cartel off as long as I could, but by the end of my first year in business, I was *this* close to losing it all.”

“You were desperate,” I realized aloud.

McCloud nodded. “That’s putting it mildly. I gave everything I had to build the firm. Every penny I had, I stood to lose. So I took them up on the offer. As Blue Cloud Financial grew, so did the amount and number of their investments. Naturally, I had to do it under the name of a shell corporation. How you managed to stumble upon their account records is beyond me.”

I shook my head in dismay. “You’ve been working with them all this time?”

“I’m afraid so, dear.”

“Why not go to the police? Couldn’t they help you? Maybe they’d give you a lighter sentence if you turned the cartel in.”

“A lighter sentence is still a sentence. I’d rather not risk jail time at all.”

“Don’t you feel bad about what you’re doing? You’re helping a group of people who hurt others for a living. Don’t you feel guilty?”

“I’ve made my peace with it. Because of them, I’ve led a very successful life. I’ve never wanted for anything and neither has my family.”

“At the cost of your soul.”

McCloud rolled his eyes. “Spare me the speech. You’d think the same thing if you were in my shoes.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I’m a good person.”

“Everyone’s the hero of their own story. I bet if I offered you a sizable sum of money to stay quiet, you’d take it.” He reached into the inside pocket of his suit jacket and pulled out a checkbook and pen. “Let’s see... How much do you want, Vivian? A million? Two million? You could start a whole new life somewhere in the tropics. New name, new possibilities.”

“Are you trying to buy my silence?”

“Like I said. I’m trying to help. I don’t agree with the cartel’s more violent antics. If you don’t stay quiet, they *will* kill you. I see this as the best option for you.”

“How on Earth is this the best option? You want me to give up everything I’ve ever known. You want me to move to God knows where and let you get away with this?”

His eyes were steely and cold. “I take it that’s a no.”

“I’m not taking your money. I won’t be complicit. What’s to stop the cartel from changing their mind and killing me at a later date?” I leaned forward, gripping the edge of the table. “I’m telling everyone. Media outlets. Your clients. The police. There’s no way I’m going to let this slide.”

He sighed, closing his menu with a hard snap, and the restaurant fell completely silent. There wasn’t a hint of conversation to be heard. No clinking of utensils on plates. No shuffling from inside the kitchen. Complete stillness.

I looked around, alarmed. What was going on?

Alistair McCloud snapped his fingers. Everyone in the restaurant stood up and vacated their seats, save for the handful of intimidating men who I now realized all had snake tattoos coiled around their throats.

Molly was right.

It was a trap.

“Gentlemen,” he said to the two men nearest us. “Please take Miss Jones to the freezer. I think she needs to cool her head.”

CHAPTER 32

Lance was still woozy, shaking off the last of the sleep aid. The pot of tea Vivian had brewed for him sat forgotten on the coffee table, half-empty.

“She could have killed me,” Lance grumbled. “What if I overdosed?”

I glanced toward the kitchen, noting the scrap piece of paper hastily shoved beneath the toaster. It was covered in numbers and equations. She’d done the math, I realized, because of course she did. Vivian was too smart to just dump a bunch of medication into a man’s tea. She took the time to figure out the proper dosage, accounting for every milligram of diphenhydramine.

If I weren’t so worried about her wellbeing, I would have been impressed.

“How did she even get her hands on the stuff?” I asked him.

Lance rubbed at his eyes and groaned. “She had me order her some things. Said she was having cravings. Ice cream, sliced banana peppers, chamomile tea, the damn sleep aids... I didn’t think twice because she’d been having trouble sleeping since she got here.”

“Ice cream and banana peppers?” I echoed, curious. “Did she eat them separately, or at the same time?”

“Does it matter?”

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. That particular combination of foods struck me as odd. When Melissa was pregnant with Wally, she'd craved odd combinations of foods as well. I shook the thought from my head. I needed to focus.

"You said she took your keys?" I asked him. Finding Vivian before she could get herself into trouble was my priority here, not dwelling on her strange eating habits.

Lance nodded. "Yeah. She must have swiped them straight from my pocket."

"Good. All the company cars are fitted with onboard tracking in case of theft. I'll call Devin and have him pull the vehicle up in the system. Should lead us right to her."

"Devin again," Lance mumbled. "Isn't it his day off today? He probably won't take too kindly to being disturbed."

I frowned. "Again? What do you mean again?"

"Miss Jones asked me for his phone number."

"Did she say what for?"

Lance shrugged. "Something about her laptop not working. I didn't think it was a security risk to give her the number. He's one of ours, after all."

The gears inside my skull were working in overdrive. What business did Vivian have calling my brother? What kind of trouble was she up to?

"Stay here and rest," I ordered.

Lance lay down on the couch, rubbing at his temples. "Trust me. I don't think I'm going anywhere for a while."

I put my brother on speaker the second I got behind the wheel.

He answered grumpily. "It's *Sunday*. Even God took a day off, Jesse."

"I have a missing vehicle," I said. "I need you to track it down for me."

"Am I being paid overtime?"

“I’ll pay you with a swift kick in the ass, how about that?”

“Fine, fine. Whose car got swiped? Pickerton? I bet it was Pickerton. Airhead always forgets where he put his keys.”

“It’s Lance’s, actually. Vivian stole his keys while he was, uh... incapacitated.”

“Vivian?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“She called me earlier. Asked me to decrypt some files for her. She’s really bossy when she wants to be.”

“Files? What—” Everything clicked into place. When she went back to Blue Cloud Financial, she must have downloaded the files she needed to incriminate the cartel. “You should have told me,” I snapped at him. “She could be in serious danger!”

“I didn’t realize, alright? She didn’t exactly tell me the whole story.”

“Shit. Do you have a location yet?”

“Still loading.”

“I thought you said the trackers we installed were top of the line.”

“They *are*. Excuse me if GPS technology needs a second to orient itself.”

“Devin, I swear to God—”

“I got it, I got it. The car’s parked on the corner of Hastings and Milden. Right in front of *El Ronso*, a Columbian restaurant.”

I sucked in a sharp breath through gritted teeth as I floored it, slamming on the gas and shoving my way into traffic. I earned several loud honks and a less than polite gesture from a few of the cars behind me. I didn’t care. Vivian was in danger.

“Hastings and Milden...” I grumbled. “That’s smack in the middle of the Azure Cartel’s territory. What the fuck was she thinking?”

“Ooh, shit,” Devin piped up.

“What? What is it?”

“I ran those files she gave me through a program I wrote. It just finished loading.”

“And?”

“Jesus. She’s got years’ worth of financial records that link the Azure Cartel directly to Blue Cloud Financial. It looks like they’ve been investing on the cartel’s behalf and Blue Cloud’s been cleaning their money. Is this the reason she was placed in your care in the first place?”

I sped straight through a red light, nearly clipping a car through the intersection. “Devin, send the files to the police and call for backup to my location.”

“You’re not going to charge in, are you—”

“I’m charging in.”

“Jesse, don’t be stupid. Wait for backup to arrive.”

“Then you’d better call them before I get there.”

I ended the call and whipped around a corner, tires screeching in protest. I silently cursed the congested Chicago traffic. Every second I spent trapped behind the beat-up minivan full of kids on their way to soccer practice, the greater the chance that something could happen to Vivian.

She was the only thought that occupied my mind as I weaved in and out of traffic. What on Earth had she been thinking, venturing out all alone? Why would she drug Lance and head straight into cartel territory? Did someone contact her, give her instructions on where to meet them? If they knew she had copies of the cartel’s transactions, her life was in grave danger.

I prayed I wasn’t too late.

I ran another red light. This time, the sound of police sirens and the flash of red, white, and blue lights reflected off my rearview mirror. The police car gave chase. Their siren wailed twice, signaling for me to pull over, but I didn’t. This was

perfect, actually. They were just going to have to follow me to the restaurant. They would serve as my backup. They just didn't know it yet. With any luck, they'd call for reinforcements.

I was going to roll up to this place with my own personal army. If any cartel members were in the area, they'd hopefully have the good sense to leave before things got ugly.

Don't worry, angel. I'm coming.

CHAPTER 33

VIVIAN

They shoved me into the walk-in freezer and slammed the door. I was surrounded by blackness. Unable to make out my surroundings, I bumped into multiple plastic storage crates and produce shelves as I felt around aimlessly in an attempt to gather my bearings. It was no use. I couldn't see anything at all.

It wasn't long before I started to shiver furiously. The chill bit through the thin fabric of my shirt and pants, seeping into my skin and bones. My teeth chattered. My lips chapped. The tips of my fingers and toes started to throb from the cold. I needed to find a way out of here before I froze to death.

Or before the cartel could drag me to some undisclosed location and do much worse.

The sound of someone sniffing reached my ears. I followed the sound forward until I bumped into something. Or rather, *someone*.

"Ow!" Molly cried. "Don't s-step on m-me."

I crouched down, reaching out blindly. "Oh, my God, Molly! Is that you?"

"V-Vivian?" she gasped. Her voice was faint. Exhausted. "W-what are y-you doing h-here?"

I wrapped my arms around her as best I could. It was clear she'd been locked inside the freezer for much longer than I. Hypothermia was suddenly a very real and dangerous threat to us both. Hopefully we'd be able to generate enough body heat to keep us warm.

“I came to rescue you,” I said, hugging her tight. “Are you hurt?”

“N-no. They m-manhandled me, but they n-never hurt m-me. McCloud is—”

“I know. He’s working with them.”

“N-no. He m-made sure they d-didn’t hurt me.”

“Save your strength,” I told her. “Don’t waste your energy. We’re going to find a way out of here, I promise.”

“They k-kept me in a basement s-somewhere,” Molly grumbled. “I was so s-scared, Viv.”

I held her close to my chest, alarmed by how frigid her skin was. There was no telling how long she’d been held captive in here. The cold metal floor was doing a good job of sapping what little heat we could generate. I needed to figure out a way to keep warm and fast.

I reached to my right and bumped against what felt like a cardboard box. Perfect. I ripped it apart, dumping its contents onto the floor.

“W-what are y-you doing?” Molly asked, shivering.

“H-here,” I said, placing the material beside her. “Sit on this. We need to minimize contact with m-metal to stay as warm as possible. The heat will s-sap right out of us otherwise.” I was starting to shiver badly.

“Oh, s-so smart,” she replied, sounding loopy.

I found more boxes and dumped their contents as well. I fashioned a makeshift tent of sorts, covering Molly’s body as best I could. It wasn’t ideal, but at least her body heat wouldn’t escape as quickly.

“Where d-did you learn how to d-do this?” she asked.

“I’ve been w-watching a lot of nature documentaries lately.”

Molly curled her nose like it was the most preposterous thing she’d ever heard. I took this as a good sign. If she still

had the energy to be her usual sassy self, then she was fairing a great deal better than I first thought.

Once I was sure Molly was covered, I stood up and aimlessly felt around for... *anything*. Possible items I could use as a weapon if someone came to drag us away. Maybe a light. Some sort of emergency lock release. Surely these things weren't built without some kind of failsafe, right? What if some poor chef found themselves stuck in here like us? There had to be a way out of here.

I found a light switch on one of the furthest walls. Flicking it on turned out to be a mistake because now I knew there was no escaping this place.

The walk-in freezer must have been modified and had no emergency release. The door looked reinforced, only operational from the outside. Worse still were the traces of old blood on the floor from whatever poor victim was here before us.

My stomach lurched. I almost threw up.

"Okay," I mumbled to myself. "Okay, okay, okay. This is fine."

Molly frowned. "F-fine? How is any of this f-fine?"

"Jesse. He'll c-come find us."

"Who the hell is J-Jesse?"

"It's a l-long story," I said through chattering teeth. "My bodyguard. And my... boyfriend, I guess? Except not really. And I'm, uh... I'm pregnant."

Molly's mouth dropped open. "*What?*"

"Like I said. Long story."

"Well, hot damn. Mazel tov, I g-guess?"

"You have surprisingly few questions."

"Too c-cold. Tell me l-later."

I nodded. "Fair enough."

I inspected the nearest shelf. It was portable, set on four wheels for easy maneuvering. I yanked hard on one of its support poles, hoping to pull it loose and use it to knock a few heads if the cartel was stupid enough to try me a second time.

I was filled with a renewed protectiveness. Knowing both Molly and the baby were in my care, I was basically ready to throw hands with the next person who walked through the freezer door.

Outside, I heard a ruckus. The sound was muffled but undeniable. Sirens. A whole squad, if I had to venture a guess. I could hear movement, the shuffling of feet and frantic shouting. Were the police coming for us? Did they know I was here?

Lance was likely awake by now, which meant that he'd definitely know I was missing. He'd have no choice but to report my disappearance to Jesse. My heart skipped a beat and my stomach flipped. There wasn't a doubt in my mind. I was certain he was coming for me.

I managed to break the support pole free from the shelf. I wielded it like a bat, prepared to swing. I took a deep breath and waited, ready to pounce at the slightest hint of movement. My heart was pounding harder and harder as the chaos outside devolved into outright havoc. I didn't know what was going on.

All I knew was that I was going to get all three of us the fuck out of here.

CHAPTER 34

Rule number one about combat: never go in with guns blazing.

Rule number two about combat: never go in alone.

I broke both rules in the span of thirty seconds and honestly didn't give a shit. There was too much on the line. Vivian needed me. I pitied any man foolish enough to stand in my way.

The restaurant in question was deeper than it was wide, accommodating four columns of tables with approximately ten rows. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the cartel was likely keeping Vivian somewhere in the back, provided they hadn't already moved her to a secondary location, of course.

The attack came as a rush. Cartel members shouted profanities, drawing their weapons just as the police behind me charged in. They were there for me, but their intended targets quickly changed when they clocked the bigger, more immediate threat.

Mayhem broke out. Officers and cartel members alike opened fire. The smell of gunpowder filled the air. I ducked out of the way, quickly overturning the nearest table to hide behind as a shield. This was going to get messy, but I had to push forward no matter what. I drew my own gun, a standard issue Beretta, waiting for the opportune moment to fire.

I was outnumbered and outgunned. I only had fifteen rounds, so I needed to make them count. There was no time to

come up with a plan. No time to think. I was running on instinct alone.

This was nothing compared to my time at war. This was a simple gunfight, yet I was terrified. Not because I was afraid for my life, but for hers. She was all I could think about as I popped up from behind my barrier and shot a man in the gut. Her voice was the only thing I could hear as I hopped to the next table, slowly but surely pressing forward.

I didn't know what I'd do if anything happened to Vivian. She was everything bright and sweet and good in my life. If they dared to lay a hand on her, if they'd harmed her in any way...

Nothing on Earth would be able to save them from my wrath.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a cartel member cowering behind a nearby table. They were out of bullets, pinned down by the hellfire the police were raining down on them. I waited for an opening and vaulted over the table, snatching him up by the collar and pinning him on his back.

"Where is she?" I shouted. "Where's the girl?"

He was too stunned to speak, but I didn't have the time nor patience to wait for an answer. I punched his jaw, hoping to jolt an answer out of him.

"*¡No hablo ingles!*" he sputtered, blood staining his teeth.

My nostrils flared. "*¿Dónde la mujer?*" I shook him hard.

The man put his hands up in surrender, fear clear in his eyes. He was too afraid to speak, so he merely pointed with a shaky finger toward the kitchen in the back. I threw one more punch to knock him out cold in thanks.

I ran for it, practically throwing myself at a cartel member who was foolish enough to try and block me. I lunged, knocking him to the ground. He was quick to get up on his feet, though, dashing at me with his fists swinging. There wasn't enough room to dodge, so I had no choice but to absorb the hit, taking it straight to the gut, which was enough to knock the air from my lungs and make my eyes water.

But I wasn't down for the count yet. Not by a long shot.

I fought until my knuckles were numb and my muscles were burning, and my bones vibrated with the impact of every blow, both given and received. The rest of the world faded, the need to get to Vivian my own personal pair of blinders. The gunshots were nothing but background music, the men in my way mere obstacles.

They were waiting for me in the kitchen, a whole swarm of them buzzing around me like vultures, waiting for the moment to strike. I counted five of them, though it very well could have been six. It was hard to tell past the adrenaline blinding me to my surroundings.

They surrounded me. Some of them had knives. Others were frantically reloading their guns. The last few ran at me with nothing but their clenched fists.

I sprang into action, but not with as much speed as I hoped. I wasn't as young as I used to be. Back in my heyday, a fight like this would have been over in less than a minute. I needed to fight smart, not hard. I knew I couldn't waste energy on needless haymakers and pointless defensive moves.

What I needed was to be accurate and consistent. What the cartel had in numbers I made up for in experience and skill.

A punch to the throat to paralyze vocal cords. A kick to the groin to send a man crying for his mother. A swift dislocation of his arm to render his trigger finger useless. A forceful chokehold to leave the last assailant unconscious.

When the dust settled, I was the only one standing.

I silently promised myself that when this was all over, I was taking a vacation. A nice and long one. I was clearly well overdue.

I looked around in dismay. Vivian was nowhere in sight.

Crash.

I heard movement coming from the walk-in freezer. I swiped a fresh gun from the belt of one of the unconscious men on the floor and approached slowly, silent like the night. I

needed to get the drop on whoever was inside. It was them or me.

With a finger on the trigger and one hand on the latch, I moved in one smooth movement, pulling the door open swiftly before aiming inside. I was fully prepared to shoot when—

“Wait!” a woman screamed.

I dropped my gun instinctively, the sound of Vivian’s voice snapping me out of my trance. Her hands were up and trembling violently.

“Jesse? Jesse, thank God! I’m so happy to see you—”

I cut her off with a deep kiss, holding her like I’d never let her go again. Her skin was distressingly cold, and her lips were likely stiff because of it. Vivian clung to me, sighing happily as she kissed me back.

I checked her over quickly. “Are you hurt?” I asked. “Did those bastards do anything to you?”

“I’m fine, Jesse. I promise.”

A noise came from behind Vivian, and I looked over her shoulder and saw another woman huddling close by.

“Jesse, this is Molly. Molly, Jesse.”

“P-please,” she said dryly. “Can we p-please go h-home now?”

The police and cartel were still fighting out front, and I really didn’t want to risk Vivian and her friend getting caught in the crossfire.

“Stay low,” I instructed. “We’ll have to take the back exit. Whatever you do, don’t stop moving.”

Vivian gasped. “Behind you!”

Something heavy hit me across the back of the head, knocking me to the ground. The room spun; the floor slipped out from under me. I couldn’t hear anything past the loud ringing in my ear. Before I could come to my senses, someone had me by the collar.

They hoisted me up and tossed me across the room. I skidded across a metal preparation table and landed in a hard pile on the cold tile floor. I struggled to my feet, disoriented. I didn't need a doctor to tell me that I'd bruised a rib. I could feel it, the throbbing pain taking hold of every nerve in my body.

My assailant charged me with a chef's knife in hand, bringing it down to take a chunk out of my leg. I rolled out of the way and pulled myself up in a hurry, dodging swipe after swipe. He moved with such force that I could feel the air split as he waved his blade around, the edge just barely nicking me each time.

"Vivian, run!" I shouted, praying she had the good sense to actually listen this time.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Vivian lunge toward me. Terror unlike anything I'd ever experienced ripped through my core. I caught her in my arms, horrified by the red soaking into her shirt.

The guy I'd been fighting stepped toward us, brandishing his knife. With a wicked grin, he swung at both of us. I was fully prepared to use my body as a shield when *thunk!* Molly threw a heavy cast iron skillet at the man's head. It knocked him out and sent him crashing to the floor.

Blood was everywhere. So much so that I couldn't figure out where her wound was. I felt around hopelessly, attempting to staunch the bleeding but with no success. I could feel her fading, growing limp and weak arms. Vivian's breathing was labored, her eyes fluttering closed.

"No!" I exclaimed. "No, no, no. Vivian, hang on."

"The ba—" she croaked incoherently. "The baby."

I shook my head. "Baby? What baby?"

With a shaky hand, Vivian took mine and placed it over her stomach. It took me far longer than I cared to admit to understand what she was trying to tell me.

Joy followed by immediate dread.

Happiness with a harsh slap of horror right after.

A healthy dose of confusion.

“You’re pregnant?” I whispered gruffly.

Vivian nodded, her head lolling to the side. She was pale. Too pale. I was losing her. I was losing *them*.

I shook her gently, trying everything in my power to keep her awake. “Vivian. Vivian, stay with me. Don’t do this to me, angel. Come on, just—” I looked up, frantically searching for help. “I need an ambulance in here! Someone! *Anyone!*”

But nobody came.

All I could do was hold her. I’d never felt more useless in my entire life.

“Why did you do that?” I whispered, brushing her hair with trembling fingers. “You shouldn’t have done that, Vivian.”

“To save you,” she mumbled weakly.

“Save your strength, angel. I’m going to get you out of here.”

“Jesse, I—” Her breath came out as a wheeze. “I love you.”

Vivian closed her eyes and didn’t open them again. I shook her again to jolt her back into a conscious state, but it didn’t work. My pulse spiked.

“Vivian? Come on, angel. Wake up. *Wake up!*” Hot, angry tears streamed down my face. I couldn’t lose her. Not like this. I couldn’t stand the thought of Vivian dying in my arms.

I didn’t even get to tell her that I loved her, too.

CHAPTER 35

VIVIAN

I was only partially aware that I'd been drifting in and out of consciousness. It all felt like a dream. Snippets of conversation held in low, concerned murmurs. Bright lights overhead. The beeping of heart rate monitors and the whir of various other equipment. The smell of latex and the calm blue of nurses' scrubs.

It was impossible to tell how much time had passed. Days. Weeks. Months. In the end, it didn't matter. The second I thought I was alert enough to return and face reality, I was hit with an almost euphoric level of relaxation. It was probably the medication, but I wasn't ever awake long enough to piece together what was going on around me.

I didn't dream of anything while I was under, though I did occasionally hear a voice. Sometimes it would talk to me. Sometimes it would talk to someone else. It was low and soothing. Familiar in its richness and lilt. While I wasn't aware enough to comprehend anything, I did get the sense that the voice belonged to someone who cared about me. I could tell through their tone, always gentle with an edge of protectiveness.

When I finally managed to summon the strength to wake up, it was morning. The sun was out and shining, rays of warm light streaming in through the sheer white curtains. The scent of antiseptic and plastic filled my nose. It wasn't unpleasant, just different. The soft voice over a PA speaker down the hall alerted me to the fact that this wasn't home, but a hospital.

And God was it a fancy place.

This wasn't some cramped, dark, understaffed inpatient wing. This was a private room, the kind that only super important people or celebrities could afford so they didn't have to recover from their ailments with a simple curtain separating them from the next patient. Cream walls and freshly cut flowers in tall vases and a big flat screen TV mounted opposite me for entertainment were clear signs of the private institution.

I knew for a fact that my health insurance through Blue Cloud Financial would never cover a place like this.

No, I knew exactly who to thank for this private room. The man in question was sitting right next to me, holding my hand like a lifeline.

Jesse was asleep in the guest chair next to my hospital bed, folded over with his head resting against his forearms. His dark stubble was growing in, and I thought he looked rather dashing. I contemplated waking him up, but the dark circles beneath his eyes were a good indicator that he needed the extra Z's.

I turned on the TV instead and quickly turned the volume to its lowest possible setting so as to not disturb him. The first channel to pop up was the local news, big red borders and fast-moving headline ticker sweeping across the bottom of the frame. I was about to click away to find something more relaxing —maybe one of those boring documentaries Jesse liked because they were growing on me— when video footage of Alistair McCloud flashed across the screen.

“The investigation continues into Blue Cloud Financial's illicit activities,” the anchorwoman explained. “This comes just a week after the arrest of the investment firm's Chief Financial Officer, Alistair McCloud, who has alleged ties to organized crime and gang-related activity. Police raided several locations suspected of being the operational hotspots of the Azure Cartel and have made several major arrests of head members. McCloud is expected to appear in front of a judge later this week. If found guilty, he could serve several life sentences behind bars.”

I was hypnotized by everything I was seeing. It was strange, but I hoped the courts didn't treat him too harshly. Even though I thought what he did was reprehensible, he *did* keep the cartel from killing Molly. It was proof enough to me that he wasn't all bad. Maybe that was naive of me, but it was the truth.

I shifted in bed, my muscles sore and my skin tight. The bedsheets were starchy and stiff. Uncomfortable. As I readjusted my position in bed, I noticed the tightness in my abdomen. I laid my free hand onto my stomach to inspect. I could feel the stitches, the taught bandage. And that was when it hit me.

"The baby," I blurted, freaked out. Everything happened so fast. I didn't remember much about the attack, only that I'd been hit while trying to save Jesse. What if something happened to the baby?

Just as I was starting to hyperventilate, Jesse awoke. He stood immediately and grasped me firmly by the shoulders, likely to keep me from hurting myself. He spoke softly, "Everything's fine, angel. The babies are fine. The cut was long, but not deep."

"Babies?" I echoed.

The smile that broke out across Jesse's face was unlike anything I'd ever seen. Pure joy and elation. Excitement. Bone-deep devotion and love.

"Yes, angel. We're having twins."

I finally took a much-needed breath. "Twins... Do we know what they are yet? Or is it too early? I've never done this before."

Jesse chuckled. "It's too early to tell. All the doctors could tell from the ultrasound was that there are two of them and they're both doing well." He reached behind him to retrieve a small slip of paper, a sonogram by the looks of it. "Here."

I squinted at the image. "I have no idea what I'm looking at."

Jesse pointed to two little dots near the center. “That’s one, and this is the other.”

Giddiness erupted within me, happy tears welling up in my eyes. “Oh my God, they’re so tiny!”

I scooched over to make room for him. Jesse lay down next to me, one arm around my shoulder bracing my head while his other hand lay gently on my stomach. He kissed my temple, still peering down at the sonogram in wonder.

“I love you, too, by the way,” he whispered.

I looked him in the eye, heart skipping a beat. “Hm?”

“I love you, too. You told me you loved me but passed out before I got the chance to tell you.” His expression darkened. “I thought I’d never get to.”

“Jesse...”

“I love you, Vivian. Seeing you like that... I thought you were going to die. I thought I was going to lose you.” Pain flashed across his face as his brows furrowed. “I wouldn’t know what to do with myself if something happened to you. I know that now. So, please, if you’ll have me... I’d really like to be with you. To take care of you and take care of our children. And I know settling down probably isn’t what you want at your age, but I promise I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you’re happy.”

I placed my hand over his and pressed firmly against my stomach. “Who says that’s not what I want?”

“Really?”

A shaky laugh bubbled past my lips. “I was worried that maybe you didn’t want to have kids again.”

“Only if I get to raise them with you.”

I tilted my chin up to kiss him. It felt good, like coming home. But a thought popped into my head just as I pulled away. “Wally.”

Jesse grimaced. “No, my name’s Jesse. Should I call a nurse? Maybe the meds are too strong.”

“No, no. I meant what about Wally? I want to be with you, I *do*, but I refuse to come between you and your son.”

“I spoke with him after I sent you away.”

“Oh. And?”

“He’s... adjusting. I’d say seventy percent onboard.”

“Better than not at all, I guess. I’m glad to hear it.”

Jesse kissed me again, slower this time. “I can’t wait to take you home.”

“When do you think they’ll let me out of here?”

“Another couple of days.”

“How long have I been out?”

“Almost a week.”

My eyes widened. “*Jesse.*”

“What?”

“A private room costs, like, a million dollars a day.”

“More like four hundred, actually.”

My brain ran the numbers automatically. “Twenty-eight hundred dollars and they want me to stay three more days? Absolutely not. I’m fine. I feel great. Let’s get out of here before they bleed us dry—”

“Vivian.” The corners of his eyes crinkled as he smiled. “Relax. The bill’s already been taken care of. I meant what I said. I’m going to take care of you. All you have to do is let me.”

I lay back down, soothed by his deep voice. “Alright, alright.”

“How are you feeling, angel? Any pain?”

“No, I’m good. Just stiff and restless.”

“I’ll go get the doctor to check on you. They should know you’re awake.”

“Wait,” I said, clutching onto his hand. “You can get them, just... In another five minutes, okay?”

He held me close, cradling me in his arms and pressing kisses into my hair. “Okay. Five minutes.”

“Ugh.” Molly was standing at the doorway. “You guys are so cute it makes me want to throw up. Can’t you get a room?”

“We *are* in a room,” I pointed out.

Jesse moved back to his chair but didn’t let go of my hand as Molly made her way to my other bedside. She looked to be in good spirits, despite everything.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Better. Thank you for coming for me. I knew you wouldn’t give up.”

“I heard Alistair’s been arrested.”

Molly nodded. “Some guy, Detective Monroe? He said that he received all the investment records he needed to link Blue Cloud Financial to the cartel. Someone emailed him from an anonymous address or something. He grilled me for hours about it, but I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about.”

Jesse glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. “Devin?”

I nodded. “Devin.”

Molly shrugged. “So, what are you going to name the babies?”

“You know?”

“Kind of hard not to. Jesse wouldn’t shut up about it.”

I smiled at him. “Is that so?”

Jesse huffed. “I was excited. Sue me.”

“If they’re girls, you should definitely name one of them Molly,” she announced, smirking. “I can’t believe I’m going to be an aunt. I’m going to spoil them rotten when they get here.”

I laughed, patting my stomach tenderly. I could very clearly imagine Fun Aunt Molly. She’d be the one to sneak the

kids their first sip of alcohol or take them to their first ever concert despite my express concern that it's a school night.

I could also imagine Jesse as a father. Warm and caring and stern at times, but only because he cared so much. I'd be there to reign him in when needed, but there wasn't a doubt in my mind that he'd be a fantastic father to our children.

I smiled as I listened to Molly recite an entire speech on why we should name one of the twins after her. Jesse held my hand and squeezed my fingers gently.

I was happy.

CHAPTER 36

JESSE

Vivian laughed as I carried her over the threshold into the penthouse. “You’re going to drop me,” she said, half-chiding.

“I would never let that happen.”

“You can put me down now, Jesse. My legs work just fine.”

I kissed her on the tip of her nose. “True, but you’ll have to forgive me for being clingy. You’re carrying precious cargo.”

“Am I part of that cargo?”

“Most definitely.”

I carried Vivian to the kitchen and set her down in the nearest chair. “Tea? Water? Something to eat?”

She giggled. “I’m fine, Jesse.”

“Do you want to lie down and take a nap?”

“Trust me, I think I’ve gotten more than enough sleep.”

“How about a—”

“Jesse.”

“Yes, angel?”

Vivian stretched her arms out toward me. “Come here.”

I went to her without question, kneeling before her feet so I could hug her, pressing my ear to her stomach. I knew the babies were still too small to kick, but I could sense them. It

was almost crazy how much I loved them already and they weren't even here yet.

Vivian combed her fingers through my hair, nails gently scraping against my scalp. "I think we should plan."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, now that we know the babies are doing okay, I think we should sort out the logistical side of things. Am I going to stay here with you? What am I going to do with my apartment?"

"I'd love it if you moved in here with me. I can turn the home office into a nursery. I'm in contact with a number of contractors. We can do it up any way you'd like. And if living in the city isn't what you want, I'd happily buy you a house out in the suburbs."

"A *whole* house?"

"No, half," I replied dryly. "Of course a whole house. We can have a backyard for them to run around in and a big driveway where we can teach them to ride their bikes."

"I like the sound of that," she mused. "What about finishing school? I'm so close to finishing my degree."

"We'll make it work," I promised. "I'm sure we can discuss remote learning options. Or we can wait until after you've had the babies, you can go back to school, and I'll watch over them."

"How are you going to juggle work and taking care of the twins?"

"I'll take a step back from the firm, be a little more hands-off. I'm sure I can appoint someone to be in charge. Maybe Devin. Probably not, but he's an option."

"You'd really be willing to do that?"

I nodded. "I wasn't around enough for Melissa and Wally. I won't make the same mistake. I'll do everything I can to spend as much time as possible with the three of you. Whenever you need me, I'm there. You've made me the happiest man alive, so it's the least I can do."

“You’re going to be an amazing father to them.”

I peered up at her, transfixed by her lovely, soft eyes. “You know, it’s going to get crazy around here once the babies are born. I should warn you, it means a lot of late nights and stinky diapers.”

“And constant crying?”

“Constant,” I agreed.

“I wonder if we’ll ever get a moment to ourselves.”

“Eventually. When they’re a little older and more independent.”

“Maybe we should take advantage of the time we have alone together now.”

I grinned. “Can I take you to the bedroom?”

“You don’t even have to ask.”

She shrieked and laughed as I picked her up in my arms, carrying her down the hall to my room. I set her down on the edge of my bed and shimmied her out of her clothes, unwrapping her like the gift she was. Kissing her was a delight, still as sweet and warm as the day I first put my hands on her. Little did I know then how she’d willingly be mine.

I was mindful of her bandages. The doctors said Vivian was in good condition, out of any grave danger, though the skin around the slash might still be a tad tender. I treated her with the utmost care regardless, laying her down on her back while I stamped my lips down her stomach. The knowledge that there was not one, but two lives growing within her set my blood on fire.

“You’re amazing,” I murmured as I settled between her legs, peppering kisses against her inner thighs. “So beautiful. Mother of my children.”

Vivian tilted her head back and moaned as I teased her clit with the tip of my tongue. She was already wet and ready for me, but I intended to savor this moment. We had all the time in the world. Nobody was coming after us. We had the whole

place to ourselves. I took it upon myself—a private challenge of sorts—to make her scream my name.

Her knees trembled as she gasped with pleasure, toes curling as she dragged her fingers through my hair.

“J-Jesse,” she whined. “Oh, *fuck*, right there.”

“Right here?” I teased her entrance, relishing the way she giggled. I nipped at the inner corner of her knee. “Or did you mean right here?”

Vivian cackled. “Stop it, babe. Quit playing.”

I sucked in a sharp breath. “Call me that again.”

“Babe?”

“Mm-hmm.”

She caressed my cheek and smiled. “Whatever you want, babe.”

The sound of the endearment made my skin come alive. Yet another reminder of how much I loved this woman. How I managed to function without her up until this point in my life was beyond me. She was my everything, and now she was all mine.

I returned my attention to her swollen bud, drawing tight circles against her. Her voice grew higher with each pass, her back arching as I pushed her closer to the edge.

When she came, it was with a rapturous moan. Her toes curled. She gripped the sheets. She was putty in my hands. Her pale skin was flushed in places, her cheeks and neck rosy with desire.

“I take it you enjoyed yourself?” I asked.

Vivian snorted. “I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again. You’re a cocky bastard.”

“And I’m all yours.”

“That you are. But there’s a slight problem.”

I frowned. “What?” I lifted myself, looking her up and down. “Shit, I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

Vivian shook her head, a demure smile on her lips. “No, no. Nothing like that.”

“Then what is it?”

“You’re not nearly nude enough.”

I sighed. “Don’t do that,” I grumbled, but started to take my shirt off.

Vivian sat up to help in the disrobing. She made quick work of the front of my pants, all but yanking them down to free my cock. I’d been so focused on her own pleasure that I hadn’t realized just how hard I was. I was throbbing, desperate for release. Once the last bit of my clothes was discarded, I returned to her, scooping her up to cradle her close.

“How do you want me?” she asked, almost shyly.

I kissed her, sweeping my tongue past her lips to taste her mouth. “Just like this,” I murmured. “I want to make love to you.”

Vivian grinned, cupping my cheeks with her hands. “I want that, too.”

I spread her legs and aligned myself with her entrance, gathering her wet heat with the head of my cock. A shiver shot its way down my spine, anticipation mounting. I pressed into her slowly, inch by inch, admiring the way Vivian’s mouth fell open to release the softest of cries.

Her walls stretched to take me in, slick and warm and welcoming. A perfect fit. Like she was made for me. It took all my willpower not to fall over the edge. Determined to make things last, I distracted myself with the task of claiming her lips. I held myself within her, feeling the walls of her pussy flutter around my shaft.

“Babe,” she groaned. “Please move.”

“What’s the rush, angel?” I asked, sucking on her bottom lip.

“I want—” She bucked her hips and sighed. “I want to make you feel good.”

“Just being with you makes me feel good.”

“You know what I mean.” She reached around, circling my neck with her arms. She dragged her nails down my back, panting. “Jesse, *please*.”

“Have I ever told you how much I love how greedy you are? Do you really need my cock that much?”

“Yes!” she blurted. “Yes, I need it.”

“Say it.”

“I need your cock, Jesse. I need to feel you inside me. I need everything you can give me.”

“Alright, angel. Whatever my baby needs.”

I rolled my hips against her, plunging my cock as deep as she could allow. I swallowed her groans, determined to kiss her breathless. My rhythm was slow at first, testing the waters. I wanted nothing more than to dive right in. Be selfish. Make up for lost time. But this was good, too. This was all things tender and loving and wonderful.

It was a privilege to see her hair all messy and tangled. It was a delight to listen to her cries of pleasure. There really was nothing Vivian could do that didn't set my nerves on fire.

“Fuck, I love you,” I growled in her ear. “I love you so much, Vivian.”

“I love you, too,” she said, voice tight and breathy. “God, Jesse. I'm so close. I'm going to—”

I reached down between us and used my fingers to tease her clit, drawing tight circles guaranteed to make her lose her mind. Vivian's body seized and sputtered as climax took over.

“*Fuck!*” she screamed. “Jesse, *yes!*”

“That's my girl,” I cooed. “So nice and tight for me.”

“Babe—”

“It's alright, angel. Gonna fill you right up. Do you want that?”

“Yes. Yes, I want all of you.”

The hot, tight coil in the pit of my stomach exploded, ecstasy shooting through my veins and wiping my mind of any thought. For the briefest, most beautiful moment, I was in heaven.

We lay in bed together, in a comfortable haze. I played with her hair while she stroked my jaw, scraping at my stubble.

“You’d look cool with a good ol’ fashion Dad ‘stache.”

I kissed her fingers. “I love you, but absolutely not.”

“What? I think you’d look good with a moustache.”

“I’ll consider it.”

“That’s all I ask.”

I took a deep breath and looked off into the distance.
“Okay. I thought about it.”

“And?”

“No.”

Vivian laughed, bright and beautiful.

CHAPTER 37

“Well,” Wally said, clapping his hands together. “This is it. What do you think?”

Jesse and I stepped into the apartment. It had two bedrooms with a shared bathroom at the end of the hall and a cozy living room that opened into the small kitchen. Video game and movie posters decorated the walls. The furniture was all mismatched, likely purchased over time from different places —garage sales, picked up off the side of the curb— but that’s what gave Wally’s apartment so much charm. A definite bachelor pad, but there was a spark of pride in his eyes.

I recognized it, that look. I’d felt the same about my own apartment. It was his, something he could have all to himself. And, of course, his roommate with whom he split the rent.

“It’s lovely,” I said. I nudged Jesse in the ribs with the tip of my elbow. “Right, babe?”

Jesse nodded slowly. “Yes. Lovely.”

I cleared my throat. A warning.

Jesse brightened his tone. “I’m proud of you, son. How’s the new job treating you?”

Wally smiled wide. “Really good, actually. Long hours, but it pays great. I’ve already got enough saved for my flight to Paris next year. In the meantime, it’s a great learning experience.” He waved us into the kitchen. “Please, have a seat. Dinner’s almost ready. I just need to add the final touches to a couple things.”

“Thank you for inviting us,” I said as Jesse pulled my chair out for me, ever the gentleman. “I’ve been looking forward to trying your cooking. Oh, did you remember the thing about the tuna?”

Wally nodded. “Yes. Tuna’s not on the menu tonight. Dad made sure to remind me. *Twice.*”

Jesse shrugged as he sat down next to me at the table. “I thought it needed repeating.”

Although the kitchen was small, Wally moved fluidly around like it was his own kingdom. His knives were sharp, his timing impeccable, his measurements precise. The way he plated made our meals look like edible works of art. He wasn’t shy about the seasoning, and he delivered our food piping hot and ready to be devoured. It was quite literally dinner and a show.

And Jesse looked like he couldn’t be prouder.

“Dig in,” Wally said. “Tonight we’re having pan fried halibut in a buttered panko crust with a side of scalloped potatoes and sautéed vegetables. The omega-three in the fish’ll be good for you and the kiddos.”

I took a bite and practically swooned. The halibut was delightfully crunchy on the outside and soft on the inside, practically melting on my tongue. The potatoes were creamy, and the vegetables offered an earthy finish.

“This is amazing,” I mumbled, not the least bit concerned that I was talking with my mouth full.

“Five-star worthy,” Jesse said, nodding in agreement.

Wally smiled, clearly pleased. “Thanks, Dad. Thanks, Viv.”

“How long is that culinary program again?” Jesse asked.

“Two years, give or take.”

“You must be excited.”

“I am.”

“My offer still stands, you know. I don’t mind paying for the flight. You might as well save your money and use it on whatever supplies you need when you get there.”

“You’ve already paid the tuition, Dad. I think I can handle the plane ticket. Besides, the school pays for our things. It’s built into the program.”

“Well, I’m here if you need anything.”

“I know,” Wally said meaningfully. “Thank you. Really.”

We continued to eat, conversation light and pleasant.

“So, how’s the baby name debate going?” Wally asked.

I groaned, rolling my eyes. “Don’t even get me started.”

“We’re stuck between Alexander or Matthew if one’s a boy,” Jesse explained.

“No,” I said firmly. “*You’re* stuck between Alexander and Matthew. If they’re boys, I want to name them Peter and Jack.”

“Peter and Jack are such boring names,” Jesse argued.

“And Alexander and Matthew sound way too stuffy!”

“We can always shorten it and call them Alex and Matt.”

“Oh, sure. It’s the length of the names that’s the problem.”

Wally chuckled. “And if they’re girls?”

Jesse rubbed his temples. “No, not this again.”

“Anastasia and Charlotte,” I announced.

“No,” he said. “I thought we agreed on Isabella and Daisy.”

“Oh my God, we’re never going to agree on anything. Can we just pull an Elon Musk and give them numbers in their names?”

“I love my children too much to do that.”

“Okay, fair. I guess it’s back to the drawing board.”

Jesse sighed. “Look, how about we let Wally decide?”

Wally threw his hands up and shook his head. “Nope. Leave me out of it.”

“Maybe we could ask Molly?” I suggested.

“She’s biased. She’ll obviously agree with you.”

“And what? Wally isn’t biased? He’d just agree with *you*.”

“Maybe I should give Theo and Ava a call.”

“But there’s two of them. We need an odd number of votes for a deal breaker.”

“Ugh, okay. How about—” Jesse’s phone rang, interrupting him mid-sentence. He checked the screen and frowned. “Ah, shit. It’s work.”

“It’s after work hours,” I pointed out, mildly disappointed. “You promised, babe. No phone calls after seven.”

“I’m sorry, angel. It’s Devin. You know he only ever calls if it’s an emergency. I’ll be sure to tell him off.”

“You’d better,” I mumbled.

“Excuse me just a sec. I’ll be out in the hall.” Jesse got up from the table and kissed the top of my head before leaving for a more private area to speak.

“Things seem to be going pretty well between you two,” Wally observed aloud. “Apart from the whole baby name thing.”

I giggled. “Yeah. We normally agree on everything, but this is turning out to be a lot harder than we first thought.”

Wally took another bite of his food, chewing slowly. “I’m happy for you two. Really.”

“Thank you, Wally. That means a lot to me. To us.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to be an older brother in couple of months. That’ll be weird.”

“Well, think of it this way: you don’t have to share any of your toys.”

“That’s true. I’m probably going to spoil them, either way.”

“Oh, Molly’s way ahead of you on that one. She’s for some reason taken it upon herself to be the one the kids run off to when they’ve got problems.”

Wally laughed softly. “Maybe I’ll be the one they run off to when they get sick of your cooking.”

“Who says they’ll get sick of my cooking?”

He held up his hands in mock surrender. “I’m sure your cooking’s fine.” He pulled a face. “You’re not going to make me call you my stepmom, are you?”

I nearly spat out my water. “Oh, *God* no. That’d be so weird.”

“Oh, good. Yeah. Very weird.”

“But I doubt that’s something you’ll have to worry about any time soon.”

“Oh? You mean he hasn’t popped the question yet?”

I shook my head, heat filling in my cheeks. “No.”

“Do you want him to pop the question?”

I peeked over my shoulder to make sure Jesse was still in the hallway taking his call. I leaned forward and whispered, “Yes and no.”

“Could you be any more confusing?”

“Yes, I’d like him to ask, but not right now.”

“Really? Even with the twins on the way?”

I shrugged. “I like the way things are right now. And I know Jesse will be there for me and the kids no matter what. With or without a ring, I love him and I know he loves me. For now, that’s all I need. Besides, it’s the twenty-first century. Just because I’m expecting doesn’t mean we have to tie the knot.”

“That’s very true. Although...”

“What?”

“I don’t know,” Wally mumbled. “Dad’s always been such a traditional kind of guy. You’ve really changed him.”

“Nah,” I said lightly. “I think he did that all by himself.”

Jesse returned some minutes later, shaking his head as he shoved his phone into his back pocket. I arched an eyebrow at him, to which he responded, “One of the bodyguards couldn’t remember where they put his duffle bag.”

“Ah, so not a work emergency, then?”

“I mean, it *did* have his gun in it. I can’t have work-issued firearms floating around for anyone to find.” Jesse kissed my cheek apologetically. “Sorry. No more work calls after hours, I promise.”

“You really have changed,” Wally muttered as he took another bite of his deliciously prepared meal.

CHAPTER 38

I paced around the room, looking at the informative diagram posters on the wall without really taking them in. The doctor was running late. The only reason I wasn't kicking up a stink about it was because Vivian said she was comfortable and rather liked this OBGYN. I'd taken her to meet several doctors in the last couple of months, determined to find her the best care available for her and the babies and this was the one she'd landed on.

"Would you please sit, babe?" she asked me sweetly. "You're making me a little anxious."

"But you said you weren't feeling well this morning. I want the doctor to check you out as soon as possible."

"Jesse, *relax*. I was probably just bloated." Vivian rubbed her stomach, which was now large and swelling. The babies were getting big. I had no idea how Vivian managed to get around the way she did, still surprisingly nimble and quick on her feet. "I shouldn't have eaten all those cookies."

"I did tell you to pace yourself."

"I know, I know. You were *right*." She said this with a pout, but I knew her well enough to know she was only pretending to be upset.

I checked my watch. "What's taking her so long?"

"She probably has other patients."

"Yes, but we have an appointment."

“Babe,” Vivian said firmly. “As much as I appreciate the protective Papa Bear in you, I need you to reign it in a little. Everything’s fine.”

I took a seat next to her and held her hand, kissing the back of her knuckles. “I just want to make sure you have everything you need, angel. And I’m excited.”

Vivian grinned. “I’m excited, too. Ava has money on the twins being girls.”

“Funny. Theo bets it’s boys.”

“Which do you want?” she asks jokingly.

“Doesn’t matter. As long as they’re happy and healthy.”

Vivian leaned over and kissed my forehead. “You’re so cute.”

“I am.”

She stuck her tongue out. “When did we get so gross?”

“I don’t know, but you probably started it.”

There was a knock at the door. The OBGYN walked in, examining a chart in her hands. “Miss Jones,” she greeted with a smile, “and Mr. White. Good to see you two again. Apologies for keeping you waiting.”

“Oh, no problem,” I said coolly, earning a pointed stare from Vivian.

The doctor sat down in a rolling stool and scooped over to Vivian’s bedside, still reading her chart. “It says here you’re five months along?”

Vivian nodded. “That’s right.”

“Any discomfort? How’s your appetite?”

“Appetite’s fine,” she answered. “But I feel full really fast. I hope I’m getting enough nutrients.”

“Yes, that tends to happen when you’ve got two buns in the oven. There isn’t a whole lot of space for food. But your bloodwork’s just come in. It looks like you’re getting what you

need, though I always strongly recommend a calcium supplement.”

I whipped out my phone and wrote everything down in my note app. “Any particular brand?”

“Any of them will do. What matters is the consistency in which you take them. At least one a day to make sure your bones stay strong.”

Vivian placed a hand on my wrist. “I’m sure he’ll get on that straight away.”

“Already ordered off Amazon.”

The doctor grabbed a pair of blue plastic gloves and pulled them on before retrieving a bottle of lubricant. She rolled Vivian’s shirt up over her baby bump and flicked on the large ultrasound machine beside her. “Alright, let’s take a look.”

“It’s cold,” Vivian said with a giggle as the doctor squirted the gel onto her skin.

I leaned against the edge of the table carefully, eyes transfixed on the screen across from us. It was hard to make out the shapes at first. Nothing but black and white curving lines with a few splotches in between as the doctor moved the wand around. She eventually settled on the image of two very distinct baby shapes.

“There they are,” she announced happily.

“How are they doing?” I asked, holding my breath.

“Everything appears fine. Both very healthy. A little on the small side, but that’s perfectly normal when it comes to twins.”

Vivian breathed a sigh of relief. “That’s good to hear.”

The doctor looked at us both. “Are you interested in learning the genders?”

I nodded, holding onto Vivian’s hand. “Yes.”

“Well, this one here—” The doctor pointed to the baby on the left side of the screen, “—is a girl. And this one’s a boy.”

If my mouth could drop any wider, it would have touched the floor. “You mean—”

“We’re having one of each?” Vivian asked, bewildered.

“Yes, congratulations.”

I kissed Vivian, elated and practically floating from the high. “We’re naming them Luke and Leia.”

Vivian threw her head back and laughed. “Absolutely not.”

“Hansel and Gretel.”

“Jesse, please know that I love you when I say this, but fuck no.”

The doctor chuckled. “I’ll give you two some privacy.”



“Tate and Kate?” I suggested as I adjusted my cufflinks.

We were back home at the penthouse, getting dressed before our big dinner date. It had been a hot minute since I took Vivian out to a fancy restaurant because her cravings were normally so specific that we usually just ordered in.

Banana peppers and pineapples on pizza. Vanilla ice cream with bacon bits on top. Pickles and hard-boiled eggs.

But tonight was special. It took some convincing, but Vivian finally agreed to let me treat her to *La Cordova*, an upscale restaurant in downtown Chicago.

“We’re not naming them Tate and Kate,” Vivian said, exasperated. She exited the bedroom, smoothing her hands over the fabric of her dress. She grimaced. “Are you sure I don’t look fat in this?”

“Angel, you’re pregnant, not fat.”

“If this place is as fancy as you say it is—”

“You’re the most beautiful woman on the whole planet, Vivian. You could show up in a tube top and jean shorts and they’d still let you in.”

She walked over with the tiniest trace of a waddle—which I found absolutely adorable—to place a kiss on my lips. “We better get going then. Isn’t our reservation in twenty minutes? What if they give our table away?”

“They won’t.”

“Let me guess. The restaurant owner is a former client of yours?”

“Am I really so predictable?”

Vivian hummed. “Why would a restaurant owner need bodyguard protection?”

“Let’s just say the restaurant business is far more cutthroat than I first gave Wally credit for.”

“Have you called him yet?”

“I did earlier when you were in the bathroom.”

“And?”

“He’s excited for us. He thinks we should name the twins Sam and Pam.”

Vivian rolled her eyes. “I guess poor naming skills must run in the family.”

By the time we got through traffic, we were officially ten minutes late for our reservation, but I was pleased to see that the owner had followed through with the favor I called.

The hostess showed us to our private table in the back near the water feature. It was a quiet corner, nothing but the low rumble of conversation from the front of the restaurant with occasional ruckus from the kitchen. The table itself was covered in a white linen cloth, a single cut rose standing at the center in a tall crystal vase.

“Delilah and Julius?” she suggested over appetizers. I made sure not to comment about how she dipped her calamari into a side of mustard. My angel could eat whatever the hell she wanted, even if it was an affront to good taste everywhere.

I considered the combination. “Not bad, but they don’t really strike me as a Delilah or Julius.”

“Amelia and Jude?” she asked over entrées. Vivian ordered an entire rib-eye steak *and* a lobster tail. It was impressive how she cleaned the entire plate, not a morsel to be found.

“Getting warmer,” I said. “I like Amelia. Jude needs workshopping.”

“Okay,” she said definitively over dessert. She ordered the chocolate mousse with extra whipped cream on top. “How about Amelia and Adam?”

At this point, I was no longer listening. I would have agreed to whatever names she wanted because right now, at that very moment, I had far more pressing matters. My heart was thumping steadily but loudly in my chest. So much so that I was worried she’d be able to hear it.

I patted my suit jacket, reassured by the solid mass hidden inside my pocket.

“Jesse?” Vivian called. “Are you okay?”

“Amelia and Adam,” I echoed. “Sounds great. A winning combo.”

She giggled. “What’s going on, babe? You look either really sick or really excited. I can’t tell in this lighting.”

“Don’t worry, angel. I’m not sick.”

I shifted out of my seat and got down on one knee, producing the ring box from inside my pocket. I opened it, revealing the diamond ring inside.

My first instinct upon walking into the jewelry store was to buy the biggest diamond I could find, but I stopped myself before the pushy saleswoman could hook me in for the sale. It wasn’t the right one, and I knew it deep within my gut.

Vivian wasn’t about the flash. She was humble and kind and caring. I wanted to give her something she could wear with pride, show off to the world without feeling like she was bragging. Because I knew her. I knew she’d appreciate the elegance and simplicity.

The ring was a thin band of white gold with three diamonds sandwiched together, the center one being the

largest with the two outer ones slightly smaller. It caught the light beautifully, glistening in my palm.

“Jesse,” she breathed. “Oh my God, is this happening?”

“You are the light of my life,” I said, peering deep into her eyes. “You make me so unbelievably happy that I can’t put it into words. You keep me grounded. You’re my reason for waking up in the morning. You’ve renewed a sense of purpose in me I didn’t even realize was gone until I met you. You’re smart and beautiful and ambitious. You’re headstrong and loyal and the funniest person I’ve ever met. I know that I’m lucky just to know you. And I’d be luckier still if you’d do me the honor of being my wife. Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she said, so soft I almost didn’t hear her. Her smile was a loud enough response.

I slipped the ring onto her finger and rose to kiss her. Nearby tables applauded politely, but I didn’t pay them any mind. All that I cared about was Vivian.

My future wife.

My angel.

EPILOGUE

Thanksgiving wasn't this big of a deal for me. Growing up, it was just another day. Sometimes I had an extra helping of pudding after dinner, but that was about it. There wasn't a whole lot to be thankful for as a foster kid. But now, I had a million and one reasons to be thankful.

Amelia was asleep in my arms. She was a deep sleeper, sucking quietly on her thumb while totally unaware of the rambunctious goings on at the Phillips house. Jesse was holding Adam, who —unlike his sister— rarely ever slept at all. My son was so alert and curious, always looking about with his big eyes to take in his surroundings. I figured that was something he got from his father.

I could see Jesse in the kitchen with Theo and Devin, baby Adam reaching up with his tiny hand to tug at his father's beard. It wasn't a moustache like I'd wanted. In fact, the beard was much better. It tickled when he kissed me, and it gave Adam something to play with.

Ava, Molly, and I were in the living room. The turkey was still in the oven, not quite done, so we had some time to kill. The TV was on, switched to some weird contest show featuring child geniuses.

“What kind of parent would let their children go on a show like this?” I wondered aloud. “Can't kids just be kids?”

Molly shrugged. “I mean, the prize for first place is ten grand. Wouldn't you want Amelia up there if she could win?”

I pressed my lips into a thin line. “No. Not unless *she* wanted to be up there. But even then, it feels icky putting your children out there for the world to see.”

Ava nodded. “I know what you mean. It feels sort of exploitive.”

“Yes, exactly!”

Amelia whimpered, stirring from her slumber. She sobbed, breaking out into choked off cries. I patted her on the back and bounced her gently, hushing her. “It’s okay, sunshine. I’m here.”

“Do you think she needs a diaper change?” Molly asked.

“No, that sounds like an *I’m hungry* cry,” Ava said.

I retrieved Amelia’s milk bottle from off the coffee table in front of me and brought it to her lips. She immediately took to it, eating hungrily. “You were right.”

“Huh,” Molly said. “I feel kind of left out. Maybe I need to find my own silver fox and have a baby so I can join the club.”

Cory, who’d been playing with Cassie on the other side of the room, looked up. “What does *silver fox* mean?”

Molly made a strangled sound, something between a laugh and a choke. “Nothing, nothing,” she said dismissively.

“I don’t think you’re allowed to keep foxes as pets,” Cory continued.

Ava and I laughed. Molly’s face was bright red.

Luckily, Wally’s sudden arrival rescued her from Cory’s innocent remarks. He came in through the front door with heavy grocery bags hanging from both his arms. “Sorry that took so long,” he said. “It was nuts at the grocery store.”

“Of course it was,” I said. “Everybody’s probably out trying to do last-minute shopping.”

“I’ll say. I almost had to wrestle a little old lady for the last turnip they had.”

“Did you get it, though?” Molly asked, walking over quickly to help with the bags.

Wally fished the turnip in question out, holding it up like some sort of trophy. “I did. Almost lost an eye, but you know. That’s what Thanksgiving’s all about.”

I frowned. “Grocery store fights?”

“No, the perfect ingredients for dinner.”

“I thought it was about being thankful,” Ava teased.

“Everybody go wash up,” Wally said. “I’ll have the rest of dinner ready in five.”

We gathered around the kitchen together. There were so many of us around the table, but I wasn’t going to complain. It was wonderful, my first Thanksgiving with the whole family. It was loud and chaotic and perfect.

Jesse sat next to me, checking on Amelia while kissing me on the temple. “How are my two favorite girls doing?”

“We’re doing good. Hungry, though.”

“I thought I heard her crying.”

“What were you boys talking about in the kitchen?”

“Oh, you know, talking shop. Boring stuff, really.”

“Firewall design isn’t boring,” Devin grumbled from his side of the table. “It’s way more interesting than talking about Adam’s weight gain. Right, Theo?”

Theo put his hands up in mock surrender. “I have no opinion.”

“Did you hear that, Adam?” Jesse asked our infant son. “Uncle Devin doesn’t think it’s impressive you’ve grown so much, no he doesn’t.”

Devin rolled his eyes. “I didn’t say it wasn’t impressive. He’s a baby. Babies grow.”

“Do I *have* to eat the Brussel sprouts?” Cory complained.

Ava gave him a gentle smile. “Yes, sweetie. You have to. Do you want to grow up big and strong like your father?”

“But Cassie doesn’t like Brussel sprouts, either.”

Theo huffed. “How about for each one you eat, I’ll give you a quarter?”

Ava frowned. “I don’t think we should pay them to eat their food, dear.”

“If you don’t take the offer, I will,” Molly said, leaning over to whisper in Cory’s ear.

“Deal!” he shouted, portioning out a small pile of greens onto his plate.

“Alright,” Wally declared from the oven. He retrieved the turkey from inside and expertly moved the bird onto a long serving platter. “Who’s hungry?”

An enthusiastic murmur of agreement washed over the room as Wally sat the plate down in the center of the table before taking his seat. We dug in without much fanfare, feasting to our heart’s content. Everything was delicious. The turkey was juicy. The stuffing was savory. The gravy was thick and salty.

Cory worked on his vegetables and earned himself a whole dollar before giving up. Molly helped herself to a second glass of red wine, listening intently to Devin talk about the coding project he was working on despite the fact that she didn’t know a thing about computers. Theo and Ava traded Cassie back and forth, taking turns eating. Wally told Cory all about what it was like in Paris and the endless number of art museums there.

Jesse and I sat together, knees touching beneath the table. Amelia and Adam were both awake now, but they weren’t fussy, too busy taking in all the sights and smells.

Jesse raised his glass. “A toast,” he said. “To family.”

“To family!” the room cheered.

And then, he murmured in my ear, “And to you, the love of my life.”

I grinned at him. “Right back at you,” I said with a wink.

EPILOGUE II

Four years later

I couldn't afford to be late. Even though I worked mostly from home now, certain work-related emergencies warranted an occasional drop in first thing in the morning. I was still the boss, and it was important that my employees remembered that. I might not rule with an iron fist anymore, but I still expected a level of professionalism and efficiency. I grabbed the necessary documents from my office before bolting right back out the front doors of Pegasus Star Security, hopping into the front seat of the SUV I'd parked by the curb.

"*Dad*," Amelia complained. "Gonna be late!"

"I don't wanna go to school!" Adam whined, crossing his arms and kicking his feet.

Vivian turned in the passenger seat to look at our children. "Now, now. Don't you want to make new friends?"

Adam pouted. "Don't wanna."

Amelia raised her hands, practically jumping out of her seat. "I wanna make brathelets."

"Bracelets, sunshine," I corrected. "It's pronounced bracelets."

"Brathelets," she tried again. I couldn't blame her considering she was missing two of her front baby teeth.

I signaled and merged into traffic. The preschool was only a couple blocks away, but Chicago traffic was unpredictable. There was also the added stress that I needed to drop Vivian

off at Jones-White & Burke Investments before eight. She had a very important meeting to get to, and I didn't want to be the reason she didn't show up on time.

"I want to color," Amelia said. "And play tag. I don't want to be it."

"Are there tests?" Adam asked. "Cory says tests are hard."

Vivian chuckled. "No, sunshine. I don't think they're going to give you tests. You're still too young for those."

At this, Adam relaxed a little. "Oh, okay."

We pulled up to the front of the school just in time to see the last few children walk in. Vivian and I guided Amelia and Adam to the doors, holding their hands. I crouched down to look them both in the eye.

"Now remember," I said. "Always be there for each other, okay? Be nice. Play with everyone. Make lots of friends. And be sure to listen to what your teachers tell you."

"When are you coming back?" Amelia asked, swinging her backpack in one hand by the strap.

Vivian crouched down, too, kissing Amelia's forehead while pinching her cheek. "We'll be back to get you in a couple of hours."

"Promise?" my son asked, looking very much like he was about to cry.

I ruffled his hair and smiled. "I promise, buddy. Don't worry. Dad never breaks his promises, right?"

Adam nodded slowly. "Right."

Inside, the school bell rang loudly, echoing off the hallway walls. I patted both my children on the backs and gave them a gentle nudge in the right direction. Their teacher waited patiently for them on the other side of the doors.

"I love you," I called after them.

"We love you, too," they said together before disappearing inside hand-in-hand.

I rose and sighed, ignoring the crack in my knees. “That teacher,” I mumbled. “Have I seen her before?”

Vivian took my hand, leading me away. “Yes, you have.”

“I don’t remember her.”

“She’s a teaching assistant from the local college.”

“Did I run a background check on her?”

My wife rolled her eyes. “No, I wouldn’t let you, remember?”

“Hm. Maybe I’ll get Devin right on that.”

“*Babe.*”

“I’m only kidding, angel.”

Vivian squinted at me as we climbed back into the car. “No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not,” I agreed.

“They’ll be fine,” she assured. “Ava works at this school, for goodness’ sake. They can always turn to their aunt in case anything happens.”

“True, but you know how I get sometimes.”

Vivian hummed. “They’re in good hands, Jesse. Don’t worry about a thing.”

I turned the engine back on and drove to our next stop. I hit a streak of green lights, so we were making good time.

“They’re growing up so fast,” I mumbled, mostly to myself. “Next thing you know, I’ll be fending off Amelia’s boyfriends with a bat at my doorstep and giving Adam the talk. It was bad enough when I had to sit Wally down to talk about the birds and the bees. Now I have to do it all over again.”

“Well, think of the first time as a learning experience. Whatever you did to make things awkward for Wally, *don’t* do it for the twins.”

I smiled. “The fending off boyfriends thing, or the talk?”

“Yes,” was my wife’s dry answer.

“Their birthday’s coming up soon,” I said. “Do you think they’ll want two different themes? Or do you think we can get away with a combo party like last year?”

“Amelia’s been saying how much she wants to go to Chuck E. Cheese, but Adam’s scared of that mouse mascot.”

I snorted. “Can you blame him? That thing’s fucking freaky.”

Vivian laughed. “Very true. We can talk to them about it later. I’m sure we can find a middle ground they’ll both enjoy.”

“Maybe a trip?” I suggested. “The twins keep asking about visiting Wally in Paris.”

“Maybe. Don’t you think that’s a bit much for a birthday, though?”

“They want to see their brother. I hardly think that’s spoiling them. It’s just some quality family time.”

“You have a point. How’s his restaurant doing, by the way? I totally forgot to ask yesterday when he called.”

“He’s doing great,” I said. “Just opened his third restaurant down the road from the Champs Elysée. It’s the talk of the town, or so I’ve heard.”

“I’m so proud of him,” Vivian said. “I knew he could do it. Okay, we’ll definitely talk about it when I get back from work. We can congratulate him on the opening in person.”

I pulled up to the curb in front of a massive modern office building. At the very top, the sign read Jones-White & Burke. Sometimes it was almost surreal to see my wife’s name up there, synonymous these days with accountability, wealth, and progress. She’d come a long way and I couldn’t be prouder.

“You’d better get going,” I said. “Do you think you’ll have to stay the whole day?”

Vivian shook her head. “I’m the boss, babe. I can go home whenever I want.”

I smirked. “Cocky.”

“You like it.” She leaned over the center console and kissed me deeply. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Don’t work too hard, okay?”

“I was going to tell you the exact same thing.”

“Don’t worry,” she said with a wink. “Whatever work I don’t get done, I’ll just give to Molly.”

“Tell her I said hi.”

“Will do.”

“See you soon, angel.”

“Later, babe.”

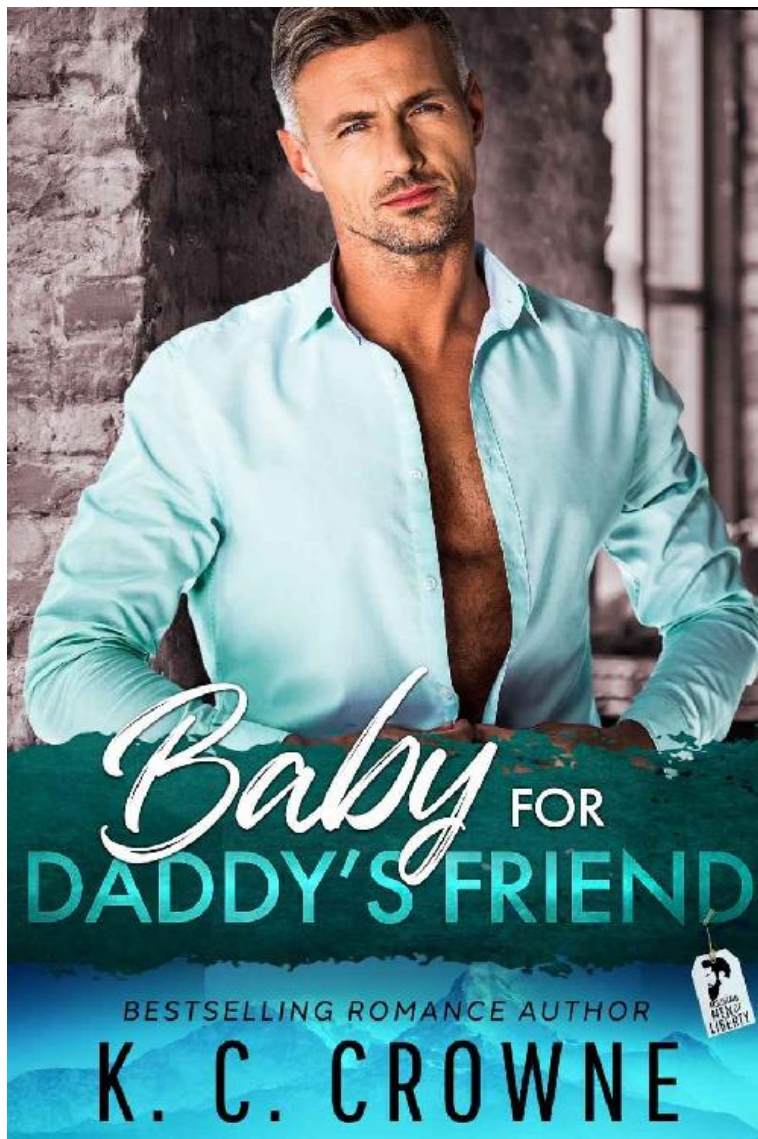
Vivian got out of the car and entered the building. I made sure to watch her go inside before leaving. Old habits died hard.

Did you enjoy Jesse and Vivian’s love story? Great news!

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BABY FOR DADDY'S FRIEND (PREVIEW)

An Amazon Top Bestseller



17 years age gap.

It's forbidden. It's taboo. It's wrong.

So why does it feel so right?

The uptight Mayor of Liberty needs to relax...

And I'll gladly do whatever it takes to loosen him up.

Jeremiah's my dad's best friend and a single daddy of twins.

He's also my life long secret crush.

Apparently, I'm the only one who can clear his name...

But he's too stubborn to let me close.

We may live in a conservative small mountain town...

But I'll show everyone there's no age restriction when it comes to love.

And first I'll need to work up the courage to reveal my growing secret...

How on earth will I tell Jeremiah that his twin girls may soon have a baby to share their daddy with!?!

CHAPTER 1

B *race yourself, Elle.*

The sound of footsteps outside my office door grew louder and louder.

Butterflies fluttered in my belly.

“Eleanor. Mae. Shaeffer.”

I recognized the raw and fiery passion in the man’s deep manly voice.

Jeremiah Jenkins was the mayor of Liberty. Growing up, he insisted I call him Jeremiah, instead of Mr. Jenkins. He was also the man of my very wet dreams ever since I was old enough to dream about men. Too bad he was my late father’s best friend, and far too loyal of a friend to cross the line with me.

Besides being handsome as sin, he was such an awesome guy. He never spoke to me like I was just a kid but talked to me like I was an adult.

I loved the sound of my full name escaping the scrumptious lips of my adolescent crush. If it were a song, I’d play that shit on repeat.

The door to my office swung open. As if seeing things in slow-motion, I watched as the fine man sauntered in.

Hot dddddamn!

Tall, built, and insanely handsome but now with a few light patches of grey on his head. It made him look even sexier

than I remembered. How was that even possible?

His gaze had a kind of intensity. It was almost as if his striking blue eyes could touch me and I felt that touch *everywhere* on my body.

On my arms.

My legs.

My neck.

And especially on my nipples and in between my thighs.

I felt moisture gather at my center and soak the thin fabric of my panties. Even at the age of twenty-eight, my body was responding to him like a hormonal virgin. What was wrong with me? The man was old enough to be my father and I still felt this way about him, even years later.

Get it together, Elle.

Sure, I'd been turned on by other men in the past, but none of them had ever made me feel as hot and bothered as Jeremiah was doing at that very moment. Only a few minutes around him and he already had the strongest effect on me.

My cheeks warmed and flushed a bright red as I pressed my thighs together to find some relief.

Needing something to focus on other than the striking blue of his gaze, I cleared my throat and sorted the documents on my desk.

It was highly unlikely he felt the same way about me. While he was now a single dad, he always had plenty of grown and established women flocking for his affection.

“Yes?” I asked, cocking an eyebrow. “And it’s nice to see you again too, Jeremiah. It’s been awhile. Over five years? You’re looking good. Keeping in shape, I see?”

He scowled at me, but he was still as handsome as he'd ever been. It was hard not to squirm in my seat. Without breaking our eye contact, he took a deep breath and then opened those perfect lips.

“Young lady, do you know what you’ve done?”

Young lady.

My thighs rubbed together involuntarily, building pressure between my legs.

A shiver ran down my spine at the way he spoke, and I couldn't help but smile. The closer he got, the stronger the scent of his delicious cologne became.

I pulled a deep breath through my mouth and grew a bit taller in my spine. My new posture made my large boobs stick out a bit and, I could see Jeremiah forcing his gaze away from my ample cleavage.

I smiled.

Thank you Victoria Secret push-up bra.

His brow furrowed, the dark brows pushing together. Jeremiah might have a little more grey around the temples, but his hair was still as brown as I remembered it, and silky smooth. He wore it short as he always had because he couldn't be bothered to style it.

There was also a little silver sprinkled through his trimmed brown beard. His face looked younger than his forty-five years, even with the scowl.

That facial expression reminded me of the time he had to pick me up from a party, the one time in high school I'd decided to try alcohol. He was the reason I never touched the stuff again.

He threw a copy of the latest *Liberty Leader* on my desk. His face was plastered on the front, no less gorgeous in black and white than it was in color. The by-line on the article was, of course, my name. Eleanor Shaeffer.

My friends called me Elle. Jeremiah used to too, unless he was angry. And right now, he was *very* angry.

“Look I know this must have come as a surprise, but everything I wrote about you is positive and accurate. Why are you angry?”

“The fact that it's been well over five years since I've even seen you and our first interaction is after you've written an

article on my personal life without my consent. How should I feel?”

“You make it sound like I painted you in a bad light.”

“You know what I mean. This is all so out of character for you.”

I leaned forward in amazement. “I left you several messages to approve the article but your staff never got back to me, even after I provided deadlines of its publication. The town wants to know their mayor, and I wrote what I knew. With the upcoming election, it’s important to draw attention away from all the false drama in the news about you. I thought I had a realistic perspective that others might appreciate. It’s my duty as a friend and a citizen of this town.”

“You wrote about my daughters.”

“I mentioned you have two little girls, but that’s it. Beside the fact that you’re a single dad. I mean, none of that is false, is it?”

His gaze narrowed on me, and he leaned closer.

“You’re no longer a kid, Elle. We’re in the real world and if I let myself get concerned about all the allegations about me then I probably shouldn’t be a mayor anyway. Life isn’t fair and we just need to focus on what we can control. You’re better off not wasting your time, or mine.”

He was back to calling me Elle, that was a good sign.

It made me sad to think about how jaded he must have become since the last time I’d seen him. Perhaps all the drama from the office had really gotten to him – and that coupled with his being a single dad to twins could make anyone feel fed-up.

On the good side, the scent of him was the same as when I was younger. Musky and natural, but delightful to my nostrils.

I closed my eyes for a second and inhaled the scent, taken back to a different time.

A time when my dad was alive.

Of BBQs on our back patio.

Flaunting my shapely bikini body around Jeremiah at the poolside.

I knew he had a distinct appreciation for curvaceous women. Compared to my classmates in school, I leaned on the side of curvy and voluptuous and I always loved that about my body.

When it came to Jeremiah, I didn't think twice about flaunting my curves. I yearned for his attention like a giddy little school girl.

Much to my disappointment, Jeremiah was always a gentleman. He never came even close to crossing the taboo line I yearned for him to cross. No matter how hard I tried, and boy did I try.

“Are you even listening to me?”

“Yes,” I lied.

“Then what did I say?” He stared down at me with such a serious expression on his face that I burst out laughing.

“What's so funny?” He crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“Just that you remind me of my dad right now,” I said, wiping the tear from my eye from laughing so hard. “So serious. So mad. You look like you're ready to burst a blood vessel or something.”

He stared at me stone faced. He was always composed. Collected. I loved that about him. His composure was a galaxy away from the manners of all the immature boys I grew up around.

“*I am* mad.”

“But why, Jeremiah?” My chair made a scratching sound as I scooted back from my desk. I stood up, but even standing, he still towered over me. He was at least a foot taller than me, but I didn't let that phase me. He had never scared me before, and I wasn't about to let him get to me now either. “You've

always taught me to focus on the positive. It was all good, all very positive.”

“When I’m ready to share my personal life in the media I want it by my terms, Elle.” He placed his hands on the desk and leaned across.

I leaned forward too, my hands on the desk, mirroring him.

“Jeremiah, I hate to break it to you, but once you became a public figure, your personal life became fair game. And if I wasn’t writing about you, then who would you prefer? Others are writing about you right now, and I’m sure you’re aware it isn’t all that good. I thought you could use some positive publicity for a change, considering all that’s going on in the mayor’s office right now, and talks of possible jail time. It’s all too absurd for me to just stand around and not do anything!”

I didn’t think it was possible for his frown to deepen, but he did it. Deep frown lines etched into his face, making him more attractive and adorable.

God, he’s perfect.

“My daughters mean the world to me. And everything you know about me because of my friendship with your father is off limits, got it?”

Hot as sin and a great dad. How much more perfect can he be?

“Don’t you want to get re-elected, Jeremiah? We need to distract the media from the shitstorm and showing that you’re a good family man does exactly that.”

Jeremiah’s eyes fell. He stared down at my desk, at nothing in particular. He didn’t answer me. I gave him a good two minutes, and he didn’t say a word.

Finally, he growled, “Please respect my wishes, Elle.” He straightened himself and turned on his heels.

My eyes fell to his ass even though I knew I should behave myself.

Yep, still as tight as ever.

The years hadn't taken any sort of a negative toll on that man's body.

He didn't say anything more to me, just punctuated his point with a slamming of my office door. I stood at my desk for a moment, staring at the door. His scent lingered in the room, surrounding me like a familiar blanket.

I closed my eyes again, and this time, the memories came flooding through me.

"Come on, Elle. You're making words up now," Jeremiah barked. "Whizbang? Carl, get over here. Your daughter's cheating again."

I giggled. "Whizbang is a word! Look it up on that fancy smartphone of yours."

The year was 2007, and the first iPhone had just come out. Jeremiah had never been excited about the latest gadgets, but he was the owner of a big, fancy construction company. His contractors and insisted the phone would replace his laptop for work. He didn't even use the damn thing; it stayed in his pocket most of the time.

He nodded and pulled it out. "Alright, I'll do that."

"For the record, it's an adjective that means lively or sensational. It was also used during World War II. A small caliber, high velocity shell."

I watched as his eyes nearly popped from his skull. "How did you know that?"

I shrugged and took a sip from my lemonade and gave him a flirtatious blink. I was sixteen years old, still in high school, and I loved educating the older man. Especially since Jeremiah was smart - super smart. He had an engineering background, so math and science were more his forte.

Still, I loved impressing him with my vocabulary, and often learned new words just so I could have moments like this.

If only I had the words to articulate how I felt about him.

A knock on the door pulled me from the reverie.

“Yes?” I muttered, secretly hoping it was Jeremiah. I wanted nothing more than for him to come back into my office and tell me how happy he was to see me back in Liberty. To tell me he missed me and was so grateful for what I’d done.

But it wasn’t Jeremiah. My assistant editor, Lucy, stood in the open doorway. “Is everything okay in here?”

“Yeah, everything’s fine.” I sat down at my desk, my gaze falling on the paper Jeremiah had left behind.

My pride and joy, my entire life’s work, was wrapped up in that paper. As the owner and editor of the *Liberty Leader*, it was my responsibility to bring the news to the people. It has always been my dream - maybe not so much in Liberty, but I aged, I felt compelled to return to my roots.

This was where I was happiest in life and I wanted to return to that.

Especially after losing my dad.

Lucy took a seat across from me and saw the paper. Her face scrunched up as she read the headline and the first few lines. “What was he upset about? I don’t get it.”

A sigh escaped my lips. “It’s a long story, Lucy. A very long story.”

This newspaper was everything I had worked for. My dream. I should be happy; I had everything I needed. Yet something was still missing.

“Well, if it’s any consolation, my mama always said that if someone doesn’t like what people say about them, maybe they should be a better person.”

I frowned. “Jeremiah is already a good person. One of the best people I’ve met. That’s the problem. I only wrote about the good things, the person I know and—”

Lucy wasn’t getting it. The lights were on, sure, and she was watching me with her big, brown eyes, but not an ounce of what I was saying would matter to her. Unless you knew Jeremiah - *really* knew him - you wouldn’t get it. He didn’t

open up to just anyone, and most people would never get to know the side of him I did.

“Never mind. Let’s drop it. How’s the article on the Liberty basketball team coming along?”

“It’s coming along just fine. But, I mean they lost badly. We’re writing about it anyway. There’s not much else going on to replace it.”

The question was did anyone really care? We weren’t a sports town, which was fine. Our kids played basketball for fun, not glory. It kept the game a little purer, in my opinion.

“You know what? Nix it. Don’t write about them losing. Maybe interview the coach instead, talk to him about the teamwork or something else. Don’t focus on the negative.”

“But it’s the news,” Lucy said.

“Yes, but let’s be honest, Lucy, It’ll only bring the kids down, and this town doesn’t need another disappointment.”

I sighed and rubbed my temples. The fact was, print journalism was on the way out, and no one really cared about it much anyway. Liberty was small enough that everyone knew what was going on without picking up a paper. It was tradition for many families to do so, the older citizens, of course. But the younger generation had yet to pick up on that habit, if they ever would.

I was on a sinking ship, and I knew it. I knew it when I bought the paper from Jasper Townsend, but I thought I could turn it around. I thought there’d be some kind of news, talking to the local businesses, exploring the beauty of Liberty, and of course, covering the good side of politics.

Like how people like Jeremiah had real aspirations for our town.

“Sales down again?” Lucy asked, reminding me that she was still in the room.

“Sales were never up to begin with.”

“I’m sure something will work out.”

She was so sweet and naive, much like I was when I entered the industry. I became a journalist to try and make a difference in the world, to share the news and to hopefully open people's eyes to the world around them.

The one thing that kept me getting out of bed was doing everything I could to keep our town from losing one of the best mayors we've had in decades, especially if there was something I could do to get him out of his own damn way.

Jeremiah didn't want me involved, but this was about much more than our relationship.

Both he and my dad taught me to hold tight to what I believed in, no matter the odds. I wasn't going to give up, not without a fight.

Jeremiah Jenkins may have been jaded by life from one too many disappointments, but I still believed that good could prosper evil.

He dedicated most of his life to others. It was my turn to be there for him.

And if I was being 100% truthful, it was my opportunity to once and for all to prove that was much more than just a kid.

I was going to go after what I wanted, and I wasn't going to give up.

CHAPTER 2

JEREMIAH

I arrived home well before I needed to pick up my girls from day-care.

Removing my clothes, I crossed my bedroom and made a beeline for my shower. Not even bothering with the hot water, I cranked the cold all the way and stepped underneath the massive rainwater spray.

The cold water fell onto my skin like needles, but I didn't dare to warm it up. I needed the cold and the sobering effect it provided.

"What the fuck was that?" I muttered to myself as I thought back on my conversation with Elle.

I got what I wanted from our meeting and made my point about the news story clear. There was only one problem with me seeing her after five years - and I could feel it pulsing between my damn legs.

Never, not even in my wildest dreams had I imagined that the shy, awkward, scrabble-loving teenager I had once known would turn into a vixen with perfectly round hips, full tits, and the face of an angel.

To top everything off, she was smart, funny, and strong-willed in a way most women I came across weren't.

She was one of those whole package women, except that she wasn't. She couldn't be.

At least, not for me.

She was Carl's, daughter, and no matter how hot she was or how much my cock twitched at the thought of her, that was all she could ever be.

I groaned and straightened my body so that every inch of me would be under the frigid spray. Defying the laws of nature, my cock didn't shrink at the cold. It remained awake and ready for someone that could never be mine.

My eyes closed in an attempt to focus my brain and find a solution to the problem. However, all I thought about was Elle.

Instinctively, my hand drifted down to my massive erection. Behind my closed lids, I saw Elle's sweet mouth wrapped around my cock. I wondered how much of me she would be able to take and how deliciously smooth it would feel. I pictured her tits bouncing and her pretty hair wrapped around my hand as I worked myself in and out of her lips.

I knew that even fantasizing about her was wrong, but for some reason, the forbidden aspect of it made the whole thing even sweeter.

Before I knew it, my balls were tight, and my body felt like it was dangling from a precipice. I held onto the wall in front of me and kept Elle's face and tits front and center in my mind as I sped up my movements, until my body finally erupted with one of the strongest orgasms I'd ever had.

Once I was done, and she was still in my thoughts, I stood under the cold water waiting for my breath to return to normal and realized one very true fact: I was *incredibly fucked*.



I pulled my coat around me as a crisp breeze filtered down the street, blowing up snow in its wake. The blanket of whiteness over the earth was as much a staple of the town as the local businesses.

We were, after all, in the mountains.

Liberty's Main Street awaited me when I stepped out of my car. Everything was within walking distance downtown, if

it could even be called a downtown at all. A few local shops, a B&B, a day-care, a café, and, the local paper. There were a few other little shops and diners. Most of them had been there as long as I could remember.

I inhaled the cold, Utah air. It was cold enough to almost hurt the lungs. If you weren't born and bred for that kind of weather, it might be a bit too much. Some folks didn't care much for snow and cold, but I preferred it over the heat out west and the humidity in the east.

Utah was my home; Liberty was Heaven on Earth, as far as I was concerned.

It came with its share of small town drama, but I was grateful to be raising my daughters in the town I grew up in.

I trekked the block to Little Cubs.

I thought about my meeting with Elle the day before and had to adjust my pants from the erection that was coming.

Shit just the thought of her has me screwed up.

She'd grown into such a beautiful woman.

And the curves on her.

Shit.

She'd always been a curvy girl but I never thought about her as more than my best friend's daughter. *Until now.*

Now, everything about her blew me away.

She was just a little too focused on her career and didn't see the bigger picture around her.

Or maybe I just had a thing against journalists. She might be a good one, but as far as I was concerned, she was amongst parasites and leeches. It was far too easy for them to suck you into their world.

Plus, it had been a long ass time since I last saw her.

It was hard to believe that beautiful, blonde-haired, brown-eyed woman with the perfect figure was Carl's little Ellie-

bean. As soon as she'd turned eighteen, she'd run off to New York City and blossomed from a child to a woman.

I was sure the men in New York had been all over her - she was a stunner. She could have been a model, but anytime anyone had mentioned it to her, she scrunched up her perfectly upturned nose and said she wanted to use her brain, not her beauty, to get ahead in the world.

It was hard to believe the woman in that office was the same girl I used to play Scrabble with, who'd always manage to come up with the most obscure words to beat me. Sometimes I let her win...no, that was a lie. She always won fair and square; I just didn't like to admit that a little girl could beat me at a game.

But she was smarter than anyone else I'd met, and I met a lot of people. I only wished she'd used her smarts for something other than writing about my personal life.

"Good afternoon, Mayor," a voice pulled me from my thoughts.

I looked around and found an older woman, a face I recognized. "Well hello there, Mrs. Wilson." I continued walking, my focus on the door of the day-care.

"I read about you in the paper. That was a real good story. I mean the recent article that seemed to paint you in a more realistic light. I enjoyed it a lot. You're a good man for taking in those babies, you know."

"They're my daughters. I didn't adopt them off the street or anything." Mrs. Wilson flinched as if I'd slapped her, and I realized my tone was a bit rough. "Sorry, what I mean is - I'm no hero. Just a father, that's all."

"Well, you're a lot like *your* father, so I say that makes you a hero. But what do I know?" She shrugged her shoulders and continued walking away before I could argue with her.

I was no damn hero.

Just a man trying to live his life, raise his daughters, and leave my personal life out of the damn limelight. But thanks to

Elle's article, everyone would think they knew me and my little girls.

I pulled open the door to Little Cubs and heard laughter. I'd always loved the sound of children laughing, but never thought I'd be hearing it in my own home. Sure, the girls were too young for laughing, but one day, the halls would be filled with it.

Tabitha, one of the teachers, was on the floor with toddlers all around her. She glanced up and smiled. "One second, Jeremiah. Piper should be right with you."

Piper was the owner of the day-care and also happened to be one of Elle's best friends growing up.

Shit, another reason I won't be able to get Elle out of my damn head.

With Liberty being such a small town it was hard not to be acquainted with people in the same circles.

Like Elle, I remembered when Piper was no taller than some of the little ones surrounding Tabitha. It was weird to think of her all grown up and responsible enough to be watching other people's kids, but she did a damn fine job of it.

Piper scurried from the back, a smile on her face.

"Hey! That was the quickest work emergency I've ever seen."

"Yes, just a quick meeting, then I had some errands to run." I frowned when I thought about what 'business' I really had to take care of after my run in with Elle in her office.

I cleared my throat.

"How are the girls?"

It had been their first week in day-care, and I was a little stressed about that. I was trying to find a nanny, but so far, none of the people I'd interviewed fit the bill. I'd known Piper forever, and I trusted her, but it was still hard leaving my children for the first time. At least she wasn't a stranger.

“Oh, they’re angels,” she cooed, her hand over her heart. “And they were just fine, don’t you worry. Want to come back with me? I can help you carry them out?”

I nodded and followed Piper down the hallway to where the infants were kept. It had already been two months since I’d brought them home, and I still couldn’t believe it. I never expected to be a dad at all, much less to twin girls.

“I do hope you’ll reconsider and think about working with us in the future.”

“I appreciate you, Piper. I do. I think you’re highly qualified and run a top-notch day-care, but with everything going on, I’d feel more comfortable with someone watching them from home. I hope you understand.”

She nodded, her smile unphased. “I get it, I do. We’re always here for you. You know that.”

“Thank you.” I didn’t mention how I needed help at home too. One child was hard enough, but two? During feedings and diaper changes, when they were both screaming, it was hard. I was outnumbered and had gained a new respect for single parents.

Piper pulled open the door to the nursery and we stepped inside. Frannie was in the corner changing a baby. She turned her head and smiled when she saw me, immediately gushing, “Oh, your little girls are the sweetest!”

“Thank you.” I was always being told this, but I had no idea how to respond. I wasn’t sure how bad two-month-olds could actually be for any frame of reference. So I just nodded and smiled and said thanks. I hated leaving the girls, but as mayor, it was sometimes unavoidable.

The mere sight of my twin girls melted my cold heart. It was like their presence just melted all the stresses of my day away. They always had that effect on me.

Elle asked me if I wanted to get re-elected. Truth be told, I didn’t. I hated the job. I’d taken it out of obligation. It was meant to be a short-term solution after my father died, until someone suitable stepped up. No one suitable stepped up. So I

remained mayor of the city I loved. I only did it because I loved Liberty; I had no desire to be in the public light. I had never wanted a career in politics. I had no idea how to run a city.

Now, with my daughters at home, I especially hated leaving them. They'd been through enough and needed a stable household. It was my responsibility to give them that. And I didn't take that responsibility lightly.

I just wanted to keep my beloved hometown out of the wrong hands, and so far, I'd been successful, but my time was coming to an end.

And as much as I should worry about my competitor, part of me just wanted to step down and be done with it. I wanted to focus on my girls and maybe get back to running my construction business. Or retire. With my finances in order, that was also an option for me, but I wasn't sure I'd ever be ready to stop working. Not at forty-five. Though I'd already made more money than I would ever need, I still had a lot of life left in me.

Piper carried Grace, while I carried Amelia. She made small talk, which I hardly paid attention to, as we walked to my truck.

Piper helped snap Grace into her car seat while I took care of Amelia. I was grateful for the help wherever I could get it. It often felt like I needed to grow another set of hands, which was one reason I wanted to find a nanny, someone to help me since their mother wasn't in the picture. But I was too picky. Whoever I chose would have to be as careful as I was, to love them like I did, and I just didn't think it was possible to find that in what was essentially an employee.

Perhaps I was being too picky, but they were my girls. My responsibility.

"Thanks, Piper," I said, patting the young woman on the back. "I appreciate all your help."

"No problem. I'm always around if you need me to keep an eye on them," she offered. She started to say something, but

stopped and smiled instead.

I'm sure she wanted to know what the work emergency was about. Everyone did. I was the talk of the town ever since one of my staff members spread rumours that I had taken bribes from the developers looking to mine the valuable lithium from the ground. Then he'd left town. Or so we thought.

James Fitzhenry had been our city treasurer. He hadn't been seen in a month, shortly after he spoke about the supposed bribes. Poof. One day he was there, the next he was gone.

Now I knew why.

When it became obvious I wasn't going to talk about what kept me busy for the day, Piper excused herself with a friendly smile. "Drive safely, Jeremiah."

She hurried back into the warmth of *Little Cubs*, and I climbed into my truck to get it started and warmed for my girls. They were covered in blankets, but since they couldn't wear their thick coats in their car seats, I blasted the heat up and hoped the truck warmed quickly.

You girls deserve the world. God as my witness I will do everything I can to give you that and more.



"Shh," I whispered, rocking Grace in my arms while holding a bottle for Amelia at the same time. I wished I was an octopus, especially at feeding time. These two wiggly little bodies were hard to handle at the same time, and it never failed that when I was feeding one, the other would get fussy - either impatient for food or if they'd already been fed, from gas or boredom or God knows what.

Sometimes I wondered if I'd made a mistake. Staring at their sweet faces, with my mother's nose and my father's eyes, I knew I wanted them. But was I being selfish? Could

someone else raise them better than me? Would an adoptive family have offered them a better life than I could?

Hell no.

My heart ached just thinking about it.

They'd only been in my life for two months, but it was already hard to imagine life without them. They were my world, and I would do anything for them - even give up my role as Liberty's mayor so I could be the best father possible. They deserved it.

I dropped the bottle as I adjusted Grace in my arms, her screaming sounding so heart wrenching. I wished I knew the magic formula to make it stop, to make her happy. I felt so lost. Amelia started whimpering, and I grabbed the bottle and held it to her mouth as well. I needed to put Grace down to properly feed Amelia, but it pained me to do so.

A knock at my door surprised me; I wasn't expecting anyone. I groaned and contemplated not answering, but at the meeting at work that day, I was told the police may be stopping by to question me at any time. They could probably hear the babies crying and knew I was home. It wouldn't look good to avoid them when they suspected me of several crimes.

"One second," I called out, hoping they could hear me over the noise.

I placed Grace in her pack and play and hurried to the door. When it swung it open, I was surprised to not find the police, but Elle. She was still in her work attire - a tailored grey dress suit that fit her curvy body perfectly. A soft pink, silk shirt showed under her jacket, with a pink, grey, and white scarf tied around her neck loosely, pulling the look together.

She'd always knew how to dress, but this was not the Elle I remembered from years before. While she was tall and fit, she also had curves in all the right places, making sure there was no doubt in anyone's mind that she was a grown woman.

Her blonde hair was pulled back in a bun, completing the sexy businesswoman look.

I found myself wanting to release it from its confines and watch it tumble around her shoulders.

Grab her hair in my fist and pull her lips to mine.

“Listen,” she said, not meeting my gaze. “I feel really bad about our talk earlier. Can I come in so we can talk?”

“It’s not a good time.”

She looked past me into the house. “Do you need some help?”

Before I could lie and tell her no, she pushed past me and into the living room. She made a beeline toward the crying, like a moth drawn to a flame and I couldn’t help but watch the sway of her perfect ass as she went. The girls were in pack and play sleepers in the living room. She walked over to Grace, who was crying the loudest, and picked her up.

“Oh my gosh, Jeremiah. They’re beautiful.”

I was at her side; ready to show her how to hold the baby if needed, but she didn’t need my help. She rocked Grace in her arms, speaking to her in hushed tones, and the baby’s cries quieted rather quickly. My cock twitched again at the how good she was with my daughter.

“How did you do that?”

“Huh?” Elle seemed to have been lost in a fantasy, shook her head, and met my gaze.

“I’ve been trying forever to get her to calm down,” I said. “And you just walk in here and stop her crying in seconds.”

“Babies can sense our stress, Jeremiah,” she said matter-of-factly.

“I’m not stressed.”

Yeah, right. Who the hell am I kidding?

She gave me a look that said she knew I was lying. Amelia let out a soft whimper which turned to more crying, drawing our attention.

“I was in the middle of feeding them,” I muttered, going to Amelia and picking her up to give her a bottle.

“Alright, can I help?” Elle asked me.

I’d originally made both of their bottles, not thinking. I motioned to Grace’s bottle sitting on the coffee table. “Do you know how to feed a baby?”

“Do I know how to feed a baby?” she asked in a mocking tone. “Come on, Jeremiah. I used to babysit all the freaking time in high school and continued doing it in college too. I even nannied for a wealthy family for a while to pay for school. You know that.”

She picked up the bottle and began feeding Grace as if it was second nature.

“Alright, I’m sorry. They’re just my babies. I’m a little overprotective.”

“Of course you are. I’m not surprised at all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you were always protective of me, and I wasn’t even your daughter.” She shrugged and took a seat on my sofa, her attention focused on the bundle in her arms.

In case I could forget that she was my best friend’s daughter, well, there she was to remind me.

Grace’s tiny fingers gripped the scarf, and if Elle minded, she didn’t let it show. Knowing Elle, her clothing wasn’t cheap.

“So which one do I have?” she asked me, though she didn’t look up.

“You have Grace,” I murmured softly, taking a seat in the chair across from her. “She has a birthmark on her right hand, right by her thumb. She’s also smaller.”

“Grace, after your mother,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“And Amelia after your grandmother,” she said, looking at the baby in my arms.

“Yes, right again.”

“You always were a sentimental man,” she said with a playful smile. “Even if you try to hide it.”

I couldn't really argue that. My mother and my grandmother had played a big role in my life. Both women were gone, but I knew they'd have been so happy to see me as a father. Surprised, too. My mother had passed only a couple years prior, and I was her only child. She had always assumed our family would stop with me. But she'd been wrong. Not that anyone could have expected that I'd one day be the father of twin girls, especially at my age.

“So do you forgive me?” Elle asked, her brown eyes wide and innocent. “About the article, I mean.”

I thought for a moment. Truthfully, I couldn't stay mad at her for long. She was Carl's daughter, and nothing she ever did could make me hate her. Even if she was a journalist.

“Yes, but please come to me before writing anything else in the future. And my daughters are off limits. Got it?”

“Got it,” she said. “I'll respect your wishes, Jeremiah. I just wanted to help.”

“I know.”

She was like her father. Carl was quick to anger because he was passionate - like Elle. He also had a good heart, but he always thought he knew what was right for someone else. Elle took after him more than I could have imagined.

“George Holt is a terrible man,” Elle commented, frowning. “Like, really bad. There's no way he can be mayor of Liberty.”

“I know.”

Elle seemed relieved that I agreed with her. I knew George well enough to know that he had an agenda. He had been a developer himself, and he'd been trying for years to grow Liberty into a tourist town to rival some of the other ski towns

in the U.S. But the townspeople didn't want that. It would mean the raising of rents, many would likely be displaced, and small businesses would be replaced with large corporations. We favoured our local coffee shops over Starbucks. It's what made Liberty what it was.

George wasn't born and raised there; he didn't get it. He was everything Liberty wasn't, and there was no way he would win the election. Unless no one ran against him. As the current mayor, taking over after my father died in office, it was a given that I'd run for re-election and win. Until the latest scandal.

We finished feeding the babies, but Elle continued holding and rocking Grace gently as we talked mostly about frivolous things. Elle always could carry a conversation all on her own.

"I think Grace might be getting sleepy," she said, her voice low.

"Amelia too," I commented, noting the little girl's eyelids drifting closed. "It's about their bedtime anyway."

I stood, and Elle did too. She followed me to their nursery at the end of the hallway, next to my bedroom. She stared around the room, her mouth opening as she saw the cribs. The baby beds were ornate and heavy, well-made and sturdy. Above each twin's crib was their name, carved in wood. Amelia's was painted in purple, my grandma's favorite color, and Grace was painted a soft blue, my mother's favorite.

"Wow, did you make these?" Elle asked, running her hand over the crib.

"I did." I smiled as I watched her trace the name above Grace's crib. "I made everything in here, actually."

"I knew you were good with woodworking, but wow," she breathed. She placed Grace down in the bed and stared at her for a bit, a small smile on her face.

I did the same with Amelia, watching as she fell into a deep sleep. I turned on the baby monitors and motioned for Elle to follow me out. I pulled the door, but left it open just a smidge so a small light from the hallway could creep in.

We walked back into the living room, and I thought that might be it. Elle had apologized. I forgave her. We put the kids to bed. Now she could leave.

But she sat down on the couch again, heaving a sigh. “You don’t happen to have anything to drink, do you?”

“I might have some beer in the fridge.” I scratched my beard.

“Ooh, can I have one?”

My first instinct was to tell her no, that she was too young. But she wasn’t too young anymore. She was a grown woman, not Carl’s little girl.

“Sure,” I said, making my way into the kitchen. I grabbed one for her, then decided it wouldn’t hurt to have one now that the girls were down. Only one.

I opened the bottles and walked back into the living room, handing one to Elle before taking my place in the large leather chair across from her again.

She drank from the bottle before giggling. “It feels weird to be drinking around you, ever since that time you picked me up from the party. You know, I don’t drink much these days, thanks to you.”

“Good, I’m glad my talk stuck with you.”

“It did,” she said, turning the bottle around in her hands. “I mean, that and my daddy yelling at me, but you talked to me like an adult. I really appreciated that.” She took another swig, made a face and put the bottle on the table.

“You were sixteen. Not yet an adult, but not a child either.”

“My father didn’t think like so. He still thought I was a child.” She spoke softly, her eyes glazing over. I knew she had to miss her father. We all did, but she had a special bond with him. She was daddy’s little girl.

But it was hard to imagine her as anyone’s little girl now.

She pulled off the scarf, tossing it on the table before taking off her jacket. “Sorry, it’s a bit warm. Do you mind?”

“No, of course not.”

She placed her jacket on the couch next to her. Her silky pink shirt clung to her body. It didn't go all the way down to her skirt either, showing off just a hint of her stomach.

I took a quick swig of my beer, trying to distract myself. I couldn't look at her body, what was I doing? She was my best friend's daughter.

Elle crossed her legs, and her skirt rode up, showing off her toned thighs. She had always been into yoga and keeping herself in shape, even though she didn't work out too much. She was no athlete, just liked to keep herself healthy.

I put the beer down, afraid it was clouding my thoughts. I had to adjust in my seat, cringing as my erection brushed against my jeans. I cursed myself; that's what I got for having such horribly inappropriate thoughts about Elle.

Thankfully, she didn't seem to notice and continued talking. “Do you remember that time Dad thought I took a drink from his beer? When I was eight, maybe?”

“I do,” I chuckled, remembering Carl's face. He wasn't so much mad as he was worried. “He kept asking me to call poison control to make sure it wouldn't hurt you. You kept insisting you'd only smelled it and thought it was gross.”

“That's exactly what happened. I smelled it, thought it smelled like pee, and put it right back down.”

“And Carl kept saying, ‘It's okay if you tried it, you won't be in trouble. I just need to know in case it can make you sick’”

“Yes! He really was a good dad.” Her voice cracked.

“He was. I hope to be as good as him.”

“Oh, I have no doubt. I always thought you'd make an amazing father.”

I looked down at my hand. “Thank you. That means a lot coming from you.”

A silence hung over us. I glanced up and found her staring at me, a pained look on her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“Do you think—never mind.” She shook her head as if trying to banish whatever thoughts she was having.

“Do I think what?”

She hesitated, but I could tell the words were on the tip of her tongue. Finally, she sighed. “Do you think my father was proud of me?”

Tears welled in her eyes, and it killed me. Any sexual thoughts I’d had went right out the window. This was Carl’s little girl. This was Eleanor.

“Of course, Elle,” I murmured. “How could he not be?”

“I don’t know. He just had all these big dreams for me, for me to go off to college in New York City, to become this big-time journalist. It was supposed to be worth being gone for so long. I even missed—” She stopped short, but I knew what she was thinking.

“Elle, there’s no way you could have known he was going to pass away so quickly. No one did. He showed no signs, no symptoms, and even if he suspected it, you know your father was far too stubborn to let anyone know something was wrong.”

She nodded. “I guess so. I feel like I missed so much, and I still ended up here. But it’s too late. He’s not here.”

I wanted to cross the room and hug her but wasn’t sure it was appropriate. I also didn’t trust my thoughts since only moments before I’d gotten an erection looking at her. Jesus, I couldn’t be sure what would happen if I actually touched her.

So I stayed put, tried to comfort her from afar. “Elle, your father just wanted you to be happy. He didn’t care what you did with your life, as long as you were happy and healthy - and you are, aren’t you?”

She nodded. “For the most part, yes. Except for his absence, I really do love being home.”

“And he would be proud of you for taking over the *Leader*.”

She barked out a laugh. “Proud of me running that pitiful excuse for a paper, you mean? Not like we’re going to be in business much longer. No one wants to read the local paper anymore.”

“He’d be proud of you because you took a chance. You took ownership of your life and didn’t let your doubts stop you.”

She was silent for a second, and a smile crossed her face. “Thanks, Jeremiah. You knew my father better than anyone, so it means a lot to hear that. You always could get through to me.”

She stood up, and before I could stop her, she crossed the room, leaned down toward me, and wrapped her arms over my shoulders. Her breasts pressed nearly into my face since she was standing and I was sitting. It was hard to breathe, hard to think for a second. She pulled away, and the erection was back.

Thankfully, she didn’t look down. She looked straight in my eyes instead.

“I think I’m going to head out, but thank you for the talk. I’ve missed you, you know that?”

“I’ve missed you too,” I admitted.

Calm down, Jeremiah. This is Carl’s daughter, I kept repeating to myself.

I walked her to the door, and she gave me a proper hug. I swallowed hard, worried that she’d feel my erection against her body. But when she pulled away, she seemed oblivious. She leaned in and kissed me on the cheek, her soft lips brushing against my skin and sending the rest of the blood in my body south.

Get a grip, Jeremiah. Get a fucking grip. This is unacceptable.

Elle pulled away, and there was something in her eyes - a heat that I'd never seen before from her.

“Have a good night,” I said, yanking the door open. “And drive safely. Your father would never forgive me if anything happened to you.”

I brought up her father, hoping to remind both of us both of who she was to me. Her gaze fell and her cheeks flushed.

“Yes, of course. Have a good night, Jeremiah.”

She walked out the door, and I realized she'd left her scarf on my couch. But I wasn't going to risk calling her back.



END OF PREVIEW

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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